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OPERA AMERICA ANNOUNCES RECIPIENTS OF OPERA GRANTS FOR FEMALE COMPOSERS

Supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation

SEVEN COMPOSERS AWARDED DISCOVERY GRANTS TOTALING \$100,000

April 1, 2019 (New York) — **OPERA America**, the national service organization for opera and the nation's leading champion for American opera, is pleased to announce the 2019 recipients of **Discovery Grants** from the **Opera Grants for Female Composers** program, which is made possible through the generosity of the **Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation**.

Opera Grants for Female Composers promote the development of works by women and raise the visibility of women writing for the operatic medium. The program consists of two components: Discovery Grants of up to \$15,000 that are awarded directly to female composers to advance their work; and Commissioning Grants of up to \$50,000 that are awarded to opera companies for commissions by female composers.

The most recent round of Discovery Grants attracted 50 applicants, and an independent adjudication panel selected seven composers to receive a total of \$100,000 to support operas in development. The recipients are:

- **Sarah Taylor Ellis** for *The Trojan Women*
- **Donia Jarrar** for *Seamstress*
- **Gina Leishman** for *Bird of the Inner Eye*
- **Carla Lucero** for *Juana*
- **Kristin Norderval** for *The Sailmaker's Wife*
- **Niloufar Nourbakhsh** for *We the Innumerable*
- **Celka Ojakangas** for *Mirror Game*

Over the past 30 years, OPERA America has awarded more than \$18 million to support the work of opera creators, companies and administrators. However, until the launch of Opera Grants for Female Composers in 2013, fewer than five percent of the organization's grants for repertoire development had been awarded to works by female composers. Opera Grants for Female Composers have helped to reverse that trend by investing nearly \$1 million in operas by women to date, with future awards to come: Thanks to continued support from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, the program was recently renewed through 2021.

The Opera Grants for Female Composers program not only funds new works by women, but also provides female composers with opportunities for networking and mentorship, and promotes their work among stakeholders in the field. OPERA America invites and subsidizes all Discovery and Commissioning Grant recipients to attend its annual Opera Conference and its New Works Forum (an annual gathering of opera creators, producers and publishers) after receiving their awards — enabling them to develop relationships with potential collaborators. OPERA America has also engaged **Peggy Monastra** as a creative consultant to advise the grant recipients on

the strategic planning and business aspects of new work development, including best practices for collaboration and workshops and how to engage and negotiate with potential producers.

“Opera is experiencing a groundswell of support for gender parity across all sectors of the industry, both artistic and administrative, and we are proud to be a part of that movement through Opera Grants for Female Composers,” stated **Marc A. Scorca**, president/CEO of OPERA America. “Thanks to the generosity of the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, these grants have invigorated our art form with new works that display the extraordinary skill of their composers, as well as a diverse range of artistic sensibilities.”

The independent panelists for the Discovery Grants were **Lucy Arner**, conductor and coach; **Jing Jing Luo**, composer; **Emily Morse**, artistic director, New Dramatists; **Greg Pierce**, librettist; **Lauren Worsham**, singer and actor; and **Edward Yim**, president and CEO, American Composers Orchestra.

Information about applying for the next round of Discovery Grants will be available this summer. The recipients of the next round of Commissioning Grants will be announced this summer, as well.

ABOUT THE 2019 DISCOVERY GRANT RECIPIENTS



SARAH TAYLOR ELLIS

Composer: *The Trojan Women* | Libretto by Ellen McLaughlin

Sarah Taylor Ellis writes music that empowers female voices and blurs the boundaries among music theater, art song and opera. In addition to *The Trojan Women*, Ellis is the composer of *These Girls Have Demons* (in development with Pittsburgh CLO) and a steampunk Regency adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Emma*. She is senior lecturer in musical theater at the University of Chester, and she holds a Ph.D. in theater and performance studies from UCLA.

About *The Trojan Women*: In the wake of their devastating defeat, the widowed women of Troy wait on the beach below the ravaged city to be claimed by their Greek conquerors as slaves and concubines. Though the war is over, exile and degradation lie ahead. This new chamber opera adaptation of Euripides’ Greek tragedy gives voice to the plight and the strength of women ripped from their war-torn homes, both then and now.



DONIA JARRAR

Composer and librettist: *Seamstress*

Donia Jarrar is an Arab and Muslim American composer, pianist and interdisciplinary artist. Her music spans the classical, electronic and experimental genres, with improvisation as a key element of her performance practice. Jarrar grew up in Kuwait, Egypt, Palestine and the United States. Her personal experiences have strongly shaped her compositional voice, leading her to explore themes of intergenerational memory and trauma, identity, exile, displacement, and cultural narratives in her work. She holds a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Michigan.

About *Seamstress*: This multimedia documentary opera is based on oral history interviews conducted with women from different generations and social sectors in Palestine. Blending audio interviews, photography, and raw and archival footage with live chamber orchestra and dance performances, *Seamstress* aims to create a moving and powerful portrait of love, strength and resistance in the face of war, injustice and misinformation.



GINA LEISHMAN

Composer: *Bird of the Inner Eye* | Libretto by Joan Schirle

Gina Leishman, composer and multi-instrumentalist, is musically at home in many worlds, including jazz, circus and classical. Born in the U.K., she has made her home in New York since 1994, writing for theater, opera, TV, film, concert stages and downtown venues. Her ensembles include Kamikaze Ground Crew, dedicated to original composition; Mr. Wau-Wa, dedicated to the songs of Bertolt Brecht; and various quartets dedicated to the Leishman Songbook. Her previous operas include *Vagabond*, *Actaeon* and *Burning Dreams*.

