

# Unequal opportunities: gender inequality and non-standard work in US opera production

Unequal opportunities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper examines the US opera sector as a means for interrogating how varying forms of non-standard work shape gender inequality in the creative industries.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors draw on 16 seasons of opera production data from Operabase.com to conduct a gender-based exploratory data analysis of the key creative roles of conductor, director and designers, as well as the hiring networks through which teams are formed, at the 11 largest opera companies in the United States.

**Findings** – The authors find that women, as a group, experienced gender-based disadvantage across the key creative roles of opera production, but particularly in the artistic leadership roles of conductor and director. The authors also find that women's exclusion in the field is being further perpetuated by the sector's non-standard and overlapping employment structures, which impacts women practitioners' professional visibility and career opportunities.

**Practical implications** – The study can help organizations implement strategic hiring practices that acknowledge the relationship between gender inequality and varying forms of non-standard work with the aim of increasing women's representation.

**Originality/value** – This study work establishes the scale of gender inequality operating within a sector that has received minimal scholarly attention as a site of employment. The study analysis also offers important insight for the wider creative industries and highlights opportunities to redress gender inequality in other sectors where project-based work is prevalent.

**Keywords** Gender inequality, Non-standard work, Creative and cultural industries, Opera production, Stage directors, Conductors

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Gendered power relations in the creative industries systemically advantage men across occupations, organizations and sectors. As a growing body of scholarship demonstrates, gender inequality is particularly sharp in the performing arts and screen industries, fields which rely on varying forms of non-standard work (Conor *et al.*, 2015; Eikhof, 2017). The UN's International Labour Organization defines non-standard work as “an employment relationship that deviates from the standard model: full time, indefinite, and in a subordinate relationship” (Gruber, 2019, p. 3). Non-standard work can include temporary or part-time work, dependent self-employment and work conducted for multiple employers—all forms of labor that commonly characterize career trajectories in the arts. The norms, values and practices that underpin project-based non-standard work have been shown to be key drivers of gender inequality across the creative industries (Hennekam and Bennett, 2017). However, there has been limited consideration of the diversity of forms of non-standard work and the subsequent impact these can have on gender inequality within arts organizations.

Our paper uses the US opera sector as a means for interrogating how the variable nature of the employment relationship can perpetuate or mitigate gender inequality in field where



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project-based work is prevalent. We use the opera sector as a case study for three reasons. First, operatic employment structures incorporate multiple forms of non-standard work, including short-term project-based roles, long(er)-term artistic appointments or residencies and dual employment opportunities for individuals in executive leadership roles. These different dimensions of non-standard work allow us to map the innerworkings of gender inequality in relation to the labor market dynamics and hiring practices for roles that have varying occupational status and career capital. Secondly, research that examines gendered power relations in operatic labor markets remains emergent (Vincent *et al.*, 2021). As Connor *et al.* (2015) argue, a shortage of data in creative fields “both reflects and *contributes* to enduring inequalities” (p. 6). This speaks to the need to address the absence of data specific to opera. Third, as a sector that frequently draws its creative practitioners from other sectors of the arts, including music, theatre and screen production, an analysis of factors that both enable and perpetuate gender inequality in opera can offer important insight into the wider creative industries and highlight opportunities to redress gender inequality more broadly.

To advance our understanding of the relationship between gender inequality and varying forms of non-standard work in opera production, we conduct the first longitudinal analysis of women’s representation as conductors, directors and designers at the 11 largest opera companies in the United States. We find that women practitioners see consistently low rates of representation at the most prestigious companies in the country, mirroring the gendered division of labor seen across the wider creative industries. We also find that the opportunities available to women in key creative roles are highly contingent on the form of the employment contract on which they are engaged. Women practitioners that have more stable attachments to opera companies, either through artistic residencies or, more potently, in executive leadership roles, have greater access to work as directors and conductors on specific opera productions and thus more opportunities to build their artistic careers across the sector. Based on these findings, we argue that efforts to address gender inequality in the field should focus on the appointment of women to high-quality standard and non-standard employment contracts that both confer and enable career development and visibility.

Our article proceeds in six sections. Section one provides an overview of literature on gender inequality in the creative industries, including in classical music and theatre, fields which relate to opera most closely. Section two outlines the organizational and employment structures of opera companies in the United States. Section three introduces the methodology for our study, which uses archival data from [Operabase.com](https://www.operabase.com) to map women’s representation as conductors, directors and designers from 2005/06 to 2020/21. In section four, we present our findings, which establish the scale of gender inequality operating within individual companies as well as across the national cohort. In section five, we consider these findings in the context of the varying forms of non-standard work that characterize opera production. We conclude by highlighting opportunities and recommendations to address gender inequality in opera production through targeted hiring practices.

