



**MEROLA**  
OPERA PROGRAM

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer commissioned to write Merola Opera Program's first commissioned work, *If I Were You*, for its world premiere in 2019**

**Merola Opera Program's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season in 2017 opens with June 11 Benefit Gala, and includes stagings of Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, Holst's *Sāvitri*, and Walton's *The Bear* and Rossini's *La Cenerentola*; two Schwabacher Summer Concerts, including Merola's first performance at Bing Concert Hall; and annual Grand Finale performance at War Memorial Opera House**

(San Francisco, CA) The Merola Opera Program is proud to announce its first-ever commission of a new operatic work, which will be written by composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer. The world premiere of *If I Were You* will be performed by Merola Opera Program artists in San Francisco in 2019, featuring artists selected for the 2019 summer season. Heggie, who is based in San Francisco, has a long and successful history with both San Francisco Opera and the Merola Opera Program, and many of the Merola Program's graduates have starred in his operas on stages around the world.

"Throughout my career as a composer and pianist, I've had the great opportunity to collaborate with an array of dazzling singers. Time and again, I'm delighted to discover how many of them have a connection with the great Merola Opera Program," said Heggie. "What an indelible difference Merola has made as the standard bearer for young artist programs! Just consider its history and the number of careers that have begun with Merola. Over the years, I've had the privilege of composing dozens of roles and songs for Merolini, and the great pleasure of seeing them inhabit and create characters in my operas *Dead Man Walking*, *Moby-Dick*, *Great Scott*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, *Three Decembers*, *Out of Darkness* and *The End of the Affair*."

"It has long been a dream of mine to write a full-length stage work especially for the Merola Opera Program to celebrate its legacy and spotlight its important place in the world of opera. I'm absolutely over the moon that the time has come with *If I Were You*. Gene Scheer and I look forward to creating a challenging and beautiful opera with the fabulous Merola team."

Merola Opera has a history of presenting American operas. Included in these American works are Argento's *Postcard from Morocco*, Menotti's *The Medium*, the world premiere of Pasatieri's *Hotel Casablanca*, Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Susa's *Transformations*, and Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

### **ABOUT *IF I WERE YOU***

*If I Were You*, the newly-commissioned two-act opera from composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer, is loosely based on the novel by Julien Green. A short synopsis follows.

Who hasn't imagined being someone else? Someone more powerful, rich, beautiful, gifted, beloved, famous or infamous. Who would you be? For how long and at what cost? Fabian Hart is a lost, dispirited young man; a dreamer yearning for adventure and desperate for a way out of his stifling existence. The devil, disguised as the dazzling and powerful woman Brittomara, offers him a supernatural power: and by singing a secret phrase, Fabian can transfer his soul into another person's body and live their life. This is the perilous journey of *If I Were You*, as Fabian moves his soul into one person after another in search of a better existence. In his wake, he leaves human wreckage. When the promise of a profound love compels him to return to his original body, he must face the choice he has been avoiding: live forever as someone else, or die as himself.

*If I Were You* is a contemporary story of identity with echoes of classic literature, from Jekyll & Hyde to Faust. Heggie and Scheer envision a work in which many of the Merola singers in the cast have the opportunity to be the lead as Fabian's soul and music moves from one character to the next. In a confusing world dominated by marketing and false celebrity, how do young people find their way from what they are told they "should" be to who they really are?

### **ABOUT JAKE HEGGIE**

**JAKE HEGGIE** is the American composer of the acclaimed operas *Dead Man Walking* (libretto by Terrence McNally), *Moby-Dick* (libretto by Gene Scheer), *It's A Wonderful Life* (Scheer), *Great Scott* (McNally), *Three Decembers* (Scheer), *The End of the Affair* (McDonald), *Out of Darkness* (Scheer), *To Hell and Back* (Scheer), and *The Radio Hour* (Scheer). He has also composed chamber, choral and orchestral works as well as more than 250 art songs, many for today's most loved singers, including Kiri Te Kanawa, Renée Fleming, Audra McDonald, Susan Graham, Joyce DiDonato, Jamie Barton, Sasha Cooke, Frederica von Stade, Stephen Costello and Bryn Terfel, to name a few. The operas have been produced extensively on five continents with major productions in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, San Diego, Washington DC, Dallas, Houston, Dresden, Vienna, Cape Town, Sydney, Adelaide, Montreal, Calgary, Dublin, Malmö and Copenhagen. *Dead Man Walking* has received 50 international productions since its premiere, as well as two live recordings. *Moby-Dick* was telecast nationally as part of *Great Performances'* 40<sup>th</sup> season and released on DVD (EuroArts). *The Wall Street Journal* called him "arguably the world's most popular 21<sup>st</sup> century opera and art song composer."

