



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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**2025/26 SEASON AGM HIGHLIGHTS
LARRY DESROCHERS' 26-YEAR LEGACY,
APPOINTMENT OF NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR &
RECORD-BREAKING TICKET SALES**

Manitoba Opera (MO) announced this evening at its 2025/26 Annual General Meeting (AGM), held at the Centennial Concert Hall in Winnipeg, that the year ending May 31, 2026, was historic on several fronts. These include the 26-year end of Larry Desrochers' tenure with the company; longtime employee, Michael Blais', first year as executive director; the appointment of Manitoba-born conductor, pianist, and educator Gordon Gerrard as artistic director; and the highest season box office revenue in company history.

"The 2025/26 season has indeed been a milestone year for the company," said Executive Director Michael Blais. "It marked the end of Larry Desrochers' unprecedented tenure with the company and our transition to a new leadership model in which I serve as executive director and Maestro Gerrard will lead the company's artistic vision."

Serving 25 years as general director & CEO and one year as interim artistic director, Desrocher's leadership was critical in shaping Manitoba Opera into the company it is today.

"Larry's vision, commitment, and passion for the art form have left a lasting impact on our organization, our audiences, and our community. It's now up to us to build on that momentum. I am so pleased that Gordon Gerrard, a talented and respected conductor, artist, and educator has joined our team and will play a vital role in shaping the company's future," Blais continued.

Artistically, both productions - *Tosca* (November 2025) and *The Marriage of Figaro* (April 2026) - were very well received by patrons, which resulted in record-breaking ticket sales. This increase in sales can be attributed to a combination of many factors, including season programming choices, a steady increase in attendance since the pandemic, and a renewed and growing curiosity in the community to experience live arts.

Another very important contributing factor was the multi-year project financing administered through Prairies Economic Development Canada that enabled the company to invest in an engaging audience-building strategy which included significant technology, box office software, and innovation upgrades.

2. Manitoba Opera 2025/26 Annual General Meeting

“It is tremendously encouraging to see audiences continue to return to opera and reaffirming the important role the art form plays in our cultural life,” said Blais. “We are grateful for the continued partnerships and confidence of our sponsors and funders that enables us to dream bigger and achieve more. Funding received from the Prairie Performing Arts Initiative through Prairies Economic Development Canada has been truly transformative and given us the opportunity to implement strategic investments to rebuild and reach out to new audiences, improve long-term financial sustainability, and position Manitoba Opera for continued success.”

The company reported that it posted an operating surplus of \$5,000 following an internal transfer of \$100,000 to its board-designated Operating Reserve Fund. As of May 31, 2026, the Reserve Fund has a balance of \$414,561, up from \$314,561, to support its activities and programs for FY 2027.

The 2025/26 season concluded with box office revenue of \$786,246, which is attributed to strong subscription growth and robust single-ticket demand. *Tosca* achieved 103% of its budgeted box office target and *The Marriage of Figaro* sold out completely, becoming Manitoba Opera's best-selling production in more than 20 years. Subscriptions climbed to 2,419, representing a 25% increase over the previous year and reaching 95% of the company's pre-pandemic five-year average.

The company was able to exceed all fundraising targets for the season, with sponsorships growing by almost \$30,000 to a total of \$260,200. During the 2025/26 season, the A. Kerr Twaddle Robert H. Thorlakson Manitoba Opera Endowment Fund (launched in 2010) also grew by over \$1 million. As of May 31, 2026, the fund totaled \$5,611,556.

“The 2025/26 season was unprecedented. The community came out in record numbers to experience the wonderful work of the casts, chorus, and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra in both productions. We promoted Director of Administration Michael Blais to the newly created role of executive director and welcomed esteemed conductor Gordon Gerrard to the helm as artistic director,” said Lori Yorke, Chair, Board of Trustees.

“We also said good-bye to Larry Desrochers, the longest serving general director in Canadian opera history and wish him all the very best.

The season wouldn't be possible without the ongoing and unwavering support of our patrons and supporters. It is the generous support of individual donors, corporate partners, funders, and investments from all three levels of government that enables us to put our best work on the stage. This is a historic moment for Manitoba Opera as we look ahead to new artistic possibilities and ways that we can continue connecting with our community.”

