



MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM KICKS OFF 64TH SEASON WITH

WHAT THE HEART DESIRES

July 3 Live Performance (limited capacity)

Followed by filmed performance available via online streaming

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (8 June 2021) – San Francisco’s acclaimed **Merola Opera Program**, one of the most prestigious and selective opera training programs in the world, commences its 64th season with a showcase of some of the program’s rising stars titled ***What the Heart Desires***. Celebrating diversity in song, this recital features compositions by women and people of color, and is co-curated by tenor Nicholas Phan and mezzo-soprano Ronnita Miller (Merola '05). In a sweeping array of breathtaking works that explore love and longing, *What the Heart Desires* includes selections that express romantic desire, as well as the yearning for home, for rest, for peace, and for a better world. ***What the Heart Desires*** will be performed **2:00pm (PDT), Saturday, July 3** for a limited audience of Merola donors, at the **San Francisco Conservatory of Music Concert Hall** (50 Oak St, San Francisco). The filmed performance will become available on-demand for Merola members on July 16, and to the public on July 30. For more information, visit www.merola.org.

What the Heart Desires opens with a performance of African American composer Robert Owens’ *Havana Dreams*, featuring Merola artists Celeste Morales (Soprano) and Erica Xiaoyan Guo (Pianist). This vivid work, described by Owens as “rough and raucous,” launches with a flamenco-inspired frenzied desperation that segues to a lilting, seductive, and sensual waltz of yearning for beautiful things – a woman’s face, a lace fan, a rose.

Passion is represented by a set of songs by Henry Thacker Burleigh, performed by Edward Graves (Tenor), Tianchi Zhang (Tenor), and Bryan Banowetz (Piano). Burleigh is the late 19th century musician who introduced Czech composer Antonin Dvořák to African American spirituals during his sojourn in the United States, leading Dvořák to believe that the pathway to an American style of music lay through the music of African Americans. Burleigh went on to play a pivotal role in the development of American art song, becoming America’s first prominent Black composer with more than 200 published works. Selections to be performed include *Tide*; *Among the Fuchsias* from *Five Songs of Laurence Hope*; and *Her Eyes*, *Twin Pools* and *Your Lips are Wine*, from his *Passionale* song cycle.

Tianchi Zhang (Tenor) will join Yang Lin (Piano) for works by American composer/professor/civil rights activist Zenobia Powell Perry, as well as pieces by Howard Swanson, who is known for his setting of texts by Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Zhang and Lin will perform Swanson’s *I Will Lie Down in Autumn* and Perry’s *Pastourelle*, highlighting peace and rest.

A trio of works will focus on the longing for home and a beloved place. Gabrielle Beteag (Mezzo-soprano) and Erica Xiaoyan Guo (Piano) will perform Zenobia Powell Perry's *Alien*. Edward Graves (Tenor) will join with Guo to present *Bright Moonlight* by Chinese American violinist and composer Chen Yi, the first woman to receive a Master of Arts in Music Composition from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Music. Laureano Quant (Baritone), who is also a composer, will perform his own composition, *Ahora hablo de gaitas*, with pianist Guo.

The essence of Eleanor Roosevelt is captured in a selection from American composer Stacy Garrop's *In Eleanor's Words*, a song cycle of settings from Roosevelt's 1935-1962 syndicated newspaper column, *My Day*. Gabrielle Barkidjija (Mezzo-soprano) and Marika Yasuda (Piano) will perform the final song of the cycle, *What Can One Woman Do?*, in which Roosevelt ruminates on the difference an individual can make towards creating a more peaceful world.

Lust is the theme of works by two modern American composers: Mohammed Fairouz, declared "one of the most talented composers of his generation" by the BBC, and Justine F. Chen, an award-winning composer who has been commissioned by the New York City Opera, Chicago Opera Theater, New York Festival of Song, and the Washington Ballet. Sensual celebrations of being human and alive are depicted in Fairouz's *After the Revels*, to be performed by Laureano Quant (Baritone). Chen's *Whilst Alexis Lay Press'd*, set to Dryden's ribald poem that slyly recounts the pleasures of love, will be performed by Gabrielle Barkidjija (Mezzo-soprano). Marika Yasuda (Piano) joins both artists to perform the selections.

Also on the program are works of yearning by Métis composer Ian Cusson; Florence Price, the first African-American woman to have a composition performed by a major orchestra; Robert Owens; and Belize-born British composer Errollyn Wallen, CBE, whose many commissions include works for the Royal Opera House, Welsh National Opera, and the BBC Proms, where she was the first Black woman composer to have her work featured in performance in the history of the prestigious summer festival since its founding in 1895. Performed by Celeste Morales (Soprano), Gabrielle Beteag (Mezzo-soprano), Edward Graves (Tenor), and Shiyu Tan (Piano), selections from these composers include Cusson's *Where There's a Wall*, a setting of a poem by Japanese Canadian poet Joy Kogawa; Price's *Sympathy*, a setting of Paul Laurence Dunbar's seminal poem that inspired the title of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Wallen's *Daedalus*, a retelling of the tragic story of Daedalus and his son Icarus; and *Heart*, Owens' musical treatment of Langston Hughes' depiction of the *commedia dell'arte* character Pierrot displaying his heart on the town wall, only to have it be ignored.