Heggie was recently awarded the Eddie Medora King prize by the UT Austin Butler School of Music and was the keynote speaker for the 2016 meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music. This year, he will give commencement addresses at the Eastman School of Music and Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music. A mentor for Washington National Opera's American Opera Initiative for three seasons, he is a frequent guest artist at universities and conservatories including Boston University, Bucknell, Cincinnati Conservatory, Cornell, The Royal Conservatory in Toronto, UNI, UNT, UT Austin, University of Colorado, USC Thornton School, Vanderbilt University and at festivals such as SongFest at the Colburn School. He lives in San Francisco. [www.jakeheggie.com](http://www.jakeheggie.com)

### **ABOUT GENE SCHEER**

Gene Scheer's work is noted for its scope and versatility. With the composer Jake Heggie, he has collaborated on many projects, including the critically acclaimed 2010 Dallas Opera world premiere, *Moby-Dick*, starring Ben Heppner as Captain Ahab; *Three Decembers* (Houston Grand Opera), which starred Frederica von Stade; and the lyric drama *To Hell and Back* (Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra), which featured Patti LuPone. Other works by Scheer and Heggie include *Camille Claudel: Into the fire*, a song cycle premiered by Joyce di Donato and the

Alexander String Quartet. Scheer worked as librettist with Tobias Picker on *An American Tragedy*, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 2005. Other collaborations include the lyrics for Wynton Marsalis's *It Never Goes Away*, featured in Marsalis's work *Congo Square*. With the composer Steven Stucky, Scheer wrote the oratorio *August 4, 1964*, for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. The work was nominated for a Grammy in 2012 for Best Classical Composition. In 2015, Scheer collaborated with Joby Talbot on the opera *Everest*, based on the doomed 1996 expedition. With Jennifer Higdon, Scheer wrote an operatic adaptation of *Cold Mountain*, which premiered in the summer of 2015 at the Santa Fe Opera. This work won the International Opera award, presented in London, for the best world premiere in 2015. Recently, along with Higdon, Scheer was nominated for a Grammy for his work on *Cold Mountain* for Best Classical Composition. In December of 2016 Scheer and Jake Heggie premiered an operatic adaptation of *It's a Wonderful Life* for the Houston Grand Opera. Also a composer in his own right, Scheer has written a number of songs for singers such as Renée Fleming, Sylvia McNair, Stephanie Blythe, Jennifer Larmore, Denyce Graves, and Nathan Gunn. The distinguished documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns, prominently featured Scheer's song "American Anthem" (as sung by Norah Jones) in his Emmy Award-winning World War II documentary for PBS entitled *The War*.

## **MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM CELEBRATES 60 YEARS**

The Merola Opera Program launches its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary season with a nod to its monumental history while forging a new path for young opera artists. Its 2017 season opens June 11 with a Benefit Gala, starting at San Francisco City Hall and continuing at Herbst Theatre, featuring some of the most illustrious participants from past Merola programs: Deborah Voigt ('85), Julie Adams ('14), Kristin Clayton ('93), Tracy Dahl ('85), Catherine Cook ('90), Zanda Svēde ('13), Dolora Zajick ('83), Pene Pati ('13), Issachah Savage ('13), Quinn Kelsey ('02), Bojan Knezevic ('92), John Churchwell ('96), Mark Morash ('89), and other special Merola alumni. The 60<sup>th</sup> season continues with two Schwabacher Summer Concerts on July 6 and 9; stagings of Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, Holst's *Sāvītri*, and Walton's *The Bear* in a triple bill (July 20 and 22); Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (August 3 and 5); and the annual Merola Grand Finale performance August 19 at the War Memorial Opera House.

In the past six decades, over 1,236 individual participants have experienced the transformative Merola Opera Program, many of whom have become world-renowned artists in the pages of operatic history. Between 1957 and 2016, 354 sopranos, 174 mezzo-sopranos, 5 contraltos, 5 countertenors, 211 tenors, 176 baritones, 71 bass-baritones, 82 basses, 136 apprentice coaches, and 22 apprentice stage directors have received invaluable and life-changing training and financial support from the Merola Opera Program. The impact of the equally impressive Merola faculty and artists has left a grand presence on operatic stages across the globe, and the program continues to surpass its own standard of excellence in quality and vision with each passing season.

For the 2017 Merola Opera Program held from June 5 to August 19, twenty-three singers, five apprentice coaches, and one apprentice stage director will participate, representing five countries and the United States. More than 600 young artists auditioned around the United States for this highly selective, all expenses paid, 12-week summer opera training program. The artists chosen for the 2017 program come from around the world, including Canada, Poland, China, Colombia, and Mexico, plus 14 different states in the U.S.

