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# How to Form an Opera Guild

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**Materials created by Opera Volunteers International (OVI)  
to assist opera companies, volunteers, and others interested  
in forming opera guilds for the volunteer support of opera**

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*“An opera company is like a three-legged stool. It rests upon three important foundations: its staff, its board of trustees, and its volunteers. Without any of the three it would fall down. Each is necessary to make it stand.”*

- Glynn Ross, General Director, Arizona Opera, in an address to Opera Guilds International, 1989

*“The word ‘volunteer’ comes from two Swahili words: vol, meaning ‘to kill oneself,’ and unteer, meaning ‘without pay.’ Anthropologists, in trying to ascertain the first volunteers, have thought perhaps they originated when Moses parted the Red Sea and was looking for someone to be the first person through. In the course of volunteer research, it has been discovered that (a) for every paid employee there were three volunteers actually doing the job, (b) behind every ‘success’ was a half-dead volunteer whose name nobody could remember, and (c) for God so loved the world that he sent his only volunteer.”*

- from an Opera Guilds International publication, 1985

## **Background on Opera Volunteers International**

These materials have been developed by Opera Volunteers International for the use of volunteers who wish to begin a volunteer opera support organization, or opera company staff members who wish to stimulate the creation of volunteer organizations to support the opera company. Opera Volunteers International (OVI) is a not-for-profit association of opera volunteer support groups from across the United States, Canada and several other countries whose purpose is to promote the use and effectiveness of volunteers and volunteer organizations to support the world of opera. It also counts among its members hundreds of individual volunteers who share this endeavor. In total, OVI and its member organizations represent more than 10,000 opera volunteers.

## **Introduction**

### **Who Are Our Volunteers?**

For the last several decades the United States Department of Labor has tracked information about the people who are volunteers in America. The latest data, as of this writing, shows that in 2009 about 26.8% of Americans over the age of 16 performed some kind of volunteer service. The percentage was highest among those 35 to 55 years of age

(over 30%). Women were more likely to volunteer than men (30.1% overall to 23.3%), and those with college educations were far more likely to volunteer than those without (42.8% of college graduates at 32.5% of those with some college). Married people, and those with children, were more likely to volunteer than unmarriages or childless people, and those employed full time (29.7%) or part time (33.7%) were more likely to volunteer than those without employment.

Among types of volunteer activities, religious organizations with 34.0% of volunteers and educational or youth service organizations with 26.1% of volunteers led the way. Cultural and arts organizations attracted 3.4% of volunteers. On the average, around 50 hours were spent per year by a volunteer. For volunteers 25 and over, around 20% volunteered for more than one organization.

For much more information, see <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/volun.pdf>.

As an interesting sidelight to statistics on volunteers, studies by several organizations, including the University of Michigan, Yale, UCLA, Johns Hopkins, Ohio State and the National Institute of Mental Health have demonstrated that volunteerism is the activity that correlates most closely with long life. We can at least make the claim that “volunteering extends your life span.”

For further information, see for example these reports in the popular press: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/17/study-retirees-who-volunt\\_n\\_216690.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/17/study-retirees-who-volunt_n_216690.html) and <http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/health/emotional/how-to-live-longer>.

## **Trends in Volunteerism**

As a result of the recent recession, some federal and state legislation has encouraged volunteers to assist government agencies in providing community services. In addition, many colleges, universities and high schools now make it a routine requirement of graduation that students work a certain number of volunteer hours.

Over the past several decades the single most striking change in the volunteer world has been the advent of the working woman as a volunteer. While in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, vast numbers of volunteers for charities of all kinds were drawn from the ranks of nonworking women, in the past 30 years women have constituted a large percentage of the work force, often a majority in some professions and age brackets.

Working women who now volunteer have less time, but higher skill levels, to bring to their volunteer activities. They are also much sought-after by many different charitable organizations and causes who wish to profit by their expertise. As a result, they understandably wish (and often demand) that their hours be well utilized by the organization for which they volunteer, and that they be able to see that they are “making a difference.” This presents both a limitation and an opportunity for organizations seeking to benefit from their willingness to volunteer. In short, we have fewer envelope stuffers but more committee chairs, and we need to adjust our expectations and volunteer tasks accordingly.

The conclusions in the preceding paragraph have always applied to men who volunteer for opera, but since opera has traditionally drawn the largest numbers of volunteers from among women, these conclusions are particularly applicable to opera volunteers today.

### **Who Are Our Opera Volunteers?**

The volunteer groups which are members of Opera Volunteers International have observed that opera volunteers typically come from one of the following categories:

♪ The true opera fans, many of whom have loved opera since childhood, who wish to promote opera, to see its audiences and financial support grow.

♪ Those who came late to opera, perhaps first introduced to it as adults, who have a broader view of the value of opera and the performing arts to the lifeblood and cultural richness of their community.

♪ Those who are only casual fans of opera, or perhaps not even fans at all, but who wish to volunteer for the opera for different reasons, such as:

♪ the desire for interaction with educated and higher income level people, purely for social reasons;

♪ the need to network with well-placed people in the community for business purposes. This may be particularly true of people who are new to a community and are looking to jump-start their position in the community, or those in the world of business who seek to expand their business contacts among prominent business leaders and their families;

♪ the desire to work for cultural organizations for the purpose of improving the community and making the general community climate more favorable for businesses and other organizations; and

♪ the need to have a more well-rounded lifestyle, particularly among those who have hectic business careers and want a change of pace, but still remain active, in their off-hours.

