From 1958 to 1960, New York City Opera and the Ford Foundation aggressively cultivated a repertoire of American operas, and an audience for them, through the vision and initiative of the opera company’s general director, Julius Rudel, and his administrative colleagues at New York City Center, and of W. McNeil Lowry, director of the Ford Foundation’s Program in Humanities and the Arts. In this venture to demonstrate a viable native repertoire, they staged three spring seasons and a national tour devoted exclusively to American opera, with positive consequences for both the art form and the institutions.

This study explores the policies and procedures that guided the development of this first mature generation of American operas—a eclectic corpus with provenances in the Broadway musical, Copland’s “American populism” style and vernacular traditions, and Italian and Central European roots. It traces the identifying and promoting of effective works, the grooming of composers, librettists, directors, and performers who showed promise in this specialized repertoire, and the exerting of a high standard of theatricality in the performances, the productions, and the works themselves. It also considers the significant contributions of the New York critical community to the general acceptance of an American operatic repertoire by its public validation both of the operas and of the producing institutions’ higher purpose to establish an American identity in the genre.

By chronicling the 1958-1960 seasons, the dissertation explores this seminally important body of twenty operas by thirteen composers, and identifies general patterns of style and content they exhibit, which reveal a widely inclusive definition of what could be considered American and operatic, derived from the ideologies and attitudes fostered by the producing institutions, the creative collaborators, and the press, in reciprocal relationship with the audience. This rapid proliferation of American operas by an adventuresome theatrical institution and a funding agency venturing for the first time into arts philanthropy signified the sudden but decisive coming of age of the genre, and deeply impacted its subsequent development.