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Peter Gelb: Anatomy of a Leader

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Classical opera is a glorious but expensive enterprise that is thought by many to be so caught up in traditional methods and structures that it cannot adapt to changing times. Not so at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, under the recent and widely discussed leadership of Peter Gelb. Here, GIA member Russell Willis Taylor, president and CEO of National Arts Strategies, interviews Gelb about his approach to leadership, and his ambitions for the Met. Along the way, Taylor, former managing director of the English National Opera in London, offers an inspiring glimpse into methods for changing an organization so it may thrive in the decades ahead.

Peter Gelb: Anatomy of a Leader

Russell Willis Taylor

Opera has been described by the Earl of Harewood, the leading British expert on the subject today, as the eternal truth of drama through music. Glorious, complex, and incorporating all art forms, it is a heady mix of music and theater that has captured the imagination of audiences since Monteverdi in seventeenth-century Italy.

Along with the splendor of opera comes a menu of management problems whose resolution challenges even the most talented. Like most of the live performing arts, opera has inherent structural problems: high fixed costs, increasing labor costs, limited capacity for audiences for live performances, price sensitivity for tickets, and the particular problem of the need for very-long-term expenditure commitments in harness with short-term revenue. Grand opera requires large companies with many disparate teams of highly skilled specialists, and opera companies are not, by design, nimble. There is a much repeated chestnut about opera companies: Trying to change one is like trying to turn an ocean liner – it can be done, but only very slowly. Peter Gelb, at the end of his first year as the general director of the Metropolitan Opera, has found a new way: he is refitting the ship while she sails.

Gelb's innovative leadership is getting a lot of attention from opera companies around the world, and with good reason. For many Americans, the Met is the venerated doyenne of opera in the United States, and its history gives it a unique stature among the world's leading houses. The talismanic quality of the Metropolitan Opera derives from its evolution from polite but passive receiving house for a European art form to the house where American opera stars were made – singers who then became world renowned. Its radio broadcasts for two generations have given opera a presence in America that has encouraged other grand opera companies and dozens of regional companies. Innovation at the Met is good for opera in America, and if a high tide raises all boats, then the Met has a lunar pull on that tide.

In the performing arts, what goes on behind the curtain determines the success of the production. Looking at the work behind the scenes offers an opportunity to examine the elements of success in Peter Gelb's leadership, and to

see how the man who started his career at the Met as an usher in his teens is now helping the Met become more influential, financially stable, and creatively successful than ever before.

The first rule in opera is the first rule in life: see to everything yourself.

– Nellie Melba

The best leaders usually bring an extremely high level of preparedness to the job, combining experience and skill with natural talent. In many respects, Peter Gelb has been training for this job his whole career, a fact he recognizes: "All of the jobs that I have done before have given me something – something I can use and that I need for this work." Coming from a family in which culture had a high value – his father was the managing editor of the *New York Times*, and his mother is a writer – Gelb had an early interest in classical music. He also had an important early job in working for Sol Hurok, a fabled Russian impresario who is renowned not only for the extraordinary work he introduced to the American stage but also for a theater aphorism that every young theater employee in the Western world is told: "When people don't want to come, nothing will stop them." This inviolate law of the theater has stayed with Gelb, to the benefit of the Met.

Gelb has been chief of in-house production for the Columbia Artists Management agency, and was most recently president of Sony Classical Music for ten years. He has won numerous awards for his television production work on artists including Vladimir Horowitz and Mel Brooks. His range of experience in the commercial sector as a businessman and a creative leader gives him not only the experience he needs to run a business as complex as the Met but also that essential credibility that opera leaders require to implement change. Opera companies are filled with true believers, and like Calais for Mary Tudor, opera seems to become engraved on the heart of everyone who works there, which can make effecting change very difficult indeed. Although he refers to himself as the "outsider candidate for this job," Gelb has an unimpeachable pedigree in the world of music and theatrical production, and this vast range of experience is no doubt one of the reasons that his first season of repositioning the Met has been such a strong one, described in the *New York Times* as the boldest statement of a new leader since the days of the late Sir Rudolf Bing in the fifties.

There are two sighs of relief every night in the life of an opera manager. The first comes when the curtain goes up....The second sigh of relief comes when the final curtain goes down without any disaster, and one realizes, gratefully, that the miracle has happened again.

