

THE INDUSTRY

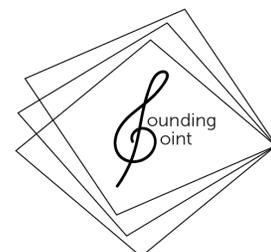
SWEET LAND

FEBRUARY 29 - MARCH 8, 2020

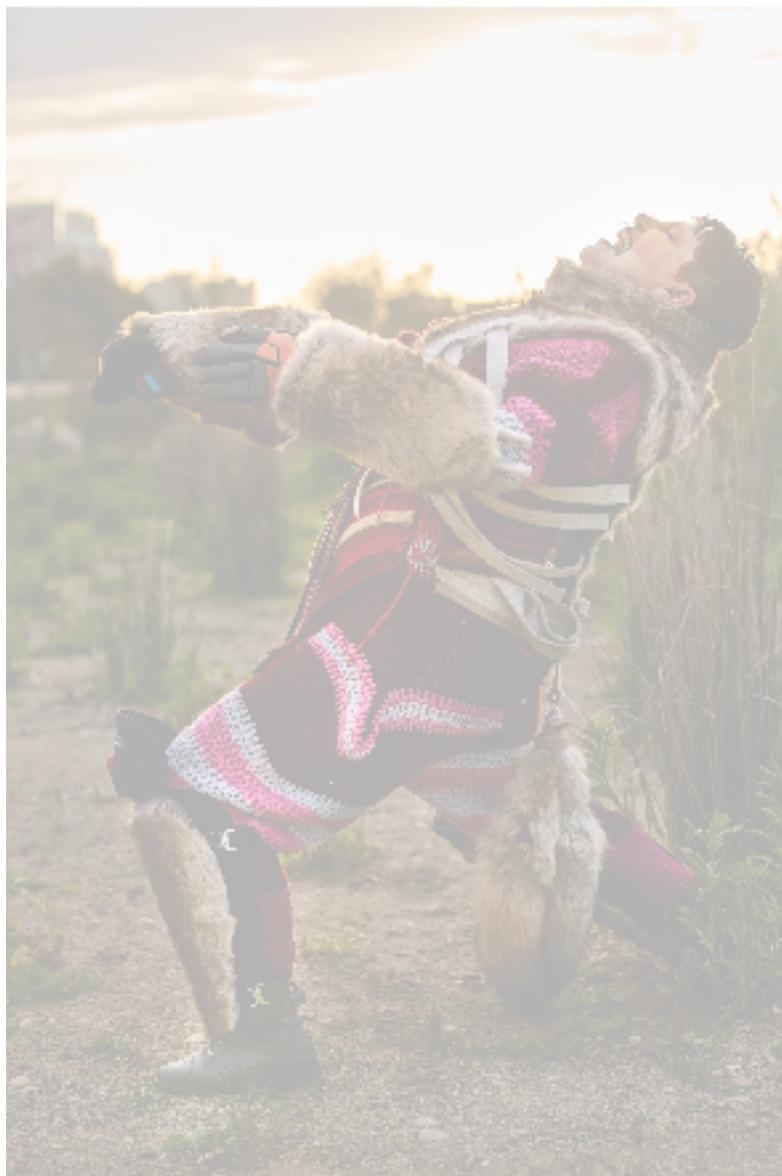
PRESS RECAP



Sweet Land title treatment by Visual Issues. Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry.



| PREVIEWS



Los Angeles Times | Yuval Sharon and the Industry take on the myth of America in the opera 'Sweet Land'

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-02-27/sweet-land-opera-yuval-sharon-industry>



Richard Hodges rehearses a scene from the Industry's "Sweet Land," at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020.(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

By [JESSICA GELT](#) STAFF WRITER

FEB. 27, 2020 8 AM

Toss out everything you thought you knew about the land you are currently occupying.

[MacArthur grant winner](#) Yuval Sharon's avant-garde L.A. opera company, the Industry, is taking on the subject in its latest production, "Sweet Land." And the creative clamor of rehearsal here in Los Angeles makes clear that this opera is an intense collaboration among renowned artists in service of a common goal: the excavation, deconstruction and reassembly of the myths surrounding the founding of America.

To tackle weighty subjects like immigration, cultural appropriation, racial identity and colonialism, Sharon has enlisted help: interdisciplinary artist [Cannupa Hanska Luger](#), co-director and costume designer, who was raised on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota; chamber music and noise composer [Raven Chacon](#), a member of the

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Navajo Nation; Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and performance artist [Du Yun](#), who immigrated from China when she was 20; librettist Aja Couchois Duncan, a writer of Ojibwe, French and Scottish descent; and African American librettist and poet [Douglas Kearney](#).

It's a lineup that would make antiquated history books shake on their shelves.

"It was definitely about building a team that had as many points of view as possible," Sharon says on a recent windy afternoon, standing beside Luger on the narrow spit of land on the outskirts of downtown L.A. known as Los Angeles State Historic Park. Here, on open land and in three pop-up theaters, "Sweet Land" will premiere Saturday and run through March 15.



Artistic director Yuval Sharon, left, and artist and codirector Cannupa Hanska Luger share a light moment during rehearsal of the opera "Sweet Land" at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

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Majority rule was not an option in this creative scenario, Sharon says. The group operated only through cooperation, collaboration and consensus.

“From Day One we were very much creating this story together,” Du says. “It’s us engaging all of our individual experiences, saying what this scenario could have looked like for us, and then extrapolating that into the work.”

Sharon calls “Sweet Land” the most “horizontal” work the Industry has created. He also calls it the most important.

This is not a light statement coming from a [man internationally known](#) for breaking operatic sound barriers and re-imagining the art form. The Industry’s projects have included conceptual giants such as [“Invisible Cities.”](#) performed amid the hustle of Los Angeles’ Union Station in 2013; and [“Hopscotch.”](#) the 2015 opera that took place in 24 cars driving in and around downtown L.A.

The Industry is dubbing “Sweet Land” an opera that “erases itself.” An audience limited to 200 (opening night tickets, at \$250 each, are sold out) will arrive at L.A. State Historic Park and be shepherded into a black box theater with a traditional proscenium stage. Later they will be divided into two groups and guided to different open-air, theater-in-the-round performance spaces. Each audience member will experience one of two stories.



A scene from the opera “Sweet Land” in rehearsal in one of two sites at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

One story line, titled “Feast,” tells of Hosts and Arrivals coming together. The Hosts already inhabit the land; when the Arrivals show up on a ship, they are invited in.

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When these Arrivals appear on scene, Chacon says, they articulate two ideas: “We’re starving. Can you please feed us?” And, “We’re here and we can’t go back, so what’s over that hill?”



Composers Du Yun, left, and Raven Chacon attend a rehearsal for “Sweet Land” at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

“They come hungry, and they are needy and they overstep their bounds,” says Luger, adding that “Feast” takes aspects of indigenous hospitality into account: what happens when Arrivals’ sense of wealth is defined by what they have, but Hosts’ sense of wealth is tied to what they can give to others.

The opera’s creators are careful to say they are not strictly focusing on what happened between Native Americans and European settlers in North America. Luger says “Sweet Land” takes place in a pocket universe.

“By relaxing our gaze and not being specific, components of different experiences globally are represented in this process,” he says.

The immersive nature of the opera, adds Chacon, makes it so audience members are held accountable and recognize that they are part of the story.

The Arrivals’ eventual land grab is violent — uncomfortable and divisive history that the creative team says should not be distilled into a neat us-versus-them narrative.

After the first part of “Feast,” audience members are ushered to a point in the park called “the crossroads,” where they rejoin others who have just experienced the story line titled “Train.” After an eight-minute set change, the audiences are again ushered into their

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respective performance spaces where they experience a completely whitewashed version of what they saw the first time.

For those who saw “Feast,” Luger says, “the scenes flip, and when you re-enter it’s like a sanitized Golden Corral buffet-style feast. All you can eat.”

“Train” is meant to be the sequence of events that occurs after “Feast.” The audience is taken on a journey of Manifest Destiny. The engine is a harbinger of doom, an “endless, relentless machine,” Sharon says, adding that the scene is very dark.

The second, erased version of “Train” is bright and loud, like a commercial. In fact, the composers used a lot of commercial music in conceiving it.

“There was no violence involved in the making of this train; no one suffered for the making of this train,” Sharon says. “We now get to consume. The land becomes a commodity that is open to us. So it’s horribly joyful.”

In both “Feast” and “Train,” a character remains who remembers the truth of what really happened.

“Like a black line on a redacted statement,” Luger says.



Performers with the Industry prepare to rehearse a scene from “Sweet Land” at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

[Los Angeles State Historic Park](#), formerly known as the Cornfield, is a vortex of cultural triumph and trauma. The 32-acre former brownfield sandwiched between the Gold Line tracks and Spring Street on the industrial outskirts of Chinatown, was the site of Southern Pacific Railroad’s River Station. It served as a point of disembarkation for migrants from around the world.

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“I didn’t know about this park, but now every time I come here, I’m going to think, ‘Whose land was this?’” says Sharon Chohi Kim, the “Sweet Land” performer who plays Wiindigo, a mythical creature known as a “hungry ghost” in a variety of cultures and is representative of the harm wrought by greed and violence.

Kim sits at a picnic table as the sun sets in a fiery blaze over Chinatown and the lights of downtown’s skyscrapers flicker on, like tiny yellow eyes blinking open. A Metro train rattling by, a helicopter buzzing overhead and the metal thrum of cars creeping through rush hour on the 110 Freeway blend with the buzz saws and staple guns of crews constructing the “Sweet Land” sets.

The sonic landscape of the city will play as much of a role in the opera’s soundtrack as Chacon and Du’s compositions. And the land itself will serve as a crucial main character alongside the 36-member ensemble.

Cast members, most of whom are L.A.-based singers, are as representative of varied cultural perspectives as are the creators.

Micaela Tobin, who plays the mischievous and immortal Coyote, is a classically trained vocalist who had drifted away from the traditional opera world, steeping herself in the underground L.A. noise and electronica scene because she didn’t see herself or her culture reflected in the art form.

“Sweet Land,” with its nontraditional, immersive presentation and radical themes of representation, felt like a revelation to her.

“I always thought this is the kind of stuff we do in basements or in DIY venues,” she says. “I remember first stepping into rehearsal and seeing a roomful of black and brown faces and it was like, ‘Wow, we were all here before,’ but in the past when you’re in other operas, it’s not necessarily like this. It was emotional for me.”

Opera, says Luger, has a long history of elitism, which is why he feels it’s the ideal medium to address how mass culture has largely succeeded in erasing the true story of how we came to be here, on this land, at this point in history.

“Opera is a privileged machine,” he says. “So as a rez kid, as a Native person in this country, having access to an opera crowd ... ,” he trails off, shaking his head and smiling at the possibilities.

Du adds that opera wasn’t created just in the Western world. In China it blossomed in the teahouses and the royal court. Still, she says, there is great power in occupying the space dominated by the Western tradition with an opera like “Sweet Land.”



Kelci Hahn, center, and other performers with The Industry rehearse a scene from, "Sweet Land," under the artistic direction of Yuval Sharon, right, at Los Angeles State Historic Park on February 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times)

Sharon jumps in.

"When I look around at the operatic landscape in this country, I see more colonialism. I see French, German and Italian repertoire, and I see stuff not at all related to the time we're living in," he says. "There's so much to talk about right now, and yet the No. 1. opera performed in America last year was 'The Barber of Seville.'"

"Sweet Land" is not interested in what Sharon calls "the gold-star approach," where audiences can pat themselves on the backs for exposing themselves to some heavy themes before heading off for cocktails and a gourmet dinner.

By taking opera out of the opera house and placing it on the land, Sharon and his collaborators hope to put audience members in an uncomfortable position.

"That discomfort is a valuable tool to stimulate new thoughts and ideas and to really provoke new ways of thinking," Sharon says.

"Sweet Land," Luger adds, should not end with the last note. Audiences must take it with them. This story, he says, scanning the smog-smudged horizon, ends somewhere out there.

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'Sweet Land'

Where: Los Angeles State Historic Park, 1724 Baker St., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Saturday; 4, 5:30 and 8 p.m. Sunday; 6 and 8:30 p.m. March 6-7; 5, 6:30 and 9 p.m. March 8 and 15; 6:30 and 9 p.m. March 13-14

Tickets: \$75-\$250

Info: (213) 761-8598; theindustryla.org

Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes

The New York Times | An Opera About Colonialism Shows How History Warps

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/arts/music/sweet-land-opera.html>

“Sweet Land,” in a Los Angeles park, is a parable for our time about Hosts and Arrivals.



Sharon Chohi Kim in a costume by Cannupa Hanska Luger for the Industry’s new opera, “Sweet Land,” at Los Angeles State Historic Park.

Credit...Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times



By [Joshua Barone](#) Published Feb. 28, 2020 Updated March 1, 2020

LOS ANGELES — This city likes to pretend it has no history, Yuval Sharon said on a recent afternoon while standing across the street from a place called, yes, [Los Angeles State Historic Park](#).

But history is here. For a long time the land on which this park now sits, not far from the forest of skyscrapers downtown, was a rail yard known as the Cornfield. Nearby, a mob of white people lynched nearly three dozen Chinese men and boys in 1871.

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Before colonialism and westward expansion, it was a flood plain and the site of an important Tongva village.

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“There’s a kind of amnesia here that’s celebrated,” said Mr. Sharon, a MacArthur “genius” grant-winning opera director. “I think that more than ever now, we need a sense of reckoning with our history. And how can art play a role in that?”



The production features ephemeral architecture throughout the park.

Credit...Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times

He doesn’t necessarily have the answer. But the new opera [“Sweet Land.”](#) which premiered Feb. 29 at the park, is an attempt by Mr. Sharon — along with a team of collaborators and his innovative company, the Industry — to at least start a conversation.

A head-spinning abstraction of colonialism and whitewashed mythology, “Sweet Land” has been described by its creators as “an opera that erases itself.” It achieves an effect not unlike that of traveling back in time to witness the first Thanksgiving, then returning to the present to hear its story warped through the traditional, wholesome retelling.

Every Industry production — including “Invisible Cities,” which unfolded at Los Angeles’s Union Station, and “Hopscotch,” set in 24 cars driving around the city — has collaborative practice at its core. Mr. Sharon’s “Sweet Land” partners include, as co-director, [Cannupa Hanska Luger](#), an interdisciplinary artist who was raised on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota; [Raven Chacon](#), a Navajo composer and installation artist; [Du Yun](#), the Pulitzer Prize-winning, Chinese-born composer; [Aja Couchois Duncan](#), a librettist and writer of Ojibwe descent; and [Douglas Kearney](#), an African-American poet and librettist.

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“We’re Noah’s Ark,” Ms. Duncan said. “Two librettists, two composers, two directors.”



The composer Du Yun, left, with the opera’s directors, Yuval Sharon (in blue) and Mr. Luger (in orange).

Credit...Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times



Marc Lowenstein, one of the opera’s conductors.

Credit...Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times

Each pair includes a newcomer to opera, which Ms. Du described as an opportunity “to listen to a culture that is not our own.” Mr. Kearney, who has worked in the form before, said that writing with Ms. Duncan, who hasn’t, has forced him to think more critically about the function of a libretto.

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The artists have proposed a new myth about two groups, the Hosts and Arrivals — reminiscent of the American experience, but also universal. (The piece’s relationship to the United States, however, is undeniable: Think “sweet land of liberty.”)

“We are all from somewhere,” Mr. Sharon said. “Everyone has been either the colonized or the perpetrator.”

Abstraction, he added, helps refocus history. “That’s where it feels more closely related to the strategies in science fiction,” he said, “which are always so political and give you the right tools to understand the present.”



A rehearsal watched by one of the opera’s composers, Raven Chacon, wearing a black hoodie at bottom left.

Credit...Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times

The “Sweet Land” librettos are placeless and poetic; the music is reminiscent of known styles, but heard as if through a prism; the colorful costumes are works of arresting fantasy. The sets are ephemeral architecture erected in the park — confronting, Mr. Sharon said, “the illusion that we’ve always been here, not nature.”

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As in previous Industry projects, which have explored the possibility of individual audience members having vastly different experiences, the plot of “Sweet Land” isn’t straightforward. About 200 people gather at the start inside a pop-up space modeled on the [Amargosa Opera House](#), an unlikely theater plopped into Death Valley, Calif. After an introduction — composed by Mr. Chacon and Ms. Du and depicting the Arrivals, well, arriving — the audience is divided onto two tracks, each leading to a separate theater and story.

One is called “Feast,” written by Ms. Du and Ms. Duncan about welcoming the Arrivals; the other, “Train,” is by Mr. Chacon and Mr. Kearney and about something like Manifest Destiny. Each, Mr. Luger said, is “closer to what the reality might have been, at least in terms of the emotional intensity. It’s much more visceral. It really does not hide away from the violence, the lust and sexuality. And the displacement.”

In these scenes, Mr. Chacon and Ms. Du avoided quoting specific Indigenous musical styles. Still, there are echoes of them, such as in the vocal technique for Makwa, one of the Hosts; there are parodic evocations of Western opera, as in an Arrival’s recitative, delivered in countertenor voice with Baroque accompaniment.



Among the production’s abstractions is the creation of whiteness as an identity.

Credit...

Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times

Image

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Peabody Southwell, left, with Richard Hodges.

Credit...Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times



The choreographer Tonantzin Carmelo, left, with Kelci Hahn during rehearsal.

Credit...Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times

After “Feast” and “Train” are over, the audience is reunited outside at what’s called “The Crossroads,” a space of images projected onto mist. A chorus tells the crowd to “go back to where you came from” — a double-edged phrase that [echoes President Trump](#) yet is also a practical instruction to return to the theaters where “Feast” and “Train” took place.

Those spaces have been transformed; “Feast” now looks more like a Golden Corral, and “Train” features a group of House Hunters. In the second-part pieces that follow, Mr. Chacon and Ms. Du have switched tracks, letting each composer respond to the other’s initial work. The stories the audiences heard in the first part are repeated, but now in an oddly mythologized way — with the exception of a character returning from each original story, flustered and trying to be heard, yet not acknowledged.

“It’s what we’ve all been told in school,” Mr. Luger said. “But we’ve left the characters that have been redacted. So you can tell the story isn’t all there.”



Ms. Hahn at the park, which overlooks downtown Los Angeles.

Credit...

Michael Christopher Brown for The New York Times

If all of this sounds confusing, that's the point. "I hope it's frustrating, in the best way possible," Mr. Sharon said. "That's what should be the catalyst for the self-examination that we want the audience to come into."

The audience's response is crucial for the opera's ending. As the listeners are reunited back in the first theater, it's up to them to make sense — with one another — about what they have just seen.

Mr. Sharon doesn't recommend trying to see both the "Feast" and "Train" tracks. "I like the idea that another person's experience is actually really cut off from yours until you make the effort to inquire about it," he said. "The audience has to complete the work."

Mr. Luger interjected: "And that is how you turn it into a myth."

Sweet Land

Saturday through March 15, Los Angeles State Park; theindustryLA.org.

LA Weekly | OPERA PICK: THE INDUSTRY'S SWEET LAND

<https://www.laweekly.com/opera-pick-the-industrys-sweet-land/>



Sweet Land (photo by Casey Kringle, courtesy of The Industry)

FALLING JAMES FEBRUARY 26, 2020

In 2015, The Industry commissioned several brilliant composers to create *Hopscotch*, an L.A.-centric, multipart opera that was staged inside two dozen taxis and cars. Now the local company returns with its first independent world-premiere work since *Hopscotch*, with the debut of *Sweet Land*.

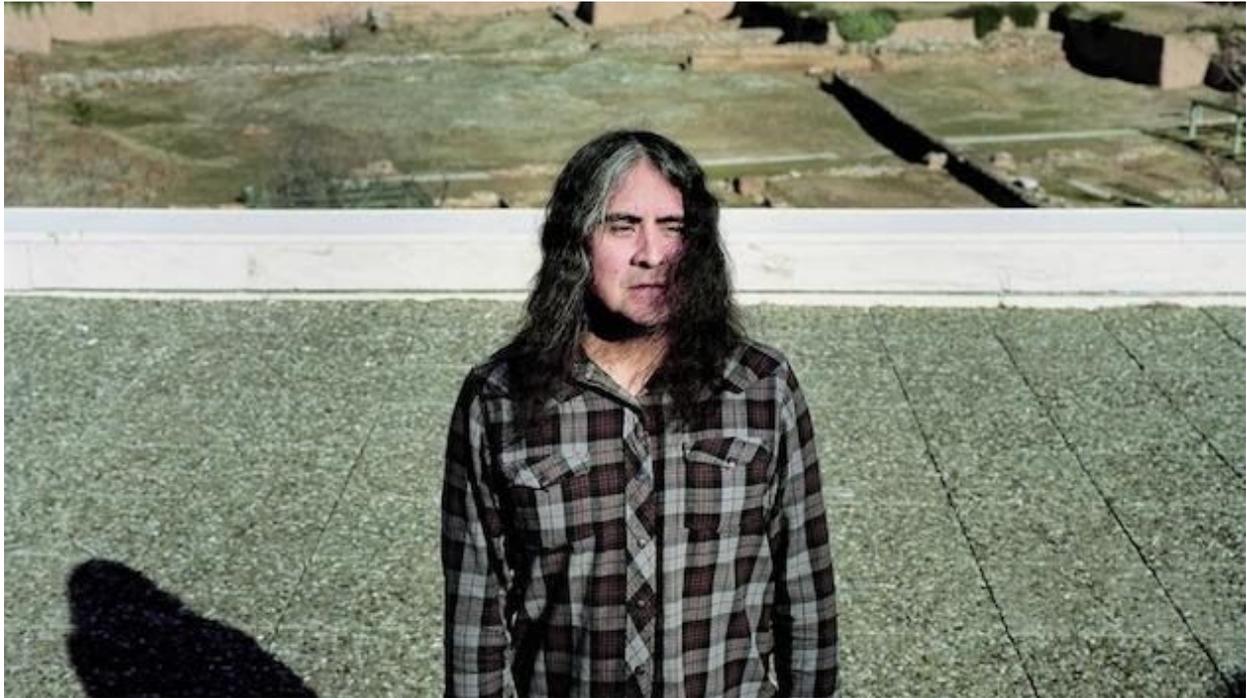
Described as “an opera that erases itself,” *Sweet Land* is an ambitious project by composers Du Yun (who won a Pulitzer for *Angel’s Bone*) and the Navajo Nation’s Raven Chacon with librettists Douglas Kearney and Aja Couchois Duncan, and co-directed by Cannupa Hanksa Luger and The Industry’s Yuval Sharon. With themes about immigration and colonization, the opera centers on a procession through the park and a feast between a “host” community and an “arrival” community, with a train symbolizing the effects of Manifest Destiny.

L.A. State Historic Park, 1724 Baker St., downtown; Sat., Feb. 29, 8 p.m.; Sun., March 1, 5:30 p.m. & 8 p.m.; through Sun., March 15, 6:30 p.m. & 9 p.m.; \$75-\$110. (213) 761-8598, sweetlandopera.com.

San Francisco Classical Voice | The Industry Prepares Another “Open” Opera

<https://www.sfcv.org/article/the-industry-prepares-another-open-opera>

BY VICTORIA LOOSELEAF , February 17, 2020



Raven Chacon

In the digital age, it is said that everything lives online — somewhere. Not so with *Sweet Land*, a site-specific opera that, according to the press release, “erases itself.” Presented by **The Industry**, the experimental opera troupe that created *Invisible Cities* (2013) and *Hopscotch* (2015) and springing from the fertile mind of founder and artistic director, Yuval Sharon, this work is the result of a highly collaborative and multiperspective approach.

Indeed, there are two composers — **Raven Chacon** and **Du Yun** — two librettists — **Douglas Kearney** and **Aja Couchois Duncan** — and, for the first time, Sharon shares directing honors with Cannupa Hanksa Luger. Performed at the L.A. State Historic Park from **February 29 through March 15**, the opera is said to be a “grotesque historical pageant that disrupts the dominant narrative of American identity.” With two separate “tracks” (each track showcases a different story, different music and different cast members), the work also features a large group of singers and musicians.



Yuval Sharon

Succinctly put, *Sweet Land*, for which The Industry partners with the Autry Museum of the American West and IKAR, is an alternate history of the United States focusing on encounters that include ships arriving on a shore — “the Arrivals” — who make contact with another civilization they call “the Hosts.” The opera, which also includes a train scene and a feast tableau, splinters in order to follow diverging perspectives.

In an email, Sharon wrote that he decided on this multiple perspective approach for The Industry, because he has been “wanting to expand how opera is created, experienced, and produced. This means not only changing what story is being told, but *who* is telling the story. I think when you can bring in new voices and let them tell stories that resonate for them, you're not only enriching the field, but you're enriching the world.”



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Composer Raven Chacon | *Credit: Roger Jones*

For Chacon, a composer, performer, and installation artist from Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation, who makes his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico — and who hadn't worked with Sharon before — the process proved intriguing. “Yuval invited me to see his [2017] production of *War of the Worlds* and he pitched this idea to somehow tell the story of America's history.

“He recognized there were a lot of myths in the founding of this country and [the subsequent] whitewashing. Young people have learned erroneous, mythological facts about the founding — events like Thanksgiving, [the Shoshone Indian guide and interpreter] Sacajawea and Lewis and Clark — and Yuval had wanted to write an opera about this but thought it might be too much for one composer to take on.”

Chacon explained that Sharon also wanted ongoing narratives and parallel stories that might not be possible to experience in only one viewing. “Once we developed the story and who would take on what segments, Du Yun and I were able to invert each other's musical ideas in each of these scenes that we're rewriting.

“After the audience sees the opening scene,” Chacon continued, “it splits into separate scenes and the audience goes back to these same locations and watches the scene again. I'm writing the whitewashed version of Du Yun's scene and she's writing mine. There were lots of opportunities for humor and for using musical references, not only to imply that you're watching the scene over again, but that the metaphorical content of history is repeating itself.”



Raven Chacon

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Chacon, a CalArts graduate and United States Artists fellow who has collaborated with Arizona Opera and the Kronos Quartet and was a member of the American Indian art collective Postcommodity, has made numerous works across a variety of mediums. One such work was the collective's *Repellent Fence* (2015), a two-mile installation that bisected the U.S.-Mexican Border that employed "scare-eye" balloons.

Often referred to as a sound artist who composes experimental noise music and explores and transforms analog sounds into strikingly eerie scores through digitization and feedback loops of handmade instruments, Chacon admits that the music he wrote for *Sweet Land* is some of his most tonal. "What's been interesting to me [in] thinking about education — what you're forced to learn as you grow into an artist or a person — I thought, or maybe I was told that I had to study music history, the musical canon, and had to learn theory and counterpoint — how to put dots on paper.

"Later," Chacon recounted, "I realized that's not necessary to be an artist, composer, or sound artist. What this did give me — not to say that I didn't have an appreciation — but this has been an opportunity for me to reference all I've learned, to make music in the style that the pilgrims might have listened to."

The notion of sound, in whatever form, unquestionably occupies Chacon's oeuvre, with the composer explaining that that has been his motivation lately. "There's an artifact of the gestures that I want the performers to do. If that gesture produces a sound or an artifact of a sound, then that's desirable instead of forcing an emotional or connected sound to drama. The challenge for me is to combine the two things in some kind of counterpoint — that I achieve the gesture but it's going to propel the narrative or the emotion.

"I like that it might not, as well," he added. "That it might have nothing to do with the narrative, that can get interesting, not making a soundtrack to something. I wasn't trying to do that with any of this — to fit the words to music, to make physical gestures for the musicians that's going to produce sounds, then mediating all of that."



Du Yun | Credit: David Adams

Shanghai-born, New York-based Du Yun said that working with Sharon and the others has been “a great process [with] the message of a diverse cast and voices put into this work [not being] just one perspective. It’s our wish to demystify that and because of our cultural backgrounds it was easy to shatter that.”

Having won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for her opera, *Angel’s Bone*, an allegory of human trafficking that has its West Coast **premiere May 1 through May 3** as part of L.A. Opera’s Off Grand series and that *The New York Times* hailed as an “appallingly good work,” Du pointed out that *Sweet Land* is not a story of what happened to whom, but more about what the creators wanted to address.

“We actually came up with the story together [and it’s] what we want to re-tell. Then we’d get together again and work on the form and structure. Yuval’s work has a lot to do with multiviews and not proscenium operas, and because I work quite a bit with people who do put work in locations other than the concert hall, it’s a unique way of dealing with American identity.”

The title, *Sweet Land*, might seem ironic to some, but not to Du Yun. “We all have our own idea of Americanness and the industry that comes with it — sugar cane, which compounds that kind of sweetness — but the opera is not about that at all. We don’t say it’s the American dream; we don’t want to call it the great land. But to me, it’s never ironic. Maybe it’s the immigration part of me, but it’s more about what you’re seeing and what you’re being told is not true. It doesn’t match. That’s the [strongest] point: it’s horror, but it’s not a horror story.”



Cannupa Hanska Luger | Credit: *Brendan George Ko*

Co-director Cannupa Hanska Luger, a multidisciplinary artist raised on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota and who now lives in New Mexico, admitted that he'd never worked in opera before and had only been to a handful of performances. "The fact that I don't have an opera background is my strength because I'm not hindered by its format. I'm not thinking, 'How is this possible?' I have no idea, so I can direct fresh. For me [a visual artist], I recognize all the humans, players and participants [as] material to create a visual image and the nice thing is I'm not doing it alone."

Luger, whose work addresses environmental matters and issues of violence against indigenous populations, especially those identifying as female, queer or transgender, said that he hopes that *Sweet Land* will resonate with audiences, despite there being no conclusion. "That's one of the strange things: there's no reason to applaud. I imagine it will happen, but I don't know why. It seems weird to applaud what we're presenting, because the audience is left with a responsibility.

"I don't want anybody to go home with a gold star and turn it into an anecdote at the Highland Park Brewery across the street. Or if they do, I hope somebody sitting in the booth next to them has a contradictory experience. There's no real resolution. If it is successful in any sort of way, that desire to clap would be crushed. I don't know what you'd be clapping for. I understand why people would, but I'm not expecting it. I would be more pleased if there was a silence at the end and people were wrapped in contemplation.

"The only way I imagine us being able to understand other peoples' experiences is through time and complexity," added Luger. "The content opens up possibilities and what I'm encouraged to do is create more complexity rather than turning it into a binary one versus the other. We have relegated ourselves to trusting the icon, the stereotype, and hopefully this makes people consider the amount of effort that goes into understanding our present, our past as part of a continuum — that it's not over.

"And the nonlinear aspect of the work incorporates the idea of it being open-ended, continuous," said the artist. "As people live the opera, hopefully they see that the opera is still going on — [it's] the opera of our lives."

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Sharon agreed: “If there was a straightforward message, there would certainly be simpler and more direct ways to communicate it than by creating this enormous operatic experience. Opera's power lies in its complexity and its ability to create complication, to help us experience complex visions of the world. It's something we need more and more desperately and why I think opera has an underestimated political power. Reducibility, along with didacticism, has been something all of us have actively resisted in this process.”

***Victoria Looseleaf** is an award-winning international arts journalist who covers dance, music, theater and the visual arts. Publications she has contributed to include the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times and KCET Artbound. Her feminist novella in verse, *Isn't It Rich?* is being adapted for the stage, and her children's/coffee table book, **Russ & Iggy's Art Alphabet**, will soon be published by Red Sky Presents. In addition, Looseleaf co-founded the online magazine **ArtNowLA**.*

Los Angeles Times | 8 best things to do in L.A. and O.C. on Leap Day weekend: Ballet BC, Ebersole, Chaplin

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-02-26/things-to-do-in-la-orange-county-leap-day-romeo-juliet>

By [MATT COOPER](#) LISTINGS COORDINATOR

FEB. 26, 2020 4:31 PM

It comes around only once every four years, so get out and enjoy this Leap Day weekend with some culture — perhaps Ballet BC’s “Romeo + Juliet” in Northridge, Broadway great Christine Ebersole in Beverly Hills, a musical salute to Charlie Chaplin in Irvine and Los Angeles Ballet’s Balanchine program in Santa Monica. The Industry presents its new opera at Los Angeles State Historic Park, New West Symphony’s Holocaust remembrance plays in Thousand Oaks and Camarillo, Danza Floricanto/USA celebrates the stories of immigrants in downtown L.A. and musical-theater duo jackbenny brings its sibling shenanigans to Cal State Los Angeles.

[...]



The Industry premieres the site-specific work “Sweet Land” at Los Angeles State Historic Park in downtown L.A. (Casey Kringle)

Manifest Destiny

The Industry, the experimental opera company led by artistic director [Yuval Sharon](#), challenges the traditional narrative of the founding of America in the new work “Sweet Land.” Los Angeles State Historic Park, 1724 Baker St., downtown L.A. 8 p.m. Saturday, 5:30 and 8 p.m. Sunday; other dates through March 15. \$75-\$110; opening night \$250.

Sweetlandopera.com

Los Angeles Times | Classical music in L.A. this week: Pink Martini with Pacific Symphony and more

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-08/classical-music-things-to-do-in-la-this-week-march-8-15-pink-martini-pacific-symphony-piatigorsky-international-cello-festival>



Pink Martini will share the stage with Pacific Symphony at Segerstrom Center in Costa Mesa.(Chris Hornbecker)

By [MATT COOPER](#) LISTINGS COORDINATOR

MARCH 8, 2020 6 AM

Here is a list of classical music concerts in L.A. for March 8-15:

[...]

Sweet Land Artistic director Yuval Sharon's experimental opera company the Industry deconstructs the myth of American identity in this new site-specific work. Los Angeles State Historic Park, 1724 Baker St., downtown L.A. Sun., Fri.-Sat., next Sun., 6:30 and 9 p.m.; ends March 15. \$75-\$110. sweetlandopera.com

Los Angeles Times Essential Arts: The world of culture feels the impact of coronavirus

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/newsletter/2020-03-07/essential-arts-culture-coronavirus>



Masked tourists visit the Louvre in Paris on Thursday. (Francois Mori / Associated Press)

By [CAROLINA A. MIRANDA](#) STAFF WRITER

MARCH 7, 2020 8 AM

Love in the time of cholera. Art in the time of coronavirus. I'm Carolina A. Miranda, staff writer at the Los Angeles Times, with everything happening in the world of culture:

Coronavirus hits culture

The novel coronavirus has affected cultural institutions the world over, with movie theaters and film shoots closing down in China and the shuttering of La Scala in Milan. The Times' Ashley Lee reports on [how SoCal institutions have been preparing to contend with the virus](#), including establishing task forces and canceling employee travel to virus hot spots. Museums in New York have [undertaken similar measures](#).

The Louvre Museum in Paris briefly closed and [then reopened this week](#) after management implemented measures to ease worker fears about the virus. Italy, which also had closed its museums, has now reopened them, with a new rule: Visitors must [stay a meter apart](#) from one another. The Venice Architecture Biennale, in the meantime, [has been postponed](#) from May to August due to the outbreak in Italy.

As of Friday, health officials in Santa Clara County, Calif., were urging residents and businesses [to postpone or cancel large gatherings or public events](#), not to shake hands and to stand six feet apart.

[...]

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

“Sweet Land,” [the new opera by the Industry](#), codirected by Yuval Sharon and multimedia artist Cannupa Hanska Luger, whose themes deal with the history of colonization, is now underway at Los Angeles State Historic Park in downtown Los Angeles. The work, writes Swed, “is anything but sweet. Prepare for the world we live in, the place we inhabit and the progress we hope for it to lose a significant amount of its sugar content.”



