

## ARTS

# An ear for new talent

Beth Morrison is a pivotal force behind a new crop of American composers. She tells John Rockwell about her collaborative model

The US has a remarkable and growing group of young opera composers: Missy Mazzoli, Nico Muhly, Ellen Reid, Gregory Spears, David Little, David Hertzberg, Dave Malloy, Paola Prestini and many more. Perhaps less well known, at least outside America, is the pivotal role played in many of those composers' careers by Beth Morrison and the Prototype Festival, which she co-founded.

Morrison recently moved to Manhattan from Brooklyn, where her non-profit organisation, Beth Morrison Projects, is based. But she has spent the pandemic in Boston, where her partner of 18 years, a music professor at Boston University, has a home, and from where she speaks to me via Zoom.

BMP depends on contributions to commission and develop operas yet it also interacts with for-profit companies. Not that most opera troupes, performance spaces and management firms make a profit. The most common collaborative pattern is for BMP to cover the cost of the artists. It then chooses a composer, helps pick a librettist, a stage director, conductor and more. "One of my great joys is putting together a creative team," Morrison says.

After setting up the artistic basis of a new work comes the collaboration to get the opera on stage. "Once we line up a project, we decide which partners will work best and pitch them," she says. Morrison oversees the creative process, down to every detail. She funds the artistic side and her partners provide the theatre and its costs. She gets a fee; they take box-office receipts. Any touring is handled by BMP, it can use the income to offset its initial outlay.

This basic model is subject to endless variation. "Of course this past year, it's been really difficult," Morrison says, but as a rule her hybrid business plan enables her to put on three or four new productions a year, each costing between \$150,000 and \$300,000. Without the partnerships, she'd be reduced to one new production.

World premieres take place at the partner's theatre or at the Prototype Festival. BMP has staged operas all over the US and the world, including nine projects with Los Angeles Opera.

Her only initial contacts were Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson, 'but those were pretty good people to know'

BMP has an office in LA and seven of its 17 board members live there. But Morrison also works with Opera Philadelphia, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Opera Cincinnati and especially HERE, a performing arts complex in downtown Manhattan.

Prototype began in 2013, founded and led by Morrison and the two women who then ran HERE. Now one of those has left and the current BMP executive, Kristin Marting and Jecca Barry, retain the tripartite female leadership.

The festival deliberately overlaps the annual meeting in New York of APAP – the Association of Performing Arts Professionals. There are several ancillary festivals, all determined to showcase their wares to APAP attendees. But



none fit the new operas Morrison was championing. "I was frustrated in not getting our work into those other festivals," she says. So she and HERE started their own.

Morrison comes from Maine and initially trained to be a singer, educated at Boston University, Arizona State and the Yale School of Drama. For three years before Yale she directed Boston University's summer Tanglewood Institute, which is aimed at teenagers and is allied with Boston Symphony's Tangle-

wood Festival. "In Boston I saw a lot of exciting theatre, but nothing in opera was on that level," she says. "I was interested in creating new opera and working with emerging artists. I went to Yale to start BMP. My whole life I wanted to live in New York – that was the plan."

"I don't come from a family which has money, so I was starting from ground zero," she says. She was put in touch with Joseph Melillo, the executive producer of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Melillo in turn led her to Linda Brumbach, a prominent manager of vanguard composers (Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson). "Those were her only two initial contacts in New York, she says, "but those were pretty good people to know".

She worked with Brumbach for a year. When she started BMP in 2005, "it was with naivete or hubris or maybe both". For six years she was the only employee. She now has eight staff and has retained them all during the pandemic.

The 2021 Prototype Festival, starting on January 8 and co-directed by Morrison, Marting and Barry, will be virtual, will operate on a reduced model, cutting back on in-progress works in favour of

Clockwise from main: a BMP production of 'Aging Magician'; opera producer Beth Morrison; a BMP production of 'Acquanetta' (left); and a BMP production of 'Acquanetta' (right)



more fully realised productions; offerings are limited to six. In previous years, HERE has presented more intimate work developed over its three-year residency programme, while BMP handles the larger projects in theatres around town.

What helps make BMP and Prototype successful is that unlike many grim modernist scores, these operas appeal to audiences and to singers. Not that they all sound the same. "The composers I'm interested in are wholly unique. You can hear them and know immediately who they are. I'm looking for people who want to take an alternate route, to push the form," she says.

BMP's Next Generation programme is a three-year cycle to identify young composers. The second cycle, now under way, drew 126 applicants. The first resulted in a commission for a full-scale opera by a female and born, Princeton-trained Emma O'Halloran, which is to be heard at Prototype in 2022, then taken to Galway courtesy of the Irish National Opera, then to Los Angeles. "This piece is going to blow everybody's socks off," Morrison says.

During the pandemic, BMP has begun virtual eight-week producers' workshops, which it plans to continue. They allow for unlimited participation: 900 people from 19 countries showed up online for the first session.

BMP is not just devoted to new work in the abstract; it seeks to "create more access to the art form" by fostering operas by women and people of colour. "We always have had at least 50 per cent women composers," Morrison says. "But we can do better."

