

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

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August 13, 2010

Dr. Deborah Burton
Asst. Prof of Music
College of Fine Arts
Boston University
855 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215

Re: TD50221

Dear Dr. Burton:

I am writing with information about why your proposal, Opera Research Online I: Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West", did not receive funding in the most recent round of competition. I would like to outline the review process and provide you with a complete set of the panelists' written comments for your information.

As with all applications submitted to the NEH, your proposal was read and discussed by knowledgeable persons outside the agency, who advised the Endowment about its merits. NEH's staff commented on matters of fact or on significant issues that otherwise would have been missing from these evaluations and made recommendations to the National Council on the Humanities. The National Council meets at various times during the year to advise the NEH chairman on grants. The chairman took into account the advice provided during the review process and made all funding decisions, as is prescribed by law.

In evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each proposal, reviewers were asked to address the significance of the topic, its potential audiences, the degree of collaboration between scholars and other project personnel, the qualifications of the project team, and the potential of the project to engage the public in humanities issues, ideas, and perspectives.

As noted above, copies of the panelists' written evaluations of your proposal are enclosed. The following ratings are used in evaluating applications: E = Excellent; VG = Very Good;

G = Good; SM = Some Merit; and NC = Not Competitive. Please keep in mind that these evaluation sheets were completed before the panelists discussed the proposals, and panelists' opinions and ratings sometimes change after exchanging views with their colleagues. In cases where there is a change in rating, we ask panelists to add a note to the evaluation sheet explaining their decision.

I hope that this material clarifies the Endowment's review process for you. Even though your application was not funded, resubmission is always possible, and failure to gain support in this round of competition does not prejudice an applicant's chances for reconsideration. Please see our Web site (www.neh.gov) for a list of upcoming deadlines.

If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to call me at (202) 606-8270, or send me an e-mail message at kmulvaney@neh.gov. Thank you for your interest in the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Mulvaney
Senior Program Officer
Division of Public Programs

Enclosures: Panelists' evaluation sheets

Panelist 1

1. Intellectual content: The likely contribution of the project to public understanding of the humanities, including the significance of the subject and the humanities ideas; the quality and relevance of the humanities scholarship informing the project; the extent to which the project offers an analytical perspective on the themes and ideas that underlie it.

Leading edge scholarship in modern techniques of operatic study involving so much more than just underlining how the music expresses the drama (which is, of course significant), but adds historical, literary, and cultural elements.

2. Audience: The appeal of the subject to a general audience, the accessibility of the ideas, and the quality of the project's plan to reach broad audiences.

Anyone with interest in opera in general and this opera in particular should find something of interest on the website when it is finished (even in its sketchy present form there are things worth perusing). Whether to read the original Belasco play (in his own typescript) for comparison with the opera libretto, or the opening night reviews, or a filmed interview with the composer's granddaughter, or the many other things promised for the finished website, it should become a central point of reference both the opera lovers and scholars.

3. Format: The appropriateness, quality, and creativity of the concept for organizing and presenting the material to advance the project's intellectual goals; and the likelihood that the chosen format will effectively convey the humanities content to the audience. For multiformat projects, the likely complementarity of the various components.

The basic organization of the website (or at least a good part of it) is already laid out. It is clear and accessible and invites the visitor to sample (or peruse deeply) the elements in each section.

4. Program resources: The appropriateness of the materials and resources that support the project's interpretive themes and ideas.

What is available now is mostly raw documentary material, but it will be supplemented not only by some of the most important studies already published, but also by newly commissioned essays from leading authorities.

5. Justification for higher funding: If the application requests higher level funding, the strength of the case for the complexity of the project, the involvement of multiple institutional partners, the combination of several different program formats, and the breadth of the project's public appeal and reach.

6. Significance of site and its interpretation (only for Interpreting America's Historic Places applications): The significance of the place to American history; the extent to which the interpretation makes use of the attributes of the place—the site, its location, buildings, landscape, or other natural or built features—in telling its story; the extent to which the interpretation addresses central themes and issues in American history.

7. Humanities team: The qualifications and potential contributions of the advising scholars.

The organizer is one of the leading authorities in the field, who knows the other participants and the work of previous scholars; all of this promises a rich lode of wide-ranging information.

8. Project team: The experience and demonstrated technical skills of the project team, quality of the team's previous work, and likelihood of timely and successful completion of the proposed project; evidence that institutional partners will collaborate effectively.

The main evidence at the moment is the preliminary sample of the website to come, which is clean and attractive, easily navigated, with promise of many interesting things to sample, read, and absorb. But it is still quite elementary

Please address the following two questions in the space provided below.

