

**Recruiting and Training the  
New Generation of Opera Volunteers**

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## I. Introduction

Opera Volunteers International, in its 37-year history of observation and interaction with opera volunteers in many cities throughout North America, has noticed a common pattern in the cycle of opera volunteerism. This pattern frequently takes the following form:

1. A group of opera volunteers is formed, either by the staff of an opera company (through seeking out season ticket holders and others who show enthusiasm for the art form) or by a group of committed individuals themselves.

2. This group plans programs, devises volunteer service projects, creates initiatives and develops a pattern of assisting the opera company in various ways. These ways can be as many and as diverse as the opera companies and the volunteers in the community: ushering at performances; giving pre-performance lectures; providing educational programs in the schools for youngsters and in churches, libraries and community centers for adults; assisting visiting artists who are in town for rehearsals and performances; forming speakers' bureaus to farm out and "spread the word" about opera in the community at large; assisting backstage during productions; create fund raising programs such as travel programs and opera balls; publish newsletters; and so forth.

3. After a few years of enthusiastic activity the enthusiasm of the initial cadre of volunteers, usually a group of close friends, begins to flag. For a variety of reasons such as age, the distractions of rearing families, the pressures of professional careers, or the temptations of volunteering for other charitable organizations, the volunteers begin to "drop out," one by one. Many still remain season ticket subscribers and opera enthusiasts, but take the time and talent previously spent on opera volunteer efforts and use it elsewhere.

4. As these volunteers withdraw from active volunteering, the programs and initiatives which they once pursued so enthusiastically begin to wither. There are either no successor volunteers in place to run them, or the people to whom the initial volunteers turn over these tasks prove less capable and/or less enthusiastic than their predecessors. One by one, the programs are dropped or discarded, the cadre of volunteers shrinks, and the whole effort "dies on the vine." Sometimes the group survives with a much smaller mission than before, and sometimes the group "dies out" altogether, perhaps with a few formerly-involved individuals becoming direct volunteers with the opera company instead.

Does it have to be this way? Is this a predetermined cycle of birth-and-death for opera volunteer groups? Opera Volunteers International doesn't think so. While some groups fit the above pattern, there are many others which have shown themselves to be resilient and self-renewing, and which refuse to die when the original participants leave. Instead, they grow in strength, numbers and enthusiasm. They branch out into yet additional areas of volunteer activity, sometimes retooling old programs to fit more

contemporary needs. Both the volunteer group and the opera company gain from this increased vitality, and the volunteer organization becomes “bigger and better” as a result.

How can we convert a failing opera volunteer effort into a renewed and revitalized one? There are many ways, but first we need to identify the causes of the problem and the address them, perhaps one by one, in as early a stage as possible. The seeds to failure were not planted overnight: they were there all along. And the keys to success will not be created overnight: they need to be uncovered and utilized in a constructive way.

## **II. The Causes of the Problem**

The seeds of potential failure can be many. This section of this paper addresses those which Opera Volunteers International has observed over the years. The succeeding section will address the approaches which, in our experience, are the most successful in addressing these various causes.

A stylistic note: Opera volunteer groups call themselves by many names. Some are Guilds, some are groups of Friends, some are Leagues, some are Associations and others use other names. By far the majority, however, call themselves Guilds, and so for purposes of simplicity we will often use that name in this paper. Of course, by that name we mean to include any opera volunteer organization of whatever name.

### **A. Failure to Recruit New Guild Members**

One of the most basic causes of the eventual failure of opera volunteer efforts is an over-dependency upon the initial group. The cadre of volunteers which creates the initial effort is often a group of close friends, or opera fans who become close through working side-by-side as volunteers for the opera company. Over time, these people sometimes come to view themselves as a sort of exclusive club, into which others are not really permitted.

The psychology of clubbiness is well beyond the scope of this paper, but it may result in part from an ability to keep all the “fun” to one’s own group, a wish to preserve the myth that only this particular group of volunteers has the talent and expertise to handle these matters (after all, if new members are allowed in, doesn’t this prove that others, too, are just as talented as the original group?), and a simple enjoyment of the social pleasures of interacting with a close group, which is inevitably dissipated when the group expands.

Regardless of the cause, the effect of clubbiness is well known: the initial group, while it may function quite effectively for a few years, eventually suffers from overwork, “volunteer burn-out,” or simple malaise, and begins to shrink. Perhaps members of the group leave town for perfectly understandable reasons (for example, a change in job, a

spouse's relocation to a different city, or a retirement and a wish to be near one's children or grandchildren). For whatever reason, the club begins to shrink. And when it does, the remaining members find it difficult if not impossible to carry on, at least in the same manner as before.

The failure here is a failure of the initial members to foresee the problems of clubbiness and to be willing to expand the group to take in new members, train them appropriately, and prepare them for succession.

### **B. Failure to Appreciate the Needs of Today's Generation of Volunteers**

In the earlier years of opera volunteering, in the 1960's and 1970's when some of today's older opera volunteer organizations were formed many of the volunteers were married women who did not have careers outside the home. They had some time on their hands, a desire to help the community, and an appreciation for what was in some instances the newest and shiniest cultural organization in town – the opera company. (This description, of course, does not apply to longstanding companies and older volunteer organizations like those we find in New York, Chicago or San Francisco, but it does apply to many mid-sized and smaller communities throughout North America.)

When the ladies who were the inspiration and heart of these volunteer organizations began to reach an age where they could no longer provide the many hours of work and support which the organization required, they often found themselves confronted with a real problem: the new generation of women was of an entirely different breed. They were career women, dedicated to pursuing their own professional opportunities, and faced difficult issues of their own. They were trying to juggle a busy professional career with the responsibilities of raising a family. Often the original founding members of the organization were nonplussed as to how to deal with these new volunteers, and had little understanding of how to appeal to these women.

Moreover, this “women-only” focus of the organization created substantial problems in appealing to men as volunteers. While many men are dedicated opera fans and bring with them substantial talents and skills (and business contacts) which could be useful to the opera volunteer group, the fact that the organization was oriented towards women made it difficult for the original volunteers to break out of the women-only mode. (Opera Volunteers International itself faced such a problem in the 1980's, but was able to “break the mold” successfully and now boasts many active men on its board and in its volunteer ranks.)

### **C. Failure to Recognize the New Needs of Opera Companies**

In the early days of opera volunteering when the projects which the groups undertook in support of the opera company consisted of “unskilled labor” – *e.g.* helping answer telephones in the company office, providing housing and other amenities for

visiting artists, stuffing envelopes for fund raising events, and the like – almost any volunteers willing to spend the time were welcome and able to do the necessary tasks. This was particularly true in the days when many of today’s opera companies were fledgling organizations, barely struggling along on shoestring budgets and needing help and assistance with even the simplest of everyday jobs in order to stay alive and function.

As our opera companies have grown in size and financial maturity, however, many of them are able to pay others to perform some of these simple tasks. It is often simpler and less trouble for the company to hire this work done, than to organize and direct volunteers, and it provides a steadier and more reliable stream of assistance (the company doesn’t need to worry about who answers the phone this afternoon when the usual volunteer is called away to care for a sick child). Moreover, more and more of the routine work is now handled by computers and office machinery.

This does not, however, mean that the opera companies have less need for volunteer services. On the contrary, as they grow larger and more sophisticated they have even more of a need. But it is a need of a different kind. Perhaps the company needs an expert in marketing to direct a special-purpose advertising campaign, or a person experienced in organizing events to help plan a focused fund-raising event, or a person with expertise in the field of opera to supply audience preview lectures. These are all tasks that very much need doing, and yet are well beyond the “envelope stuffing” stage of volunteer work.