Opera luminaries Alan Darling, Jane Eaglen, Robert Morrison, Martin Katz, and Warren Jones will lead public master classes for the young artists, which may be attended by Merola members. Guest teachers include Richard Battle, Deborah Birnbaum, Steven Blier, Nicky Bowie, Alessandra Cattani, Tracy Dahl, Peter Grunberg, Robin Guarino, Peter Kazaras, Bruce Lamott, James Morris, Patricia Kristof Moy, Kevin Murphy, John Parr, and César Ulloa, who will provide training in voice, foreign languages, operatic repertory, diction, acting, career management, and stage movement. Apprentice coaches and the apprentice stage director have a 12-week program and performers have an 11-week program.

## **ABOUT THE 2017 MEROLA SUMMER FESTIVAL SEASON**

The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summer Festival Season will begin with the Gala Concert on June 11. The season will continue with the Schwabacher Summer Concert in which the Merola artists present extended staged scenes from Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Massenet's *Thaïs*, von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, and Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*, accompanied by full orchestra, with English supertitles. The first performance will take place at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on July 6. A second performance will

take place on July 9 at Bing Concert Hall as part of Stanford Live's Summer at the Bing, Merola's first foray onto the Peninsula in over a decade.

On July 20 and 22, Merola will present a triple bill of one-act operas in contrasting styles. Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* is a quintessential operatic work that links history to the present with relatable characters in the form of a cunning young maid and her aging master. In *Sāvitrī*, Holst reaches into the Mahābhārata, one of the great epics of ancient India, focusing on the tale of Death outsmarted by a young woman. The series closes with Walton's *The Bear*, where a widow faithful to the memory of her late husband finds unexpected love.

The second fully staged opera production of the season is *La Cenerentola*, presented on August 3 and 5. In Rossini's warmhearted retelling of the Cinderella story, the evil stepmother has become a wicked stepfather, the fairy godmother a philosopher, and the slipper has been swapped for a bracelet. Goodness and kindness triumph and melody reigns supreme. The opera has special significance for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary – Merola also presented it in its 40<sup>th</sup> (with Joyce DiDonato) and 50<sup>th</sup> (with Daniela Mack and Alek Shrader) anniversary seasons. All performances of *La Cenerentola* and the triple bill will take place at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

The summer festival season concludes on August 19 with the Merola Grand Finale, a concert at the War Memorial Opera House, featuring scenes from some of opera's most thrilling moments.

## **ABOUT MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM**

Led artistically by San Francisco Opera Center Director and internationally acclaimed soprano Sheri Greenawald, the Merola Opera Program is an independent nonprofit organization that operates in collaboration with the San Francisco Opera. Founded in 1957 and named for San Francisco Opera's founder, Gaetano Merola, the program celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2017 and is recognized as one of the most prestigious operatic training programs in the world. The Merola Opera Program typically receives more than 800 applications for approximately 29 positions. Throughout the summer, the Merola artists participate in master classes and private coachings with opera's most accomplished singers and performers. Participants, which include singers, apprentice coaches, and an apprentice stage director, also receive training in operatic repertory, foreign languages, diction, acting, and stage movement. The artists appear in public performances throughout the summer. The Merola Opera Program Summer Festival includes two staged operas, a scenes program, and a concert.

Offered free of charge for all participants, the Merola Opera Program is unique in the industry in many ways. Merola is the only young artist program to provide financial support to developing artists for five years following participation. In the past year alone, more than \$150,000 was distributed to more than 100 artists, supporting their essential career development costs including coaching, language classes, and audition travel. In addition, only Merola graduates are considered for participation in the San Francisco Opera's Adler Fellowship program.

Merola members (including students in the Merola ConneXion program) enjoy the opportunity to sit in on select master classes and attend other special events with the young artists for a behind-the-scenes look at the training process.

A full season calendar follows the artist announcement below. For more information about the Merola Opera Program, please visit [www.merola.org](http://www.merola.org) or call (415) 936-2324.

**PRESS ONLY:** For more information on the individual 2017 Merola Opera Program participants, please visit <http://merola.org/2017artists>. To download headshots of the 2017 Merola artists, please visit <https://merolaopera.box.com/v/2017ArtistHeadshots>. No password required; for media use only. To download the highest resolution, select photo and then press the "download" button on the top right.