– Sir Rudolf Bing

Another characteristic of a strong leader is a visionary understanding of the scope of the business he or she leads. Although he has years of experience in the commercial entertainment sector, Gelb has no confusion regarding either the business he is now in or his role within that business. His understanding and strength of vision on this are striking, and he now brings to the Met the same strategic focus that he brought to the creation of new markets for Sony via recordings such as the score for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Red Violin*. At Sony, he found new sources of outstanding artistic content to broaden audiences, and at the Met he sees his role with a compelling and defining clarity: he is the producer.

Alongside James Levine, his role is to achieve artistic greatness for the Met while filling 3,800 seats every night. Gelb notes, “I see my role as the chief producer, and this means I am involved with virtually all aspects of the operation: artistic, creative, as a business. I have put a greater emphasis on the cause-and-effect relationship between art and commerce than perhaps my most immediate predecessors may have, in part because times are much more difficult for opera today than they were in the past. The days when the Met could enjoy sold-out houses without really flexing *all* of its artistic muscles at the same time are no longer. I don’t have the emotional baggage of the ‘intendant’ that perhaps some others do – I bring a different perspective.”

As well as understanding that it is neither pejorative nor threatening to see the Met as part of the larger entertainment world – albeit a very high-quality niche part of that world – Gelb sees that the future of the Met is to become a destination for people. His delight in the contemporary art gallery off the foyer of the theater, completed in time for his first season at the Met, is visible as he describes a space that will feature visual art directly related to the work on stage. He understands the appetite for a rich mix of artistic work that drives today’s audiences, and he wants the Met to have many points of access for everyone. “The future of this opera house is going to be secured through presenting combinations of star artists, attractive rep choices, and acclaimed directors – with the highest musical standards in the world.” His strategy is very focused: Create as much excitement and buzz around the highest quality performances, in as many media as possible. Gelb sees his business clearly enough to know what it should, and should not, have in common with other forms of entertainment. He is not the first to understand that the public needs a range of opportunities to engage in an art form – but he has been the first to successfully implement a

full-scale strategy to make that happen in as short a space of time as one year.

Leadership requires patience, and taking the time to think before acting. Gelb’s bold strategy started with planning. For the first year of his involvement with the Met, he was there in an observer’s capacity while Joe Volpe finished his tenure. During this year, he developed a vision for what he would need to change, what resources were available to him around the world, and what he would do in his first few months. In theater, there is no substitute for planning and rehearsal, and Gelb used this time intelligently. Although it is as close to impossible as makes no odds to change an opera season on short notice, Gelb knew that the first production of his first season needed to be much more than the usual gala of mediocre artistic merit. The English National Opera was already working on a new *Madam Butterfly* with the renowned director Anthony Minghella. The Met became a full producing partner, and opened the season with a striking and dramatically adventurous production incorporating Japanese Bunraku puppetry that was broadcast live onto screens in Times Square. The choice was a smart one: it offered economies of scale while making a bold artistic statement.

There is a telling symmetry between the way his friend Anthony Minghella directs and the way Peter Gelb leads. Minghella is known for exhorting his singers and actors to think before they act, and Gelb clearly approaches his job this way. “There is a huge and daunting cost of producing anything in this theater; one has to be careful before investing millions of dollars.”

So long as the human spirit thrives on this planet, music in some living form will accompany and sustain it and give it expressive meaning.

– Aaron Copland

An understanding of strategy alone is not enough for an effective leader. Balancing strategic choices with artistic and financial risk is essential, and this is an area in which Peter Gelb excels. “I am running the Met as a producer, and a good producer thinks with both sides of the brain. You cannot make artistic decisions in a vacuum – you *have* to be always aware of who your audience is. This doesn’t mean that you pander – in fact you do the opposite: you lead. But you cannot lead the audience to a place where they cannot possibly go.”

Part of this leadership of audiences for Gelb means remembering that opera is much more than music – it is indeed the eternal truth of drama through music. He is committed to finding the brightest theatrical talent wherever he can, sometimes in unexpected places. Along with Minghella’s *Butterfly*, he will be bringing a new *Lucia di Lammermoor*, directed by Mary Zimmerman, to the Met in the 2007/8 season, and will also welcome international directors and composers such as Robert LePage and John Adams to the Met stage. LePage, a

celebrated European dramatic figure, will also create a *Ring* cycle for the Met in 2010/11. Like the Julie Taymor ninety-minute production of *The Magic Flute*, part of Gelb's family oriented programming, such collaborations will bring something new and dramatically heightened to the Met audiences. Gelb has a firm concept of the way to manage this risk: "You increase the odds when you hire theater directors whose body of work has been superb. And it works the converse way – if you hire someone whose work has been weak, it will still be weak here. We are not in the new-talent-discovery business – we can't be. I am not interested in giving someone who has no demonstrated brilliance theatrically a chance to work at the Met; it's too risky for us, and for them. They should work somewhere else first. But I am deeply interested in bringing people to the Met who have not necessarily done opera before – as long as they are brilliant."