We can say with some certainty that opera volunteers, as a group, share several characteristics that may differentiate them from some other volunteer groups:

♪ They are more highly educated than many other volunteers. Of course, this is to be expected since more highly educated persons are more likely to have been exposed to the art form than those with less education (at least, this is true in the United States).

♪ They come from higher income levels than many other volunteers. This is perhaps corollary to the fact that opera volunteers are generally more highly educated.

♪ More and more of them are employed. As a result:

♪ They have fewer and fewer hours available for volunteer work, and

♪ They have higher and better skills to use when they do volunteer.

♪ Finally, they want to get substantial satisfaction out of their volunteer work. No longer is it enough to simply feel good about doing something constructive, although that of course continues to be important. More specifically, opera volunteers want to know that their specific talents are being well used and that they are “making a difference.”

### **What Do Opera Companies Seek of Their Volunteers?**

Whether the opera company obtains its volunteers through organizations like opera guilds or through direct recruitment (see further discussion below), the opera company seeks several specific things from its volunteers:

1. Volunteers can perform certain tasks that the company might otherwise have to use its employees to perform, or which it might otherwise need to hire outside help to perform. This reduces expenses and helps the company meet its budget targets.

2. Volunteers can render services that a company would not otherwise find it economical to render at all. For example, no opera company boutique could stay in business if it had to pay its workers, because the extra cost of salaries and benefits would drive the prices beyond acceptable market levels. But a boutique managed and staffed by volunteers can afford to sell its merchandise for reasonable prices.

3. Volunteers can provide expertise that is unavailable elsewhere, or at least that is not available for a reasonable cost. For example, a knowledgeable opera fan can provide program notes, edit a newsletter, give opera previews, or serve as a “speaker’s bureau” member. Opera companies know that this expertise is not readily available in the market, at least not without taking significant staff time away from company duties.

4. Volunteers can provide ideas for new initiatives in the fields of opera education, audience development, public relations and fund raising that no opera company staff would ever have the time or energy to create or implement.

5. Volunteers are drawn from the community at large, and can thus serve as contact people and ambassadors to the community in ways that no paid staff member could ever match. They provide an exponential increase in the numbers of people who can be reached by education, audience development and fundraising programs and projects.

### **The Common Ground of Opera Volunteers and Opera Companies**

From all of the above, there appears to be a common ground between opera volunteers and opera companies. Opera companies can benefit from their volunteers’ ability to furnish the services and contacts described above. Opera volunteers can benefit from having the company (and their fellow volunteers) serve as an outlet for the volunteer needs described above. The situation is a “win-win” situation for both groups. This is only true, however, if an acceptable volunteer structure is created, and if the volunteers feel comfortable and positive about their contributions. That is where the opera guild “fits in,” and that will be the subject of the remainder of these materials.

## **What is an Opera Guild?**

### **Volunteers as Members of a Group**

An opera guild is an association of volunteers who join together for the promotion of opera through volunteer efforts. The reasons for having a group of volunteers are many:

♪ groups are able to perform certain volunteer functions which by necessity exceed the capabilities of individual volunteers (*i.e.* holding a fund-raising event or running an educational program);

♪ groups provide volunteers with a base of fellowship and friendship which increases loyalty to the group and which increases the productiveness of the volunteers;

♪ groups are able to recruit new members through the contacts which each member of the group brings to the organization. The ever-increasing circle of contacts brought by each new batch of members makes perpetuation of the group's life more likely; and

♪ groups are likely to be inventive and creative in developing projects which benefit the opera company. The history of opera guilds is replete with examples of innovative projects conceived, developed and carried out by groups, which the opera company staff would never have created in the first place, much less actually carried out.

For these reasons and others, opera volunteers have historically associated in groups, which have been the primary source of opera volunteer efforts.

### **Opera Guilds as Contrasted with Direct Service Volunteers**

Even though opera guilds are group-based organizations, it is not necessary that all volunteers be members of groups. In many cases an opera company may need individual volunteers to perform certain jobs -- like usher at the theater, or help update the company's database, or answer the telephone at the company office, or pick up visiting artists arriving at the airport. Many companies recruit individual volunteers for such tasks ("direct service volunteers") which volunteer directly for the company on a one-on-one basis rather than through a group.

Direct service volunteering makes sense where the company has a specific, defined job, the job can be done by a single volunteer, the company is able to locate a volunteer who is capable and willing to perform the job, and the task requires no particular creativity or innovation. However, an opera company should not make the mistake of thinking that direct service volunteers are the complete "answer" to the company's volunteer needs. No matter how talented, direct service volunteers cannot carry on the project-oriented tasks which opera guilds perform. By definition they do not have the same "investment" of creativity and feeling of "ownership" that an opera guild feels for "its" own projects. Moreover, direct service volunteers do not have a self-perpetuating recruitment process akin to the nominating or membership committee that an opera guild typically uses.

