HIGH NOTES

THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ACADEMY OF VOCAL ARTS **2025–2026 SEASON**



From left to right: Beautiful Sheriff, Ryan Wornall, Cumhur Görgün, Joshua Berg, Joshua Klein, Alla Yarosh, Sergio Mandujano, and Matthew Sink in *I Capuleti e i Montecchi.*

Photo credit: Wave Lane

AVA
ACADEMY OF VOCAL ARTS

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ACADEMY OF VOCAL ARTS

The mission of the **Academy of Vocal Arts** is to be the world's premier institution for training young artists as international opera soloists. With its rigorous instruction and coaching, as well as performance opportunities in concerts, recitals, and fully staged operas, the Academy trains the most promising young singers from around the world, while also contributing to the performing arts community in the greater Philadelphia region.

Founded in 1934, the Academy of Vocal Arts is the only tuition-free institution dedicated exclusively to the study of voice. When Resident Artists graduate from AVA, they are prepared to share their gifts with audiences around the world, fulfilling not only their own hopes and dreams, but those of AVA's wise and generous founder, Helen Corning Warden.

Gifted singers come to Philadelphia from all over the world to seek the exceptional guidance and training that the Academy of Vocal Arts offers. Admission to the tuition-free program is determined yearly by competitive auditions. While hundreds of hopeful singers apply, only 6-8, 3% of applicants, are accepted into the four-year program each year.

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** in memoriam*

† resigned April 2026

WELCOME



Dear Friends,

It is my pleasure to present *High Notes,* the annual report of the Academy of Vocal Arts. This year's publication looks back on a season brimming with illicit romance, treacherous intrigues, and riotous laughter – from July 1, 2025, to June 30, 2026 – a year that saw our Resident Artists rise to the occasion, taking on renowned classics.

Aside from working on four fully staged operas and singing in concerts, recitals, lectures, and events, our Resident Artists were busy preparing for the demands of their future professional careers. They receive many hours of vocal training and coaching each week, in addition to lessons in languages, stage combat, stage interpretation, and professional development. Behind the success of each Resident Artist is the outstanding faculty. The performances on stage are crafted in practice rooms and rehearsal halls under the tutelage of our renowned coaches and instructors.

2025-2026 was another successful year of accomplishments at AVA. This season's repertoire pushed our singers to new heights, seeing them take on challenging roles in the opera canon, like the titular Sir John Falstaff of *Falstaff* and Susanna of *Le nozze di Figaro,* that they will carry with them for the rest of their careers. Outside of AVA, our Resident Artists won many major awards. They had an extremely successful year in the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition, with five of our singers advancing out of Districts. Alla Yarosh, Katherine Dobbs, and Julianna Smith swept the top three spots in the Mid-Atlantic Region, and Anna Thompson won the competition. We had five Zachary Competition Finalists, with our own Daniela Machado winning first prize. This season our Resident Artists made names for themselves as rising stars in the wider opera world.

We concluded the season with our annual Farewell Recital, featuring our newest graduates, Cumhur Görgün and Alla Yarosh. It is always bittersweet to say goodbye to our brilliant artists, but we look forward to watching their careers bloom in the coming years and wish them much success.

It is an honor to lead this exceptional organization and carry out our important mission of providing the very best tuition-free training to the next generation of great opera singers. Thank you for your continued partnership and support of our work. I look forward to seeing you all many times this season.

Warmly,



Scott Guzielek
President and Artistic Director

THE 2025–2026 OPERA THEATER SEASON

The 2025-2026 season kicked off in the fall with one of our most eagerly anticipated events of the year, the New Artists Recital, introducing patrons to the singers who earned a coveted spot at AVA. Our seven new Resident Artists, Jasmine Rose (soprano), Anna Thompson (soprano), Dawson Franzino (mezzo-soprano), Maiya Williams (mezzo-soprano), Sergio Mandujano (tenor), Matthew Sink (tenor), and Ryan Wornall (bass) filled The Church of the Holy Trinity in Rittenhouse Square with shimmering sound as they performed favorite arias, wonderfully supported by Music Director and pianist José Meléndez.

