

Seattle Opera's 'An American Dream': Community is at the Heart of Everything

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

Posted in [Arts](#), Volume 42 No. 15



Promotional art for 'An American Dream,' which runs on August 21 and 23, at McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer Street. • **Courtesy Photo**

[The Seattle Opera](#) will present a new work that is a collaborative effort not only among the artists involved, but also among our local Puget Sound community.

The new opera, *An American Dream*, arose from the Seattle Opera's Belonging(s) Project, according to Seattle Opera PR Manager Gabrielle Gainor. "The Belonging(s) Project asked members of the community to answer 'If you had to leave today and could not return, what would you take with you?'" Gainor said.

“Seattle Opera received many entries, but was inspired by two stories in particular: one was Marianne Weltmann, a German Jew and former opera singer, and the other was Mary Matsuda Gruenewald, a Nisei Japanese American.”

Then, Seattle Opera’s former Director of Education Sue Elliott became involved, seeing possibilities for an original work. According to Gainor, “Elliott did a lot of awesome community-based operas that were created in partnership with communities of color when she worked at Houston Grand Opera.”

Elliott followed a similar model for *An American Dream*. “Sue was originally the one who organized this project, and also the one who roped in Jessica Murphy Moo, librettist, Jack Perla, composer, Judith Yan, the conductor—and me, as sort of an informal community and cultural adviser,” said Gainor, who is Japanese American and serves on the board of the Japanese American Citizens League.

Gainor worked closely with librettist Jessica Murphy Moo, aiming for linguistic and cultural authenticity. “Even though Jessica is not Japanese, she has created a world in this opera where I have a sense of familiarity and ‘being at home’ in the Japanese American elements,” Gainor said. “She has always listened to me whenever I’ve had a question or concern about something that I found to not accurately represent the Japanese American community. She’s been willing to revise, to learn, and to immerse herself in this experience.”

Gainor also assisted with arrangements for one of the show’s performers, Nina Yoshida Nelsen, who also participated in the development of the opera itself. “Jessica asked Nina to interview her grandmother, a Seattle native who was incarcerated during World War II,” Gainor said. “The interview was then used to write a new aria for Nina’s character.”

Nelsen was happy to participate so fully. “I am half Japanese-American. My grandparents were interned in World War II. When I was asked to be in this opera, I jumped at the opportunity,” Nelsen said. “It’s not often that an opera plot *is* the story of your family.”

Nelsen’s family was pleased, as well. “I am lucky enough that my 91-year-old grandmother is still alive and mentally able to share many stories with me about her experiences in ‘camp,’” said Nelsen. “Ironically, my middle name (Kiyoka) is after my great grandmother. She would have been the same age in camp as my character. I like to think that this is a special connection between us.”

That connection came to life for Nelsen during the interview process. “I have learned so much about my own family through working on this opera,” she said.

“My grandmother has been inspired to share her stories with me, stories I’ve never heard before. It’s been an incredible experience for me!”

As part of *An American Dream*, Nelsen has also been able to give special presentations, with Gainor’s assistance, performing at the 92nd Annual **Japanese American Citizens League** Banquet, as well as for elders at Nikkei Concerns’ **Seattle Keiro** nursing home, many of whom were incarcerated during WWII. “For the Japanese Americans in the 1940s, it was just as easy to lose everything they had worked and dreamed toward,” Nelsen said. “That just breaks my heart.”

Nelsen hopes that seeing their experiences reflected onstage will please local Japanese Americans. “Touching souls with music is one of my greatest joys in life,” Nelsen said. “It’s the most precious gift I have to give.”

Despite their advanced age, both of the women who inspired *An American Dream* have been involved in the project, and both plan to attend the August performance. “Marianne Weltmann attended the workshop performance of the opera, and Mary Matsuda Gruenewald was recently at a community event at Wing Luke for the opera,” said Gainor.

Gainor hopes that this project will alter the perceptions of the local community about the possibilities inherent in opera. “Opera is not simply a dated art form about long ago, and far away,” she said. “It’s about *us*, people, the experience of being human. For this reason, it was important for us as a company to create an opera with locally-sourced stories and bring these to the stage.”

Gainor reports that numerous community partners also helped bring this project to fruition: Holocaust Center for Humanity, Bainbridge Island Historical Museum, Densho, Japanese American Citizens League-Seattle, Museum of History & Industry (MOHAI), Wing Luke Museum of the Asia Pacific Experience, and Los-Angeles-based Japanese American National Museum.

An American Dream reflects the goals of Seattle Opera, said Gainor. “Community is at the heart of everything that Seattle Opera does.”

‘An American Dream’ runs on August 21 and 23, at McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer Street. For more information, visit seattleopera.org/on-stage/american-dream.