



Artist As Leader: Paola Prestini

While studying composition at the Juilliard School, Paola Prestini was eager to create the kind of boundary-blurring, collaborative pieces that didn't have a place on the noted conservatory's curriculum. She therefore co-created her first non-profit, the interdisciplinary arts company VisionIntoArt (VIA), and ran it successfully for 15 years thereafter, all the while gradually making her inimitable mark on the world of classical music with her own creations.

In 2015 she folded VIA's mission into [National Sawdust](#), a brand-new performance space and music incubator in Brooklyn that she co-founded with tax attorney and arts lover Kevin Dolan. While managing National Sawdust's many programs and its impressive performance slate as the organization's artistic director, she has continued to compose works that have been performed around the world, including orchestral and choral works commissioned by some of the world's premier classical music venues, including the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Barbican Centre.

Paola spoke with Pier Carlo Talenti in April from her home in Brooklyn, several weeks after she'd returned from Minneapolis, where the pandemic lockdown had shut down rehearsals for the premiere of her first commissioned opera, "Edward Tulane." Minnesota Opera has committed to premiering the work at a later date; San Diego Opera has made the same commitment for her opera "Aging Magician," which was also slated to premiere in spring of 2020.

In this interview she discusses how hewing to her vision with integrity has guided her artistically and institutionally and how it continues to serve her through the current crisis, in which she and National Sawdust have to lead like never before.

Pier Carlo Talenti: Which of the skills that you use in your composition practice do you think translate directly to your leadership style?

Paola Prestini: Well, I think when you're dealing with composition, you're dealing with always starting something from nothing. I certainly have aspects of my music that I hope one hears and can relate to that are recurring, but really as a composer I'm always trying to do something new, always trying to bend and stretch myself.

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So I think that one of the qualities that most directly relates to being a leader is this ability to build something from nothing and to reimagine constantly our reality and be able to take disparate thoughts and merge them into one cohesive thought. Also the persistence of imagining that you can be a composer and that you can do this thing that is very rare and that is very difficult in terms of jobs. I think those are things that probably really extend themselves into being a leader.

Pier Carlo: Can you describe yourself as a leader?

Paola: Sure. I think that I'm a person who has a lot of ideas, for better or worse [she laughs]. I tend to be very driven. When I fall in love with something, when I have an idea, when I'm dedicated, I'm 100% in. I don't easily take no for an answer, so I'm constantly trying to find ways to make things work. That persistence and the fact that I keep trying is probably a good asset.

I love collaborating. That's really what I've always done, and so I like to be around teams of people. I don't like "no" people. I tend to do better with people around me who are strong and are not afraid to voice their opinion, because if someone tells me something's not possible, I'll tell them 50 ways it is. That's unfortunately just part of what you develop when you've had to struggle in a career or have had to really build everything from the ground up.

Those are a few things that probably describe me as a leader.

Pier Carlo: You've been at this a long time. You've been a leader almost as long as you have been an artist. At this point, you must know yourself as a leader as well as you know yourself as an artist. Are there any ways in which you'd like to improve your leadership? Are there things you would still like to learn?

Paola: Always to improve. Taking the best part of the ideas of people around you and lifting that up and doing that with grace even when you're in moments of great tension, these are things that I think I can always learn how to do better.

One of the things that I've felt good about is that some of the leadership skills that I've learned ... have helped me in turn to deal with complex situations, for example, as a composer in the opera world. I love to see how reflexive those qualities now are in me.

Personally, I think in terms of leadership, one of the things that I've felt good about is that some of the leadership skills that I've learned — in terms of interacting with boards and with people from very diverse backgrounds at National Sawdust — have helped me in turn to deal with complex situations, for example, as a composer in the opera world. I love to see how reflexive those qualities now are in me.

There was a time when I saw being a leader as a very separate thing from being an artist. I think that's part of many things. It's part of the fact that I didn't have a lot of mentors or leaders who were women who were also composers that I could say, "Ah, that's me. I can be like that!" I think there was a part of me that didn't celebrate the fact that I build structures as an artistic accomplishment, as something that is equally valuable.

Once I've been able to accept my totality, I feel much more free in something that I've always done very naturally, which is to oscillate from creative thought to building structures into thinking about ways to bring programs and change out into the world. That comes with age and with being able to feel comfortable in your skin. I've been excited to see that those skills are reflexive.