That initial excitement continued at the annual Giargiari Bel Canto Competition in the Perelman Theater on the Kimmel Cultural Campus, generously sponsored by Walter and Alice Strine, Esquires. The competition presented our singers to an influential panel of judges from across the opera industry: Robert Ainsley, Artistic and General Director of the Glimmerglass Festival, Bill Palant, Founder and Managing Director of Étude Arts artist management, and renowned soprano and AVA alumna, Angela Meade ('09). The winner of the 2025 First Prize and Audience Choice Award was mezzo-soprano Alla Yarosh, who impressed the judges with her heartfelt rendition of "Che farò senza Euridice?" from Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Bass-baritone



From left to right: Danielle Orlando and Alla Yarosh at the Giargiari Bel Canto Competition.

Photo credit: Wave Lane



From left to right: Alla Yarosh, Geoffrey Schmelzer, Jacob Hanes, Matthew Sink, and Veronica Richer in *Capriccio*.

Photo credit: Morgan Horell

Nan Wang won Second Prize with the rarely heard "Ombre di mia prosapia" from Amilcare Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*. Third Prize was shared by soprano Alexa Frankian for her rendition of "Senza mamma" from Giacomo Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, and baritone Geoffrey Schmelzer for his lively rendition of "O vin, dissipe la tristesse" from Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*. Master Vocal Coach and Music Director Danielle Orlando oversaw this event and accompanied all Resident Artists.

The Helen Corning Warden theater was buzzing with excitement as the Opera Theatre season began in earnest with a black-tie Opening Night Celebration, of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro.* The esteemed Maestro Joseph Colaneri conducted and Tara Faircloth's direction charmed audiences. Opening Night guests enjoyed cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, dinner by Catering by Design, and a post-performance champagne toast to celebrate the singers. Performances of *Le nozze di Figaro* were generously sponsored by Victoria Zoellner. After two weeks at AVA, *Le nozze di Figaro* went on tour with performances at Centennial Hall at The Haverford School, the Zoellner Arts Center at Lehigh University, and the Life Sciences Building at Delaware Valley University, extending AVA's reach more than 50 miles outside of Philadelphia. The next generation of opera lovers were also part of the fun at our special outreach performance for young students at The Haverford School. Members of AVA's Young Professionals program enjoyed a special performance of the opera, generously sponsored by Charlotte H. Watts, followed by the chance to mingle with the Resident Artists.

Our winter production of Richard Strauss's *Capriccio* featured four performances in AVA's intimate Helen Corning Warden Theater that allowed the audience to see the theater in a fascinating new light. Presented with piano accompaniment, the production extended the stage beyond the proscenium, bringing the Resident Artists closer to the audience for an even more intimate experience. The production was directed by AVA's own Dr. Josh Miller and was music directed and accompanied by Luke Housner. This production of *Capriccio* was made possible thanks to generous sponsorship by Barbara Augusta Teichert.

Strauss's conversational *Capriccio* was followed by the soaring vocal lines of Bellini's bel canto gem, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, presented for the first time in the Helen Corning Warden Theater. The production, directed by John de los Santos, was set against the backdrop of the 17th-century French Wars of Religion, marking a visually stunning AVA premiere of Bellini's rarely performed opera. This production was led by AVA's first female conductor, Maestra Michelle Rofrano,



From left to right: Joshua Klein, Cumhur Görgün, Maiya Williams, and Raúl Morales Velazco in *Le nozze di Figaro*.

Photo credit: Morgan Horell



From left to right: Alex Mathews, Beautiful Sheriff, Julianna Smith, Cole McIlquham, and Daniela Machado in *Falstaff*.

Photo credit: Morgan Horell



From left to right: Beautiful Sheriff and Alla Yarosh in *I Capuleti e i Montecchi.*

Photo credit: Wave Lane

whose appearance was generously underwritten by Sheila Kessler.

