On March 2, 2015, a line of people stretching around the block waited to get into the Rickshaw Stop on Fell Street in San Francisco. This was not like most nights at the funky music venue and bar; the people in line weren't waiting to see an indie band, or dance to music spun by a DJ. This night the entertainment would be opera … of a sort. The evening, organized by the San Francisco Opera (SFO), was called "Barely Opera," with the slogan "This Isn't Your Grandmother's Opera." Complete with a "Wheel of Songs" that audience members could spin to select the next song, a live DJ, opera-themed drinks, and costumes for attendees to try on, it was designed to remove the intimidation often felt by those new to opera and introduce a younger, hipper audience to operatic music.

Barely Opera was the result of a project that was part of a course at Stanford University's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design ("d.school"). As part of the course, two students worked with SFO to help the Opera think about how to best use a new 299-seat facility that would open in early 2016. But they hoped that the benefits would extend far beyond this objective — that the project would introduce the Opera staff to new ways of thinking that offered the potential to fundamentally change how it operated.

The challenge of experimenting at an organization committed to perfection
An important part of the city's cultural scene, the San Francisco Opera dates back to the 1850s. SFO's facility, the 3,146-seat War Memorial Opera House, was funded by a voter-approved municipal bond in 1927. Where most opera houses are funded by wealthy patrons, this "people's opera house" was paid for by ordinary citizens. The new facility would enable the performance of programs not well suited to the large opera house.
As one of the world's leading opera companies, SFO has traditionally focused on perfection in all aspects of its performances. Matthew Shilvock, the company's new General Director, described this drive for perfection as, "our blessing in allowing us to produce moments of exquisite theater, and our curse in terms of not giving us the flexibility to adapt quickly."
Like almost every non-profit organization, SFO has limited resources. Ticket sales cover just a fraction of its production and administrative costs, with the balance coming from donations, grants and endowment. To survive and thrive with the conflicting demands of performance excellence and constrained resources, SFO has developed a highly structured organization.
As a result of these factors, previous "experiments" had typically been meticulously planned, and executed at extremely high levels of quality. Given the drive for perfection ingrained in its culture, the natural response to poor results was that the quality level had not been sufficient, and other potential lessons were often lost. This blend of perfectionism and limited resources meant that experiments were rare events at SFO.

Getting comfortable with feeling uncomfortable
"Design thinking" is a hands-on approach that focuses on developing empathy for others, generating ideas quickly, testing rough "prototypes" that, although incomplete or impractical, fuel rapid learning for teams and organizations. The two d.school students who worked with the Opera were Zena Barakat and Madhav Thattai. Zena was a John S. Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford, and previously a senior video producer at The New York Times. Madhav was in the MSx program at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, a program for mid-career managers. He had been director of product management at Dell Computer before coming to Stanford.

The SFO project began in January 2015. Zena and Madhav's first step was to take the SFO team working on the d.school project to meet with people from outside the world of opera. One was Christina Augello, founder of the experimental Exit Theatre and organizer of San Francisco's Fringe Festival. She described the struggle of experimenting on a tight budget, something she considered to be an essential part of the creative process—a sign on the wall read "No Risk, No Art." At Exit Theatre, everyone worked as a community, sharing roles, pitching in where needed. The opera team also spoke with Hodari Davis, the Artistic Director of Young, Gifted, and Black, and the National Program Director of Youth Speaks. He emphasized the importance of going out into the community, insisting that you can't "wait for the community to come to you. Don't build a space and think that the community is coming to you. You have to go to the community." Zena also brought in James Buckhouse, an opera and ballet fan who works at venture capital firm Sequoia Capital and formerly with Twitter. He was scheduled to be the Master of Ceremonies of an under-40 night for the San Francisco Ballet, which shares the War Memorial Opera House with the Opera. Planning for the event had just started, and it would take place in 30 days.

These conversations energized the SFO team, who realized that they usually communicated and learned from within the opera community. There was also a useful sense of competition — if the Ballet could put something together quickly, why couldn't the Opera? The group brainstormed around this idea, and began to conceive a dramatic new prototype that would enable them to attract a new, younger audience.

