



For Immediate Release

**OPERA PARALLÈLE ANNOUNCES 12TH SEASON
WITH LIVE, IN-PERSON PERFORMANCES FOR 2021-22:**

**PREMIERE OF MARCUS SHELBY'S *HARRIET'S SPIRIT*, NOV. 13 & 14
WEST COAST PREMIERE OF LEMBIT BEECHER'S *SOPHIA'S FOREST*, FEB. 24-26
PHILIP GLASS' *LA BELLE ET LA BÊTE*, JULY 15-17**

www.operaparallele.org

SAN FRANCISCO (Thursday, September 30, 2021) — Opera Parallèle's (OP) General and Artistic Director **Nicole Paiement**, today announced the 2021-22 season repertoire, casting and creative teams for the company's 12th anniversary. The nationally acclaimed company will present the premiere of a newly orchestrated version of celebrated jazz artist **Marcus Shelby's** *Harriet's Spirit*; the West Coast premiere of **Lembit Beecher's** *Sophia's Forest*; and **Philip Glass' La Belle et la Bête**, distinguishing OP as the only U.S. company to have presented Glass' entire trilogy of operas that are an homage to **Jean Cocteau**.

Paiement said, "In the spirit of Opera Parallèle's commitment to bringing relevant stories to the stage, we are thrilled to present this season, stories that celebrate human rights hero Harriet Tubman with *Harriet's Spirit*; the power of memories as catharsis and lasting effects of immigration with *Sophia's Forest*; and the importance of seeing beyond the eye with Philip Glass' opera based on Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête*. This uplifting repertoire celebrates the power of transformation and new beginnings. Join us as we travel from the Bayview Opera House to Grace Cathedral and finally to SFJAZZ to celebrate Glass' 85th birthday."

HARRIET'S SPIRIT

Harriet's Spirit, with music by jazz bassist Marcus Shelby and a libretto by **Roma Olvera**, is a one-act opera of a young girl's story of courage and empowerment, inspired by her hero, celebrated 19th century abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Opera Parallèle will present three performances of *Harriet's Spirit* November 13 and 14 in collaboration with San Francisco's historic Bayview Opera House, the cultural hub of the city's African-American Arts and Cultural District.

The cast will feature jazz soprano **Tiffany Austin** as Harriet Tubman, soprano **Christabel Nunoo** as Modesty, baritone **Bradley Kynard** as Montgomery, and the "Say Nothing" and "Do Nothing" Choruses

sung by the **San Francisco Girls Chorus**, led by **Valérie Sainte-Agathe**. Nicole Paiement will conduct and award-winning actor and director, **L. Peter Callender**, will direct this premiere.

The genesis of this family opera began in 2018 when Opera Parallèle presented a workshop production at the African American Arts & Culture Complex. Since then, the work has been revised and now includes a new orchestration for 10 players (flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, strings and percussion).

Harriet's Spirit is the latest of a series of operas for youth commissioned by Opera Parallèle as part of the company's "Hands-on-Opera" community engagement program. All of these new works have been created by BIPOC artists primarily to address the interests and concerns of Bay Area youth from African-American, Latinx and other underserved communities. To date, OP has offered world premieres of *My Head is Full of Colors*, *Amazing Grace*, *Xochitl and the Flowers* (2016 & 2019) by **Chris Pratorius Gómez**, and the original workshop production of *Harriet's Spirit*.

Shelby is a composer, bassist, and educator whose work focuses on the history, present, and future of African American lives, social movements, and music education. Currently, Shelby is an artist-in-residence with the Yerba Buena Gardens Festival and was the resident Artistic Director for the San Francisco Jazz Festival 2019-2020. In 2020, he was appointed as the new Artistic Director for the Healdsburg Jazz Festival, where he has been an artist-in-residence for more than 10 years. *Harriet's Spirit* is Shelby's first opera.

Roma Olvera contributes her third libretto to OP's "Hands-on-Opera" program for youth, following up on *Amazing Grace* and *Xochitl and the Flowers*. Olvera worked as the Educational Programs Director for Opera Parallèle where she helped to develop a three-tiered community engagement program that commissioned new works for children and families. Olvera also developed original curricula for engaging local communities in main-stage contemporary opera productions. Born in Mexico City, Olvera is currently the Music Director for Woodland School in Portola Valley.

SOPHIA'S FOREST

With music by **Lembit Beecher** and libretto by **Hannah Moscovitch**, Opera Parallèle will present four performances of *Sophia's Forest* February 24-26 at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral.

An opera in one act, *Sophia's Forest* relates the story of a young girl, Sophia, who has recently immigrated to the United States, having survived a traumatic journey through the chaos of a civil war in her homeland. During the course of the one-act opera, we see Sophia as an adult remembering her childhood, as a nine-year old recent immigrant to the U.S., and in flashback to a couple of years earlier, as a child escaping her homeland with her mother, Anna, and sister, Emma.

Sophia's Forest is an exploration of both the lasting effects on families of the immigrant experience, and the ways in which children use their imaginations to deal with trauma. These themes are part of family lore for both librettist and composer: Moscovitch's great-grandparents escaped a wave of Eastern European massacres to find their way to Canada while Beecher's grandmother and then-two-year-old mother, escaped Estonia during WWII, having survived both Nazi and Soviet occupations of their country.