9. Work plan: The likelihood that the applicant will achieve the project's goals in a timely and efficient manner.

10. Budget: The appropriateness and reasonability of the project's costs.

The work plan and budget both seem well planned and very realistic.

11. Overall Evaluation: Please summarize the major reasons for your rating.

Field-leading position of the applicant, impressive list of materials already accessed or soon to be available, quality of the sample website

It seems, though, that project director might wish to work with an experienced web designer to consider richer possibilities, especially for the humanities elements

Preliminary Rating: E: Excellent

Additional comments after panel discussion:

Final Rating: E: Excellent

Panelist 2

1. Intellectual content: The likely contribution of the project to public understanding of the humanities, including the significance of the subject and the humanities ideas; the quality and relevance of the humanities scholarship informing the project; the extent to which the project offers an analytical perspective on the themes and ideas that underlie it.

This has the potential to be very informative to a general audience, broadening the horizons of opera studies on an accessible web platform. However the analytical aspect of the project is still underdeveloped.

2. Audience: The appeal of the subject to a general audience, the accessibility of the ideas, and the quality of the project's plan to reach broad audiences.

The appeal would be moderate unless the web site effectively ties the opera to broad and important cultural contexts. The ties to ethnicity in the Gold Rush era are implied in the description, but should be developed much more to amplify the significance of this particular work.

3. Format: The appropriateness, quality, and creativity of the concept for organizing and presenting the material to advance the project's intellectual goals; and the likelihood that the chosen format will effectively convey the humanities content to the audience. For multiformat projects, the likely complementarity of the various components.

I agree with the team that a web site is a superb place to broadcast an opera and its cultural milieu. An accompanying conference (proposed) would also help, especially to sharpened the analysis on the site. And the links to the site can be continuously increased and updated.

4. Program resources: The appropriateness of the materials and resources that support the project's interpretive themes and ideas.

The Gold Rush visuals seem rather generic without an accompanying interpretation, which hasn't been developed yet. The interviews and 1910 archival material are very good but skew the project presently toward the event of the premiere, and perhaps the Met's history of mounting the work. How to open this up to broader, more significant cultural contexts?

5. Justification for higher funding: If the application requests higher level funding, the strength of the case for the complexity of the project, the involvement of multiple institutional partners, the combination of several different program formats, and the breadth of the project's public appeal and reach.

Since this could be expanded as ideas develop, the team may want to pursue higher funding in the future, and it could be more open to that likelihood.

6. Significance of site and its interpretation (only for Interpreting America's Historic Places applications): The significance of the place to American history; the extent to which the interpretation makes use of the attributes of the place—the site, its location, buildings, landscape, or other natural or built features—in telling its story; the extent to which the interpretation addresses central themes and issues in American history.

7. Humanities team: The qualifications and potential contributions of the advising scholars.

The team is strong but small. There are other musicologists and historians specializing in the key fields that might also be consulted. This is a good reason to pursue more funding.

8. Project team: The experience and demonstrated technical skills of the project team, quality of the team's previous work, and likelihood of timely and successful completion of the proposed project; evidence that institutional partners will collaborate effectively.

The team is really the grant writer and the web page designer. They are adequate to the job, but again even more innovative design may present the complex cultural significance of the opera in a more striking way.

Please address the following two questions in the space provided below.

9. Work plan: The likelihood that the applicant will achieve the project's goals in a timely and efficient manner.

10. Budget: The appropriateness and reasonability of the project's costs.

The budget is appropriate for what the project currently seeks to accomplish (though obviously they are behind the printed schedule). Per diems for London and Milan are needed too, I think.

11. Overall Evaluation: Please summarize the major reasons for your rating.

It is a great idea to dedicate and multidisciplinary web site to a single opera. This project makes a good start but could be more explicit and bold in its proposed interpretation of La Fanciulla in Western culture (not just the US West!).

Preliminary Rating: G: Good

Additional comments after panel discussion:

A great basic concept, but the humanities content needs to be developed a lot more.

Final Rating: G: Good

Panelist 3

1. Intellectual content: The likely contribution of the project to public understanding of the humanities, including the significance of the subject and the humanities ideas; the quality and relevance of the humanities scholarship informing the project; the extent to which the project offers an analytical perspective on the themes and ideas that underlie it.