Alas, all too many volunteer groups fail to recognize this change in the needs of their companies and continue to want to provide the “tried and true” (in their minds) types of volunteer support, without realizing that the opera company really doesn’t need that kind of support anymore, but instead has very different needs. This often leads to a disconnect between the company and the volunteers who purport to support it, and an increasing marginalization of the opera volunteer group, whose efforts become less and less useful with each passing year.

#### **D. Failure to Update Projects to Today’s Needs**

The projects which many opera guilds carry out are those with which the guild began, or which were created at one point in its history in response to particular needs of the opera company or particular talents of the individual volunteers. Naturally, these projects, particularly if successful, become a part of the guild’s standard mode of operations and continue year after year.

Are these particular projects still useful? Do they answer a need in the community? Is there still a demand for these initiatives? Are the volunteers who are doing them now still up to the task, or if the projects have been handed over to future generations of volunteers are these new volunteers doing as good a job? If the answers to these questions are “yes,” then there should be no problem, other than to examine

whether the projects, even though still worthwhile and well done, are possibly taking time and effort which could be even better spent elsewhere.

However, in some instances the answer to one or more of these question will be “no.” If that is the case, then the guild maybe spending valuable time and volunteer talent continuing an initiative which is no longer needed, unappreciated or ineffective. In such a situation the guild is not only wasting the volunteers’ time and effort, but may actually be undermining its own legitimacy and value in the eyes of its opera company and others in the community.

#### **E. Failure to Match Volunteers With Their Responsibilities**

How many of us have detected an opportunity to do a job (either volunteer or professional), become enthusiastic about working on it, and joined the team working on the project, bristling with energy and enthusiasm – only to find that we are given a minor task far from the exciting one we thought we were undertaking? Nothing is more depressing to a worker in any situation than finding his or her talents under-recognized, under-appreciated, and therefore underutilized. In modern lingo, this is a “turn-off” which can drive away any worker – and this certainly includes opera volunteers – as fast as anything.

All too many leaders of opera volunteer organizations assume that volunteers are interchangeable, that each can do the task with equal facility, and assign volunteers to tasks based upon the convenience of the leader rather than any real understanding or appreciation of the capacities of the volunteer. This attitude may result from a continuing “envelope-stuffer” mentality, or it may simply be a lazy person’s approach to the job. Whatever the cause, it can be a most destructive force and can quickly lead to volunteer disillusionment and resignation.

Some volunteers seek out opportunities to work with charitable organizations for the precise reason that in their professional lives they feel under-appreciated and underutilized. At least in a volunteer capacity, they reason, they should be able to employ their talents and do the work of which they are capable. In some instances, volunteers plainly seek more than just personal satisfaction: they may actually be trying to “build a record” of success in one or more areas of expertise, so that they can demonstrate to their employers a level of achievement in the volunteer world which could lead to more enticing assignments in their work careers.

So if you consider this type of volunteer, imagine the depression which must accompany the realization that as a volunteer – *even as a volunteer* – their skills are not recognized, appreciated or used. This is a sure-fire way to drive off a person who might otherwise be a most talented and effective worker for the field of opera.



## **F. Refusal of Older Generation to Turn Over Responsibilities**

On pages 2 and 3 above, we spoke about the “clubbiness” of some opera volunteer organizations (and many others too, we are sure), which leads to a failure to recruit and appreciate newer members.

Even in some organizations which overcome the natural reluctance to share their opportunities with newer members, there is a second stumbling block which new recruits experience, and that is the failure of the older members to turn over real responsibility. So often, the original group of volunteers may decide to allow newer members in to help them with certain projects, but always in a subordinate role. In fact, there is never an intention to turn over real responsibility to the newer members. This may result from a genuine belief that “no one else can do it as well as I can,” or from a (hidden) fear that maybe the new person will prove to be even more successful, and thus outshine the original leader.

The ego of the volunteer is at the bottom of both of these problems. If the volunteer will simply remember the reason why he or she got involved in the first place – presumably, to help the opera company with its mission and to bring the experience of professional opera to an ever-widening and appreciative circle of audiences – the volunteer will hopefully appreciate the necessity of training people to take over the lead responsibilities and move the organization on to greater and greater heights.

The original volunteers need to remember that their efforts in the nascent days of the organization will not go unappreciated, even as a volunteer project they began may take on a size, dimension and effectiveness which they never foresaw. As Sir Isaac Newton was famous for saying, when asked how he had managed to see things in our physical world which had eluded generations of earlier scientists: “If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Every achievement capitalizes upon the successes (and profits even from the failures) of the past. Programs have to be created before they can be grown. They must exist first, in a simple form, before they can be enhanced and expanded. The original volunteers will always have a prized role to play in the history of the group, and the fact that a program goes on to greater success in the hands of successors is no criticism, but rather a compliment to a project well begun in the first instance.

## **G. Failure of Opera Companies to Insist on Change**

Let’s switch viewpoints for a moment and look at opera volunteers through the eyes of the people they are trying to assist: the staff members of the opera company they support. (This discussion of course relates to opera volunteer groups organized in support of a particular opera company. Not all of our opera volunteer organizations fit

this model – some of them exist quite independently of any particular organization, and still provide exemplary support for the world of opera in their communities. But these fine organizations are in the minority, so this section addresses the others.)

When a group of opera volunteers outgrows its usefulness, in any one of the many ways identified above, what is the opera staff to do? Are they to sit down with the volunteer leaders, explain as graciously as possible that the volunteer organization has lost its way, outline the ways in which the opera company currently needs assistance, and seek ways in which to retool the volunteer group to meet the company's current needs? Or are they to ignore the problem, hope that the volunteer organization continues to provide whatever small financial assistance it may still be furnishing, and not “rock the boat”?

Let's face it...most of us like to follow the path of least resistance in such matters, and confronting a group of people with “bad news” – particularly when they have been helpful in the past and have nothing but the best of intentions – is very tough. Which opera staff member wants to take the responsibility of angering a group of its supporters and risk alienating them (and possibly losing their much-needed financial contributions)? None.

Thus, what sometimes happens when a cadre of opera volunteers becomes irrelevant is that the company ignores the problem, tries to keep the volunteers satisfied, praises them (not always genuinely) for their help, tries to find ways to accommodate the volunteers' needs, and seeks other ways to find the help the company needs. Thus, ironically, an organization originally created to serve the company becomes a burden instead, and the company which originally relied upon these volunteers for help finds itself having to go outside the group to find the help it needs.

In other opera companies, where the staff is perhaps more brusque (and, frankly, more honest), it will simply tell the volunteer organization that it isn't needed any more, “cherry pick” the finest volunteers for its own company-directed activities, and dismiss the rest of the volunteers as irrelevant. In recent years several formerly quite active opera guilds have “disappeared” in this way.

These developments are the primarily reasons for the impressive growth in recent years of “direct service” opera volunteers, *i.e.* those who work directly with company staff members and under their supervision, without being members of a traditional opera volunteer organization such as a “guild” at all. The recruitment of direct service volunteers bypasses the cumbersome nature of the existing volunteer group and allows the opera company staff to have direct access to volunteers whom it can recruit, train and utilize in ways the company really appreciates. It also bypasses new volunteers' understandable reluctance to get involved in a group which they well understand has been irrelevant and unresponsive to the needs of the company which it theoretically supports.

