

## “A TRAIL OF BREAD CRUMBS.”

“When I moved to this city, I met a lot of people who seemed like they should love opera — they love music and theater, they go to museums,” says **Opera Memphis** General Director Ned Canty. “What was it about opera, I wondered, that was keeping them away? We all have our assumptions and theories; I wanted to be able to point to real data.”

To that end, Canty engaged research firm Decision Support Partners to help design and document its New Audience Initiative (NAI), launched with the help of a grant from the Assisi Foundation.

Participants were first solicited through local groups with diverse membership, including The Leadership Academy and Give 365; the company then worked with the media to spread the word about the program to lovers of sister art forms. Seventy-nine people signed up to be in the program, which provided each participant with two complementary tickets to every performance in the 2011-2012 season, as well as a variety of social and educational activities. Participant demographics were broad: ages ranged from under 25 to 74, with the majority being age 25-34, and professions included architect, barista, librarian, caregiver, banker, educator, tattoo artist and accountant, to mention a few. Participants were asked to complete surveys and other activities to gauge their views of opera over the course of the year.

The findings: “All the things we worry about are true,” says Canty, noting that people initially associated opera with words like grand, boring, long, loud, expensive. He was surprised, however, to learn that some clichés had a positive effect. Participants experienced opera in two venues: the Orpheum, an ornate former vaudeville house, and a newer hall, with more comfortable seating, convenient parking, better acoustics and a clean, modern aesthetic. “When we asked people to assign a price, people consistently said they would pay more to go to the Orpheum. What was on stage was not necessarily grander, and the quality of the singing was steady. But the Orpheum had a stronger correlation to what they thought a night at the opera should be like.”

“The question we’re wrestling with now,” continues Canty, “is how much do we try to change the preconceptions, and how much do we embrace them? We’ve been working to encourage the jeans and polo shirt crowd to attend, but we’re hearing that people want to get dressed up.” All NAI participants were offered a 50 percent discount on subscriptions for the 2012-2013 season, and will be offered 25 percent off for the season after that; the company will continue to engage them in a dialogue about their ongoing experience.

One clear message has already emerged: once people experienced opera for the first time, they were eager for more. As a result, Opera Memphis launched a new initiative this fall, “30 Days of Opera Presented by Evolve Bank & Trust,” which created a series of small, positive encounters with opera throughout Memphis. “Making the decision to see your first opera can be a big step,” says Canty. “Very few people wake up and say, ‘I think I’ll go to an opera today.’ With 30 Days of Opera, I hope to create a trail of bread crumbs, a series of small, positive encounters, that might help people overcome their reservations.”



Joel Herold, Maria Lindsey, Ben Makino, Caitlin McKechney, Jesse Koza and Logan Rucker were the team of six who presented over 50 performances in 40 locations throughout Memphis during 30 Days of Opera Presented by Evolve Bank and Trust. Photo by Ned Canty.