Micaela Tobin, as Coyote, in the Industry’s “Sweet Land.”(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

[...]

No Proscenium | The Industry's 'Hopscotch' (2015) shook up the opera & performing arts worlds. (Source: The Industry)

<https://noproscenium.com/nopro-podcast-episode-234-yuval-sharon-of-the-industry-332d3c234b25>



The Industry's 'Hopscotch' (2015) shook up the opera & performing arts worlds. (Source: The Industry)

NoPro Podcast Episode 234: Yuval Sharon of The Industry

Redefining opera for the 21st century

This week Yuval Sharon, Artistic Director of The Industry and co-director of that company's upcoming opera Sweet Land, joins host Noah Nelson to talk about his approach to making opera. Yuval has created the seminal works Invisible Cities and Hopscotch here in Los Angeles, propelling the conversation about how audiences engage with opera forward and raising the bar for immersive creators of every stripe.

Arts Beat LA | The Industry's "Sweet Land" opening in February

<http://www.artsbeatla.com/2020/01/sweet-land-2/>



Pauline Adamek 113 views 3 min read



The Industry—the company that created the groundbreaking operatic events *Invisible Cities* and *Hopscotch*—now brings you a grotesque historical pageant that disrupts the dominant narrative of American identity.

The Industry and its Artistic Director Yuval Sharon [have announced the world premiere of a new project, *Sweet Land*.](#)

Sweet Land brings together composers Raven Chacon and Du Yun, librettists Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney, and co-directors Cannupa Hanska Luger and Sharon. Together, they spin separate but interconnected narratives that re-imagine the founding of America and westward expansion in order to make visible the violence and erasure of American history.

Sweet Land will be performed in Los Angeles State Historic Park in the New Chinatown neighborhood; the park—on the site of a former Tongva village and, later, the southernmost point of the Southern Pacific Railroad line—is a palimpsest of exploitation and eviction of indigenous and immigrant peoples alike. *Sweet Land* premieres on February 29, 2020.

Premise: The Arrivals wash up on the shore. They make contact with another civilization they call “the Hosts.” And from there, the story splinters, following diverging perspectives.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Starting as a procession through the LA State Historic Park, *Sweet Land* becomes an opera that erases itself.

Continuing their commitment to innovative and original staging, The Industry is offering two versions of this new opera.

Two Tracks:

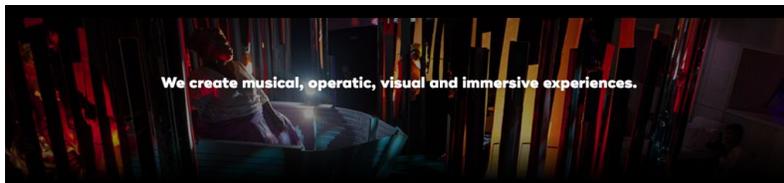
There are two *Sweet Land* “tracks.” Each track features a different story, with different music and different cast members. Both tracks offer a complete experience and feature music by both composers and both writers. The box office will assign your track.

Please read the [Ticketing and Experience FAQ](#) before you purchase your tickets. Information provided there includes the following:

If you wish to see both tracks, you must purchase your tickets for separate days (which you can do in the same transaction or in a different transaction). They will know which track you have experienced and will assign you the other track. If you want to see the same track again or a specific artist, let them know in the comment section at check out.

Use the code SWEETLAND2 in the comment section at check-out to get a 10% discount voucher/refund (the amount will be refunded to your card), while supplies last. *This discount only applies to 2 tickets purchased on separate days in one transaction.*

You can [purchase tickets online here](#).



Sweet Land

Performance dates:

February 29 – March 15, 2020

Music by Raven Chacon & Du Yun

Text by Aja Couchois Duncan & Douglas Kearney

Directed by Cannupa Hanska Luger & Yuval Sharon

For questions about the performances, special access needs, or assistance in making a reservation, please email boxoffice@theindustry.la.org or call (213)761-8598.

Please visit www.sweetlandopera.com to learn more about the story and its creators.

Sweet Land* Events

Saturday, February 29

8 PM – Opening Night

Sunday, March 1

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

4 PM – Sunday Sessions: destroying // erasure

5:30 PM

8 PM

Friday, March 6

6 PM

8:30 PM

Saturday, March 7

6 PM

8:30 PM

Sunday, March 8

5 PM – Sunday Sessions: building // culture

6:30 PM

9 PM

Friday, March 13

6:30 PM

9 PM

Saturday, March 14

6:30 PM

9 PM

Sunday, March 15

5 PM – Sunday Sessions: searching // religion

6:30 PM

9 PM

*Tickets range from free (Sunday Sessions), \$75, \$110, to \$250 (opening night performance with reception).

KUSC | The Industry's "Sweet Land" Uses the Magic of the Moment to Retrace American History

<https://www.kusc.org/culture/arts-alive-blog/the-industry-sweet-land/>

Posted by Sheila Tepper · 2/27/2020 12:00:26 PM



Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry

Hit play below to listen to our bonus **Arts Alive** feature.

The Arrivals wash up on the shore. They make contact with another civilization who they call the Hosts and from there the story splinters, starting as a procession through the LA State Park, *Sweet Land* becomes an opera that erases itself. It is done on two different tracks.

The company that created *Invisible Cities* and *Hopscotch*, now brings you a historical pageant that disrupts the dominant narrative of American identity.

Sweet Land is born from collaboration, it could not have been done by any one of the contributors alone. As our country could not have been built by any one group of people alone. The collaborators are: co-director Yuval Sharon, Founder and Artistic Director of The Industry and a 2017 MacArthur Fellow, and co-director Cannuupa Hanksa Lugar, a multidisciplinary artist. One Composer is Du Yun, a Chinese immigrant. Her last major opera won a Pulitzer Prize for music. The other composer is Raven Chacon, a recent Berlin Prize awardee, is originally from the Navajo Nation. One librettist is Douglas Kearney, a poet, and the other is Aja Couchois, a mixed-race Ojibwe writer.

Sweet Land is an invitation to reflect on the layered and silenced history of all colonized land. LA State Park has a history of eviction and exploitation of indigenous and immigrant peoples.

The Industry's "Sunday Sessions" series supplements *Sweet Land* with free public events that further explore pertinent themes from the opera. They are partnered with The Autry Museum of the America West and IKAR for this programming. To learn more and RSVP, visit theindustry.org. *Sweet Land* runs from February 29 through March 15 at LA State Historic Park.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Los Angeles Downtown News | Settlement and Erasure in The Industry's 'Sweet Land'

http://www.ladowntownnews.com/arts_and_entertainment/settlement-and-erasure-in-the-industry-s-sweet-land/article_5e1477a2-5ce4-11ea-a06d-bb6c2544cfa4.html

By Nicholas Slayton

Mar 3, 2020



photo by Casey Kringlen for the Industry

A group of settlers arrive on an unfamiliar land, striking up a connection with the native population. Given food and shelter, the Arrivals soon turn on their Hosts, seizing the land and creating their own white-washed myth of settlement.

That is both part of the history of the Americas and the narrative thrust of *Sweet Land*, a new opera that opened over the weekend at Los Angeles State Historic Park. Set up in multiple wooden venues spaced around the park, it is an immersive production that is meant to push audiences to reconsider how cultural narratives are framed. It follows two groups, the settlers known as “Arrivals” and the indigenous population, dubbed the “Hosts.” The show comes from experimental opera company The

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Industry, and is co-directed by MacArthur “Genius” grant winner Yuval Sharon. The production runs through March 15 and each night is limited to 200 people. Tickets start at \$75.

It’s the first independent production from The Industry since the 2017 “moving opera” *Hopscotch* in Downtown Los Angeles. Since then the company had worked with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in partnership on a series of shows, including 2017’s *The War of the Worlds* and 2019 *Atlas*.

The genesis of the project started two years ago, according to Aja Couchois Duncan, who wrote the libretto with Douglas Kearney. Sharon brought the writers and composers Raven Chacon and Du Yun to explore making an opera based on the first Thanksgiving, and while that show never came to fruition, the work and ideas evolved into *Sweet Land*. The opera is co-directed by Cannupa Hanska Luger. The creative team all comes from an ethnically diverse background, which Duncan said was important in telling this kind of story, and drawing on the history of the United States.

Duncan said that the physical Sweet Land of the opera is a settler colonialist country, and that America is not really interested in its own history, apart from the Declaration of Independence; “We’ve never really reckoned with the fact that we’re on stolen land,” she said. The opera is a way to present and explore that history of erasure in a non-documentary format.

“Sweet Land is both America and not,” Aja said. “You can put aspects of opera into any part of the world. What does it mean when a people disconnect from their story?”

As with other shows by The Industry, *Sweet Land* is not a traditionally staged opera. Audiences arrive in a more familiar “black box” theater space constructed for the show for the opening section, but are then split into two groups and taken to different open-air venues. One half sees the “Feast” track, while the other sees the “Train” story (set later, in the opera’s loose chronology, and based on the westward expansion across the United States). It is designed so that people can return a second time and experience the other path in the show, which could yield different ways of interpreting and understanding the more symbolic conclusion.

One of the central aspects to the narrative is that halfway through the opera, there is a scene change where audiences revisit what they have just seen. However, it is a sanitized version, with theft and abuse and other crimes erased in favor of a kind of commercialized, cheerful “history.”

That is reflected in turn in the music. Chacon said that the score and songs do not draw from any single genre or style, but is inspired by the era of early colonialism in the United States. However, he said that the way the narrative unfolds allowed for he and Yun to be experimental with the sonic flow.

“As the opera progresses, the time periods we reference do advance, but perhaps sonically mocks its own previous version of itself, as if we are stuck repeating the same traumatizing scenarios,” Chacon added. “There was an opportunity to use repetition and inversion, but also remind you that we are accelerating toward an eventual violence.”

The opera’s location is also intentional. In the late 19th Century, the land that is now the state park was a rail station for new arrivals to Los Angeles. Those stations are no longer there, but the history lends itself to the narrative. Now though, the 32-acre park is in an increasingly lively area on the edge of Downtown, not far from freeways or the Metro Gold Line. Chacon said that the music and sonic design was created knowing that they would have to contend with the city’s ambient noise.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

“There is the Metro, which of course beautifully aligns with our westward expansion story, and fits naturally alongside the electronic noises I like to include in my music. Also, I write lots of subtle, very long glissandos for strings in my compositions, so something like a police siren or the doppler effect of a speeding motorcycle or circling helicopter only exaggerate those sounds,” Chacon said.

The creative team said that they wanted to tell a story of colonialism and settlement, and real-world history played a significant aspect, but Sweet Land is not meant to be a literal, all-encompassing narrative.

“In no way is this an attempt to cover everything, to do that well, maybe opera isn’t the best approach,” Duncan said. “Opera has a particular ability to do specific things, and we really wanted to be in relationship to those topics, and not be a 16-hour documentary.”

Sweet Land runs through March 15 at Los Angeles State Historic Park, 1245 N. Spring St. or theindustryla.org.

nslayton@timespublications.com.

KPCC | Yuval Sharon's Not-So-'Sweet Land'

<https://www.scpr.org/programs/the-frame/2020/03/05/20660/>



A scene from Yuval Sharon's "Sweet Land," an open-air opera about colonialism and displacement at the Los Angeles State Historic Park. **CASEY KRINGLEN FOR THE INDUSTRY**

The Frame® | March 5, 2020

On today's show:

WHOSE LAND IS THIS LAND?

(Starts at 8:45)

Yuval Sharon is used to being on the receiving end of some baffled looks when he tries to explain his operas. "Hopscotch" took place in cars driving around Los Angeles. In "Invisible Cities," people listened to the opera on headphones as they moved through L.A.'s Union Station. His latest piece, "Sweet Land," is a collaborative, open-air opera about colonialism and displacement. Set in the Los Angeles State Historic Park, just north of downtown, the opera is an examination of what it means to be an American.

Classical Voice America | Opera As History Upended, Guttural And In Your Face

<https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2020/03/04/opera-as-history-turned-on-its-head-in-stark-rav-view/>



The spirit Wiindigo (Sharon Chohi Kim) and a Coyote (Micaela Tobin) gave 'Sweet Land' haunting mythological presence. Two composers, two librettists and two directors created The Industry's American history re-take. (Photos: Casey Kringlen)

By Rick Schultz

LOS ANGELES – Opera at its best can be transformative. It can strengthen our empathy muscles. For a time, maybe we take fewer things for granted and feel connections between people more deeply.

That's one response to *Sweet Land*, the latest site-specific work from Yuval Sharon's probing, avant-garde, L.A.-based opera company *The Industry*. Like previous Industry shows – *Invisible Cities* was set at L.A.'s Union Station; *Hopscotch* told three separate stories as 24 limos stopped at various sites in central L.A. – *Sweet Land* conjures considerable magic in an unlikely venue: the unprepossessing *L.A. State Historic Park* located north of downtown.

Entering the park on Saturday evening, I passed a row of porta-potties. So much for amenities. Two hundred audience members were given wristbands signifying which track, or journey, they were to take. I got orange for *Feast*; the other half got *Train*. (A separate ticket was required for each track.)

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

We all took places on unfinished bleachers. A transparent sheet acted as a curtain of sorts. Above us in the distance loomed the back of a billboard and a bridge. You could smell dirt and raw wood. The Metro Rail rumbled by directly to our left.



Carmina Escobar as one of the Coyotes, who were depicted with in-your-face attitude.

While waiting for the show to start, two men provided light percussion, with chiming and scraping sounds. One held a bunch of wrenches in his teeth. If those primal sounds were meant to cause some disorientation and nervous anticipation, it worked.

A program note says that *Sweet Land* is intended to take place “in real-time, today,” but presented that way, the show wouldn’t work as well as it does. Instead, Sharon and company generate a universal you-are-there quality, allowing the show’s themes of colonialism, racial identity, and exploitation to unfold without becoming preachy and patronizing in a clunky, [Peter Sellars](#) manner.

Mercifully, *Sweet Land*, co-directed by Sharon and [Cannupa Hanska Luger](#), who also serves as the inspired costume designer, avoids these pitfalls by also creating distance between the history we assume as factual and what we are shown. An example: The first act of *Feast* seems like the Thanksgiving holiday we know. Presented abstractly, it becomes something else. In part two of “Feast,” for instance, the Hosts sit wearing white hoods. In an interview, Sharon suggested such touches create an alternate “pocket universe.”

The co-directors, librettists [Aja Couchois Duncan](#) and [Douglas Kearney](#), and composers [Du Yun](#) and [Raven Chacon](#) all apparently agreed on finding ways to keep the audience connected – no Us v. Them allowed – so we would remain open to reflecting and rethinking received history.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

This technique is masterfully controlled throughout the well-conceived and executed *Feast*, and also between acts where both audience groups meet at “the crossroads” overlooking the downtown skyline. As the scene plays out, the sun sets. Since darkness is often disempowering, *Sweet Land*'s creators gain a further purchase on our unconscious.

Spirit animals stealthily moving along are projected on a wall of water, while two Coyotes, played with in-your-face convincing attitude by [Carmina Escobar](#) and [Micaela Tobin](#), and Wiindigo, given a haunting mythological presence by [Sharon Chohi Kim](#) and wearing colors of no particular tribe, make guttural sounds deep enough to wake the dead. Someone said Wiindigo looked like the stringy-haired scary lady from [The Grudge](#). There's pop-cultural appropriation for you.



Micaela Tobin as a Coyote. A you-are-there quality allows 'Sweet Land's' themes to unfold without becoming preachy.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

The two Coyotes also opened the show, acting as guides for the two groups and directing us back to our respective theaters for act two of *Feast* and *Train*. (The latter show, by the way, focuses on westward expansion.)

The title *Sweet Land* is bitterly ironic. Other ironies roil below the surface, like the word “coyote,” a term for opportunists smuggling desperate people across the U.S. border. Sharon and his collaborators also have some fun with Jimmy Gin, the main Arrival invited in by the Hosts. He’s given black patches on his crotch and butt, worn like badges of a rapacious despoiler. He also wears a blue phallus as his bolo tie clip and silly cowboy-type hats (a la the singer [Pharrell](#)). Sung with appropriately sweet-sinister character by countertenor [Scott Belluz](#), Jimmy makes a memorably disgusting villain, but one with a sense of implacability about him. His unwilling bride, Makwa, was portrayed with stunning authority and moving sadness by [Kelci Hahn](#), a soprano with impressive range.



Stringy-haired Wiindigo (Kim), costumed by Cannupa Hanska Luger, made guttural sounds deep enough to wake the dead.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Feast's small orchestral ensemble, expertly conducted by [Jenny Wong](#), performed the austere and finely integrated music of Chinese composer Du Yun and Raven Chacon, a Native American artist, with dramatic precision. Generally, Du Yun's sonic palette offered a sensitive, expressive mix of styles, including a wry Baroque passage featuring harpsichord-like accompaniment announcing European Jimmy Gin's arrival. Incidentally, a new work by Du Yun will be featured [on April 21](#) on an L.A. Philharmonic Green Umbrella program, and her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angel's Bone* is scheduled [May 1-3 at L.A. Opera](#).

At the end, the audiences from both shows converge a final time at the bleachers. There's more singing, much of it sounding like howls of despair, from a distance. Supertitles projected on the back of the aforementioned billboard and bridge became eerie.

Sharon recommends people choose one track of *Sweet Land* or, if they must see both, to come back on a different evening. I can see why. At a lean 90-minutes each, these shows pack a lot into them.

While every audience member will bring a unique response to *Sweet Land*, I found myself thinking of Tommy Orange's harrowing Thanksgiving history lesson in his 2018 novel, *There There*. And J.M. Coetzee's observation, "that the settler societies [of the past], the settler societies of today, ought to be riven with self-doubt but are not...When a society (but for a few dissident members) decides that it does not feel troubled, how can healing even begin?"

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP



The show's branding includes a Mayflower image. (Concept by Cannupa Hanska Luger, graphics by Visual Issues)

Maybe a show like *Sweet Land*, which explores our collective amnesia and cultural mythologizing with imagination and asks whether progress must always depend on dehumanization and despoilment, offers a place where healing has a fighting chance.

Performances of *Sweet Land* continue through March 15. For tickets and information, [go here](#).

Rick Schultz writes about classical music for the Los Angeles Times and other publications.



| REVIEWS

Los Angeles Times | Review: 'Sweet Land' astonishes. Opera in an L.A. park examines what it means to be American

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-01/sweet-land-opera-industry-review>



Scott Belluz, center, and other performers with the Industry perform in "Sweet Land," at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

By [MARK SWED](#) CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

MARCH 1, 2020 4:10 PM

"Sweet Land," the new, tenaciously uncategorizable opera by [Yuval Sharon](#)'s doggedly unorthodox opera company, the Industry, is not sweet. The land on which it is performed, Los Angeles State Historic Park north of downtown, is no longer sweet.

The experience of attending "Sweet Land": not sweet. Dress warmly. You'll be outdoors 90 minutes in early evening and at night, and the park gets a lot colder than you might expect. It might even rain, and that's your tough luck, because you'll still have to go through with this.

Negotiating the pop-up venues for "Sweet Land" can get a little tricky. There are steps to trip on in the dark. It is easy to scrape yourself on raw lumber. There are no amenities, no opera house coddling. No wine bar, chocolate, coffee or much of anything.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Prepare for all of that, and then prepare for subject matter that is anything but sweet. Prepare for the world we live in, the place we inhabit and the progress we hope for it to lose a significant amount of its sugar content. If you love Thanksgiving, prepare to no longer know what that even means.



Jenny Wong, center, and members of the Industry perform “Sweet Land” on Saturday at Los Angeles State Historic Park.(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

“Sweet Land” is opera as astonishment. To say that Sharon has changed the operatic landscape by changing the physical landscape of opera is glibly obvious. That *is* what he has done but in ways — musically, visually, theatrically, environmentally, historically — that are not glib and far from obvious.

So, what is “Sweet Land”? It’s too early to say, which is one of its many remarkable and remarkably confusing glories.

It follows directly with what Sharon, as an inveterate disrupter, has been up to from the start with the Industry. He may be invited to the toniest opera houses in [Berlin](#), Vienna and Bayreuth, but at home in L.A. he’s made opera in a [warehouse](#), [Union Station](#) and, famously with [“Hopscotch.”](#) in limousines and outdoor sites around central L.A. He’s tended toward outsider composers, outsider poets, outsider visual artists as well.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

He is not driven by narrative alone but by image and idea and place and purpose and sound and soul and the latest ideas in critical theory and avant-garde art and music, with some popular culture thrown in. He is also driven by making opera the art form of the impossible, getting city fathers and mothers to condone violations of regulations. He has won over local arts patrons who are indispensable in funding the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Opera, [Long Beach Opera](#) and various new music ventures around town. Sharon's winning support for "Sweet Land" after the inchoate, disaster-seeming first workshop was persuasive power of genius (yes, he has [MacArthur](#)).



Micah Luna performs in "Sweet Land" as a Metro Rail train passes in the background at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

"Sweet Land" is America before and after colonization. Kind of. There is the native population, the Host community. There are the Arrivals. But there is also the land, its Nature and mystical spirit. The Hosts recognize that spirit, but even they have an uneasy relationship with it. The Arrivals are, of course, despoilers.

An opera of pairs, "Sweet Land" has two composers. Du Yun, who arrived in the U.S. from China and has quickly moved up the avant-garde ranks. In the next months, L.A. Opera will mount her Pulitzer Prize-winning "[Angel's Bone.](#)" and she will be featured with a new work in an L.A. Phil Green Umbrella concert. [Raven Chacon](#) is a Native American artist with CalArts composition credentials and a background in installation, performance and film.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

The composers, while highly individual and attuned to each's respective cultures, have a sophisticated sense of the abstract sonic potential of music. Both are superb sound artists.

There are two librettists. The African American poet Douglas Kearney collaborates with Chacon. The part-Ojibwe poet Aja Couchois Duncan wrote the texts for Du Yun. There are two directors — [Cannupa Hanska Luger](#) and Sharon — and two scenic designers, Tanya Orellana and Carlo Maghirang. It is seldom possible to keep track of any of this.

There are even two operas with common points. The audience meets in a central space of bleachers. (The pop-up "Sweet Land" set is made of wood, gorgeously raw and elegant and tactile, splinters included.) A transparent sheet serves as curtain on which there are projections. We're welcomed by singing Coyotes (Carmina Escobar and Micaela Tobin), who look part punk and part wild beast and who are only partly welcoming (while also partly crazily threatening). All the eye-popping costumes are by E.B. Brooks and Luger. The crucial choreographer is Tonantzin Carmelo.



An audience member is framed by a mist projection which is part of the performance of, "Sweet Land," at Los Angeles State Historic Park on February 21, 2020. (Genaro Molina/Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times)

Hosts welcome Arrivals as guests. Drumming and eerie vocal writing come from both composers. Helicopters occasionally fly over the park and drown everything out, a threat to art. Metro trains occasionally whiz by.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

One part of the audience heads off to the “Feast,” the other to the “Train.” Everyone then meets in the middle “Crossroads,” an open space overlooking the downtown skyline where the Coyotes cavort and projections appear on water from sprinklers — pure magic.

Audience members return to “Feast” or “Train” to find everything changed. As they return to the bleachers for a communal finale, the land looks different, sullied. Songs of sorrow are what we hear. The texts appear as spectacular projections, near and far, including on a bridge and on a billboard (how did Sharon get away with that?). The texts remind us of America’s violent past of slavery and persecution. When a Metro train comes by again, it isn’t so innocent. Nothing is innocent.

“Feast” and “Train” are both vehicles for uncertainty. Each takes place in a wondrously carpentered circular space, open to the sky.

For “Feast” we sit at tables facing glum, Puritan-seeming Arrivals. The Hosts are flamboyant and joyous. Du Yun is the composer of unearthly ceremonial music, and Jenny Wong conducts a small ensemble. The Coyotes roam. Before long, the Arrivals abuse their Hosts, telling them their way of life must end. Jimmy Gin (Scott Belluz) forces Makwa (Kelci Hahn) to be his bride.

After the communal meeting at the Crossroads, we return to the “Feast” theater to find the physical and metaphorical tables have turned. Makwa, and the Hosts, are victims. Here, Chacon delivers a musically violent turn.

The part of the audience ushered to “Train,” meanwhile, sit on swivel chairs around a central orchestral ensemble conducted by Marc Lowenstein. Chacon provides the propulsive music. Preacher (Richard Hodges) provides the soundtrack for Manifest Destiny. The Arrivals push for modern technology; the Hosts attempt to retain their own.

After gathering at the crossroads, the “Train” audience returns to see the country on the way to “progress.” The Arrivals boast that they have taken everything they want, everything they need. Du Yun’s score is again ceremonial, but now sounding more like a sad, angry requiem.



Micaela Tobin as Coyote and members of the Industry perform in “Sweet Land,” at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020.(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

But it’s not that simple. Too many words haunt with double meanings. The composers employ the most advanced techniques of modern music and technology to reach back to the sonic essence of what we’ve lost. The visuals are dazzling as primitive art and modern art. Everything happens under our noses, and the large cast is, to a singer and dancer, exceptional. So much happens that we forget.

Once back to “Feast” or “Train,” you simply have to no opportunity to remember what was because you are bombarded by what is. Past and present, mythic land and “Sweet Land” and the land which we occupy become one and confused.

Who are we, the public? Are we now the Hosts, and are new immigrants the Arrivals, thus the threat to our way of life? Or are we still the Arrivals, and are immigrants the original Hosts returning to take back a sweet land? Or is it something very different, where we’re all in this together as progress threatens us all alike, and no one knows what to do?

Can this ritual opera open our eyes and ears and spirits? You can attend “Sweet Land” at dusk or in the dark. You’re not recommended to see both versions on the same day. You need time to think and to absorb. With every art form at his disposal, Sharon has made that — and opera! — essential.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP



Micaela Tobin as Coyote performs in “Sweet Land,” at Los Angeles State Historic Park on Feb. 21, 2020.(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

'Sweet Land'

Where: Los Angeles State Historic Park, 1724 Baker St., L.A.

When: 6 and 8:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 5, 6:30 and 9 p.m. Sunday; 6:30 and 9 p.m.;
5, 6:30 and 9 p.m.

Tickets: \$75-\$110

Info: (213) 761-8598; theindustryla.org

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

New York Times | Review: An Opera Erases and Rewrites the American Myth

“Sweet Land” is a parable of, and fantasia on, Manifest Destiny, performed outdoors at a richly suggestive site.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/arts/music/sweet-land-opera-review.html>



Kelci Hahn as Makwa in the Industry’s production of the new opera “Sweet Land.”

Casey Kringlen for The Industry



By Zachary Woolfe

- March 9, 2020

LOS ANGELES — A light-rail train barrels along the curving west edge of Los Angeles State Historic Park, [a spit of land here](#) just north of Chinatown. It roars by so close that it feels like the audience watching “Sweet Land,” the bewildering, ghostly new opera being put on in the park, could reach out and nearly touch it.

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The train becomes almost a character in the opera. You feel a rush of anxiety and thrill every time the tracks start whistling. And the cacophony of each brief passing both overwhelms and underlines the “real” performance.

As it kept whooshing past last weekend, I started to think about who was inside and who was driving. Where was it coming from? Where was it going?

These are also the questions raised by “Sweet Land,” a parable of, and fantasia on, Manifest Destiny and the colonization of America, that “sweet land of liberty.” The work captures — with a poetry that’s stern yet colorful, oblique yet blunt — the uneasiness of our past and future as a nation defined by brutal oppression and pervasive cultural mixing, and by a history that’s been painfully selective about what it remembers.

“Sweet Land” is the latest endeavor of the Industry, the Los Angeles company founded by [the director Yuval Sharon](#) and dedicated to an alternative vision of opera. Its productions sprawl well clear of traditional theaters. “Invisible Cities” (2013) was heard over headphones in Union Station, performed by singers indistinguishable from ordinary travelers. “Hopscotch” (2015) put musicians and audience members into 24 cars driving around downtown.

Different people had vastly divergent experiences of these pieces, which asked how much of any performance is defined by the perspective from which it’s consumed. And by the environment in which it takes place: next to that barreling Gold Line train, when it comes to “Sweet Land,” in a park recently built on land that was once acorn fields, a Tongva settlement and a rail yard, near which Chinese men and boys were killed in a 19th-century lynching.

It’s a richly suggestive site for a reflection on the winning of the West, a story that is really many stories, variously exposed and submerged. To tell them, or at least evoke them, “Sweet Land” has enlisted an unusually large group of central collaborators: a pair of directors (Mr. Sharon and [Cannupa Hanska Luger](#)); composers ([Raven Chacon](#) and [Du Yun](#)); and librettists ([Aja Couchois Duncan](#) and [Douglas Kearney](#)).



A light-rail train passes by Los Angeles State Historic Park during a performance of “Sweet Land,” featuring Micah Angelo Luna, pictured.

Credit...

Casey Kringlen for The Industry

Coming from different ethnic, racial and artistic backgrounds, they offer a sort of American utopia: a panoply of traditions that intermingle — to the point that it’s hard to tell one contribution from another — even as each retains equality and integrity.

The audience enters the park and is ushered toward a theater, one of three roughly constructed, temporary open-air structures built for the production. Through a scrim, there’s a dim view of the northern side of the park, still a construction site, and the bridge beyond over the Los Angeles River. Musicians lightly tap on metal. Individual voices — chanting, ululating, cracking, squealing, howling — gradually emerge over speakers, as does a soft, smooth choral harmony underneath.

Here, the opera’s first part, “Contact,” establishes the rough outline of the stylized, mythlike story, told with gnomic economy. A group of Arrivals, singing a blurry version of a religious hymn, comes ashore amid a blast of electronic noise and quivering flute. They are greeted as guests by the native Hosts.

The audience is separated into two tracks — “Train” and “Feast” — each of which has a dedicated in-the-round theater and a separate story. (Over a pair of performances, I was able to experience both.) “Train” is like an abstraction of missionary-driven westward

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expansion; an ominous drone is punctuated by ripples of percussion as the Hosts teach the Arrivals words and skills. There is building; there is a murder.



The opera takes place in and around three roughly constructed, temporary open-air structures built for the production.

Credit...

Casey Kringlen for The Industry

“Train” suggests the rape of a land, and “Feast,” the rape of a woman: At a Thanksgiving-like banquet, the music light and flickering, a cowboy-cocky member of the Arrivals, singing Baroque-pastiche countertenor lines, claims one of the Host women as his bride.

Both tracks come together outside in the chilly darkness for “The Crossroads,” before splitting again for “Train 2” and “Feast 2.” Time has moved forward during the interlude. The “Feast” banquet is now a catering hall, complete with chafing dishes, for the wedding of Arrival and Host, and the desperately brassy “Train 2” conjures the chaotic world of contemporary consumerism, mounting to cries of despair from both voices and orchestra. Then the audience reunites back in the “Contact” space for the final part, “Echoes and Expulsions.”

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All this, in barely 80 minutes. Despite the ad hoc architecture and the D.I.Y. aesthetic — particularly the costumes, a mixture of neon knits and thrift-store finds — there's a sense of extravagance in the marshaling of dozens of artists and so many technical challenges for something that passes so quickly.

Quickly, yet in epic style. I've rarely taken in a work that's so grandiosely modest.

The vocal lines tend toward passionate extremity as the instruments seethe underneath. Our guides throughout are two figures, both called Coyote: part-human, part-animal, part-eternal beings who communicate in nearly wordless moans, hums, cackles, clicks and giggles. They take center stage in "The Crossroads" alongside the evil spirit Wiindigo.

As projections play on a mist of water, their voices rise to a guttural roar before Wiindigo chokes out the phrase "Go back to where you came from," perhaps American racism's most notorious line — given darkly witty dual meaning here as an instruction for the audience to return to the theaters.



The evil spirit Wiindigo (Sharon Chohi Kim) takes center stage in a section called "The Crossroads."

Credit...

Casey Kringlen for The Industry

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The weakest part of “Sweet Land” is the first: “Contact,” much of which takes place behind that scrim, is musically and dramatically murky. Is some incoherence the point as we begin this disorienting journey? If so, it was unsatisfying; while the piece hardly gets clearer as it progresses, its enigmas grow to feel more intentional and beautiful.

But if the opening is unsteady, the ending is a miniature masterpiece. For “Echoes and Expulsions,” the scrim has been pulled aside, revealing rough country. A child plays (works?) in a ditch (grave?). Voices of the past are heard as if coming out of thin air, chanting in overlapping chorus: stories of a Pomo girl and a Greek immigrant, that 1871 Chinatown lynching and segregated medicine. The words are projected on surfaces all over the wasteland, enlivening even the bridge in the distance.

Finally, a single voice is left, singing “the sweet land” over and over. The sad, curling melody, like a memory of a hymn, bleeds into the child’s quietly forlorn cry, and Coyote, howling at the moon.

There are no curtain calls, as if the work, as it ends, has really vanished. Vanished into an uncertain future: “Sweet Land,” and the spiffy park itself, are symbols of urban renewal and also, inevitably, avatars of gentrification. You can almost hear in the music the rising rents and displacements coming nearby.

The temporary structures in which it’s being performed will be gone in a week or so. Then there will be no trace that an opera was ever put on here. Yet another event on this land, to be remembered and forgotten.

Sweet Land

Through March 15 at Los Angeles State Historic Park; theindustryla.org.

Zachary Woolfe has been the classical music editor since 2015. He was previously the opera critic of the New York Observer. [@zwoolfe](https://twitter.com/zwoolfe)

Wall Street Journal | 'Sweet Land' Review: A Journey Through History

In its ambitious, sprawling opera, staged across Los Angeles State Historic Park, The Industry explores a troubled colonial past.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/sweet-land-review-a-journey-through-history-11583868835?shareToken=st9f29b0537e8d4c0baa368bfe4b03ebff>



A scene from 'Sweet Land'
PHOTO: CASEY KRINGLEN FOR THE INDUSTRY

By Heidi Waleson

March 10, 2020 3:35 pm ET

Los Angeles

With “Hopscotch” in 2015, The Industry, Los Angeles’s audacious indie opera company, made art that grew out of the environment that Angelenos inhabit every day. It has done so again with the mesmerizing “Sweet Land,” this time conjuring the troubled, blood-soaked history of colonialism from a small patch of land, called, fittingly, Los Angeles State Historic Park, just north of Chinatown. As the show unfolds in the moonlit park, inside and outside of several open-air, temporary wooden structures, one feels the presence of ghosts.

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“Sweet Land” is a feat of collaboration (two composers, two librettists and two directors, with one of each having Native American heritage) and logistics. The audience gathers on bleachers in one theater to see the first contact of the Hosts—the indigenous people—with the Arrivals, who come by ship, singing a chorale about the Crucifixion (the words “blood” and “lamb” are themes throughout the show), which happens behind a scrim. The Hosts and Arrivals then divide, as does the audience, to follow one of two tracks, “Feast” and “Train,” which play simultaneously in separate, round structures reached by arcaded walkways; each structure has a small orchestra in situ.

“Feast” is basically Thanksgiving; “Train” is Manifest Destiny and the opening of the West, but these familiar stories are told in the overlapping voices of the invaders and the overrun. The first half of each track is the struggle between the two; the second depicts how the whitewashed story of that struggle became received history. In between halves, the audiences exit their theaters and hear the voices of the spirits of the land (“The Crossroads”).



A scene from ‘Sweet Land’

PHOTO: CASEY KRINGLEN FOR THE INDUSTRY

I saw the two tracks in successive performances on March 7. “Train” is violent and visceral. Even the set is violent—the wooden panels that make up the round theater slide abruptly on tracks, alternately revealing and concealing the performers in niches behind the audience.