The program rounds out with a celebration of love in works by Undine Smith Moore, called "the Dean of Black Women Composers"; California-born, multi-award-winning composer Viet Cuong; and María Grever, who became the first female Mexican composer to achieve international fame, with an early 20th century career that included 1,000 songs that gained popularity around the world. Celeste Morales (Soprano), Edward Graves (Tenor), Laureano Quant (Baritone), and Anna Smigelskaya (Piano) will perform Moore's *Lyric for Truelove* and *I Want to Die While You*

Love Me, Viet Cuong's *O Do Not Love Too Long*, and María Grever's first international hit *Júrame* ("Promise Me"), a passionate cry from a lover begging not to be forgotten.

About the co-curators:

Described by *The Boston Globe* as "one of the the world's most remarkable singers," American tenor **Nicholas Phan** is increasingly recognized as an artist of distinction. An artist with an incredibly diverse repertoire that spans nearly 500 years of music, he performs regularly with the world's leading orchestras and opera companies. A celebrated recording artist, Phan's most recent album, *Clairières*, a recording of songs by Lili and Nadia Boulanger, was nominated for the 2020 Grammy Award for Best Classical Solo Vocal Album. His album, *Gods and Monsters*, was nominated for the same award in 2017. He remains the first and only singer of Asian descent to be nominated in the history of the category, which has been awarded by the Recording Academy since 1959. Sought after as a curator and programmer, in addition to his works as Artistic Director of the Collaborative Arts Institute of Chicago (CAIC), Phan has created programs for broadcast on WFMT and WQXR, and served as guest curator for projects with the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Laguna Beach Music Festival, Apollo's Fire, and San Francisco Performances, where he served as the vocal artist-in-residence from 2014-2018. His programs often examine themes of identity, highlight unfairly represented voices from history, and strive to underline the relevance of music from all periods to the currents of the present day.

Ronnita Miller (Merola '05) received her Masters of Music from the Manhattan School of Music and graduate diploma from The Juilliard School before spending two years in the Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program at Los Angeles Opera. In 2013 she became a principal artist in the ensemble at Deutsche Oper Berlin where she remained until 2020, singing many roles including Mama Lucia in *Cavalleria rusticana*, Fenena in *Nabucco*, Third Lady in *Die Zauberflöte*, Mary in *Der fliegende Holländer*, Madelon in *Andrea Chenier*, Ulrica in *Un ballo in maschera*, and Fidès in *Le prophète*. Miller appeared in several roles in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, most notably Erda and First Norn, roles she also sang at San Francisco Opera, Teatro Real Madrid, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Semperoper Dresden, and The Metropolitan Opera of New York. Miller sang concert performances of the work at Tanglewood Festival, the Edinburgh International Festival, and in Amsterdam at the Concertgebouw. She has appeared in many concerts worldwide, and has shared the concert stage with Christian Thielemann, Simon Rattle, Andrew Davis, Alexander Vedernikov, Donald Runnicles, Fabio Luisi, and Riccardo Muti, among others. Returning to the U.S. in 2020, Miller joined The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra for a gala concert last fall, and recently appeared as Mrs. Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera* at The Atlanta Opera. She returns to The Metropolitan Opera next season for the role of Big Stone in Matthew Aucoin's *Eurydice*.

The **Merola Opera Program** is widely regarded as the foremost opera training program for aspiring singers, pianists, and stage directors. Merola nurtures the opera stars of tomorrow with master classes and private coaching with opera's most accomplished singers, coaches, conductors, and directors. Participants also receive training in operatic repertoire, languages,

diction, acting, stage movement, and professional development. 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 their participation, offering aid for essential career development expenses including coaching, language classes, and audition travel. In summer 2020, the company initiated the Merola Artists Emergency Fund to offer much-needed financial assistance to those artists who have lost wages and incurred unreimbursed expenses as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FOR CALENDAR EDITORS:

WHAT: San Francisco's acclaimed **Merola Opera Program**, one of the most prestigious and selective opera training programs in the world, commences its 64th season with a showcase a select group of the program's rising stars titled ***What the Heart Desires***. Celebrating diversity in song, this recital featuring compositions by women and people of color is co-curated by tenor Nicholas Phan and mezzo-soprano Ronnita Miller (Merola '05). In a sweeping array of breathtaking works that explore love and longing, *What the Heart Desires* includes selections that express romantic desire, as well as the yearning for home, for rest, for peace, and for a better world.

SHOWS: **2:00pm (PDT), Saturday, July 3*** – in-person recital for Merola donors (limited space)

Friday, July 16 – Video performance available to Merola members

Friday, July 30 – Public release of video performance

***San Francisco Conservatory of Music Concert Hall** (50 Oak St, San Francisco)

TICKETS: A limited audience of Merola donors will be invited to view the live performance. Streamed on-demand will be available to Merola members beginning July 16.

Streamed on-demand access will be FREE to the public beginning July 30

INFO: For information or to become a Merola member, visit <http://merola.org>.

-30-

MEDIA: Contact Sydney Albin, Carla Befera & Co.
sydney@cb-pr.com

Ruben Pimentel, Merola Director of Marketing & Communications
415.936.2323 | rpimentel@merola.org

PHOTOS: Downloadable high-res photos are available here:

<http://www.cbpr.co/press/MerolaOperaProgram>

MEDIA CONTACT: SYDNEY ALBIN, CARLA BEFERA & CO.
EMAIL : SYDNEY@CB-PR.COM