### **Background: gender at work in classical music and theatre**

In order to advance discussions of gender inequality in opera, we locate our study within the literature that examines how the organization of work and hiring practices in the creative industries produce unequal and deeply gendered access to work opportunities and career advancement (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). Work in the creative industries is often project-based, producing labor markets that are characterized by short-term contracts and freelance work. The precarious nature of such work systemically disadvantages women as a consequence of a range of socio-economic factors, including the gendered nature of caring work and under-developed or absent social policy support for self-employed and freelance workers (Brook *et al.*, 2018).

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The project-based nature of work in these fields further interacts with gendered social relations, epitomizing the worst elements of a “reputation economy” (Gandini, 2016). Hiring processes are informal and opaque, with both workers and employers leveraging their personal and professional networks and reputations to gain advantage in acquiring work and talent (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Vinodrai and Keddy, 2015). These networks are self-referential, self-reinforcing and homophilic, with enduring impacts on labor markets over time (Lutter, 2015; Greguletz *et al.*, 2019). Risk management logics and mythical meritocracy discourses further normalize hiring practices that are highly exclusionary and systemically advantage white men for both work opportunities and leadership roles (Brook *et al.*, 2021; Christopherson, 2009; Coles and Eikhof, 2021).

There is also strong evidence of social norms which (re)produce an occupationally gendered division of labor that mirrors gender roles in wider society and aligns to longstanding gendered conceptions of the “ideal” creative worker (Coles *et al.*, 2018; Handy and Rowlands, 2017). These norms travel horizontally across labor markets, with men dominating jobs that are trade-based or technology intensive, and women dominating administrative roles and feminized occupations such as makeup and costume designer (Conor *et al.*, 2015). Women who attempt to diverge from these feminized occupational categories are framed as being less reliable, less experienced and ultimately higher risk than male workers in the same fields (Handy and Rowlands, 2017). This gendered division of labor also travels vertically within creative labor markets, further contributing to the overrepresentation of men in key artistic, strategic and governance roles (Coles *et al.*, 2018).

In classical music and theatre, the two sectors proximate to opera, we see these systemic issues exacerbated by the unique nature of performance-based work and the embedded stratification of both industries. In classical music, women must contend with the extended and insecure work hours, closed networks, and vertical and horizontal segregation endemic in the wider creative industries, alongside gendered constructions of the “ideal-typical artist.” As Miller (2019) argues, this artist archetype is inherently masculinized, characterized as a creative genius who is wholly committed to their artistic calling. This characterization reinforces perceptions of women as “risky” compared to men, particularly for positions of artistic leadership that are typically recruited based on a practitioner’s creative persona and industry prestige. The role of conductor, for example, remains “deeply entrenched in nineteenth-century ideology and concepts of patriarchy,” with women conductors inherently viewed as “disruptive figures” (Bartleet, 2008, p. 6). Meanwhile, necessary career advancement strategies in classical music, including self-promotion and entrepreneurialism, are similarly aligned to masculine gender norms, posing further barriers to women navigating careers in the field (Scharff, 2018).

The theatre sector shows similar evidence of both vertical and horizontal segregation for women practitioners, as well as deeply-embedded masculine paradigms for positions of artistic leadership. Like the role of conductor, the stage director functions as the seeming locus of creative—and inherently male—genius. Accordingly, MacArthur (2015) finds that women comprise just 30% of stage directors and artistic directors in Canadian theatre companies, with women seeing their highest representation at companies with the smallest budgets. Miller’s (2019) “ideal-typical artist” archetype also holds gendered weight in terms of theatrical work structures, with practitioners typically needing to engage in high-pressure and intense periods of short-term work, often extending beyond standard business hours, as well as be available for frequent travel, all of which can conflict with family responsibilities.

Opera functions as an artistic bridge between classical music and theatre, with productions that engage both conductors and stage directors, as well as designers, performers and instrumentalists. However, both the artistic and employment structures of the opera industry are distinct from those of classical music and theatre, with longstanding traditions and expectations for how operas should be realized on stage. As a further

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complication, the field continues to rely on a canon of works written by white European men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for which the roles of conductor and director evolved as artistic heirs (Vincent, 2022). Accordingly, both the operas programmed on stage and the creative roles that realize them behind the scenes have been historically dominated by men.