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“Train 1” (music by Raven Chacon, libretto by Douglas Kearney) is driven by the percussive hammer strokes of the railway builders and the blood-infused religious rhetoric of the Preacher (the powerhouse baritone Richard Hodges), urging the Captain of the Arrivals (Jon Lee Keenan) to claim the land for God. Rifle (Joanna Ceja) slaughters every animal in sight while Bow (Lindsay Patterson Abdou) tries to stop her; Scribe (Peabody Southwell) writes down the lore of Drum (Nandani Sinha). The intensity heightens as these frantic lessons are subsumed into the rhythmic work song of the railroad builders and reaches its climax when the Captain murders the Guide (Jehnean Washington).

In “Train 2” (music by Du Yun, libretto by Aja Couchois Duncan), we are in the modern era. The percussive drive continues, but the music has taken on a jazz tinge. The Preacher is now a land-selling huckster, an automaton with wavering pitch, hawking lots to a bevy of buyers; Bow picks mournfully through a pile of bones and chants “Them dead, dead bones” over aleatoric orchestral noise and wails of naked pain from Host spirits.



A scene from ‘Sweet Land’

PHOTO: CASEY KRINGLEN FOR THE INDUSTRY

“Feast” is softer and creepier; more narrative and ritualistic. For “Feast 1” (by Ms. Du and Ms. Duncan), the round theater has banquet tables set with candles, but the glow of welcome is quickly shattered by Jimmy Gin (the countertenor Scott Belluz, singing in a parody of baroque style, with harpsichord accompaniment) who demands Makwa (Kelci

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Hahn) as his wife. The Hosts drive the Arrivals out, but their victory is short-lived; in modern-day “Feast 2” (by Mr. Chacon and Mr. Kearney), the tables are set with chafing dishes and Makwa has become a kind of centerpiece, surrounded by a menacing chorus of bridal instructors (“You’ll say, ‘I do’”). Her poignant lament of loss is the flip side of her defiance in “Feast 1.”

Gluing it all together are the Coyotes—Carmina Escobar (“Train”) and Micaela Tobin (“Feast”)—who guide the audience along the routes while mockingly observing and commenting on the performance. In the outdoor “Crossroads” section (music by Mr. Chacon), their astonishing, ululating vocalizations become the main event, the voice of the land, along with the cries of a malignant spirit, Wiindigo (Sharon Chohi Kim), who concludes the section with a hoarse, juddering command, “Go back to where you came from.” Coyotes, of course, also guide those entering the country illegally, and Wiindigo’s injunction has multiple layers: The audience is being sent back to its theaters but is also labeled an invader.

Her words resonate again in the evening’s chilling coda, “Echoes & Expulsions” (written by all four composers and librettists). The audience reassembles in the bleacher theater. The scrim behind which the Hosts and the Arrivals met is gone, revealing a wasteland behind a chain-link fence, where a teenager picks through junk, including an anchor. Now, disembodied voices sing new, piercing stories of the persecuted—Los Angeles’s Chinatown massacre of 1871; an enslaved child thrown out with the trash. A Latina forcibly sterilized in a hospital (Joanna Ceja) gets the last word: “But we’re in the Sweet Land. And who gets to make babies is who gets to make citizens. I understand now. I understand.” The Coyotes, perched on piles of rubble, yip and wail.

Yuval Sharon (also The Industry’s founder and artistic director) and Cannupa Hanska Luger did the incisive directing; conductors Marc Lowenstein and Jenny Wong presided, respectively, over “Train” and “Feast.” Mr. Luger also designed the remarkable costumes, which alluded to historical influences but created something entirely new. The Coyotes and Wiindigo got the most eye-catching garb—the former in jumbles of knitwear, fringe, armor, fur, bones and more; the latter a shaggy white Abominable Snowman, with a terrifying mask of a gaping maw on the back of her head. The garments told their own stories: The Preacher, in a snappy suit, wore chains that recalled his origins as a Captive, and in both Part 2s, the ensemble members wore jumpsuits and had bags over their heads, suggesting their deliberate blindness.

Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew, the production and lighting designer, melded the structures with the land and accentuated atmosphere inside and out, down to details like the cornhusks hanging from the walkway that led to “Feast.” Hana S. Kim created the projections, which included a red opera-house curtain decorated with petroglyphs at the beginning and leaping silhouettes of horses and buffalo in “The Crossroads.” In the coda, the projections of the text played on a variety of surfaces, including a bridge and a billboard; one last, lonely buffalo appeared on the bridge at the end. Tonantzin Carmelo was the choreographer; Jody Elff’s sound design made the haunting voices at the end echo in memory.

It’s fashionable today for writers of new operas to tackle contemporary issues, hoping to demonstrate the art form’s relevance and value. “Sweet Land” takes that idea many

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steps further: It gives its subject a complexity and an impact that could be experienced in no other way. Opera is, ideally, an indivisible meld of music and text; here, with even more creators than usual, and the double story, imagined and embellished, it gets a new, multilayered richness. The site-specificity is essential, not a gimmick. With commuter trains passing just a few feet away, and the lights of Los Angeles in the distance, you can sense all those bones and all that blood as the Coyotes wail under the moon. Neither replicable nor recordable, “Sweet Land” is not an artifact. You had to be there.

—Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the *Journal* and is the author of “*Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America*” (*Metropolitan*).

Musical America | "Sweet Land" Exposes America's Dark Underbelly

<https://www.musicalamerica.com/news/newsstory.cfm?storyid=44571&categoryid=4&archived=0>

By Richard S. Ginell

Musical America.com, Mar. 3, 2020

LOS ANGELES – Putting on an opera is a complicated enough task as is, and Yuval Sharon's company The Industry makes it even more so – on purpose. In "Sweet Land", the company's latest attempt to push out the walls of the opera house and sprawl into the surrounding community, Sharon, co-director Cannupa Hanska Luger and company have applied that added complexity to their most portentous project yet – recasting the history of the United States itself. Along the way, the unorthodox means to that end threatened to upstage the message.

Sharon, who is really a resourceful throwback to showmen of past eras, basically took over a portion of the LA State Historic Park, a sparsely-vegetated crescent of parkland close by Chinatown on the fringe of downtown L.A. It was here that a lot of checkered Los Angeles history going back centuries took place, a fitting spot in which to follow a plot line, or lines, that tried to tell two allegorical stories at once via the clashing memories of the victors and the victims. It was like Howard Zinn's renegade *A People's History Of The United States* battling the standard U.S. history textbooks – and judging from the darkening tone of the production, there was little question as to where The Industry stood.

And what an outlandishly complex production it was, a unique combination of high and low tech. Members of the audience were ushered into a rickety-looking outdoor theater constructed from two-by-four wood planks from a West L.A. lumber yard. A percussionist tapped out a preliminary soundtrack on splash cymbals while another stroked a ribbed iron rod with a wrench. A prologue entitled "Contact" depicted in abstract dances, the original inhabitants of the land, The Hosts, greeting a group called the Arrivals whose ship had just run aground.

From here, the audience was split into two equal-sized groups determined by the colors of our wristbands, and we were led down parallel wood-plank-lined walkways into one of two cylindrical surround theaters. In one theater, the audience saw "Train 1," in which the Arrivals push westward building the Transcontinental Railroad, picking up technologies from the Hosts and ruthlessly exploiting labor. In the other theater, that audience saw "Feast 1," a pioneer Thanksgiving-like setting in which Jimmy Gin – a macho outlaw cast ironically as a countertenor (Scott Belluz) – tries to force a Host girl, Makwa (Kelci Hahn), to be his wife and sire a new generation.

Following an interlude, "The Crossroads," in which everyone was led outside to witness a ceremonial ritual, it was back to our respective theaters where we were asked to forget about what we had just seen there. In "Train 2," the railroad is finished, the country is spanned, but we see a nightmare vision of progress, with only one person, Bow (Lindsay Patterson Abdau), in a heart-wrenching number, lamenting how everything is broken. The set of "Feast 2" is transformed into a wedding reception for Jimmy and Makwa, everything

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in symbolic white right down to Jimmy's coonskin cap as Makwa laments, "What happened to the land?" Finally, everyone returns via the walkways to the first theater for "Echoes & Expulsions," where the stage scrim has been removed to reveal a real-life wasteland in which downtrodden victims of American history tell their stories, referring to the idea of "Sweet Land" with irony and bitterness.

The catch is that a curious operagoer could only experience one of the storylines and a partial score per performance, so you would have to go to two performances in order to experience the whole piece – which I did in the late afternoon and evening of Feb. 29. This is typical of Sharon; no one person could see all of previous Industry projects like "Hopscotch" and "War Of The Worlds" in one pass either. While I don't think the company is doing this primarily as a ploy to sell more tickets, it does act as an incentive to return. They do say this is a deliberate attempt to make the audience feel they are getting only a partial look at history as they might in a textbook. But it's more satisfying to see two performances anyway, if possible.

But you didn't need two performances in order to gauge just how strange and creative all of the stagecraft was. Supertitles were displayed all over the wasteland in "Echoes" on various objects, including a billboard. I don't know what strings Sharon pulled to do this, but there were even supertitles projected onto the side of the Broadway Viaduct way off in the distance – and those happened to contain the most incendiary lines in the libretto. With the help of Panasonic projection mapping, there were hologram displays of galloping horses in the park, and abstract colored designs on the first theatre's scrim. The interior of the "Train" theater featured doors shaped to the curvature of the room that were forever opening and closing, revealing the cast in various poses. There were helpful swivel chairs in the "Train" theater in which you could whirl around and not strain your neck to catch the surrounding action.

Two composers – Raven Chacon from the Navajo Nation and Du Yun from China – and two librettists – Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney – were employed. The Chacon/Kearney team composed "Train 1" and Yun/Duncan did "Feast 1" and then they switched places for "Train 2" and "Feast 2." Chacon, Yun and Kearney collaborated on "Contact," Chaco did "Crossroads" alone, and all four combined forces in "Echoes" (if all of that sounds confusing to you, you're not alone).

Both composers served up collages of music for two separate chamber ensembles in several styles – abstract electronic noise, rigorous atonal instrumentals that could get quite rowdy, a quasi-folk-song with spike-driving percussion (from "Train 1," naturally), wailing chorales, extended vocal techniques based on Native American music, some aleatoric improvisations as well. Marc Lowenstein conducted the "Train" ensemble while Jenny Wong led the "Feast" group, both working hard to pull together a polyglot score that probably wasn't meant to be a unified statement, a metaphor for competing narratives of how America came to be.

The sense of technology and "progress" overwhelming the land and its original inhabitants was heightened by the frequent whooshing sound of the Metro Gold Line trolley running on tracks right beside the theaters. Helicopters buzzed the performance, another reminder of disruptive technology. A train horn would blow in the distance, like the Iron Horse that the Arrivals built. During "Crossroads," look south and you can see the lit-up skyscrapers of

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downtown Los Angeles tacitly proclaiming the triumph of wealth – mostly that of white folks – hovering over the former cornfield that was literally the dirt under our feet.

Ultimately, after two passes through "Sweet Land," one gets over the shock of the radical departures from conventional opera and concentrates on the biggest takeaways from the experience. It wasn't the score, nor the libretto, nor even the astounding staging. Rather, the most moving aspects of "Sweet Land"" were the random things happening in the environment that Sharon and his laptop had no control over. When they interacted with the piece, The Industry truly achieved its goal of blowing out the opera house walls.

"Sweet Land" continues through Mar. 15.

LA Weekly | THE INDUSTRY UN-MANIFESTS DESTINY IN THE BEAUTIFULLY STRANGE *SWEET LAND*

<https://www.laweekly.com/the-industry-un-manifests-destiny-in-the-beautifully-strange-sweet-land/>



Sharon Chohi Kim in *Sweet Land* (photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry)

FALLING JAMES MARCH 6, 2020

The story of how the West was won is so shocking, violent and sad that it defies dramatic credibility. The conquest of America and the attempted destruction of so many disparate indigenous cultures remains this nation's original sin, and involves a seemingly endless litany of heartbreaks, betrayals, broken promises and treaties, slavery, poverty, rape, suicide and murder that also extends to the non-white immigrants who came here, both willingly and forced.

To fully confront the systemic horrors of such a prolonged and ongoing genocide — spanning centuries — of Native and other people by European invaders requires abandoning almost everything you might have learned in U.S. history classes and recognizing, like Alice in Wonderland, that down is up and everything is backward in this country.

The Industry's *Sweet Land* confronts this tragic history boldly in an astonishing presentation that unfolds like a chillingly beautiful fever dream across several unusual settings spread out in Chinatown's L.A. State Historic Park. Enigmatically described as "an opera that erases itself," the multimedia work, which received its world premiere on Saturday evening, February 29, and continues through Sunday, March 22, was created by composers Raven Chacon and Du Yun and librettists Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney and enacted by a virtual all-star cast of new-music adventurers.

Like this divided country, *Sweet Land* splits off in two directions, giving audience members the choice of following one of two different storylines and processions that wend their way through the park in the gloaming before coming together again at the end. The piece is so ambitious that it requires two directors, Native artist Cannupa Hanska Luger (who also

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designed the costumes) and The Industry's artistic director, Yuval Sharon; a cast of 18 vocalists and actors; two small vocal ensembles; and two dozen orchestra musicians.

As the audience files in for the Saturday preview and gets seated in wooden bleachers overlooking a vacant lot on the northeastern edge of the park, percussionists Corey Fogel and Derek Tywoniuk stir up a low, jangling din of metallic sounds in front of a large screen made out of a semi-sheer white sheet. Fogel walks back and forth, scraping little wrenches against a metal bar to create a bell-like blur of noise; later, he suspends a chain of wrenches from his mouth and moves his head back and forth to make them clink together. More ambient percussion occurs when trains from the Metro Rail Gold Line go by occasionally on tracks just past the park's fence.

Vocalist Carmina Escobar (looking garishly wild in a hybrid costume of furs, kneepads, robotic gloves and a kind of exoskeleton) and soprano Micaela Tobin (wrapped up in colorful Native blankets, a canine-shaped glove and a black Misfits T-shirt) emerge from the darkness and begin prowling around while occasionally launching triumphant, feral coyote cries and boasts. An undulating keening of intertwined voices builds like a prayer-like incantation as the silhouettes of other characters of the community walk joyously back and forth on the other side of the screen.

But the feeling of harmony changes along with the music when a group of European settler-refugees known as the Arrivals marches in from the opposite direction, chanting more quaintly structured songs about their blood-obsessed god, their voices overlapping and then drowning out the Host community's singing. There is a feeling of mutual curiosity as the two groups encounter each other. They intermingle and break off into two directions, leading each half of the audience to follow them on a short promenade to one of two settings: Train and Feast.

On Saturday, the Feast path led to a large, round wooden yurt-like building with an open-air ceiling framing the bare branches of a tree outside. The audience and the Arrivals assemble at benches and candlelit tables arranged in a circle as a small string section scratches together woozy, unsettling lines for conductor Jenny Wong. The Hosts feed the desperate refugees, whose mournful voices murmur together hypnotically in a section composed by Du Yun with a libretto by Duncan.



Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry

But the Arrivals turn out to be ungrateful and demanding, and the boorish Jimmy Gin (portrayed by falsetto-voiced countertenor Scott Belluz) tries to force Makwa (soprano Kelci Hahn) to be his wife, although he is eventually driven away by the Hosts. After the feast ends, the audience is taken outside to a nearby field called the Crossroads, where animated images of horses and deer are projected onto the shimmering sides of water formed by a row of sprinklers in the moonlight. The coyote singers are joined by Wiindigo (voice artist Sharon Chohi Kim), a fearsome, white-faced, wraithlike being draped in a furry, Yeti-like costume with oversize jaws and teeth sticking out of the back of her neck. Escobar's lyrical coyote cries and Tobin's wordless wailing (composed by Chacon and Du Yun with improvisations by the three soloists) come out as an engrossing series of gasps, shudders and laughter against an ominous electronic drone while Kim croaks scary guttural sounds.

The audience returns to the round building for a second Feast, where the white-hooded Arrivals sit at tables with empty plates while brandishing their forks and knives demandingly, as the small ensemble unspools creepy string parts bumped against restrained, fuzzy crumbles of electric guitar. Makwa is wrapped up like a cocoon in a shiny silver blanket on the center table, and, when she stands up in a daze, she finds herself being married against her will to the leering Jimmy Gin in a bizarre ceremony.

"An appetite can bite right back when the gut outgrows the spirit," Tobin sings accusingly to the Arrivals, with lyrics written by Kearney. "Your skin reeked of drowning," Hahn sings as Makwa recalls how needy the settlers were when they first arrived. "What happened to the land? It's like a bone bleached by the sun."

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Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry

Gin and Makwa's marriage symbolizes that the Arrivals have taken over the country, which they have renamed Sweet Land. The cast and audience, from both the Feast and Train storylines, walk back to the bleachers where the story began. A solitary figure named Speck (played alternately by Micah Angelo Luna and Leander Rajan) appears in the dark vacant lot beyond the park fence. At first, it's not clear if the person is digging a grave, building an altar or making camp for the night.

Unseen soloists (singing from a nearby location) lament about how Sweet Land was built on the bones of innocent people, and horrifying stories about the deaths of Chinese railroad workers and abuse against African-Americans mingle with accounts of Native women being sterilized in white hospitals. Meanwhile, a choir intones warm vocal accents from under the bleachers. Supertitles with these memories suddenly appear on the front of a billboard across the train tracks and, even more stunningly a few minutes later, played out against the long side of the North Spring Street Viaduct, the imposing bridge that crosses the Los Angeles River just north of the park. (The sight must puzzle train passengers and other passersby in the area.) Seeing those heart-wrenching words projected starkly against such mundane backgrounds is as visually startling as the weave of voices — by soloists Nandani Sinha, Molly Pease and Joanna Ceja — is sonically mesmerizing.

One voice ruefully confides that survival in Sweet Land is all about “who gets to make citizens and who gets to make babies,” in the ending section, “Echoes & Expulsions,” which was composed by Chacon and Du Yun with a libretto by Duncan and Kearney. A piercing final voice cleaves the night air with a majestic and poignant final aria, punctuated by howls from the two coyote women, as the opera — and the story of America itself — winds down delicately into a powerfully moving silence.

Because *Sweet Land* involves two separate plots, it's worth going a second time to catch the other storyline. At the late performance on Sunday, March 1, half the crowd took a ride on the Train track, entering another circular wooden structure with no ceiling. Guided by conductor Marc Lowenstein, the musicians in the first of the two Train scenes were ensconced inside a gazebo, and they emitted a disturbing, muted soundtrack of low strings and electric guitar. Panels inside the curving walls were pulled along a track, closing and

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opening again like shutters to reveal vignettes from such characters as the Preacher (baritone Richard Hodges) and his dutiful scribe (played alternately by Peabody Southwell and Molly Pease) and Rifle (Joanna Ceja) with music by Chacon and lyrics by Kearney. (If possible, try to get a seat in one of the swivel chairs up front, which makes it easier to quickly spin around as vocalists suddenly appear from behind panels at different places within the circular walls.)

Regardless of which track is chosen, *Sweet Land* lingers in the memory with its utterly entrancing music and inventive visual presentation. In relating such a bitter history of this country, the composers and librettists could have indulged in melodramatic sentimentality or used generic musical tropes. Instead, they experimented with unusual sounds and melodies to unlock the dark secrets still lurking in America's collective attic.

L.A. State Historic Park, 1724 Baker St., Chinatown; Fri.-Sat., March 6-7, 6:30 p.m. & 8 p.m.; Sun., March 8, 7 p.m. & 9 p.m.; Fri.-Sun., March 13-15, 7 p.m. & 9 p.m.; Fri.-Sun., March 20-22, 7 p.m. & 9 p.m.; \$25-\$250. (213) 761-8598, sweetlandopera.com.

San Francisco Classical Voice | Cultures Clash in *Sweet Land*

BY **JIM FARBER**

March 3, 2020



A scene from *Sweet Land* | Credit: Casey Kringlen for *The Industry*

Amid the glitz and glamour of the recent Oscar festivities, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences chose to make a rather significant announcement.

“The academy would like to acknowledge that tonight we have gathered on the ancestral lands of the Tongva, the Tataviam, and the Chumash. We acknowledge them as the first peoples of this land on which the motion picture community lives and works.”

A few months earlier, the Academy had also awarded a lifetime achievement award to the great Native American actor, Wes Studi, who at the beginning of his acceptance speech observed, “I’d simply like to say, ‘it’s about time.’”

“It’s about time” is also the overriding theme of the remarkable operatic experience that is *Sweet Land* — a site-specific, multidimensional collaboration from Yuval Sharon and The Industry. Presented on the former ancestral land of Los Angeles State Historic Park, this panoramic opera experience will be performed through March 15. Then, by design, it will simply fade away.

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The *Sweet Land* creative team (L-R): Douglas Kearney, Elizabeth Cline, Du Yun, Yuval Sharon, Aja Couchois Duncan, Cannupa Hanska Luger, and Raven Chacon

In order to tell its complex story of cultures in conflict, *Sweet Land* incorporates a variety of musical vocabularies created by two composers: Native American composer and soundscape artist Raven Chacon, and Chinese immigrant Du Yun. Likewise, there are two librettists: Douglas Kearney and Aja Couchois Duncan; two orchestras (one conducted by Music Director Marc Lowenstein, the other by Jenny Wong); and two directors, Yuval Sharon (founder of The Industry) and director/costume designer, Cannupa Hanska Luger.

Enter the Land of Dreams



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A scene from *Sweet Land* | Credit: Casey Kringlen for *The Industry*

As evening fell, the audience gathered in the first of several constructed wooden venues to share the experience of the arrival of colonists. We were greeted by a pair of gaily clad spirit guides: Coyote (Carmina Escobar) and Wiindgo (Sharon Chohi Kim) whose costumes and makeup rejoiced in the vibrant colors of the earth. They embraced us, rubbed noses, and sang to us in a bird-like language of chirps and chants.

The entire tone of the opera changed, however, with the arrival of the newcomers, the first members of a white horde emboldened by a sense of religious superiority through “the power of the blood” and the righteous mandate of manifest destiny. They also introduced the curse of slavery upon the Sweet Land.

This first encounter is presented as a collision of musical themes composed by Chacon and Du Yun. The earth-oriented nature of native harmonies is soon overwhelmed by western harmony, pious religiosity, and the ornamentation of Baroque opera.

The “Feast” or the “Train”



A scene from *Sweet Land* | Credit: Casey Kringlen for *The Industry*

At this point, the audience — which has been divided into two groups — followed one of two tracks: the “Feast” or the “Train.” But just as in *The Industry*’s multitrack opera, *Hopscotch*, the only way you can experience *Sweet Land* in its complete form is to attend two performances.

By the time the audience entered the elegant wooden enclosure for the Feast, night had fallen. The hall was decked in stalks of corn, sheaves of wheat, and was ablaze with candles. The natives, in full ceremonial finery (as tradition dictates), greeted and fed the newcomers. But their hospitality is soon disrupted by the arrogance of the colonists who seek to impose their God-granted superiority. They are led by the brash outlaw character of

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Jimmy Gin, (countertenor Scott Belluz), who, in a burst of coloratura frenzy, tells them in no uncertain terms, “Your way of life must end!”

At the same time, the other half of the audience had entered the circular pavilion of the Train — a remarkable 360-degree stage of revolving panels designed by Tanya Orellana and Carlo Maghirang. As the panels open and close they reveal the conquerors led by the Preacher (Richard Hodges). It is their destiny, he proclaims, to subdue the land and decimate its native peoples. At the center, the orchestra conducted by Lowenberg pounds out Chacon’s jackhammer score.



Mayflower image and conceptual design by Cannupa Hanska Luger Lettering and graphic design by Visual Issues

In full darkness the entire audience joined together to hear the lament of the spirit guides, Coyote, Wiindigo, and Totaa’ar (Jenny Wong). And as their plaintive moans filled the cold night air projections of leaping deer and antelope appeared on a softly falling veil of mist. Then each group returned for the second part of the Feast (which devolves into a cannibalistic orgy) or the Train, where the completed conquest of the “Sweet Land” is celebrated.

The final scene, “Echoes & Expulsions,” reunited the audience back where it all began. But now the once-verdant landscape has become a desert of rubble where the desolate spirit guides roam among the ruins as their words of lament are projected on the old bridge that spans the Los Angeles River.

As it was with *Hopscotch*, any attempt to convey the overall impact of *Sweet Land* in words is doomed to failure, since it is by design a totally immersive experience of sight and sound. Once again Yuval Sharon and The Industry have expanded the borders of what an opera can be and told a story that is in desperate need of telling.

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Jim Farber wrote his first classical music review in 1982 for the Los Angeles Jewish Journal. Since then, he has been a feature writer and critic of classical music, opera, theater, and fine art for The Daily Variety, the Copley Newspapers and News Service, and the Los Angeles Newspaper Group (Media News).

Cultural Attaché | Sweet Land

<https://culturalattache.co/2020/03/05/sweet-land/?fbclid=IwAR1X-3QM4ZPQZuiFw55JwURHHB-Rq94SrSHsrk0PujHmlA3VC-x7Cn23io>



Yuval Sharon and The Industry present the world premiere of a new opera

By Craig Byrd

March 5, 2020

All remaining performances of SWEET LAND have been canceled. A video recording of the piece will be available for on-demand streaming starting as early as Friday, March 20.

Even if you never experienced *Invisible Cities* at Union Station or *Hopscotch* in cars around Los Angeles or *War of the Worlds* in a former parking lot across the street from Walt Disney Concert Hall, you probably heard about them. I can assure you word has already spread about the new project from The Industry called *Sweet Land* which is now being performed at Los Angeles State Historic Park.

Yuval Sharon, the Artistic Director of The Industry, has assembled an amazing team to tell, in opera form, the story of indigenous people (or *The Hosts* as they are called here) who encounter settlers (or *The Arrivals*.)

The team includes composers Du Yun (Pulitzer Prize winner for her opera *Angel's Bone*) and Raven Chacon; librettists Douglas Kearney and Aja Couchois Duncan and joining Sharon as director is Cannupa Hanska Luger.

The creators refer to *Sweet Land* as an opera that erases itself. Let them explain.

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There are two distinctly different tracks you can experience when you see *Sweet Land*. One is entitled *Feast* and the other is *Train*. (Note that they are separate and require separate tickets.)

The opera begins with *Contact* where *The Hosts* and *The Arrivals* first meet. Then you begin on either *Train* or *Feast*. In each track you experience the story first as a natural progression from *Contact*. There is an interstitial section (called *The Crossroads*) that immediately follows either *Train 1* or *Feast 1*. *The Crossroads* allows for both tracks to reset and tell a different story about life once *The Arrivals* have made their presence known and have completely appropriated the land, the life and the people we were first introduced to as *The Hosts*. (These are called *Train 2* and *Feast 2*).



An image from “Feast” in “Sweet Land” (Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry)

Sweet Land comes to a conclusion in the same space where it started in a section called *Echoes and Expulsions*. (By the way, the higher you sit in the bleachers for this last segment, the more you will experience.)

Having seen both tracks I can tell you that you are in for a moving and thoroughly thought-provoking experience. It is recommended that you do NOT see both tracks in the same day. I can attest to the wisdom behind that because I *did* see both tracks on the same day. My mind was filled with so much that I regret not having the proper time to digest and think about what I had experienced. This is truly powerful and inventive work.

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An image from “Train” in “Sweet Land” (Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry)

One other thing to be aware of before going: this all takes place outdoors at night. You will spend time walking, standing and sitting in the elements. Even though we are in Los Angeles, it does get cold during the performances. I strongly recommend you bundle up before attending even more than you might otherwise normally do. (Makes me even more amazed that the 31-person cast and the 24 musicians and 2 conductors can sing and play as beautifully as they do.)

There are two full performances each night and each track runs 85 minutes.

For tickets go [here](#).

Main Photo is an image from *The Crossroads* in *Sweet Land* (Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry/Courtesy of The Industry)

Opera Wire | The Industry 2020 Review: Sweet Land

<https://operawire.com/the-industry-2020-review-sweet-land/>

MAR 12, 2020

A Mystifying Work That Asserts a Sense of Place While Challenging Notion of Opera

By [Gordon Williams](#)

With their latest production, The Industry proves once more why they're a major reason to consider LA a vital center of opera.

"Sweet Land," directed by The Industry's founder Yuval Sharon and Cannupa Hanska Luger (also the designer of stunning costumes), and with words by Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney and music by Raven Chacon and Du Yun, premiered at Los Angeles State Historic Park on February 29, and continues again next weekend. Once more, an Industry production – clearly arising from operatic milieu – raises questions about the nature of opera, the extent to which it is always a "gesamtkunstwerk" drawing on all the arts, and the expressive balance of its constituent parts.

Asking Questions in 5 Parts

Essentially "Sweet Land" tells of the coming of white folk into this land, their disruption of indigenous society and what remains. However, the white folk are called Arrivals and the original inhabitants Hosts as one of the ways in which this production moves the tale onto a more mythic, archetypal level. It's "not an opera about Pilgrims and Indians. That was just the cover of the book to get some of you audience in the door," says composer Raven Chacon from Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation in a program-booklet conversation with fellow-composer Shanghai-born Du Yun.

There are five parts to the presentation. In "Contact," the Arrivals immediately bungle protocol, but the Hosts agree to treat them as guests. Half of them are taken to a Feast and the other half are taken into the land to be "taught the ways of the community."

At this point, the audience is divided in half and walks from the opening scene's theatrical space through gangways to different performing areas – one in which a "Feast" takes place (shades of Thanksgiving), the other called "Train (the Arrivals will obviously appropriate and industrialize and embitter the land they're meant to understand)." The audience reconnects at "The Crossroads" – where improvised singing from Wiindigo (Sharon Chahi Kim) and Coyote (Carmina Escobar) connects the audience with "the now" – and then divides again for Feast 2 and Train 2 before returning to the original performance space to witness "Echoes & Expulsions," the reverberating effects of America's past. I was assigned to Train. Perhaps an audience-member is meant to yearn for and regret the part they missed out on.

The venue for an Industry production is frequently a major part of the attraction. "Invisible Cities," back in 2013, took place at Union Station. Audience-members walked through the peak-hour rush listening through wireless headphones to the singers interspersed among the commuters. You could watch 2015's "Hopscotch" on monitors in a pavilion in the Arts District called The Hub, but really the best way to experience the different scenes of the

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varying storylines was to get in and out of 24 cars traveling three different routes around town.

In the “Sweet Land” program booklet and pre-show literature, much is made of the fact that LA State Historic Park where this performance takes place sits roughly where the Native American Tongva village Yaang-na and its cornfield once lay – an area replete with memories (many tragic) close to Downtown and the original pueblo. This area up to present-day Lincoln Heights station on the Gold Line was an important source of water in the early days of Los Angeles. It is thought that Gaspar de Portolá forded the river in 1769 at a point near today’s North Broadway-Buena Vista Bridge.

What is Opera?

What is “Sweet Land” like as an experience? Significantly that’s a question to consider before evaluating the work as an opera. Attendees wore snow coats, mittens and beanies. It was cold. The towers of Downtown glistened in the distance and trains running between Azusa and East LA roared past, adding their music. There was still a sense of pre-colonial nature, even acknowledging the exotic eucalypts up on Chavez Ridge.

The temporary performance structures gave off a beautiful fragrance of timber, and the moon glimpsed through the circular opening of the “Train” performance-structure evoked (for me) Jefferson’s account of a speech by the great Cherokee chief, Outassate – “The moon was in full splendor”. Surely, given the tentacles of meaning reaching out from this work and the lack of a dramatic plot’s gravitational pull, the creators want audience-members to loop in and out of their own thoughts?

A significant portion of watching “Sweet Land” is taken up in moving between locations. “Train” audience-members had to get to their viewing structure past performers humming while they “worked.” The act of traversing was important. How might Sharon go in Australia devising an opera based on the songlines, those epic Aboriginal chants that criss-cross and map the country? The prospect seems ripe with promise.

Clearly, an audience member needs to prepare to get the full benefit of this experience. Co-director Cannupa Hanska Luger says he wants the audience to work. “How do we,” says the multidisciplinary artist raised on North Dakota’s Standing Rock Reservation in printed conversation with Chicago-born co-director Sharon, “become, rather than teachers, reference librarians?”

This openness accounts for a welcome lack of didacticism. But does The Industry reverse opera’s traditional hierarchy of meaning? With them, it seems, it’s place, structure and design first, with sound, poetry and music following. And does that blunt meaning and impact? And, of course, does that matter if the audience is meant to do half of the work? For Sharon a key feature of opera – perhaps its ethical virtue – is a behind-the-scenes one, beyond gesamtkunstwerk, collaboration: “I actually feel like what we are undertaking is a mode of leadership that the world could use most right now.” But also, then, collaborating with the audience.

How Does it All Fit Together?

But it's hard to decipher text, apart from scattered phrases that stand out, because so much is going on and there's little traditional plotting or musical profile to help support the meaning and sustain an audience member's (or at least this audience member's) attention.

It's when reading the libretto as an act separate from sitting at the performance that important points jump out, eg Kearney's "An arrow stitches distance – / Doesn't fly so much as bind. / As you kill you carry – / A burden dragged behind." Only by reading the libretto, do you know that the Captain of the Arrivals (Jon Lee Keenan) makes a mistake of protocol by mistaking the Father (Babatunde Akinboboye), not Totaa'ar, the Mother (Jenny Wong), as the leader of the Hosts. Otherwise, all you see – and you might miss it – is one guy walk up to another who gestures.

The graphic of a falling woman projected onto the cloth at the beginning is meant to evoke the story of "Sky Woman Falling" but if you haven't read this story in Aja Couchois Duncan's Introduction to the program booklet, you've missed arguably the show's most stunningly beautiful piece of writing.

Is it worth considering the possibility that relying on audience imputation hinders the ability of the show to rise to a point? But then the creators might object to the need for "points" or even the idea that this would be a "rise." And of course, viewing a traditional indigenous ceremony can be like this, sequences conveying a logic of meanings only the initiated can understand. In this case, the audience-member can at least read the libretto beforehand (if that is not veering into the highly cerebral that at least one of the creators seems intent on avoiding).

But where does music fit in all this? Is it memorable and to what extent should it be?

I could remember the "Blood and water putrify" melody as I walked over the gangway to Train. Raven Chacon's Railroad Song stood out as did Du Yun's percussion-scape at the beginning of Train 2. Jon Lee Keenan as the Captain and Richard Hodges as the Preacher were formidable presences. Through the energy of her performance (physical as well as vocal) Carmina Escobar, as Coyote, contributed so much to the moulding of the show.

In the Train performance space, conductor Marc Lowenstein handled the orchestra with great skill. It was riveting to watch him lead to that one scene-ending note to "Train 2" that sustained through twittering, blaring, trilling to signify we should move to the final location.

And then it became clear. This is not music for a Highlights CD; it's actually a navigation device for a space. But might the work be even more widely impactful if traditional musical story-telling were involved?

At the end of Act One of "Parsifal," Gurnemanz asks the hero, "Weisst du, was du sahst?" No, Parsifal did not understand the ceremony he had just seen. As opera, "Sweet Land" is mystifying. But, in a sense, so what? Its greatest importance is as memorializing of place. It requires a shift in audience-perspective and maybe a new definition of opera.

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Perhaps the greatest proof of this was the last scene, “Echoes & Expulsions.”

