



SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA

MICHAEL CAVANAGH (1961–2024) AWARDED OPERA MEDAL



Michael Cavanagh. Photo: Anita Watkins

Opera director who created many unforgettable productions for San Francisco Opera recognized with Company's highest honor



John Adams' *Nixon in China* (2012); Michael Cavanagh with set model for Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (2015), Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* (2014). Photos: Cory Weaver (left and right); Scott Wall (center)

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (April 19, 2024) — San Francisco Opera presented the Opera Medal, the Company's highest honor, to Michael Cavanagh shortly before his death last month. The acclaimed Canadian opera director, who passed away on March 13 from leptomenigeal cancer at the age of 62, was a guiding, creative force behind a number of important new productions for San Francisco Opera over the past decade, including his vision for presenting composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and librettist Lorenzo Da

Ponte's three operatic collaborations as a trilogy set in a single American house over three centuries.

San Francisco Opera Dianne and Tad Taube General Director **Matthew Shilvock** said: "It was clear from the moment Michael debuted with us in 2012 that his vision, energy and collaborative spirit resonated beautifully with the Company and this city. We entered into a series of new productions with Michael that have defined so much of the artistic arc of the Company over the last decade. In recognition of his extraordinary impact on the artistry of our stage, we proudly awarded Michael our highest honor, the San Francisco Opera Medal. His beloved wife, Jackie Short, was able to share the news with him shortly before he passed.

"Michael has left us far too soon, but he leaves us with an incredible body of work that will continue to be a part of our repertoire and the most beautiful memories that so many of us have of working with him, laughing with him, making art with him. Michael will forever be part of the soul of San Francisco Opera, and it is our great honor to have written this chapter with his friendship."

Winnipeg-born Cavanagh was a brilliant, funny and prolific director. He began as a singer, performing in church and school choirs. During his 20s, Cavanagh sang with the *a cappella* group The Easy Ts and appeared on the popular Canadian television program *Hymn Sing* with a choir. During a period of study in Hamburg, he realized that he was, in his words, "in the wrong end of the right business." He began writing, producing and directing operas for Manitoba Opera and The Winnipeg Fringe Festival and embarked on a 34-year international career, directing more than 150 operas for over 30 opera companies across Canada, the United States and Europe. In 2020, he was appointed Director of Opera at the Royal Swedish Opera (RSO), one of the world's oldest opera companies. Cavanagh's 2023 production of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* for RSO proved a great success with a sold-out run and critical acclaim.

Following his 2012 San Francisco Opera debut directing the Company premiere of John Adams' *Nixon in China*, Cavanagh staged new productions for the Company of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* in 2014, featuring Patricia Racette in the title role, and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, starring Nadine Sierra and Piotr Beczala in 2015. For the inaugural season of SF Opera Lab in 2016, he staged Ana Sokolović's *a cappella* opera, *Svadba-Wedding*, in the Dianne and Tad Taube Atrium Theater.

Cavanagh's most ambitious and far-reaching contribution to San Francisco Opera was arguably his Mozart-Da Ponte Trilogy which was unveiled over three seasons. Conceived with the creative team of frequent collaborator and set designer Erhard Rom, costume designer Constance Hoffman and lighting designer Jane Cox, the trilogy stagings began in 2019 with *The Marriage of Figaro* (*Le Nozze di Figaro*) set in an America house during the early post-revolutionary period. *Così fan tutte*, which updated the action to the late 1930s with a nation on the brink of war and the house repurposed as a country club, came next in 2021 and the *San Francisco Chronicle* praised it as "terrific ... directed with a light but richly inventive touch by Michael Cavanagh ... it engages us in the piece's essential drama without losing sight of the comic spirit coursing through it." The final installment of the Trilogy project, *Don Giovanni*, had its premiere in 2022 and set the opera in a dystopian future where both house and country are in ruins. Cavanagh's Mozart-Da Ponte Trilogy productions have traveled or are scheduled to travel outside of San Francisco, with presentations at Dallas Opera and LA Opera.



Mozart and Da Ponte's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (2019); Michael Cavanagh with the cast of *Così fan tutte* (2021); *Don Giovanni* (2022). Photos: Cory Weaver (left, right), San Francisco Opera (center)

A celebration of life event for Michael Cavanagh will be held this weekend on Sunday, April 21 at the Somerville House on the campus of Western University in London, Ontario, Canada. For more information, visit the Michael Cavanagh Legacy Foundation page [HERE](#).

The San Francisco Opera Medal was inaugurated in 1970 when former General Director Kurt Herbert Adler awarded the first medal to soprano Dorothy Kirsten. The Opera Medal is awarded for distinguished artistic service to San Francisco Opera over an extended period of time. Past awardees include singers such as Samuel Ramey, Marilyn Horne, Birgit Nilsson and Nina Stemme, former music directors Sir Donald Runnicles and Nicola Luisotti, composer John Adams and artist David Hockney.

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For photographs of Michael Cavanagh and his productions for San Francisco Opera, please visit pressphotos.sfopera.com.

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