As a result of these differences, direct service volunteers should be seen as useful to an opera company in certain situations, but by no means a replacement for an innovative, expanding and creative guild.



## **What Does an Opera Guild Do?**

Opera guilds have many different functions and perform many different tasks. These objectives differ from guild to guild. In some cities the opera guild is considered an important fund-raising group, for example, while in others the guild's major function may be opera education or the development of new audiences.

A guild's functions in a particular situation may depend on the needs of the company and the talents and proclivities of the individual guild members. The opera company may request that a guild perform specific functions (like, run educational programs). The guild, however, may be more comfortable performing others (like, fund raising). To a certain extent both the company and the guild should be understanding of the other's needs and flexible in accommodating them. The company should always realize, however, that the guild's effectiveness is highly dependent upon the talents of the individual guild members who assume leadership roles, and that it may be far better in the long run to allow the guild to do what it does best rather than to force it into a role for which its members are unsuited.

Moreover, an opera guild's functions may change over time. In its start-up stage a company may need help in audience development, for example. As it grows and expands, however, its needs may change and it may request the guild to assume a more active role in fund raising.

The function of the guild should not be "cast in iron" but should be a matter for discussion and agreement between the guild and the opera company staff and board of trustees. It is a dialogue that should always continue. One of the problems that sometimes arises with established guilds is that the dialogue has broken down and a clash has arisen between the opera company's expectations and the guild's self perception. Constant communication is the answer to this problem.

### **Fund Raising**

Opera guilds have undertaken an almost bewildering variety of fund-raising projects. In many cities the guild presents the annual opera ball, handling everything from the solicitation of underwriting dollars to hotel and caterer selection to decorations and ambience to reservations and attendance to programming and entertainment. Often a guild will host oral or silent auctions of premium items either in connection with an opera ball or as a stand-alone fund-raising project. These auctions, of course, require the

solicitation of appropriate items, the organizing of the event itself and the handling of payments and deliveries.

Other fund-raising projects include designer show houses, pub crawls, celebrity dinners, special performances or movie showings, city tours, opera trips, arts and crafts sales, drawings for big-ticket items, estate and furniture sales, and many, many more.

Opera Volunteers International maintains a Resource Manual, which contains how-to descriptions and instructions of many such fund-raising events.

### **Education Programs**

In the last two decades opera guilds have become more and more involved in education projects. Many guilds have conceived and developed their own opera performances for schools, classes for school children, puppet opera projects, children's workbooks, and other classroom education projects. In addition, many guilds sponsor school group visits to the opera house for matinee rehearsals or for actual mainstage performances. The variety of education projects is almost unlimited, and once again descriptions of some of these can be found in the Opera Volunteers International's *Good Ideas* booklets.

In several instances opera guild educational projects have proven so successful that opera companies have established their own education departments to take over and run the projects, considering them so valuable so as to be made a regular part of the company's objectives and budget. A healthy opera guild should consider this as a compliment, and be willing to move forward to create yet more interesting projects for the opera company.

Opera education involves not only children, but also adults. Many opera guilds sponsor opera previews before the performances, hold adult education seminars and programs in various public venues, bring opera performances to senior citizen centers or community centers to attract audiences which the company might not otherwise reach, or produce audiotape previews to which adults can listen at their leisure.

### **Advocacy**

The recent trend away from government support for the arts, which we see in the United States, Canada and other countries, has made more important than ever the organizing of citizens to speak out for the arts. Arts advocacy may not only encourage continued government support, but may address such issues as the nonprofit postal subsidy, the

continuation of tax deductions for charitable contributions, and other public issues which affect the arts.

Opera guilds are particularly suited to advocacy efforts, representing as they do a cross-section of the community. Many opera guilds have organized telephone trees or other means of reaching their members and encouraging them to make their voices known to elected officials and others.

### **Membership**

An opera guild must continually perpetuate itself, and attracting new members is part of the function of any well-run organization. Opera guilds often develop functions specifically to attract new members, or reach out to new communities or new audiences. These programs range from parties to trips to seminars and workshops, as well as the individual networking/recruitment which must always continue.

### **Audience Development**

The opera guild is the company's "grass roots" organization in the community. Often it is the guild members who are the closest to the audiences the company wishes to reach. Therefore, they are uniquely suited to certain kinds of audience development activities. These activities may include, for example, speaker's bureaus of guild members willing to give talks to neighborhood and community organizations, opera previews, teaching classes about music and opera, and programs of bringing friends to the opera (often at discount ticket prices arranged through the company box office). Surveys have shown that most people first attended an opera because somebody asked them -- and the person doing the asking was, in all likelihood, a member of the guild.

### **Public Relations**

Any organization, including an opera company, should maintain regular contact with the community and with its own constituency. Opera guilds can often be useful in this regard. For example, several opera guilds publish their companies' newsletters and represent their company in various public forums.

### **The Importance of Making it Fun**

Regardless of the opera guild's functions, it is important to both the guild and the company that the members of the guild enjoy doing the things that they do. The guild must "make it

fun” for the guild members to participate and contribute the time and effort they invest in guild projects. Part of the “fun” derives simply from the joy of helping encourage an art form the guild member loves, getting to know fellow opera enthusiasts, and seeing through to completion a project created and developed by the guild. Sometimes these things are enough. But every manager of a guild project should always keep in mind the goal of making sure that the volunteers enjoy what they are doing. After all, they are unpaid, and if they don’t enjoy it, you will lose them.