The final opera to grace AVA's Helen Corning Warden Theater this season was Giuseppe Verdi's final opera, the comedic masterpiece, *Falstaff*. After its sold-out downtown run, the production traveled to Centennial Hall at The Haverford School. Maestro Steven White led the AVA Opera Orchestra with wit, echoed onstage by Chas Rader-Shieber's riotous stage direction. This production of *Falstaff* was generously sponsored by Judith Broudy. Like our production of *Le nozze di Figaro*, Young Professionals were invited back for their own performance with a post-performance champagne reception with the Resident Artists, generously sponsored by Charlotte H. Watts.

Our annual Farewell Recital held at The Church of the Holy Trinity in Rittenhouse Square was a touching sendoff for our graduates Alla Yarosh (mezzo-soprano), and Cumhur Görgün (bass) under the direction of José Meléndez. For the AVA family, the recital is always a bittersweet occasion, but also a moment of tremendous pride. We celebrated not only their artistic growth and life-changing achievements during their time here, but the role your support has played in helping these exceptional artists as they prepare to take their first steps on the world's great opera stages.



Sergio Mandujano performs at the AVA Holiday Party.

Photo credit: Morgan Horell

The season came to a close with Brindisi!, AVA's annual gala, held at the picturesque Crossing Vineyard and Winery in Bucks County. The evening celebrated 91 years of opera training and, most importantly, the generous donors who make AVA possible. Through your continued support, our Resident Artists have the opportunity to pursue world-class training and launch their professional careers without financial barriers. The popular live auction was led by guest auctioneer Richard Troxell ('92). Led by Event Chair Scott Hickman, the evening included an elegant dinner by Catering by Design, with arias and ensembles performed by our Resident Artists. Thank you for joining us in celebrating opera excellence and supporting the future generation of opera singers.

CLASS OF 2026

AVA bid a fond farewell to two Resident Artists this year at the annual Farewell Recital, which took place at The Church of the Holy Trinity in Rittenhouse Square. We will miss these talented singers, and we look forward to following their promising careers around the world.



CUMHUR GÖRGÜN

BASS

Memorable AVA roles: Lorenzo, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*; Figaro, *Le nozze di Figaro*; *Méphistophélès*, *Faus*t; Don Basilio, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*; Collatinus, *The Rape of Lucretia*; Enrico VIII, *Anna Bolena*; Leporello, *Don Giovanni*; Don Pasquale, *Don Pasquale*; Marchese d'Obigny, *La traviata.*



ALLA YAROSH

SOPRANO

Memorable AVA roles: Romeo, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*; Clairon, *Capriccio*; Beppe, *L'amico Fritz*; Dorabella, *Cosí fan tutte*; Siebel, *Faust*; Lucretia, *The Rape of Lucretia*; Smeton, *Anna Bolena*; Annina, *La traviata*.



Collage photo credit: Morgan Horell

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS







AVA Young Professionals is a community of young opera enthusiasts under the age of 45 based in the Greater Philadelphia area who celebrate a mutual love of music through networking and social gatherings, exclusive receptions, and opportunities to meet and mingle with AVA's Resident Artists. More than a social program, Young Professionals helps AVA introduce a new generation of audiences to opera, build connections with the art form, our singers, and one another that we hope will last for years to come.

Special events for Young Professionals this year included discounted performances of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Falstaff*, and after-performance champagne receptions with the Resident Artists. These events were generously sponsored by Charlotte H. Watts, whose support helps AVA make opera more accessible and welcoming to a new generation of opera lovers.

Young Professionals Reception.
Photo credit: Morgan Horell

OPERA OUTREACH

In 2025-2026, Opera Outreach reached 998 students from 20 schools, including public, private, and charter schools, from across the Greater Philadelphia region. Participating schools include both loyal, long-time partners, some of which have attended for more than a decade, and newer schools, with nearly half joining the program since the pandemic. On average, participating schools have a 71% minority enrollment.

Student-length matinee performances of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Falstaff* were presented at The Haverford School's Centennial Hall. Free Study Guides provided materials for teachers and students to prepare for what they would see and hear. Question & Answer Sessions followed the performances where Resident Artists answered students' questions about how they began singing, how to learn and memorize a role, what it's like to sing in foreign languages, and the daily life of an opera singer, among many others.