Yet, scholarship on gender inequality in opera production remains limited. One key exception is Vincent *et al.* (2021), which considers the gender profile of directors and designers credited by the UK's Royal Opera House from 2005/6 to 2019/20. Analyzing women's representation by production type, repertoire and occupational category, the authors find evidence of systemic gender-based disadvantage for women at the company, with compounding negative impacts on their career trajectories in the sector. Another important exception is Cuyler (2021), who interrogates equity, diversity and inclusion in US opera companies using interviews with executive opera managers of color. A critical barrier to increased representation, Cuyler notes, is a lack of data on the existing diversity in the sector, which limits opportunities to drive change or to hold companies to account. The analysis that follows aims to address this need for baseline data that can be used to better understand women's representation in opera production and help to shape industry strategies to promote increased diversity.

Before continuing with our analysis, it is important to understand the nature of non-standard employment forms within opera companies. The next section will present an overview of the sector's organizational and employment structures.

### **Outlining the US opera-ting model**

The United States has one of the largest opera sectors in the world, with more than 172 companies employing nearly 18,800 practitioners and 12,300 administrators in 2019 (OPERA America, 2020). Companies are primarily structured under what Cohen (2011) terms a "regional theatre model," in which companies maintain a small number of permanent staff including an artistic or music director and a general director or CEO, as well as other critical administrative roles (p. 93). All other personnel—including conductors, stage directors, designers and performers for individual productions—are hired on short-term contracts (Cohen, 2011).

The members of the executive leadership team—the artistic or music director and the general director or CEO—hold predominantly full-time, salaried positions that align to Gruber's (2019) definition of standard work. Reporting to the Board of Directors, the executive leadership team is responsible for all strategic and artistic decisions within the company. While the general director or CEO is tasked with operational and financial matters, the artistic director or music director is responsible for artistic programming. This includes choosing the company's repertoire and hiring the conductors, directors, designers and performers for individual productions: in other words, which operas will be staged and by whom (Agid and Tarondeau, 2010). Importantly, these hiring decisions are most often made through informal recruitment processes based on personal networks, as well as practitioners' existing social capital and reputation in the field.

Both conductors and directors hold artistic leadership roles within the individual production framework. Conductors are responsible for the musical aspects of the work and oversee the members of the orchestra, while directors are responsible for a work's stage interpretation and also select which designers will be hired to join the creative team (Cohen, 2011). Unlike the executive leadership team, both roles, along with the production's team of designers, operate in a non-standard, freelance capacity.

Directors and designers function as true independent contractors and will frequently stage or design multiple productions at different opera companies over a single season. For

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these roles, as [Morris et al. \(2021\)](#) note, the success of a freelance career “rests on the individual’s skill in manoeuvring between projects and networks” (p. 3), or in this case, from opera company to opera company. Conductors similarly operate on a per-project basis in terms of employment. However, conductors also commonly hold longer-term affiliations, residencies or appointments with opera companies that provide a more stable form of non-standard employment. Titles such as “assistant conductor,” “resident conductor” and “principal guest conductor” come with salary support as well as consistent opportunities to conduct for the company, even as the practitioner is able to take on freelance work with other organizations ([Wittry, 2006](#)). These appointments also function as drivers of social capital that increase a conductor’s profile within the sector ([Bourdieu, 1986](#)). Accordingly, it is not uncommon for conductors to maintain affiliations or residencies with multiple companies and orchestras.

Across these non-standard employment structures, a further complexity lies in the capacity for individuals to overlap across roles at different levels of the organization. Executive leadership roles within a company are frequently held by conductors and directors—conductors as music directors and directors as artistic directors—because their professional experience is seen as appropriate expertise for more senior strategic and programming roles. Indeed, all ten of the artistic director and music director roles at the 11 largest companies in the United States are currently held by individuals who maintain separate practices as either directors or conductors. Accordingly, the artistic director or music director of a company will often hire themselves in a freelance capacity to conduct or direct an individual opera production, on top of their managerial (and salaried) role.

In the following sections, we offer an analysis of the significance of these varying forms of work in relation to gender equity strategies.