I guess the place where I really want to go next is maybe a little bit back to the things that drove me at the beginning, which was really about reimagining artistic processes and what that means in terms of specific impact for communities. Also, in terms of collaboration, how can I refine my collaborating with scientists, with neuroscientists? For example, the work I'm doing at Atlanta Opera is about this intersection between disability and AI. How can I continue to refine that artistic process and then have that be mirrored for younger artists? I guess I'm always thinking about ways in which there can be regenerative cycles in what we do. I think that as artists, the more that we can do that, the more that we'll see a more holistic, learning and evolving artistic society.

Pier Carlo: You mentioned that it took you a while to realize that your leadership was not separate from your artistry. Do you remember what that turning point was? Was there a specific moment when you realized, "OK, wait, I'm equally an artist and leader, and they don't detract from each other"?

Paola: I think it was well into having built National Sawdust, because the beginning of that was so difficult and uncharted for me. It was really a complex start of a new venture.

Pier Carlo: Can you describe it?

Paola: Sure. Many people say this — sorry if I sound like a cliché — but had I known how hard it was, I probably wouldn't have done it. [She laughs.] At the time, my husband was in the Kronos Quartet. We were living in San Francisco, and I was leading VisionIntoArt remotely, away from New York. And I had a small child, and I was sad. I was away from my community. For some reason I just couldn't break into the San Francisco scene. And all of a sudden I'm presented with this incredible opportunity from this gentleman, who is the co-founder with me, Kevin Dolan, to reimagine what it would be like to create a home for artists. He wanted a living artist, he wanted a practicing artist, and how could I build that from scratch?

At the time, there wasn't the fundraising component, which later would become a huge part of what I did. I think that in those first years — and this is not to fault anyone — nobody really understands that you can't really be all things to everybody. So even though they said, "Oh, we really want you to be an artist," the truth is, you can only do so much in a day. I had a child and I was ... I did the best I could. But the reality was, I was always spread thin.

And the complexities of fundraising for a mission like the one we have, which is all about discovery and not coming to hear Renée Fleming, you're coming to hear the next Renée Fleming or whatever it is, in any style we put forward It's really about discovery. You're looking for the venture-capitalist type, if you will, a philanthropist who's willing to put money into something that very well may fail.

It took a long time to fundraise. It took us five years. And finally when we opened, we had opened and raised enough for the building but hadn't raised anything for the art! None of the ideas were capitalized. What that meant was that everything from then on for a while was putting us further and further in debt, if you will. It just was a difficult, difficult beginning, because you need to build a brand and you need to tell people what you stand for. And art isn't free.

For me, the whole point was, how can we create a mentoring, regenerative system that's going to help artists and do so in a way that is not so Eurocentric but that really deals with aesthetic equity?

I think there's this myth that artists just need space. And while they just need space, you don't get a Soros Fellow to just build a club, right? For me, the whole point was, how can we create a mentoring, regenerative system that's going to help artists and do so in a way that is not so Eurocentric but that really deals with aesthetic equity?

I had big ideas, and I was just doing the best I could without a ton of experience. I learned while doing it and luckily, for better or for worse, hit my head along the way many times. And then I

would say that about two, three years in, I think people began to understand that it was more than just this beautiful-sounding space — which was really important, obviously — but it was really a space that had a set of values, that had aspirations.

As I built confidence in knowing that I had built something that I would be proud of and as my writing was getting back on track and the pieces that I had been working on for years — I tend to write large-scale work that take many years to complete — were being performed, like “Aging Magician,” I began to feel more pride in myself and began to be able to translate some of those leadership skills.

Also some of those skills of dealing with people who have a very, very different set of values and understanding about art. Having to deal with people when you’re really at odds helped me succeed in situations where I had to see everyone’s way. I had to emerge from it in a way that I would be proud but at the same time do so with diplomacy.

Pier Carlo: We’re hearing in a lot of these interviews —and of course this isn’t going to be a surprise to you or anyone — that arts leaders’ least favorite task is having to fundraise, because usually it entails having to speak to non-artists and learning how to do that. Do you have any hints or tips on how to share your vision and your passion with someone who is not naturally versed in the arts?

Paola: Absolutely. First of all, and it’s the thing that I say with everyone, it takes patience. The idea that you’re going to develop a relationship with a donor that is going to immediately translate into money often only happens when you’ve already done all the building blocks. There are some miracles in life, and those are amazing. For example, right now, we just got an angel donation to start this live aspect of our digital stage that helps artists with really substantial grants. That was a miracle, but we have also been building for five years. That can happen.