There are some compelling ideas within the proposal... but they are not fleshed out in any meaningful detail, even for a development grant. There is not much analytical perspective - it is more of a list of themes. The scope is limited to one opera and its impact/resonance. Scholarship is not addressed in any deep and meaningful way. It seems unclear whether the true interest is in the opera or in the historical content in the story that is told in the opera. I imagine that many of the issues of social relevance that the site proposes to address - the Gold Rush, myths of the West, Native Americans etc., are already addressed in other web sites.

2. Audience: The appeal of the subject to a general audience, the accessibility of the ideas, and the quality of the project's plan to reach broad audiences.

This project does not have much relevance for a wide general audience. It will mainly appeal to scholars of opera and of Puccini.

3. Format: The appropriateness, quality, and creativity of the concept for organizing and presenting the material to advance the project's intellectual goals; and the likelihood that the chosen format will effectively convey the humanities content to the audience. For multifformat projects, the likely complementarity of the various components.

A web site is the proposed format, and given the diffuseness of the proposal, makes sense. Still, the kinds of materials that would be put on the site seem uninspired.

4. Program resources: The appropriateness of the materials and resources that support the project's interpretive themes and ideas.

The scope of the project is limited, and so are the materials that are proposed.

5. Justification for higher funding: If the application requests higher level funding, the strength of the case for the complexity of the project, the involvement of multiple institutional partners, the combination of several different program formats, and the breadth of the project's public appeal and reach.

6. Significance of site and its interpretation (only for Interpreting America's Historic Places applications): The significance of the place to American history; the extent to which the interpretation makes use of the attributes of the place—the site, its location, buildings, landscape, or other natural or built features—in telling its story; the extent to which the interpretation addresses central themes and issues in American history.

7. Humanities team: The qualifications and potential contributions of the advising scholars.

don't know

8. Project team: The experience and demonstrated technical skills of the project team, quality of the team's previous work, and likelihood of timely and successful completion of the proposed project; evidence that institutional partners will collaborate effectively.

The team has organized academic conferences, which is not much like putting together a web site that would be user friendly and have broad appeal. So conceptually I am not sure the expertise is there on the content side. There is a web designer who can assuredly complete the project.

Please address the following two questions in the space provided below.

9. Work plan: The likelihood that the applicant will achieve the project's goals in a timely and efficient manner.

10. Budget: The appropriateness and reasonability of the project's costs.

I don't have much experience with web budgets or schedules.

11. Overall Evaluation: Please summarize the major reasons for your rating.

The subject seems too narrow in scope - and the importance to a broad national audience is limited. I missed a justification for how opera can be brought to a broader audience through this project, and why that would be a good thing to do. I think they also missed a chance to hone in on why this opera is an important vehicle to address the humanities themes. It seems to assume an interest in opera and doesn't make a convincing case for how the project will reach outside the opera world successfully.

Preliminary Rating: SM: Some Merit

Additional comments after panel discussion:

Final Rating: SM: Some Merit

Panelist 4

1. Intellectual content: The likely contribution of the project to public understanding of the humanities, including the significance of the subject and the humanities ideas; the quality and relevance of the humanities scholarship informing the project; the extent to which the project offers an analytical perspective on the themes and ideas that underlie it.

Deeply intellectual project -- situating Puccini's opera in the context of the history of the American west -- and one that seeks to make the interdisciplinary study of opera easily available to students of the form. However, it's unclear what the central analytical perspective is at the moment: what we have now is largely an exhibit-in-the-making, structured by 'types of material' but not so much by frames of analysis.

2. Audience: The appeal of the subject to a general audience, the accessibility of the ideas, and the quality of the project's plan to reach broad audiences.

A selective general audience -- in that students would have to seek out the website (the primary product of the proposal), and in that the materials themselves seem aimed at a fairly sophisticated audience. However, for those who land upon the website, it seems likely to expand their appreciation and understanding of opera.

3. Format: The appropriateness, quality, and creativity of the concept for organizing and presenting the material to advance the project's intellectual goals; and the likelihood that the chosen format will effectively convey the humanities content to the audience. For multifaceted projects, the likely complementarity of the various components.

Wonderful use of the web to make available formerly obscure and hard-to-find materials.

4. Program resources: The appropriateness of the materials and resources that support the project's interpretive themes and ideas.

Quite appropriate.

5. Justification for higher funding: If the application requests higher level funding, the strength of the case for the complexity of the project, the involvement of multiple institutional partners, the combination of several different program formats, and the breadth of the project's public appeal and reach.

6. Significance of site and its interpretation (only for Interpreting America's Historic Places applications): The significance of the place to American history; the extent to which the interpretation makes use of the attributes of the place—the site, its location, buildings, landscape, or other natural or built features—in telling its story; the extent to which the interpretation addresses central themes and issues in American history.