## Methodology

In order to establish an initial benchmark of women’s representation within this tier of the US opera sector, we conducted an exploratory data analysis (EDA) of an existing online dataset managed by [Operabase.com](#), [1] an archival platform that maintains records of every production presented by opera companies worldwide dating back to the 1990s. The only opera-specific database of its kind, [Operabase.com](#) draws all of its production information directly from official company materials and therefore serves as a reliable and comprehensive repository of opera production data.

EDA is a useful methodology to detect empirical social phenomena through the identification of patterns—what [Haig \(2018\)](#) refers to as a “signal from the noise of data” (p. 24). Thus in order to investigate the status of women working at the highest levels of opera production in the United States, we focused our analysis on the 11 largest opera companies in the country [2]. Each of these companies has an annual operating budget of USD 15 million or higher ([OPERA America, 2020](#)) and functions as an artistic leader and center of power within the national sector. Not only does their artistic programming serve as an example of practice for smaller companies, but their hiring decisions serve as clear markers—and drivers—of prestige in the field.

Our sample consists of 1,500 staged productions presented by these companies between 2005/6 and 2020/21. For each production, we manually scraped the names of the practitioners credited in each of the key production roles from [Operabase.com](#): (1) conductor, (2) director, (3) set designer, (4) lighting designer, (5) costume designer and (6) video/projection designer. In productions where a single practitioner was credited for multiple roles (e.g. director and set designer), we counted each role as a separate credit. This provided a data sample of 7,783 credited roles and 1,456 individual practitioners across the six occupational categories. To ensure the accuracy of the data collected, we manually cross-referenced each production

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credit with official production materials from each company, including annual reports, media releases and website archives.

Each individual practitioner was then gender-coded as man/woman/gender non-binary and/or indeterminate, based on the self-identified pronouns used in their professional biographies. Biographies were sourced from company playbills, annual reports and media releases, as well as the professional websites of practitioners or their managers. Because many opera productions are commissioned and restaged over a series of decades, a small number of credited practitioners were dead and lacked an active professional website. In these instances, we drew on secondary documentation, including obituaries and scholarly literature, in order to apply our pronoun-based coding scheme.

Across the 7,783 roles, 6,361 roles (82%) credited practitioners who professionally identified as men, and 1,362 roles (17%) credited practitioners who professionally identified as women. No roles credited practitioners who identified as gender non-binary. Thirty-two roles credited a practitioner for whom no gender identity could be determined based on available documentation. Twenty-eight roles credited a company instead of an individual practitioner (e.g. 59 Productions as video/projection designer). Both cohorts were excluded from analysis.

We used descriptive statistics to conduct our EDA. First, we conducted a gender-based frequency analysis of conductors, directors, set designers, lighting designers, costume designers and video/projection designers within individual companies, as well as across the cohort of 11 companies. Second, in order to develop a gender-based understanding of hiring networks, we cross-tabulated the gender profile of the director with the gender profile of the designers they chose to hire. Third, we examined the data through the lens of employment (e.g. how do they work?). This involved considering women's rates of representation in the context of the varying forms of non-standard work associated with each production role (conductor, director, designer).

It is critical here to note that gender identities are neither static nor necessarily public, particularly in work contexts (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Consequently, a limitation of this dataset is that it must be viewed as a reflection of how individuals chose to present their gender in a professional context at a particular moment in time. An equally important limitation is that an exclusive focus on gender results in a profoundly incomplete understanding of how inequality, exclusion and privilege are reproduced through multiple and intersecting social identities. A broader dataset that enables an intersectional analysis of the opera workforce, including but not limited to race, gender, Indigeneity, age and class, would make an overdue contribution to an understudied art form. This article therefore offers only one of many important entry points for examining inequality in the field.

## Findings

### *Conductors*

Across the six occupational categories, women were most poorly represented in the role of conductor. Over the 16 seasons, there were 1,671 conductor roles credited. Of these, 95% (1,585) credited men and 5% (86) credited women. This aligns to existing scholarship on gender inequality in classical music, which shows particularly low representation for women conductors at the highest levels of the field (Watson, 2021). Three hundred and two individual conductors were credited over the 16 seasons: 274 men and 28 women.

Not only did men significantly outnumber women as conductors within our study, they were also given more opportunities to conduct. Men conducted an average of nearly six productions, while women conducted an average of three. Women conductors were also less likely to see repeat opportunities. Forty-three percent of women conductors (12 of 28) were "one-offs," credited on just a single opera production over the 16 seasons. Six of the 28 women



conductors (21%) saw five or more appearances. Only one woman was credited ten or more times. In comparison, 35% of men conductors (97 of 274) were one-offs, while almost 30% (78 of 274) saw five or more appearances. Thirteen percent of men conductors (35 of 274) were credited ten or more times. This smaller group was responsible for conducting 63% (943 of 1500) of all productions included in our dataset.