## **Where Do We Start?**

Okay, now that we know what opera guilds are, what they do, and the functions they can perform, where do we go from here? How can we get one started?

### **Identify the Founders**

First and foremost, an opera guild consists of people. So, the first task is to identify the people who will form the nucleus of the guild. These are the founders, the people who will choose the guild’s purpose, decide on the specific guild projects, recruit others to join them and ultimately set the tone for the new organization.

In many cases a member or two of the company board of trustees will be the founders of the guild. In others it is a small group of particularly enthusiastic opera fans. Sometimes it is a direct service opera company volunteer or two, who wish to get involved in a bigger way and develop camaraderie with other volunteers. In other cases, the founders are people who are socially prominent in the community, who want to be known and identified with one of the community’s major assets, *i.e.* the opera company. In several instances guilds have been founded by teachers or students from a local college or university music department.

It is important to remember that the founders of the guild must be the sort of people who are unafraid of challenges, and who are outgoing, willing to recruit new members, excited about proselytizing for the opera, and who have the kind of infectious enthusiasm which will draw others to them. Finding just the right people is important, and is probably the most difficult part of the process.

Remember not to close your eyes to any possibilities, and to look for these types of people wherever you might find them. The diehard opera fan who has no independent wealth and

no social standing but who listens intently from a balcony seat at every production may surprise you by being able to contribute in time and effort far beyond the value of any monetary contribution he or she might bring.

## **Recruit the Membership**

Most newly formed opera guilds recruit their membership through one or all of the following methods:

♪ A mailing to those who buy tickets to the opera, those who contribute money, or who otherwise might be on the opera company mailing list. This mailing should consist of a flyer or brochure for the new guild, hopefully presenting it as an exciting, fun-filled organization which has interesting projects to do and which will “make a difference” in the community.

♪ This mailing can also be sent to other mailing lists which the company might obtain, such as the mailing list for a local theater organization, dance company, symphony orchestra, or public television or radio station. These lists, or portions of them, can sometimes be obtained free of charge through a trade of lists with the other organization(s).

♪ A kickoff event. This would be a dinner or other social occasion, perhaps featuring songs by an opera performer or two, and perhaps held in an attractive home or other appealing location. A “big name” attraction, such as a prominent opera figure from another city, may encourage attendance. Invitations can be mailed to a broad list of people, along with the membership flyer. However, the actual attendance will probably come more from personal invitations made by the guild’s founders to their friends and acquaintances.

♪ Publicity in the local newspaper or in local magazines. You can send out press releases announcing the formation of the guild, announcing that memberships are being accepted, and perhaps announcing the kickoff event described above.

In making the initial pitch for the newly formed guild, either in print, at a kickoff event or elsewhere, you should describe the types of projects which the guild might undertake, without making specific promises that they will be done. Whether they will actually be done depends upon the talent, time and skills of the volunteers who are to be recruited. The point, however, is to give a specific flavor to the new organization, rather than announcing that it is generally a volunteer group for the service of opera. Most volunteers, particularly

the talented ones you want to recruit, will want something more substantial that they feel they will be able to “sink their teeth into.”

## **Identify the Projects**

As you have gathered from the above, some of this work needs to be done by the guild’s founders even before the initial membership flyer or kickoff event is produced. Once the initial “push” is over and the membership consists of least a few more people, however, the membership needs to decide what projects, in particular, it will undertake for the opera company.

We have already described above the kinds of projects which a guild can undertake. Some of these are ambitious projects which take many volunteers and lots of experience, while others are simpler projects that can be done by beginning volunteers with no prior seasoning.

We recommend that for its first project or two the guild start modestly, with projects that are easily handled by a few volunteers, and with goals that are not overly difficult to achieve. It is much easier to capitalize on a success than on a failure. Not a few guilds have gotten sidetracked right from the start, and have sometimes lost valuable new members, by “biting off more than they can chew” and seeing the first project fail for lack of volunteer time, organizational ability, or manpower.

This is the time for the opera company staff to have patience. Good guilds take time to create!

## **Do It!**

Once the first project is chosen, the guild needs to undertake the work, finish the project and (hopefully) celebrate its success. The particulars will of course depend entirely on the project itself. The important thing, however, is to tackle it in an organized way and make sure that the project is something in which all members of the new guild can take pride.

# **Organizational Structure**

## **Get it Started First**

One mistake that is often made by newly-formed volunteer groups is to get bogged down in organizational matters. There will always be those who think it is important to choose officers, designate committees, write bylaws and do other organizational work before undertaking any real volunteer projects. While those who feel this way may ultimately be very useful to the organization when it gets to that stage, it is our observation that the new guild needs to get a few successes under its belt before focusing too much on the paperwork.

In other words, let's make sure that the guild is a success and will be around for a while, before we get too concerned about a lot of organizational details. Many guilds do not grow into the formal organizational stage until several years after their creation (although we are not necessarily recommending that you wait that long!).