### **III. The Solutions to the Problems**

Having identified the problems, it is time to turn the solutions. As mentioned above, the seeds to these difficulties are often planted early in an opera volunteer organization's history, so it may take awhile to plant and nurture the efforts which will solve them. But there are some things that can be done on short notice, and even for those which take longer to develop, the sooner one begins, the sooner the problems will be resolved.

Perhaps before tackling the solutions, we should ask: whose responsibility is it to revitalize the organization? Who should take on the burden of doing all of this? The answer will probably differ from organization to organization and from community to community. In some cases a core group of older volunteers who don't want the organization to die will realize what needs to be done and seize the initiative to take corrective action. In other cases, it will be a new and younger group which will take over and reinvent the organization. In still other instances there may be no present volunteers on the scene at all who are capable of this task, and it may take company staff members to take the first steps to reinvigorate the group. In any event, one of the first things to do is to pick the right people to do this work, and move on from there.

#### **A. Recruiting New Members**

First and foremost, many opera volunteers simply need "fresh blood." Where is this to be found? Fortunately, for an established opera company, there are several ready sources which are not available in a community where the opera is just beginning.

##### **i. Searching for Volunteers**

New opera volunteers can be found in a variety of places:

##### **1. Opera Attendees**

The most ready source of volunteers is probably the most obvious...those who already come to the opera. How can the potential volunteers be identified, from among the others who simply want to come and be entertained? One way is to advertise for volunteers in the opera program. Another is to set up special events at the opera house for those who wish to know more about the opera (an opportunity to attend a rehearsal and meet the artists, for example, or an informance with the conductor), then pass around a sign-up sheet, note who signs up, and watch for those who show a real interest.

Sometimes establishing a program which is attractive to the real opera enthusiast – such as a travel opportunity to hear performances in another city, for example – will help identify those who are "true believers" and thus more likely to become volunteers. Many a volunteer has been recruited because of his or her initial involvement in such an activity.

Just as in the fund-raising arena, there is no substitute for the direct ask. Many an opera audience member probably never thought of volunteering (or perhaps never thought that his or her skills were particularly recognized or needed) before somebody asked them to serve. Once a few volunteers have been recruited, they can identify others who might be interested and do the asking. But in the initial stages, the “asks” may need to come from the opera company staff members themselves.

## **2. Those Interested in the Performing Arts**

If the opera company is just starting up, or cannot find the volunteers it needs from among its own audience, the company may need to look at those who attend other performing arts events. Generally, our experience at Opera Volunteers International is that many opera enthusiasts also like other performing arts events – many go to the symphony, attend performances at the local theater companies, or like to attend the ballet. Don’t ignore these persons as potential opera audiences and potential volunteers. Cooperative events held with these organizations may help the opera company cross-sell both for tickets and volunteers with these other organizations.

Some opera companies and guilds have found that there is a group of people in the community who are intrigued by opera but who know little about it. They desire to learn and become more knowledgeable. This desire may lead them to become volunteers so they can get further insights into an art form that they have always found of interest.

The opera company’s web site can be a source of volunteers. Each web site should have an area where volunteers can submit information about themselves and a list of interests or skills, and give the company a chance to contact them.

## **3. Professionals Seeking to Utilize or Enhance Their Skills**

Once a basic group of new volunteers is recruited, the revitalized group will need to decide which volunteer initiatives to continue, which to discard, and how to organize itself. Undoubtedly the group will uncover “holes” in its volunteer capabilities. It might decide, for example, to put on a fund raising event consisting of a progressive dinner, but it needs to find somebody to publicize the event. Or perhaps it decides to take on the opera company’s newsletter as a volunteer project, but needs somebody with the computer expertise to design the final product.

This is where the volunteers may need to go outside the immediately group to find the special skills which are required. Remember that not all volunteers necessarily start as opera fans. Some start as volunteers because they were recruited for special skills, and end up falling in love with the art form. Others never do really take a liking to opera, but enjoy serving as a volunteer simply because the volunteer work itself is fun and challenging, or perhaps fulfills a social need – and the fact that it benefits an opera company is strictly secondary.

Where do you find these special skilled volunteers? Sometimes an opera company staff member will know somebody, or an existing volunteer will have a suggestion. Don't hesitate to ask opera company board members for contacts, or call on a business which purchases season tickets or contributes to the opera, to see if a person at that business has the necessary skills and would be willing to assist.

Don't forget that many businesses actively encourage their employees to give volunteer service, and even post volunteer opportunities on their bulletin boards or in their company newsletters. And a business which in tough economic times may be unable to contribute as many dollars to the opera company as it would like might seize upon the opportunity to have an employee volunteer, as a kind of substitute for its economic support of the company, at least for awhile.

#### **4. Those Seeking to Bolster Their Resumes**

As noted above, some opera volunteers are professionals who seek to bolster their work experience by performing service in a volunteer capacity which they haven't yet had an opportunity to do professionally, thus giving them needed experience which they can later "sell" to their current employer or a future one, in the hope of better job assignments or a different job altogether.

In recruiting a skilled volunteer, opera company staff members and volunteers should remember to emphasize this possibility. You should not be above negotiating in a friendly manner with a potential volunteer over the kind of responsibility he or she would have in the organization, to entice him or her to join the volunteer corps. (Of course, be prepared to carry out your part of the bargain!)

Another source of such volunteers is an employment agency which carries the resumes of persons with certain skills. The agency may appreciate knowing of opportunities – even nonpaying – which could bolster the experience level of the persons for whom they are seeking positions, and thus increase the likelihood of placing these people in paying positions.

#### **5. Students Seeking Volunteer Opportunities**

As parents of adolescents and college-aged children know, almost every secondary school and college or university these days requires a certain number of volunteer hours for each student before the student can graduate. Thus, high school and college students are prime candidates for volunteer work. Moreover, if your opera company is in a city with a music school or conservatory, these students are often prime candidates for volunteering.

Lest you think there is no way that a high school or college student would be interested in volunteering for the opera, look at the opportunities you might have available: how about helping to transport sets and costumes from the warehouse to the

opera house (an ideal job for muscular young men), or decorating a space for a fund raising party (a great job for young women), or helping drive artists to and from rehearsals (perfect for an older high schooler who has just gotten a driver's license), or assisting with computer work at the office. OVI is even aware of some high school computer experts who have served to help the opera company staff members with web site design, e-mail marketing and the like.

These contacts are best made through the volunteer coordinators at the schools. They often post volunteer opportunities on bulletin boards or in school newsletters or web sites. Of course, some of your volunteers may have children or grandchildren who might become interested, and usually if you recruit one or two you will end up with a group, and these youngsters often like to get their friends to help out in a spirit of camaraderie (and everybody fulfills their volunteer hour commitments at the same time).

An obvious caveat to this source of volunteers is that they are often short-term. But if you have specific jobs for limited time periods that need doing, they can be a valuable resource.

## **ii. Identifying the Volunteers Who Will be Winners**

Okay, now we've identified some sources for recruiting new volunteers who will revitalize your moribund opera support organization. Once you have them on board, what are you going to do with them? Remember that one of the biggest "turn offs" to volunteerism of any kind is the failure to use the volunteers in ways which they find satisfying. We need to be able to identify the "winners" from those who are just short-term flashes in the pan (and there will inevitably be some of those). How do we do this?

