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Seattle Opera, Early Music Seattle holding virtual town halls discussing racial justice in classical music

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Alejandra Valarino Boyer, Seattle Opera's director of programs, will moderate an Aug. 19 "Crescendo for Racial Justice" virtual town hall. (Courtesy of Alejandra Valarino Boyer)

By [Tom Keogh](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

If the current moment in America is defined by a pandemic and a fight for social and racial equity, those same issues are having an impact on at least two of Seattle's most revered classical music institutions.

Early Music Seattle (EMS) and Seattle Opera are each holding virtual town halls on Wednesday, Aug. 19, on issues of racial justice. Both events will livestream and also be recorded for later viewing on the groups' websites.

Seattle Opera's "Crescendo for Racial Justice" starts at noon and will feature a panel including conductor Kazem Abdullah; Matthew Ozawa, opera stage director; and [Naomi](#)

[André](#), Seattle Opera scholar in residence. Seattle Opera's director of programs, Alejandra Valarino Boyer, will moderate.

“This is an opportunity to discuss not just racism and the harm caused by racism in the industry, but to determine how we're going to move forward when we can start performing again,” says Boyer. “How are we going to really make a change in the way we produce or present operas so that they become an inclusive space?”

Seattle Opera has been soul-searching for a while about how to present certain works in opera repertoire — “[Madame Butterfly](#),” “Otello,” “[Aida](#)” — that are either built on racist tropes or typically involve white singers in blackface or yellowface.

“We're all in opera because we love it,” says Boyer. “We fell in love with this white European art form, and as people of color we found our way into it. Part of our conversation is going to be about how artists can walk into a space and feel like they can be their full selves and create art without having to hide, assimilate, whitewash anything.”

“We know these operas include hurtful stereotypes,” says André. “What do we do today when we're more conscious that these stereotypes are causing a lot of pain and keeping people out of the opera house?”

Gus Denhard, director of Early Music Seattle since 2000, will host EMS board president Jim Hessler and Seattle Baroque Orchestra music director Alexander Weimann in its virtual town hall, starting at 7 p.m.

Denhard has been deeply committed for years to collaborating with regional and international artists of color in presenting original events such as last February's “The Other Conquest,” [a new opera about Montezuma](#). But programming trial and error over the years has made him and his EMS staff aware that continuing to incorporate racial justice into their musical mission involves rethinking some fundamentals.

“We have not fully examined the white culture framework of presenting classical and early music,” he says. “We're always asking ourselves, why aren't people [of color] coming? But we created the barriers that make that difficult. And because we live in the society we live in, we don't see the framework that has been created.”



Monica Rojas-Stewart, cultural anthropologist, artist and assistant director of African Studies and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the... (Courtesy of Monica Rojas-Stewart) **More** ▾

A significant ally for EMS is Monica Rojas-Stewart, cultural anthropologist, artist and assistant director of African Studies and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Washington. A native of Peru, she has been sharing ideas with Denhard about creating a positive reckoning, a reconciliation, between that white culture model and people of color traditionally left outside of artistic planning.

“We’ve been performing all along,” Rojas-Stewart says. “Just not in the spaces that have been historically white. We haven’t been mainstreamed, supported. But we’ve always found a way to speak up. Things would look different if we were given resources, different spaces, different venues not traditionally used by people of color.”

Seattle Opera’s “Crescendo for Racial Justice,” noon Wednesday, Aug. 19:
seattleopera.org/classes-camps-clubs/for-adults/community-conversations/crescendo-for-racial-justice-in-opera

Early Music Seattle’s “Virtual Town Hall,” 7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 19:
uso2web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_8Ww2RiwLQqm45xtf3wrXEg

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