## **2017 MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM ARTISTS**

### **Sopranos**

Kendra Berentsen, Portland, Oregon

Mathilda Edge, Chandlerville, Illinois

Natalie Image, Tsawwassen, British Columbia, Canada

Jana McIntyre\*, Santa Barbara, California  
Felicia Moore, Princeton, New Jersey  
Alexandra Razskazoff, New Brighton, Minnesota  
Kelsea Webb, Anderson, Indiana

**Mezzo-sopranos**

Alice Chung, Loma Linda, California  
Ashley Dixon\*, Peachtree City, Georgia  
Edith Grossman, Elma, New York  
Samantha Hankey, Marshfield, Massachusetts

**Tenors**

Andres Acosta, Miami, Florida  
Anthony Ciaramitaro, Coral Springs, Florida  
Xingwa Hao, Zhan Jiang City, Guang Dong, China  
Addison Marlor, Salt Lake City, Utah

**Baritones**

Thomas Glass, Edina, Minnesota  
Dimitri Katotakis, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

**Bass-baritones**

Andrew Hiers, West Palm Beach, Florida  
Daniel Noyola, San Luis Potosí, Mexico  
Christian Pursell, Santa Cruz, California  
Cody Quattlebaum\*, Ellicott City, Maryland  
Szymon Wach\*, Lublin, Poland  
David Weigel\*, Asheville, North Carolina

**Apprentice Coaches**

César Cañón, Bogotá, Colombia  
Tuomas Juutilainen, Jyväskylä, Finland  
James Maverick, Baton Rouge, Louisiana  
Michael Sherman, Los Angeles, California  
Andrew Sun, West Windsor, New Jersey

**Apprentice Stage Director**

Victoria Crutchfield, New York, New York

\*Returning artists

**CALENDAR EDITORS, PLEASE NOTE:**

**2017 Merola Opera Summer Festival** *Calendar of Performances*

Tickets for all San Francisco performances go on sale Monday, April 17 and may be purchased by calling the San Francisco Opera Box Office at (415) 864-3330 or by visiting [merola.org](http://merola.org) or [sfopera.com](http://sfopera.com). The box office is open Monday, 10 am to 5 pm, and Tuesday through Friday, 10 am to 6 pm. Tickets for the Bing Concert Hall performance on the Stanford University campus go on sale in early June and may be purchased online at [live.stanford.edu](http://live.stanford.edu); by calling 650-724-2464; or in person at 327 Lasuen Street, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.

**Sunday, June 11 at 8:00 pm**

Merola presents 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala and Concert  
War Memorial Veterans Building, Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco  
Concert Tickets: \$60

Gala Tickets (include reception, dinner, concert & dessert after-party): \$600 and \$1500  
Deborah Voigt, Dolora Zajick, Issachah Savage, Quinn Kelsey, and many more noted Merola alums return for an evening of song and Merola memories in honor of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Merola Opera Program.

**Thursday, July 6 at 7:30 pm**

San Francisco Conservatory of Music, 50 Oak St., San Francisco

**Sunday, July 9, 2:30 pm**

Bing Concert Hall, Stanford University, Palo Alto

Merola Opera Program presents the **Schwabacher Summer Concert**

Tickets: \$45/\$25 (SF) and \$25 to \$45 (Palo Alto)

Featuring staged scenes from Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, Moore's *Ballad of Baby Doe*, Massenet's *Thaïs*, von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, and Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*, accompanied by full orchestra, with English supertitles.

**Thursday, July 20 at 7:30 pm and Saturday, July 22 at 2:00 pm**

San Francisco Conservatory of Music, 50 Oak St., San Francisco

Merola Opera Program presents *La Serva Padrona* (Pergolesi), *Sāvītri* (Holst), and *The Bear* (Walton)

(English supertitles will accompany each opera)

Tickets: \$70/\$50

A triple bill of one-act operas

*La Serva Padrona* is a quintessential operatic work that links history to the present with relatable characters in the form of a cunning young maid and her aging master. In *Sāvītri*, Holst reaches into the Mahābhārata, one of the great epics of ancient India, focusing on the tale of Death outsmarted by a young woman. The series closes with Walton's *The Bear*, where a widow faithful to the memory of her late husband finds unexpected love.

**Thursday, August 3 at 7:30 pm and Saturday, August 5 at 2:00 pm**

San Francisco Conservatory of Music, 50 Oak St., San Francisco

Merola Opera Program presents *La Cenerentola* (Rossini)

(performed in Italian with English supertitles)

Tickets: \$70/\$50

In Rossini's warmhearted retelling of the Cinderella story, the evil stepmother has become a wicked stepfather, the fairy godmother a philosopher, and the slipper has been swapped for a bracelet. Goodness and kindness triumph and melody reigns supreme.

**Saturday, August 19 at 7:30 pm**

War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco

Merola Opera Program presents the **Merola Grand Finale** and reception

Concert Tickets: \$50/\$40/\$25 Reception Tickets: \$75

Celebrate with the 2017 Merola young artists one last time before they head out to dazzle audiences around the world! The Merola Grand Finale is an exciting evening at the War Memorial Opera House, featuring scenes from some of opera's most thrilling moments. Program to be announced at a later date.

Post-performance reception (10 pm) with the artists takes place at the War Memorial Veterans Building's Green Room. A separate ticket is required for admission to the reception. For reception tickets, please call the San Francisco Opera Box Office at (415) 864-3330.