### **1. The Skills of the Volunteer**

Perhaps it's an obvious point, but we state it so as not to overlook it: the volunteer who will be most valuable to the opera company or volunteer group will be one who has the talents and skills to do the job. Enthusiasm, although necessary, is no replacement for basic skills. Especially today, when the volunteer jobs we need to have performed often require special sets of skills and talents, not every volunteer has the skills it takes.

All too many volunteer support groups have found in recent years that they simply need to politely marginalize the talented but unskilled volunteer who is capable of little more than envelope-stuffing or addressing envelopes. Perhaps there is a place in some organizations for such a person, but it probably isn't in today's sophisticated opera support group which plans and carries out intricate fund raising, educational and membership undertakings for the benefit of opera.

Fortunately, experience demonstrates that many opera volunteers are also highly educated and greatly skilled people whose talents, when channeled in the right direction,

can prove enormously beneficial. So this is an issue that may simply resolve itself once you recruit the right volunteers to the task.

## **2. The Experience of the Volunteer**

Not all volunteer projects are made equal. Some can be done well by novices, but others require a level of experience in handling projects of that particular kind. An opera volunteer can obtain experience in all sorts of ways – by starting out in lower level support “jobs” and working his or her way up to positions of more responsibility, by coming to the task with previous experience handling similar jobs for other organizations, by bringing to the job a history of successful performance in a professional work setting, and in many other ways.

Patience is the byword here. Throwing a person into a task for which he or she is untrained is probably a good way to not only doom your project, but exasperate the volunteer as well. Starting slowly with a volunteer, and building his or her skill level to the point where the volunteer can take on more complicated leadership roles, can often produce a senior volunteer who will be invaluable to the organization for years to come.

Volunteers tend to sort themselves out, in terms of capacity for further development, after awhile. After a year or two it will become fairly obvious who are the volunteers who have the capacity to play leadership roles in the organization and for its projects.

## **3. The Enthusiasm of the Volunteer**

Most of us who are volunteers learned long ago that there are many tasks of which we are capable, and many organizations who would love to have us volunteer to do these jobs for them. But our effectiveness is severely limited if we undertake a job when our heart isn't in it. Let's face it – you will occasionally run across the volunteer who meets the grade in every other way, but just doesn't have much enthusiasm for opera and the particular volunteer group. That person would probably be better off volunteering for another organization and promoting a cause in which he or she truly believes.

A volunteer's lack of enthusiasm for the opera or the task at hand will inevitably show through, and serve to dampen his or her effectiveness. Better to let that person move on to another group and another cause than to slowly infect your organization with a sense of malaise.

Again, those of us in the world of opera are fortunate here. Those who love opera tend to really love it, and thus enthusiasm is ordinarily no problem at all.

Enthusiasm can also come from another source. Even someone who is not particularly excited about the art form of opera can sense that involvement in an opera volunteer project can “make a difference” for the community. Perhaps the volunteer appreciates the impact which the arts in general make in the community and understands

the importance to the city of having a strong cultural fabric which can attract and retain strong people and civic leaders. That appreciation may, in and of itself, be enough to motivate the volunteer to do outstanding work.

#### **4. What to Do With Those Who Don't Make the Grade**

As pointed out above, you will occasionally encounter a volunteer who has all of the requisition enthusiasm, but simply doesn't possess the skill sets, and doesn't seem to be able to garner the experience, to be useful in the kinds of jobs you need doing.

Opera volunteer organizations have taken several approaches to dealing with such volunteers. Many assign them to relatively simple tasks (the group's corresponding secretary, for example) to make them feel needed and yet put them in a position where they can do little "damage." At least one guild has created an "associate" category of volunteer especially for the volunteer who may want to attend meetings, receive minutes of meetings and stay informed, but who is no longer active in his or volunteer efforts. Some organizations create do-nothing jobs for the outmoded volunteer, although such a "solution" really is none at all, for it is a time-waster for all involved. Still others develop the nerve to address the situation head-on, uncomfortable though it may be, and try to encourage the person to seek other volunteer opportunities which might be more suitable to his or her level of competence.

Although the latter approach is the most difficult, it sometimes is the only real choice, and those who "put it off" or don't address the situation at all are doing no favors to either the organization or the volunteer. Surprisingly, many such volunteers take the message well and are even relieved to know that they are no longer going to be expected to perform a job of which they know themselves (perhaps subconsciously) to be incapable. Many continue to attend functions and donate money to the cause. And of course, we all need plenty of those kinds of people.

#### **B. Understanding the Different Kinds of Volunteers and Meeting Their Needs**

As pointed out in pages 4-5 above, in today's world of opera volunteerism there are many different kinds of workers who volunteer for many different kinds of reasons. Unlike "the old days" when many people (such as nonworking women with little if any professional experience) had basically interchangeable skill sets, many of today's volunteers have very particular talents and capacities. It is one of the major challenges for the leaders of any volunteer organization to understand and appreciate the differences, and to tailor volunteer programs and responsibilities to take best advantage of what the volunteers have to offer.

The key lesson here is to get to know your volunteer. Ask the questions, and listen to the answers, that will enable you to find out what that volunteer's motivation might be. Once you understand, you can tailor the assigned responsibilities to that



person's desires. A happy volunteer is one who feels fulfilled, and such a volunteer works best, and longest, for the group.

One thing to remember is the "intimidation factor" which may affect some newer volunteers. In the world of opera, the more experienced operagoers and volunteers are often quite familiar with the art form and bat about technical terms; exchange information about favorite singers, operas and arias; and play games of opera trivia without realizing that these habits are all intimidating for novices to the art form who may feel left and out and (often unintentionally) excluded by such conversation. If your volunteer is of this kind, sliding him/her into the organization along with other novices, or having him/her work initially with experienced opera junkies who may not be so intimidating, may be a good practice.

#### **i. The Volunteer Seeking an Outlet**

It is not necessarily true that today's volunteers, coming to the task from the viewpoint of successfully employed professionals, want to treat their volunteer efforts as another aspect of their work lives and get straight to business in the most organized and efficient way. While this is certainly a description of how many volunteers will operate, once they have a task at hand and a timeline to meet, they also probably seek a volunteer experience which adds to and enriches their lives.

Thus, it is important, even in today's world, not to avoid the social and educational aspects of volunteering. Volunteer jobs should be organized so that there are opportunities for the volunteers to get to know one another socially, and to enrich their experiences by learning more about the opera art form and developing an insider's knowledge of the art form that yields more insight than that possessed by the casual opera audience member.

Thus, don't overlook the importance of meetings (in moderation!), brainstorming sessions, working groups, and other opportunities to get volunteers together so that they can become better acquainted.

Also, make sure that there is a component of the work which will enable the volunteer to get something more out of the project than just the satisfaction of a job well done. For example, can you arrange to have some of the singers join the volunteers at some point so that the volunteers can ask questions and learn more about opera? Is there an opportunity to have an opera preview lecture or some other educational component as a part of the volunteering task? (For example, if the organizers of an opera ball are supposed to focus the ball around the theme of a certain upcoming opera, perhaps an expert such as the scenic designer can come to speak to them on the opera and the ambience surrounding it, to both better enable them to do their tasks and to increase their appreciation of what they are doing.)

These kinds of approaches will afford the volunteers an "outlet" as well as just another opportunity to apply their skills. In other words, this isn't just an extension of

their work day – it’s something special that enhances their social and educational horizons in way that a workday job never could.