### **Answering the Initial Questions**

Once the guild is firmly established and looks like it is going to be around for a while, the time has arrived for the guild to develop a formal organizational structure. At this juncture the guild needs to ask itself several questions, the answers to which may depend in part on the company staff and board of trustees. We suggest that all aspects of the opera company be involved in answering these questions:

(1) Is the guild going to be an independent entity or will it come under the wing of the opera company? In other words (in legal terms) will it be a separate not-for-profit corporation or association with its own articles of incorporation, bylaws, tax exemption, nonprofit postal permit, insurance policies, and so forth? Or will it be a more informal association of volunteers which uses the opera company's nonprofit status, postal permit, insurance coverages, etc.?

(2) Will the guild control its own finances, or will its finances be under the control of the company? Some guilds have their own bank accounts on which the signatories are only guild members. Others simply have a sub-account (often in ledger format only) under the company's bank account, and the company has ultimate control of the guild's funds. This may be a question on which the company's auditors will have key input.

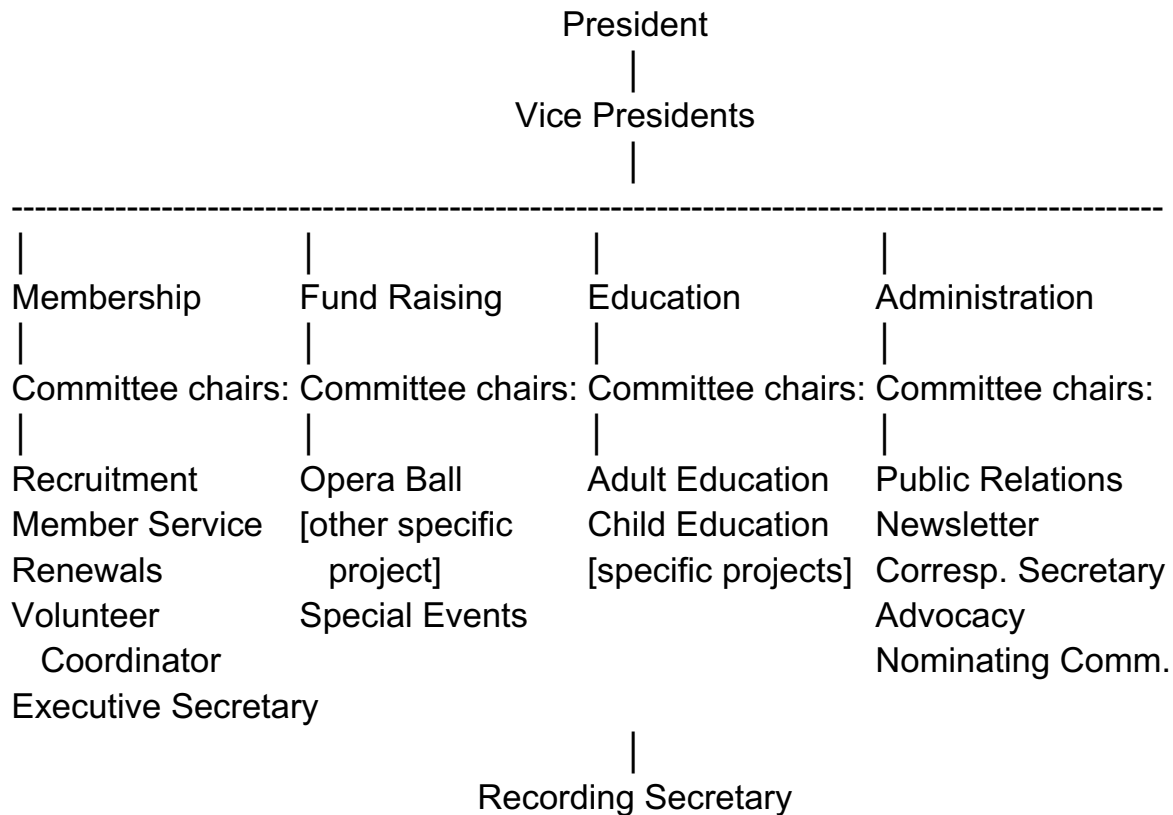
(3) How independent will the guild be, in terms of leadership and direction? Will the guild's leaders (officers and board of directors) decide what projects to undertake, how to spend money, and how to recruit members? Or will this be done only in conjunction with (and with the consent of) a company staff member?

There is no one “right” answer to any of these questions. The answers depend on the personalities involved and the preferences of the opera company.

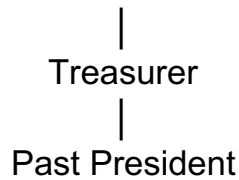
Opera Volunteers International has observed over the years that guilds typically operate under the legal umbrella of their companies with no separate legal existence, tax exemption qualification, nonprofit postal number or insurance policies. However, most guilds also have their own independent bank accounts, control their finances and have independent leadership. Keep in mind that the most successful guilds are often those which operate with relative independence. Those guilds which exercise a great deal of discretion in deciding which projects to undertake, and in organizing and carrying out those projects and dealing with their finances, are often the guilds to which creative volunteers are most attracted.