But what I’ve learned — and maybe it’s that I haven’t had as much success as others — is that fundraising is about authenticity. In the same way that you would deal in a collaboration, it takes time. A collaboration is an artform in itself. It takes time, just like practicing your instrument or composing. The same goes for a philanthropic relationship. There has to be trust. You have to be willing to give it time. You have to be willing to learn from them. The idea that I go into a relationship with someone and think that I need to teach them, and that’s it? Well, that’s a missed opportunity for me. What do they have that they can teach me?

That’s how I developed, to be honest, a pretty successful relationship with my co-founder — I would venture to say we are very close — and also with our board president: I call on them. I ask them for advice. I take it. Sometimes. Most of the time. These are relationships that I built that are important to me. When you’re not asking for money but you’re building something together, even when it’s with someone that you’re not as close to but there’s that authenticity and passion, something sparks, and it becomes easier.

Pier Carlo: That makes sense. You mentioned Live at National Sawdust. Can you walk us through how you came up with it as this crisis was unfolding and you had a sense of what was happening? How did you go about creating that program, and can you describe it?

Paola: Yeah. At the beginning, I, like everybody else, was in shock. I was actually in Minnesota, about to premiere my first grand opera. Then I had another opera going up at San Diego Opera. Things that I had been working on for years ... everything was just canceled days before the show. I was heartbroken and at the same time had to deal with the heartbreaking reality that we couldn't continue the way we were at Sawdust.

We've always been towing this tightrope, and so when things began to unravel, they unraveled very quickly. We didn't have a backup. We had to immediately restructure. I went off-salary. My managing director went off-salary. We brought the company down to literally six or seven people that could just help us rebuild. That was painful because I've never done anything like that.

Then the first instinct was what everyone's instinct was, which is to say, 'We have this incredible archive; how do we organize it in a really beautiful way that can thematically bring people through some of the work that we've had over the years?'

Then the first instinct was what everyone's instinct was, which is to say, "We have this incredible archive; how do we organize it in a really beautiful way that can thematically bring people through some of the work that we've had over the years?" Some of the workshops. I had interviewed Todd Machover and Renée Fleming on mental wellbeing. We created these weekly themes that range from joy to, this week it's mysticism. Anyway, a beautiful arrangement of themes. And we began to archive and cut up the work and do so in a refined way.

The question to me was, "This is great, but as I've lost all my income, how's everybody else going to survive?" And that's when we got very fortunate and we received this angel donation after speaking to someone whom I really cherish. They gave us a wonderful sum of money to be able to support both emerging and mid-career artists. We came up with the idea of a discovery series that would launch two times a week and then a master class hosted by myself and my good friend, the vocalist Helga Davis, with more mid-career-to-established artists, talking about performance practice and also how they're coping with this new normal, in the hopes that for some of the younger artists out there, or anybody really, it could help elucidate a way forward.

Pier Carlo: That's incredible. You haven't had to stop the paying of your artists.

Paola: No. In fact, that's the thing that's really important to me, because a part of what everyone's struggling with is that everybody is streaming and no one's getting paid. And that's tough, right? And I don't blame institutions, because I also see both sides. What's tough about being an artist and a leader is that I get it. Institutions need to be around in order to be able to pay their orchestras, their artists. And they're struggling. We're lucky in a way because we're so small that we could bend and be flexible and immediately repurpose our staff to a new online system. Again, we wouldn't have been able to do that without the support of this incredible anonymous donation.

Pier Carlo: And clearly you've also assembled a very flexible and willing staff.

Paola: Yeah, it's incredible, to be honest. We couldn't hire anybody. In fact, we only hired one person onboard with us who really has experience producing live, because that's something we had never done. And helping us build out the live platform that's going to unveil in literally an hour or two. That was the only person we brought onboard. Everyone else was on staff, and completely pivoted.

Pier Carlo: **Wow. You state currently on your special statement on the National Sawdust website that you, meaning National Sawdust, are in a place to imagine a new reality and a new future. Now's a perfect time for me to ask you, what do you imagine is this new reality and future, and how do you plan to lead the organization to it?**

Paola: There is a lot unknown, so I want to preempt this by saying that I still don't know, as very few people know, what's going to be the new normal in the fall. Can people congregate? Will people want to congregate? I can't tell the future. But what I do know is that, as artists, we're going to be needed more than ever. There's going to be a lot of independent voices, which I think is a really powerful thing.

I do worry that some of the really big strides, in terms of gender equity and wonderful inclusion initiatives, that those might be put on the back burner by mere need to survive. I worry that that really doesn't represent where we were going as an artistic ecosystem. I worry about that.

