

Canadian Opera Company Alexander Neef cements place as country's most important vocal impresario

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The Canadian Opera Company announced yesterday that it has extended its contract with general director Alexander Neef to the 2020-21 season.

This was, without a doubt, the right thing for the board to do.

Neef, who succeeded the late Richard Bradshaw in 2008, has proven to be a sound manager during uncertain times. He has embarked on a long-term plan to renew the company's productions of the core (i.e. box office-friendly) repertoire, while also bringing in a fresh mix of more challenging works, new and old.

Best of all, Neef has championed the broad range of Canadian vocal talent. We have to remember that most singers still have to spend most of their careers abroad if they want to earn sufficient income to live off their vocation.

Yes, Neef has so far shown himself to be cool to Canadian composers and librettists, but we will all wear him down sooner or later.

These are tough times — much less severe in Toronto than in the United States or Europe, but still challenging for anyone with multi-million-dollar production budgets and sliding ticket sales.

An opera company can't change leadership with the same wild abandon as Yahoo or Hewlett-Packard. Artistic planning is done several seasons into the future and, more importantly, building fruitful relationships with patrons, businesspeople and the arts councils takes time and patience.

We have to remember that the general director is also the fundraiser-in-chief — a duty that the vast majority of European intendants, who have until recently survived on public-sector grants, have no idea how to fulfill. Unless this person does something incredibly (and, in Neef's buttoned-down, poker-faced case, unimaginably) stupid, having a rock of stability on which to forge community relationships is essential.

Neef has also been tireless in fostering outreach, getting the COC on CBC Radio's dwindling list of made-in-Canada broadcasts, and making the annual COC Ensemble Studio auditions into a celebratory, public event.

We also have to realise that, with the near extinction of the vocal recital from Toronto's concert scene over the past two seasons — an extinction brought about entirely by the lack of ticket sales — the Canadian Opera Company and, by extension its general manager, is now the country's single biggest vocal impresario.

It's a role Neef takes very seriously.

So, for the rest of this decade, we will see artistic triumphs and, very probably, a lot of hard-nosed business decisions based on survival.

After four years on the job, the Canadian Opera Company's board of directors are confident Neef is the right person for the job.

The rest of us should be, too.