Women's representation as conductors showed considerable variation within individual companies. At the low extreme, women comprised less than 1% of conductors credited by the Metropolitan Opera over the 16 seasons, or just five out of 533 practitioners. At the high extreme, women made up 16% of conductors at Washington National Opera, or 19 out of 116. The remaining companies saw women's representation as conductors range between 3% and 11% (see [Table 1](#)).

All but one company showed trends of increasing representation for women conductors over time. Seattle Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Washington National Opera and Dallas Opera saw the most dramatic increases, tripling or quadrupling the average number of women conductors in the five most recent seasons compared to the previous 11. Washington National Opera saw the highest rates overall, with women comprising an average of 34% of conductors (11 of 32) in the five most recent seasons. The remaining companies saw less dramatic improvement. However, even the Metropolitan Opera showed a slight upward trend, crediting four women out of 168 conductors in the five most recent seasons compared to one out of 365 in the previous 11. The only exception in our study, Michigan Opera Theatre, showed a clear downward trend, with just one woman out of 24 conductors credited in the five most recent seasons.

### *Stage directors*

As with conductors, men overwhelmingly dominated as stage directors in our study. Over the 16 seasons, 1,511 director roles were credited. Of these, 85% (1,277) credited men and 15% (234) credited women. This is higher than the average rate for women conductors discussed above but significantly lower than comparable rates from theatre ([MacArthur, 2015](#)). Three hundred and sixteen individuals were credited as directors: 249 men and 67 women.

Like conductors, men directors received considerably more work opportunities than women. Men directors were credited on an average of five productions, while women were credited on an average of 3.4. Women directors were also more likely to be "one-offs" compared to men. More than half of the women directors in our study (34 of 67) were credited only once over the 16 seasons, compared with 38% of men (94 of 249). Only 15% of women directors (10 of 67) saw five or more appearances, compared to 31% of men (78 of 249). Only three women (4%) were credited as directors on ten or more productions, compared with 17% (43 of 249) of men. The 43 men who saw ten or more directing appearances were credited on almost half (747 of 1500) of all productions presented over the 16 seasons.

Women's representation as directors again varied within individual companies. Nine of the 11 companies credited women directors on 10–20% of their productions over the 16 seasons. The remaining two companies were outliers. Santa Fe Opera saw the lowest rates of representation for women directors, crediting women on just 2.5% of their productions (2 of 80). As with conductors, Washington National Opera saw the highest rates of representation, with women credited as directors on nearly 40% of their productions (42 of 108).

The majority of companies (8 of 11) showed improving trends of representation for women directors over time. Seattle Opera, Houston Grand Opera and LA Opera saw women's representation rise to 20% or higher in the five most recent seasons, compared to averages of 10%, 13% and 17%, respectively, in the previous 11. Washington National Opera saw the highest increase overall, with women comprising 56% of directors in the five most recent seasons, compared to 30% in the previous 11. Meanwhile, the Metropolitan

**Table 1.**  
Women's  
representation in  
creative roles at the 11  
largest opera  
companies in the  
United States, 2005/6–  
2020/21

Opera company	Conductors		Directors		Set designers		Lighting designers		Costume designers		Video designers				
	Total	Women %	Total	Women %	Total	Women %	Total	Women %	Total	Women %	Total	Women %			
Dallas Opera	82	9	81	11	79	2	69	14	74	25	12	8	67		
Houston Grand Opera	121	7	112	20	109	20	95	10	109	35	14	5	35.7		
L.A. Opera	146	7	137	26	132	21	127	14	133	71	35	8	22.9		
Lyric Opera of Chicago	159	6	153	22	154	13	153	34	138	61	14	2	14.3		
Metropolitan Opera	533	5	434	50	433	40	430	71	412	174	77	10	13.0		
Michigan Opera Theatre	73	8	71	7	69	14	20.3	2	56	19	5	1	20.0		
Opera Philadelphia	87	7	88	14	83	16	19.3	83	11	86	28	32.6	23	8.7	
San Francisco Opera	178	8	153	26	149	17	11.4	152	18	127	53	41.7	35	22	62.9
Santa Fe Opera	82	3	80	2	81	13	16.0	79	9	82	22	26.8	13	2	15.4
Seattle Opera	94	7	94	14	95	12	12.6	87	20	85	43	50.6	11	1	9.1
Washington National Opera	116	19	108	42	105	8	7.6	98	10	105	48	45.7	22	17	77.3

**Source(s):** Table by authors



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Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre and San Francisco Opera saw decreasing trends, with all three companies crediting either a single woman director or none in the two most recent seasons reviewed.