The backdrop was gone and the original performance space was no longer a building bound on four sides. The super-titles were projected onto a disused billboard and the North Broadway-Buena Vista Bridge a couple of hundred yards away. Mention of the 1871 Chinatown massacre was made – reinforcing echoes of tragedy in the location. And then, as the synopsis says, “Speck [Micah Angelo Luna] remains on the industrialized land. / The voices of America’s history rise up around him.” Singers mimicked the cries of coyotes which once echoed around this area and possibly still do occasionally up on Chavez Ridge.

That – a strong sense of place formed by a bundle of devices, mostly visuals but including sound – was the impression that remained. And a strong impression at that.

Observer | Spring's Best Opera Reveals an Art Form Rapidly Innovating

<https://observer.com/2020/03/springs-best-opera-reveals-an-art-form-rapidly-innovating/>

By Mary von Aue • 03/02/20 10:00am



Heartbeat Opera's *Dragus Maximus*, Anthony Braxton, and the Industry's *Hopscotch*. Julia Cherruault/for Observer

When working with a genre as dated as opera, the most important thing an artist can do is experiment. The old guard of classical music often struggles with relevance, meaning the future of opera heavily relies on its burgeoning indie scene. These artist-driven groups are prioritizing accessibility and produce operas in neighborhoods that are historically underserved. They invest in young singers and living composers to launch new works. They reimagine the classics as political commentary.

The risk takers of the indie world have forced the establishment to take more chances, invest in diverse talent and engage directly with social issues. It's sometimes (but only sometimes) evident in The Met's productions and LA Opera's ethics.

Whether new to opera or not, this spring's lineup of traditional and indie performances are a fresh take on what the genre could be and where it should be going.



The Industry's "Sweet Land." Casey Kringle for The Industry

***Sweet Land* at The Industry, Los Angeles (February 29)**

The Industry is one of the most important opera companies right now. They've been called the "coolest opera company in the world" and while that's a great endorsement, the artist-driven team is delivering more than just performances inside a fleet of cars driving around LA. (Though, again, that is pretty cool.) The Industry stands apart not just for expanding the definition of opera but expanding the community it reaches. The disruptive vision of artistic director Yuval Sharon showcases a dialogue from artists often neglected by the big-name opera companies, making it a great hangout for discovering new writers and musicians.

Sweet Land will claim its stage in LA State Historic Park and is conceptualized as "an opera that erases itself." Composer Du Yun worked alongside librettists Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney to communicate stories of indigenous people of the 21st century and challenge a whitewashed American identity. [...]

| OTHER COVERAGE



Los Angeles Times | 'Sweet Land's' radical design uses Los Angeles to rethink the architecture of opera

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-12/sweet-land-opera-radical-design-los-angeles>



Kelci Hahn as Makwa in “Sweet Land.” Her costume was created by Cannupa Hanska Luger and E.B. Brooks.(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By [CAROLINA A. MIRANDA](#) STAFF WRITER

MARCH 12, 2020 11:55 AM

It is an opera about land whose main set is, quite literally, the land that makes up Los Angeles. The soil and rocks and fragments of industrial detritus that can be found underfoot in the city, the parts not blanketed in concrete.

“[Sweet Land.](#)” the site-specific opera created by the Industry, the company founded by [Yuval Sharon](#), is a story about those who live as part of the land and those who seek to own it. It is, in abstract ways, the story of U.S. colonization. But it could be any story in which Arrivals (as the opera labels its newcomers) land in a place and soon overtake their Hosts (longtime inhabitants).

And for this reason, the opera takes place not in a performance hall or warehouse (that great contemporary signifier of avant-garde-iness) but on the land itself: a corner of [Los Angeles State Historic Park](#) in downtown, where a trio of structures in which the opera is performed sits lightly on

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the soil — so lightly, in fact, that to be a spectator of “Sweet Land” is to stand amid dandelions and get your shoes covered in dust.



“Sweet Land” is being staged in a series of temporary structures designed by Tanya Orellana and Carlo Maghirang at Los Angeles State Historic Park. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

“It had to be in conversation with the land,” says Carlo Maghirang, a scenic designer for the opera.

“You are using the buildings only to frame what’s there,” adds Tanya Orellana, codesigner on the project. “Not having a floor was really important.”

“Sweet Land” has drawn critics’ attention for the innovative ways in which it has addressed its fraught topic: a nonlinear narrative, stripped of place and time, that reflects on the violence of colonization but also on systems of belief and resilience. The narrative takes place on a pair of parallel tracks — titled “Feast” and “Train” — and the audience sees only one of them over the course of a show.

(On Friday morning, the Industry announced that it was canceling any remaining performances due to [the COVID-19 pandemic](#), but the company is working on a video recording of the opera that it hopes to make available for on-demand streaming by March 20.)

[In his review](#), Times classical music critic Mark Swed described the work as “opera as astonishment.”

Just as astonishing is the opera’s design — the sets, costumes and projections — which dispenses with the visual tropes of U.S. colonial history (pilgrim hats, feathered headdresses) in favor of elements that feel postindustrial and retro-futuristic.

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“The main thing is to remove specificity,” says [Cannupa Hanska Luger](#), who codirected the opera with Sharon.



“Sweet Land” codirectors Cannupa Hanska Luger, left, and Yuval Sharon. (Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)

The design also dispenses with the visual tropes of opera.

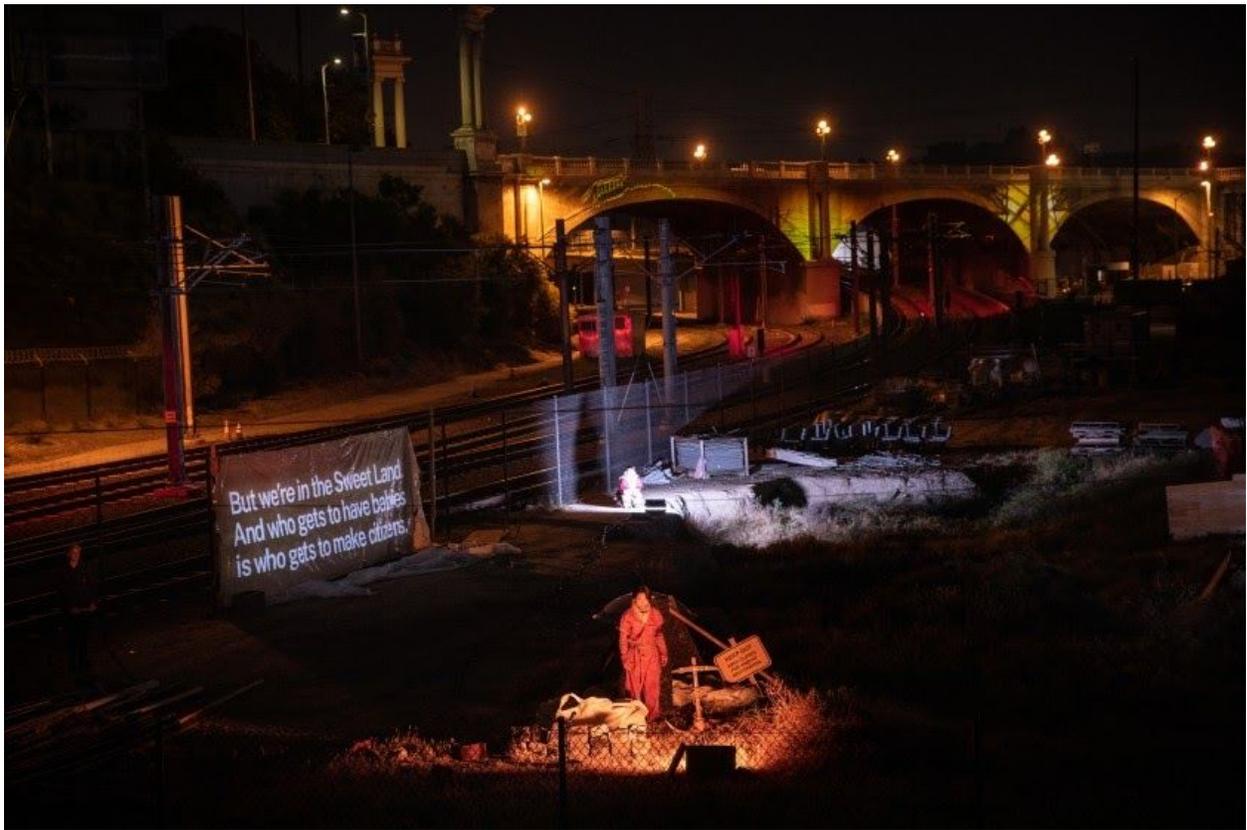
Gone is the traditional proscenium stage. Instead, a set of bleachers crafted from unfinished lumber overlooks an industrial boneyard on the eastern end of the park. This raw space is where the audience begins and ends its journey. Functioning as backdrop are the tracks of the Gold Line, the [North Broadway Bridge](#) (a handsome Beaux Arts structure built in 1911) and the illuminated neon crucifix belonging to the Young-nak Church of L.A. in the distance.

When the narrative splits, the audience also splits, migrating through wood-frame tunnels to one of two circular theaters, also fabricated from raw lumber, in which viewers are promptly immersed in the performance — be it the candle-lit banquet that greets the viewers of “Feast” or the rolling walls that serve as evocations of locomotives in “Train.” (The latter is a remarkable feat of design — like being placed in a swirling vortex.)

“*You* are an Arrival,” says Maghirang of the sensation the designers wanted to inspire. “*You* are arriving in this land. And *you* are part of this critique.”

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“We were like, how do we do this so that we don’t let the audience off the hook — that *this* is the land where this happened?” says Sharon. “Los Angeles State Historic Park feels like a central character in ‘Sweet Land.’”



Hana S. Kim projects images onto industrial detritus and the North Broadway Bridge for “Sweet Land.” (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

These design choices emerge out of the opera’s narrative but also its intense collaboration — a creative team that worked not as top-down enterprise but as a collective. Sharon teamed up with Luger, a visual artist who is based in New Mexico, to codirect. Two poets — Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney — supplied the libretto. Composers Raven Chacon and Du Yun wrote the music. Maghirang and Orellana collaborated on the set design. Luger shared costume design duties with E.B. Brooks.

“This opera is an opportunity to look at the founding of the United States from different perspectives,” says Orellana. “We were coming at it from many different angles.”

Part of that included a multitude of indigenous perspectives. Chacon is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation. Duncan is part Ojibwe. Luger is an enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation who grew up on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota.

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“Sweet Land” composers Du Yun, left, and Raven Chacon.(Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times)



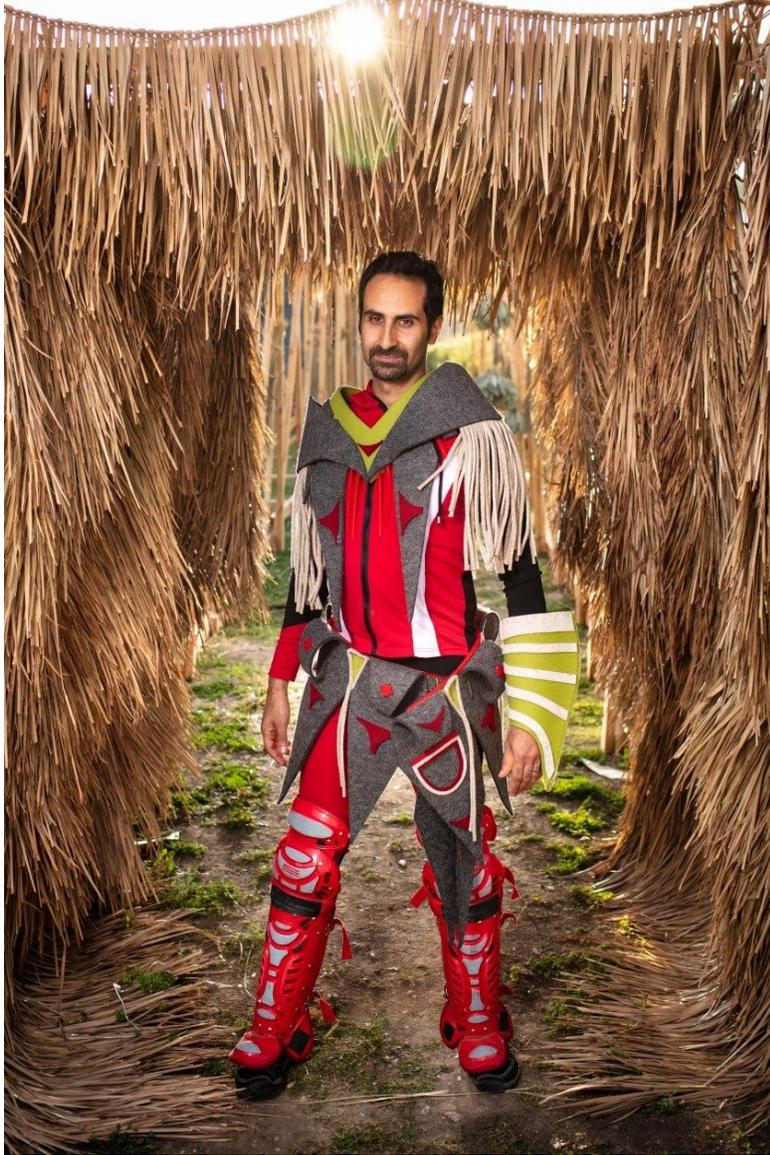
Scenic designers Tanya Orellana, left, and Carlo Maghirang with projection designer Hana S. Kim, on the set of “Sweet Land.”(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Luger’s vision was essential to the costume design, with its aesthetics drawn from an ongoing art project dubbed [“Future Ancestral Technologies.”](#) which imagines a futuristic indigenous regalia that isn’t specific to a single ethnicity.

“A lot of the work I’ve been doing is looking at science fiction, indigenous futurism,” he says. “One of the core ideas is that rather than manufacturing new material, how do you repurpose existing material?”

“I found that used sporting equipment is built for dynamic movement and makes great infrastructure for costumes and regalia. Some of the designs to displace impact actually look like indigenous graphic design, like the shin pads — they have these plated lateral and diagonal lines and it looks a lot like indigenous beadwork.”

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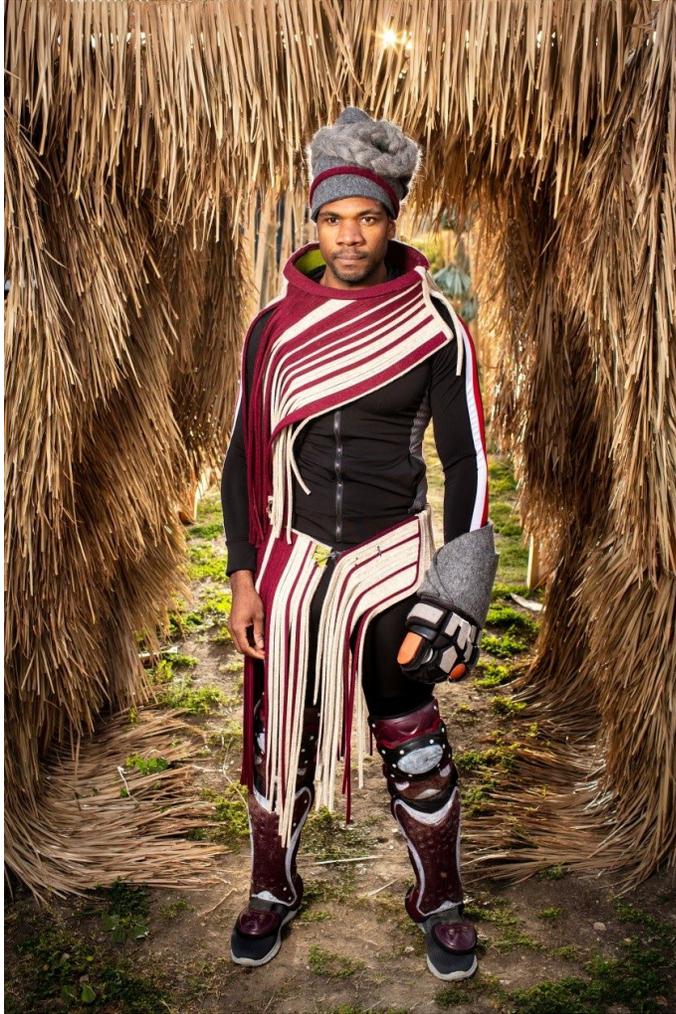


Fahad Siadat as Brother in “Sweet Land,” in a costume designed by Cannupa Hanska Luger. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

The Hosts wear ensembles creatively engineered out of shin guards and shoulder pads and hockey gloves. These are accented with bright, geometric arrangements of industrially milled felt, remnants that Luger scooped up from a manufacturer in Albuquerque at no cost.

“I like the subtlety of talking about a postindustrial experience,” Luger says. “How do we escape the weight of primitivism and look at some of these new materials?”

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Derrell Acon as Grandfather. Many of the costumes were made with old sporting equipment and scraps of industrial felt.(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP



Sharon Chohi Kim as the ghostly character Wiindigo in “Sweet Land.”(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

The opera takes the indigenous — often relegated to the past in U.S. history — and makes it wildly futuristic. Its design also serves as counter to the frequent pop cultural depictions of Native Americans as bellowing warriors.

“We are embedded as combatant with mascotry and all of that,” says Luger. “It reinforces us as enemy. And that savagery, it’s for sale. Disney sells it. Every sports team that is ‘honoring’ us is honoring only one perspective. You never see sports teams called things like the Aztec Astronomers.”

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP



Scott Belluz as Jimmy Gin in "Sweet Land," in a costume designed by E.B. Brooks.(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP



Maria Elena Altany plays an Arrival in “Sweet Land.” Many elements of the production’s costumes were acquired in thrift stores. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Much of the opera’s design was about working with what was available. The theaters were placed where land was flattest and they wouldn’t disturb any trees. The boneyard supplied a ready-made postindustrial landscape.

Hana S. Kim’s skillful projection design employed the back of a billboard to project supertitles and the North Broadway Bridge to show the silhouettes of galloping animals.

At the beginning of the opera, a scrim features projections of Tongva patterns, which soon dissolve into other forms.

“It’s a nod,” says Kim. “The beginning would be the most grounded — it’s our departure point — into something more abstract and complex.”



An early sequence from “Sweet Land” features Tongva patterns projected on a scrim.(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

“Sweet Land” is placeless and timeless, but in its design it has Los Angeles in its bones.

There is the landscape. But also the sound of helicopters. The rumbling Gold Line. The wheezy exhale of braking buses. This keeps the opera “eternally fresh,” says Luger. Every day, “Those environmental cues are different.”

It also makes Los Angeles State Historic Park a central player.

The park marks the city’s cradle: the Tongva village known as Yaanga that was ultimately replaced by the Spanish municipality established by several dozen *pobladores* in 1781.

Hosts and arrivals.

Sharon and Luger didn’t have to construct an elaborate set to evoke the epic narratives of colonization. Los Angeles has been building it for 239 years.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP



Jehnean Washington in costume as Guide in "Sweet Land." The L.A. skyline hovers in the distance in some of the opera's scenes.(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

"Sweet Land"

- Where: Los Angeles State Historic Park, 1724 Baker St., downtown Los Angeles
- When: Through March 22
- Tickets: \$75-110; \$25 tickets are available for artists and community members for select performances
- Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes
 - Info: (213) 761-8598,
 - theindustryla.org

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Los Angeles Times | Commentary: How the spirit of protest is echoing across L.A.'s concert halls

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-10/political-music-protest-songs>

By [MARK SWED](#) CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

MARCH 10, 2020 6 AM

Do you believe in zeitgeists? I do.

The German for time (*Zeit*) and ghost (*Geist*) combine to imply the spirit of our time. Even in our meme-a-minute age of social media (which is a zeitgeist in itself), larger and crucial sustaining forces remain at play.

I've been noticing the overpowering sensibility of the protest song at very different events around town. Artists, after all, are our early-warning systems in just about everything that affects society.

Last weekend the zeitgeists finally made their timely presence unmissable.

[...]

Jerking, invisible hands guided my journey to Los Angeles State Historic Park a couple of miles away for a return to "[Sweet Land](#)." The opera that Yuval Sharon has masterminded for his company, the Industry, made such a huge impression at its premiere the previous week that it has haunted me ever since. I can't think of anything more zeitgeisty than this [immersive environmental work](#) with enraptured scores by Du Yun and Raven Chacon, a phenomenal staging and sensation-inducing performance that allows us to look at our past, the land on which we stand, who we are and what we must mean to one another anew.

[...]

The prescient "Parable of the Sower" is dream besotted. Most of that may be our worst nightmare, our communities destroyed, civilization turned barbaric, the brutally insurmountable divide between rich and poor deadly, the environment in tatters, walls erected everywhere to keep us apart. Lauren is a seer, and she has a recurring dream of flying — her freedom.

The cast is large and charismatic. The Reagons' songs follow Butler's novel, expressing the feelings of characters and of the times. Protest underlies all. Toshi Reagon sits in the center like a singing Buddha. "We're building the art we need," she said at one point. ("We're building a culture out of an erased society, the art we need," the bass-baritone Derrell Acon said Sunday as he introduced the conversation series he is curating around "Sweet Land.")

[...]

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

Meanwhile, "Sweet Land" will soon cease to exist. Its lumber will become new homes. Its ideas will resonate. People are traveling from all over to catch it. After a second time through one of its parts, I can say for certain it is ready to pervade the operatic zeitgeist, a maker of ghosts determined to haunt us if we ever try to forget.

Los Angeles Times | Behind the scenes with Yuval Sharon's opera company as coronavirus shuts down the show

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-17/coronavirus-shut-down-opera-behind-the-scenes-yuval-sharon-sweet-land>



Derrell Acon performs during a taping of "Sweet Land" on Sunday. With performances canceled, the Industry is producing a video of the opera. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

The opera 'Sweet Land' was a success. Then came the coronavirus. How Yuval Sharon's company banded together for one last show where cameras replaced the audience.

By [CAROLINA A. MIRANDA](#) STAFF WRITER

MARCH 17, 2020 12:12 PM

Like every show before it, this one began with a thrum of discordant strings, the singers, in costume, standing at attention, as they await their musical queues.

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Unlike every other show before it, the seats are empty of spectators. For its final show, the Industry's critically acclaimed new opera, "Sweet Land," is being staged only for a trio of video cameras.

As the action unfolds, Derrell Acon, a bass-baritone singer dressed in red-and-white regalia in the role of Grandfather, presents a bowl of fruit to the open sky in the open-air theater in Los Angeles State Historic Park, where the opera is staged. On this evening, his deep melancholic notes sound especially mournful.

It is Sunday, in the hour before sunset, and as the cast pours its heart into what will be its final, improvised performance of "Sweet Land," Mayor Eric Garcetti is preparing [to announce](#) the closure of bars, movie theaters and gyms and placing limitations on restaurants to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus responsible for [COVID-19](#).

"This is the last day we could do something like this," says co-conductor Jenny Wong, who also plays Totaa'ar, as she steps into the set with the other performers. "Just everyone stay 6 feet apart."

With the opera's remaining shows canceled — "Sweet Land" had been scheduled to close on March 22 — the video will be an attempt to offer ticket holders who haven't demanded refunds an opportunity to see the show virtually. It's also a last chance to get the show on tape. (KCET is producing a documentary.)

"I think of it a little bit like if a house was burning, and you had the opportunity to run in and save a piece of humanity," says Industry founder Yuval Sharon. "That's what we're doing."



“Sweet Land” co-director Yuval Sharon, in blue, at the taping of “Sweet Land” on Sunday. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

The ongoing pandemic has led to a raft of theatrical, performance and other cultural cancellations over the past week. L.A.'s [big three performing arts organizations](#) — the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Opera and the Center Theatre Group — had shut down by Thursday. [Almost two dozen California museums](#) followed. This has left actors and musicians without gigs and part-time visitor services associates who staff museum galleries without shifts.

And it has left small arts organizations like the Industry teetering on the brink.

“Other organizations may have the opportunity to postpone,” says Sharon, who also served as “Sweet Land’s” co-director. “We have no such structure.”

For one, the opera’s [unorthodox scenic design](#) means that it isn’t held in a theater but in a trio of temporary, wooden structures in a state park — not the sort of venue that can be easily locked up and reopened later.

Moreover, the company itself is tiny. (The core staff consists of just three people: Sharon, executive director Elizabeth Cline and music director Marc Lowenstein. The performers all work on contract.) And the budgets are, likewise, small.

During the periods in which it is developing an opera, the Industry’s budget might hit half a million dollars a year. The years in which it stages a production, such as this one, those

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numbers may rise to more than \$1 million — not a lot given that “Sweet Land” has a cast and crew of 105 people. (The L.A. Opera, by comparison, has an annual budget of almost \$44 million.)

This is the kind of organization in which a director can be found directing — as well as operating supertitles, getting performers water and putting port-a-potties in place.

“It’s a very glamorous shoestring,” jokes Sharon.

Now that shoestring is fraying.

“We built a cash reserve for a rainy day,” says Cline. “But we don’t have a reserve for a pandemic.”

The performance cancellations meant the company lost ticket sales from a dozen performances. Grantors hit by stock market losses have emailed indicating that they may need to back out on grants because of force majeure. And the executive team has made a commitment to pay the performers for all of the performances, regardless if they were canceled. “We are an artist-driven company,” says Cline.

As of Sunday evening, the team hadn’t calculated all of the losses. But Sharon estimates that the coronavirus-related cancellations have ripped a \$150,000 crater into the Industry’s modest budget.

“The cascade of effects is unreal,” says Cline.

Part of the plan for the video is to potentially help fill some of that gap. Though it will be made available to ticket holders of canceled shows for free, it will also be put online as a pay-per-view film and shared with a wider, internet audience. Sharon estimates they will get the footage edited and online by March 24. (The film will be available at stream.sweetlandopera.com. Find additional details at theindustryla.org.)

[Cannupa Hanska Luger](#), the opera’s co-director, looks for the silver lining in this unexpected digital release.

“It’ll be a different experience, but it will have a far larger reach,” he says. “I’ve had hundreds of people who apologized that the cancellation happened but were excited to throw down and see it online. These are people who wouldn’t have been able to see it otherwise.”



Director Jonathan Stein, standing, directs the video shoot of “Sweet Land.” Performer Adam Faruqi sits before him. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

For the producers of the Industry — like the rest of the world — the rate at which coronavirus caught up with them seemed to happen at whiplash speed.

When I interviewed Sharon and Luger for a story on the opera’s design on March 3, they were both easy, relaxed, preparing to announce a one-week extension of the show after positive reviews in both the [Los Angeles Times](#) and [New York Times](#). (Previously “Sweet Land” had been scheduled to run through March 15.)

By Monday, March 9, just six days later, things began to change — rapidly.

Officials at various California universities announced that they would be [suspending in-person classes](#) and San Francisco announced it was [canceling group events](#) at city facilities. It quickly became clear that the week would not proceed as planned.

Originally, the Industry’s plan had been to film the opera on the final night of the show — March 22. But early on the morning of March 9, Sharon says they decided to move the shoot up to March 15 instead.

“We said, ‘Let’s call the film crew for this weekend, because who knows?’ ” says Sharon. “The original idea is that we were supposed to film it with an audience.”

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That was when things really began to move quickly. “We were going hour by hour and trying to follow the outbreaks in Los Angeles County,” he says. “We decided to follow the guidelines of the health department in L.A. County.”

For a time, they held out hope that they might be able to proceed since the opera was held outdoors and the audience was small. (Only 200 people, compared with larger venues, such as UCLA’s Royce Hall, which seats 1,800.)



Co-director Cannupa Hanska Luger, in brown jacket and baseball hat, observes the video taping of “Sweet Land.”(Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

But after the World Health Organization declared the virus a pandemic on March 11, and Gov. Gavin Newsom issued a recommendation that events of more than 250 people be canceled, it became clear that “Sweet Land” would have to close.

Even though the opera was just under the crowd limit, Sharon said it felt “icky” to proceed. “And people were asking me, ‘Why aren’t you canceling this already?’ ”

On Thursday night, he pulled together all of the opera’s available cast and crew on a Zoom video conference — “a mega Zoom,” he dubs it — to let them know that “Sweet Land” was shutting down.

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During that discussion, he raised the idea of a final performance for video.

The request was one he agonized over. “How do I possibly even ask people to come together under these circumstances?” he says. “Isn’t the right thing not to come together?”

They discussed it together as a group. “There was the risk of getting together,” he says, “And the risk of this being gone forever.”

Some cast members declined to participate. “And I completely understand their decision,” says Sharon.

The majority said yes.

On Sunday evening, they landed at Los Angeles State Historic Park for one final show.



Kelci Hahn, center, and performers from the opera “Sweet Land” joke around as they wait for videotaping to begin. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

The final performance of “Sweet Land” was a show that, in its process, couldn’t have been more surreal.

There were moments of strange normalcy: performers chatting idly about their favorite video games as they waited for a take to begin. Musicians tapping text messages into their cellphones between scenes. Women dressed as coyotes lounging in the wings. And there

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

are moments of camaraderie and humor, of the kind shared by a cast and crew that have been rehearsing a show for weeks.

At one moment, Sharon volleys with the performers on various topics including coronavirus. Someone responds by suggesting he sell any of the production's remaining toilet paper as a fundraiser for the Industry. Singers wearing bags on their heads all bob their heads in laughter.

But there are countless other points in which the reality of the outside world seeped through. Performers did their makeup in cars, parked just off site, so they wouldn't have to jam together into the production tent. Members of the crew wiped down props with liberal amounts of sanitizer before each scene. Artists who hadn't seen each other in a week or more greeted with awkward waves at a distance instead of customary hugs.



Crew member Amanda Reynoso wipes down props with sanitizer during the video taping of “Sweet Land.”(Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

But when the director yelled “Action!,” what emerged were moments of incredible poignance.

“Sweet Land” is made up of a pair of abstracted, parallel narratives that evoke the history of U.S. colonization — a history that is not without its own pandemics — namely, [the decimation of native populations](#) from diseases imported from Europe.

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“This is a story of survival,” Sharon reminds the assembled cast and crew in the moments before the shoot begins.

And when it does begin it feels as if it is with a singular purpose and determination. The musicians don’t miss a note. The choreography goes off without a hitch (even though the rain has left the exposed ground of the theater muddy). The singers attack their lyrics with fierceness and power. It’s as if the audience for this show is something greater than any one person or thing.

Micaela Tobin, an experimental voice artist who plays one of the mischievous coyote figures in the opera, says it’s an emotional farewell.

“All of my gigs have been canceled and this has been such a unique role,” she says. “To sing outside, under the moon, it doesn’t get better than that. I’m glad I get to see everyone one more time before a quarantine.”

Art can’t cure. But it certainly can soothe.



Fahad Siadat, left, in costume as Brother, waits for videotaping to begin. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

Cultural Attaché | Sweet Land's Librettists Have a Lot on Their Minds

Aja Cochois Duncan and Douglas Kearney reveal their inspiration for the opera

By [Craig Byrd](#) -March 12, 2020



The opera *Sweet Land*, from Yuval Sharon's *The Industry*, is a two-part work that examines race in America, the taking of land from indigenous people, the definition of being an immigrant and the responsibilities of settlers. It is a bold work that has earned rave reviews for composers Du Yun and Raven Chacon and their librettists Douglas Kearney and Aja Couchois Duncan.

While the tagline for *Sweet Land* is “an opera that erases itself,” Kearney and Duncan had more than that on their mind as they structured the two-parts: *Feast* and *Train*. (For full details of the opera please go [here](#).) Not only are there two parts to the opera, there are two parts to *Feast* and *Train*.

Kearney wrote the second part of *Feast* and the first part of *Train*. Duncan wrote the first part of *Feast* and the second part of *Train*. But the librettists had more than just the idea of an opera erasing itself on their minds as I learned when I spoke by phone last week with each of them.

Here is part one of my conversations with the two writers. These excerpts from those conversations have been edited for length and clarity.

The timing of *Sweet Land* seems perfect given the present administration's treatment of immigrants. How much did Trump's policies influence the creation of this work and the writing you did?



Aja Couchois Duncan (Photo by Sarah Deragon)

ACD: My understanding is the 2016 election had a really profound impact on Yuval personally and that was a large piece of his impetus of wanting to do the original version and then the struggle to fund it through to what we have.

One of the things that in response to his draconian immigration practices is a refrain that people say all the time which is wrong which is “We are all immigrants.” We are not all immigrants. The complexity and nexus of those things was of particular interest for Douglas and I.

DK: One of the things that’s interesting about that line is how it has been imagined as a unifying rallying call. But in that usage there is an erasure that is maybe well-meaning, but is persistent erasure because the indigenous people are not immigrants. That exclusion is central to the American myth.

There is a way in which immigration is imagined as a kind of intentional seeking of a better life. From an Afro-dysphoric perspective, at least some populations of it, I don’t know you can call it immigration.

When creating art that has a strong political component, are you preaching to the converted or do you think that concept itself reflects a naivete that would suggest there’s not racism to be found amongst the arts crowd?



Douglas Kearney (Photo by Eric Plattner)

DK: That's such a great question. I think there was definitely a time period in which I was really worried about preaching to the converted. During the process I had to think about what I was arguing for in terms of representation and space myself as one of the creators. Even in delivering political commentary there is a way people can come expecting a particular kind of response or treatment. So trying to destabilize that and make things less streamlined is one of the ways I try to approach political content.

ACD: There was an operating assumption that the largest percentage of the audience would be white and older based on the demographics of The Industry's opera audience. However, because all of the creative folks with the exception of Yuval were people of color and we were focused on bringing in people of color, we were not writing in opposition to white imagination or something. I think we were hoping we would affirm things that resonate with people's experience; jar folks who aren't as experienced with the experiences of the audience.

It seems to me that *Sweet Land* reaches two segments of the audience: those who are determined to break the cycle of bigotry and those who repeat it. What would you like each group to get from their experience of seeing *Sweet Land*?

ACD: One of the things that we were doing in sort of an explanation for the second act for *Train* and *Feast* was to evidence ways in which erasures of history are present. Speaking for myself as a mixed race, cisgender queer woman, there's all kinds of way I don't write things that I'm tacitly implicit in or just don't literally see because I don't see the breadth of them because of my skin, or mixed race or higher education. All of us, regardless of what we are trying to do, can always increase the volume of our awareness.

DK: For people who would like to break the cycle, I would like people to come away from it not feeling as though they have been necessarily given an answer as much as they have been given a method for destabilizing and working through the questions and the problem.

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

ACD: For folks that don't care, if they don't care you can't speak to them. They need some cataclysmic life event and even that might not change their world view. I'm not sure that people who don't care were ever our audience. People who are more comfortable not having to care, it's probably those folks we are hoping we can be in a dialogue with. It's a presenting of an experience so that hopefully they no longer feel they can't care.

DK: It's a difficult game to presume that what a person who is dead-set against recognizing the humanity of other people that what they need is just the right argument. That strikes me that it is the job, often times, of the victims to not be victimized. I don't know that in the great history of political speech or artistic effort that the goal should be "maybe if I write this one line, that person will go 'Oh.'" That's giving them the right to abdicate responsibility. I don't know that's the rubric we should be using.

For someone in the 21st century to say they haven't encountered humanity from other people that are not like them, if they come to *Sweet Land*, I hope what they see is opera in which you have a group of artists who have created a work of art using an approach while, on the outside it might look like it is consistent with other kinds of productions, but that it was created with an approach of consensus that is more consistent with a sense of community. That it took discipline and that took effort, but was what was central to creating this work that is *Sweet Land*.

Check back soon for part two of my interview with Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney.

