

# OPERA NEWS

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## The Muses Are Heard

How do composers write music for the divas who inspire them? BARRY SINGER finds out.



Composer Smith and muse Blythe  
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“**T**he first person I ever wrote a song for was Barbra Streisand,” says Jake Heggie. “She never knew it. I was thirteen or fourteen years old. I loved the sound of her voice — and her personality. For me, it has always been not just a singer’s voice but their personality that I write for. Also, having a visual image of them makes all the difference for me. I am a theatrical storyteller.”

Writing for the opera has always meant telling a story theatrically through someone else’s voice. When that voice belongs to a woman, she is often called a diva. Sometimes the diva is not even an opera singer, but that is another story. This story is about American opera divas today and some of the opera composers who write for them — specifically Elizabeth Futral and Ricky Ian Gordon, Frederica von Stade and Jake Heggie, Patricia Racette and Tobias Picker, and Stephanie Blythe and Alan Smith.

The degree to which these ladies have inspired these writers is fascinatingly disparate. Accompanist and composer Alan Smith displays the kind of besotted romanticism that the words “diva” and “muse” cry out for. “I love to write songs for people I love deeply,” says Smith. “I’m not only thinking about their voices and their ranges, I’m thinking about who they are as people and what they would think is beautiful — what would touch them. It’s a wonderful experience. I’m hyper-aware of them. It’s like they’re in the room with me. The songs are born in love, they’re performed in love, and they continue in love. It’s the most magnificent continuum of love in my life.”

The special object of Smith's adoration is Stephanie Blythe. "I've written more for Stephanie than for anyone else by far," he says. "I've written roughly one hundred songs all told, and almost half of them have been for Stephanie. Some of them were song cycles, some were individual songs. I love writing for Stephanie, because she loves words and she loves communication. This is on top of the fact that she has a beautiful voice, which is what people are aware of first — her magnificent voice. She's also a statuesque woman, and people notice that too. But what they respond to, more than anything, is that she's a terrific communicator. I love her very intensely and have for twenty years."

Ricky Ian Gordon proclaims himself similarly smitten with Elizabeth Futral, who recently took part in the premiere of his newest opera, "27," at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, in the leading role of Alice B. Toklas. "She's the one," says Gordon. "I'm just in love with her. Elizabeth is not only a great singer and a great singing actress, she's an anchor. I know that, just by having her in the room for an opera, everyone else's level goes up. The conversation that Elizabeth has with herself whenever she does a new role is totally rich to me. She is so hungry for what makes that character tick. She's just a very deep person."

Tobias Picker is far more taciturn in his nevertheless unmistakable devotion to Patricia Racette, who has starred for him in *Emmeline* (1996), *An American Tragedy* (2005) and *Dolores Claiborne* (2013). "I wrote *Emmeline* for Pat," says Picker, "because that's who John Crosby — who commissioned the piece as general director of the Santa Fe Opera — told me was going to sing it. I didn't have a choice. But," Picker adds with a grin, "if I'd had a choice, I can't think of anyone else but Pat whom I would have chosen."

Jake Heggie's relationship with Frederica von Stade has been, without question, the most deeply influential, in terms of Heggie's very existence as an opera composer.





Frederica von Stade with Jake Heggie  
 Courtesy San Francisco Opera

“In my late twenties, I stopped composing,” Heggie recalls, “because I developed focal dystonia, a neurological disorder that curled the fingers on my right hand into a permanent fist. I couldn’t play. I recovered from it slowly through muscle re-education. Then in 1994, I started working at San Francisco Opera in their PR and marketing department. They were in the midst of preparing to premiere Conrad Susa’s *Dangerous Liaisons*, with Renée Fleming, Tom Hampson, Johanna Meier and, of course, Flicka. I watched it all being put together. Just seeing Flicka work — that energy and enthusiasm and that voice bouncing through the opera house — inspired me to want to write again. I hadn’t for four or five years. But I suddenly realized I wanted to write something for *her*.”