Another example of how Gelb manages innovation and risk can be seen in his twenty-dollar rush ticket scheme. In the nonprofit theater, patrons will often return tickets to theaters they support without asking for a refund, making it possible for the theater to resell them. In what is surely the most spectacular ticket return deal in theatrical history to date, Gelb designed a proposal for Met patron Agnes Varis, the founder and president of a highly successful pharmaceutical company. To make two hundred orchestra seats available "on the night" for twenty dollars (normally priced at one hundred dollars each), he proposed that she buy \$2 million worth of tickets, and then return them. This program has opened up the doors to the Met in a truly new way, and created queues for tickets every night they are on sale – visible lines of people that can be seen wrapping around Lincoln Center. By combining a genuine desire for access with savvy about creating a buzz, Gelb and benefactor Varis have started a program that will continue into next season by very popular demand.

I shall seize Fate by the throat; it shall certainly not bend and crush me completely.

– Ludwig van Beethoven

Leaders are always clear about their priorities, and use their energies to pursue goals in a disciplined and comprehensible way. Another component of Gelb's success thus far has been his intelligent ordering of priorities backed by the personal focus needed to lead change in line with those priorities. His description of bringing about monumental shifts in two areas is so matter of fact it approaches meiosis, but he has crafted a way to utilize the intellectual property of the Met through new-media delivery systems, and has reached agreement with the relevant unions to make this possible. As with almost every symphony and opera company in America, Gelb "inherited a cost structure that had decades of agreements with unions about the work that are so far beyond business sense that you can't even begin to explain or justify them. They don't make sense, and they are too expensive to

sustain." In addition, for many years the unions have resisted any control of intellectual property by management, particularly where it concerns distribution through recordings or streaming. This had made it virtually impossible for opera companies to gain any advantage from the Internet or other new media beyond websites. For example, the Chicago Lyric had been unable to reach agreements for radio broadcasts for five years.

Starting from a position of strong respect and admiration for musicians, Gelb began talks with the unions against the unlikely backdrop of five-year agreements that had been recently crafted by his predecessor on his way out the door. "This change was only possible because the box office was declining, and everyone here was worried about what their future was; there was no real media activity beyond the radio broadcasts. And I was new. I just said, "Listen, five years from now when your other labor agreements are up, we're going to be discussing the dismantling of this opera house, not the continuation of it, unless we change it together." So yes, I came on strong, with a vision for how we could change opera for the better. I told them you have nothing to lose except possibly a chance to save your own jobs – and they accepted that." Gelb stresses that "had the Met been doing better at the box office and in fundraising, I probably wouldn't have been offered the job at all – it would have gone to a more usual suspect. But the problems have really helped everyone focus on the need for change. And without the progressive thinking of our unions, what we are doing wouldn't be possible."

In September 2006, the Met issued a press release that was heard 'round the (opera) world. In it, Peter Gelb announced that unions representing the Met orchestra, soloists, chorus, ballet, and stagehands had reached agreements granting the Met "control over the creation and distribution of our electronic content." Honesty, determination, and a clear vision for the future had made possible the acceptance of a new revenue-sharing model at the Met, and will change the shape of intellectual property and new-media agreements for most performing arts companies in America, in time. In very short order, Chicago had reached an agreement with their unions to get back on the air. Further afield, when the HD simulcasts made possible by these new agreements were so successful in cinemas around the world, Nicolas Joel at Opera de Paris applauded the achievement and said he intended to open discussions with his unions to make them possible for his own opera company. Msr. Joel noted that he had told his friend Peter Gelb that he wouldn't let the Met be the only broadcast in France.

An opera begins long before the curtain goes up and ends long after it has come down. It starts in my imagination, it becomes my life, and it stays part of my life long after I've left the opera house.

