



OperaOnline.us  
Worldwide reviews for a worldwide audience



Photo: Michael Winokur

**San Francisco Opera's new General Director faces challenges, is ready to take a stand and make his mark. Meet . . . David Gockley.**

By Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us  
March 1, 2006

Pamela Rosenberg, San Francisco Opera's former general director, has left David Gockley, her replacement, with significant challenges that will no doubt enable him to put his MBA degree to good use.

Rosenberg's propensity for producing original works and unconventional productions may have been responsible for the company's financial woes, and Gockley's first order of business will be to bring the company back into the black, and keep it there.

It's a daunting challenge.

The son of an athletic coach, Gockley grew up in Philadelphia with an early love for sports. But he also inherited his mother's passion for music, pursued vocal studies at Boston's New England Conservatory, and then earned a bachelor's degree from Brown University. After five years of pursuing an operatic career while supporting himself as a private school music teacher in New Jersey, he decided that he was better suited for a life offstage. He earned a master's degree in business administration from Columbia, worked briefly at Lincoln Center, and then accepted a position as business manager for the Houston Grand Opera. Two seasons later at the age of 29, he became the company's general director, a position which he held for 33 years. "During that time, I expanded the budget from about \$400,000 to approximately \$22 million; was responsible for building an opera house, the Wortham Center; and established a \$45 million permanent endowment. We did a lot of new works [33 world premieres] and a lot of interesting productions as well as traditional ones," he said. "We had top quality artists, and we kept a financial balance through all of those years."

As general director of Houston Grand Opera for more than 30 years, Gockley believes he can bring to San Francisco some of the dynamic innovations that he implemented while there, plus a few more. Keeping pace with the electronic revolution, he plans to have frequent outdoor videocasts (like the Plazacasts in Houston). "I want to establish an in-house high definition digital video studio that produces edited video of every production we do for transmission to the balconies, lobbies and outdoors, and to websites, DVDs and Podcasts," he explained. "A whole range of opportunities exists to bring video in various lengths -- from meal-size to bite-size -- to people electronically. And we're going to be back on the radio nationally and internationally as well."

#### STEPPING INTO THE BREACH:

In a recent Los Angeles Times article which analyzed the conservative trend in opera (LA Times, Calendar, Feb. 15), music critic Mark Swed viewed Gockley's appointment this way: "Particularly disappointing is the situation in San Francisco where David Gockley has just replaced Pamela Rosenberg as the company's general manager. Gone, it seems, is Rosenberg's provocative intellectual approach of using opera as a lens for the exploration of social issues, and gone, so far, is her extraordinary attention to new and relevant work." For the 2006-07 season, Gockley is playing it "100% safe," Swed wrote.

While this may be true, the somewhat traditional roster announced by Gockley in January was, for the most part, devised by Rosenberg before her departure.

"Her board of directors imposed it upon her because the company had lost a lot of its subscribers and some important donors because of artistic policy," Gockley told OperaOnline.us during a telephone interview in mid-February from San Francisco. "I think that there probably was enough of an imbalance between the familiar and the unfamiliar and the well-received and the not so well-received that there was some attrition. Her artistic policy was applauded in many circles -- she did some wonderful things. But one needs to look at what's happened to the subscribership, what's happened to the donors and what has happened to the staff. I think that any manager needs to not

only do interesting and fascinating projects, but needs to maintain a vital, well-motivated organization as well.”

#### A COMPANY IN NEED OF RESUSCITATION:

Gockley took over the reins of the opera company on Jan. 2, far too late to make substantial changes in the 2006-07 season. “This company is in need of major organizational and financial resuscitation,” he said. “It was simply not appropriate to do wholesale changes, and it was really too late [since opera productions and artists’ schedules are often planned years in advance]. I’ve been in residence here for only about six weeks, even though I started working on some of the issues facing the company last fall. . . . I think that it is unfortunate that someone would make a judgment [of me] so quickly.”

As for short-term goals, Gockley plans to refrain from making expensive changes to what has already been planned and contracted. For the remainder of this fiscal year, he said he will attempt to trim costs wherever possible “and find areas of inefficiency within the cost structure to eliminate. We have to ramp up the fundraising between now and the end of the year to close a substantial hole,” he said. “Next year [the 2006-07 season] is going to be what I would call a ‘placeholder’ year that has a lot of great repertoire and some very good casting. I frankly look at it as a way to approach our public and our donors afresh. . . . I’ve promised the board that I’m going to deliver a solid balanced budget for ’07.”