## **ii. The Volunteer Seeking Skills**

As mentioned above, some volunteers come to the task with a specific, individual purpose in mind: they want to acquire experience in doing a certain kind of job, so that they can take that experience and use it in other arenas, such as in their regular job or in a new job which they seek to obtain. You might think of these as the “resume builder” volunteers.

Your crucial job, as a volunteer organizer or leader, is to identify such people and understand their needs. Once you understand what they want to do, ask: does my group have a project my group which fits what this person wants to do? If not, can we create one which will satisfy this person’s needs as well as furnish something of value to the opera? Do we have the other volunteers who can support this person? If not, can we recruit them and bring them on board?

This may be a difficult task. But once undertaken, it can prove enormously beneficial, for the volunteer involved will have a special motivation and unique determination to make the project succeed. Many a guild project over the years has resulted from one or two volunteers’ passion to do a particular thing, and do it extremely well. It is one of the joys of opera volunteering that such people may take you and your organization down entirely unexpected – and surprisingly rewarding – paths.

## **iii. The Volunteer Seeking Job Advantages**

In addition to the volunteer described above, who seeks to enhance his or her job opportunities by obtaining special experience in volunteer work, there are also volunteers who seek to “use” their volunteer experience in their professional lives in other ways.

The most typical example is the volunteer who wishes to network with other people. Many young professionals in the early stages of their business careers want to get to know as many other people in town as they can, particularly leaders of the business community. They often believe that the opera is a place where business leaders can be found, and they figure that by volunteering for the opera company or guild they can place themselves in a position to meet people of influence in the community. If that is what your volunteer is after, be sure to include the volunteer in events which may be attended by business leaders, such as members of the company board of directors or businesspeople working on certain projects for the opera.

## **iv. The Time Commitment of the Volunteer**

As part of the process of getting to know your volunteer and his/her abilities and needs, it is crucial to understand the volunteer’s time commitment. Is this a person who has limited time and wants to work on a specific task, under deadline, and then have no

further commitments to your organization? Or is this a person with time on his or her hands (perhaps a retired person, for example) who has time to fill and who is looking to do so constructively by volunteering for the opera?

In addition, make sure that you understand *when* the volunteer has the hours available to work. Don't assign a person with a full-time job the duty of working at the opera company office during business hours. And don't assign an elderly person with difficulty driving at night some task which requires work in the evening.

These principles may seem self-evident, but all too many volunteer organizations have lost an otherwise valuable resource because they failed to understand these distinctions and simply gave the volunteer the wrong job. Unfortunately, some volunteers will not notify you of this and advise you that they need a change; they will simply "drop out" because they find it obvious that the organization doesn't care enough about them to get it right.

Aside from the time-of-day issue, the types of jobs you will assign to the volunteer will differ dramatically depending upon your understanding of the volunteer's time commitment. If the person offers a short-term commitment, then identify (or develop) a short-term project that fits that person's needs. Stick to the bargain, and truly end the job at the stated time. You will find, more often than not, that a volunteer who understands your respect for his or her parameters will come back again and again, and perhaps turn from a short-term project volunteer into one with a long-term commitment. But often the volunteer has to be "shown the way" by a leader who begins by respecting and honoring the volunteer's initial wishes.

### **C. Group Volunteers vs. Direct Service Volunteers**

As mentioned above, in today's world of opera volunteerism, volunteers fall into two broad categories: those who work through traditional volunteer organizations such as opera guilds and "Friends" groups, and those who volunteer directly with the opera company itself. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to volunteer – often a person will simply be better suited to one than to the other, and as long as the opera volunteer group and the opera company staff members have a mutually supportive and communicative relationship, each can maximize the benefit from its own workers.

#### **i. Will This Person Function Well in a Guild?**

The key feature of volunteers who work in group settings – we'll call them the "guild" volunteers – is that they work well on collective projects. We all know that the beauty of guild groups is their ability to conceive, plan, and implement large projects – the sorts of endeavors that no individual could possibly do alone. Thus, Opera Volunteers International publishes booklets on Good Ideas for guilds (see [www.operavolunteers.org](http://www.operavolunteers.org) for information). These are chock full of group projects – from fund raising ventures such as opera balls, wine tastings, progressive dinners, special

events, and the like, all the way to purely educational initiatives such as taking short opera programs into the schools, putting on puppet opera performances, and organizing lectures or workshops for adults who wish to explore the art form in detail.

Is your volunteer suited to group work? To determine this, inquire about the following:

(a) Is the person a leader-type, the kind who is good at formulating plans and directing others at handling the details?

(b) Or, alternatively, is the person a follower-type, who is not necessarily an initiator or a leader but a person who is good at performing a specific function under the direction of others?

(c) Is the person the kind who seeks social contact and views the act of volunteering to be a social experience bringing the person in contact with other opera fans who share an enthusiasm and interest in the art form, or who just love to volunteer for a particular kind of project (for example, a person wishing to expand her contacts in social circles by working on the opera ball)?

(d) Or, alternatively, is the person a “loner” type who doesn’t necessary need the social experience of volunteering but who simply has a talent or skill to share and wants to get the job done, out of a love for opera?

Once you understand the answers to these questions you will be much better able to address whether the person will fit within a group-volunteer situation such as with a guild, or would be better suited to one-on-one volunteering with the opera company itself.

Of course, we should keep in mind that not all direct service volunteering with an opera company is necessarily one-on-one. While some jobs, such as helping out in the opera company office, may involve much independent work on the part of the volunteer, others, such as ushering at performances or helping with company-sponsored special events, may involve a group experience just as much as guild volunteering might. In these group volunteer situations, the real distinction between the direct service volunteers and guild volunteers is not so much one of group experience vs. individual volunteering, but rather the extent to which the volunteers initiate, plan and implement the project themselves. In the guild situation, the projects are usually quite independent of (although often with the knowledge and active cooperation of) the opera company. In the direct service situation, by contrast, it is usually the company staff members who conceive, plan and carry out the project, and the volunteers perform specific tasks, determine by others, in aid of the overall plan.

**ii. Structure of the Company’s Volunteer Program:  
Does it Fit?**

The previous comment raises an issue which is important in allocating volunteers between guild situations and direct service volunteering: Does the opera company have volunteer programs which fit this person's need? There is no sense in deciding that a particular volunteer is a "loner" who would fit well in a direct-service job, only to discover that the opera company staff is not prepared to utilize the skills of a person with the particular talents of this volunteer.

In such a case, the opera staff should either develop a job which utilizes this person appropriately, or else perhaps the guild can develop a task which would satisfy this particular volunteer, even in a group setting. Even the most group-oriented of volunteer activities may encompass certain jobs which can best be done by one motivated individual working alone. The organization (*i.e.* opera company or guild) which utilizes the volunteer is not as important as the type of job the volunteer is asked to perform, and whether he or she is satisfied with it.

### **iii. Coordinating With the Opera Company**

As mentioned above, the correct placement of volunteers in the right situations and in the right jobs should ideally involve a careful coordination between the members of the opera company staff and the leaders of the volunteer organization which supports the company. A mutual understanding of the needs and strengths of each, coupled with a lack of jealousy or turf-building, can create a constructive relationship where volunteers are gently steered in one direction or the other, depending upon their suitability to the tasks at hand.

Unfortunately, this kind of relationship is sometimes missing in guild-company dynamics. A more detailed exploration of this subject is available in another publication of Opera Volunteers International which specifically addresses guild-company relations.