What Teachers are Saying:

"The AVA outreach performance of *Falstaff* was an extraordinary experience for my students, many of whom were attending their first opera.

Once the opera began, the students were completely captivated by the singing, staging, and storytelling.

Experiences like this are incredibly valuable because they provide students with meaningful access to the arts while creating authentic and memorable connections to language, literature, music, and culture."

-Colleen DiMaggio, Upper Darby High School

What Students are Saying:

"Thank you so much for inviting me and my school mates to attend your magnificent opera. The show was absolutely spectacular and extremely entertaining as well as funny. I really enjoyed the stage presence of the actors. My favorite character was definitely Susanna because she was really cute and pure and her character was super funny. This opera impacted our school by letting us take in a new world of art that we don't typically see in our area. So dear Academy of Vocal Arts, please continue doing your amazing performances and bless the people of the world with your splendid vocals and acting skills, stay safe, wealthy, and most importantly happy."

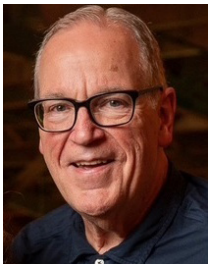
- Fariath (grade 7)

A note from Bill Buddendorf, the Director of Patron Engagement and Opera Outreach:

"After completing my first year as director of the Rebecca Carr Opera Outreach program, I was blown away by the enthusiastic reaction from the attending students. The faculty have shared inspiring stories about students who have overcome behavioral and academic challenges through music class and specifically coming to the AVA performances. They leave the performances telling me and their teachers how they will "write an opera" or they will "be on that stage someday." I am overwhelmed with gratitude to Rebecca Carr for creating and fostering the outreach program for so many years and am fiercely committed to carrying on her legacy."

Please join us in welcoming our new Board, Faculty, and Staff Members!

NEW AVA BOARD MEMBERS



ERIC L. HUME M.D. is an orthopaedic surgeon specializing in hip and knee arthroplasty and trauma surgery. During a career spanning over 40 years, he practiced orthopaedic surgery and served on the faculties at Thomas Jefferson Medical College and Hospital, Cooper Hospital, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center. He continues at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in a semi-retired capacity. Eric studied the piano and trumpet and sang in the University of Rochester Chorus and Men's Glee Club. After he met his future father-in-law, who was a professor of viola at the Eastman School of Music, his experience of classical music grew profoundly. Currently, he enjoys teaching Penn residents part-time and family time with his wife, two daughters, and three grandchildren.



KHA TRINH is a risk management executive with over 15 years of industry experience in financial stress testing (CCAR/DFAST) for large banks, model governance, financial reporting, and procurement. Throughout his career, Kha has been known for efficiently building programs that could meet the needs of multiple internal and regulatory stakeholders. Outside of work, he is an avid fan of the opera, orchestra, and boutique fitness. As part of the AVA Board, Kha is committed to expanding AVA's reach to young professionals within the region.

IN MEMORIAM



We remember with gratitude those whose generous support of AVA, our Resident Artists, and the future of opera left a lasting impact.

LICIA (LEE) ALLMAN
ABRAHAM BAILIS
ALEXIS BARRON
ALLEN BLACK
DENISE FROST
WILLIAM HANGLEY
JACQUELINE JERREHIAN
IVAN RUDOLPH
P. JEFFREY WARDEN

NEW AVA STAFF AND FACULTY:

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSOCIATE



KRIS SELL (she/they) Finished their degree in Film and Television at Drexel University after attending the University of the Arts for 3 years before its closure. She has worked on many a short film and co-founded the Foley Artist Collective at UArts. They have accumulated 10 years of customer service experience throughout their lifetime and have a deep passion for all fine and performing arts.

DEVELOPMENT EVENTS MANAGER



CHAZ T. MARTIN (they/them) is a producer, writer, and performer in Philadelphia. They were most recently the Literary and Development Manager at InterAct Theatre Company before joining the Academy of Vocal Arts team. They produce the biannual comedy festival, Variety Pack.