Main photo: An image from *Feast 2* in *Sweet Land* (Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry) All photos courtesy of The Industry

Cultural Attaché | How Sweet Land Disrupts: More with the librettists as the opera becomes available for streaming

<https://culturalattache.co/2020/04/07/how-sweet-land-disrupts/>

By Craig Byrd -April 7, 2020

When I published an [interview](#) on March 12th with Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney, the librettists for the opera *Sweet Land*, none of us could have known that the Covid-19 virus would force an early closure of this challenging and important new work that disrupts some of our ideas about our own identity.

“Necessity is the mother of invention” for Yuval Sharon, Artistic Director of The Industry and co-director (with Cannupa Hanska Luger) of *Sweet Land*. He and the entire company came up with a plan to make sure the opera didn’t just fold up without further opportunities for audiences to experience this opera which garnered rave reviews from [Mark Swed](#) in the [Los Angeles Times](#) and [Alex Ross](#) in [The New Yorker](#).

Sharon assembled the entire team to film both parts (*Feast* and *Train*) of the opera. Now *Sweet Land*, which was composed by Raven Chacon and Du Yun, can be [streamed](#) for less than fifteen dollars. The cost of purchasing this film will help offset losses incurred due to the early closure.



scene from “Feast 1”

With the release of *Sweet Land* in this format, it felt like the right time to conclude my conversation with Duncan and Kearney. Remember, the answers below have been edited for clarity and length.

I read multiple takes on *Sweet Land* from both critics and audience members. One person said that the opera, “disrupts the dominant narrative of American identity.” If disrupting that identity was

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

indeed a goal, what would you, as one of the creators, like that narrative of American identity to be replaced with?

ACD: I find great resonance in that description. One of the things Douglas and I talked about early on was the idea of American exceptionalism. That was something we were really interested in breaking up. In part, by just noticing that the reason so many “great things” happen in America is because land is stolen and labor is replaced. You don’t get to see they *pulled themselves up by their bootstraps*, but by the skin and hair of others.

DK: That domination is not abstract. That means at some level that you are a part of something in which people are often seen as resources to be exploited. You don’t have to go to slavery to think about that. You can walk down the street and see people who have jobs that have had to fight for minimum wage.

ACD: What do we want to replace that with? For me I’m most interested in the dis-ease, it’s about being disinterested in the past and the vast wasteland that is that. I want people to reconnect to land and plants and animals. The climate is accelerating at such a fast rate, it just says how much we aren’t in touch with what the earth needs. Actually reconcile with how we got here and what that means.

DK: Some of the work is going to be hard. What we have to ask is is that what we want to keep doing. If that isn’t, it’s going to take work to stop, to create a different possibility. I would like us to have an identity of reckoning with what it is that has gotten us to this moment and actually dealing with it.

There is the idea of privilege that runs through *Sweet Land*. For those who define privilege in strictly economic terms, what does this opera say to them?

DK: One of the things that *Sweet Land* talks about in terms of privilege for people whose view of privilege is more strictly speaking routed through economics, we do see a kind of extractive colonialism happening in some of the different scenes. It’s not just the settler. One of the things that’s important about *Train 2*, is there is a scene that Aja wrote about a kind of distance between sort of the ideal around expansion and possession and a hollowness around what that acquisition actually provides. There’s a kind of soullessness about that. *Sweet Land* braids and entangles so many different strands of what we might think of as categories for privilege and what we might call underprivilege.



A

scene from “Feast 2”

Aja, in your poem, *Fictive*, you write, “There is a story we tell. A story about suffering. Not because we are suffering, but because that is the story we have been taught to tell.” How does *Sweet Land* fall into the category of a story you have been taught to tell?

ACD: There is a level of intergenerational trauma that I both hold and continue to re-thread into my present experience and my experience of others – because of the depth of erasure of indigenous lives in particular. That was the project. I also feel as an artist my writing is a way of evoking an alternative future. It’s not just the traumas of the past, it is weaving backwards in order to weave forwards.

Sweet Land is self-described as an “opera that erases itself.” Is that how you looked at it creatively?

ACD: I didn’t have to erase my own story. I don’t think it is in fact an erasure, but I think it gets engaged with erasure in Douglas’s sections. [He wrote *Train 1* and *Feast 2*] I was interested in different kinds of erasures. In the libretto there were a lot of things being disrupted simultaneously.

DK: That question is something Aja and I still talk about. I gave a Sunday talk last week and I wrote a little bit about erasure and how can you call it erasure when the bones are still there. Is that still erasure if you see bones? What we really wanted to do was show a myth being made.

To purchase *Sweet Land* for streaming, please go [here](#).

All photos from *Sweet Land* by Casey Kringlen for The Industry/Courtesy of The Industry

Los Angeles Times | Newsletter: Essential Arts: Culture shuts down IRL, materializes online

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/newsletter/2020-03-21/essential-arts-coronavirus-online-culture-irl-shuts-down-essential-arts>



Scott Belluz, left, before one last performance of the opera “Sweet Land,” done without an audience and to be made available on demand.(Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

By [CAROLINA A. MIRANDA](#) STAFF WRITER

MARCH 21, 2020 8 AM

Greetings, my fellow quarantinis. I hope you have found good shelter and strong [toilet paper supply lines](#). I’m Carolina A. Miranda, staff writer at the Los Angeles Times, with the week’s essential culture and coronavirus news:

[...]

Culture goes online

The self quarantines that began even before Gov. Newsom issued [a stay-at-home order for California](#) on Thursday has left culture battered, but not down.

The cast and crew of the acclaimed opera “Sweet Land” from Yuval Sharon’s company the Industry [got together for one final performance](#) — before empty seats and a trio of video cameras. I sat in on this particularly melancholic show, which the Industry aims to put

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online next week as an [on-demand video](#) (partly to fill the budget gap that the cancellations have left in their budget).



Practicing social distancing on the set of “Sweet Land” are, from left: Industry executive director Elizabeth Cline; opera co-director Cannupa Hanska Luger and Industry musical director Marc Lowenstein.(Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)

Airmail Weekly | Opera for Shut-Ins

<https://airmail.news/arts-intel/highlights/opera-for-shut-ins-174>

From the Metropolitan Opera in New York to the Vienna State Opera, streaming without borders

BY MATTHEW GUREWITSCH

[...]

Arguably the virus's single most grievous operatic casualty has been Sweet Land, the mythopoeic, outdoor meditation on America from The Industry, in Los Angeles. Evoking the first contact of an indigenous civilization of "Hosts" with an undreamt-of cohort of alien "Arrivals," the piece unfolds on nonintersecting planes impossible to take in on a single viewing. Described by its multiple creators as "an opera that erases itself," Sweet Land opened late last month to bewildered hosannas only to vanish before its time. While glimpses may already be seen online, a comprehensive video goes live on demand on March 25. Announcing the plan, The Industry's founder Yuval Sharon said that the company would be charging "a small amount," just to help defray the costs of an outfit whose chief asset is the courage to dream. The price has now been set at \$14.99, a pittance. To pre-order, visit <http://stream.sweetlandopera.com>.

The New Yorker | Air Opera, Cut Short by Social Distancing

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/06/an-open-air-opera-cut-short-by-social-distancing>

The encroaching pandemic hung over “Sweet Land,” an opera performed in a Los Angeles park, but its tales of cultural violence would have been a gut punch under any circumstances.

By Alex Ross

March 30, 2020



Yuval Sharon has a singular flair for staging work in open-air spaces. Illustration by Wesley Allsbrook

In 2015, the Los Angeles-based theatre company the Industry mounted “Hopscotch,” an outdoor, mobile, multi-composer opera of staggering logistical complexity and transporting, almost delirious beauty. It unfolded like a magical-realist fable in which the experience of the observer becomes part of the story. Certain of its images—a trumpeter playing at the top of a water tower, with a trombonist on a distant rooftop answering him; a soprano, in a red dress, gliding along the cast-iron walkways of the Bradbury Building’s famed atrium; another soprano singing while riding in a Jeep along the Los Angeles River—will stay with me as long as I remember anything. It was a waking dream of a city, and I keep wishing I could have it back.

In February and March, the Industry presented a new opera, “Sweet Land,” its most ambitious venture since “Hopscotch.” The vibe was stranger and darker, bordering on nightmarish. The title has a bitterly ironic ring: the work tells of lands plundered, peoples murdered, cultures appropriated. My reaction was undoubtedly conditioned by the

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encroaching coronavirus pandemic, which soon shut down American public life. Yet “Sweet Land” would have been a punch in the gut under any circumstances. Chaotic, conflicted, implacably honest, it unfurled a narrative that dismantled its own ideological underpinnings and exposed its own lies.

“Hopscotch” and “Sweet Land” both emanated from the potent theatrical sensibility of the director Yuval Sharon, who founded the Industry, in 2010. He has a singular flair for staging work in open-air spaces, letting landscapes become part of the drama. The setting for “Sweet Land” was the Los Angeles State Historic Park—a patch of green in a concrete expanse, hemmed in by freeways, the L.A. River, and a light-rail line. During the performances, which began in the evening, trains would periodically clatter by, with perplexed commuters peering out the windows. The image of a train hurtling into the dark is an elemental trope of American myth; in “Sweet Land,” myth merged with the grimy routine of the everyday. As in “Hopscotch,” but in a much more unsettling way, the border between stage and city disappeared.

The program for “Sweet Land” included a “Land Acknowledgment.” Julia Bogany, of the Gabrieleno Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians, wrote, “We, the Indigenous People, the Traditional Caretakers of this landscape, are the direct descendants of the First People who formed our lands, our worlds during creation time. We have always been here.” One aim of “Sweet Land” is to give voice to the Tongva people, who once thrived in the Los Angeles Basin. At the same time, the opera reserves its right to fantasize on historical themes. A cryptic prologue, titled “Contact,” portrays the first encounter between groups called the Arrivals and the Hosts—essentially, colonists and indigenous tribes.

Sharon and his co-director, the Native American artist Cannupa Hanska Luger, chose not to let any one perspective dominate the proceedings. Two creative teams produced the music and the text: the Chinese-American composer Du Yun worked with the writer Aja Couchois Duncan; Raven Chacon, a composer of Navajo background, was paired with the poet Douglas Kearney. There are two distinct narrative components, “Feast” and “Train,” each ensconced in its own roundhouse venue. After the prologue, which takes place in bleachers overlooking the park, the audience is divided in half, with one group sent to “Feast” and the other to “Train”; only by attending “Sweet Land” twice could you see both. The structures were built for the occasion, under the direction of the theatre designer Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew.

“Feast” depicts what happens immediately after the Arrivals make their appearance. It is loosely based on the interaction between the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony and local peoples—an initial period of peace and mutual assistance followed by aggression on the part of the settlers. A warm, welcoming atmosphere, signalled by dozens of lit candles, dissipates when an Arrival named Jimmy Gin declares, “God gave us dominion over everything,” and threatens Makwa, a young woman of the tribe. Weapons are drawn, and the Arrivals seem to retreat. The second part of “Feast” is a kind of erasure of the first, presenting history as the victors tell it. Makwa is being married off to Jimmy Gin, alongside a Thanksgiving-style feast. She protests in vain as the ceremony proceeds. “Who wants seconds?” someone cries.

“Train” is a tale of industrialization and brutalization. The language of missionary conquest and Manifest Destiny—“The Word of God is the Hand of God”—intersects with scenes of

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animal slaughter, work-gang labor, and mob violence. Doors rumble back and forth on casters, conjuring a real, or metaphorical, speeding train. In the second part, that bloodshed is forgotten as the society gives in to consumerism and self-gratification. A percussion-heavy chamber orchestra is positioned at the center of the roundhouse, with the audience arrayed in a circle surrounding it and the performers racing around the space's outer rim.

Du Yun and Raven Chacon, the co-composers, prove to be a good match. Both draw on a wide spectrum of musical techniques, from the folk-primeval to the experimental. Chacon brings to bear his understanding of Native American musical traditions: in the latter half of "Feast," he creates a mesmerizing multicultural counterpoint, blending Makwa's sorrowful arias of remembrance with the sinuous cantilena of Host spirits and blocky four-part hymns sung by the Arrivals. Shimmers and flecks of instrumental sound establish a wide-open atmosphere, as if the city had wafted away into wilderness. The sonic textures of "Train" sometimes become dense to the point of incoherence, but Du Yun provides a thunderous climax in the form of bulldozing drones, pounding ostinato, and blasts of electric-guitar feedback.

Between the two parts of "Feast" and "Train," the audiences leave their venues to see an outdoor interlude called "The Crossroads." A trio of singers evoke ancient spirits: Carmina Escobar and Micaela Tobin jointly played the trickster Coyote, and Sharon Chohi Kim was the monster Wiindigo. The costumes, designed by Luger and E. B. Brooks, combine folkloric and surrealist features: brightly colored woollen garments, masses of fur, animal heads. The music, partly improvised, wavers between unearthly ululation and piercing lyricism. Throughout the scene, a sprinkler system is operating in an adjoining field, and images of horses, deer, and buffalo are projected onto the spray of water—ghosts of the land as it once was.

At the end, the full audience reassembles in the bleachers to witness "Echoes and Expulsions," a harrowing epilogue of protest and lament. Unseen singers tell of the dark side of L.A. history: stories of enslaved indigenous children, of the Chinese massacre of 1871, of a Latina woman undergoing involuntary sterilization. A youthful figure crawls around a construction site at the corner of the park—perhaps scavenging for food, perhaps digging for the truth. Trains trundle by; fire engines scream across the North Broadway Bridge, in the distance. A chill descends, and not just because it can get cold at night in L.A.

The coronavirus shutdown cut short "Sweet Land" in the middle of its run. Smaller, nonprofit groups like the Industry are already reeling because of the crisis; some may not come back. The Industry is trying to recoup lost revenue by offering a video of "Sweet Land" for sale online. Cameras cannot capture the eerie power of the event, but the zooming lens picks out details that I missed live: subtitles projected on billboards like spectral graffiti, the image of a deer flickering across the bridge. The video was made after the cancellation of the show, when the city was closing up. The last train that passes through is almost empty. ♦

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Alex Ross, The New Yorker's music critic since 1996, is the author of "The Rest Is Noise" and "Listen to This." He will publish his third book, "Wagnerism," in September.

Los Angeles Times | Review: 'Sweet Land' triumphantly moves online. It's the best ticket in opera right now

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-30/coronavirus-industry-sweet-land-opera-streaming-vimeo>



An image from the Industry's site-specific opera "Sweet Land." (Casey Kringlen)

By [MARK SWED](#) CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

MARCH 30, 2020 4:59 PM

"Sweet Land," the widely celebrated opera mounted by the Industry during the last weekend of February and the first weekend of March at Los Angeles State Historic Park, was performance of place and of the moment. The setting was the work. You had to be there.

The opera was designed as immersive art, and you needed to feel it physically. The experience was meant to be personal. Another aspect of its essence was disappearance. Here was fragility amplified. After two additional weekends of performances, all traces of the sets were meant to vanish into thin air.

Those final weekends were wiped out by the pandemic. The park closed. Yet an operatic butterfly with a lifespan of a month lives. It has mutated into a video opera. Cast and crew

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returned for a [shoot](#) on March 15, and on Sunday the video was released for on-demand steaming via Vimeo.

What [Yuval Sharon](#), the founder and artistic director of the Industry and the mastermind of “[Sweet Land](#),” has done is make a video that is a very different experience from attending in person. If you saw the park staging, originally co-directed by Sharon and Cannupa Hanska Luger, this shows you what you missed. If you weren’t, this shows you what you are no longer missing.

An opera of place has become an opera of stay in place. An opera of physical immersion has become an opera of aural immersion. (I recommend listening with headphones.) An opera that was meant to be a very strong communal experience has become, as our quarantined lives have, utterly personal. An opera about the spirit of the land has become, itself, a spirit in the digital ether rather a physical presence.

Most of all, an opera about disappearance has refused to disappear.

When performed live, there were two versions of “Sweet Land,” with common points. The audience sat in bleachers for the opening spectacle of immigrant Arrivals coming to Sweet Land, greeted and fed by native Hosts attempting to attune the newcomers to the spiritual needs of nature.

Then half of the audience saw “Feast,” in which the Arrivals turn on their hosts as the countertenor outlaw Jimmy Gin violently takes the beautiful Makwa against her will. The other half saw “Train,” in which the Hosts attempt to guide the Arrivals in the ways of the land, only to have that used against them as their captors propulsively ravish the Earth. At the end, the audiences from both parts returned to the bleaches for a bleak look at that ravishment.

There were hundreds of ways of making the experience of “Sweet Land” entrancing. Los Angeles was seen physically from a new angle. There were dazzling visuals, particularly a central scene with mischievously mystical creatures in front of magically mysterious projections on mists of water from sprinklers. Only audience members capable of muscling their way to the front of the crowd could see more than the bits everyone else could catch by craning heads.

During other parts of the performance you were hit by stimuli from so many sides you never quite knew what was what. With so much going on, the sheer barrage on the senses meant that everybody had a different experience. That was the point. You had to let it sink in. Trying to see each 90-minute part, “Feast” and “Train,” on the same night was a bad idea. This was an opera of commitment. Through it all, the music was but one part.

Watching and *listening* to the video version, you can’t help but notice the music and libretto taking the central place they occupied all along, even if that required more than one sitting to comprehend. “Sweet Land” was shot and recorded on a single evening and edited in a mere two weeks, but the sound and editing are so superb that, by itself, the soundscape creates the landscape.

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There was never any question that the performances, both the instrumental ensembles for each part and the arresting singers, were terrific. But experiencing all of that close-up shows just how terrific.

Then there is the score by the composers Raven Chacon and Du Yun. Here is how you can tell this is real opera — its bones, blood, sinew, skin and consciousness all in the music. The experience that seemed more than complete outside was that only because all along it was the score that gave everything else meaning.

The music is complex. Chacon draws on his Native American roots, Du on her Chinese émigré ones. Both composers are highly adept in avant-garde instrumental and vocal techniques. Both have a sophisticated understanding of electronics. Repeated listening reveal scores with layers upon layers of coexisting elements that include a host of musical traditions, be they from Baroque opera or various kinds of spiritual ceremonies.

However different the two composers' personalities, they together unveil the unexpected, unique American melting pot of now. The video — which is beautifully shot, by the way — is also a better way to appreciate the poetic texts by the librettist Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas Kearney. For them, cultural anger and arresting imagery also potently meld.

“Feast” and “Train” have been edited down to around an hour each. That mystical central section, clearly not meant for the video screen, is now a brief two minutes of effective collage. The final scene, reduced to just a small boy on ravished land, has an emotional power all its own.

The Industry, for which the loss of revenue from the cancellation of “Sweet Land” poses an existential threat, has hoped to make something back by pricing [“Sweet Land”](#) at \$14.99. (To watch, go to [theindustryla.org](#).) It is the single best deal in all of opera right now, and that is taking into account the sudden riches of free opera streams from the world's most illustrious companies.



[Mark Swed](#)

Mark Swed has been the classical music critic of the Los Angeles Times since 1996.

Los Angeles Review of Books | Yuval Sharon Reinvents Opera for Los Angeles

By [James C. Taylor](#)

MARCH 28, 2020



Banner image: *The Industry*, Sweet Land (2020). Photo by Casey Kringlen for *The Industry*.

▣

OPERA IS AN ephemeral endeavor, a balancing act of all the art forms: poetry, design, dance, acting, drama, architecture, fashion, and music. This ephemerality is part of opera's allure, but it comes together all too rarely: one night out of 100 if you are lucky. Read on for the improbable, dizzying tale of how one of these singular operatic events came about. How in less than 10 years, one Angeleno went from opening his funky new music project in a tiny arts space in Atwater Village to occupying the director's seat of one of the most famous theaters in the world — and then how he risked it all to make Los Angeles the site of the operatic event of 2020.

▣

Yuval Sharon has directed at the biggest opera houses in Berlin and Vienna, but in the last few months, the 40-year-old Los Angeles resident has been mostly in Southern California preparing his latest piece for *The Industry*, the opera company he founded eight years ago.

During a recent afternoon rehearsal at a former nightclub in the West Adams neighborhood, I observed Sharon explain to a group of singers why they are walking around in a circle. "It's a zoetrope," he explained, "it goes around once, and each time it's like one flip-book." They are rehearsing Sharon's latest opus, *Sweet Land*, which he co-directed with Cannupa Hanska Luger. Described as "an opera that erases itself," the widely anticipated *Sweet Land* prioritizes collaboration and features Native American artists. The music, for example, was composed by Creative Capital artist Raven Chacon and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Du Yun, and the libretto was written by Aja Couchois Duncan and Douglas

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Kearney. Its premiere last month attracted the attention of the national media, which described it with words such as “mesmerizing” and a “masterpiece.”



The Industry, “Sweet Land” (2020). Photo by Casey Kringlen for The Industry.

In early 2012, I was at lunch with someone who is one of the pillars of the Southern California opera community. He mentioned casually: “You really have to check out the new thing by this guy Yuval Sharon. He’s a comer.” So a few weeks later, I schlepped up to Atwater Crossing to see *Crescent City*, which was billed as a “hyperopera.” The space was, to put it politely, modest. Despite covering performing arts in Los Angeles for over a decade, I had never been to it before.

It didn’t feel like going to the opera: no one was seated, everyone — including the performers — milled around these big, Red Grooms–like sculptures. “It was more an operatic happening,” I wrote at the time,

a gothic, if impenetrable southern tale that featured twins eating fried chicken and lines like “I took too much Viagra.” Yuval Sharon’s staging — more art installation, really — was visually raucous and always cheeky — even if it was rarely coherent. That said, the singers (many of them veterans of LA Opera productions) seemed to be having fun and the whole thing had the feel of a passion project.

Crescent City ran for three weeks that May and then was done. It didn't seem like it was going to change the world. The august magazine for which I wrote those lines cut them out of my column that ran the following month.

□

Sharon's next piece, about a year and a half later, started to draw the attention of critics and operagoers. In 2013, Sharon staged an adaptation of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* in Union Station. The 1972 novel is a dialogue between explorer Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan detailing a series of fantastic cities. Sharon suggests in his staging that the 55 fictional cities in the novel are no different from the many destinations to which one can travel from downtown Los Angeles — that for many operagoers at least, the notion of what lies at the end of the Gold Line or the Metrolink is as speculative as what an aging ruler knew of his vast kingdom. Drawing attention to the “unseen” city, in combination with the interactive, immersive format of the production, Sharon's *Invisible Cities*, like Calvino's, is a reminder that even Los Angeles is a city as personal as it is public, as imagined as it is real.

Despite the projection of Calvino's text on the walls of the Art Deco landmark, the opera was hard to follow — literally. Audience members trailed the performers all over the station. The orchestra played in the café, and ticket holders were given headphones to hear the music as they wandered, watching the singers and dancers (from L.A. Dance Project) perform. Those with headphones were encouraged to share with strangers in transit who otherwise had not anticipated witnessing an opera. It was quite a *coup de théâtre* — mounting a piece with 75 performers in an active environment during an evening commute.



The Industry, "Invisible Cities" (2013). Photo by Dana Ross for The Industry.

Sharon's next endeavor, *Hopscotch*, came in 2015. Named for the Julio Cortázar "choose your own adventure" novel *Rayuela* (1963), *Hopscotch* has since become Los Angeles mythology. It was, as it is simply known in L.A. parlance: "The Car Opera." Alex Ross, in a long feature in *The New Yorker*, called it "a combination of road trip, architecture tour, contemporary music festival, and waking dream." Boasting a million dollar budget, plus a huge cast and crew (including 24 cars), not to mention six different composers, *Hopscotch* was wild and head-spinning, but most of all, it was fun. Sharon worked with six librettists to whittle Cortázar's 155 chapters down to 24 and distill the complex plot into an Orpheus-like tale of one female puppeteer (Lucha, played by about 20 different performers) and her surreal romance with a motorcycle-riding scientist (Jameson). With *Hopscotch*, however, story was secondary to the ways in which the opera's structure asked audience members to see contemporary Los Angeles as a place that cannot be captured or even accurately evoked by traditional operatic forms. The city is too sprawling, containing too many different narratives.

In putting this massive collaboration together, Sharon did something special; he made it clear to the opera world that Los Angeles has its own style, one that both reflects and employs the city's immensity and diversity.

At the same time, the Los Angeles Philharmonic had been slowly getting into the opera business, doing concert performances at Disney Hall with fancy window dressing, courtesy of big-name collaborators such as architects Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid; and designers

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like the Rodarte sisters, Hussein Chalayan, and Azzedine Alaïa. Given the splash Sharon had made with *Hopscotch*, it was no surprise when that same year the Phil announced that he was joining them as their “artist-collaborator.”

Sharon’s three-year residency with LA Phil is key to understanding his growth as a director. He started in 2016 with smaller interactive and immersive pieces, like *Nimbus*, which took place in a Disney Hall stairwell; and then grew to mammoth proportions, culminating in 2017’s *War of the Worlds*, a reimagining of Orson Welles’s radio play from 1938, which starred Sigourney Weaver and took place simultaneously inside the concert hall and at other locations downtown. These projects were interesting, but they often seemed like variations on previous themes.

Where Sharon really came into his own at the Phil was finding discarded American operas from the recent past and reviving them. His mounting of California composer Lou Harrison’s sole opera *Young Caesar* was a landmark. Sharon took this opera, which premiered in Pasadena in 1971 (disastrously by all accounts), and made it feel like a local treasure. *Young Caesar* was musically ahead of its time, but not without flaws. Sharon helped prune the libretto and enhance the orchestrations. He then created a staging that both honored the progressive playfulness of its premiere and yet also pushed *Young Caesar* into our time — and hopefully beyond. There was only one performance, and it was magical. Thankfully, it was recorded for posterity.

Later in 2017, Sharon was named a MacArthur Fellow, and by this time, the big-money European opera world had taken notice. One early champion was Austrian conductor Franz Welser-Möst, who has led close to 100 new productions at the most prestigious opera houses and festivals in the world. He enlisted Sharon to collaborate on Leoš Janáček’s opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*. “When he told me the concept, I could not imagine how it could work,” Welser-Möst told me, “and it turned out to be a work of genius, one of the most moving things I’ve ever seen on an opera stage.” “But while many directors can have a strong vision,” Welser-Möst added, “Yuval, he knows how to follow through with it every step of the way. And that’s unusual.”

This partnership led to Vienna Staatsoper hiring Sharon to direct a new production of Peter Eötvös’s operatic adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. Next came a revival of the opera of *Lost Highway* in Frankfurt. It was in the middle of all of this activity that one of the plumiest assignments in opera suddenly fell into Sharon’s lap: directing a new production of *Lohengrin* for the Bayreuth Festival in Germany.

Lohengrin had already been scheduled to open in July 2018. Artists Neo Rauch and Rosa Loy had been working on sets for years, and Latvian actor/director Alvis Hermanis was the intended director. When he withdrew from the project in 2016, the Wagner family called Sharon with a kind of Mission Impossible: stage a new production of someone else’s designs, for someone else’s concept, for one of the most high-profile (and high-pressure)

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opening nights of the season, in less than a year, and in German. No wonder the Wagners called the guy who had staged an opera with moving cars.

Despite these challenges, Sharon delivered an impressive *Lohengrin*. The performance I attended was the most well received of any I have seen at Bayreuth (where booing is almost expected at curtain calls). His skill at helping major international singers in an old-fashioned, proscenium theater was as assured as his directing of young local artists at quirky, Southern California stages. He also smartly tilted the opera so that it made the female characters, Elsa and Ortrud, more prominent in the drama, a shrewd touch that managed to make the opera feel fresh — and somehow didn't ruffle the feathers of the very conservative Bayreuth Wagnerians.



“Lohengrin” (2018). Photograph by Enrico Nawrath.

Most opera success stories would end here: local director goes on to big major international triumph. We could tie everything up nicely by mentioning the fact that Wagner was what brought Sharon to Los Angeles in the first place, when he assisted German director Achim Freyer on his Ring Cycle in the late aughts. But Sharon's story keeps going. His real passion project — and his best production to date — was yet to come.

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In 2019, he staged a revival Meredith Monk's *Atlas* as the final piece for his LA Phil residency. Unseen for almost 30 years, Monk's sprawling, wordless opera — a loose retelling of the story of Alexandra David-Néel, a female French explorer in the 1920s — was ready for its close-up. *The New Yorker* raved, calling the performances “incandescent,” and *The New York Times* hailed Sharon's “lavishly glowing production.” It was a revelation, and three lucky audiences last summer saw the language of American opera rewritten in front of their eyes and ears. There were lots of cool design elements, including a giant turning orb designed by Es Devlin (the designer behind Kanye's, Beyoncé's, and Lady Gaga's touring spectaculars) through which the performers traveled, but the real magic was simply Monk's music and libretto, which employs nonverbal syllables and vocalese, melded with movement to tell a powerful story perfectly in sync with the themes of David-Néel's writings, which focus on Far Eastern spirituality and the idea of travel as a metaphor for inner growth and vision. By setting *Atlas* in Disney Hall, where the audience could see the audience surrounding the action, Sharon forced viewers to contemplate how Los Angeles itself is both local and global, like the orb in which the characters travel: a place where strangers connect, where linear histories and disparate origins are less important than a collective destination.



Los Angeles Philharmonic Association – “Atlas”

“Atlas” (2019). Photograph taken by Craig Mathew/Mathew Imaging at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, provided courtesy of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association.

What *Atlas* showed was that Sharon does not just direct operas, imposing fashionable concepts and ideas on to existing works. What he does, as well as any opera director

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today, is listen to what the operas say to us right now, what they can make us feel — and then he channels the voice inherent in the work and brings it to life on stage.

This approach made the 2020 premiere of *Sweet Land* such an event. What would the man whom the Gray Lady has called “opera’s disrupter in residence” disrupt next? Perhaps the very idea of Los Angeles itself.

If his previous projects asked participants to experience Los Angeles in new ways, *Sweet Land* discomfits the very privilege of getting to do so, focusing on Southern California’s history of settler colonialism. Set in the newly christened Los Angeles Historic State Park — on the site of a former Southern Pacific depot that was considered the “Ellis Island” of Southern California — *Sweet Land* is an outdoor, pop-up performance featuring a cast and crew of over 100. Like *Hopscotch*, it comprises different “tracks,” one titled “Feast,” the other titled “Train.” Both are captivating. “Train” is more impressionistic, “Feast” more narrative. However, the final scene of *Sweet Land*, which is the same regardless of which path you choose, is simply ravishing. When it was over, I canceled my evening plans and stayed for the second performance of the night both to see it again and to experience both tracks. *Sweet Land* is The Industry’s first solo produced work since *Hopscotch*, and it is as ambitious and political in content as in its multi-tracked form.

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Back at the West Adams rehearsal, I watch Sharon move the handful of singers around in a circle, but I have no idea what the story is. At a break, he tells me a little about the “plot” and shows me a mock-up of the sets, which only makes me feel that I understand even less. When break is over, Sharon claps his hand together and calls out, “Work Song!” The performers all move back into a circle and continue to make strange, interesting sounds. It feels like no other opera rehearsal, but what I am watching is compelling. I want to see more. Sharon’s real talent just might be making things that don’t look or sound like operas feel deeply operatic.

When I sit down on the bleachers at the Los Angeles State Historic Park two weeks later, I once again don’t feel like I am at an opera. When the early performance starts just before sunset, one musician rattles a ring of wrenches in his mouth and another plays a cymbal — the sounds I hear do not sound like opera either. Yet just over an hour later, in these same bleachers, I witness one of the most stunning and operatic scenes I have witnessed. Ultimately, *Sweet Land* is not just an opera that erases itself, but it is also an opera about the erasure of history — a parable that abstractly represents the violent history of colonization in Los Angeles and the plight of indigenous peoples in the United States.

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How did Sharon pull these projects off? I asked him point blank over coffee last December: What was one thing to which he could point that made The Industry succeed, both artistically and with audiences, when so many other Los Angeles troupes had failed over the past few decades? Unlike many maestros or magicians, who distract or dissemble when asked about their secrets, Sharon answered candidly that he tried to differentiate The Industry from other companies by letting work linger for longer than a mere weekend. “From *Crescent City* onward,” he said, “I’ve always said there’s going to be a minimum of a three-week run. I think in many ways it’s the main key to our success, even though it makes it so much more expensive, that extra time allows for people find you. If you don’t have three weeks, the difficult thing is you’re only talking to the people who already know about what you’re doing.”

The tragedy of *Sweet Land* is that due to COVID-19, Sharon’s crucial third weekend had to be canceled. “Between weekend one and weekend two, we started to think about how to let people know that the park was safe,” Sharon recounted after the final performance: “That went well, people felt safe since it was only 200 people and outside. People were planning to come back.”

After the good reviews, a fourth weekend was added, but as the third weekend approached, Sharon describes the mood as “this roller-coaster — hour by hour, it was shifting, and then Thursday, when the governor said no gatherings over 250 people, and other organizations were all shutting, we realized we couldn’t be some lone holdout. That was it.”

Luckily, there was a plan to film the final performance, but could they move it up in time to accommodate newly interested audiences and current disappointed ticket holders? “We had to figure out a solution — it was a scramble. We talked to the cast and crew about wanting to film as a way to preserve it. We said can be surgical and we can be safe. Most everyone signed on. We ran it twice,” he said with a sigh. They filmed it without an audience: “It was social distancing and opera — which are very strange bedfellows.”

Sweet Land was recorded by a film crew and will be able to be experienced in its entirety in this new form. Sharon is still processing just how all this will affect his career, The Industry, and opera as an art form. “Everything we do is a risk. This was a hire-wire act in a way we hadn’t done before,” he laughs. “It was agonizing but yet inspiring to see it come together.”

This ending is painful, but unsurprising. To reiterate, opera is ephemeral. The word “ephemeral” comes from the Greek *ephemeros*, meaning “lasting only one day.” *Sweet Land* only lasted five nights, but it will live on. “I only realized at the end of the process,” Sharon adds as we wrap up our last interviews, “this piece is really about survival.” He is right.

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Thanks to the same viral force that closed *Sweet Land*, there is no live opera in any of the grand theaters around the world right now. There is only streaming. Luckily, here is [Sweet Land](#).

▣

James C. Taylor is the Southern California correspondent for OperaMagazine and a frequent contributor to the Los Angeles Times, The Economist, New Jersey Star-Ledger, and other publications. He was twice nominated for a Los Angeles Press Club Award for his radio programs about the performing arts in L.A.

LiveDesign | Sweet Land, Home To Ghostly Projections Of Another Time

<https://www.livedesignonline.com/theatre/sweet-land-home-to-ghostly-projections-another-time>

by [Meghan Perkins](#)

Apr 5, 2020 11:14pm



Neil Matsumoto,

Independent, artist-driven company, [The Industry](#), recently immersed its audience in a singular historical fact: History is fragmented. Perspectives and opinions differ; details hidden or embellished; certain voices censored or even silenced. The Industry advertises its production of *Sweet Land* as “an opera that erases itself.” The Arrivals come to shore and meet another civilization, the Hosts, and from there, the story splinters. Guided through the L.A. State Historic Park, the audience members were separated into diverging tracks across the space to experience different perspectives of history.

Directed by Cannupa Hanska Luger and Yuval Sharon, *Sweet Land* featured a diverse creative team, including projection designer [Hana S. Kim](#), lighting designer [Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew](#), scenic designers [Tanya Orellana](#) and [Carlo Maghirang](#), and sound designer [Jody Elff](#). “The Industry wanted to have a team of diverse people,” explains Kim, “who could bring more of a first-hand experience in terms of American myth and the American tale of immigrants.”

From the beginning, the team’s design directive was to craft an opera that asks questions without providing any answers. “We had to embrace the didactic direction and leave it open for

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interpretation. To a degree, we had to embrace the chaos and confusion of the unanswered question, ‘What is America?’” says Kim. “We did our best to be sensitive to the topic, but I do think there is no way to have this conversation in a completely politically correct way. I think focusing on the question rather than the answer was a way for us to not be bogged down by the sensitivity.”