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### *Designers*

In our dataset, men held 76% of all credited designer roles across the 11 companies. Men dominated within each of the four design categories, holding 88% of set designer credits, 85% of lighting designer credits, 59% of costume designer credits and 70% of video/projection designer credits. Within the designer category, 838 individual practitioners were credited over the 16 seasons: 560 men and 257 women.

Women's representation as designers saw extreme variation within individual companies. For example, women comprised 2.5% of set designers (2 of 79) at Dallas Opera but 20% (14 of 69) at Michigan Opera Theatre. Women comprised 3% of lighting designers (2 of 71) at Michigan Opera Theatre but 23% (20 of 87) at Seattle Opera. Women's representation as costume designers was similarly inconsistent but with a higher overall average, ranging from 27% of credited costume designers (22 of 82) at Santa Fe Opera to 53% (71 of 133) at LA Opera. This aligns to existing research on horizontal segregation in the creative industries, in which women are more likely to assume traditionally feminized roles in production compared to more technical ones (Conor *et al.*, 2015).

The data shows a particularly wide range for women video/projection designers. Women comprised just 9% of video/projection designers (2 of 23) at Opera Philadelphia. This runs parallel to women's average representation in lighting design (15%), a field that requires similar equipment and technical skills (Vincent, 2022). However, women comprised 77% of credited video/projection designers (17 of 22) at Washington National Opera, the highest representation for women in any production role tracked in our study.

As with conductors and directors, women's rates of representation as designers show signs of improvement over time. Nearly all of the companies in our study show increasing trends for women set designers (9 of 11), women costume designers (10 of 11) and women lighting designers (7 of 11). Video/projection design was the only outlier, with women's representation decreasing at six of the 11 companies. While these improvements across set, costume and lighting design are positive shifts, women's overall representation continues to reflect traditional notions of "men's" and "women's" work. On average, women still comprised just 15% of set designers and 16% of lighting designers credited in the five most recent seasons under review. Meanwhile, women's representation in the feminized role of costume designer increased dramatically, with more than half of the companies crediting women costume designers 50–69% of the time in the five most recent seasons.

### *Creative teams*

In addition to examining women's representation in occupational categories, we also considered their status within creative teams and the extent to which the gender profile of the designers aligned to the gender profile of the stage director [3]. Vincent *et al.* (2021) previously identified a connection between the gender profile of directors and designers in their study of the UK's Royal Opera House, with men directors significantly more likely to work with men designers. This aligns to scholarship from other cultural fields, including film and television, that emphasize the homophilic nature of recruitment and hiring practices within short-term project teams (Handy and Rowlands, 2017).

Our data from the US company cohort actively reinforces these findings. More than half of the productions led by men directors (646 of 1,234) credited no women designers. Approximately 37% of productions directed by men (455 of 1,234) credited a single woman designer. Just 13% of productions directed by men (163 of 1,234) credited women in

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two or more design roles. This means that women designers were either excluded or under-represented from nearly three-quarters of all opera productions included in our dataset (1,101 of 1,500).

In comparison, productions led by women directors saw much higher rates of representation for women designers. Of the 234 productions directed by women, nearly 70% (162 of 234) credited one or more woman designer. Importantly, however, even though women directors were more likely to hire women designers, their most common design credit remained costume designer. Nearly 60% of productions directed by women and 35% of productions directed by men credited a woman costume designer. Here we see the pervasive impact of horizontal segregation and so-called “women’s” work in opera production.

The divide between men and women directors and women’s representation on creative teams becomes more striking when we consider the most prolific directors in our study. Recall that 43 men directors were credited ten or more times over the 16 seasons and were responsible for directing half of all the productions in our dataset. More than half of the productions directed by this group (378 of 747) credited no women designers. In comparison, consider the three women directors who were also credited ten or more times. Eighty percent of productions directed by this group (75 of 94) credited at least one woman designer.