7. Humanities team: The qualifications and potential contributions of the advising scholars.

A smaller team than many, perhaps because the PI is a faculty member. But Burton seems eminently qualified (and well-connected), and Nina Silber is a fine resource as a historian.

8. Project team: The experience and demonstrated technical skills of the project team, quality of the team's previous work, and likelihood of timely and successful completion of the proposed project; evidence that institutional partners will collaborate effectively.

Sample web work thus far is professional...though still sketchy in terms of non-primary content provided by Burton.

Please address the following two questions in the space provided below.

9. Work plan: The likelihood that the applicant will achieve the project's goals in a timely and efficient manner.

10. Budget: The appropriateness and reasonability of the project's costs.

Seems appropriate.

11. Overall Evaluation: Please summarize the major reasons for your rating.

The website will be a fabulous resource for scholars, no doubt; its eventual use by students is less clear.

Also, though the applicant's previous work suggests that the materials will be well-synthesized -- and although she has assembled an impressive amount of primary material for the website -- at this point it's not evident what the analytical framework will be (i.e. how the project will engage with the mythology of the west, the history of Broadway, the history of opera, Italian views of the US, etc.).

Preliminary Rating: VG: Very Good

Additional comments after panel discussion:

Because so much of this project rests on the artistry of the web design -- itself an interdisciplinary artform, like opera -- it would be valuable to have more thought put into this issue.

Final Rating: G: Good

Panelist 5

1. Intellectual content: The likely contribution of the project to public understanding of the humanities, including the significance of the subject and the humanities ideas; the quality and relevance of the humanities scholarship informing the project; the extent to which the project offers an analytical perspective on the themes and ideas that underlie it.

G. Critical analysis appears to be marginal to the principal goal of the project: to collect and present archival materials of an opera on the internet. While the principal scholar raises interesting issues of identity politics among the opera's characters, there is no evidence that her collaborators (musicians, descendants of the composer & conductor, etc.) would necessarily share her critical insights. I fear that this project is simply a matter of old wine (Italian opera) in new bottles (the internet).

2. Audience: The appeal of the subject to a general audience, the accessibility of the ideas, and the quality of the project's plan to reach broad audiences.

G. While the proposal makes claims about making opera appealing to a wider audience through the internet, it is unclear how the site will be promoted to encourage broad access beyond social networking sites. The plan to simply stream an unedited video of a scholarly panel as an enticement to a general audience is, to me, a red flag.

3. Format: The appropriateness, quality, and creativity of the concept for organizing and presenting the material to advance the project's intellectual goals; and the likelihood that the chosen format will effectively convey the humanities content to the audience. For multiformat projects, the likely complementarity of the various components.

VG. Regardless of my concerns regarding visibility, making archival materials available on an opera website seems appropriate for the project's intellectual goals.

4. Program resources: The appropriateness of the materials and resources that support the project's interpretive themes and ideas.

VG. It is evident that the scholars leading the project have been rigorous in compiling archival documents and contacting individuals with insight into Puccini's opera.

5. Justification for higher funding: If the application requests higher level funding, the strength of the case for the complexity of the project, the involvement of multiple institutional partners, the combination of several different program formats, and the breadth of the project's public appeal and reach.

6. Significance of site and its interpretation (only for Interpreting America's Historic Places applications): The significance of the place to American history; the extent to which the

interpretation makes use of the attributes of the place—the site, its location, buildings, landscape, or other natural or built features—in telling its story; the extent to which the interpretation addresses central themes and issues in American history.

7. Humanities team: The qualifications and potential contributions of the advising scholars.

E. This is a very impressive collection of scholars and others related to the project.

8. Project team: The experience and demonstrated technical skills of the project team, quality of the team's previous work, and likelihood of timely and successful completion of the proposed project; evidence that institutional partners will collaborate effectively.

G. The media staff consists of two web designers from an educational firm without any reference to knowledge of the arts.

Please address the following two questions in the space provided below.

9. Work plan: The likelihood that the applicant will achieve the project's goals in a timely and efficient manner.

10. Budget: The appropriateness and reasonability of the project's costs.

G. Opera Research Online is a new endeavor that appears to be the brainchild of a single Puccini scholar.

11. Overall Evaluation: Please summarize the major reasons for your rating.

G. The lack of a clear plan on widening the audience for opera and the relative newness of the organization lead me to weigh the project's merits with some speculation.

Preliminary Rating: G: Good

Additional comments after panel discussion:

Final Rating: G: Good