ADVANCEMENT OPERATIONS COORDINATOR AND BOARD LIAISON



MONTI CERABINO (he/him) is a graduate of the Directing, Playwriting, and Production BFA program at the University of the Arts. Outside of AVA, Monti is a freelance theatre director and producer, as well as the co-founder and artistic director of Theatre by Development, a theatre company focused on workshopping and producing new plays by emerging Philadelphia playwrights. Theatre by Development has been recognized as Philly's Favorite Theatre company by the The Philadelphia Inquirer in 2025 & 2026 and was awarded the 5-Star Fringe Award in 2025.

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER AND ASSISTANT PRODUCTION MANAGER



KEL FLEMING (they/them) is a Magna Cum Laude graduate of the Directing, Playwriting, and Production BFA program at University of the Arts, where they fell in love with theatrical production. When not at AVA, they are a freelance Stage and Production Manager working with local companies such as The Philadelphia Orchestra, Ensemble Arts, Applied Mechanics and Obvious Agency. Kel is a founding member of sketch comedy group "The Freaks" and is the Production and Stage Manager for the Variety Pack Comedy Festival, and moonlights as a playwright and performer, writing and performing many of their own works.

VOCAL COACH



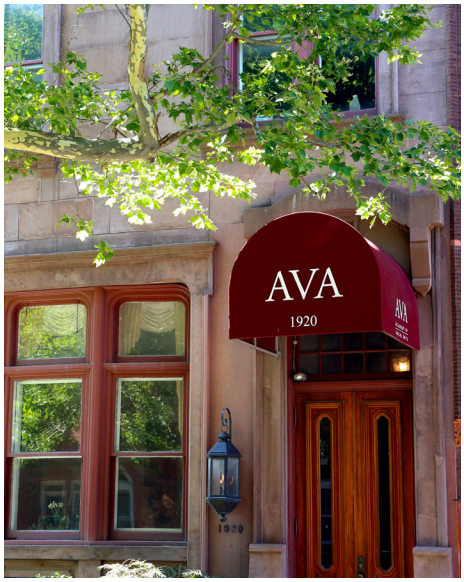
French pianist **MATTHIEU COGNET** (he/him) is an internationally active soloist, chamber musician, vocal coach, and artistic leader, with performances spanning Europe, Asia, and the United States. He has collaborated with distinguished artists, including flutist Carol Wincenc and violinist Philip Setzer, and appeared as soloist with orchestras in the U.S. and Europe. A laureate of international competitions, Mr. Cognet holds degrees from the Paris and Brussels Conservatories, Paris–Sorbonne University, Indiana University, and a Doctor of Musical Arts from Stony Brook University. He is Artistic Director of the French-American Piano Society, Staff Collaborative Pianist at The Juilliard School, French Diction Coach at the Curtis Institute and the Academy of Vocal Arts, and Collaborative Piano Artist at Meadowmount. He has released four albums and published his own arrangement of Ravel's La Valse.

PIANIST



SARAH THUNE (she/her) is a native of Des Moines, Iowa. Ms. Thune completed her DMA in Collaborative Piano at the University of Michigan studying under Martin Katz. She also holds degrees from the University of Colorado Boulder (M.M. Collaborative Piano), Syracuse University (M.M. Piano Performance), and Drake University (B.M. Piano Performance). An active chamber musician, Sarah has performed in concerts through the Anchorage Music Festival, the University of Alabama, the Civic Music Association of Des Moines, Iowa, Civic Morning Musicals in Syracuse, NY, the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, the Western Slope Concert Series in Grand Junction, Colorado, the Tuesday Morning Musicale in Detroit, the LACMA in Los Angeles, Light Opera Lab in NYC, and the Musicians Club of Women in Chicago, among others.

SUPPORTING AVA



GIVING VOICE TO OPERA'S FUTURE

The future of opera depends on the extraordinary voices of the gifted young artists at the Academy of Vocal Arts, the world's only tuition-free conservatory dedicated exclusively to training opera soloists. They arrive with exceptional talent and leave ready for international careers, shaped by rigorous instruction, individualized coaching, and professional performance experience that equip them for leading roles on the world's great opera stages.

For nearly a century, those stages have included The Metropolitan Opera, La Scala, Paris Opera, the Vienna State Opera, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and many others. AVA alumni have enriched audiences with their artistry while ensuring opera remains a vibrant, living art form for generations to come.