We also found that 33% of men directors never worked with *any* women designers on any productions over the 16 seasons. Interestingly, 31% of women directors in our study also never worked with women designers on their productions. Yet the impact of these hiring decisions had greater consequences with men directors because of the larger number of productions they directed. The 78 men directors were collectively responsible for 230 productions, or 15% of all productions included in our study, while the 21 women directors were responsible for 32 productions, or just 2% of productions presented.

### Analysis

Over the 16 seasons, women, as a group, experienced gender-based disadvantage across all of the key creative roles of opera production. Across the 11 companies, women were significantly under-represented in the technical roles of set designer, lighting designer and video/projection designer, with higher (but still imbalanced) representation in the feminized role of costume designer. Women’s disadvantage was even more pronounced in the artistic leadership roles of conductor and stage director. Not only did fewer individual women work as conductors and directors, but they worked less frequently and saw fewer repeat opportunities. Men’s dominance as stage directors also had a further negative impact on women’s representation as designers. Because men directors were more likely to work with men designers, their overrepresentation in this artistic leadership role led to significantly fewer opportunities for women practitioners. In this way, we can see how women’s low rates of representation as directors has a long tail that extends far beyond the directorial role in terms of unequal opportunities.

An analysis of the forms of non-standard work embedded within these production roles adds further depth to our understanding of how gender inequality operates within the sector. As discussed earlier, directors work in a freelance capacity, in which they accept multiple directing contracts at multiple companies over a given performance season. Because these opportunities rely on informal recruitment, driven by professional prestige and industry connections, a director’s visibility and “reach” across different opera companies has important implications for their career trajectories.

Our data shows that men directors see significantly greater “reach” as freelancers compared to women. Almost a fifth of men directors (45 of 249) appeared at four or more of the largest companies in the United States over the 16 seasons, while in comparison, only one woman director (1 of 67) saw similar reach. This establishes a negative feedback loop, in

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which the organizational hiring practices at the country's most prestigious opera companies both reinforce and perpetuate women's exclusion from the sector.

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This also speaks to questions of gendered risk perception and the degree to which opera companies may be hesitant to hire less-established women directors compared to men (Coles and Eikhof, 2021). While opportunities for men directors are fairly evenly divided within the directorial labor pool, opportunities for women directors show a clear prioritization of certain practitioners over others. Director Francesca Zambello, for example, was solely responsible for nearly 30% of all productions directed by women at the 11 companies. Accordingly, without the inclusion of Zambello's data, women's overall representation as directors drops from 15% to 11% (166 of 1500).

The reach (or lack thereof) of a given director has further impacts on employment opportunities for designers, who also work in a freelance capacity driven by their professional reputation and network. A director's choice of which designers to hire is shaped by their artistic vision for the production as well as their assessment of a potential designer's reputation, skillset and reliability. Here we see the activation of Morris *et al.*'s (2021) "social networks based on trust, reputation and reciprocity" for short-term creative projects, as stage directors are most likely to draw on existing homophilic connections when determining the make-up of their production teams (p. 3).

Importantly, we find that employment status within opera companies—whether as a member of the executive leadership team or in the form of a professional appointment or residency—has a significant impact on the career opportunity and profile of individual practitioners. As a growing body of literature shows, chronic employment precarity is a key driver of intersectional inequality (Eikhof, 2020), in which individuals with greater financial resources are better equipped to develop their careers and remain attached to artistic labor markets. Positions within companies, whether as a standard or non-standard form of work, allow practitioners to promote their professional profile and reduce their reliance on exclusionary networks for work in the short-to-medium term, while simultaneously providing higher rates of exposure that increase their long-term chances of career "success."

Of the 35 men conductors who were credited ten or more times in our study, almost half (16 of 35) held or hold a residency or appointment at one of the 11 companies, in addition to their freelance work. The only woman conductor credited ten or more times in our study also had an official affiliation with one of the companies. We can clearly trace the impact of these appointments in terms of increased professional opportunities. Consider conductor Patrick Summers, the Artistic Director of Houston Grand Opera. Summers was credited as a conductor on 77 productions at seven different opera companies over the 16 seasons. Yet, 49 of these professional opportunities were with his own company, reflecting his ability to leverage his executive leadership role to hire himself in a freelance capacity on individual productions.