– Maria Callas

Gaining control of the intellectual property that is a wasted resource for so many of the performing arts was a top priority for Gelb, and with good reason. Without increased flexibility in this area, it is not possible for opera companies to take advantage of any of the new technologies that are so attractive to consumers of all ages. Exploiting new technology is also the only way to expand the audience capacity of the Met beyond the auditorium. The highly successful Met Opera simulcasts in cinemas across America utilize high-definition satellite networks and will provide an income stream in the future. As importantly to Gelb, the simulcasts – the idea of Julie Borchard-Young, who had been a colleague at Sony Music and now works at the Met – are one of the many new “portals to the Met” that he wants to create. While demonstrating that this new way of giving people access to the Met at eighteen dollars a ticket was an enhancement of and not a replacement for live performance, Gelb also showed a commitment to an outstanding artistic experience in every medium. Podcasts, video on demand, live streaming public television broadcasts, and DVDs are all in the future for the Met, because Gelb has brought the Met into the present.

The technology used in the simulcasts is being improved all the time; with the advent of robotic cameras the production quality is so high that the *Wall St. Journal* called it “sublime” and leaders of other opera companies, highly respected figures such as David Gockley at San Francisco and Speight Jenkins in Seattle, publicly commented on how artistically impressive they thought the broadcasts were. Alex Ross in the *New Yorker* noted that “adroit camerawork can improve upon the less felicitous imaginings of opera directors.” And in a possibly unintended consequence, with one hundred cinemas outside of the United States showing the simulcasts to full theaters in Canada, England, Sweden, France, Germany, Norway, and Denmark, Gelb has performed a respectful act of cultural diplomacy that will no doubt be far more effective in sharing our artistic achievements than any exportation of canned management presentations could ever be.

Part of Gelb’s insight about these new delivery systems is his intuitive understanding that technology that doesn’t encourage isolation can be a tremendous boon to new audiences. He wants people to convene and he wants the Met to be the convener, and he wants to use every delivery system he can for the work the Met produces – for the benefit of the entire organization. The cinema work demonstrates for him the joy of experiencing spectacle in a group. (It’s not new for the Met to use technology: in the fifties operas were broadcast from there in a network of theaters using the television technology of the day. Poor picture quality made it a short-lived experiment, but the advances in satellite technology have now caught up with the production values of opera.) Incorporating behind-the-scenes interviews and making the most of intervals and the reality-TV feel of the broadcasts, Gelb is helping everyone in America and beyond get to know the Met family and its love of opera. “What I love about the Met is the energy that emanates from the stage and the orchestra

– from everyone here, really. Everyone is so proud of working here, and they want to succeed as an institution. So, I accept that the economics are nearly impossible, but we are finding ways together to make the best of it, and create new chances to succeed.”

Opera comes to me before anything else.

– Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Peter Gelb has demonstrated many of the abilities and qualities that make a leader successful: he has the background and experience to do the job well; he clearly understands the nature of the business; he is committed to artistic quality; he took the time to plan and create a vision for the Met; he knows how to balance risk and innovation; he made a priority of freeing up the intellectual property of the company and establishing sustainable agreements with the unions; and he embraces the possibilities of technology. In most jobs, this would be more than enough to establish you as a leader. In opera, something more is required. And that something more is passion.

When Gelb took over, the usual suspects engaged in some mild sniping about whether or not his commercial music experience was quite up to the Met standard. This standard had seen a drop in the box office, all earned income, and fundraising. Subscriptions were down because it was always possible to get a ticket. His appointment was very quickly decided; after interviewing a number of candidates and not finding them promising, the board talked to Gelb and offered him the job within forty-eight hours. As a casting decision, it was a fast one. A conversation with him makes it very clear why the board would feel so strongly about it – Gelb is a rare combination of clear-eyed realism and unshakable passion for music and theater as embodied specifically in the Metropolitan Opera. He says, “I am very aware that the core positive values of the institution are represented by James Levine and his great work. There is no conductor in the history of modern opera who has had the kind of enduring relationship that he’s had with this house and this orchestra. With a strong partner with a real artistic understanding, it is possible for us to achieve even more. I took this job because I am a producer – and this is, in my opinion, the greatest theater in the world. We have the most extraordinarily talented technical team; they can do anything, almost anything. There is something so magical about the physical space of this theater – and it is a miracle acoustically.”

