

Summer Intensive.

Celebrated composers workshop
new operas with **University
of Colorado Boulder** students.



► **THIS MONTH, WHEN** the young artists of the Merola Opera Program present the world premiere of Merola's first commission, Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer's *If I Were You*, they will not be the first to perform the material. That distinction belongs to the students at CU Now, a three-week, paid summer program affiliated with the University of Colorado Boulder's Eklund Opera Program. CU Now has also nurtured Robert Aldridge's *Sister Carrie*, Libby Larsen's *Wrinkle in Time* and Kirke Mechem's *Pride and Prejudice*, among others.

"Our singers are mostly graduate students, but it's not restricted," says Leigh Holman, CU Now's founder and artistic/general director, and resident stage director of the Eklund Opera Program. "It depends on the piece, and who has the best voice for it. They not only have to have tons of talent, but they have to be very sharp and very quick and be able to go with the flow. We always say, 'Embrace the chaos!'"

Librettist
Gene Scheer
(standing),
composer
Jake Heggie and
guest conductor
Adam Turner
with students at
CU Now

Now in its tenth year, CU Now grew out of Holman's experience running the young-artist program at Opera Colorado. During Opera America's 2008 annual conference in Denver, her charges participated in a new-works sampler that included excerpts from Aldridge's *Elmer Gantry*, which she staged.

"The young artists told me in their exit interviews that it had been the most exciting experience of their whole nine months in residency," says Holman. "Frankly, directing it felt the same way with me. Everything is so new ... you don't have all this tradition and history." A subsequent conversation with *Gantry* librettist Herschel Garfein inspired her to launch a similar effort when she relocated to Boulder. "We feel at CU that if we're not training our students to do new work, it's akin to malpractice."

CU Now offers established writers an opportunity to try out material in whatever format is most useful to their development process in a safe, nurturing atmosphere, far from critical eyes. The workshop culminates in two public performances, which range from singers at music stands to mini-productions with sets, lights and costumes. This past summer, Holman staged a thirty-minute excerpt from Tom Cipullo's *Hobson's Choice*. Next year, Heggie and Scheer will return for the third time, having also workshopped *It's a Wonderful Life*, which Eklund will produce on the mainstage in November—the opera's first new production since its 2016 premiere at Houston Grand Opera.

"It's like having Broadway previews for an opera!" Heggie writes by e-mail. "For almost three weeks, we work on the piece every day—try new things, move things around, add new material, cut material—and get to hear it immediately. To have

that much time just to learn about the piece is absolutely extraordinary. It allows us to dig deep into the process and stay in the zone as a team." Heggie particularly loves working with students. "They are 'all in'—often more so than professional singers, who don't have as much time for this kind of thing. Students ask good questions and bring up important points throughout."

Heggie: "It's like having Broadway previews for an opera!"

Four years ago, CU Now added an adjunct program, the Composer Fellows' Initiative (CFI), which pairs student composers with professional mentors throughout the academic year. After honing score and libretto via Skype, phone, e-mail and occasional campus visits from their advisors, the students present their short operas to the public on the third night of CU Now. Four singers perform their peers' work, often passing along important pedagogical points along the way.

"A singer will say, 'Giving me a vowel "ee" on a high C is not acoustically possible. Maybe an idea would be to put the word on an E-flat, and because this is a big dramatic moment and I'm very excited here, I could sing "ah" and still give you exactly what you want,'" Holman says. "They'd never thought of that, because they're just learning too."

"Coming into rehearsals and seeing my friends do beautiful things every day is so fulfilling and joyful, and it is so easy to bounce ideas off them," says Margaret Rose Friesen, a composer starting her junior year. "CFI has taught me to advocate for my career, even in these early stages where I am very young and haven't written a lot of music. I've made actual

money from selling my scores. I can now see myself writing opera professionally, which is not something I imagined possible two years ago."

Many students stay in touch with the visiting writers, and some have gone on to perform their work professionally. But Holman is quick to point out that while networking is a great bonus, the essential benefit for students is an increased confi-

dence in their abilities—especially for a generation grown dependent on learning from easily accessible recordings on YouTube and Spotify.

"When you've got a brand-new piece, there's only one way to do it," says Holman. "In the feedback sessions after every presentation, people always ask students, 'What's one of the most important things you've learned?' Without a doubt they'll say, 'I can do this on my own. I am a good musician.' When we send our singers out, they're going to be ready for anything." ■

Joanne Sydney Lessner's musical *Einstein's Dreams*, an adaptation of the novel by Alan Lightman, will have its Off-Broadway premiere in the fall.

Student Assistant Erin Hodgson, Gene Scheer and Jake Heggie in Boulder



COMPOSER FELLOWS' INITIATIVE

- **LE PHARE**, BY MAX WOLPERT
- **LOVE FINDS A WAY**, BY MARGARET R. FRIESEN
- **THE HIGH LINE**, BY ELENA SPECHT
- **ADAM AND EVE WALK INTO A BAR...**, BY JOHN BOGGS

► Pictured above are scenes from four of the operas developed in the 2018 CU Now Composer Fellows' Initiative, which paired student composers with professional mentors Jake Heggie and Mark Campbell.