

***A Quarter Century of Song
Salt Marsh Opera
Oral History Series, 2000-2025***

***“Open Your Heart to the Music!”
More Fabulous and Unique Shows, 2014-2019***

**By Marianne McNee
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If we can return to the idea of Salt Marsh Opera acting as a superpower in our community, then surely the orchestra has had a major hand, pun intended, in the execution of that achievement. We owe the orchestra a lot. It is their collective effort that plays some of the most beautiful music ever created. As we all can attest, so many distinct and happy memories revolve around music. A few notes and you are transported to another time or place. It's magic, really. And how does this happen? Turns out our brains process music in a special way, releasing dopamine which evokes pleasant emotions and memories. Who doesn't want to enjoy that sensation? Sign us up!

Contributing to this very happy sensation was the fact that, between 2014-2019, state-wide and regional arts-expansion forces were at work, and Salt Marsh Opera was inspired from this groundswell of support. Significant new funding mechanisms, combined with an overarching goal to create a multi-pronged arts network offering first rate cultural events in this area, were already underway. The brass ring of creating a mini-Lincoln Center here was within reach, or so local arts denizens hoped.

A Big Vote in Favor of Cultural Arts Inspires Salt Marsh Opera

The years 2014-2019 proved to be pivotal to Salt Marsh Opera.

As background to the continuing success of the company, the game-changing event in the macro—Rhode Island arts world occurred in November 2014, when ***Question 5***, the ***Creative and Cultural Economy Bond***, was approved by voters. It was the first time a state-wide referendum on the arts was voted on and, lucky for all of us, approved. Rhode Island had made history.

The vote allowed the state to borrow \$35 million in bonds, which were to be used for preservation, renovation, and capital improvements of various cultural landmarks.

This had a trickle-down effect on the whole arts community here. Boards took action, matching grants were offered, and a public-private partnership, with common purpose and much excitement, bloomed anew.

Charles M. Royce, Westerly's respected philanthropist who has generously renovated and improved several local landmarks, got involved in making plans for the United Theatre, which would become one of Salt Marsh Opera's permanent venues. Mr. Royce also has been a major financial supporter of Salt Marsh Opera for many years.

Simon Holt, Salt Marsh Opera Executive Director, remembers the time very well:

"Salt Marsh Opera was in the middle of all this energy, and we felt inspired to try new works and expand our audience. It was an incredible moment."

That's All Great, But What About the Musicians?

Si puo? May I?

As one of the world's foremost experts on opera, New Yorker and honorary Italian, **Fred Plotkin**, suggests in his well-known book, *Opera 101 - A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Opera* [Hyperion, 1994], that opening your heart to the music, without any inhibitions, is the best way to become a music enthusiast. You have to be ready to embrace the music and allow yourself to enter the special world of opera. That's the genesis of the *Pagliacci* line, 'May I,' noted above: may I take you on a journey into the emotion-packed world of opera? Why, yes, thank you!

Enter Salt Marsh Opera co-founder, Simon Holt, who has been conducting the orchestra from the very first show in 2001, expecting the best from his talented players. Since the company's founding, over 150 different musicians have played in the orchestra, with around twenty repeat performers, three of whom we're highlighting in this article.

This month, as a complement to the oral history, we are offering insights from **Alison Holt, Matt McCauley** and **Jill Maurer Davis**, who all played during the years 2014-2019. They elaborate on what makes their love of Salt Marsh Opera, and the broader opera genre, so enduring.

Alison Holt

Alison Holt has been playing viola in the Salt Marsh Opera orchestra every year since the beginning, minus two years, one when her mother was ill in England and another for the Hartford Marathon (well done, Alison!). After attending the **Royal College of Music in London**, where she happened to meet a young organist named Simon Holt, Alison played in several orchestras, freelancing as a viola player and teaching violin and viola, which she continued to do after the Holt family moved to the United States in 1999.

She has found playing in the Salt Marsh Opera orchestra to be enjoyable because of the friendly, yet professional atmosphere.

Asked about her love of opera, Alison explained:

“I think opera is more encompassing than symphonic or choral works as you have both the visual drama of the story on stage and you also hear the emotion in the voice and the music. To me, opera ties together many art forms to immerse the audience more completely in the narrative.”



Alison Holt

One of the unique things about playing in the orchestra, Alison feels, is the connection the orchestra makes with the singers, especially the soloists.

“The thrill of playing in an orchestra for me is the connection formed between the players, with a united purpose to bring across the music. In opera, this purpose is heightened when our job is also to accompany the singers, whom we often cannot see and must rely on hearing alone, in their interpretation of the arias, preempting their nuances and reading their intentions through the conductor’s direction. This wordless communication between players leads to my second love of the orchestra, which is the friendship built upon this common ground. Salt Marsh Opera may change some personnel each year, but we are always a community built on love for what we do.”

Matt McCauley

Salt Marsh Opera string bass player **Matt McCauley** has been playing for Salt Marsh Opera from its very beginnings. He’s a former member of the **Board of Trustees**, and has played with many orchestras.

Like many opera fans, Matt innately had an early appreciation of music, and realized he loved choral music as a child.

“When I was young, my mom listened to **WQXR**’s opera show every Sunday afternoon. It was appointment listening. I was a kid who loved music, so this was fun to me. At **Oberlin College**, I quit bass after returning from a year playing string bass in **Peru’s National Symphony Orchestra**, chamber orchestras, and salsa bands, which was a great experience. After Oberlin, I started working in a start-up recycling company and playing in old-time, pop, and country-western bands. I left music for about 10



Matt McCauley

years and then met **David Darling**, an inspiring improvisational musician, and became deeply involved with his organization, **Music for People**. That's where I met Salt Marsh Opera board member **Mark Hinkley**, who was also on Music for People's board with me. After being re-inspired by David's improvisational concepts, I went back to the books and boned up my bass chops and studied jazz with **Jeff Fuller**. It was around then that Simon got hold of my name and gave me a call so that I could play my first opera, *Madame Butterfly*. Since then, I've learned that Simon is the musician's musician who inspires the best work from everyone, which is a great way to run an opera company. I have really enjoyed working and playing for Salt Marsh Opera."

