

# How Seattle Opera became one of few companies nationwide to pull off an all-digital season | The Seattle Times

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Seattle Opera films "Tosca," featuring Alexandra LoBianco in the title role, at St. James Cathedral. (Philip Newton)

“Tosca,” filmed at St. James Cathedral, is the final program in a season unlike any other. With McCaw Hall closed to audiences, Seattle Opera produced its entire planned season in a digital format, stretching budgets, imaginations and skill sets. It also made opera accessible to audiences that had perhaps never experienced it before. Now that public spaces are opening again, will the opera company go back to business as usual or continue exploring the digital frontier?

Seattle Opera delivered its entire promised 2020-21 season (though the double bill of “Cavalleria Rusticana” and “Pagliacci” became recitals of highlights) through increasingly sophisticated filmed performances culminating in cinematic productions of “[Flight](#),” and “[Tosca](#),” which streams online June 25-27 at [seattleopera.org](https://seattleopera.org). According to Marc Scorca, president and CEO of Opera America, an industry umbrella organization, Seattle Opera was one of only a handful of opera companies in the nation to present its entire planned season digitally. At four full operas and seven hourlong recitals, it appears Seattle Opera released more newly recorded material in one season than any other company.

performers and technical staff. The company has yet to determine how it will leverage its newly developed technological prowess in the future. And these filmed productions are not yet a sustainable income source: “[Don Giovanni](#),” for example, generated about \$8,000 in individual ticket sales, while “Flight” generated \$21,000. Given that a typical in-person opera brings in \$300,000 to \$500,000 in single-ticket sales, “the income from the streaming is so marginal, it’s not an income source,” said Christina Scheppelmann, general director of Seattle Opera.

But the yearlong experiment has opened intriguing possibilities for making opera accessible to new audiences and has proven that the notoriously slow-moving industry can be nimble.



It all came about when the initial pandemic lockdown

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space comprising the McCaw Hall stage and recording equipment salvaged from the KeyArena renovations, the season opened with a simple recital of highlights from “Cavalleria Rusticana.”

possible at Benaroya Hall, and Seattle Opera was confident they could manage a site-specific production. Just before filming was to start, the governor announced that museums could reopen. To complete filming before the Museum of Flight opened to visitors, Seattle Opera compressed its filming schedule to five days, shooting scenes out of order and leapfrogging camera rigs to eliminate downtime between different locations.

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In Europe, government subsidies for the arts helped Vienna State Opera make archival recordings available for free streaming. In the U.S., many companies produced stage captures in empty theaters; some created film projects in

Seattle Opera's data shows that roughly a third of single-ticket streaming sales were out of state, with buyers across the country and in 10 countries. Some of the education talks posted on YouTube have more than 1,700 views — that's 14 times as many as typically attended in person prior to

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