About *Bird of the Inner Eye*: This chamber opera is based on the correspondence of American painter Morris Graves (1910–2001). A workshop production is projected for 2020 in Blue Lake, California, at Dell’Arte International, a theater company and regional art center. Librettist Joan Schirle, founding artistic director of Dell’Arte International, will direct the workshop.



CARLA LUCERO

Composer: *Juana* | Libretto by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Carla Lucero

Bay Area composer and librettist Carla Lucero is originally from Los Angeles. Her first opera, *Wuornos*, premiered at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center in 2001. Her second opera, *Juana*, will premiere at UCLA in 2019, and she is also working on her third opera, *Touch*, about American icon Helen Keller. Lucero has received support from San Francisco Arts Commission, Creative Work Fund, Mexico City Philharmonic, Zellerbach, Horizons, Astraea Foundation, Getty Foundation, Meet the Composer, Earplay, West Edge Opera and UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, among others.

About *Juana*: This Spanish-language opera is based on Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s novel *Sor Juana’s Second Dream*. The opera chronicles and celebrates the life and work of Mexican icon Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the 17th-century nun, epic poet, lover of women and fierce feminist who is often considered the first great poet of the Americas. *Juana* premieres in November 2019 at UCLA’s Freud Playhouse, directed by Peter Kazaras, with music direction by Mary Chun.



KRISTIN NORDERVAL

Composer: *The Sailmaker’s Wife* | Libretto by Julian Crouch

Kristin Norderval is a composer and singer who specializes in developing new works for voice, cross-disciplinary works and works using interactive technology. Her opera *The Trials of Patricia Isasa* was premiered at the Monument-National theater in Montreal in 2016 and won Quebec’s Opus Prize in two categories: best production in Montreal and best contemporary music. *The New Yorker’s* Alex Ross listed her solo CD, *Aural Histories*, on his “Ten Notable Classical Music Recordings of 2012.”

About *The Sailmaker’s Wife*: Based on a poignant Japanese folktale, this chamber opera tells the story of a man’s kindness to an injured crane, who then returns to him in the form of a woman and becomes his wife. She brings him a magical secret gift at the expense of her well-being. But the gift is requested one time too many, and her secret is ultimately betrayed. Large ethical questions are woven into this simple yet multilayered story. When her true identity is revealed, the crane-wife departs — a tragic ending or a liberation?



NILOUFAR NOURBAKHSH

Composer: *We the Innumerable* | Libretto by Lisa Flanagan

Niloufar Nourbakhsh's music, described as “stark” by WNPR, has been commissioned and performed by Symphony Number One, I-Park Foundation, PUBLIQuartet, Akropolis Quintet and others. Founder and co-director of Iranian Female Composers Association, Nourbakhsh is a strong advocate of music education. She is currently a teaching artist for composition students at the NY Philharmonic's Very Young Composers program and teaches piano at Brooklyn Music School while finishing her doctorate at Stony Brook University.

About *We the Innumerable*: After the 2009 presidential election in Tehran, Iran, Roya and her husband, Siavash, become targets of the state for participating in nationwide protests against the election result. Siavash is murdered, and Roya is imprisoned and put under extreme pressure to record a confessional stating that her husband was a Revolutionary Guard force who was killed by the enemies of the state. The opera is the heroic journey of an Iranian woman who protects the truth in the face of fear and violence.



CELKA OJAKANGAS

Composer: *Mirror Game* | Libretto by Amy Punt

Celebrated for her music's charm and wit, Celka Ojakangas is an award-winning Los Angeles-based composer who is unafraid to compose music that is both accessible and “out of the box” through the incorporation of inventive musical elements. Her work has been performed and commissioned by many artists, including USC Thornton Wind Ensemble, Post-Haste Reed Duo and Boston New Music Initiative. Ojakangas is pursuing her doctorate at the University of Southern California.

About *Mirror Game*: The opera examines issues of gender bias through the journey of one ambitious female video game designer who decides to take matters of the sexist gaming industry into her own hands. A multimedia production, *Mirror Game* incorporates electroacoustic music, projections and choreography for a rich sensory experience that combines reality with the imaginative virtual reality of video games.

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For more information about OPERA America, its many programs and the National Opera Center, visit operaamerica.org.



About OPERA America

OPERA America (**operaamerica.org**) leads and serves the entire opera community, supporting the creation, presentation and enjoyment of opera. The organization is committed to:

- Delivering professional development to artists, administrators and trustees.
- Increasing appreciation of opera through educational and audience development resources.
- Offering technical support and informational services that foster the creation and presentation of new works.
- Fostering equity, diversity and inclusion across all aspects of the opera industry.
- Undertaking national research and representing the field to policymakers and the media.
- Managing the National Opera Center, a custom-built facility that provides a centralized space for collaboration, rehearsal and performance.

Founded in 1970, OPERA America fulfills its mission through public programs, an annual conference, regional workshops, consultations, granting programs, publications and online resources. It is the only organization serving all constituents of opera: artists, administrators, trustees, educators and audience members. Membership includes 150 professional opera companies; 350 associate, business and education members; and 1,600 individuals. OPERA America extends its reach to 80,000 annual visitors to its National Opera Center and over 40,000 subscribers and followers on e-communications and social media. Representing over 90 percent of eligible professional companies, OPERA America is empowered to lead field-wide change.

OPERA America's long tradition of supporting and nurturing the creation and development of new works led to the formation of the Opera Fund, a growing endowment that allows OPERA America to make a direct impact on the ongoing creation and presentation of new opera and music-theater works. Since the inception of its granting programs, OPERA America has awarded more than \$18 million to the opera field to support the work of opera creators, companies and administrators. Currently, OPERA America awards more than \$2 million each year through its range of grant initiatives.