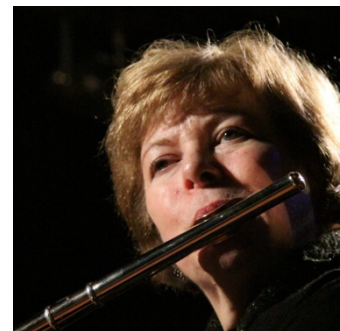
Matt was lucky that he was also able to go to the opera and musical theater as a youngster, adding:

"The best way to experience opera and musical theater is to go to a live performance, sit up close and witness all the moving pieces -- the drama, the music and the spectacle -- and see how they all go together. That's why local opera, such as what Salt Marsh Opera presents, is the gateway to developing an appreciation of the art form."

Jill Maurer-Davis

After a childhood of loving music, **Jill Maurer-Davis** attended the **New England Conservatory** earning undergraduate and graduate degrees along with a diploma from the **Mozarteum**. She later embarked on a career with the **U.S. Coast Guard Band**, retiring in 2001 and meeting Simon Holt during that time.

"My first opera with the company was *The Mikado* in 2004. This was the first Gilbert and Sullivan work that I had ever played, and I am now very much looking forward to playing my second Gilbert and Sullivan with *Pirates of Penzance* this fall (2025). After performing over 50 different operas, playing something new is very exciting. I always make an effort to be available for Salt Marsh Opera productions because of the high-quality singers, the camaraderie of everyone involved with the company and the outstanding collaboration with Simon and **Josh Shaw's** productions."



Jill Maurer-Davis

Ms. Maurer-Davis spoke about the many moments she has experienced, including the production of 2019's *Pagliacci* in the round, with acrobatics and colorful sets and staging. One very favorite memory Jill mentioned was the 2016 production of *Abduction from the Seraglio*.

“Every opera company is reluctant to stage this opera because of the political overtones. However, setting Mozart’s *Seraglio* in the Star Trek universe was not only brilliant but so very, very much fun especially for us in the orchestra. Many other players and I are big sci-fi fans. Some of us even wore Star Trek costumes.”

Turning back the clock a bit, Ms. Maurer-Davis recalls a special moment from 2008:

“One of my unique memories was working with soprano **Diana McVey** during 2008’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* which involved the famous unaccompanied ‘Mad Scene’ cadenza between the soprano and the flute. The orchestra was hidden completely behind the set, so there was no visible communication between us. Diana’s professionalism and consistency helped me to play this challenging part.”

While we chatted with only three company musicians for this article, it is important to note that **ALL Salt Marsh Opera musicians** have contributed greatly to the success of the company. And we thank each and every one of them for their outstanding work!

2014-2019 Productions Recap

In addition to building on its usual list of productions, including *Kids Love Opera!*, The Guild sponsored talks with **James Kuslan**, *Music at the Lighthouse*, Classic Love Songs, Victory Celebrations, Arts on the Quad (Mystic), Broadway Classics and Moonlight Serenade events at The Ocean House, Salt Marsh Opera undertook two bold new productions, *The Abduction of the Seraglio* (2016) and *Jack and Jill and The Happening Hill* (2018).

“We wanted to broaden our audience reach and appeal to younger people. The mash-up of Star Trek with Mozart’s track produced fine moments of irony, with singing Klingons and space age Mozart. This show was something different for us and a lot of fun,” Simon Holt said.

Jack and Jill and The Happening Hill used a new libretto by local poet **Nancy Meneely** set to the music of **Sarah Meneely-Kyder** and music composed by several of our emerging middle school composers.

“It’s a great way for children to start understanding opera, experience live performance, and learn how to work through a story. Both of these shows were well-received and accomplished our mission of reaching out to different communities and audiences,” Director Holt added.

Main Stage Productions, 2014- 2019

- 2014 - *The Marriage of Figaro* – such delicious guile, romance and intrigue
- 2015 - *Madame Butterfly* – one beautiful day, one forsaken dream

- 2016 - *The Abduction from the Seraglio* – a Star Trek parody of Mozart’s opera
- 2017 - *Don Giovanni* – souls dangled on a thread of fate
- 2018 - *La bohème* – experience love at any cost
- 2019 - *Pagliacci* – man swallowed by feelings of love, jealousy and betrayal

Kids Love Opera! Productions:

- 2014 - *Gianni Schicchi* – a comedy from Puccini. Who knew? And what a joy!
- 2015 - *The Magic Flute* – adventure, mystery and music - a timeless tale for all.
- 2016 - *La Cenerentola* – a merry frenzy of ardor, trickery, chaos and comedy!
- 2017 - *Gianni Schicchi* – a memorable performance of “O mio babbino caro.”
- 2018 - *Jack and Jill and The Happening Hill* – an imaginative commissioned opera with new libretto and music!
- 2019 - *The Magic Flute* – a timeless tale for all ages.

2020 is on the Horizon: Cue the *Jaws* Theme...

With all these successful productions in the books, Salt Marsh Opera excitedly turned the calendar to 2020, a year in which everyone, including private citizens, businesses and cultural institutions, faced major upheavals. Next month, in our fifth and final installment of this 25th Anniversary Oral History, we’ll review the years 2020 to 2025 and see how nimble the company was during this time. We’ll reflect on our achievements and look ahead to the future.

And remember, always open your heart to the music. That’s where the story is.

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