The 2026/27 Board of Trustees was also announced at the AGM. Returning members are Paul Bruch-Wiens, Sandy Chahal, Terence Sokohianisaks Douglas, Flavia Fernandez Fabio, Lana Maidment, Anthony Maros, Luisa Matheson, Andrea McLandress, John Pacak, Dr. Bill Pope, Dr. Verona Wheatley, and Lori Yorke (Chair). Joining the board of trustees are E. Berk Erke, Paula Havixbeck, and Dale Vencatasamy (see below for bios). Board members completing their service are Charlene Ord and D. Grant Suderman.

Larry Desrochers was also conferred with the lifetime title of General Director Emeritus at the AGM in recognition of his distinguished leadership and enduring contributions to the company, art form, and Manitoba's cultural life.

2026/27 SEASON: Scott Joplin's Treemonisha: A Musical Reimagining & Madama Butterfly

Manitoba Opera will open the 2026/27 season with the Western Canadian premiere of **Scott Joplin's Treemonisha** (pronounced TREE-muh-NEESH-uh): **A Musical Reimagining** November 21, 25, and 27. One of opera's most powerful and unforgettable stories, Puccini's **Madama Butterfly**, will close the season April 17, 21, and 23. Both productions will be presented at the Centennial Concert Hall.

Subscriptions and single tickets are now available. For more information on tickets, call 204-944-8824 or visit mbopera.ca.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES NEW MEMBERS 2026/27 SEASON

E. BERK ERKE, CFA, TEP

**Senior Investment Counsellor and Portfolio Manager
BMO Private Investment Counsel Inc. ("BPIC")**



A senior investment professional with over 20 years of experience in private wealth and banking, E. Berk Erke is a senior investment counsellor and portfolio manager with BMO Private Investment Counsel, advising ultra-high, net-worth individuals, families, foundations, and charitable organizations on the long-term stewardship of capital. He joined the company in 2008.

As a chartered financial analyst (CFA) and trust and estate practitioner (TEP), Erke brings an integrated perspective that extends beyond investment performance alone. He collaborates with clients' legal, tax and family-office advisors to ensure portfolios are aligned with governance structures, long-term objectives, and real-world constraints – particularly important for families with cross-border considerations or multijurisdictional assets.

Erke maintains a strong interest in community engagement and the role of arts and cultural institutions in enriching civic life. He enjoys being engaged in initiatives that strengthen community connection and cultural access.

PAULA A. HAVIXBECK

**Academic Chair, Continuing Education Academic Programming
Red River College Polytechnic**



Paula Havixbeck is an educational leader, business consultant, and former municipal politician with extensive experience spanning post-secondary education, public service, governance, and community development. She currently serves as the academic chair for Continuing Education Academic Programming at Red River College Polytechnic, where she leads the development of innovative, industry-responsive programming that supports workforce development and lifelong learning. She has taught business and leadership courses at the University of Manitoba's I.H. Asper School of Business, the University of Winnipeg, and at Red River College Polytechnic.

Havixbeck has built a diverse career across the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Her experience includes management positions with the City of Winnipeg and the Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba, as well as more than two decades as a business and marketing consultant supporting organizations, municipalities, Indigenous communities, agricultural groups, non-profits, and post-secondary institutions.

As a former Winnipeg city councillor and mayoral candidate, Paula Havixbeck was recognized for her commitment to fiscal accountability, transparent governance, and long-term community planning.

She has also contributed to numerous community and governance initiatives through board and volunteer service include the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg Museums Board, Winnipeg Arts Council, and Heritage Buildings Committee.

**DALE VENCATASAMY, MBA, B.A. Econ.
President & Owner, Carpets for Less Inc.**



Dale Vencatasamy has dedicated much of his career to strategic planning, financial management, and business development. After spending over 20 years working within some of Winnipeg's largest companies and advising business leaders, Vencatasamy made the jump into entrepreneurship in 2022. Since then, he has grown one business and acquired a second. As president of Carpets for Less Inc., Vencatasamy continues to lead the company in year-over-year growth.

Immigrating to Canada at the age of three, Dale Vencatasamy has been involved in the arts for most of his life. Whether it was piano lessons, community choirs, school band, musical theatre, or the University of Manitoba Singers, Dale credits the arts as being the creative outlet that helps him be a better husband, father, and business leader. Ultimately, for him, this is why giving back to the arts is so important.