This passion for the work of the Met gives him a sense of conviction that is energizing but not overly zealous. “It’s our job to make opera a relevant art form, and that is what I am attempting to do. I am not interested in change for the sake of change. I’m interested in artistic truth in our productions, and in re-energizing the public. The directors I am hiring here are not being hired to make a scandal – they are being hired to create great stories. I know it’s not for everyone – it

doesn't have to be. I want to make sure that everyone who wants to know us, to experience us, can do that. But there are billions of people in the world, and opera needs only a tiny percentage of them. It's not mass culture, it's more like the audience for foreign language films. Because, you know, quality does win out over everything else sometimes. Not always, but sometimes."

If music in general is an imitation of history, opera in particular is an imitation of human willfulness; it is rooted in the fact that we not only have feelings but insist upon having them at whatever cost to ourselves.

– W. H. Auden

The first year of Gelb's tenure at the Met offers some benchmarks for the issues an effective leader must tackle. Post 9/11 and with a lagging artistic program that was musically sound but predictable, the Met had started to flag. The Met was beginning to resemble the place that composer Gian Carlo Menotti had described fifty years earlier as not so much "an audience but a habit." When companies as big as the Met slow down, the effect can take hold in a very worrying way, and radical change was needed to bring it up to speed again. Gelb has provided that impetus, with specific ideas, with a strong sense of the value of partners and collaborators, and by bringing all of his expertise to bear on the key problems the Met faced. The simulcast model is being replicated by other opera companies on college campuses or in local venues, and regional opera companies used the Met broadcasts to promote their own work.

The real success of leaders is measured by how they advance their institutions. Peter Gelb is making the Met a great house again, motivating and directing the fifteen hundred people who are the Metropolitan Opera. In his first year the box office capacity increased by 7.1 points, and he oversaw eighty-eight sold-out performances (an almost Olympic marketing achievement, given the previous season high of twenty-two). He is working to lower the average age of audience members by attracting new attendees through a variety of innovative schemes, and he is achieving these new audiences by adroitly using new delivery systems and raising the quality of the experience of opera at the Met. New work is being commissioned at a rapid rate, to advance what is largely a heritage art form for the future.

Working within the constraints of the nonprofit model, with its sometimes cumbersome governing structure, he is demonstrating patience when needed and expediency when required. He respects the board/staff relationship, but does not approach the work as a supplicant to his volunteer board, noting that, "A smart general manager knows what decisions should be brought to his boss, who is the president, and to the executive committee. I learned a long time ago, even

though I had never worked in this capacity before in a nonprofit, that you need to make sure you have the consensus of the people you're working for. I made it very clear from the start that the artistic vacuum for productions would be filled by me – discussions for new productions were coming from all quarters and it's just not an effective way to develop an artistic reputation. Of course I listen and I talk carefully to any person who supports us generously, but I was very clear with the board at the start that I felt a responsibility to perform well, and it would not be possible for me to do that if my individual artistic decisions were second-guessed. Of course the ultimate second-guessing for them is that they can always fire me, but until they do, my decisions stand. On that basis, I have found peace and harmony. Of course, it helps quite a lot that my early decisions have been successful ones."

Gelb admits that the job is bigger and more difficult than he had anticipated, while also acknowledging that he is constantly making it bigger and even more difficult. The complexity of the job would be suffocating for anyone who did not bring his ability and knowledge to it, but the progress he is making seems to drive him forward, and his passion has not diminished in his first year. "Judging by the number of people who said they were at our big-screen opening in Times Square, you would think that there must have been about fifty thousand people there, rather than the fifteen hundred who were actually there. It's become one of those iconic cultural events in the life of New York where everyone feels that they *should* have been, even though they weren't." And that is where Gelb wants to lead the Met – to be the place where everyone feels they should be, a place where iconic cultural events are always on offer.

Peter Gelb is the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera and has helped in launching numerous initiatives to reinvigorate North America's largest opera company. One of the most groundbreaking and successful of these efforts is Metropolitan Opera: Live in HD, which transmits live, high-definition performances to movie theaters across North America, Europe, and Japan. At the age of seventeen, Peter Gelb was an office boy for the late impresario Sol Hurok. He then became an assistant manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and was manager of the legendary pianist Vladimir Horowitz during his career revival in the 1980s. Gelb later served as president of CAMI Video and of the international record label Sony Classical. He has won six Emmy Awards as a television producer and director as well as a Peabody Award for Marsalis on Music, an educational television series.

Russell Willis Taylor is the president and CEO of National Arts Strategies, the leading provider of executive education for arts and cultural leaders in the United States. Prior to joining NAS in 2001, she was the managing director of the English National Opera in London.