So, the way that I think we will lead is to continuously have this live and digital reality. If we're able to have people in this space ... for example, we might have 30 people socially distance and also have a really healthy audience online. Thus far, all the offerings have been free. I think that was really important because so many people have lost their jobs. We want to be able to pay artists but also want people to be able to see this work. I could see eventually there being a membership program, things like that.

Buckling down to some of our values while using some of the new digital realities to bring that work out to a wider field and cultivate our audiences in new ways, I think those are the ways that we're going to be able to survive and to continue to fill a niche in a city like New York.

But in terms of the real healing that needs to happen in terms of an ecosystem, I think a lot of the work that we've been doing in terms of mentorship, in terms of creating pathways for artists and bringing always this lens of aesthetic equity, that it's not just European composition that's valued In a way, buckling down to some of our values while using some of the new digital realities to bring that work out to a wider field and cultivate our audiences in new ways, I think those are

the ways that we're going to be able to survive and to continue to fill a niche in a city like New York.

Pier Carlo: And thinking even further ahead — it's totally inappropriate for me to ask this because it's such a fantasy — but thinking to the time when we no longer have to social-distance and we can gather en masse, let's say two years down the line, how do you think audiences' relationships to the arts will have changed? Is there going to be a new expectation? How do you want to address them differently?

Paola: That's such a good question. I think that the thing about audiences and artists is that we're all living through the same thing. There is some art that is super looking-into-the-future, but art is really often a reflection of one's identity. And identity is informed by a community. I foresee that when we can be together, there will be a need evermore for that kind of trust and connection, that spiritual connection that happens between audiences and artists.

I'm hopeful that the big forums that I love to write for continue to exist and that those opportunities continue to exist. We were in a very plush time. It was still very difficult for many people, but there was a lot. There was a lot of noise, there was a lot out there. I think there will be more and more independent work continuing to be done.

In terms of audiences, it's going to be up to all of the spaces right now to try to find new ways to give to the audiences and to let them into what the artistic experience is so that when we can be back together, there's a clearer way to do that. I think that's the responsibility of anybody who is in an artistic leadership position to be thinking about right now.

That was a huge impetus for getting the work out there and inviting audiences in for free right now, namely that nobody is in a place to be spending money. Let's face it. Our audiences are very young concertgoers, and everyone's been really affected by this. For us, it was important that this be free so that we can continue to foster that relationship.

So in two years down the line, what do I hope for? Well, I hope that, first of all, that it's not two years down the line. I hope that it's sooner than that! I hope there is an ever-growing need to want and to be together in these kinds of communal experiences. I think there's also going to be the creation of new forms, new digital forms.

Having said that, I've done a lot of collaborations in the last month digitally. And it is hard. Sonically, it's important that it sound good, if you're a composer or a musician. That really matters! It's just not the same, because you use your ears to hear and to create within a space. And that space is now being channeled through computer speakers. It's just not easy. So while I think there are going to be these new digital forms, I think we're going to want evermore to be in the presence of musicians and hearing things in the ways that we've had the opportunity to have in the past.

Pier Carlo: I want to turn back to something you said earlier, that you worry that during this crisis a lot of the advances that the arts have made in gender, cultural and aesthetic equity might be lost. Why do you think that?

Paola: Historically, minorities have always been more marginalized. Right now, I think what's happening is that, if you take for example, the disability community, they're more marginalized. Very few people think about what's the reality for them. Communicating this in a time of need, in terms of mental health and how we make it through this, I think, is really important, especially for communities that need to be heard. That ranges everything from gender equity to disability rights to any community that, as I mentioned, has been marginalized.

What I worry is that historically it's been very comfortable for a certain subset of people to reign in the arts. That was beginning to come apart and not in a way that prohibits people from having a collective discussion. I want to be in rooms with many different kinds of people but in ways that help correct some of the injustices of the past. I worry that we're going to go back to a place where it's easier to play music that people are used to. It's easier to promote the people who are already established. Because there's going to be so many bigger issues at stake. Will an organization even survive? And I'm talking about less of an organization like mine; our whole point is discovering talent. I do worry about that.

I see it because, as a composer myself, these opportunities to work with these big companies came well into my forties. I've been working 25 years to have these opportunities. And I'm a collaborator; I'm someone who builds people up; I foster relationships. I worry because not every artist should be everything to everyone. Not every artist can be an entrepreneur, an activist, a talent. I feel like in a way somehow the world in which I had to be born made me into a super strain of human. I don't think that's fair, because with some artists, it's enough that they're writing and they're dealing with their own set of complex issues. Those are the things I worry about.