Sophia's Forest was presented in an initial, exploratory production at Philadelphia's Drexel University Black Box Theatre in 2017, conducted and directed by OP's creative team Nicole Paiement and Brian Staufenbiel, supported by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage. The opera received critical acclaim from David Patrick Stearns, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*: "A searingly introspective study on immigrant children, the opera was full of vocal lines reflecting psychological depths but also electronic music effects that added greatly to the dreamlike atmosphere."

A central part of the production is nine electronically-controlled sound sculptures placed across the stage. These were built in collaboration with the ExCITE Center at Drexel University, an interdisciplinary center for research and innovation that combines the arts and engineering. The sound sculptures featured in *Sophia's Forest* form part of the opera's set as well as functioning as an instrumental chorus, blending with the string quartet and percussion to create the fantastical and dream-like musical landscape of the piece.

Opera Parallèle's fully realized production of *Sophia's Forest* includes soprano **Maggie Finnegan** as Sophia; mezzo-soprano **Kindra Scharich** as Anna; baritone **Bradley Kynard** as Wes; young sopranos **Virginia Ko** and **Samantha Fung-Lee** as Emma; and actor **Charlotte Fanvu** as Young Sophia. The creative team is led by Nicole Paiement, conductor; **Brian Staufenbiel**, concept and director; **Jessica Bejarano**, assistant conductor; **Mariseley Cortés Fonseca**, costume designer; **Jon Altemus**, scenic designer; and **Aaron Curry**, lighting designer.

The musical score will be performed by the **Del Sol Quartet**, percussion by **Divesh Karamchandani**, and Sound Sculpture electronics by **Lembit Beecher**.

LA BELLE ET LA BÊTE

The season will conclude with Philip Glass' opera *La Belle et la Bête* based on the epic 1946 romantic fantasy film by French poet and filmmaker, Jean Cocteau. This surreal new interpretation on a timeless tale, fusing opera and film live on stage will be performed July 15, 16 and 17 in collaboration with SFJAZZ. These performances will be presented in celebration of the composer's 85th birthday.

Once upon a time, in a world of magic and wonder, the true love of a beautiful girl finally dispelled the torment of a feral but gentle-hearted beast. Jean Cocteau's sublime adaptation of Mme. Leprince de Beaumont's fairy-tale masterpiece is a landmark of motion picture fantasy, with unforgettably poignant performances by Jean Marais and Josette Day. This timeless icon of cinematic wonder served as the inspiration for Philip Glass' 1994 opera of the same name.

In July 2022, Opera Parallèle will present Glass' *La Belle et la Bête* in partnership with SFJAZZ, and is the first company granted permission to perform this work with the film outside of The Philip Glass Ensemble. This opera is the second in a trilogy of works Glass intended as homage to Cocteau. With this production, Opera Parallèle will complete performances of all three operas, having performed *Orphée* in 2011, and *Les Enfants Terribles* in 2017.

For this groundbreaking fusion of opera and cinema, Glass stripped the original soundtrack to integrate his own music, to be performed live with the film. The new score incorporates the original spoken

dialogue, now sung to match the on-screen action. By transforming the characters of both *la Bête* and *la Belle* from childlike figures to complex adult characters living in a surrealistic dream world, Cocteau transforms the tale into a dreamlike vision of death and desire, while exploring themes that continue to resonate today - identity, compassion and inner beauty.

Glass' initial concept was for the opera to be performed by four singers taking on multiple characters along with a small instrumental ensemble while the film is projected in the background. With the exclusive permission of Philip Glass, the Philip Glass Ensemble and the Cocteau Estate, Opera Parallèle has been allowed to develop a new hybrid approach for this production. This new interpretation will blur the boundaries of film and opera even further to create a transformed music theater - honoring two of the great artistic minds of modern times, Cocteau and Glass.

The Opera Parallèle cast features **Vanessa Becerra** in her San Francisco operatic debut as *La Belle*; **Hadleigh Adams** as *La Bête / Avenant / L'Officier*; **Anders Fröhlich** as *Le Père / Ludovic / L'Usurier*; and **Shawnette Sulker** as *Félicie / Adélaïde*.

The creative team includes **Nicole Paiement**, *conductor*; **Brian Staufenbiel**, *director and concept*; **David Murakami**, *media designer*; **Jessica Bejarano**, *assistant conductor*; **Yayoi Kambara**, *assistant director & choreographer*; **Alina Bokovikova**, *costume designer*; **Sophia Smith**, *hair & make-up designer*; and **Mextly Couzin**, *lighting designer*.

DIGITAL PRODUCTIONS

In addition to live performances, two Opera Parallèle productions are available on digital platforms pay-per view/on-demand viewing. The 2021 production of Joby Talbot and Gene Scheer's ***Everest – A Graphic Novel Opera*** is offered exclusively on thedallasopera.TV until January 16, 2022. Tickets available at operaparallele.org/everest. OP's 2018 co-production with the Days and Nights Festival of Philip Glass' ***In the Penal Colony*** is available at <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/penalcolony>.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Bullhorn: Amplifying Unheard Voices is Opera Parallèle's year-long community engagement program of activities created in partnership with The Transgender District, the California College of Arts, San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus and Ruth's Table. The program aims to be a 'Bullhorn' for the community and exemplifies the company's commitment to amplifying unheard stories.

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For more information about Opera Parallèle, visit www.operaparallele.org.

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NB: please see the attached calendar of performances.