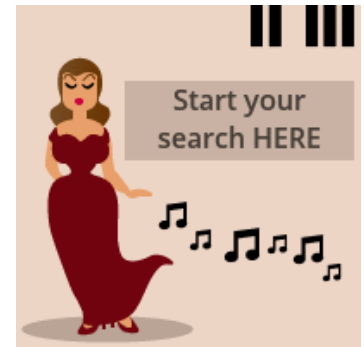
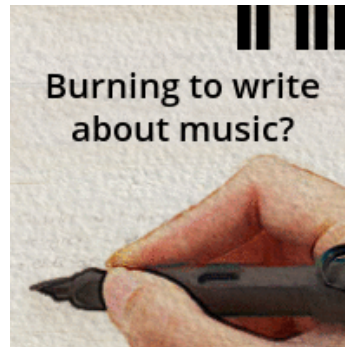


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Kansas City's Royal Renaissance

By Hilary Stroh, 09 May 2019

Scribbles and Skylines

'Opera house' says my two year old within days of moving from the East Coast to a downtown Kansas City loft last summer. He's learning a new word. High culture is not everyone's association with the so-called flyover states. Yet there it is, unmistakable, flamboyant and iconic, The [Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts](#), presiding over the city from a hill, with its vast glass frontage, its pre-cast concrete and bead-blasted steel cables. Once, like all the best plans, it was a mere scribble on an architect's napkin. Now it is a distinctive part of the city's skyline and an integral part of its revitalization. Moshe Safdie, the Israeli-Canadian architect behind the project wanted the 285,000 square foot building which consists of two halls – the Muriel Kauffman Theater and the Helzberg Hall – to be a 'front door to the community'. And that door, as everyone must discover who comes here, is very definitely wide open.



Kauffman Center northwest exterior

© Tim Hursley

A cultural scene in disarray

So fundamental has the Center become to the city, it is almost hard to imagine that a mere thirteen years ago, none of this was there at all. Like many American cities, Kansas City, Missouri, has been through dark times. Starved of life and sucked dry of funds, the downtown core, once known as Paris of the Plains for the dynamism of its jazz and night-life, had become, over the course of several decades, a sort of ghost town, stagnant by day, dead or dangerous by night. It was certainly not the place to be. To hear accounts of these days is to be impressed that an arts scene survived at all, despite the odds.

The Lyric Theater, where most performances took place, was distinctly inhospitable. Acoustics were second-rate. It was never possible to rehearse opera to scale. Props and sets were kept *ad hoc* in disused (and un air-conditioned) warehouses and schools. Painting was often done in parking lots. The companies jostled for schedules, confined to one weekend per production. Faithful audiences came, but it was as if performers had to overcome their discomfiture to carry the evening. At every turn, there were limitations. Frank Byrne, Executive Director of the Symphony since 2002, shrugs wryly about this time period, now firmly in the past: goldfish grow no larger than their bowl. There was simply no room.

