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Michigan Opera Theatre Founder David DiChiera Succumbs to Pancreatic Cancer

Beloved impresario leaves legion of friends and admirers

Detroit, Sept. 18, 2018 – Dr. David DiChiera, Founder and long-time General Director of Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT), died today at his home in Detroit with his family by his side. He was 83 years old and had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in March, 2017.

DiChiera was a visionary and a beloved figure throughout the international opera world, but it was in Detroit and at MOT that he made his mark. He was known for his love of the city and for championing opera and dance (with the late Carol Halsted) in Detroit. He was committed to diversity on and off stage. His commission, production, and world premiere of “Margaret Garner,” with libretto by Toni Morrison, brought national attention to Detroit and to MOT. He fostered the early careers of African American singers including Leona Mitchell, Kathleen Battle, and Denyce Graves, and he produced lesser-known Polish and Armenian operas to reflect the diverse ethnicities of the city.

DiChiera was a respected composer whose works include the full-length opera “Cyrano” and Four Sonnets to verses by Edna St. Vincent Millay. A recording of his chamber works, “Letters and Fantasies,” was released in 2017.

From the earliest days of the company, DiChiera fostered extensive community educational programs with his former wife, Karen VanderKloot DiChiera. Those programs continue to be an integral part of MOT’s work. In recent years he established the Michigan Opera Theatre Studio resident artist program to identify, train and mentor up-and-coming opera singers.

DiChiera believed that every great city deserves its own opera company and, when so many were fleeing to the suburbs, chose to invest in Detroit. Prior to the Detroit Opera House, he established the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts with assistance from the Kresge

Foundation and Detroit Renaissance, saving the historic building from demolition. In 1993, he purchased the abandoned and dilapidated Grand Circus movie theater in a relatively forgotten part of downtown Detroit. Over the years, he raised more than \$75 million to renovate the building and establish the Detroit Opera House and a permanent home for MOT. Today, the building is one of the finest and most splendid opera facilities in America and one of few theaters actually owned by an opera company. The Opera House opened in 1996 with performances by Luciano Pavarotti and Dame Joan Sutherland. It ultimately became the sparkplug for a cultural and economic renaissance in an area of downtown Detroit that has since generated millions of dollars in urban development.

"Nobody ever worked harder or did more for an organization than David did for Michigan Opera Theatre," said MOT Chairman Rick Williams. "He was always thinking and creating and cajoling others to get on board with him. He wanted MOT to be the best at everything it did, and he put his heart and soul into it to make sure that it was. That's why he had such a following. He was truly one of a kind."

Williams said "Cyrano," which had its 2007 world debut in Detroit and was co-produced with the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Florida Grand Opera, was "David's most personal and intimate gift to opera, the gift of his own artistry and greatest love, composing."

"David was a visionary in every way," said MOT President and CEO Wayne S. Brown. "He loved opera and he loved Detroit. He envisioned a magnificent venue that would attract great performers and great performances of opera and dance for enthusiastic audiences in Detroit, and he went out and built it. His organization is healthier today than it's ever been. David's personal charisma and charm and his love of opera, dance and theater, plus his ability to work '27' hours a day, endeared him to our Board, Trustees and the entire MOT staff. He was like a father to many of them and he will forever be missed and remembered."

Stephen Lord, MOT Principal Conductor, said of DiChiera, "He was my mentor, my boss and my friend. I remember him from our early days together when he was just starting MOT and every day was exciting, challenging but exciting. I thought of him then as my 'Opera Santa' for all the good things he was doing for me personally and for opera. I'll always remember him that way."

DiChiera served as President of Opera America from 1979 to 1983, where he led a national initiative called "Opera for the 80s and Beyond" to bolster commissions of new operas. He was a trustee for the National Institute of Music Theatre and a board member of the American Arts Alliance. He founded MOT, to which he devoted his life's work, in 1971. Prior to that he chaired the music department at Oakland University in Rochester, Mich., where he helped

establish the Meadowbrook Music Festival and where his "Overture to Opera" series flourished, leading to the establishment of MOT.

Opera America President and CEO Marc Scorca called DiChiera "a visionary, leader, ally, mentor and a gentleman who set a national standard of community service and entrepreneurial inventiveness."

From 1981-83 DiChiera was Artistic Director of Dayton Opera Association. From 1986-96 he was founding General Director of Opera Pacific in Orange County, Calif. He managed both positions concurrently with his MOT responsibilities and created production collaborations between the three companies. He retired from his position at Opera Pacific in 1996 to devote himself full time to MOT. He retired as Chief Executive of MOT in 2014 and transitioned to Artistic Director Emeritus in 2017.

DiChiera was born in McKeesport, Pa. in 1935 to Italian immigrant parents. He was raised in Los Angeles. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1956 from UCLA where his activities as a pianist and composer garnered him the Atwater Kent and Gershwin Awards. He also received a Fulbright scholarship for musical studies in Italy. He received a PhD in Musicology from UCLA while also serving as an instructor there in 1962.

DiChiera was elected "Michiganian of the Year" by the Detroit News in 1979 and won the New Detroit "Closing the Gap" and Neal Shine Award for Exemplary Regional Leadership Awards in 2008. In 2000 he received the Bridge Builders Award from the Partners for Livable Communities in Washington, D.C. The latter award recognized DiChiera's mandate to "build bridges of understanding and cooperation across racial, social, economic and political divides." In 2010 he was honored by the National Endowment for the Arts with its Opera Honors Award, the nation's highest award for lifetime achievement in opera.

DiChiera received an honorary Doctor of Music Degree from the University of Michigan in 1999 and served as commencement speaker. He also received honorary doctoral degrees from Oakland University, Wayne State University, Madonna University and Marygrove College. In 2013, DiChiera was honored with the Kresge Foundation Eminent Artist Award. In recognition of his contributions to the musical world, he had been honored by the mayors of Detroit, New York, San Francisco and New Orleans, as well as the governments of France and Italy. Most recently, at the behest of the President of Italy, he received the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic, Italy's highest honor.

Both Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder praised DiChiera for his commitment to the cultural life of the city and state and the opportunities that culture provides to both.

DiChiera is survived by his beloved daughters Lisa DiChiera (John Kane) and Cristina DiChiera (Neal Walsh); grandchildren Aidan James, Julian David Kane and Violetta Elizabeth DiChiera Walsh; his former wife, Karen VanderKloot DiChiera; his sister Ellen DiChiera Blumer and several nieces and nephews.

A public visitation and funeral service will take place Friday, Sept. 21 at the Detroit Opera House, 1526 Broadway, Detroit. The visitation will begin at 11 a.m., followed by the service at 1 p.m.

Memorial contributions can be made to Michigan Opera Theatre c/o The David DiChiera Artistic Fund (1526 Broadway, Detroit, MI, 48226) and to The David DiChiera Music Therapy Program at Henry Ford Health System c/o Mary Jane Vogt (1 Ford Place, Suite 5A, Detroit, MI 48202).

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About Michigan Opera Theatre

Michigan Opera Theatre (Wayne S. Brown, President and CEO; Stephen Lord, Principal Conductor, Dr. David DiChiera, Founder and Artistic Director Emeritus), one of the nation's most vibrant nonprofit arts organizations, is committed to presenting opera and dance of the highest artistic caliber. Founded in 1971, the company's mission is to serve as a major cultural resource to the state of Michigan and the city of Detroit. Visit the website at www.michiganopera.org.