

Our Second Outbreak

by Patti Niemi

Opera plots don't bother with reality. In Wagner's *The Ring*, a brother and sister make out and have a baby together. So it's a plot twist worthy of opera that Covid-19 is San Francisco Opera's *second* experience with contagion. Twenty-seven years earlier, we dealt with a different epidemic.

That one began with an itch.

It was November, the busiest part of our season. The orchestra was stuffed into the pit for rehearsals by day and performances at night. Sweat was destroying the armpits of tailcoats; spit was raining down from the singers above us. We were *asking* to spread germs.

At first, only one cellist was itching. It could've been dry skin; it could've been her body's reaction to her pregnancy.

Then her stand partner started scratching.

Reports began coming in from other corners of the opera house: two chorus members were itching. A wigmaster. A stagehand. During an intermission, the cellist took her itch to the company doctor. He told her it was stress.

You don't anger a pregnant lady. I pictured her listening to this doctor, her face darkening and morphing into the Queen of the Night from *Magic Flute*, who sings, "The vengeance of hell burns in my heart." She made an appointment with her own doctor.

Two days later, during a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, I put down the cymbals and started clawing at the back of my hands.

It was a disservice to call this an "itch." I dug at my shins like I was trying to hit bone. I clawed at an arm until it looked like a map of New York's Finger Lakes. I told a colleague I had fingertip-sized bruises on my thighs from scratching; she pulled up her skirt to show me hers. Nature, in her misguided wisdom, designed it to be worse at

night. Conductors looked out over the orchestra and saw instruments at rest, their owners frantically raking their limbs before an entrance.

Soon there were ten scratchers in the pit. The chorus count was eight. Was this hysteria? There was nothing to see—our only evidence of disease was a symptom.

We weren't waiting for intervention. In the percussion room, we strapped on gloves and took matters into our own hands. The pile of clothes on our couch was the first thing to go, followed by the couch. We waited until after a performance, then pushed it down the hall and into the garbage room. The rest of the orchestra was unnerved enough by the outbreak to follow suit. The whole basement looked like the waiting room of a DMV: only hard plastic chairs allowed.

Our unofficial count crept close to fifty. Chorus members were changing in and out of hot and sweaty costumes all night long—what did that mean for the dressers? For the make-up artists? What about the stars of the opera, the singers?

The cellist finally had her appointment. Her doctor found pinprick red spots in her finger webbing and delivered his diagnosis.

Scabies was not what we wanted to share with our audience. It's highly contagious; we could spread it if we shook hands over the pit wall. The extreme itchiness is caused by the body's reaction to mites, their eggs, and their excreta.

Bugs were having sex, giving birth, and pooping under our skin.

The regular strain would have been bad enough. We had Norwegian scabies, also known by its more vivid name, Crusted Scabies. Instead of the five to ten mites seen in the classic variety, we had thousands. We were playing host to a colony so unique it made the Associated Press.

The company was forced to deal with the plague when it started creeping towards Famous Soprano. FS, starring in *Lucia*, was married to a baritone in the chorus. She would not have legions of scabies riding her coattails to the stage.

And if the itch hadn't started spreading to the audience, the rumor had. One night, a woman leaned down to me and stage-whispered: *Is it true that y'all are contagious?*

The San Francisco Department of Health was called. A Pacific Heights dermatologist, taken from the world of teenage acne and giddy with his sudden

significance, stood in front of the company. D-Day was scheduled for the following day's performance—time enough for Elimate prescriptions to be filled. Itching or not, everyone in the company had to perform the ritual. Some carriers might be asymptomatic, just waiting for the bugs to finish procreating.

The doctor instructed us: Take off all your clothes. Start at the top of your head and massage the cream into your scalp. Work your way down: the folds of your ears, your armpits, under your nails, between every finger, your stomach—

A question, from our group: “Do you have to put it—everywhere?”

Scabies' favorite home was in the folds of the skin. “*Epecially* everywhere,” was the answer.

We had to leave it on for eight miserable hours. The personnel managers of each union would be stationed at the door with a checklist. No one would be allowed to enter unless they'd greased themselves.

As the itching died down, we reimagined a new season. After our opening night performance of Pagli-itchy, we would have eight operas: The Merry Hives of Windsor, Billy Bug, The Girl of the Golden Pest, Cosi Fan Cootie, The Rash's Progress, Scales of Hoffman, A Midsummer Mite's Cream, and the rarely performed Beatrice and Benadryl.

That scourge was an easy fix. COVID-19 was not.

Live music is in the business of crowds. The relationship between performers and crowd has always consisted of one activity: spending hours together in the dark, listening to music. Covid-19 forced us to break up with our audiences.

We've all had unwanted breakups. Part of grieving is replaying happy memories.

Like this one. One night, we were performing *Turandot*. It's hard to imagine a more hair-raising opening to an opera. After the orchestra shrieks out the first chords, the curtain is supposed to rise on a stage full of choristers screaming about a beheading.

That night, the curtain didn't rise. Instead of watching the executioner grind his ax, 3200 pairs of eyes were staring at a gold curtain. Our conductor cut us off, turned to the audience and said, “I think the curtain has to be up to play opera.”

He could have gone backstage and waited for stagehands to resolve the mechanical glitch. Instead, he opened the door separating orchestra pit and audience. He strolled up the aisle, introducing himself and shaking hands. The audience started clapping in rhythm. Maestro conducted them—softer and louder, slower and faster. Since the opera was being simulcast to AT&T ballpark, we played “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” The audience sang along. When the stage manager announced the malfunction had been fixed, we applauded together: the orchestra, 3200 audience members inside the opera house, and our 30,000 fans watching us on a screen at the ballpark.

That was the only time in my twenty-eight years of playing in the San Francisco Opera Orchestra that the fourth wall was breached. For most of our relationship with the audience, we communicated only through music.

In Wagner’s Ring Cycle, we spend fourteen hours together. For us, the physicality of playing this music is a rollercoaster ride. We climb to astonishing heights, take dizzying turns and make death-defying drops.

But it demands as much of the audience as of the musicians. Over four nights, our fans take in catastrophic violence and disorder and magic swords (along with that incest).

At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, the conductor leaves his hands in the air an extra beat. That silence is sacred. It separates the world of giants and fire and gods and vengeance, from the world of jobs and bills and disappointments. It’s our final moment together in Valhalla.

After our March 2020 split, we longed for this nightly interaction. But to get back making music together, we had to guarantee the only thing we’d share with each other is opera. Unamplified music works best when you cram in close to the source. If a virus can be spread through talking, how much more is spread when singers fill up their considerable lungs and spray great sheets of spit?

Thousands of empty seats waited for our return. The ghost light took center stage. The music was silenced.

On August 21, 2021, we returned to the Opera House.

We missed you, audience. In an art form filled with drama, it's not overly dramatic to say: we were nothing without you.



Patti Niemi has been a member of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra since 1992. Prior to joining SFO, she played in the New World Symphony from 1988-1992, under Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas. In 2016, she published her first book entitled *Sticking It Out-From Juilliard to the Orchestra Pit*. Her book won the 2017 Independent Publisher Book Award's Silver Medal-Performing Arts Category and was named *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Best Classical Music Book of 2016. Visit her at: www.pattiniemi.com.