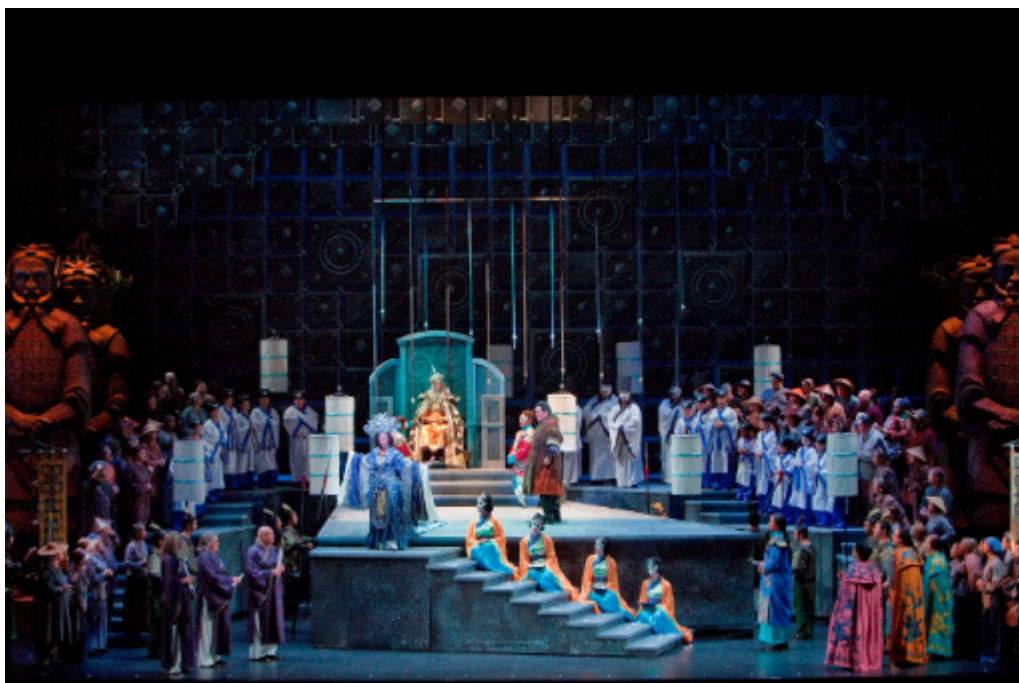


Kansas City Symphony

© Eric Williams

Yet the three resident arts organizations (RAOs), the [Kansas City Symphony](#), the [Lyric Opera](#) and the [Kansas City Ballet](#), had several things going for them. First, the degree of collaboration and solidarity between them was striking, and according to insiders, rare, when competition can be so fierce for the entertainment dollar. They were thus in a strong collective position to lobby for a seat at the community table. Second, the city was beginning to transform itself thanks, in part, to a grassroots arts scene in the Crossroads district, and in part also, to the top-down policy of an enlightened mayor, Kay Barnes in the early 2000s, whose five big ideas to transform the city included the expansion of the arts.

The third push towards regeneration came from Kansas Citians themselves, for among them, there were quite extraordinarily committed patrons. It was thanks entirely to 2,000 of them that the Center was built. Dwell on that achievement for a moment: the Center was constructed amidst the dire pressures of the Great Recession, yet their enthusiasm and commitment did not wane. Chief among them was Julia Irene Kauffman, who put her family's foundation to the best of uses and quietly bought the hill back in the 1990s. Closely involved in every single decision, she saw the Center through to its triumphant opening in September 2011. Even a miserable, rainy day could not deter the 55,000 people who queued up to attend the free Open House event that Sunday; Kauffman herself presided, in royal blue to reflect the fact that her father had owned the Kansas City Royals baseball team. Culture was yet another layer to bind the city's present to its past. The sporting team was named for the famed *American Royal* (livestock and rodeo) Show in the once-thriving Kansas City's stockyards, which was in turn named for the *Royal Agricultural Show* in Victorian England. Rodeo, baseball, and now a world-class cultural campus: such realities need not be mutually exclusive.

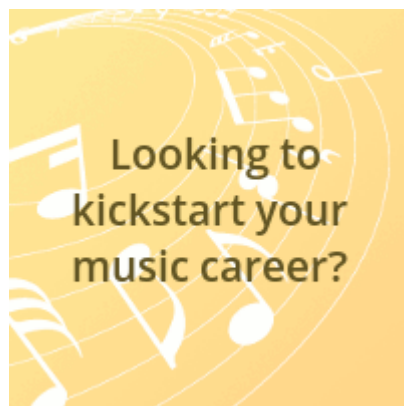
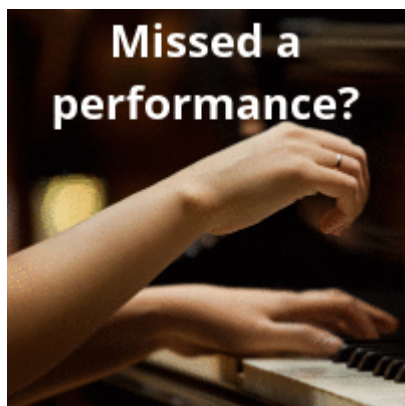


Lise Lindstrom in the title role of *Turandot*, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, 2011

© Cory Weaver

A cultural campus

With the Center breaking ground in 2006, it was time for the three resident arts organizations (RAOs) to raise their own game. Even before the building opened formally, the orchestra began to rehearse in the Helzberg Hall, learning, as Byrne recalls, how to play in a new space, and how to listen in a new way. If a hall itself is a kind of instrument, an integral part of the whole concert experience, the Symphony refashioned itself in response to Yasuhisa Toyota's intimate acoustic. The ballet, meanwhile, transformed a building that had been empty and rotting for 50 years to make it into the stunning *Todd Bolender Center for Dance and Creativity*. The Opera acquired two buildings nearby, as administration, production and studio space.



