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Covid-era opera is getting more intimate, accessible and experimental



Sishel Claverie as one of the three Weird Sisters in Heartbeat Opera's "Lady M." (Heartbeat Opera)



By **Michael Andor Brodeur**
Classical Music Critic

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I was on a Zoom call this past weekend that took a weird turn.

There were 15 of us in attendance, calling in from all over the place — Queens, Orlando, Martha's Vineyard — and the one-at-a-time chat seemed to be proceeding according to the freshly established norms of the now-default videoconferencing platform. Then, one of the participants vanished into the folds of the cosmos.

Mezzo soprano Sishel Claverie peeked through the purple-black shroud of a faraway galaxy and swung around the frame of her square in a fitful dance. Her voice rose up, joining a stormy piano track that slightly overloaded the audio feed — forgivable, considering she appeared to be calling in from a different dimension.

Claverie is one of the three witchy Weird Sisters (along with mezzo soprano Taylor-Alexis Dupont and soprano Jamilyn Manning-White) in Heartbeat Opera's "Lady M" — a production that Heartbeat co-artistic director Ethan Heard describes as an "online fantasia" of Verdi's Macbeth. And what started as an unremarkable Zoom session was actually transforming into a dress rehearsal.





A collage of screen images from Heartbeat Opera's "Lady M" featuring cast members (clockwise from upper left) Jamilyn Manning-White, Sishel Claverie, Quentin Oliver Lee, Tyler Putnam, Taylor-Alexis Dupont and Felicia Moore. (Heartbeat Opera)

"Lady M" was supposed to premiere this month as a staged concert performance by its six singers and six instrumentalists at Brooklyn's Irondale Center. But after the novel coronavirus pandemic shuttered the city and scattered the cast and crew to their respective homes, Heard and company suddenly had to think outside the proscenium.

[Music that will settle you down or at least resonate with your embattled vibe]

They opted to assemble the cast and musicians on Zoom to prepare a deconstructed and reconfigured vision of "Lady M" in the form of 18 virtual "soirees," co-presented by the Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

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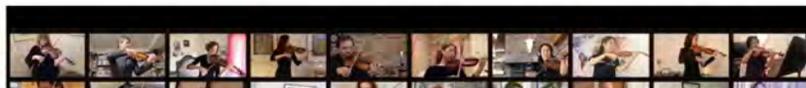
Each night between May 11 and May 20, these 45-minute Zoom sessions will let a limited number of guests experience a mix of live performance, prerecorded video (a music video they created for Lady Macbeth's iconic sleepwalking scene and a behind-the-scenes documentary short), a Q&A session with the artists, and a celebratory toast (it's a soiree, after all).

In early April, members of Heartbeat produced an exuberant online performance of "Make Our Garden Grow," the finale from Leonard Bernstein's "Candide." So, as a company, they already had a loose grip of the Zoom ropes. But "Lady M" — adapted here by Heard into a contemporized exploration of "gender, ambition and violence" — presented a deeper challenge, as singers found themselves serving as their own stage managers, designers, sound and light technicians, and makeup artists.

"I had no idea how much we would discover," says Heard. "It's a fascinating moment because we're experimenting with film and recording and streaming — but also with liveness."

All of which seems to be part of a grander experiment unfolding across the Internet: How will opera, consigned to online, thrive in the ether of the virtual? What will it look like? How will it sound? (Spoiler: If it's on Zoom, the answer is "a little choppy.")

The covid-19 crisis has forced a sacrifice of so much of what makes opera so powerful — the massive casts, booming orchestras, elaborate staging and singular thrill of being present to experience it all. But it also presents an unlikely opportunity for the form itself to get more intimate and accessible, reach new audiences and evolve in different directions. It's an art form in survival mode, and it may well come back stronger.





The Metropolitan Opera's "At Home Gala" in April. (Metropolitan Opera)

A virtual “[At-Home Gala](#)” thrown by the Metropolitan Opera at the end of April seemed to revel in the resolute staying power of the art form, with its cavalcade of stars scattered around the globe, even as it “attempted the unprecedented” in the introductory words of Met general manager Peter Gelb.

[In a time of uncertainty, classical music provides a sense of permanence]

Any telethon vibes set up by the prospect of a global tour of opera stars’ living rooms were quickly quelled by the emotional punch and endearing intimacy of each performance. The scruffy acoustics didn’t mar soprano Lisette Oropesa’s soaring rendition of “Idole de Ma Vie” from Meyerbeer’s “Robert le Diable,” accompanied by pianist Michael Borowitz on a screen behind her. Diana Damrau and Nicolas Testé’s performance of the duet “Là ci darem la mano” from “Don Giovanni” concluded with a cameo by their kids darting into frame. And Roberto Alagna and Aleksandra Kurzak Le Raincy’s raucous run-through of “Caro elisir sei mio” from Donizetti’s “L’ Elisir d’amore.”