### **iv. Volunteers Moving and Changing Roles**

The need for flexibility is always present in the management of volunteers. Some volunteers start out working for the opera in a certain capacity (say, performing an individual task over a limited scope of time), and grow into more involved and time-consuming jobs as their enthusiasm increases and their commitment to the organization grows.

These changes may well result in a shift of the volunteer's status. Some direct service volunteers who find themselves having lots of initiative and imagination, and who want to conceive and direct their own volunteer projects, may well need to shift over from direct volunteering to a leadership position in the opera guild. Likewise, some opera guild members who find themselves unhappy working in a group volunteer situation with the guild may be ideally suited for an individual self-directed task, and should be steered towards direct service with the opera company.

The proper handling of these situations is one that takes perception, understanding, cooperation, communication and tact. These are all skills that opera company volunteer coordinators and opera guild leaders should have, or develop, in abundance!

**v. How to Cope with the Old Volunteers vs. New Volunteers Problem**

To those who are attempting to resuscitate a moribund opera guild, the above discussion will sound all good and find in theory. But what about the old-timers who have been around for years, who like doing things their own way, who are resistant to change, and who don't fit the mold of being the right person in the right job?

These volunteers present perhaps the greatest challenges, especially if they harbor talents and skills which the opera company could well use. The best approach is the direct one – to admit that the organization has not done well at allocating its volunteer resources in the past, interview the older volunteers as well as the new ones to identify the answers sought in the questions outlined above, and discuss re-assigning these volunteers to the tasks and responsibilities which fit their skills.

Some will resist this approach, feeling that any change is bad. If a soft explanation doesn't work, then the opera staff member or guild leader may face the difficult choice of letting the volunteer continue in his or her outmoded way of doing things (on the theory that "something is better than nothing") or deciding that the organization needs to be committed to better efficiencies and a more logical organization, and asking the volunteer to leave. There is no right or wrong answer to this dilemma; it depends uniquely upon the company, the guild, the needs of both, the skills of the volunteer, and the cost vs. benefit analysis to the company and the guild of potentially losing the volunteer.

Happily, this choice rarely has to be faced. The truly talented and motivated volunteers will usually recognize the importance of assigning people to their most suitable volunteer jobs, and be enthusiastic about the fact that their skills (sometimes "at last," they say) will be suitably recognized and utilized. The volunteers who don't recognize this may well be the very volunteers that the company or guild doesn't need in the first place.

**D. Training the Volunteer**

Well, if we have correctly implemented the plans outlined above, then we have recruited new volunteers to the cause, invested the necessary time and effort to identify their needs and wants and their skills and talents, identified or created the volunteer responsibilities which best suit their situations, and assigned them to the tasks in which they will be most efficiently utilized.

What remains now? To train the volunteer and set him or her to work.

### **i. The Volunteer's Need for Training**

We must remember that although many volunteers may come to the task with pre-existing skills we have already identified, the volunteer may not quite be ready to simply take the assignment and run with it.

For example, suppose we have recruited a person familiar with public relations and marketing, and we ask that person to take on the job of publicizing an upcoming special event which will benefit the opera. The volunteer may well know the process of creating publicity, but may have little idea of exactly what it is that he or she is going to be publicizing. Clearly, the publicity agent must have some idea of the idea being promoted, before he or she can do an effective job.

This is where specific training comes in. If the person has little familiarity with opera, some basic understanding of the art form is required. Perhaps the person can spend some time with an opera staff member or volunteer who is very familiar with the art form, and learn about the world of opera and how it works. Providing the person with recordings or videos may be important, particularly if the event is centered around a particular opera or opera-related theme (such as, for example, a masked ball in connection with a production of Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* or a concert of tenor voices held in conjunction with a production of an opera featuring a famous tenor).

Ask yourself: If I were given this task, what would I need to know in order to do it? Then make sure that your volunteer has been supplied with all of the necessary information. There is little that is more frustrating for a volunteer than being asked to undertake a job and not being given the basic background information which is necessary in order to effectively do it.

Of course, a talented volunteer will undoubtedly recognize his or her limitations and ask the right questions. So sometimes the training will consist of little more than being ready and willing to answer the questions or find those who can. But it is always wiser to never assume...and take a proactive stance in educating the volunteer.

### **ii. The Need for Interaction With Other Volunteers**

Where the volunteer is working on a group project, it is of course important that the volunteer know the other people in the group and how his or her job fits in with theirs. Even though the task itself may involve mostly an individual effort, it is still undertaken in the context of other jobs being performed by other people, and an understanding of "how the pieces of the puzzle fit together" is essential for any worker who is asked to be effective in any job which is part of a larger project.

Even a volunteer who has a “loner” type of job, then, needs some interaction with the others who are working on the project. A certain number of committee meetings may be indispensable in order to provide this essential background.

### **iii. Selecting the Trainer**

If the volunteer needs to be trained on a one-on-one basis, the selection of the trainer may be important. If the job is one which has been performed well by a previous volunteer, then the previous occupant of the job is an obvious choice, but make sure that there is a personality fit before setting up the training session. More than one volunteer has been “turned off” to a job because of a trainer who was too slow, ponderous, or outdated to do an effective job of training a new and (initially) enthusiastic worker.

### **iv. Training Methods**

The method of training depends entirely upon the job being done and the volunteer(s) being recruited, of course. In some circumstances where a group of volunteers has been obtained to undertake a certain large project, a group training session may be in order. Meetings can be an efficient way to impart the identical information to a larger number of people, to reduce the discrepancies which may arise between one trainer and another. It also allows the trainer(s) to answer questions in a group format and thus give all of the trainees a better understanding of what is involved.

Where the job is an individual one, one-on-one training sessions will probably be more appropriate. And all trainers should remember the wisdom of the ancient Chinese saying: “Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I’ll understand.”

## **E. Supervising the Volunteer**

Okay, so your volunteer is recruited, slotted into the right job, and adequately trained. What kind of supervising does the volunteer require? While this issue is clearly dependent to a large extent upon the volunteer in question and the particular job, we can make a few general observations which may be useful.

### **i. Defining the Volunteer’s Responsibilities**

It probably follows from much of what has been said before, but an important part of supervision is making sure that the volunteer’s responsibilities are carefully defined. This may already have been done in connection with identifying the job to which the volunteer is assigned, but if not, do not lose the opportunity to be very careful and specific with the volunteer regarding what is expected. This is particularly important if he or she is new to the situation. Make sure there is no question as to the exact duties and expectations.



Some especially careful volunteer coordinators or guild leaders have even taken to the practice of outlining these things in a written agreement between the volunteer and the opera or guild. This can be set forth in a letter, which is ideally countersigned by the volunteer to indicate his or her agreement. This may be too formalistic for many situations, but where you have a volunteer who wishes to be extremely meticulous about what is expected (perhaps fearing an unintended expansion of the job somewhere along the way), the letter may serve as a source of comfort rather than dismay. And certainly there is nothing wrong with setting things forth in writing, for sake of precision and later reference. Naturally, the advisability of this practice depends largely upon the nature of the task and the volunteer. It may make more sense for newer volunteers who are uncertain of the organization than for those who have been around for awhile and have done the job before.

## **ii. Establishing Goals and Timelines**

A helpful way of defining the volunteer job may be to define the specific goals of the job and set forth the precise timetable. If the goals and timetable have not already been established as part of the description of the job, be sure to include them. The timetable, especially, may be important for the one-time special-skill volunteer who is recruited for a specific project.