“I decided that maybe the least terrifying thing would be if I started out making her a few folk-song arrangements. So I arranged three and gave them to Flicka as an opening-night gift. With marvelous enthusiasm — and a silent look of terror, that the house PR guy was giving her music he’d *written* — Flicka said to me, ‘Okay. I’m going to come in early for the next performance, and let’s read through them.’”

“Well, she did. Then she asked me if I wanted to play a recital with her, and then she asked me to write a few songs for her, and then she started telling people about my songs, and Renée Fleming started singing them, and Sylvia McNair, and Dawn Upshaw, and it all just spiraled from there. But it was Flicka, with her generosity and spirit and that tremendous voice, who started everything for me.”

All four composers agree that to write at all, they must first get to know the voices they are writing for. This is so even for the divas they know best.

“I know Elizabeth’s instrument so well,” says Gordon. “I’ve known her since the beginning of both our careers. I know what her voice does. I know what kind of leaps she can take. I know where her voice has changed and grown. Now, as she’s gotten older, she’s developed a chest sound. I can write low A-flats for Elizabeth now, and she has them. Whereas, if I’d written them for her ten years ago, it would have been harder for her. I’m always in touch with Elizabeth’s singing. I either see or try to hear everything that she does.”



SFO general director David Gockley, Picker, mezzo Beth Clayton and Racette at work on *Dolores Claiborne*

© Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera 2014

Racette and Picker first met when Picker was beginning work on *Emmeline*. “She came to my apartment at ten in the morning one day,” remembers Picker. “I asked her to sing something. ‘Are you out of your mind?’ Pat said. ‘It’s 10:30 in the morning!’”

“She gave me a bunch of cassette tapes of her singing. I then wrote the opera. There was an aria that opens Act II in which Pat had to leap down to a low B or B-flat and then leap up to a very high note — an A or something. When I finally sent the finished opera to her, Pat called me up. ‘We need to talk,’ she said. ‘This aria is unsingable. It would wreck my voice. If I sang this, it would destroy the center of my voice, and I’m not going to do that.’”

Picker sighs. “Now, I was brought up by teachers like Elliot Carter and Charles Wuorinen, who were part of a tradition of composers who never changed anything for anybody. It was unthinkable. I learned that firsthand from them. If a singer ever said to one of my teachers, ‘I can’t do this as written,’ my teachers would say, ‘Practice.’

“So I said to Pat, ‘Well, that’s what I wrote.’ But after a lot of back and forth, I finally rewrote the passage. And, as often happens, I found that I liked my rewrite better. It wasn’t as rangy, but it was good.”

Picker smiles. “I then went to Santa Fe for the premiere. And I walked by the room, one day, where Pat was working with a coach. She was singing her Act II aria. And I heard her singing it in the original version, with the leap.

“I knocked at the door. ‘I rewrote this for you,’ I said. ‘And it was hard for me. But I did it for you. And now you’re singing what I *originally* wrote. That is no longer the correct version.’

“‘Oh, no,’ Pat said. ‘I love it. It feels so good in my throat.’

“I reminded Pat of this years later, when she was doing Violetta at the Met. And she laughed. ‘I use that passage now to warm up,’ she said.

“Sometimes singers find when they are stressed,” says Picker, and then corrects himself. “I mean when they are *stretched*, they discover things about their voices that they never knew were there. I mean, it’s a very complicated instrument, the voice — and the way I write often requires quite a bit of vocal gymnastics. But singers usually rise to the occasion.”

So do composers. Jake Heggie concedes that he was “sort of timid initially about pushing vocal ranges. Flicka gave me permission to push it, as long as it fit the dramatic moment. I also learned how to orchestrate for those moments — when to keep things very light, when to go full bore. Flicka always encouraged me to explore the range of everything that she had to offer.”

Heggie believes “that virtually every opera composer ever always knew who they were writing for. Handel, Mozart, Verdi, Puccini — you go back and look at their correspondence, and you can see. They always knew.”

Is there an example that has particularly inspired him?

“Peter Lieberon’s *Neruda Songs*,” Heggie replies, “composed for Lorraine Hunt. So deeply heartfelt, profound and gloriously moving. I am positively wrecked whenever I hear it.” □

BARRY SINGER *has been blogging about music and theater (and Winston Churchill) for the Huffington Post.*

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