To gain insights into audience perceptions, SFO team members approached strangers near San Francisco's Ferry Building and asked if they would be willing to give 5-10 minutes of their time for some feedback. Once they agreed, they were given tickets and told to walk through some imaginary doors. The "audience members" were warmly greeted by the SFO team, given a mask, and directed to three stations, each with an iPad providing information: one station had food menus on the iPad and a person playing a bartender, one station showed a video of a wig maker, and one station had videos of a singer performing. Afterwards, each participant was debriefed. This exercise taught the team that people in different age groups have very different needs, and also that there's much variability within age groups. For instance, among people in their 30s, parents were vastly different than singles. They also learned that audience involvement (tested by giving participants the mask) was far more powerful than previously anticipated. They got useful input on menu items and prices.

Most importantly, the SFO team learned the power of rapid prototyping. It had taken them just two hours to pull the materials together and three hours in the field, and they had gained valuable insights. Although they were a bit embarrassed by the low-budget feeling of the prototype, they were surprised at the depth of the insights they gathered in such a short time. The feedback was so much more useful and empowering than information from surveys.

And yet there were setbacks during this early stage. Zena and Madhav challenged the SFO team to go to some event that they would never ordinarily attend, something that made them feel uncomfortable — and do it within the next two weeks. The idea was to gain empathy for their new audiences, who would be asked to come to a new experience put on by the SFO. They

wanted the SFO staff to talk to people at these events to learn more about them. But only two of the seven team members completed the exercise.

Zena and Madhav scheduled another prototype to get the SFO team into the community, interacting with people outside the opera. The team went to a park in nearby Hayes Valley, played opera music, and tested ideas about including drinks in ticket prices (an idea that was not well received), various menu options for the new venue, and whether people would want to take food and/or drinks into the performance. Their d.school classmates weren't impressed by this prototype: With the SFO team in the room, they criticized it as being too safe and encouraged Zena and Madhav to push the SFO team further outside their comfort zones.

Building a more ambitious prototype
As the SFO team walked out of the disappointing design review at the d.school, they told Zena and Madhav that they were thinking of taking over a bar for their next, more ambitious prototype. Zena and Madhav challenged them to put on the event in just two weeks, by the end of the class, which was far sooner than the SFO staff thought possible. In less than a week, the SFO team had booked the Rickshaw Stop, an alternative music venue just three blocks from the Opera, which had a stage and space for an audience of 400 people.

Zena and Madhav formed three teams to plan and carry out the event: programming (what the performance would be at the venue), experience (things surrounding the performance), and engagement (audience engagement before the event, and feedback afterwards). The seven SFO project members joined teams that were outside of their comfort zones. For instance, the marketing person was on the programming team, and the woman who would be responsible for programming at the new SFO venue joined the experience team. Each team then recruited three more people from amongst the staff, for a total of 5-6 people per team. While the whole event was intended as an experiment, each team also designed experiments within their area to provide additional insights.

They came up with a name, Barely Opera, at a brainstorming session 10 days before the event, involving all 20 people from the teams plus Zena and Madhav. As soon as the name was chosen, the engagement team bought a URL, developed a website, created a logo—all within a few hours, and without having to go through the approval process normally required for decisions at the opera. The SFO teams found this autonomy liberating.

They advertised the event on social media and on local blogs, charging a $10 "cover charge" (not ticket price). A list of songs was developed with the Adler Fellows, a group of young resident opera singers in training, who would perform with piano accompaniment. Their hope was modest: to attract 100 people.

When the doors opened on March 2, 2015, a line of nearly 400 people stretched around the block. Just inside the door was a photo booth, with costumes from the Opera's inventory that people could put on. To make guests feel welcome, six opera-loving volunteers served as hosts — dressed in full costumes, wigs, and makeup. They greeted the attendees, took photos with attendees, asked for feedback, and served opera-themed cocktails and tamales.

The idea was to flip conventions on their head. The greeters were in extravagant attire, but the singers themselves were casually dressed—just jeans and t-shirts. The audience members were invited to try on opera costumes, but that's where the formality stopped.

Audience members selected songs by spinning a "Wheel of Songs." As each song was performed, a projection screen behind the stage provided translations in the form of memes (a funny image sometimes accompanied by text.) For instance, when the final singer hit a dramatic high note, a picture of Beyoncé was shown. The audience loved it.

The event was a huge success. But the real purpose was not the single event; it was to help SFO staff top change how they think about their mission and to develop new ways of operating. The next day, everyone met to debrief. As Madhav described it, "We had decided ahead of time that we were absolutely not going to focus on the outcome of the experiment." They did not want the event to be the end, but rather the beginning of an ongoing process.