January 8-16, [prototypefestival.org](http://prototypefestival.org)



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## Painter whose medium is architecture

Edwin Heathcote visits a show of captivating work by Zoe Zenghelis, a key figure in the early days of OMA

Modern architecture began as painting. Ideas were always and inevitably ahead of reality and the medium through which Modernism emerged was the painted canvas. From the strange, geometric surrealism of the Bauhaus and the vivid constructivism of Farkas Molnár's Red Cube (1923) to the extravagant Suprematism of Ivan Leontov and the industrial sublime of Yakov Chernikhov, the architecture of the early 20th century was first defined on the easel.

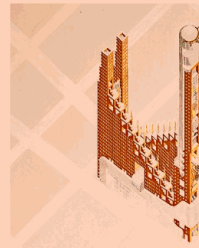
You might say the same about the architecture of the late 20th century too. Painting has proved to be a vivid and oddly enduring medium for communicating construction. You can see the relationship between the two at a small but captivating show of the work of Zoe Zenghelis at the Betts Project in London (currently online only but reopening when Covid restrictions are eased, and due to transfer to the Architectural Association later this month).

Zenghelis was there at the birth of OMA, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, co-founded with her husband Elia Zenghelis, Rem Koolhaas and Madelon Vriesendorp in the mid 1970s. The new practice's ideas were concretised in Koolhaas's hugely influential and provocative 1978 book *Delirious New York*, a brilliant blend of history, technology, narrative and a reimagining of a city then struggling with bankruptcy and depopulation.

Although the words were electrifying, the images which stuck so stubbornly in the imagination were by Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis. There were surreal landscapes of buildings as objets d'art, flaccid skyscrapers and anthropomorphised towers, tombstone-like blocks in endless grids and suggestions of megalomaniac schemes reduced to a single city block like toytown utopias.

Look around the exhibition *Zoe Zenghelis: Do you remember how perfect everything was?*, and you can see those ideas condensed into compelling, dreamlike suggestions of possible cities and impossible constructions.

Zenghelis, who was born in Athens in 1957, studied in London but found herself disillusioned with strictures of both interior and production design. The fanatical reproduction of an exact historic moment on stage failed to stimulate her, so she returned to painting. Yet she found herself working in architec-



'Hotel Sphinx' (1975)

ture again with the foundation of OMA.

The practice's early works were all theoretical projects, paper architecture, provocations rather than proposals. "The Hotel Sphinx" (1978) for instance, exhibited here in a dazzling grid and tower, envisaged a New York building with the attributes of the heterogeneous city, a cocktail of uses from luxury hotel and pool to social housing and civic infrastructure. The intention was to develop a new type of architecture for Times Square, an area which already embodied all these activities albeit incoherently and reluctantly.

At a smaller scale, there are evocative, Constructivist designs for her own house which seem to return to her stage-set student days with a Cubist-inspired interior that is staid and strange in equal measure. When I speak to Zenghelis on the phone, she tells me that before it began building, OMA was sustained not only by teaching but by the sale of paintings. There are now examples in MoMA and dozens of other institutions and collections. "Once OMA started building, they dumped the painters," she says.

OMA was joined briefly in its early history by Zaha Hadid, who also found

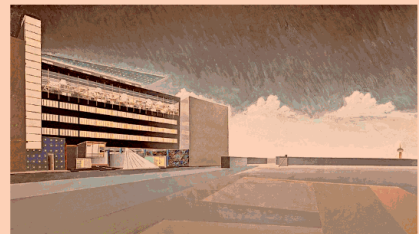
her expression in painting. In Zenghelis's more angular and fragmented paintings you can see where Hadid drew her influence from, and she too would make her name in painting, with striking canvases that recalled Soviet Constructivist space. You can see too how Zenghelis's own work was influenced by the Freudian dreamscapes of Vriesendorp, who always humanised buildings, introducing a surreal, cartoonish quality into the metropolis – the city as urban playground.

Crowded on to one wall, academy-style, is a lifetime of work, a line passing through towers and tombs, trees and cubist landscapes, but the thread that ties them all together is architecture, a certain type of tectonic representation. Pastel superblocks collide with deep shadows cast by looming wedges, towers appear as subsiding gravestones, buildings are scattered like disruptive pebbles on a beach. The types of architecture contribute to a mood: melancholy, angst, ecstasy and ennui through form, colour and distribution.

Zenghelis tells me she always saw herself as a painter, yet her medium is architecture; the concerns about objects in space, the grid, fragmentation and mass have remained remarkably consistent. The works on show here span the whole of Modernist history and historiography, from early experiments in reductive form to the rediscovery of Modernism as a visionary medium in itself.

Architects who think they are artists quickly become a problem, mistaking buildings for sculpture and producing unusable and overblown structures. But artists who work with architecture are a very different proposition: less destructive, more contemplative, capable of creating something closer to beauty. This is an engaging and engrossing show from exactly one such artist.

3D viewing room at [bettsproject.com](http://bettsproject.com)



'Checkpoint Charlie (Two clouds)', OMA (1980) by Zoe Zenghelis