This remarkable transformation is made possible through philanthropy.

Your gift supports the hallmarks of an AVA education: a tuition-free experience, master teachers, and transformative performance opportunities. When you give to AVA, you are not simply investing in an educational institution. You are investing in the future of opera.

OPPORTUNITIES TO GIVE

ANNUAL FUND

The Annual Fund provides the resources that sustain every aspect of AVA's mission, from world-class instruction and coaching to unforgettable performances. A gift to the Annual Fund has an immediate impact on our Resident Artists while enriching audiences throughout the Philadelphia region. Annual Fund donors also enjoy invitations to exclusive events and opportunities to meet our Resident Artists.

RESIDENT ARTIST FELLOWSHIPS

Resident Artist Fellowships provide critical support for living expenses during AVA's rigorous training program, allowing gifted young artists to focus entirely on their musical and professional development. Fellowships may be funded annually or endowed to create a lasting legacy for generations of singers.

DONOR-ADVISED FUNDS

A grant from your donor-advised fund is one of the simplest and most tax-efficient ways to support AVA. Recommend a grant through your sponsoring organization and help give voice to opera's future. Please contact the Development Office for additional information. Our EIN is 23-1352001.

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A planned gift to AVA is an enduring investment in opera's future. The Helen Corning Warden Society recognizes those who have included AVA in their estate plans through a bequest, charitable trust, charitable gift annuity, retirement plan designation, or life insurance policy. In doing so, you help ensure that future generations of extraordinary artists continue to find their voices at AVA.

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIPS AND PERFORMANCE UNDERWRITING

Corporate partnerships provide meaningful support for AVA's fully staged opera productions, Resident Artist recitals, the AVA Opera Orchestra, and other artistic initiatives. Sponsorship opportunities can be tailored to align with your philanthropic priorities while providing prominent community recognition.

MATCHING GIFTS

Many employers will match charitable contributions, doubling or even tripling the impact of your generosity. Please contact your employer's benefits office to determine whether your gift qualifies.Opera Outreach.



UNITED WAY

The Rebecca Carr Opera Outreach Program is eligible to receive contributions through the United Way Specific Care Program. To designate your gift, enter AVA's code #3164 on your United Way pledge form.

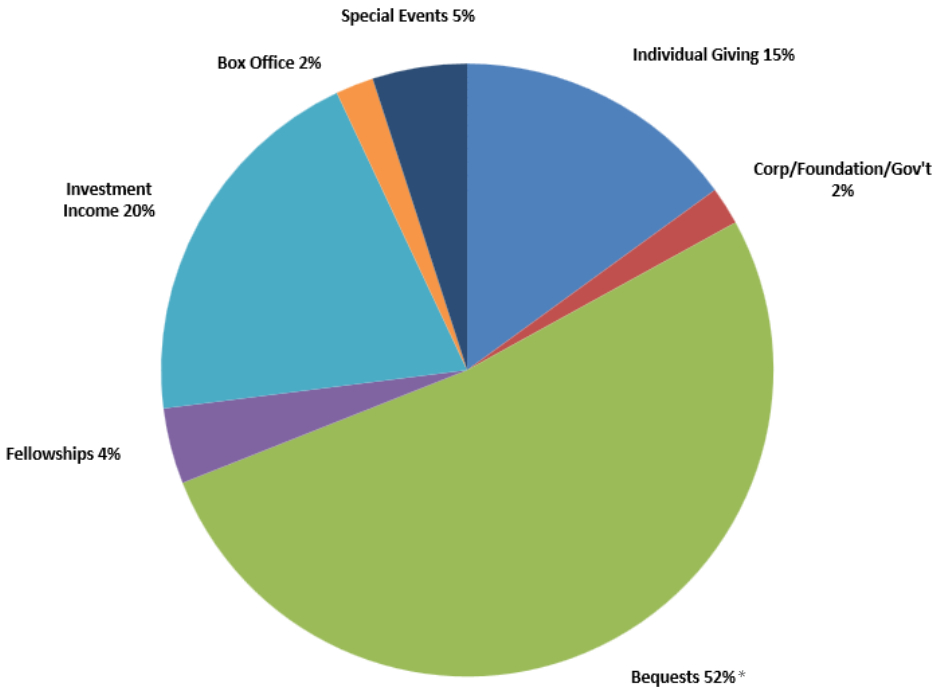
For a conversation about supporting the Academy of Vocal Arts and our Resident Artists, please contact Michael Bolton, Director of Advancement, at mbolton@avaopera.org or 215.735.1685.