These live performances were augmented by carefully constructed group performances from the Met Orchestra, recorded separately and assembled into vast Zoom-esque grids. Its account of the Intermezzo from Mascagni’s “Cavalleria rusticana” led by music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin achieved an uncanny sense of presence — or perhaps I’ve just been sequestered in my apartment long enough to supply whatever emotional energy was lost in the connection.



Lisette Oropesa in Baton Rouge offers a soaring rendition of “Idole de Ma Vie” from Meyerbeer’s “Robert le Diable,” accompanied by pianist Michael Borowitz. (Metropolitan Opera)

The four-hour program featured more than 40 artists around the world and was watched by nearly a million viewers in 162 countries — not bad for an art form often thought of as inaccessible. Yet, as satisfying as its globe-trotting simulation of intimacy was, and despite thrilling moments that transported you to memories of far more elaborate stagings, it was also bittersweet — as was the knowledge that the recently laid-off artists were all essentially donating their time. You could hear hope in the singers’ voices and see loss in their eyes

...during their time. You could hear hope in the singers' voices and see loss in their eyes.

[Artists are struggling to find inspiration in isolation]

Perhaps that's because the event, as concerned as it was with the Met's future, amounted to a long look back — a disconcertingly beautiful reminder that it could be years before we're once again together in the rows. At times, it was hard to escape the feeling that it wasn't so much a presentation of opera as a representation.

Meanwhile, smaller, more experimentally minded opera outfits have been using the uncertainty of the crisis as the milieu for new work, and hacking the corporate contours of Zoom into a postmodern proscenium of sorts.

The NYC-based collaborative group ThingNY recently premiered "[SubtraeTTTTTTTT](#)" (still viewable on YouTube), an hour-long series of "études, songs and scenes developed in isolation" and "intended to toy with the abilities, shortfalls and comical inconsistencies of bandwidth broadcast." Its lo-fi tangle of opera, poetry, sound art, visual effects and a few minutes of beards rubbing against microphones leaned into its technical difficulties, indulging in the iffy sound and glitchy vision of our new social lives. ("I am less alone than I have ever been," went one mantrically repeated refrain.) ThingNY sounded fully at home in the void.



An image from ThingNY's "SubtraeTTTTTTTT." Top row, from left: Erin Rogers, Dave Ruder and Paul Pinto. Bottom row, from left: Isabel Castellvi, Jeffrey Young and Gelsey Bell. (Eamonn Farrell/ThingNY)

Likewise, composer Kamala Sankaram and librettist Rob Handel's short digital opera "[all decisions will be made by consensus](#)" presented by NYC's HERE Arts Center (and still viewable on its Facebook page) also mined the immaterial for its material, employing the flaws of Zoom as a framework. Its cast of a half-dozen imaginary activists (fighting for what, we're never told) appeared and vanished from the grid, overlapping and interrupting each other, muting and unmuting — everyone battling for screen time, vying to lead the leaderless. And while the libretto feels like a latticework of Zoomisms ("Oh sorry, you go"; "You're all frozen"; "Not everyone has the same bandwidth"), the story it tells in its brief 11-minute runtime is a potent one about the difficulties of coming together when we're forced apart. It's also about how dreadful Zoom can be.



An image from "all decisions will be made by consensus," by New York's HERE Arts Center. (HERE Arts Center)

For the "Lady M" soirees, Heard isn't so much making a message out of the medium as he is taking full advantage of what Zoom can (and can't) do.

Movement director Emma Jaster has the singers taking full advantage of their tiny frames, with choreography that plays with the walls of the grid and the depth of their rooms. Lithe leadership and arrangements by music director Jacob Ashworth and arranger Daniel Schlosberg never overcrowd the tight acoustic confines of Zoom. And each of the performances — from soprano Felicia Moore, who powerfully realizes her Lady M from her own childhood bedroom, to baritone Quentin Oliver Lee, whose Macbeth brings sound and fury — manage to reach through the screen.

Zoom may not be the future of the opera, but for now it's providing a way forward, rich with as many obstacles as opportunities. And this migration to the virtual is forcing some essential questions about the state of the art and its future. How can we keep opera not just alive, but growing through this uncertain suspension?

In a time when none of us can go anywhere, where do we go from here — to borrow a line from one of the Weird Sisters — "when the hurlyburly's done, when the battle's lost and won"?

Michael Andor Brodeur

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