The positive could be that more power gets put into the hands of smaller institutions ... the discovery aspect of bringing forward new voices goes into the hands of smaller institutions. So then his concept of a micro-institution has a lot more power, because you're more flexible, you're more adaptive and you can have an equal megaphone.

The positive could be that more power gets put into the hands of smaller institutions. Maybe it is that the larger institutions deal with the past and maintain that sense of legacy, which is important, historically. Kudos to that. And then, the discovery aspect of bringing forward new voices goes into the hands of smaller institutions. So then his concept of a micro-institution has a lot more power, because you're more flexible, you're more adaptive and you can have an equal megaphone.

Beth Morrison is a good friend of mine, and she's been producing my work forever. There was a time, when I was in my early twenties, that you would never see a young independent company in The New York Times alongside the Met. Well now, that's totally the norm.

Pier Carlo: Imagine a young you, a composer coming up through Juilliard right now. I imagine she's probably had to go home, but anyway she's mapping out her career. Do you have any advice for her during this period?

Paola: That's such a good question. I think that the advice I would give is first of all to be healthy, to be able to look at the time needed in terms of mental health. Especially as a composer, actually as any artist, your mental health is paramount in terms of how you deal with your artform. It needs to be able to support, not detract from you. If this time is time where you need to not write and you need to just live, let that be it. That is a huge successful thing, to be happy, to find happiness in the unknown, to be able to survive it, to be healthy. To just survive is important during moments of massive, unknown change.

If that is all working and the desire to create is still there, then I would say that building communities is evermore important. People deal with massive stress in different ways. I tend to retreat a little bit, I'm not going to lie. I'm like, "Oh, I'm upset. I don't know how to figure this out. I'm going to not reach out to people." And really when I have finally reached out, I feel so much better. "Oh, this person's coping with this this way." Not to forget that everybody's coping with this and that there is a difference between isolation and solitude. We want to not be isolated. We want to learn how to deal with the solitude and to do that in ways where you're calling upon your community; you're creating new communities. If this is a time to learn about digital reality in terms of your craft, then use that time.

There's a lot of free stuff out there, so be looking to service organizations to see what the conferences or services they're providing. As hard as it is for artists and freelancers right now, I do think that there are services and people out there who care and who need our voices. Just be reaching out. Again, just taking care of oneself is paramount in this time.

Epilogue

In this time of great turbulence, Paola Prestini reminds us of the value of thoughtfulness and reflection. Key takeaways from our time with Paola include:

- **Seek feedback.** Challenge your thinking and your creative prowess by having people challenge your assumptions. A good devil's advocate can help with ideation clarification and motivation to succeed.
- **Honor self-reflection and self-awareness.** A leader's decisions are guided by their awareness. The more you understand yourself in the context of your situation, the more open you become to possibilities and choices.
- **Have patience and humility.** These are trying times. Learn to sit in the discomfort, as that is where inspiration will emerge.
- **Use innate skills.** Artists are idea generative creatures. Being a leader doesn't mean you have to drop your skills as an artist; rather carry them with you into whatever role you are playing.
- **Think systemically.** Everything impacts something else. Watch for interconnectedness in your relationships, your work and your goals.



Paola Prestini

COMPOSER, CO-FOUNDER & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL SAWDUST

Paola Prestini has collaborated with poets, filmmakers, and scientists in large-scale multimedia works that chart her interest in extra-musical themes ranging from the cosmos to the environment. Her compositions have been commissioned by and performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn Youth Chorus, Barbican Centre, Cannes Film Festival, Carnegie Hall, The Kennedy Center, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Opera, Roomful of Teeth, Choir of Trinity Wall Street, and Young People's Chorus of New York City, among others. Upcoming projects include the opera "Edward Tulane" (Minnesota Opera), the chamber opera "Sensorium Ex" (Atlanta Opera and Beth Morrison Projects Prototype Festival), the foley chamber opera "Silent Light" (Banff's Opera in the 21st Century), a piano concerto for Awadagin Pratt and "A Far Cry," a piano concerto for Lara Downes and the Louisville Symphony, Oregon Bach Festival, and Ravinia, and music for "The Amazon," a documentary and arts event (recently screened at the Margaret Mead Film Festival at the Museum of Natural History). She is the co-founder and artistic director of the Brooklyn based arts institution and incubator, National Sawdust, and as part of her commitment to the next generation and equity, she started the Hildegard Competition for emerging female, trans, and non-binary composers and the Blueprint Fellowship for emerging composers with The Juilliard School. She was a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow and a Sundance Fellow, and was a graduate of the Juilliard School. / Photo: Caroline Tompkins