### Organizational Structure

The guild should have an organizational structure, which typically looks something like this:







The executive committee of the guild typically consists of the officers, being the president, vice presidents, recording secretary, treasurer and past president.

This simple outline may well omit some of the officer or committee chairs you may desire, such as a telephoning chair, a transportation committee, an artist hospitality committee, and so forth. Of course, no two guilds' organizational structures are the same. Modify as you see fit!

One question the guild should address is whether to have a President-elect. Many guilds have found it useful to have a designated person "waiting in the wings" to assure a smooth transition from one leader to another. The President-elect can either be one of the vice presidents, or a separate person designated by the board.

## **Bylaws**

Whether or not the guild has independent legal status from the company, it should have its own set of bylaws setting forth its governing structure and rules. These bylaws can be (and probably will be) changed from time to time to adapt to changing circumstances, but they should contain at least the following elements. A sample set of bylaws (which is not necessarily a recommendation, but which is an example) is available from Opera Volunteers International.

### **Elements of Guild Bylaws**

**Introduction.** The bylaws should briefly set forth the relationship of the guild and the company, and state the reason for their adoption (*i.e.* to set forth the organizational rules governing the guild).

**Statement of Purpose.** This is one of the most important parts of the bylaws, and probably requires the most input from guild members. The guild should consider and adopt a statement of purpose or "mission statement" setting forth the basic purpose, mission and precepts of the guild. A sample is contained in the sample bylaws attached, but this may vary widely from guild to guild.

**Principal Office.** Where will the guild's office be, if it has one? Often this is at the company's offices, but not always.

**Membership.** The bylaws should state who is eligible for membership (Anyone? Ticket holders only? Contributors only?), whether dues will be charged (the exact amount can be left to the board to determine, from time to time), whether there will be one or several categories of membership (again, the board can determine these from time to time), what the membership year will be (it does not have to be the same as the guild's fiscal year, but it may be), when general membership meetings will be held (these are different from board meetings, which will be more frequent), the procedure for giving notification of meetings, the place of meetings, who can vote (presumably only members in good standing; if you have "family" memberships, ask yourself whether a "family" has one or more votes), what constitutes a quorum for voting purposes and whether there are super-majority requirements for any particular votes (like, election of officers or board members).

**Directors.** As the guild grows it will almost always find itself needing to be governed by a board of directors rather than the whole membership. The bylaws should specify who is eligible for the board (presumably only members in good standing, but is there a seniority requirement?), how many will serve on the board (an odd number of people avoids the possibilities of deadlock), whether the directors are reimbursed for any expenses, the length of term for which a board member is elected, whether board members are elected for staggered terms (many boards have three-year terms, with a third of the board being elected each year), how board members are nominated and elected (this is where the Nominating Committee may come into play), how to fill board vacancies upon resignation or death, and how directors are removed from office (this will hopefully be unnecessary, but some guilds have really been glad they have had such a provision, in some circumstances!). The bylaws should also cover when and where board meetings are held, specify the voting procedures for the board, define the quorum for a board meeting, specify whether any votes require supermajorities (e.g. removal of a board member), and establish any particular board committees (the board should have discretion to add or remove committees from time to time).

**Officers.** The bylaws should specify the officers of the guild and give brief job descriptions for the officers. What are the powers and responsibilities of each officer? The bylaws should specify which officers constitute the executive committee, which should have the power to act (especially in the event of emergency) in lieu of the entire board. They should define whether there are any particular requirements of officers (for example, is the treasurer to be bonded or not?). The bylaws should address the procedure by which

officers are elected (by the whole membership at an annual meeting, or by the board alone?), and the timing and length of their terms of office. The bylaws should also address whether officers are to be compensated for their expenses.

**Financial Matters.** The bylaws should specify whether the guild will have its own bank account and, if so, how it is handled (*e.g.* who are the signatories?). What is the fiscal year of the guild (it often coincides with the company's fiscal year, but need not necessarily do so)? Many bylaws also contain a legal statement that no financial obligation of the guild constitutes a financial obligation of the opera company itself, and that the opera company is not liable for activities of the guild or its officers.

**Legal Limitations.** It is very important that the opera company maintain its tax-exempt status. Any actions of the guild that are inconsistent with that status may jeopardize it. Therefore, for the understanding of all guild members, the bylaws should contain a specific statement that the guild will undertake no actions which will jeopardize the company's nonprofit status (like, for example, endorsing political candidates or lobbying for legislation).

**Other Legal Matters.** Finally, there are a few legal odds-and-ends that the bylaws should address: the issue of how the bylaws themselves are amended, and how the guild would be dissolved in the event it goes out of business (What happens to its bank account? What happens to its personal property such as equipment and computers?).

### **Other Organizational Issues**

One of the most important things for guilds and opera companies to remember is the necessity for regular communication. While in some instances this takes place on an ongoing basis without the need for any formal structure, we feel that a formal structure is best, for it guaranties that the communication will take place, regardless of the changes in personalities that may from time to time occur. This is best done through:

♪ Having a company staff member be a formal guild "liaison" and attend guild board meetings. The staff member can keep the guild board updated on the latest company developments, head off possible miscommunication or controversy, and serve as a sounding board for guild ideas. Likewise, the staff member can take guild issues back to the staff for discussion and later resolution.