Projections at Black Box One

Over the course of the opera, the video design continually faded into evermore indistinct representations of history. “The projections are almost like ghosts themselves,” notes the designer. “The video design is not solid. The projections don’t guide the story arc, but they do act as a unifying force. The video opens and ends the story but does not get into the specifics of the story. The audience only sees projections when the whole of them are together, not during their separate tracks.”

Much like *Sweet Land*’s audience, the projection design was scattered throughout the park. The show began in Black Box One, where the ghostly projections were displayed on a conventional scrim surface, laying the fabric that would be woven into two different stories. From there, the audience was split between two scenes, *The Feast* and *The Train*, neither of which featured projections. Afterwards, the two groups of audience members met again at *The Crossroads*, an almost mythical landscape. “In a very mystical and ethereal way, we projected onto water at *The Crossroads*,” says Kim. “It’s a very abstract piece with a poetic touch, almost like a video and sound installation.” The audience members then left *The Crossroads* to witness their remaining story track,

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before ending their evening at the Boneyard for the final projections, where were cast across the landscape of L.A. State Historic Park.

The video at Black Box One opened with a projected curtain decorated with the symbol of the Tongva tribe of Native American people, “but in a very kitschy way,” adds Kim. “We were playing with this notion of a very stereotypical way of thinking of Native American culture. Out of all three video components, the first one needed to be the most graphic and the most visible in as artificial way as possible. So I tried to really play off the pattern of the symbol from my research and have a little bit of a twist. From there, it morphs into something a little more abstract toward the end.”



Water projections at The Crossroads

The water projections at The Crossroads were inspired by the legend of the Sky Woman, a creation story from one of the First Nations. In the story, a woman falls from the sky, and to save her, turtles and other natural elements form land beneath her. “In the video, I played with deep time, like conventional time versus universal time. There’s a train motif to represent the push of civilization, and this directional movement going back and forth in time, morphing the effects of time. That middle ground is where the myth meets contemporary time. The sky woman actually falls upward, while herd animals, who were here before humans, crash with the train, before morphing into humans. The main idea of the video is that it is a contemplation of time, mixing what has happened so far and then seeing how contemporary culture interacts with the myth.”

The final scene took place at the “Wasteland” or “Boneyard” of the park, where Kim projected onto the North Broadway Bridge seen from the bleachers, the back of a billboard on the nearby freeway, and other sculptural elements within the trash pit. “These people are singing arias parts of the

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not-so-pleasant American immigrant history, and their language is texted throughout the city. Here, we really wanted to see the text of the aria manifesting themselves in ghostlike fashion but popping up everywhere you didn't expect them to be. On opening night, it was quite interesting to see how people were surprised by this element because it was so unexpected and popped up in places that you would have not imagined. The vista of the city and the Boneyard creates a very interesting tension that you see something projected onto the bridge that's so far away, versus the projections that are right in front of you."



Projections onto North Broadway Bridge

Due to the outdoor nature of the production, Kim had to install the projectors in very unusual places. "The video design was really not possible without the sponsorship from **Panasonic**. We really needed the projectors to be punchy but at the same time compact and easy to move around. For that purpose, the 7K laser projectors were perfect." Two Panasonic PT-RZ770 projectors covered the plastic sheet and wood panels at the Black Box, while another two covered the water projections at The Crossroads. Meanwhile, a Panasonic PT-RZ21KU, rigged to a scissor lift, moved up and down throughout the show, displaying projections onto both the scrim at Black Box and the billboard at the Boneyard. "We could not have done that with a lamp projector because it would not be able to handle that kind of movement." Six Panasonic PT-RZ12KU projectors covered approximately 300' of the North Broadway Bridge. "Ultimately, we were putting projectors on top of offices constructed of container boxes, so we had to keep them as light as possible. The Panasonic

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laser projectors were perfect. While we do have weather coverings, they are still open to the outdoor air, and I was very impressed with their durability.”

With such a dispersed production, Kim could not be at every station. “The biggest challenge was really the scale of it all, so having such a solid, competent team really helped because we were able to work on different things concurrently,” the designer concludes. “Coordinating with other departments and navigating the audience traffic was a challenge, but it was overcome by working with really good people.”

The Industry’s *Sweet Land* is available online. Order the video streaming version of *Sweet Land* at stream.sweetlandopera.com.

Share:

LiveDesign | Two Different Stories, Two Different Sets In Sweet Land

<https://www.livedesignonline.com/theatre/two-different-stories-two-different-sets-sweet-land>

by Meghan Perkins
Apr 13, 2020 12:29pm



Casey Kringlen for The Industry, The Feast scene in Sweet Land

Worlds converge and stories diverge in **The Industry's** recent opera, *Sweet Land*, where audience members were separated into different story tracks across L.A. State Historic Park. Directed by Cannupa Hanska Luger and Yuval Sharon, *Sweet Land* featured a diverse creative team, including scenic designers **Tanya Orellana** and **Carlo Maghirang**, projection designer **Hana S. Kim**, lighting designer **Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew**, and sound designer **Jody Elff**. Read about the **ghostly projections**.

"There are two of almost every position—two directors, two composers, two librettists, two costume designers, and two set designers," states Orellana.

"It was natural that they also employ two contrasting scenic designers to visually portray the diverging plotlines," adds Maghirang.

From the beginning, the team designed the production as a collective group. "There was an incredible amount of fluidity across the design elements during the 'what if' phase," notes Orellana. "I think it works a lot like a conversation, where everyone is discussing the same topic but from their

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individual perspective...I think all the early work of collective conversation shows in how the experience has so many diverging perspectives and yet still feels like they all dance together.”



The Journey

The resulting design featured a dispersed variety of scenes that led audience members on a physical and introspective journey. “The experience begins at a ‘theater,’ called ‘Contact,’ that is meant to resemble both an opera house as well as a barge, bringing the audience as part of the ‘Arrivals’ onto *Sweet Land*. From here, the ‘Hosts’ invite the audience of 200 through the experience by splitting them in half, through a series of winding Tunnels, where we begin to see vignettes of the stories we are about to experience,” describes Maghirang. The audience then diverged into the Feast, designed by Orellana, or Train, designed by Maghirang, to experience different genesis stories. Next, the audience converged at The Crossroads for a video and audio art installation. The audience split again to Feast II and Train II, but this time, the stories change. The audience then journeyed through the Tunnels to their final destination, the theater, where Kim cast projections onto the surrounding landscape and North Broadway Bridge.

“Unless they come back for another show, they can only learn about the two other spaces through conversation with audience members from the other track,” explains Orellana. “I like the idea that you wonder what the other members are experiencing but have to accept that your experience of the show will be different than theirs.”

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The Tunnels

The stories of Feast and Train began in the Tunnels. “As they moved from the theater to either Feast or Train, they watched half of the audience be led through a track they would not experience,” describes Orellana. “The Feast tunnel was inspired by curing/drying houses to begin telling the story of the land and harvesting. The Train tunnels were inspired by mining shafts to begin asking the question: What has been the historical human cost of the Western pursuit of technology?”



The Feast

The timeline of Feast was non-specific, a “moment caught somewhere between past and present,” notes Orellana, who created a circular set with natural materials and repeating patterns to invoke that feeling. “Often, people imagine that the future is sterile and white, clinical and plastic. But I am interested in imagining a future that embraces nature, the handmade, bright, beautiful colors, and the ability to share space amongst different groups. The Feast set wanted to create a space where we could examine and break open the dominant narrative of how the United States was founded and how that has affected everything following. We kept a lot of the wood raw and with as few cuts as

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possible so that it can later be donated to other companies. While these sets are large, we also want the material to have many lives after the production is done.”

The audience’s relationship changed from Feast I to Feast II. First, the audience entered an intimate space with warm lighting where the Hosts and Arrivals shared the ritual of breaking bread for the first time. When violence erupted, the space transformed into an arena, and the audience escaped to The Crossroads. “When they return, the space is no longer a place of sharing. The once colorful food is now replaced by buffet trays. Food has gone from an experience of sharing to a solitary one. The warm lighting has been replaced by sterile, clinical tubing, and the audience is no longer participating but completely focused on the center staging. The natural world is not gone from the space but is now in the background, partially erased by the blinding white light. There is a violence to that erasure. Culture has been taken away, and history has been redacted,” explains Orellana.



The Train

“Tanya and I fell naturally into which stories we wanted to take part in, and personally, I immediately felt connected to the ‘Train’ storyline, dealing with the mythology of Manifest Destiny, American expansion into the West, and consequently, more Native land, and the creation/expansion of the railroads on the backs of black and Chinese bodies,” Maghirang clarifies. “As an immigrant myself, I wanted to explore visually the myths surrounding meritocracy— that one could carve out a living by working hard in a country that promises success, only to find out that it is on a moving and unattainable target, and particularly that it is built at the expense of another culture.”

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This illusion of progress led Maghirang to research optical illusion machines, particularly the mechanism of the zoetrope. “Defined as a ‘device that produces the illusion of motion from a rapid succession of static pictures,’ the directing team and I were immediately drawn to its potential for staging,” he recalls. The team designed a circular structure, locating it near the neighboring railway, so that the sound of the passing train integrated with the performance and sonic landscape. “We created a space that had panels on a track that rotated around the audience, separating the audience (located inside the structure) from the performers (located at the perimeter around the audience), with the orchestra in a central gazebo. The machine is designed to be operated manually, pushing the panels around the audience, the labor of creating the motion being integrated into the performance.”

The mechanism of the zoetrope emulated the sensation of being inside a train car, “looking out of windows as if the railroad itself was being created as you looked out from your seat,” notes Maghirang. “The opera performers would appear and disappear from behind these kinetic panels, and sometimes singing through the slits in between, much like how one would view a zoetrope. The audience is seated on swivel stools in the middle, so that they may control their vantage point, given that the performers would often appear from behind them at any given moment. The overall effect is disorienting and manic, taking cue from the composition of the music in this particular storyline, and even the sound of operating the mechanism coincidentally created the sound of a moving train.”

Since *Train*’s story revolved around the labor and cost of Western expansion, the creative team left the lumber exposed, to make the set as authentic as possible. “The mechanism is clearly visible, to feel the human cost of creating this monument,” says Maghirang. “We abandoned plans to mask and paint, and what was left was a structure that was unapologetically oppressive that was in stark contrast to the landscape.”

Overall, Orellana felt challenged to make certain she “met the artistry of all the incredible collaborators at the table,” she says. “As a set designer, I feel that it is a gift to be able to hold someone else’s story, and I always want to do it in a meaningful way. In general, it is important to me to not be nostalgic about the past. While I honor history, I do not believe in having visual aesthetics that glorify time periods that have been historically non-inclusive. For me, designing *Sweet Land* was about carving a place for my visual perspective and contributing to the ongoing conversation.”

“I am eternally grateful to Yuval Sharon and The Industry for inviting me to their table, and to the numerous collaborators involved for sharing their immense talents and stories for us to take part in,” Maghirang concludes. “A special thanks to my technical director Mateo Rudich, and his associates Cole Castine and Josh Esquivel, without whom *Train* would not be possible. The generosity of the team’s hearts and minds is what made *Sweet Land* such an incredible journey. Also, thank you to Los Angeles State Historic Park and **Anawalt Lumber**, who sponsored the production by providing all the lumber for this massive installation.”

The Industry’s *Sweet Land* is available online. Order the video streaming version of *Sweet Land* at stream.sweetlandopera.com.

Los Angeles Times | Enjoy weekend culture while social distancing: Terrence McNally, LACO, Michelangelo

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-03-28/coronavirus-what-to-watch-online>



“Sweet Land” cast member Kelci Hahn before a performance at Los Angeles State Historic Park, outside downtown L.A. (Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times)

By [MATT COOPER](#) LISTINGS COORDINATOR

MARCH 28, 2020 6:30 AM

For a little culture during your home quarantine, we'll be offering daily recommendations of streaming concerts, online musicals, virtual art exhibitions and more. Here are seven picks for Saturday and Sunday; all times Pacific:

[...]

“Sweet Land”

Filmed at Los Angeles State Historic Park before production [ended mid-run](#) this month because of the coronavirus outbreak, this [much-lauded work](#) from Yuval Sharon's experimental opera company [the Industry](#) challenges the traditional narrative of the founding of America. Available to stream beginning 9 a.m. Sunday. Look for a review of the streamed show Monday from Times critic Mark Swed and compare notes. \$14.99. theindustryla.org

I Care If You Listen | This week: live streamed concerts (March 30, 2020 – April 5, 2020)

SAM REISING on March 30, 2020 at 6:00 am

[...]

SWEET LAND: A NEW OPERA BY THE INDUSTRY



Du Yun

The Industry is offering a stream of *Sweet Land* by Raven Chacon and Du Yun beginning March 29. With cameras as the only audience, the ensemble came together for one final performance to preserve a new work. A modest on-demand fee will help The Industry survive this emergency, by making up lost box office income and allowing us to fully pay the artists and crew.

...: [Website](#)

[..]

DO YOU HAVE AN UPCOMING LIVE STREAM?

Let us know by emailing us at hello@icareifyoulisten.com.

The New York Times | The Coronavirus Hasn't Slowed Classical Music

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/arts/music/classical-music-streaming-coronavirus.htm>

!

As closures give way to a deluge of live streams, performances have never been more accessible.



By **Joshua Barone** March 31, 2020 A classical music critic in New York City could conceivably never spend an evening at home.

Carnegie Hall presents the world's leading artists virtually every night during its season; Lincoln Center's theaters are almost never dark. Then there are the dozens of smaller venues scattered throughout town. Planning a concert-going calendar, then, has always been a balancing act, full of disappointment that you can't be in multiple places at once.

Then came the coronavirus pandemic, which caused performances to grind to a halt earlier this month.

I haven't had the heart to delete events in my own calendar, even though in the coming week there's no chance I'll see the premiere of a Kate Soper opera in Montclair, N.J., or hear Mitsuko Uchida play Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations at Carnegie.

But I also haven't had the time.

In-person performances have been replaced by a deluge of digital ones — live streams and recently unlocked archive recordings — that have made for a calendar hardly less busy than before concert halls closed. It's enough to keep a critic happily overwhelmed, yet also wondering whether the industry is making a mistake by giving away so much for free.

The live streams began immediately, with production values ranging from tinny iPhone videos to cinema-ready sophistication. On March 12, the day New York theaters shuttered, the pianist Igor Levit gave a lo-fi performance from his living room, while the Berlin Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra played to empty halls and audiences at home. (In retrospect, these groups of 100 or so musicians should probably have stayed as far apart as the rest of us.)

Since then, a day hasn't gone by without something to stream. In the past week alone, I've been able to watch older performances I missed; ones I had hoped to travel for this spring; ones that would otherwise seem unfathomable, like the pianist Maria João Pires coming out of retirement. If anything, I'm taking in more music than before; the only difference is that now I *can* be in multiple places — or at least multiple browser tabs — at once.

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Image



The photographer Nathan Bajar's girlfriend, left, and cousin streaming a performance.

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Credit...

Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

Many of these videos have had more charm than a typical classical concert, with banter, a casual dress code and imperfect production. Before a scorching streamed performance of Frederic Rzewski's "[The People United Will Never Be Defeated!](#)" for the 92nd Street Y — cut short because, hey, the technology isn't reliable — the pianist Conrad Tao worked through his feelings about the medium, talking to the camera in his apartment like a confessional vlogger.

On Monday, the publisher Boosey & Hawkes hosted [a live score-reading of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring"](#) on YouTube; alongside the video was a candid chat that included artists like the composer David T. Little and the conductors Teddy Abrams, Christopher Rountree and Marin Alsop. (Ms. Alsop was openly, hilariously critical of the often slow tempos in the chosen recording, Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra.)

In breaks from live streams, you can watch archived films. The Industry, an experimental Los Angeles opera company, has made "Sweet Land," whose run was cut short by the closures, [available on Vimeo](#) for the more-than-worth-it cost of \$14.99. (This is one of the few organizations putting a price tag on their work.)

Ideas from The Times on what to read, cook, watch, play and listen to while staying safe **At Home**.



Once you see how many operas are available online, your free time quickly evaporates. Beth Morrison Projects is [putting one on its website every week](#); right now, you can watch Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek's "Song From the Uproar." (Another Mazzoli-Vavrek piece, "[Breaking the Waves](#)."

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is streaming on SoundCloud.) [Rai, the Italian public broadcaster](#), is playing Gyorgy Kurtag's [widely hailed "Fin de Partie,"](#) filmed during its premiere run in Milan in 2018.

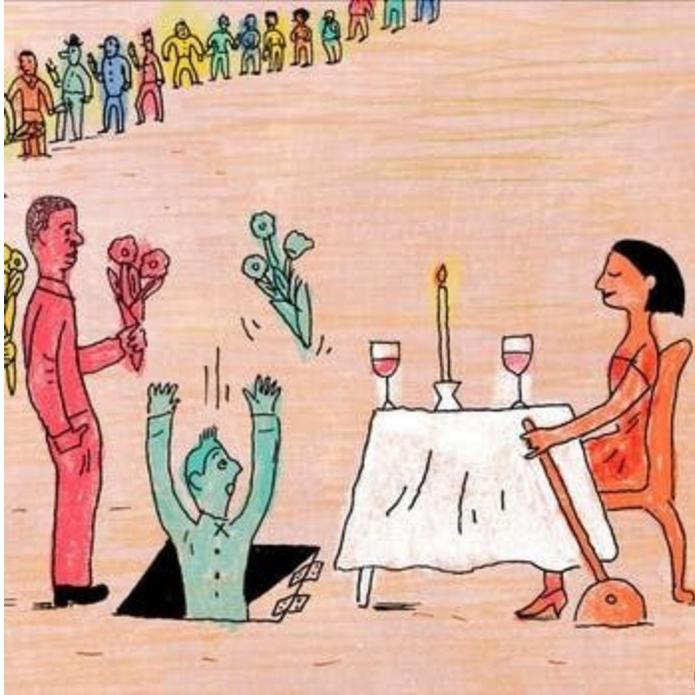
And a production of Beethoven's "Fidelio" at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, originally planned for this month but then canceled, [was thankfully recorded](#). The direction, by the actor Christoph Waltz, may be a bit chilly; but the sculptural set, by the architects Barkow Leibinger, is a subtle and mesmerizing reflection of the music, propulsive under the baton of Manfred Honeck.

Editors' Picks



He Made Brooklyn Comedy a Scene. But His Life Took a Different Turn.

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Confessions of a Former Serial Dater



The Lesson We Are Learning From Zoom



Image



A screenshot of the broadcast of Beethoven's "Fidelio" from the Theater an der Wien in Vienna. Last weekend, live streams escalated to marathons. The cellist Jan Vogler organized a 24-hour event called [Music Never Sleeps NYC](#), which coincided with Deutsche Grammophon's [globe-trotting relay of solo performances](#) for Piano Day. Never have I felt so productive spending hours on YouTube.

Among the Piano Day artists were Ms. Pires, out of retirement for an elegant and lucid reading of Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata; and Daniil Trifonov, both eerie and endearing in a mask and gloves as he introduced himself from the Dominican Republic with a selfie video. Music Never Sleeps was a feel-good miracle of coordination and collaboration across musical forms and genres. When it overlapped, at 7 p.m. Eastern time, with a moment for New Yorkers to applaud out their

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windows for those on the front lines of the pandemic, the conductor David Robertson and the pianist Orli Shaham cleverly offered Steve Reich's "Clapping Music." Later, Inon Barnatan gave an [elegant, at times sublime performance](#) of Schubert's Piano Sonata in B flat that I hope to one day hear in person.

The two marathons were studies in contrast. Music Never Sleeps was a soft fund-raiser — not quite a telethon, but presented with the suggestion that fans donate to the [NYC Covid-19 Response & Impact Fund](#) and the [Local 802 Musicians' Emergency Relief Fund](#). Piano Day, however, was simply a celebration of top-shelf talent: artists who could — and have — sold out Carnegie, playing here at no cost to viewers.



Image



The 24-hour event Music Never Sleeps NYC was streamed on Facebook and YouTube.

Credit...

Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

Like almost every other live stream of the past month, Deutsche Grammophon's felt dangerously reminiscent of the internet's early days, when prestige journalism — including The New York Times — was available for free. Publishers later regretted not monetizing their work from the start; I hope the classical music industry doesn't end up in the same position.

Freelancers, whose incomes depend on live performance, are in crisis as even summer festivals begin to announce their cancellations. The New York Philharmonic [is anticipating a loss of \\$10 million](#) in revenue because of its closure; the Met Opera, [up to \\$60 million](#).

And yet these are the same artists and organizations giving away their music for free. The Philharmonic launched a website of archived performances, [NY Phil Plays On](#), and is broadcasting older concerts on Facebook every Thursday. The Met is digging into its collection of high-definition movie theater transmissions for [nightly streams](#). It's heartening to witness, and the exposure may be helpful, but it doesn't even begin to cover lost revenue.

So if you like what you hear, donate. Think of the industry as a giant Central Park busker, happy to play but leaving that guitar case open and ready for tips.

The world of classical music has never been more accessible. Rarely, though, has it ever been so endangered. And it's up to all of us to decide just how much it's worth.

Joshua Barone is a senior staff editor on the Culture Desk, where he writes about classical music and other fields including dance, theater and visual art and architecture.

San Francisco Classical Voice | In the Season of the Virus, the Online Concert Comes of Age

<https://www.sfcv.org/article/in-the-season-of-the-virus-the-online-concert-comes-of-age>

BY **PETER FEHER**

March 31, 2020

For the latest updates and additions, click [here](#).



In the past few weeks, music has moved online. Not that it wasn't there before. But as concerts were canceled — and continue to be canceled — in an effort to “flatten the curve” and curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, musicians and ensembles have looked online for that connection we normally associate with live audiences. Simply put, there's a lot of free music to listen to right now. That's not to forget that there are recordings you can buy and artists to support — and *San Francisco Classical Voice* is **reviewing the latest releases** and keeping you in touch with **the news from arts organizations**. But there's also an unprecedented amount of music to stream online, unconventionally. Here, *SFCV* offers a comprehensive guide to streaming music from the Bay Area and Los Angeles, music we'd be covering live any other time:

[...]

If you couldn't make it to L.A. for the world-premiere performances, you can still catch The Industry's innovative new opera *Sweet Land* online. The company is streaming the full two-hour work [here](#); it's not free, but what you pay will support the artists and crew.

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A scene from *Sweet Land* | Credit: Casey Kringlen for The Industry

[...]

Peter Feher is an editor at SFCV. He can be reached at peter@sfcv.org.

I Care If You Listen | The Industry's Immersive Opera Sweet Land Mythologizes Itself

<https://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2020/04/the-industry-immersive-opera-sweet-land-mythologizes-itself/>



LANA NORRIS on April 28, 2020 at 6:00 am

Sweet Land was originally an immersive “historical pageant” opera presented in Los Angeles, March 2020, ready to take its place in *The Industry's* pantheon of acclaimed productions. When *Sweet Land's* audience arrived at Los Angeles State Historic Park, they were collectively welcomed and then split into two tracks for divergent experiences of America's indigenous Hosts and foreign Arrivals. Engaging both tracks required two separate visits, though after encountering the head-spinning and sensually luxurious piece, the L.A. Times' Mark Swed did not recommend going twice in one day.

Then COVID-19 cancelled *Sweet Land's* sold-out run. The creative team quickly adapted the opera's tracks into *individual opera films*, in which viewers are guided by Coyotes (*Micaela Tobin* and *Carmina Escobar*) between the original opera set and various park locations. Film as an artistic medium focuses *Sweet Land* in a way that was never intended: the experiences can be paused or rewound at will. I promised myself I would let the films play uninterrupted to imitate a live viewing, but just a few minutes in, I instinctively stopped the video to catch a subtitle and realized this effort was foolish. Even an opera as immersive as this now seems traditional—dare I say quaint—in that we traditionally assembled in close physical proximity.

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The opera presents an abstract exploration of human relations on Turtle Island (North America), including the United States' construction of identity. In both tracks, small parties of the groups conflict after initial contact, ending in indigenous destruction that is remembered by a surviving warrior woman. The "Feast" track, noting hospitality as a social fulcrum, depicts indigenous Hosts feeding famished cowboy-styled Arrivals. The Arrivals take without thanks, refusing any indigenous respect or reciprocity and explicitly demanding to split the earth open. The Hosts initially drive the Arrivals away, but they are unable to withstand violent greed; we learn the land has been renamed "Sweet" and experience the indigenous fate through a native warrior's memories ([Kelci Hahn](#)). Arrivals continue their westward "Train" expansion later in history, with weaponized religion and warrior Bow's bitter memorial ([Lindsay Patterson Abdou](#)) sung over relentless percussion.

Turtle Island (North America) is the true star. It is the suffering host of the violent drama that unfolds between its native kin, foreign colonizers, and immigrants to the United States. The film's opening moments offer a drone shot of daytime Los Angeles, bathed in light with the glittering city skyline and busy highways, before zooming into its green landscape. We meet the Coyote guides there, and we finish the film there with wildlife and a small child in the shadows of detritus and abandoned green space. Supertitled singers tell of a massacre by greedy white colonizers who have also raped the land: "The land is unresponsive... her legs tightly closed."



Sweet Land—Photo by Casey Kringlen for *The Industry*

Between *Sweet Land*'s first and final moments of acapella voices is orchestration that manages to hide in plain sight. The production's pivot to film transformed the music into a film score, and it is perfectly suited: cinematic, punctuated, and fleeting. [Du Yun](#), a Chinese-born immigrant, and [Raven Chacon](#) of Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation co-composed music that weaves tight notation with urgent improvisational interludes. The human voice is the featured instrument: stratospheric soprano and countertenor, multi-pitched chanting, hymnodic, and distorted articulation curve through an orchestral

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landscape of extreme timbres and movement. Rhythm unfurls and drives but, like the human behavior, rarely locks into a groove.

The music is cohesive, but Du Yun and Chacon reinforce [Aja Couchois Duncan](#) and [Douglas Kearney's](#) libretto: the way forward is not cultural domination or dilution but co-existence. Madrigals, swing, cante jondo, "oriental music," Motown, brass band, and Americana are a few of the discrete, ironic styles used to characterize or comment on the aggressive tale. Minimal electronics are deployed for the ceremonial dancer; the Host's defense is accompanied by complicated modern harmony, rhythm, and timbre. There is indeed a clash of old and new, but it is the Arrivals who are regressive, and their behavior is as predictable as their harmonic progressions.

Co-directors [Yuval Sharon](#) and [Cannupa Hanska Luger](#), discussing mythmaking in the program notes, say that *Sweet Land* lives in "that indeterminate space between the concrete and the abstract," which is neither comfortable nor wholly unified. Since social situations are complicated, we must ask how we can see ourselves as part of and accountable for all sides.



Sweet Land—Photo by Casey Kringlen for *The Industry*

It is a question and tension which sits as resolutely in music industry values and audience relationships as it does in judgement of history. Both versions of *Sweet Land* are visually fantastic and offer different accessibility options or barriers. Both offer prismatic, rainbow costumes. In addition to rich visual and movement textures, the original immersive experience offered outdoor smells and an orchestration that includes percussive vibrations accessible for D/deaf audiences.

One of the notable changes in the film translation—perhaps *the* notable improvement—is the fully sub- or supertitled libretto. The text was difficult to catch even with a pause button and a 41-page digital program at hand. I imagine the original production was fragmentary to a hearing person, limited and challenging for a D/deaf or hearing-impaired attendee, and nigh impossible to follow for someone

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with visual impairment. Film also allowed for fleeting but proper recognition of the musicians' contributions, as "Train" provided closeups of the irreplaceable and demanding percussion work.

Sweet Land explicitly offers an uncomfortable, incomplete, and at times incomprehensible hospitality. If, however, its goal was wondrous physicality juxtaposed with severe abstraction, then *Sweet Land* succeeds in both forms, finding its zenith in the provocative line, "All you've seen, what you remember doesn't matter." It was originally sung by the colonial character Jimmy Gin to wage war on the indigenous people, and the line twists into a poignant stamp of the opera's own legacy. Whether in memories of the live experience or in *Sweet Land's* self-editing film, it seems unavoidable that this opera mythologizes itself.

Wall Street Journal | The Staying Inside Guide: Outdoor Performances for Indoor Times

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-staying-inside-guide-outdoor-performances-for-indoor-times-11588105770>

Nature provides the ideal backdrop for these operas that you can enjoy even during lockdown.



A still from the 'Feast' section of 'Sweet Land'

PHOTO: THE INDUSTRY

By Heidi Waleson

April 28, 2020 4:29 pm ET

- SAVE
- PRINT
- TEXT

With the opera house off-limits and outdoor access limited, now's the moment for online events that successfully combine the two. In March, the Industry, the boundary-breaking Los Angeles opera

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company, was presenting “Sweet Land” in Los Angeles State Historic Park when pandemic precautions forced the cancellation of half of the run. Fortunately, [a video, available on demand](#), permits a much larger audience to at least approximate the experience of attending this remarkable work; the \$14.99 charge helps the Industry weather the loss of its performances,

I saw [“Sweet Land” live on March 7](#), and while the video can’t fully capture its visceral impact—the piece seemed to physically conjure the blood-soaked history of colonialism out of the land you were standing on—you can still get the idea. There are even a few pluses. The three-camera setup, with close-ups of individual characters, helps clarify the action in some of the more layered sections. Viewers can also take in both of the opera’s tracks: “Feast” (depicting Thanksgiving from the perspective of the conquered) and “Train” (doing the same for Manifest Destiny), which played simultaneously in the live version. Each video runs about an hour, and the double exposure to their common material, in addition to the scenes unique to each, deepens the experience and amplifies the raw, passionate violence of the tale, as the narrative of the Hosts is ruthlessly erased by that of the Arrivals.

Benjamin Britten’s “Peter Grimes” is inextricably linked with its setting, an isolated fishing village on the Suffolk coast. In 2013, to celebrate the composer’s centennial, the Aldeburgh Festival staged the opera on the beach. In the film of that production—available on [MarqueeTV](#), which has free trial offers, as well as on [Medici.tv](#)—you feel as though you are there, especially since the sounds of the sea and the waves breaking over the pebbled beach are audible in the interstices of Britten’s sea-inspired music. The set, hugging the water’s edge, is a ramshackle-looking assemblage of platforms and boats; the storm clouds, the wind, and the lights against the gathering darkness intensify the opera’s portrait of a community huddling fearfully against the elements and turning on the presumed evildoer, the fisherman Peter Grimes.



Alan Oke as the title character in 'Peter Grimes'

PHOTO: ROBERT WORKMAN/BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

Director Tim Albery's concept updates the opera to 1945, the year of its premiere, from the mid-19th-century original setting, and hints of the war add an extra tinge of menace. The musical performance, conducted by Stuart Bedford, is excellent. You would never know that the orchestra was pre-recorded, and the superb cast stars Alan Oke, beleaguered and desperate in the title role, and Giselle Allen as a touching Ellen Orford. The supporting singers deftly portray the complex village society (the busybody, the quack, the alcoholic preacher, the good-time girls) and the fine chorus is terrifying when its members, wielding flashlights and homemade weapons, coalesce into a lynch mob in Act III.

Outdoor venues define some summer opera festivals; one example is the Aix-en-Provence Festival's airy Théâtre de l'Archevêché, the courtyard of a former archbishop's palace. The 2020 Festival has been canceled, but several operas from past seasons are available on demand through the website. Simon McBurney's riveting 2017 production of [Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress"](#) can be seen through July 10.

It boasts a splendid cast of young Americans: Julia Bullock is a luminous Anne Trulove; Paul Appleby, a tormented Tom Rakewell;

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and Kyle Ketelsen, a smoothly evil Nick Shadow. The updated production suits the open-air theater and the opera's themes of false promises and the temptation of easy money and fame. The walls of the set, a plain white box, rip like paper as characters enter and exit, leaving gaping holes, and serve as screens for arresting contemporary video backdrops. Tom's London establishment is a soaring glass penthouse against a crowded cityscape of lights; photos of Baba the Turk multiply like a giant Zoom meeting screen; tumbling stock prices scroll as Tom's ruin is complete. In the haunting final scene, the mad Tom tries without success to tape the now-blank white walls back together. The poetic English text isn't always as clear as one might like, and the only subtitles are in French and German, but it's a small price to pay. Just Google the libretto and follow along.



A scene from 'The Rake's Progress'

PHOTO: PASCAL VICTOR/ARTCOMPRESS

The enormous floating stage on Lake Constance is the hallmark of Austria's Bregenz Festival, and its ["Turandot," on YouTube](#), is all about spectacle. There's an immense Great Wall of China, part of which tumbles down dramatically; boats deliver characters to the stage, which is filled with a swirling host of masked extras in Mao jackets, martial artists and fire jugglers; there's a gruesome library of severed heads in transparent display boxes. Hang on for Act III and the show's best singing: Riccardo Massi's "Nessun dorma" and Guanqun Yu's poignant rendition of Liu's death scene. Then, for comic relief in a much more modest, but delightful, outdoor opera experience, try On Site Opera's production of [Mozart's "The Secret Gardener,"](#) staged in a New York City community garden, on YouTube through the end of June.

—Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the Journal.

Digital Signage Connection | Panasonic Projectors Help Redefine the Opera

<https://www.digitalsignageconnection.com/panasonic-projectors-help-redefine-the-opera>

BY JASON KUSHNER - DSC EDITOR / DIGITAL CONTENT MANAGER APRIL 29, 2020
CONTENT, CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES, DISPLAYS & PROJECTORS, ENTERTAINMENT & RECREATION, EXPERIENTIAL DESIGN & PLANNING, INSTALLATION OF THE WEEK, OUTDOOR



[The Industry](#), an artistic company focused on pushing the limits of productions and transcending traditional views of opera, was tasked with creating an experiential, immersive production that would expand the definition of the medium. To create something that fused visual artistry and musical ingenuity, The Industry created *Sweet Land*, an opera that serves as an experiential procession through the Los Angeles State Historic Park. Given the opera's unconventional outdoors environment, The Industry needed a reliable partner that could deliver technology and blend the real world with stunning visuals from a variety of projection effects across multiple backdrops including scrims, landscapes, cityscapes and even walls of mist.



The Industry collaborated with [Panasonic](#) to provide the necessary projection mapping technology and developed an entirely immersive opera experience that presented both audio and visual elements. Together, Panasonic and The Industry created *Sweet Land* by deploying 11 of Panasonic's projectors – one PT-RZ21K Series 3-Chip DLP® SOLID SHINE Laser Projector, six PT-RZ12K 3-Chip DLP® Series Projectors and four PT-RZ770U 1-Chip DLP® Fixed Installation Laser Projectors. This array allowed for projection mapping techniques that paired visual elements with musical cues throughout the L.A. State Historic Park.