### Opportunities and recommendations

Drawing from our examination of women's representation in the context of varying forms of non-standard work, our findings highlight clear opportunities to address gender inequality in opera production. For companies aiming to increase women's representation as designers, the role of stage director is critical, as the gender profile of directors has a snowball effect on the gender breakdown of creative teams. By hiring more women directors, companies are likely to see an increase in women designers across productions. Companies could also consider contractual measures to address homophilic hiring tendencies among directors, such as requirements for non-homogenous designer selections.

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Another important area of focus is employment within the company itself. This acknowledges the close relationship and frequent overlaps between formal positions and appointments within companies and the freelance roles of individual productions. Because our data shows that conductors with formal affiliations see increased opportunities within the sector, these positions should be a strategic focus for equity efforts within individual companies. Like the gender-based connection between directors and designers, our data also points to a potential relationship between the gender profile of individuals in executive leadership roles like artistic director and the gender profile of the conductors and directors that are subsequently hired.

Of all the opera companies in our study, Washington National Opera saw the highest rates of representation for both women conductors and directors over the 16 seasons. The company also had the highest rates of representation for women across all creative roles combined, with women holding 26% of total production credits. Washington National Opera is also the only company within our sample that is led by a woman artistic director, Francesca Zambello, who has authority over both repertoire and hiring decisions (Tu, 2019). Like executive leaders at other companies, such as Patrick Summers at Houston Grand Opera, Zambello frequently hired herself to direct productions at her own company. Yet, excluding Zambello's productions, Washington National Opera still saw the highest rates of representation for women directors out of any other company. Given that none of the male-led opera companies show similar trends, we argue these results are more than mere correlation. Under Zambello's leadership, Washington National Opera is clearly prioritizing female practitioners, particularly within the artistic leadership roles most central to opera production.

The example of Washington National Opera reinforces the findings of Cook *et al.* (2019), who link increased gender equity in S&P 500 companies to women in leadership roles, and in particular, to the amount of direct influence they hold. As they argue, "not all types of power are equal," and the particular status of roles held by women within companies can affect how (or whether) gender equity policies advance within organizational contexts (p. 1292). Zambello's status and influence as the peak artistic authority at Washington National Opera allows her to have a direct impact on women's representation in other creative roles at the company, while also avoiding the limitations of tokenism that often hinder women in male-dominated organizations (Cook and Glass, 2016). This suggests that efforts to address gender inequality in opera production can also be driven by increased representation in executive leadership roles.

## Conclusion

This exploratory analysis points to a number of important questions that need to be answered in future research, including a better understanding of the relationship between advancements in gender representation and organizational cultures. While our analysis demonstrates that Washington National Opera is leading the sector in terms of women's representation, more data is needed to consider whether this is solely attributable to Zambello or can be linked to a broader organizational culture that encourages gender equality. Equally, qualitative research with opera practitioners and organizational leaders would yield a more sophisticated understanding of the internal working dynamics of executive leadership and production teams at opera companies.

More generally, while our methodology and resulting data set provides a much-needed benchmark for *what* is happening in the field, it does not provide insights into *why*. We therefore suggest that this article only lays the groundwork for future research that will further unpack the complexities of gender inequality in the field, particularly through the use of qualitative methodologies that can shed light on practitioner motivations, organizational risk perceptions and perceived career barriers. Particular areas for research would consider

the educational and training pipelines for opera conductors, directors and designers that have led to our quantitative results; cultural policies and policy legacies that may be impacting women's representation at organizational levels; and social network analyses to determine the nature and form of these collaborative production processes.

However, this study functions as an important starting point to build a robust body of research on sectoral dynamics that can be used to assess, evaluate and design more effective diversity initiatives within opera companies, as well as across the cultural sector. Our focus here is general in first establishing "the problem" in opera as has been done with other sectors of the creative industries. Yet, we also aim to highlight the important role played by the nature of employment and, in particular, the diversity of forms of non-standard work that can shape and drive gender inequality in practice. A finding of value to both the scholarly and practitioner community is that innovation in addressing gender inequality in opera must prioritize employment quality and associated status, beyond mere numerical representation.

### Notes

1. <https://www.operabase.com/en>
2. The 11 companies are Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, LA Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Metropolitan Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, Opera Philadelphia, San Francisco Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Seattle Opera and Washington National Opera. Note: Michigan Opera Theatre rebranded as Detroit Opera in 2022. Because the data for this study predates this change, "Michigan Opera Theatre" is used throughout.
3. Productions that credited two men co-directors were counted as male-led productions. Productions that credited co-directors of mixed genders were counted as female-led productions.

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