♪ Having the guild president sit on the company board of trustees as an *ex officio* (and often full voting) member. This way the guild president can make a regular "guild report" at

company board meetings and keep the company advised on guild developments. This will serve the purpose of making sure that the board of trustees appreciates all that the guild is doing. It also provides a line of communication directly between the guild and the trustees, so that mutual concerns can be expressed and (if necessary) handled.

At least one guild and company have taken the second of these suggestions a step further, and have the *President-elect* of the guild sit on the company board of trustees as well. This gives the incoming guild president a “leg up” on company matters and helps smooth the transition in guild leadership.

### **Does a Guild Have to Have an Opera Company?**

The above discussion assumes that the opera guild will be closely associated with an opera company. This is usually the case, but there are a few successful opera guilds which are independent of any opera company. Some of these guilds were formed before any opera companies existed in their city, and decided for one reason or another not to formally associate with the one (or more) opera companies which were later founded. Others of these guilds used to be associated with opera companies, but have continued life independently after the opera company folded or was dissolved.

The organization and structure of a truly independent opera guild will be much the same as described above, with the obvious exceptions that the guild will be separately organized and that there is no communication issue or representation issue with respect to the respective organizations' boards of directors. Still, it is important for independent guilds to have clear bylaws governing their structure and organization.

## **Guild/Staff/Trustee Relations**

### **Expectations**

As we have discussed several times above, it is crucial that the guild, the opera company staff, and the opera company board of trustees develop clearly established relationships and lines of communications. Each group should understand its role and act accordingly. Because roles sometimes change with changing times and personnel, this requires constant communication and a mutually supportive attitude among all three “legs” of the three-legged “stool” which supports the opera company.

The key word which describes the intersection of these three groups is “expectations.” Each group needs to understand exactly what is expected of itself and of the other groups. We have observed that relationships between these three groups most often break down in situations where a group has not clearly defined its expectations of the others. For example, if a company board of trustees begins to expect its guild to play a certain role (e.g. raise a significant amount of money), but does not articulate the role or explain its thinking, the guild will naturally fail to achieve the board’s goals. This could then lead to trustee disappointment with the guild, which could easily have been avoided if the trustees had simply expressed their expectations in the first instance and given the guild a chance to react.

The important adjective which should be attached to the word “expectations” is the word “realistic.” A sudden shift in expectations to an unrealistic level is bound to lead to disappointment and perhaps recriminations. The expectations of each group need to be defined not only by the group holding the expectations, but endorsed by the group from whom the performance is expected.

### **The Written Contract**

In several cases of which we are aware, the company, trustees and guild have actually set down their expectations in writing, and have created a sort of “contract” between the groups. While such contracts are still rare, they may well gain popularity in future years. Such a contract might cover, for example, the following subjects:

♪ The roles of the three groups. For example, the contract might state (in more detail) that:

♪ The board of trustees is to hire and fire the company general director, approve budgets, approve the company’s repertoire each season, and take responsibility for raising enough money to cover the annual fund-raising goal;

♪ The company staff is to handle administrative matters such as theater rentals, hiring and firing of employees, handling of accounting and bookkeeping matters, producing the operas within the budgeted amount, providing marketing and public relations support, and providing development support; and

♪ The guild is to provide volunteer support as the company staff may request, conceive and carry through projects to raise funds to help the company’s development

efforts, organize and plan educational programs for the schools and also for adults, provide advocacy support, recruit new audiences, and increase its own membership.

♪ The lines of communication between the groups. We have already discussed having a company staff member as a “liaison” to the guild, and having the guild president sit on the company board of trustees. There may be other channels of communication (for example, between guild committee chairs and certain second-level company staff members) which should be established.

♪ The specific goals for the groups. For example, the company may establish an annual fund-raising goal for the guild, which the guild is expected to meet. The guild should agree to meet it, provided that it is established through a mutually agreeable procedure (like, having the guild board approve the goal before it is submitted to the company board as part of a budget proposal). Another example would be for the guild’s education programs to reach at least X number of students or to have at least Y number of school performances.

♪ Recognition for jobs well performed. The company might, for example, agree to recognize that a certain number of guild volunteer hours is being worth a certain level of monetary contribution to the company, and agree to give the guild appropriate opera program recognition or other benefits that accrue to monetary donors to the company (access to donor lounges, tickets to special events, etc.).

♪ Ways in which the groups support each other. If the guild, for example, needs the help of the company development office in organizing a fundraising event (assisting with mailing, consulting on underwriting, etc.), this should be defined. If there are deadlines or timetables to be met (for example, the company needs the guild to hold its opera ball within a certain time frame to avoid conflicting with the company’s season or other fundraising events) these should be specified.

♪ Limitations on the groups’ authority. For example, if the company wants the right to approve guild projects in advance, the contract should specify so, and indicate the level of information the company needs before it will be able to say yes or no.

♪ Possible conflicts which may arise. One common issue is whether the guild and company are in conflict when they each seek to raise money from the same constituency (the opera-going audience). If the guild seeks to have these people join as guild members and pay dues, at the same time that the company is soliciting these people for monetary contributions to the company, does this create a problem? In many situations it does not,

but in some cities the organizations have become concerned about this and have implemented other solutions (for example, making every contributor above \$X an automatic member of the guild).