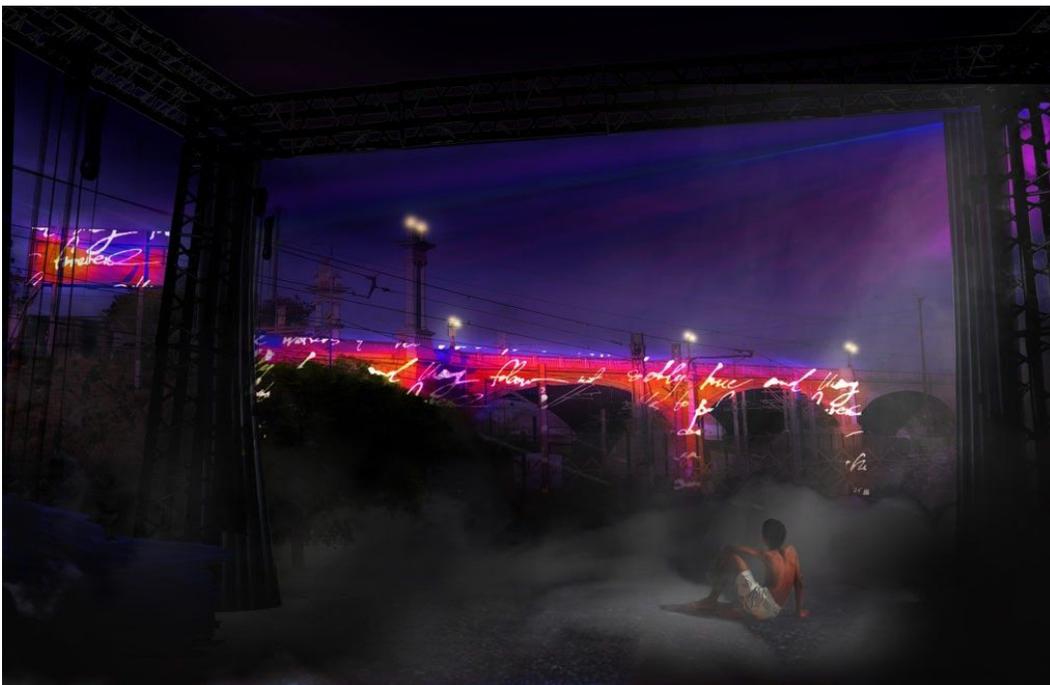
By deploying Panasonic's laser projection and lens technology throughout the urban outdoor environment, guests progressed through a one-of-a-kind opera experience. *Sweet Land*, which derives its title from the iconic lyrics to "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)" by Samuel Francis Smith, was able to encompass the narrative of American identity with diverging perspectives through a series of displays and musical elements. Considering the layers of implemented technology that support the layers of meaning implicit in this particular piece about the unique American experience, it's difficult to imagine a more appropriate setting than Los Angeles — one of the richest U.S. centers for diversity and immigrant culture. Luckily, *Sweet Land* was able to complete its run in March 2020 with minimal impact from the COVID-19 pandemic and only a few cancellations.

Panasonic's projectors were essential to this process and execution. Beginning as a procession through the L.A. State Historic Park, the opera separates the audience onto diverging tracks in order to experience different perspectives of history. Spanning across 32 acres of open space, *Sweet Land* audiences were welcomed to walk pathways and take in the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the city, all while witnessing an immersive musical display. Guests experienced projection mapping and music working together to showcase artistic elements projected onto various pieces of the park, including a bridge, billboard and even a water display.

"The way projection mapping enables guests to walk through a story, while simultaneously listening to opera music is what makes *Sweet Land* so unique," said Hana Sooyeon Kim, a L.A.-based projection and set designer who helped create and launch *Sweet Land*. "One of the most popular exhibits was the water display, where visuals were projected onto the water's mist. Due to the layers of the mist, and Panasonic's ability to execute on such a

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unique surface, the audience was captivated, and thought the image was a 3D hologram, rather than projection mapping.”



The compact size, flexibility and durability of Panasonic's projectors, along with their filter-less design and virtually maintenance-free features, allowed The Industry's team to

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nimbly install the technology at the beginning of each day and break it down at the end of the night. Panasonic's projectors were up for the challenge, and despite being placed in outdoor settings and projecting on non-traditional surfaces, guests could expect exceptional image quality with consistent performance throughout the entire show.

"We were dealing with unconventional surfaces, different textures and a space that's significantly larger than a typical opera house, and therefore our decisions on the technology used and where each projector was installed was a strategic one," said Kim. "As this opera was outdoors, it was critical the projectors accommodated our unique environmental requirements, while being durable and lasting for extensive periods of time while outdoors and on uneven terrain."

Check out the video below to hear more from Hana Kim's perspective and to learn more about how the collaboration between The Industry and Panasonic has reinvigorated the opera medium as well as the technical limits of live performance in general for a new generation of cosmopolitan American aficionados.



JASON KUSHNER - DSC EDITOR / DIGITAL CONTENT MANAGER

Jason Kushner is a videographer, editor, writer and filmmaker living in the Greater Atlanta Area. With an educational background combining film and journalism, Kushner has shot video and written for a myriad of publications and multimedia projects including *Creative Loafing Tampa*, TBO.com, Starline Films and Digital Signage Connection. His 2009 documentary *American Colonies: Collapse of the Bee* became an Official Selection at 12 international film festivals, won Best Documentary at the 2009 Central Florida Film Festival and a John Muir Gold Award at the 2009 Yosemite Film Festival. In 2015, he became Digital Media Editor for Digital Signage Expo, LightShow West and LED Specifier Summit and has since become Digital Content Manager for those shows' parent company, Exponation.

Peabody Post | Du Yun's Sweet Land Available On Demand

<https://peabodyinstitute.wordpress.com/2020/04/15/du-yuns-sweet-land-available-on-demand/>

by [peabodyinstitute](#)



Composition professor Du Yun's *Sweet Land*, a multi-perspectival opera which explores the myths of American identity, was presented by The Industry in the Los Angeles State Historic Park in March. Starting as a procession through the LA State Historic Park, Sweet Land becomes an opera that erases itself. While many of the performances were canceled due to COVID-19, an [on-demand video stream](#) of the show is available for a fee.

Soho House | The forefront of opera

'Sweet Land' creator Yuval Sharon questions what it means to be American in his latest immersive opera

By Charlotte Steinway Tue, Mar 3, 2020

Last week, we took LA Soho House members to the premiere of 'Sweet Land,' an experiential opera performed in Los Angeles State Historic Park, just north of Downtown LA. Described by the New York Times as 'opera's disrupter in residence,' Yuval Sharon is the founder of the Industry, the unorthodox opera company behind such critically-acclaimed shows as Hopscotch, Invisible Cities, and now, 'Sweet Land,' an opera which re-examines American History through the Native American lens.

Soho House members can purchase tickets for the March 14th show here with special pricing using the code SOHOSWEET75; and below, we sat down with Sharon to hear more about using performance as a tool for civic engagement and what's next for opera as an art form.

How did you work to make opera contemporary?

There must be something about the way the operas are presented that creates a barrier to us understanding them, and that's when I started thinking about making my own. Opera doesn't have to be in some other language about some other time, but it could be in our language and try to address us as Americans. What if opera is not considered an established art form, but rather, an emerging art form, and that people are still discovering what it is? I want to strip away the sense of inaccessibility opera tends to have, without losing the challenge and excitement that surrounds it. It's not about dumbing it down, but about realizing what's challenging about it is also what's so inspirational and exciting.'

Would you describe what you're doing as experiential?

'I'm looking to change the way opera is experienced – so I started to think about where it take place in a train station or a moving vehicle or a parking lot. But re-imagining it also includes re-imagining how opera is written, who's telling the stories and what stories are being told. I want to radicalize every single element of the opera. I also wanted to make sure it wasn't coming from a privileged perspective, in the way I think opera has been consumed in the past.'

How did you come up with the storyline behind 'Sweet Land?'

'The process of creating this was extremely horizontal. There are six members of our creative team – all from different backgrounds – that all came to develop what this is today. Part of our larger mission was to make sure that opera is connected to our civic life in some way. We wanted to address the racial inequality within America, and address how much of our identity tries to erase all of the histories within that inequality.

With what's happening now politically and socially in this country, we have to re-examine our identity and recognize our past in a way that honors the voices of those who may not have been heard. What's great about working with a six-person team was that we were

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able to highlight all sorts of voices and make sure they were heard. Everyone else's point of view has certainly expanded my own, and I think the goal of the opera is to help expand the idea of how we want to live in this world.'

What do you want the audience to come away with after seeing the show?

'What we really want is for people to own a personal share in the story. Everyone is going to approach it through their own cultural background and I think what we're trying to do is create a big enough space where all of that can coexist. One thing that's so powerful about art in general – not just opera – is that art is the place where we can truly play around with and imagine a better life or a better country.'

When it comes to opera and theatre, you rarely think of LA as the hub for that. Do you think that's changing?

'You don't hear people say LA doesn't have culture anymore. There's been a big shift, and it's been exciting to be a part of that. The artistic community here is being emboldened to think nationally, which is exciting. With 'Sweet Land,' we want to put the opera into the landscape of the city itself, and that's why we set it in Los Angeles State Historic Park. LA is probably the most important character in the show.'

Where do you think opera is going?

'I would love for independent artists who want to try their hand at opera to have the opportunity and support to do that, and that the larger companies learn from the innovators in the field. I think it's starting to happen. I think opera in America is so different than opera in Europe in that it's not a native art form in America. I have had to confront why opera – a non-American art form – is telling the story of America. And in this country, it is so important for the people who make opera to have their own vision of it. I'd like us to lean into that, and take away some of the confining structures we inherited.'

AV Nation | Panasonic and The Industry partner to redefine the opera

<https://avnation.tv/2020/04/panasonic-and-the-industry-partner-to-redefine-the-opera/>

April 30, 2020 by AVNation Press Releases

[The pair partnered to develop an immersive opera experience with projection mapping technology for a unique outdoor experience](#)

The Industry, an independent, artist-driven company, was tasked with creating an experiential, immersive production that would expand the definition of opera. To create a production that fuses visual artistry and musical ingenuity, The Industry created *Sweet Land*, an opera which serves as an experiential procession through the Los Angeles State Historic Park. Given the opera's unconventional outdoors environment, The Industry needed a reliable partner who could deliver technology to transform the LA State Historic Park, blending the real world with stunning visuals with a variety of projection effects across multiple backdrops including scrims, landscapes, cityscapes and even walls of mist.

The Industry collaborated with Panasonic to provide the necessary projection mapping technology to develop an entirely immersive opera experience that presented both audio and visual elements – a non-traditional approach when compared to typical opera performances. Together, Panasonic and The Industry created *Sweet Land* by deploying 11 of Panasonic's projectors — one PT-RZ21K Series 3-Chip DLP SOLID SHINE Laser Projector, six PT-RZ12K 3-Chip DLP Series Projectors and four PT-RZ770U 1-Chip DLP Fixed Installation Laser Projectors — and utilizing projection mapping techniques, pairing visual elements with musical components throughout the LA State Historic Park.

By deploying Panasonic's laser projection and lens technology throughout the LA State Historic Park, guests progressed through a one-of-a-kind opera experience. *Sweet Land*, which ran during March 2020, told the narrative of American identity with diverging perspectives, through a series of displays and musical elements.

Performing on an Unlikely Terrain

The Industry is an artistic company focused on pushing the limits of productions and taking creative approaches that expand the traditional views of the opera. Founded by Artistic Director Yuval Sharon, The Industry reinvented the opera in 2012 with the Los Angeles debut of CRESCENT CITY, which according to Out West Arts, changed “the face of music-theater in this town overnight.” Nearly a decade later, the creative group is continuing to showcase its artistic abilities. Taking on one of its largest creative projects to date, *Sweet Land* challenged The Industry and Panasonic to create an immersive outdoor opera experience outdoors, rather than in a traditional opera house.

“We were dealing with unconventional surfaces, different textures and a space that's significantly larger than a typical opera house, and therefore our decisions on the technology used and where each projector was installed was a strategic one,” said Hana Sooyeon Kim, a LA based projection and set designer who helped create and launch *Sweet Land*. “As this opera was outdoors, it was critical the projectors accommodated our unique environmental requirements, while being durable and could last for extensive periods of time while outdoors and on uneven terrain.”



By deploying Panasonic's laser projection and lens technology throughout the LA State Historic Park, guests progressed through a one-of-a-kind opera experience.

A New Definition of "Opera"

Panasonic's projectors were essential to help redefine the opera experience. Beginning as a procession through the LA State Historic Park, the opera separates the audience onto diverging tracks to experience different perspectives of history. Spanning across 32 acres of open space, *Sweet Land* audiences were welcomed to walk pathways and take in the natural beauty and cultural heritage of Los Angeles, while witnessing an immersive musical display. Guests experienced projection mapping and music working together to showcase artistic elements projected onto various pieces of the park, including a bridge, billboard and even a water display.

"The way projection mapping enables guests to walk through a story, while simultaneously listening to opera music is what makes Sweet Land so unique," said Hana. "One of the most popular exhibits was the water display, where visuals were projected onto the water's mist. Due to the layers of the mist, and Panasonic's ability to execute on such a unique surface, the audience was captivated, and thought the image was a 3D hologram, rather than projection mapping."

Due to the compact size, flexibility and durability of Panasonic's projectors, along with their filter-less design and virtually maintenance-free features, the projectors not only performed well in this environment, but Hana, along with the team at The Industry were able to easily install the technology at the beginning of each day, and break it down at the end of the night. Panasonic's projectors were up for the challenge and despite being placed in outdoor settings and projecting on non-traditional

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surfaces, guests could expect stunning, exceptional image quality with consistent performance throughout the entire show.

“When we hear the reactions from guests as they walked through the park and commented on how amazing the exhibits were, that’s the most rewarding part of this entire process,” added Hana.

“Panasonic’s projection mapping technology played an essential role in executing such an incredible experience.”

American Record Guide | Yuval Sharon and The Industry

AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE

INDEPENDENT CRITICS REVIEWING CLASSICAL RECORDINGS AND MUSIC IN CONCERT

Yuval Sharon and The Industry
"Sweet Land" (world premiere)

By Richard S. Ginell

American Record Guide, July/August 2020

Remember when Pierre Boulez said that he wanted to blow up the opera houses? Yuval Sharon, maverick stage director – or disrupter, as they like to say – seems to be figuratively doing just that in Los Angeles with his company, The Industry, even as he gets invited to work in such Establishment citadels as Berlin, Bayreuth, Vienna and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. As a result, the environment of the communities in which he stages his productions becomes the show.

And Sharon's vision is getting bigger, more encompassing, more portentous. In their latest brainstorm, a collaborative opera called "Sweet Land," Sharon takes on the mantle of renegade historian Howard Zinn by calling into question the whole story of how the United States came to be as related by the textbooks we read in school. We get to hear the victims' side of colonization, assimilation, the push Westward, and how their stories were "erased" (The Industry's word) from history.

To pull that off, Sharon, co-director Cannupa Hanska Luger and company came up with two occasionally intertwining operas, staging it outdoors in the northern portion of L.A. State Historic Park, a crescent-shaped patch of parkland just north of downtown. We the audience could only see one of the two story threads at a time so as to replicate the feeling of seeing only a partial narrative of history, as in the limited scope of a textbook. I managed to catch both threads by going to back-to-back late afternoon and evening performances Feb. 29, and I'm glad I did, for you needed more than one viewing to get a handle on this complex pageant.

After a prologue consisting of an abstract staging of Europeans (The Arrivals) meeting the Native Americans (The Hosts) in a bare-bones theater made of two-by-fours from a local lumber yard, half of the audience was ushered into one cylindrical theater and the other half into another cylindrical theater nearby. There, the first audience saw "Train," a saga of the building of the Transcontinental Railway, and the ruthless exploitation of the labor to do so. The second audience saw "Feast," a tale of a mythical Thanksgiving in which a macho white man named Jimmy Gin (countertenor Scott Belluz) tried to force a Native American maiden, Makwa (soprano Kelci Hahn), to marry him.

Following an electronic ritual interlude for the two audiences outside in the park, they went back into their respective theaters only to encounter the whitewashed versions (in the case of "Feast," literally white sets and costumes). The last scene took place in the initial structure where we contemplated "progress" in the form of a real-life junk-strewn wasteland, populated by a few downtrodden folk who described their place in American history. Long before we reached that point, it was clear upon which side The Industry stood.

To make matters even more complicated, Sharon employed two creative teams – composer Roven Chacon and librettist Douglas Kearney being one, composer Du Yun and librettist Aja Couchois Duncan the other. Chacon/Kearney wrote the first part of "Train" while Yun/Duncan wrote the first part of "Feast" and for the second parts, they switched places. Everyone collaborated on the final scene, "Echoes & Expulsions." The L.A. Master Chorale's Jenny Wong conducted and sang in the "Feast" portion while Industry music director Marc Lowenstein led "Train."

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Were there significant differences in the composers's scores? Hard to tell, because both were employing freewheeling collages of idioms – rigorous atonal instrumentals, a folk-like number with the sharp crack of a mallet on iron symbolizing the building of the railroad, Native American-influenced vocalizing that sometimes resembled the wailings of Yoko Ono and other champions of extended vocal techniques, electronic music, chorales, solo “arias” of indeterminate idiom. Et cetera. You know the old joke about the camel being a horse as designed by a committee but in this case, one couldn't even tell if it was a camel.

In any case, the scores and librettos were basically upstaged by the audacious staging, with its combination of low-tech rickety structures and high-tech electronic wizardry. Hologram-like images of galloping horses danced outside in the park. English supertitles took many forms in many places – projected on screens inside the “Train” and “Feast” theaters, on a pre-existing billboard in the finale's wasteland, and in a feat that must have cut through miles of civic red tape, onto the side of the ancient Broadway Viaduct way off in the distance. The sheer novelty of being herded from theater to theater through parallel wood-planked walkways, being semi-participants at the tables of the “Feast,” watching the theater-in-the-round staging of “Train” on swivel chairs with the instrumental ensemble in the center of the room, is something no one will likely forget.

Yet even all of the above has to give way to the most poignant – and perhaps depressing – impression of all left by “Sweet Land.” It was the environment itself reminding us of the costs to humans and nature of so-called progress.

We were on ancient Native American land, once a cornfield, where centuries of disruptive Los Angeles history took place. “Progress” was represented by the Metro Gold Line trolley whooshing back and forth on the nearby tracks during the performances, helicopters randomly roaring overhead, and the horn of a train nearby Union Station in the distance. During the ritual interlude out on the lawn, if you looked to the south, you could see the lit-up downtown skyline silently proclaiming the triumph of the white man's money in the American story. And it was cold out there at night in the sparsely-vegetated park, and you wondered about the discomfort of the skyrocketing population of homeless in Los Angeles not far away, with no stake in Sweet Land USA. Despite the strenuous efforts of the producers and cast, it was the random elements beyond their control that ultimately made “Sweet Land” the thought-provoking spectacle that it was.

(Update: The final performances of “Sweet Land” later in March had to be cancelled due to the shutdown of all concert life due to the coronavirus. It will not be revived; however, a video was made of the piece after the shutdown for on-demand streaming. Go to TheIndustryLA.org. for more information.)

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| KCET STREAM

Variety | KCET's 'Southland Sessions' to Bring L.A. Arts and Culture Events to the Quarantine

<https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/kcet-southland-sessions-los-angeles-quarantine-1234707680/>

By **Michael Schneider**



Mario Tama

As a spike in COVID-19 cases puts a halt to reopening plans in the city of [Los Angeles](#), public broadcaster [KCET](#) is launching the series “[Southland Sessions](#)” to bring arts and cultural events to viewers quarantined at home.

The series, which premieres Wednesday night, will feature conversations with local artists and cultural leaders as they discuss how the pandemic — as well as the recent social uprisings across the country — impact the arts locally. Episodes will also focus on local arts and cultural events, including the City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowships, Watts Towers Day of the Drum Festival and the annual Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival.

Other episodes will focus on mariachi music in Los Angeles, as well as the city’s dance community of the city, and local artists’ virtual studio visits. Radio station dublab, avant-garde opera company The Industry, artist/designer/writer Rosten Woo, San Fernando Valley’s performing arts center The Soraya, and Orange County’s Pacific Symphony will be featured in upcoming episodes.

“Southland Sessions” launches July 15 at 8 p.m. with the episode “Change(makers): The Future of Arts and Culture,” hosted by KCET chief creative officer Juan Devis. The episode will feature L.A. cultural leaders discussing how the role of arts and culture in the city has been impacted by current

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events, and how civic institutions plan to rebuild. The episode also features poetry from members of Get Lit.

The City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the National Endowment for the Arts are among the underwriters for the series, which Devis said was inspired by a documentary KCET had been shooting for its “Artbound” series, about The Industry’s next opera, “Sweet Land.”

When the pandemic put a halt to “Sweet Land,” The Industry artistic director Yuval Sharon asked Devis if KCET could capture the show for viewers who bought tickets but couldn’t attend due to it being shut down.

“That really pushed me to think, ‘holy crap,’ the impact that this pandemic is going to have in the culture sector, in every single regard, from audiences to big institutions, performances,” he said. “It became like a domino effect. The LA Phil closed the Hollywood Bowl. That made me think, we’re not taking our culture as seriously as we need to be taking it. And the amazing work that people are doing right now, in spite of what is happening and the closure and the lock down, and the pandemic is incredible and there’s a lot of stuff that is being expressed out there.”

Devis said he also began to wonder about how these institutions, organizations and galleries were scrambling, trying to figure out how to find some sort of financial stability during this time. That’s when he connected with Danielle Brazell, general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs.

“We had no idea that it was actually going to turn into a complete bending of our daily lives for the next foreseeable future,” Brazell said. “But it essentially canceled all arts and cultural events in the region. And, as Juan pointed out, the sector is incredibly resilient. And at the same time, incredibly fragile, the philanthropic landscape of Los Angeles is unlike any other in the country. There’s a lot of small family foundations that we have a few anchor traditional philanthropic organizations that fund some organizations... We needed to find a partner to work with us to develop a new platform and expand our impact by making sure we can get into every single home in Southern California, free of charge.”

“Southland Sessions” will also air in a second window on KCET’s sister station, KOCE-TV (PBS SoCal). The series, which will continue until at least the end of the year, will debut new episodes on Wednesdays, where KCET has scheduled it with other arts-themed programs such as “Artbound,” “Fine Cut” and “Great Performances.”

Hollywood Soapbox | INTERVIEW: KCET to highlight resiliency of local arts scene on 'Southland Sessions'

<https://www.hollywoodsoapbox.com/interview-kcet-to-highlight-resiliency-of-local-arts-scene-on-southland-sessions/>



July 15, 2020 John Soltes 0 Comments Danielle Brazell, Juan Devis, KCET
Photo: Southland Sessions will kick off on KCET with a virtual discussion on Southern California arts in the time of COVID-19 and national protests. Photo courtesy of KCET / Provided with permission.

The arts community — encompassing theater, music, film, community art and so much more — has been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Live audience offerings have stopped, ticket sales have ceased and the future remains uncertain. This is especially true in the Los Angeles area, which is a bonafide cultural capital of the globe.

But to say that the art-making has stopped altogether would be wrong, and the folks at KCET know there are many stories to tell — now more than ever. So they have crafted a new series, with the partnership of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, that highlights the many ways artists are surviving, thriving and plotting a new path forward. The new series, called *Southland Sessions*, premieres [Wednesday, July 15 at 8 p.m.](#)

The first episode will feature a virtual discussion with several arts leaders in the Southern California area. Included among the panelists will be Danielle Brazell, general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs; Betty Avila, executive director of Self Help Graphics; Ravi Rajan, president of California Institute of the Arts; and Leslie Ito, executive director of the Armory Center for the Arts; plus leaders from the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture, Los Angeles

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County Museum of Art, California Community Foundation, The Music Center Arts, Community Coalition and KAOS Network.

“I think that one of the things that we’re the most excited here at KCET and PBS SoCal is that we are being able to provide a space where we’re presenting the diversity of arts and culture across the region when people are not being able to present it and showcase it, and audiences are not able to go to the traditional places where that used to happen,” said Juan Devis, KCET chief creative officer and host of the first episode. “So for us being able to create a space where we are presenting everything from ... orchestra performances to backyard singalongs in East L.A. and everything in between is what we’re the most excited about, really putting a focus on the role that arts and culture [has] as an essential part of our mental well-being during this pandemic and these moments of virtual uprising and reckoning.”



Juan Devis is the chief creative officer for KCET. Photo courtesy of KCET / Provided with permission.



Danielle Brazell is the general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. Photo courtesy of KCET / Provided with permission.

Southland Sessions has a stated goal to include a diverse offering of art-makers, everything from LACMA to smaller outlets. For example, the first episode will also feature local youth poets from the organization Get Lit. Another episode will showcase the Watts Towers Day of the Drum Festival, and another one will focus on the Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival. The second episode includes an interview with Yuval Sharon, artistic director of The Industry opera company, while later episodes will find mariachi musician Julian Torres exploring the cultural significance of this unique art form.

KCET is excited for what the series will offer audience members, and the same excitement is shared by the City of Los Angeles.

“From the city’s perspective, we’re the city’s local arts agency, and we have a mandate and a mission to support and foster creativity and culture throughout our city,” Brazell said on behalf of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. “Los Angeles is a global creative capital. We’re the cultural crossroads of the world, and when the pandemic hit, arts and culture ... was the first to shut down in a sense. One in six or one in seven [jobs], depending on how you slice it, is directly related to the creative economy in Los Angeles. When we talk about the creative economy that means cultural and creative workers. That means artists and artisans, whether they’re trade, in front of the camera, behind stage, in the booth ... we’re all part of this dynamic ecosystem, and when COVID hit, we immediately started to think we’ve got to move everything online. And what we saw was the resiliency from the arts and cultural community to begin to put everything online.”

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Brazell said that she saw audiences gravitating online and still wanting their arts and cultural offerings, but unfortunately there wasn't a centralized place to find the many works from Southern California's artistic community. The most innovative and most interesting voices needed greater exposure.

"We're now in a complete shifting of our daily lives, and we don't know how long that shift is going to happen," she said. "We have this new extraordinary movement around social awakening and reckoning, and I think for the City of Los Angeles we really needed to identify a partner who could create a new platform that has the capacity and the innovative storytelling chops to get into the homes of every person in Southern California, and there was no better partner than KCET, PBS SoCal and Juan Devis."

The local Department of Cultural Affairs is guided by a cultural master plan, Brazell shared, and equity is at the core of their mission. So whether they are administering grants or approving public art projects, they are trying to consider equity in every decision they make. "So it made perfect sense for us to work with a partner who really also had that at their core," Brazell said.



The first episode of *Southland Sessions* will feature a poetry reading by the young poets at Get Lit. Photo courtesy of KCET / Provided with permission.



Image courtesy of KCET / Provided with permission.

Devis added that KCET is trying to fill a hole essentially — a hole created by the pandemic, one that leaves members of the community at home and social distancing. They are charged with breaking down some of those necessary health barriers by presenting these community offerings from the safety of the living room.

“That means we’re going to be giving them everything from orchestral episodes with partners such as Pacific Symphony to more tailored concerts,” Devis said. “But we’re also going to be looking at [how] the dance community has been doing as a whole, or the mariachi community, the Indian music community, the theater community, so we are trying to create a platform where everything fits and everything can be shared with the audience.”

He added: “We’re also inviting people that are stakeholders in those particular genres, like dance and theater and music, to come to the studio and host these episodes. We’re starting to also open the doors for people to just come and say this is what my community has been going through, what the dance community has been going through, this is how we’re using technology, this is how we’re adapting to moving our artistic practice to a safe-distance presentation, this is how we’ve been affected economically. That sort of democratic approach to our programming is what I think is going to make it stand out.”

For Brazell, it’s important for her that Southern California residents understand this is a pivotal moment, with history being written almost every second of these tumultuous times. Thus, it’s critical that the storyteller has a role to play in the reopening and reshaping of society.

“This is also a historical moment, and who is telling the story of what happened in Los Angeles in 2020 and how are we telling that story to the rest of the world,” Brazell said. “We really need to engage the storytellers, the artists, the ones that are continuing to make the work and helping all of us get through these extraordinary times.”

By John Soltes / Publisher / John@HollywoodSoapbox.com

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Southland Sessions will premiere Wednesday, July 15 at 8 p.m. on KCET. Click [here](#) for more information.

John Soltes is an award-winning journalist. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, Earth Island Journal, The Hollywood Reporter, New Jersey Monthly and at Time.com, among other publications. E-mail him at john@hollywoodsoapbox.com

The Hollywood Times | To Re-Connect Artists with their Audiences, KCET Announces New On-Air and Online Initiative “SOUTHLAND SESSIONS” – Creativity and Spirit of LAs’ Arts & Cultural Communities July 15th

By Judy Shields - July 14, 2020



Southland Sessions Episode One “Change(makers): The Future of Arts and Culture” features a conversation with civic arts leaders across Los Angeles
By: Judy Shields

Rancho Cucamonga, California (*The Hollywood Times*) 07/11/2020 – “A few of the things that we did here at KCET during this pandemic is that we went from servicing the needs of educators and students in a partnership with LAUSD and other districts in California, to a partnership with KPCC to be able to give daily reports on Covid-19 news that were going on in our region. We soon realized that the arts and culture sector was going to be hugely impacted by what was going on. We started to see museums, small community theaters and performance venues all close, just like the restaurant businesses. The idea really evolved into ‘how can we become a place where we are showcasing the work that has not been able to be presented to audiences?’ in spite of the conditions that we are in– in terms of the pandemic and also with the racial unrest that we have been experiencing.” Juan Devis, KCET Chief Creative Officer, told *The Hollywood Times* during a telephone conversation.

The *Hollywood Times* was honored to be able to watch the first episode. I believe that all the adults reading this article should make sure to watch this informative panel discussion with those involved in the upcoming KCET **Southland Sessions** Public Television program being shown tomorrow, July 15th at 8pm on KCET (or streaming at <http://kcet.org/southlandsessions>). I truly enjoyed how this was shot at each of their homes and it was very clear to see and hear them. It was truly an eye opening panel discussion about LA culture and arts and how so very important culture and arts is to us and to our kids. And their kids to come I also really enjoyed the young folk that read poems, so emotional and heartfelt. PLEASE watch this new show with your family to find out about culture and arts.

Interview with Juan Devis, KCET Chief Creative Officer:

THT: Tell us about this new weekly programming starting **this** Wednesday, July 15th.

Juan Devis: The goal is to create an entire night of arts programming on KCET where we will be able to present everything from orchestral works by large companies such as The Pacific Symphony to actors performing monologues sometimes from their own homes. We will bring the high and low together and find the place that converges all those things together and present them to an audience in the community of Southern California. That's it in a nutshell!

Interview with Danielle Brazell, General Manager of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs:

THT: Tell us about how this new programming came about and the affiliation with KCET?

Danielle Brazell: In March we got the stay at home orders from the mayor and we were able to move our employees safely to teleworking. The Department of Cultural Affairs funds community centers throughout LA and we provide public art for the city. We also make grant awards in partnership with over 350 nonprofit cultural organizations in the city. Many of them operate around \$250,000 and \$500,000 a year, so they are really important. They are all local and they employ artists and cultural workers as well as provide rich and dynamic programming for the people of our city and the visitors to our city.

We needed to find a partner to figure out how we could develop a new platform, because the creative sector is so innovative that they immediately pivoted and started to put up online panel discussions and cultural programming that was phenomenal. But there wasn't really any kind of a centralized place where we could really start to help elevate the work that was being done. There was no better partner than KCET to develop this new virtual public square for culture in our region. We are now going to be able to get into the homes of 15.5 million viewers or households throughout the region. This is actually an extraordinary opportunity and I would also say that there would no better person than Juan to spearhead all of this as he has done such extraordinary things with this public television station. 'Southland Sessions' is going to help elevate the important role that art, culture and creativity plays in our region during this time of COVID, our current economic crisis and during this time of phenomenal new social awakening. It's a moment for all of us to learn and to share in the creative expression."

THT: What can our readers expect to see in this new series *Southland Sessions*

Juan Devis: "In the first episode, we decided that the best way to set up the series was to have a really serious conversation with some of our cultural leaders in the region and really talk about what we are experiencing right now. We invited our funder, of course, Danielle Brazell from the Department of Cultural Affairs and Michael Govan, president of LACMA and many more. We wanted to do a conversation of where we are, what are the needs of the community, and what is the opportunity for change that we have in front of us and then really follow up with a series that is going to be all about a solution."

"The second episode is going to be a presentation of Sweet Land, from the regional innovative opera company called The Industry. That production was closed down because of the pandemic and we

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were able to capture it in its entirety. We will be presenting it for an audience and it's going to be an exclusive opportunity for us to host the broadcast premiere of this opera.”

“The third episode is going to be a look at how Mariachi culture and music has been affected during this time. Mariachi music is a staple in Southern California and Mexican culture. Many of them are immigrant workers that come to do quinceaneras, birthday parties, weddings and things like that. So hundreds of workers have been impacted and you'd be surprised at how innovative they have been in keeping the tradition alive. So we are going to be looking into what they have been doing which is everything from singing to farm workers in the fields of Oxnard to virtual serenades and backyard sing-alongs.”

“We are really doing our very best to showcase the diversity of LA's culture during COVID-19, with the presentation of orchestra music in Orange County to, as I mentioned, a backyard sing-alongs in East LA. **This is what we have been up to.** That is the variety that people are going to be able to see in the new show “Southland Sessions.” But most of all, it's going to present the resiliency and the innovative spirit of the cultural capital of the world.”

The Hollywood Times thanks Juan Devis and Danielle Brazell for this interview.

With the Los Angeles Art Scene Forever Transformed, New Series Celebrates Resiliency of the Creative Community Featuring Diverse Array of Content from the Best of Local Arts and Culture, Ranging from Local Music and Dance to Poetry and Visual Arts

kcet.org/SouthlandSessions

Select programming will also be available for streaming on PBS platforms, including PBS.org and the free PBS Video App, available on iOS, Android, Roku, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV and Chromecast.

PBS station members get extended access to select programming via Passport.

Burbank, Calif. – KCET, Southern California's home for award-winning public media programming, today announced **SOUTHLAND SESSIONS**, a new weekly series that will allow the Los Angeles community to experience their regional arts and cultural institutions in this unique moment, when attending in-person, cultural events is not an option. As regional artists adapt to an uncertain future due to the current pandemic and the influence of social uprisings across the country, the new broadcast and digital initiative draws together prominent voices from around Southern California for up-close, virtual “sessions.” Every Wednesday, viewers will witness artists inspire audiences with a front-row seat to the creative process, guided by the community's arts leaders. The new series kicks off with a conversation among key cultural leaders from around the city, working together to discuss how arts and culture are essential to Angelenos. **SOUTHLAND SESSIONS** premieres on **Wednesday, July 15 at 8 p.m. PT on KCET** and will run through the end of the year.



SESSIONS Hero Art

SOUTHLAND SESSIONS will engage viewers across Southern California who are staying at home to stop the spread of coronavirus – an order that has changed the lives of everyone, and impacted the futures of auditoriums, concert halls, and art galleries across the region. The series will vary in format on a weekly basis showcasing a variety of artistic communities and programs across the city. **SOUTHLAND SESSIONS** is supported in part by the **City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs** (DCA) and the **National Endowment for the Arts**. Episodes will feature diverse arts and cultural events, including DCA's **City of Los Angeles (COLA) Individual Artist Fellowships**, **Watts Towers Day of the Drum Festival**, and the annual **Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival**. The format will be a compilation of artist disciplines including music, dance, theater, spoken word, and poetry, capturing the immediacy of the region's artists' responses to COVID-19 and the racial, as well as social, injustices that are happening across the city and the nation.

SOUTHLAND SESSIONS

The premiere episode of **SOUTHLAND SESSIONS** will explore how integral the arts and culture is to a community's lifeblood and how it can become part of the solution to larger systemic issues in society. Over ten leaders from civic institutions across the city of Los Angeles participate in a virtual discussion as their organizations are re-evaluating their roles and re-focusing their energies to become an integral part of rebuilding sustainable institutions for the future. The episode will also feature poetry as written by local youth poets from the organization **Get Lit**. Hosted by KCET Chief Creative Officer **Juan Devis**, featured guests include General Manager of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs **Danielle Brazell**, Executive Director of the Los Angeles County Arts Commission **Kristin Sakoda**, Executive Director for Armory Center for the Arts **Leslie Ito**, California

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Institute of the Arts President **Ravi S. Rajan**, Self Help Graphics & Art Director **Betty Avila** and more.