A few days later, when the group met up again, after 10 minutes of celebratory champagne, strawberries, and cupcakes, Zena and Madhav asked, "What were our failures?" The entire group then celebrated the committee that had the most failures—and celebrated the freedom to experiment and try things outside their comfort zones.

Keeping the creativity going

The project opened the eyes of Opera personnel to the power of experimentation, spurring "a new commitment to innovative thinking and creative brainstorming" as Shilvock put it. The Opera subsequently formed a number of innovation groups (iGroups) drawn from different departments to work on issues related to opening the new facility.

These in turn gave rise to a new production arm called "SF Opera Lab" to stage productions at the new facility, now named the Diane B. Wilsey Center. SF Opera Lab would experiment at the Wilsey Center, but also in other venues around the city.

For the new theater's first season, lasting from March through May 2016, events included an a cappella opera, a one-man show, a film concert, and a program of music featuring the opera's promising young performers (again, the Adler Fellows) and members of the Opera's orchestra. Ticket prices for these events were considerably less than for the opera, ranging from $25 to $125. The web page for each event had a box titled "Who's Gonna Love It," describing the type of person who would be most attracted to the event. For instance, "Svadba-Wedding" is an a cappella opera about a Serbian bride-to-be and her friends preparing for her wedding day. The "Who's Gonna Love It" box read, "Fans of Pentatonix, World Music lovers, or anyone planning a wedding."

Through Wilsey Center performances and casual pop-up events around the city, the SFO team began to learn what younger audiences wanted from an opera experience.
The art form (opera) wasn't a problem – they thoroughly enjoyed the performances – in fact, the singers performed some pop songs at the pop-up events, but the audiences seemed to react more strongly to the opera songs.

The problem for younger audiences were some of the trappings and traditions that surrounded the art form – the feeling that there were lots of rules made for an intimidating experience. For instance, Zena attended an opera at the War Memorial Opera House and noticed a sign at the main stage that encouraged people to take selfies and to share them via a particular hashtag. When she did so, an older patron scolded her, saying taking pictures wasn't allowed.

The atmosphere at the pop-ups was much different. It was informal.   There was an emcee that explained the songs, why the singer was doing a particular song, and who generally made everyone feel welcome and comfortable. The singers also enjoyed the less formal events, in which they were able to interact with the crowd in a different way than during staged operas. They could tell jokes, talk to the crowd, and see reactions up close. They were accessible to the audience, and the audience was accessible to the singers.

Yet, as with all innovators who challenge the status quo, the iGroups faced challenges. The SFO culture had a strong bias towards maintaining the highest possible production values. Not all members of the Opera's staff and management had embraced the design thinking "fail early, fail often" approach. And some felt that experiments like Barely Opera had diminished the Opera by not incorporating the high standards of a world-class opera company. The success of the pop-up events helped overcome this resistance. Sean Waugh, who led the SFO project team, observed that more and more staff were attending the pop-ups, where they realized "how thrilling it is to go to an opera event and see that the majority of people there are under the age of 35."

Given the strong cultural pull of perfection, there was a risk that the pop-up events, which originally had a high degree of spontaneity, could become too polished. That SFO would get comfortable with a successful formula, and that it would lose those attributes which made it successful. For the audience and performers, keeping the show authentic, real, and unpredictable was part of the appeal.

But now the Opera had a way of fighting these impulses. As Shilvock puts it, "Design thinking is liberating for a company tightly constrained by contracts and expectations!" The d.school project "opened the door for us to be a more creative, questioning, and iterative organization, a little more willing to try and fail."

Waugh agreed that the effect on the organization had been transformative. "This is an organization that has done almost a complete 360 after this process. Before it was an organization that was very, very, very adverse to change, not open to the idea of failure, and now we're embracing change to a greater degree, making SFO a more fun place to work."
To which we can only say, "Bravo."

Authors' Note: Zena Barakat's and Madhav Thattai's San Francisco Opera project was completed for a d.school class called d.leadership: Design Leadership In Context, where a dozen or so pairs of Stanford students each year work with an external "client" to help them apply design thinking to solve thorny problems. Charla Bear also contributed to the project during a different phase. The class is taught by Perry Klebahn, Kathryn Segovia, Bob Sutton, and Jeremy Utley.

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