



**MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM ANNOUNCES DIRECTOR, CONDUCTOR,  
AND LEAD SPONSORS OF THE ORGANIZATION'S FIRST-EVER  
COMMISSIONED WORK**

***IF I WERE YOU***

**By Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer**

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (29 October 2018) – In 2019, San Francisco's acclaimed **Merola Opera Program** will present the first opera commissioned in the Program's history, the world premiere of *If I Were You*, by distinguished American composer Jake Heggie and noted librettist Gene Scheer. This ground-breaking work will be presented August 1 – 6, 2019, at San Francisco's Herbst Theatre. Today it was announced the opera will be conducted by **Nicole Paiement** and directed by **Keturah Stickann**. Information is available at [www.merola.org](http://www.merola.org). Tickets will go on sale in Spring 2019.

Loosely based on the novel *Si j'étais vous* by the French-American writer Julien Green, *If I Were You* is a contemporary story of identity with echoes of classical literature, from *Faust* to *Jekyll & Hyde*. The lead character is Fabian Hart, an aspiring writer who yearns for adventure and a way out of his stifling existence. Brittomara, a shape-shifting devil, appears to him in many guises, finally offering Fabian a supernatural power that will allow the writer to transfer his soul into other people's bodies, living their lives as their own souls languish in a shadowy netherworld. Thus begins the journey of *If I Were You* as Fabian moves his increasingly lost soul from person to person in search of a better identity, leaving a trail of human wreckage and hollow shells. When the promise of profound love compels him to return to his original body, he must face the great existential question: live an immortal but lonely existence as someone else, or face imminent death while deeply loved as yourself?

The world premiere of *If I Were You* would not be possible without the generous support of these lead sponsors.

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**Jake Heggie** is the 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* (libretto by Heather McDonald), *Out of Darkness* (Scheer), *To Hell and Back* (Scheer), and *The Radio Hour* (Scheer). His 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.

**Gene Scheer's** work is noted for its scope and versatility. With 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 operas include *Everest* (Joby Talbot), and *Cold Mountain* (Jennifer Higdon), which won the International Opera Award for the best world premiere in 2015 and was nominated for a Grammy for Best Classical Composition.

Conductor **Nicole Paiement** has gained an international reputation as a conductor of contemporary music and opera, with numerous recordings including many world premieres. As Artistic Director of Opera Parallèle, Paiement has conducted many new productions, including: world premieres of Luciano Chessa's commissioned opera *A Heavenly Act*, the commissioned chamber version of John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*, the premiere of the re-orchestration of Terence Blanchard's *Champion* in collaboration with SFJAZZ Center; the American Premieres of Adam Gorb's *Anyá 17* and Tarik O'Regan's *Heart of Darkness*; the San Francisco Bay Area return of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*; and a new production of Peter Maxwell Davies' *The Lighthouse*, among others. Additionally, Paiement has been the Artistic Director of the BluePrint Project at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM) where she has commissioned, premiered, and recorded works from a wide variety of living American composers.

Director **Keturah Stickann** was trained as a classical and contemporary dancer and performed with Cerulean Dance Theatre, Malashock Dance, The Wally Cardona Quartet, Colleen Halloran Dance, SCW/The Group, and Danny Grossman and Dancers. She was the assistant director and choreographer for the mariachi opera *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*, which premiered at Houston Grand Opera, and went on to Le Théâtre du Châtelet, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Diego Opera, and the Arizona Opera. In 2012, Ms. Stickann toured to Japan and Chile as the associate

director for Michael Hampe's production of *Tannhäuser*. She has also assisted and choreographed for Lillian Groag, Lotfi Mansouri, Sean Curran, John Copley, Mark Lamos, Michael Gieleta, Lawrence Edelson, and Harry Silverstein, among others. She has helped bring to stage new productions of *Orphée*, *Samson et Dalila*, *Agrippina*, *Rigoletto*, *La fanciulla del West*, *Pagliacci*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *La rondine*, *Maria Stuarda*, *Acis and Galatea*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Otello*, *Three Decembers*, *Hydrogen Jukebox*, and *The Good Soldier Schweik*. Her collaboration with director Elise Sandell on *Einstein on the Beach* was chosen as a finalist for the inaugural Director/Designer Showcase with Opera America in 2009.

The **Merola Opera Program** is widely regarded as the foremost opera training program for aspiring singers, coaches, accompanists, and stage directors. Merola nurtures the opera stars of tomorrow and offers outreach through educational programs for students and the general public. Throughout the summer 29 Merola artists, selected from more than 800 international applicants, participate in master classes and private coaching with opera's most accomplished singers, conductors, and directors. Participants also receive training in operatic repertory, foreign languages, diction, acting, and stage movement. Offered free of charge for all participants, the Merola Opera Program is unique in the industry in many ways. It is the only young artist program to provide financial support to developing artists for five years following participation, offering aid for essential career development expenses including coaching, language classes, and audition travel. In addition, only Merola graduates are considered for participation in the San Francisco Opera Adler Fellowship Program. Merola has served as a proving ground for hundreds of artists, who have gone on to impressive careers in opera, including Anna Netrebko, Ailyn Pérez, Patricia Racette, Nadine Sierra, Elza van den Heever, Carol Vaness, Deborah Voigt, Joyce DiDonato, Susan Graham, Dolora Zajick, Brian Jagde, Stuart Skelton, Quinn Kelsey, Rolando Villazón, Thomas Hampson, Lucas Meachem, and Patrick Summers, among many others.

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**PHOTOS:** Downloadable high-res photos are available here:  
<http://www.cbpr.co/press/IfIWereYou>