## **iii. The Need for Supervision**

Once the job is carefully defined and the volunteer is at work, is there a need for supervision? Certainly if the volunteer is a self-starter and can work independently, little or no supervision may be required, although having the leader of the project “check in” now and then is never a bad idea. Hopefully the volunteer will communicate freely and keep the rest of the project team updated (perhaps through committee meetings or regularly scheduled e-mail updates), and this will not be necessarily.

Other volunteers who are not used to working independently may need closer supervision, however, and certainly those who are involved in the more “manual labor” aspects of the task may need to actually work in a physical setting along with the other volunteers. Whatever the need, in whatever the situation, the head of the project simply needs to make sure that the degree of supervision is appropriate to the task and the volunteers at hand. And, of course, being available to answer questions whenever they arise is an important part of the project leader’s job.

## **iv. Supervision vs. Getting in the Way**

Some volunteers will feel that there is a point at which supervision becomes needless (and sometimes disruptive) intrusion. Different volunteers will reach this point at different junctures, of course. The project leader simply needs to be sensitive to this possibility and make judgments based on the feelings and needs of individual volunteers.

## **v. The Magic of Communication**

Again, it may be obvious from all that has preceded this point, but the key to achieving effective volunteer results is communication, communication and more communication. Until it becomes intrusive, regular communication is almost a necessity. There are very few volunteer projects which could not benefit from a better and more clear understanding among the participants, so that no detail is left unthought-of, no task left undone, no possibly problem un-addressed.

Any project leader who has arrived at the day of the event and faced the shocking discovery that a key element of the project is undone will recognize the truth of these statements.

### **F. Supporting the Volunteer**

Remember that an important part of the job of any volunteer coordinator, whether the coordinator is a company staff member or a person in a leadership position with an opera guild or support group, is to offer as much support to the volunteers as possible. You never want a volunteer to feel that he or she has been put “out there” alone and unaided, facing an unknown situation without appropriate backup.

Part of the secret to providing adequate support is to identify the need for support up front. This should be an important part of the volunteer training described above – to identify the areas where the volunteer needs help, or needs further background information – and supply it as and when needed. In addition to the training, however, situations inevitably arise during the course of a project where a volunteer uncovers something that he or she needs in order to do the job, but simply didn’t ask earlier because of ignorance or being misinformed.

Thus, another part of the volunteer coordinator’s task should be to be receptive to questions and pleas for help, to identify these situations as soon as possible, and move to fill the void by supporting the volunteer as soon as possible. The payback in terms of increased volunteer productivity, and the likelihood of having the volunteer return to help with other projects, can be greatly enhanced.

### **G. The Project “Wrap Up”**

You have reached the end. The project is over. The volunteers were recruited, slotted into the best volunteer jobs available, trained for their tasks, given the support they required, and completed the project, hopefully with great success.

So is your job over? That is, apart from beginning the planning for the next project? We’re afraid not. One more task remains: to hold a “wrap up” meeting with the volunteers, or at least the key players, to find out why the project succeeded, and what could have been done better. Only the perfect project requires no “wrap up,” and even

that project could use one, just to establish what went right for purposes of future reference.

### **i. Measuring Accomplishments Against the Goals**

When the task began, you had a set of goals you wished to accomplish. If this was a fund raising project, perhaps it was raising a certain amount of money. If it was an educational project, perhaps it was reaching a certain number of children or adults, and getting favorable reviews and comments so you knew you had an impact. If it was an audience development project, it probably involved selling a certain number of tickets to a performance. And so forth.

Did you accomplish these goals? A simple numeric comparison can be instructive. When you make your report to the Board of Directors on the project, that will probably be the first question someone will ask, and you should be ready with an answer.

Of course, we all know that mere statistics cannot tell the story. Some projects may be take years to bear fruit. An educational program may be regarded a success if it reaches a certain number of schoolchildren, for example, but the real proof of its effect will lie in how many of those children, years later, return to the opera house ticket window or web site to purchase tickets.

These things are impossible to measure, at least in the short term. Nonetheless, you can often get some feel for them by asking those who were the “targets” of the program (children and teachers, in our education example) about the impact the program had. And then perhaps follow up with offers of discounted tickets to children and their parents, or some such plan, to see how many take advantage.

Don’t forget that sometimes these results, although difficult to measure in the short term, may have long-term measurements which can prove enlightening. Some opera education programs, for example, have been around for twenty years or more. The children who were six or seven years old when the programs started are now young adults, and are of an age where they might start purchasing tickets to the opera. Looking at the demographics of today’s audiences, and perhaps doing audience surveys to see how many of them remember hearing educational programs during their school days many years ago, might reveal some very interesting information. But unfortunately this can’t be done in the immediate *post mortem*, so we’ll leave the rest of that topic for another day.

### **ii. Constructive Criticism**

It is important in any *post mortem* to not only tabulate and celebrate your victories, but also to ask, even for the most successful program, what could have been done better. Rare is the perfect project; almost all have areas in which they could have been improved. Once the euphoria of success has waned, be sure to ask the tough

questions about the weaknesses of the project and how its execution could have been improved.

### iii. **Group Participation**

The *post mortem* is an ideal time to get the whole team together for a discussion. Often those not involved in one particular task may have spotted weaknesses in how it was done by others, and can offer constructive criticism. Sometimes ideas will arise out of a group discussion that will never be thought of by individuals alone.

Having a group participation session in the *post mortem* is also important from the social aspect of the volunteer experience. Remember from our discussions above that one of the reasons many volunteers volunteer in the first place is because of the social interaction which is involved. This is an ideal time to satisfy this need of some of your volunteers, particularly if you combine the *post mortem* with a party celebrating the success of the project.

### iv. **Documenting the Results**

Once you have the results of your *post mortem*, make sure that the good ideas you have developed don't float away into thin air. Write them down, pass along the list to whoever will chair this project the next time, and make sure that the ideas for improvements are implemented to the extent possible. This is another way to make the volunteers feel wanted and needed ("Hey! They took my suggestion!"), and of course it increases the likelihood that the project will be even more successful the next time.

### v. **The Project Handbook**

Every project should have a handbook that goes along with it. The first time it is done, the head of the project should create a handbook detailing every aspect of what was needed to carry the project out successfully. Such a handbook might include, for example:

- a description of the project and its goals.
- a description of the volunteer structure (committees, subcommittees etc.) needed to carry it out.
- the number of volunteers needed for each portion of the project, and the particular talents and skills required for each job.
- a description of each volunteer task and exactly how it was done, with as many specifics as possible, including names, addresses and telephone numbers. Each volunteer could be asked to supply this part of the manual for his or her particular function.
- a timetable for the entire project, from the idea stage through the final *post mortem*.
- a detailed budget, including line items for each category of expenditure, in as much detail as possible.

- for each portion of the project, a list of contact people and a description of what they did (*e.g.*, X magazine gave us free publicity, or Y was our photographer and gave us a discount, or Z was a good contact for bargain flower purchases).
- a description of the supplies and materials needed, where they were purchased, the cost and the mode of delivery and other such details.
- an identification of what “went wrong” and how the *post mortem* suggested that the deficiency be addressed.

Of course, many other things may be included in a volunteer manual as well, such as samples of invitations, guest lists, publicity materials, photographs from the event, and the like.

Each year the project is done, the following chair should supplement or rewrite the project manual as necessary, so that over time it becomes an impressive notebook with hopefully a several-years’ history of how the project has been done over time and how it has grown and improved.