As each guild and company develop and learn to work with one another, other items to be included in such a written contract will become evident. Needless to say, each such agreement should be reviewed and revised from time to time to reflect changing conditions and expectations.

### **The Maturing Process**

One important thing to keep in mind throughout this process is that the only constant is change. As a guild grows and matures, it will find its own identity in terms of the types of volunteers it attracts, the skills and talents of its membership pool, the types of projects it wishes to run, and the nature of the results it achieves. Constant communication between a company and a guild, and a mutual willingness to be flexible, will be the hallmarks to a successful guild/company relationship.

As mentioned above, one of the developments that often occurs with mature guilds is that the opera company likes some of the guild's projects so much that it takes them over as its own. Many guilds have found this to be true, particularly in the area of opera education. Guilds across the country established innovative and effective education programs for the schools thirty or forty years ago, but in recent decades the opera companies have established their own education departments, and quite naturally looked first to the education programs of their own guilds and used them as a starting point for their own education initiatives, taking over the management of these projects.

When this occurs, a guild needs to remember to be flexible and allow the company to take over the project. A dispute over "ownership" of an effective project can only be detrimental to the cause of opera. The guild should consider it a fine compliment that its project has been "co-opted," and should be willing to find other outlets for its creative and organizational energies.

Another issue that often arises with "mature" guilds is that of succession. The early group of founding members often finds that with time and increasing age it loses focus and commitment. This is the natural time for a new generation of leaders to step forth. All too often, however, the original group has failed to identify and recruit new leaders and thus finds itself "trapped" in a situation where it has to continue to lead, or see the guild shrink and perhaps disappear.

The solution to this problem is to start early, well before the problem arises. A guild should always be seeking new leaders. As newer members become more involved in the organization, they should be promoted to leadership positions. Then they themselves should be encouraged to seek new leaders. This constant recruitment and placement of new leadership is terribly important, so that the founding group does not become “trapped” without a succession plan.

### **Do You Need More Than One Guild?**

In many cities there is more than one opera guild. Is this a good idea?

In some cases, multiple guilds arise because of geographic dispersion. If the opera company is placed in a large metropolitan area with many far-flung suburbs, those in the outlying areas may prefer to organize their own chapters of the guild, and conduct their own activities, because most of their members will be unwilling to spend the time and energy to go “all the way downtown” for meetings and functions. Also, some guilds are associated with companies based in smaller cities, but which draw their opera audiences from other small and medium-sized towns throughout the state. If an opera company serves an entire region, it may be impossible for guild members to get together for common meetings because of travel difficulties.

In these instances, individual opera guilds naturally form in different suburbs or cities. They often run their own programs and have their own activities, but are governed by a “council” of presidents or representatives from the different guilds. Sometimes a portion of the guild members’ dues are kept by the local chapter to fund its own activities and the rest is forwarded to the “council,” which conducts overall activities and makes contributions to the opera company. These arrangements can work in a number of ways.

In other cases geographic dispersion has nothing to do with the rise of multiple guilds. The original guild becomes focused on one particular type of activity, or recruits one particular type of member, and other guilds are needed to broaden the volunteer support base for the company. There is nothing wrong with this phenomenon; in fact, it seems to be a very common occurrence. It is often far better to form a new guild and allow it to take on its own identity and activities rather than to try to force the original guild to broaden its membership or purpose, if the original guild finds that uncomfortable.

The following are some examples (with the identities of the organizations deleted) of “special purpose” guilds which actually exist in some cities:



♪ A guild of intense opera fans whose purpose is limited to giving opera preview lectures and adult education programs.

♪ A guild of society women of wealth who form a small exclusive group whose sole purpose is to put on the opera ball each year, which is the city's most exclusive social occasion.

♪ A guild of backstage volunteers who work with the opera company's technical staff in building sets, making costumes, making wigs, and creating props for the opera company's productions.

♪ A guild of men only, who gather together to discuss business and community issues as well as support the opera, mainly through financial contributions.

♪ A guild which began with a group of talented and creative young women who publish an extremely successful series of opera workbooks for children.

♪ A guild of merchandising enthusiasts who do nothing but run their opera company's boutique, and do so with enormous success.

♪ A "young people's" organization which focuses on recruiting young professionals, first with social and networking events, but later moving into fund raising activities.

♪ A guild devoted to increasing awareness of the opera and opera attendance among certain minority populations of the community, sponsoring events and functions that appeal particularly to members of that minority group.

As you can see, there is a wide variety of special purposes to which guilds can devote themselves.

## **Conclusion**

There are many paths to success for opera guilds. In the case of each successful opera guild, however, there is a similar thread to its story: strong founders, a good initial membership campaign, good projects, broad-based membership recruitment, excellent communications with the opera company and board of trustees, and a practice of recruiting and training new leaders. We at Opera Volunteers International hope who will find these materials useful in launching your guild on the path to success. Remember that your guild

can grow and learn by becoming a member of Opera Volunteers International, where we share resources and expertise among opera guilds across four continents. We remain ready and willing to help whenever we can. We wish you the best of luck, and we offer you our continued support.