According to reports, the company’s deficit was \$7.7 million in October 2002. After budget and performance cuts in 2003, the shortfall was significantly lowered.

“Over the last couple of years, the situation has basically been balanced through extraordinary non-recurring gifts made by very generous board members,” Gockley said. “And I’ve made the commitment for ’07 to balance the budget based on recurring ticket sales and contributions. If there are possible big gifts available, we will put those into a long-term endowment and build the endowment which is currently inadequate given the size of the operating budget.” The 2005-06 budget is approximately \$57 million. It’s set at \$55 million for 2006-07, according to Gockley.

#### RECLAIMING A LAPSED AUDIENCE:

“I want to reclaim people, make the board more active, and organize a professional development staff to cultivate people in a successful, congenial and convincing manner,” Gockley said. And then when fiscal stability has been fully restored, he will embark on his long-term artistic goals.

“The first season that will have my stamp on it will be 2007-08,” he said. “We have commissioned Philip Glass to write a piece, and there will be three new productions.” Also scheduled is a “Ring” cycle to begin with “Das Rheingold” in 2008. The co-production with Washington National Opera is being directed by Francesca Zambello and has been described as an “American Ring.” “It happens to be in our warehouse right now [in mid-February] under construction,” Gockley said. “‘Rheingold’ will play in

Washington in March, and we will do it later based on what we feel works and does not work as a result of the Washington performances.”

For the 2008-09 season, he is planning the world premiere of an opera composed by Stewart Wallace which will be based on Amy Tan’s novel, “The Bonesetter’s Daughter.”

#### REFLECTING ON WHAT WORKS:

Gockley has ambitions of reviving the company to the status it held while under the helm of Kurt Herbert Adler (from 1953-81). “In the 1970s, he [Kurt Adler] created the most exciting opera company in the country,” Gockley remembered. “He had every great singer. He debuted new singers, trained young artists through the Merola Opera Program, conceived programs for new audiences, brought in younger audiences, and he had television productions and national radio broadcasts, good conductors, spring opera and Western Opera Theater [San Francisco Opera’s touring company], and his theatrical productions were not just run-of-the-mill traditional but really had a point of view. I think that those particular elements – great stars and great productions, innovation, young audiences, new audiences, broadcasting and telecasting – are what I aspire for in order to reach more people and have a greater impact artistically.” And to assist Gockley with the task at hand, he has appointed Francesca Zambello as artistic adviser, Shane Gasbarra as director of artistic and music administration, and Drew Landmesser as production director. Donald Runnicles is staying on as principal conductor and music director.

#### STARTING WITH A NEW LOOK:

The company already has a new look of sorts: a metallic gold sunburst logo for its print materials and website. It’s a contemporary rendering of the chandelier in the War Memorial Opera House, or it can be interpreted as sound waves emanating from the human voice, or then again, it might signify the explosive excitement of an audience after an exhilarating performance.

During the Adler era, San Francisco’s War Memorial Opera House was where Los Angeles opera-lovers always flocked when they wanted to hear international artists perform Mimi and Rodolfo or Violetta and Alfredo. But now Los Angeles has a vital company of its own. “I think that LA is a great city,” said Gockley. “It’s a much bigger population center than San Francisco and should have a bigger and more substantial company. I think that over recent years, San Francisco has had its difficulties, and simultaneously through Plácido [Domingo] and Edgar Baitzel [Los Angeles Opera’s chief operating officer] and because of the availability of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion now that the Philharmonic has moved to the Walt Disney Concert Hall, LA Opera has finally had the opportunity to achieve the status that it rightfully should have in the second largest market in the country. I think they’re doing a great job and I take my hat off to them.”

#### MEETING THE CHALLENGE:

Although he doesn’t worry himself about the competition, he is somewhat envious of LA Opera in at least one respect. Maintaining favorable union relations doesn’t have to be as high on LA Opera’s priority list. “San Francisco has a longer tradition of union relations

than the younger company in Los Angeles does,” Gockly explained. “The contracts [in San Francisco] are quite extensive and rich, and they provide for guaranteed employment for approximately half the year for the chorus, orchestra and to a lesser extent, the stagehands, so we’re dealing with a considerably higher overhead right now than I understand exists in LA.”

After 33 years in Houston, when the job offer from San Francisco came along, Gockley welcomed the opportunity to make a change. “I adore San Francisco. It’s a beautiful, bracing, thrilling, aesthetically pleasing place to live. It’s a great international city, and the roach count compared to Houston is very low.”

What?

“No! No! quipped Gockley a second later. “I was obviously joking.”