Remember that the project manual may serve a twofold purpose. Not only does it prove to be an invaluable resource for the people doing the project next year, and in following years. It also serves as a valuable recruiting tool, for those who are asked to join the project in later years may be much more willing to take on the job if they have detailed information about how their predecessors in that job were able to carry it out successfully.

Project manuals also tend to outlive memories, which can fade over time or unfortunately be lost altogether when the original participants retire from volunteering or pass away. Don’t forget to save your project manuals in a computer file format and preserve them on disk, hopefully in several places so they can always be accessed or printed later.

#### **vi. Getting the Volunteer Involved in the Next Project**

Finally, as a follow-up to the *post mortem*, the time will come for the project leader, or the leader of next year’s project, to contact the volunteer with the inevitable question: how would you like to be involved in next year’s program? Or, if the volunteer is ready to move on to another project, the question might be: now that you have seen how well you can do at X, how would you like to step up to the challenge of Y?

If everything else has been done correctly, we would be willing to bet that the volunteer will be delighted to be asked, and will jump at the chance to help out again. After all, where else in his or her life will he or she be treated so well and appreciated so much?

### **IV. Conclusion**

The task of recruiting and training opera volunteers, and getting them to do their jobs successfully in carrying out successful volunteer projects, is a never-ending one. Why? Because our opera companies will always need help. Their finances are never secure, their foothold in the community is never as strong as they would like, their audiences are never guaranteed, and their impact upon the coming generations (the audiences of the future) is never as great as they would like. No matter how much progress is made, there is always the challenge of doing it bigger and better next year, and we have yet to see an opera organization that is willing to take a step back and lower its sights.

Unfortunately, none of us live forever. And our energy usually begins to wane way before that. So we will always need new volunteers, new talents, different skills, new projects for them to undertake, and new goals to set and meet. Therefore, the volunteers of the past will become the trainers and facilitators of the future, and when they retire their successors will step into these roles in turn.

The important thing to realize, for those running opera volunteer projects, is that we must establish a culture of looking to the future. Each group must always be alert to identify new volunteers, to recruit and train them, to get them involved, to trust them to do their jobs well, and to have them in turn seek out other volunteers to the cause. A continual process of renewal brings constant breaths of fresh air and new ideas into the organization and the need for these things will never disappear.

Once that culture is established, the problem we addressed back the beginning pages of this paper – the cycle of “life and death” for opera volunteer groups – will be conquered, and your organization will be one that lives and thrives, not one that fears disillusionment and marginalization.

## **V. Epilogue: Ten Questions of Your Opera Guild Members and How to Answer Them**

As a refresher, or as an introduction from those readers who can't resist turning to the Epilogue first, let's consider these questions we sometimes hear from members of today's opera volunteer organizations which are having the kinds of problems which have led them to this paper in the first place:

### **Question No. 1: “The current leadership group is doing a good job; why change things?”**

The current leadership group can't live forever, and the needs of the opera for a consistently high standard of volunteer help will just continue to grow. Besides, everyone gets tired sooner or later, and having new members recruited and trained to take their places will allow the leaders to relax and focus on new and different tasks instead of repeating the old formulas again and again. Change is usually good. It stirs up the mix, introduces new ideas and approaches, and often results in a better long-term product.

**Question No. 2: “Our guild is big enough; we don’t need any more members, do we?”**

The more members a guild has, the broader its pool of volunteers and the deeper its talent. The kinds of aggressive volunteer projects which today’s opera companies need require this kind of talent. Besides, if a guild doesn’t add members and grow, the number of members who are gaining the experience to assume leadership roles is shrinking. This is a prescription for disaster for any guild which is looking to the future.

**Question No. 3: “The company seems to do just fine; does it need to involve our guild?”**

This question may be a result of an opera company having given up on its guild. The company has plenty of needs which volunteers can supply, but it may not be asking because its staff members realize that the guild is shrinking, failing to attract new talent and growing more irrelevant each year. A guild which reverses this trend and appeals to new and talented members will find itself with lots of things to do. We guarantee it.

**Question No. 4: “Can’t we let the chair of that committee find her own workers; it’s not our problem, is it?”**

This kind of attitude is what resigns many otherwise promising projects to the dustbin. A guild project is just that – a project of the whole group – and everybody needs to help, no matter how small the job may be. Remember, if you find the workers first and have the talented people to chair your subcommittees, it will probably be far easier to attract that talented person you need to run the whole project. If you take the opposite approach your chair will be much harder to find – and once found, will be far more likely to fail.

**Question No. 5: “Everybody knows how this project is to be done; why do we need special training?”**

Maybe that’s why the project hasn’t been as successful recently as it was in years past: we’re doing it the same old way. There probably are much better ways of doing things now, but the same old workers lack the knowledge or energy to pursue them, finding it much easier to use the old members, who are being increasingly marginalized. Finding talented volunteers and training them well will enrich your project and your guild’s talent pool. And remember that any volunteer, no matter how talented, needs some training in the background and history of your project. Give your volunteers the tools they need in order to succeed.

**Question No. 6: “Our guild has never had a person like X before; why do we need [her] [him] now?”**

Maybe your guild has never been able to attract this kind of person before. The fresh ideas and insights of people with new ideas will revitalize your organization and, who knows, lead to substantial improvements in the way your guild does things. Don't forget that people who don't fit the old mold often bring new contacts and imagination to your guild, and help you with your main task, which is to broaden your numbers and deepen your talent pool so that you can be more effective workers for your opera company.

**Question No. 7: "If people like Y want to work as volunteers, why don't they just start their own group?"**

Just what your opera company needs...competing volunteer organizations! If the new and talented people in your community use their talents outside your guild, your guild will become increasingly static and irrelevant, and be supplanted by a newer group. What is the point of that? It loses the history and continuity your own organization brings to the table, deprives the newer volunteers of the beneficial experience of older volunteers, and creates a sense of senseless competition in a situation which should call for cooperation instead.

**Question No. 8: "We're primarily a social organization; if these new people want to do something different, why should they be part of us?"**

While not ignoring the important social needs of its members, every opera guild needs to ultimately focus on the task at hand: doing its best work as a volunteer organization to create, plan, and implement projects which raise funds, spread the word about opera, and increase audiences. If your organization is one which has lost the focus of these important tasks and thinks of itself primarily as social, then it is time to let more dynamic volunteers take hold.

**Question No. 9: "We're not interested in new projects; we know how to do the ones we've always done, and they work fine, don't they?"**

As communities change, as the fund raising climate changes, and as the nature of the opera audience changes, the opera company needs volunteer groups which are willing to be innovative in designing and implementing new programs. The old projects may not work as well as you think, particularly when you consider the opportunity cost of not channeling all the volunteer effort they require into more productive tasks instead. Not every new idea is a good one, but not every new idea is bad either. Remember that the old projects (which may in fact not be "working fine" anymore, when you examine them closely) were new once upon a time.

**Question No. 10: "We're an independent organization; why should we need to hear from the company on how we're doing?"**



The lifeblood of every successful relationship between an opera guild and the company it supports is communication. This is a two-way street. The guild needs to know the company's desires and needs to listen to the company's (hopefully friendly) critiques of the guild's work. The company needs to understand the guild's capacities, talents and skills. There will always be many important areas of intersection where the needs of the company and the resources of the guild overlap, and this is the area where successful projects can be born and nurtured. There is no way that can happen in a vacuum of communication.