To make a gift, mail your contribution to the Academy of Vocal Arts, Attn: Development Office, 1920 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103, or visit www.avaopera.org and click

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Thank you for helping the Academy of Vocal Arts give voice to opera's future.

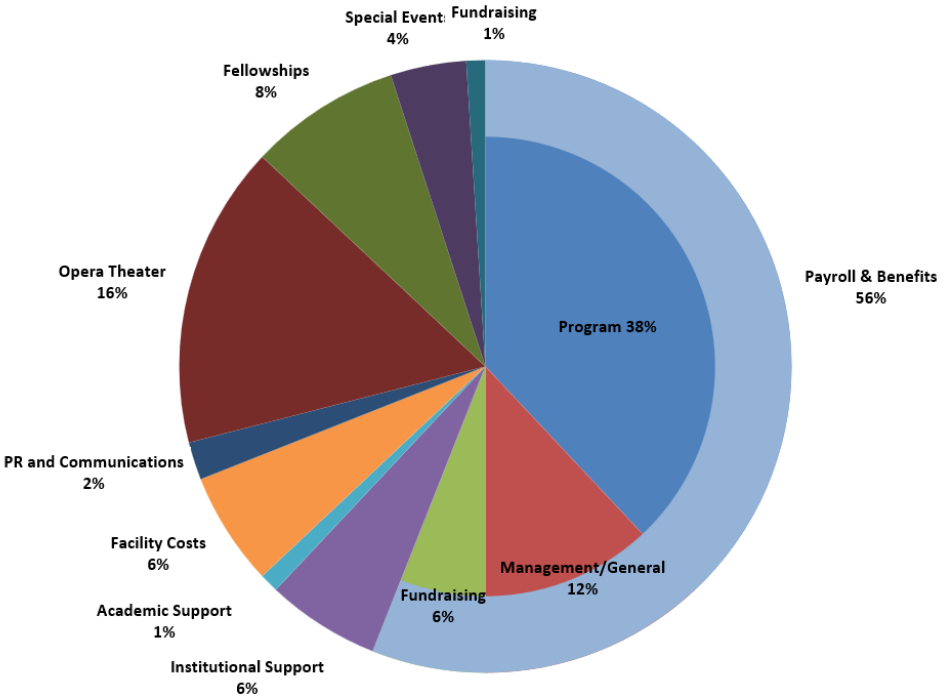
FINANCIALS



OPERATING INCOME

$9,659,906

Operating income consists of revenue from a variety of sources. Like many schools, the largest single revenue source for AVA is the investment income from its endowment. Unlike other schools or conservatories, AVA receives no income from tuition, and therefore must rely on support from our loyal patrons. Individual and foundation contributions, ticket sales, and special events, including the annual Gala, provide most of the remainder of our budget. In recent years, planned gifts and bequests have been an increasingly significant source of revenue support. Thank you to all who share our love for opera and want to help us train the voices for opera's future!



UNRESTRICTED OPERATING EXPENSES

$4,787,708

The two largest expenditures in AVA's budget, program payroll and benefits, along with opera theatre expenses, are directly related to the training program. Other costs are associated with recitals, concerts, and piano productions.

**If you would like to learn more about how you can continue your legacy with AVA, visit our website to read about joining the Helen Corning Warden Society.*

A SPECIAL THANK YOU

We would like to extend our thanks to all our donors and contributors. No matter the size of your donation, you are doing your part to ensure the future of opera by donating to the Academy of Vocal Arts and supporting talented Resident Artists. We would like to extend a special thank you to our generous 2025-2026 leading supporters.

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