Already by 2011 then, the renaissance was in full swing. With world-class performance space, what could be done that couldn't be dreamed of before? As Deborah Sandler, General Director and CEO of the Opera since 2012 comments, 'once you change the frame, you change the picture'. It is inestimable what follows. The season opened, fittingly, with Puccini's large-scale opera, *Turandot*: Keith Brumley, the Director of Design and Technical Production finally got a chance to build huge Chinese sculptures, impossible in their old shop. The Ballet could now add more full-length ballets to their repertory – their first *Swan Lake* in 2014, and their first ever world premiere of a full-scale ballet, Septime Webre's superb *Wizard of Oz* last year.



Lillian Hagerman and company, *The Wizard of Oz*, Kansas City Ballet, October 2014

© Elizabeth Stehling

It isn't just the quality and scale of performances that have changed for the better of recent years: it is also about who the city is able to attract, nurture, launch or even keep hold of. Under Sandler, the Lyric has started a Resident Artist Program which is now in its third year, the idea being to stamp singers with the local brand before sending them out into the world. Furthermore, the city has become a much more attractive place for musicians, singers and dancers to make their career home. One time, as Jeff Bentley, Director of the Ballet since 1998 points out, the city was more of a stepping stone for ambitious artistes; now it is becoming a destination in itself.

The future

What next? Talking with the directors of each of the RAOs, there is no sense of resting on laurels. On the contrary, they each want to build on the momentum created by the Kauffman Center, and their enthusiasm is contagious. It's a good time. The city is still on the ascent, its full potential yet to be reached. With the 10 year anniversary of the Center in 2021 on the horizon, audiences, according to its CEO, Paul Schofer, are holding up well, at 480,000 a year, showing that the first flush of enthusiasm was no flash in the pan but a sign of real commitment.

Raising the bar, as Sandler points out, has to be done in every single aspect of the RAOs' operation – not just in terms of the calibre of performances, but also in funding, institutional structure, audience development, and presence in the wider community. The last is especially dear to all their hearts. All three RAOs have outreach programs for schools and are keenly committed to making up for the deficit in arts education in the region. All three understand the need to integrate wider and more diverse audiences: the orchestra, for example, plays live for film showings and with non-symphonic artistes; the ballet offers sensory friendly performances; the opera hosts free First Friday events for the crowds who flock to the Crossroads district for a monthly taste of city life.

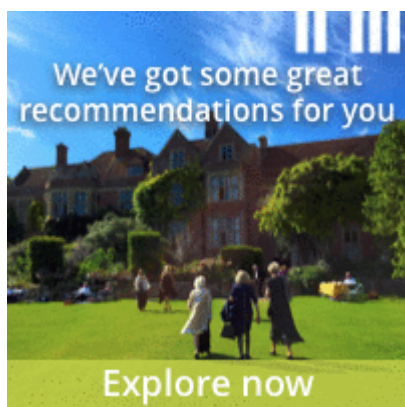


Kauffman Center night view

© Tim Hursley

A whole new source of energy flows from the Lyric's studio building, where they run an Explorations Series for experimental opera, especially important in an area of the country where audiences tend to conservatism of taste, preferring, on the whole, to be entertained rather than challenged. Does Sandler struggle with this? However she might feel about it privately, she is shrewdly pragmatic: 'I'm an advocate for my audience' she says simply; her job is to bring opera to as many people as possible, not to turn them off. 'People here don't want to be lectured to'.

Nonetheless, they are clearly energized by the cultural renaissance around them and overturning the Midwest's reputation as flyover country, are getting used to being looked at, for a change. As Safdie conceived it, the grand lobby of the Kauffman Center would be the living room for an entire city. And it's a living room with the lights on, and the curtains up: an invitation to come in. Backlit against the glass, attendees stage themselves, visible to the whole city during evening performances. The hill is a beacon: a symbol of cultural transformation, and a sign of good things still to come.





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