In addition to the conversation with civic arts leaders across Los Angeles, upcoming episodes will feature the tradition of mariachi music in Los Angeles, the diverse dance community of the city, and a personal tour of DCA's COLA program with local artists exhibiting their work through at-home interviews and virtual studio visits.



Getty Images

Several of the episodes will be produced in partnership with community cultural leaders including online cultural trendsetting radio station **dublab**, avant-garde opera company **The Industry**, artist/designer/writer **Rosten Woo**, San Fernando Valley's performing arts center **The Soraya** on the CSUN campus, Orange County's **Pacific Symphony** and many more. Later this year, KCET will put out a call for regional artists to submit their own content for future episodes.

Upcoming episodes of SOUTHLAND SESSIONS will air as follows (subject to change):

Wed., July 15 and Wed., Aug 5 at 8 p.m.: "Change(makers): The Future of Arts and Culture"

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Southland

Sessions Episode One “Change(makers): The Future of Arts and Culture” hosted by Chief Creative Officer of KCET Juan Devis

Key cultural leaders from around Los Angeles gather to discuss the role of arts and culture in shaping the world’s future. See how civic institutions are re-evaluating their roles in society and re-focusing their energies to become an integral part of rebuilding sustainable institutions for the future. Hear poetry inspired by the questions of the future written by young poets from **Get Lit**.

Wed., July 22 at 8 p.m.: “The Industry Presents Sweet Land”

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Southland

Sessions Episode Two "The Industry Presents Sweet Land." Mayflower image and conceptual design by Cannupa Hanska Luger Lettering and graphic design by Visual Issues

The Industry, one of Los Angeles's most innovative opera companies, continues their acclaimed experimental site-specific productions with a performance that disrupts the dominant narrative of American identity. Featuring an interview with The Industry's Artistic Director **Yuval Sharon**.

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Southland Sessions Episode Two "The Industry Presents Sweet Land." Photo Credit Casey Kringle for The Industry.

Wed., July 29 and Wed., Aug 19 at 8 p.m.: "Mariachi: From Romance to Resistance"

Hosted by Mariachi musician **Julian Torres**, this episode explores the tradition of Mariachi music and its transformation through time and circumstance. See how groups are finding ways to survive and support one another like **Las Catrinas's** driveway serenades and **Mariachi Aguilas de Oxnard** who took to the fields to celebrate farmers. Featuring special performances by **La Marisol** and **Quetzal**.

Wed., Aug. 12 at 8 p.m.: "Dance Break"

Tour L.A.'s wild and diverse dance community in this showcase of the city's vibrant scene. See uplifting homages to L.A. by aerial dancer **Joe Pinzon** and a parking lot turned performance space from **Jacob Jonas**. Explore how the body's movements can reflect the community's voice for change with **Lula Washington** and **Infinite Flow**. Hosted by **Tamica Washington**.



photo courtesy

of KCET

Wed., Aug. 26 at 8 p.m.: “Musical Expansions in Quarantine”

Witness the creativity of L.A.’s music scene during COVID-19, from drive-in performances and punk rocker exercise videos to musical tributes to the city’s iconic street vendors and food trucks. See how rhythms made from scavenged household items created during quarantine have kept communities inspired and moving to the beat in this episode made in collaboration with **dublab**.

The vibrancy and dynamism of L.A.’s arts and cultural scene will also be reflected online through a robust [digital hub](#) where viewers can find the creative community’s most engaging, uplifting content. Musical performances, dance presentations, poetry readings, art exhibitions, and more will be featured. Alongside these virtual presentations, local culture journalists will keep readers abreast of all things related to arts and culture in the time of pandemic and protest through artist profiles, gallery interviews, feature pieces, and arts news briefs. The **SOUTHLAND SESSIONS** digital destination will also include resources and how-tos detailing financial support and advice from other artists with ways to connect to gallerists, curators, and more.



Photo

Courtesy of KCET

Guided by the various art forms and themes highlighted in the new Wednesday night programming, KCET will also provide virtual audience engagement opportunities including live streaming events, discussions, arts classes/demonstrations, and more.

The new series **SOUTHLAND SESSIONS** will launch a robust Wednesday night of programming for KCET designed to highlight the resilience of the arts community. Under the theme “**Create Wednesday**,” the schedule will also feature popular Arts and Culture programs that have previously aired on KCET and PBS that include KCET’s Emmy® award-winning Original arts series **ARTBOUND** and student film showcase **FINE CUT** as well as America’s preeminent performing arts television series from PBS, **GREAT PERFORMANCES**. Like the new local series **SOUTHLAND SESSIONS**, the programming lineup for the night will feature diverse artistic innovation across all media and disciplines to celebrate art as an essential service.

The goal of the new programming lineup is to highlight Southern California as home to one of the most important cultural communities in the world. In addition to providing healing and solace to many, Los Angeles’ arts and cultural scene is a major source of income to millions in the local economy. Art and culture in Los Angeles are indelibly interwoven into the fabric of Southern California’s economic landscape and have an undeniably important role in shaping not only the culture of the region but also act as a powerful economic driver for the state and the rest of the nation.

For updates, follow @KCET and #SouthlandSessions and #CreateWednesday on social media.

ABOUT KCET



On-air, online and in the community, KCET plays a vital role in the cultural and educational enrichment of Southern and Central California. KCET offers a wide range of award-winning local programming as well as the finest public television programs from around the world. Throughout its 54-year history, KCET has won hundreds of major awards for its local and regional news and public affairs programming, its national drama and documentary productions, its quality educational family and children's programs, its outreach and community services and its website, kcet.org. KCET is a donor-supported community institution. For additional information about KCET productions, web-exclusive content, programming schedules and community events, please visit kcet.org. Select original programming from KCET is also available for streaming on Apple TV, YouTube, Amazon and Roku platforms. For more information please visit kcet.org/apps. KCET is a content channel of the Public Media Group of Southern California.

About the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA)

As a leading, progressive arts and cultural agency, DCA empowers Los Angeles's vibrant communities by supporting and providing access to quality visual, design, literary, musical, performing, and educational arts programming; managing vital cultural centers; preserving historic sites; creating public art; and funding services provided by arts organizations and individual artists. Formed in 1925, DCA promotes arts and culture as a way to ignite a powerful dialogue, engage LA's residents and visitors, and ensure LA's varied cultures are recognized, acknowledged, and experienced. DCA's mission is to strengthen the quality of life in Los Angeles by stimulating and supporting arts and cultural activities, ensuring public access to the arts for residents and visitors alike. DCA advances the social and economic impact of arts and culture through grantmaking, public art, community arts, performing arts, and strategic marketing, development, design, and digital research. DCA creates and supports arts programming, maximizing relationships with other city agencies, artists, and arts and cultural nonprofit organizations to provide excellent service in neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles. For more information, please visit culturela.org or follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/culturela, Instagram [@culture_la](https://instagram.com/culture_la), and Twitter [@culture_la](https://twitter.com/culture_la).

KCET | Myth-busting Opera “Sweet Land” Lives on Long After Final Curtain

<https://www.kcet.org/shows/southland-sessions/myth-busting-opera-sweet-land-lives-on-long-after-final-curtain>



S O U T H L A N D S E S S I O N S

Jordan Riefe

July 21, 2020

Sign up for Passport and watch The Industry's groundbreaking "Sweet Land."

To call The Industry a site-specific opera company is to only scratch the surface of what this groundbreaking organization is. Yes, their productions are sometimes staged in a single location, but more often the show moves, and the audience moves along with it. Their opera, "Hopscotch," was set in cars. Their adaptation of Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" broadcast of 1938 occurred simultaneously in locations throughout Los Angeles.

Their latest, "Sweet Land," a look at our country's bloody origins and the myths we've built around them, was staged in several sections of Los Angeles State Historic Park in Chinatown in late February for 13 performances (including previews), before being shut down by COVID-19. Today, its spirit lives on not only on their [website](#) where it can be streamed, but in the current

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real-world push to dispense with symbols of a romanticized past that don't square with the bloody facts, whether they be town square statues or logos of professional sports teams.

"It's strange to think of 'Sweet Land' in relationship to everything that's happened in the last few months, including being shutdown by a pandemic that has been brought from outside this country," says Artistic Director and founder of The Industry, Yuval Sharon, drawing parallels between the fate of the opera's characters and the fate of many Native Americans. "The idea of a pandemic wiping out a piece that is ultimately about Indigenous natives is a truly cruel irony."

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Micaela Tobin as Coyote in "Sweet Land" | Casey Kringlen for The Industry

The audience arrives to a pre-show percussion improv before they are split into two groups, with one being ushered to "Feast" and the other to "Train." "Feast" begins when European immigrants

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arrive on the shores of the “New World,” where they are honored by local hosts with a feast. Sitting down peacefully together, the arrivals soon turn on their hosts.

After an interstitial in which Coyote (Carmina Escobar/Micaela Tobin/Kathryn Shuman) and

Wiindigo (Sharon Chohi Kim) deliver antic performances to the music of composers Raven Chacon and Du Yun, the audience lands at another feast, one set after the arrivals have “tamed the land” and subjugated their hosts. “Train” traverses a similar arch, this time focusing on industrialization and ravaging of the land.

The audience is again reunited for the opera’s final section, “Echoes & Expulsions,” in which a little boy, Speck (Micah Angelo Luna/Leander Rajan), putters around a makeshift shelter in an empty lot as a subway passes in the background, and the voices of history are projected in phrases on a bridge, billboard and other surfaces.

“Sweet Land” opened just months before the current reexamination of past symbols resulting in statues of Confederate generals being toppled in public squares around the country. “The political moment, with Trump’s election and watching the rise of the President’s unvarnished use of white supremacist language, you can look at that and say, ‘I see where this train is going,’” says librettist Douglas Kearney about the show’s uncanny prescience.

On a recent visit to New Orleans, Sharon stopped by Jackson Square, named in honor of President Andrew Jackson. The only law Congress passed during his tenure was the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which he championed and which resulted in the Trail of Tears, a relocation effort that cost over 12,000 Native Americans their lives.



Kelci Hahn as Makwa and Sharon Chohi Kim as Wiindigo in "Sweet Land" | Casey Kringlen for The Industry

“Even though it’s not my ancestry, it makes me upset to see that in this public space, someone like that can be held up on a pedestal,” Sharon says. “If you take that statue down and put it in a museum and allow people to engage with history in a deeper way, I think that’s the right way to do it.”

Mezzo-soprano, Jehnean Washington, plays the Guide in “Train,” and happens to be a descendant of the Yuchi, Shoshone and Seminole nations. “They represent such hurt and such harm, like the Nazi flag,” she says of the deposed monuments. “I don’t feel like they need to be in a museum. I feel like we are the living testimony to what those people did. We don’t need a statue to remind us.”

“Sweet Land” is the sixth production by The Industry since their founding in 2012. Their site-specific opera “Invisible Cities,” based on the novel by Italo Calvino and set in downtown L.A.’s historic Union Station, was a 2014 Pulitzer finalist. And Sharon himself is a MacArthur “Genius” winner from 2017, two years after “Hopscotch,” the opera in cars, a production that in many ways is emblematic of The Industry.

That opera was a series of thematically connected narratives occurring in locations throughout downtown L.A. and Boyle Heights. Ticket buyers boarded a limo with the opera simulcast on

SWEET LAND PRESS RECAP

speakers, and experienced performances both inside and outside the vehicle along its route. The multi-pronged narrative employed here and elsewhere in their repertoire — the idea of giving audiences only part of a larger scheme — has become an Industry staple. The same approach was applied to “War of the Worlds,” broadcast through three antique air raid sirens around town where scenes played out simultaneously with the L.A. Phil performing at the Disney Concert Hall.



Carmina Escobar and Micaela Tobin as Coyotes with Sharon Chohi Kim as Wiindigo in “Sweet Land” | Casey Kringlen for The Industry

Due to the complexity it engenders, the multi-narrative approach compels collaboration, another staple of their work. On “Sweet Land,” Sharon was joined by co-director New Mexico artist Cannupa Hanska Luger to help oversee a production employing two composers, Navajo Nation’s Raven Chacon and Pulitzer Prize winner Du Yun, as well as two librettists, Kearney, who collaborated on The Industry’s inaugural production, “Crescent City,” and poet/activist Aja Couchois Duncan.

“I don’t have a musical background, and Yuval has been pretty expressive about thinking poets are the best librettists,” says Duncan, whose debut poetry collection, “Restless Continent” won a 2017 California Book Award. “One amazing aspect of working with The Industry is they really invest in collaboration and relationship building.”

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Kearney found the soup of creative voices generated an exponential increase in the decision-making process. “You’re trying to understand the sensibility of two composers and how they’re triangulating between themselves and the director, and then add another librettist. Then the question is what kind of stories do we want to tell and can we tell together?” he says, describing a convoluted, but ultimately rewarding process. “Yuval is deeply invested in how production can transform opera, especially contemporary opera.”

Familiar with the form from a young age when he accompanied his father to productions, Sharon began to notice a gap between the magic the music conjured in his head and the predictable productions he often sat through. To fill that gap, he became a director. In 2001, he graduated summa cum laude from UC Berkeley, then spent four years as director of New York City Opera’s VOX workshop for new American opera before assisting director Achim Freyer on L.A. Opera’s Ring Cycle.

“Opera is, for some people, the epitome of cultural hegemony. So, there’s a tension there that I think is really fruitful. Certainly a big mission for The Industry is to think about opera away from all of its rigid structures, liberate it to see how we can truly speak to a moment by creating something brand new,” says Sharon, formerly Artist-in-Residence at the LA Phil. “A piece like ‘Sweet Land’ is impossible to imagine within the current institution of opera ‘cause it does not allow these kinds of representations. So, The Industry has to push hard and move the conversation forward from the outside, and put pressure on the core of what opera is and think about how it can live up to a higher standard.”



Kelci Hahn as Makwa in "Sweet Land" | Casey Kringlen for The Industry

"Sweet Land" lives up by exposing the process of erasure — how white America has dominated the country's historic narrative and whitewashed it with its own mythology — the way toppling icons exposes the blood-soaked truth. A great way of honoring that truth is to not hold campaign rallies on sacred Lakota land like Mt. Rushmore, carved by KKK member Gutzon Borglum.

"They were desecrated by the carvings of white Presidents and Jack-ss number forty-five makes a spectacle there," Duncan says of Trump's campaign stop, adding, "we should remove those edifices like the statues of Civil War generals and racist Jim Crow f—kers."

Another way of honoring the truth is through reparations, which the city of Asheville, North Carolina, recently voted to provide African-American citizens for crimes their ancestors endured under slavery. "While America may or may not be grappling with reparations for African-Americans, what they are not grappling with is reparation for Native Americans," says Duncan.

As for the recent Supreme Court ruling in Oklahoma that put the eastern half of the state, including the city of Tulsa, under tribal jurisdiction, Duncan wonders why it usually takes the Supreme Court for her people to get what's guaranteed them in 19th-century agreements. Mezzo Jehnean Washington sees the ruling as a watershed moment. "It's a wonderful turning point and

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it sends a message throughout the globe that this kind of behavior of lying and cheating and ripping people off is not going to be tolerated anymore.”

Like many, Sharon, a first-generation American whose parents emigrated from Israel, was educated along the lines of the white settler fantasy, Manifest Destiny and the westward expansion. “All of that ideology is a big part of what we’re still taught about our country. This is particularly important in Los Angeles, which has an enormous culture of forgetting and loves to pretend everything is sui generis and nothing has history,” he says of an area that was formerly home to the Chumash, among other tribes. “You realize it carries with it a pretty insidious look at nation making. It tends to erase populations that have made it a home long before white settlers arrived.”

| BEST OF 2020

THE
NEW YORKER

2020 in Review

Notable Performances and Recordings of 2020

By Alex Ross

December 12, 2020



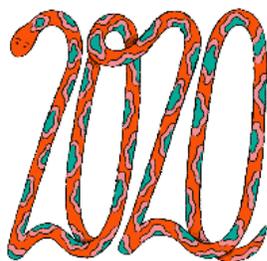
Illustration by Min Heo

At the close of a catastrophic year in the performing arts, the annual ritual of cobbling together a list of highlights takes on a woeful cast. To begin with, I saw only three in-person events after mid-March. Although I watched dozens of performances online, sitting at my

desk day after day lent the experiences a sense of sameness, of solipsism. The power of joining an audience resides in yoking your individuality to a collective, however temporary or disparate. In our electronic watchtowers, we seem to command a wide landscape, but ultimately we rarely leave the cocoon of the self. The COVID-19 year has trapped us all the more completely in the digital bubbles from which we so often long to break out. In a related development, the tech monopolies that already control too much of the cultural landscape have tightened their grip.

2020 in Review

New Yorker writers reflect on the year's highs and lows.



The damage that performing-arts groups and working performers have suffered is more severe than we can measure, and years will pass before even a partial recovery takes hold. Union rights were already under sustained attack, and organizations may opportunistically use the crisis to degrade those rights further. The Metropolitan Opera, which furloughed around a thousand employees in the spring, has offered to resume sending paychecks to unionized employees but only if they accept long-term reductions in salary. Elsewhere, institutions have managed to avoid gutting their employees' livelihoods. The case of the Columbus Symphony is worthy of note: remarkably, it has made no cuts for any of its full-time musicians or staff. Admittedly, that orchestra is a far smaller organization than the Met. As I commented in a piece on pandemic-era string-quartet activity, the hulking dinosaurs of the musical world may face the gravest danger.

Listeners can play a role in the recovery, as well. For more than twenty years, since Napster gave people the idea that music should be free for the taking, a radical devaluation of musicians' work has been under way. Spotify and other streaming services have perpetuated and normalized that iniquity: the royalties they offer to non-superstar musicians

are insultingly small. It was all the more welcome, then, when, beginning in mid-March, the enlightened music site Bandcamp began running a series of altruistic sales, the proceeds of which went directly to artists. It's also worth bearing in mind that streaming music is more destructive to the environment than any technology of musical reproduction that has come before.

I feel compelled to erect a memorial for eagerly anticipated performances that never took place. Phantom highlights that come to mind: Alban Berg's "Lulu" at the Cleveland Orchestra; a new production of the "Ring" at Bayreuth; the world première of Kaija Saariaho's opera "Innocence," in Aix-en-Provence; a revival of Peter Sellars's staging of "Tristan und Isolde" at the Los Angeles Philharmonic; Barrie Kosky's production of Prokofiev's "The Fiery Angel" at the Met; and Esa-Pekka Salonen's inaugural concerts at the San Francisco Symphony. John Keats notwithstanding, heard melodies are sweeter than the other kind.

Ten Notable Performances of 2020

Trevor Bača at Monday Evening Concerts, January 13th

Monday Evening Concerts, the venerable Los Angeles new-music series, has experienced a spectacular creative surge under the direction of the percussionist and conductor Jonathan Hepfer. I had planned to write about the organization last spring, on the occasion of a series of programs with the immensely gifted baritone Davóne Tines. M.E.C.'s January concert, with Hepfer's Echoi ensemble, would have been occasion enough: Trevor Bača's new piece "(HARMONY)," based on an austere beautiful, Beckett-like text by Paul Griffiths, created a liminal world at once gorgeous and ominous, with an A-major chord shimmering like a mirage of hope at the end. When it faded out, the narrator, Paul Holdenraber, softly intoned, "Not yet."

Jennifer Walshe at National Sawdust, March 1st



Illustration by Anja Slibar

The Irish composer and vocalist Jennifer Walshe, one of the most volcanically inventive forces in twenty-first-century arts, came to Brooklyn at the beginning of March to perform her voice-and-string-quartet work “everything is important”—an audiovisual pandemonium that gets close to the heart of the contemporary condition. At the beginning of the fall, I made a virtual trip to the National Concert Hall, in Dublin, to hear and see “Ireland: A Dataset,” an alternately hilarious and haunting meditation on Irish reality and myth.

“Sweet Land” in Los Angeles, March 7th

Productions by the Los Angeles-based opera visionary Yuval Sharon have appeared on my end-of-year lists in five out of the past six years, and with good reason: no one in the field has been as consistently creative or daring. The first of two astounding Sharon projects in 2020 was “Sweet Land,” an outdoor opera that meditated on the plundering of Native American lands by colonizers. The score was a joint effort by the composers Du Yun and Raven Chacon—the first is Chinese-American, the other of Navajo descent. Scenes from

the work lingered in my mind as two ineradicable national crimes unfolded: the separation of children from their parents at the American border and the destruction of sacred Native sites by border-wall construction.

Igor Levit's House Concerts in Berlin, March 12th to May 4th



Illustration by Andrea Ventura

In the summer of 2019, I began work on a [Profile](#) of the brilliant German pianist Igor Levit, whose political outspokenness has given him a prominence far outside the classical field. The shutdown prevented me from travelling to see Levit perform Busoni's titanic [Piano Concerto](#), which was to have been the culmination of the piece, but a different ending materialized: beginning in mid-March, Levit gave a series of nightly *Hauskonzerte*, or house concerts, in his apartment, in Berlin. In the fall, he released a glowingly sombre album titled "Encounter," pairing arrangements of Bach and Brahms with Morton Feldman's "Palais de mari," which had figured in one of his [more memorable home broadcasts](#).

Oslo Philharmonic, May 7th

Few streaming concerts can attain anything like the presence and atmosphere of a live event. But there was something exceptional about the Oslo Philharmonic's rendition of Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll," which I singled out in a May column on Zoom-era music: the mixture of beauty and melancholy, longing and loss, brought me to the brink of tears. My mother had died a few months earlier, and although she never cared for Wagner I thought of her all the same.

"Lift Every Voice: A Conversation Hosted by J'Nai Bridges," June 5th

In the wake of nationwide protests following the murder of George Floyd, the soprano J'Nai Bridges organized an online discussion with five fellow African-American singers: Julia Bullock, Lawrence Brownlee, Russell Thomas, Karen Slack, and Morris Robinson. Their candor rocked the complacent world of American opera, encouraging an outwardly liberal establishment to see how systemic racism cuts through the heart of their institutions.

Mainly Mozart in San Diego, July 11th

My first experience of live music during the pandemic took place in an unpromising locale: the Del Mar Fairgrounds, north of San Diego. The Mainly Mozart series organized a performance of Mozart's Divertimento in D (K. 136) and Mendelssohn's Octet, involving musicians from the L.A. Phil and the San Diego Symphony. Audience members sat in cars and honked their applause. The event was a scrappily joyous affair, showing that the classics can make an impact outside formal settings.

The L.A. Phil at the Hollywood Bowl, August 5th and 6th

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A few weeks after the Mainly Mozart event, I watched as a reasonably full complement of L.A. Phil musicians took the stage of the Hollywood Bowl to record a series of videos, titled “sound/stage.” Only a handful of observers witnessed the performances—among them Alejandro González Iñárritu, the film director, and Eric Garcetti, the mayor of Los Angeles—but the music seemed to fill the empty space and resonate with the eerily quiet city beyond.

“Twilight: Gods” in Detroit, October 17th

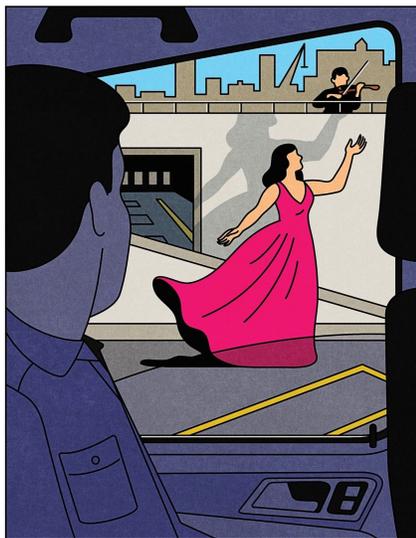


Illustration by Seb Agresti

Early in the pandemic, opera companies began reaching out to Yuval Sharon, who had long made use of the unconventional settings into which mainstream institutions now found themselves forced. Michigan Opera Theatre agreed to Sharon’s improbable scheme to mount a drive-through production of Wagner’s “Götterdämmerung,” in a parking garage. Sharon was subsequently appointed the company’s artistic director—a sign that the reigning unrest might lead to a long-overdue rethinking of complacent assumptions.

“Twilight: Gods,” as the Wagner production was called, would have been a triumph in any season; in 2020, it felt borderline miraculous.

Concertos by Tyshawn Sorey, November 6th and 19th

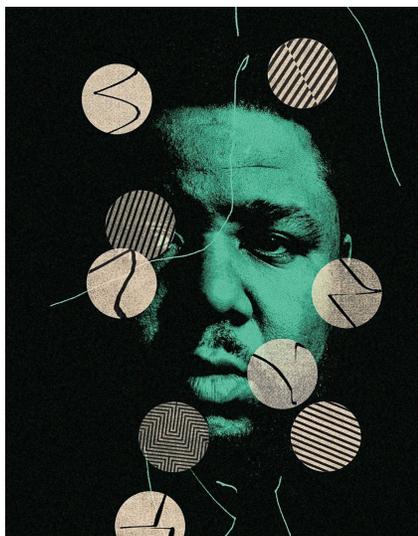


Illustration by Mike McQuade; source photograph by John Rogers

The composer and multi-instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey unveiled not one but two major works in November, both cast in unconventional concerto form: “For Marcos Balter,” which the violinist Jennifer Koh presented with the Detroit Symphony, and “For Roscoe Mitchell,” which the cellist Seth Parker Woods played alongside the Seattle Symphony. They were purely abstract creations, yet I couldn’t help hearing them as contrapuntal responses to a dire, vicious year—enigmatic monuments of artistic strength and conviction.

Los Angeles Times

Best classical music of 2020: 10 heroes who came to our rescue in a horrendous year



Gustavo Dudamel, left, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Patricia Kopatchinskaja and Kristy Edmunds. (Photo illustration by Micah Fluellen / Los Angeles Times; Getty Images; Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times (Dudamel and Salonen); Gary Coronado / Los Angeles Times; Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

By [MARK SWED](#) CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC DEC. 8, 2020

Twenty-twenty was the year that was, however much for classical music it may have seemed the year that wasn't. Live performance, as we knew it, came to a sudden halt early March.

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In startling advance of the Black Lives Matter protests, the Los Angeles Philharmonic happened to be in the middle of its revolutionary [Power to the People!](#) festival, examining the artistic legacy of Black protest movements and the issues of racial and economic inequality. Well before the presidential election, Yuval Sharon's innovative opera company, the Industry, had to cut short its run of ["Sweet Land."](#) an acute questioning of America's foundation myths, exposing our democracy's fragility. With summer wildfires still in the future but the pandemic at our doorstep, UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance barely squeaked in its operatic treatment of Octavia Butler's prophetic novel ["Parable of the Sower."](#) forecasting the dire social and political consequences of environmental irresponsibility.



Admirable local institutions of all sizes — Los Angeles Opera, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Piano Spheres, Boston Court, New West Symphony, the Wallis and REDCAT among them — rose to find innovative ways to keep the music coming online and to continue the discussion of potent issues. But let this year's top 10 go to classical music first responders who magnificently kept music mattering.



Gustavo Dudamel conducts an Ives symphony in February (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Gustavo Dudamel. The L.A. Phil's music and artistic director began the year with an extraordinary cycle of [Charles Ives' four symphonies](#), performances arresting in their multifaceted approach to Americana. Now released as downloads, they have been nominated for (and damned well better win) [two Grammys](#). With the first months of pandemic spring spent brainstorming with L.A. Phil management about how to contend with a projected \$100 million loss of income from Hollywood Bowl and Walt Disney Concert Hall performances, Dudamel emerged in a radio series from his home, a themed television series of Hollywood Bowl highlights and an online series of new concerts with the conductor and orchestra filmed over the summer in a cavernously empty Bowl. Off in Europe, where concerts have proved more feasible and where many are livestreamed, Dudamel led a ravishing "Firebird" with the Vienna Philharmonic at the Salzburg Festival. A Schumann cycle in Munich with the Bavarian Radio Orchestra was so exciting, that great orchestra, shopping for a music director, may well be dangling an offer. Dudamel couldn't be missed this fall in Spain, where he starred in an immersive virtual reality film, "Symphony," that toured the country and conducted his first "Il Trovatore" in Barcelona.



Esa-Pekka Salonen, photographed conducting the L.A. Phil in February.(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Esa-Pekka Salonen. Besides conducting orchestras (with and without audiences) in London, Helsinki, Paris, Hamburg and San Francisco, the L.A. Phil's visionary laureate conductor found that the break in his schedule allowed him to pursue his love of technology. At Finnish National Opera, he helped to create an artificial intelligence singer, [Laila](#). He began his tenure at the San Francisco Symphony with an AI-friendly [digital concert](#), and he led his old London orchestra, the Philharmonia, in an extraordinary digital realization of Beethoven's little-known ballet, "[Prometheus](#)." But what he will be most remembered for during the pandemic is the riotous "[Covid fan Tutte](#)" he conducted at Finnish National Opera and the broadcast with the Philharmonia of a haunting performance of [Britten's "Les Illuminations"](#) with Julia Bullock that perfectly captured the surreal emotions so common to our present state.

Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla. The L.A. Phil's phenomenal former associate conductor, now a bona fide star music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, had an especially

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eventful year. She came down with COVID-19 in March. By the beginning of June, visibly pregnant, she jumped in to conduct the Berlin Concert Hall Orchestra in a livestreamed concert in Dortmund, Germany, that ended with a skin-tinglingly expressive Beethoven Fourth that felt all about future promise. After taking the summer off for the birth of her second boy, Mirga was back in Birmingham, England, celebrating the orchestra's 100th birthday. Like Salonen, she made a major Britten statement, recording the composer's wartime "[Sinfonia da Requiem.](#)" a riveting statement of loss and wonder ripe for a pandemic year. Get it!



Yuval Sharon directs Kelci Hahn and others during rehearsal for "Sweet Land." (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Yuval Sharon. "Sweet Land," more than any other Industry project, redefined opera with its imaginative use of a downtown park and the vast yet refined scope of music by Chinese émigré composer Du Yun and Native American Raven Chacon, as well as pairs of librettists and directors. In Detroit, where Sharon was named artistic director of [Michigan Opera Theater](#), he staged a pandemic-centric version of Wagner's "Götterdämmerung" in a parking garage. One good thing to come out of America's disastrous coronavirus year is

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that this minor U.S. company is poised to become one of its most important. Meanwhile, as [interim artistic advisor](#) of Long Beach Opera, Sharon has come up with a seemingly feasible and unmissable season next year of operatic revitalization.



Patricia Kopatchinskaja (Gary Coronado / Los Angeles Times)

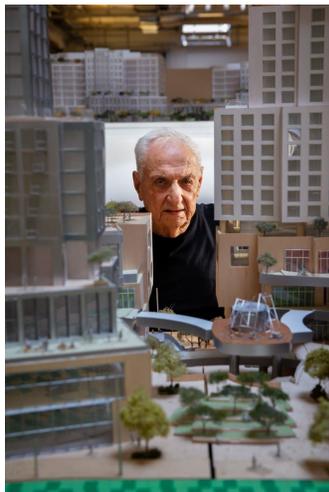
Patricia Kopatchinskaja. The [irrepressible violinist](#), one of the world's great instrumental virtuosos, also proved a virtuoso of moods, from exhilaration to doom. As she does every year, she lived onstage as if were her, and the Earth's, last. She gave recitals in what was left of Europe's summer festivals, many of them broadcast, treating Beethoven, Ravel and Schubert with life-and-death urgency. In a German orchestra concert steamed live from Stuttgart, she sat on the floor facing the conductor, Teodor Currentzis, also on the floor, playing the bizarre Baroque music. Her new recording "What Next Vivaldi?" is not only the most astonishing Vivaldi playing on record but also the craziest, as musically mixed up as our emotional lives have become. Get it!

Deborah Borda. Even without the pandemic the L.A. Phil's transformative former president and CEO would have had her hands full turning around the formerly dysfunctional [New](#)

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[York Philharmonic](#). Yet, despite the horror of New York City's deadly COVID surge and Dutch music director Jaap van Zweden getting stuck in Amsterdam, she stayed in constant, honest touch with her audience, oversaw what may have been the best pandemic orchestra website, put her players on the backs of flatbed trucks throughout the boroughs when that was safe, and somehow managed to salvage, in the midst of a budgetary catastrophe, a feasible renovation of David Geffen Hall, something no one else has been able to do for decades.

Frank Gehry. Having turned 91 in February, the great L.A. architect who continues to say his best work is ahead of him, is not about to rest on his Disney Hall laurels. This fall he released plans for a fabulous pair of [Colburn School concert halls](#) with the potential to make Grand Avenue the arts corridor it is poised to become — if only the clueless Colburn board will, like Borda, move forward, which thus far it has scandalously not. Gehry also has overseen the construction of the [Judith and Thomas Beckmen YOLA Center@Inglewood](#), a stunning home in Inglewood for the L.A. Phil's essential education program, and he has progressed on an educational arts center that's part of his L.A. River project.



Architect Frank Gehry photographed with a model of his Grand Avenue project across the street from Walt Disney Concert Hall. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

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Tyshawn Sorey. Four summers ago at the Ojai Music Festival, the multi-instrumentalist and composer best known as a jazz percussionist proved that his musical realm extended well into the broad world of modern music. Now there is no stopping him. In November alone, Jennifer Koh was soloist with the Detroit Symphony in the premiere of his violin concerto [“For Marcos Balter.”](#) and Seth Parker Woods gave the premiere of Sorey’s moody cello concerto [“For Roscoe Mitchell”](#) with the Seattle Symphony. The pandemic forced the cancellation of a major reworking in Paris of Sorey’s “Perle Noire,” a portrait of Josephine Baker conceived by Peter Sellars and featuring Julia Bullock that had its premiere in Ojai, but [Da Camera](#) of Houston will put a recent version online Friday.

Vijay Gupta. In any other year the violinist, an electrifying advocate for the homeless and founder of the Street Symphony on Skid Row, would be presiding over his inspirational “Messiah Project” at the Midnight Mission around this time, unleashing the vibrant creative potential in a community we too readily underestimate. But the pandemic hasn’t stopped him from spreading the word. Delivering the [33rd annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts Public Policy](#), Gupta offered exceptionally powerful examples of how supporting the arts and supporting the homeless, particularly now when the homeless must add the coronavirus to their devastations, improve society when it most needs improving.



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Brett Steele, dean of the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture, and Kristy Edmunds, executive director and artistic director of the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA, outside the Crest Theater in Westwood. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

Kristy Edmunds. For the head of UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance, the curtain falling on "Parable of the Sower" was but the prelude to her indomitable dealing with a year-plus intermission from the art of live performance. But the art of performance continues. She has scrupulously filmed a host of artists for inspiring [online performances](#) and festivals. She — like Borda, like the L.A. Phil with its YOLA Center and unlike Colburn — also has found in the pandemic opportunity, not obstacle, to continue her Nimoy Theater project, renovating the old Crest Theater in Westwood as CAP UCLA's new home.

A final note. It seems mean-spirited to follow the occasional Times tradition of ending with a stinker of the year. So in the spirit of a great many others in the arts — and in government (Angela Merkel, take a bow) — who have heroically fought to treat the arts as essential, I'll just note that it's not too late for the Colburn board to show crucial foresight as well.