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OPERA America Awards First-Ever IDEA Opera Grants For Composers and Librettists of Color

Grant Program Brings New Creative Talent to Opera Stages

November 25, 2019 (New York) — **OPERA America** has awarded the inaugural cycle of **IDEA Opera Grants (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access)** to composer Kui Dong and librettist Monica Datta for ***Hu Tong (Narrow Alley)*** and composer Daniel Reza Sabzghabaei and librettists Mina Salehpour and Yashar Saghai for ***The Veil***. The grants are designed to support and promote new works by the most promising composers and librettists of color through developmental activities like workshops and working performances.

The selected teams will receive a total of \$25,000 and high-quality video portraits of their works for promotional use. OPERA America will provide complimentary registration, travel and housing to attend a New Works Forum and Opera Conference 2020, where the teams will be able to discuss their work with industry leaders. The winners will also be featured on OPERA America's digital and social platforms and in *Opera America Magazine*.

The grantees were selected from an applicant pool of 64 teams by an independent adjudication panel of industry experts including Donna Di Novelli, librettist, lyricist and screenwriter; Priti Gandhi, singer and chief artistic officer, Minnesota Opera; Cerise Jacobs, Charles and Cerise Jacobs Charitable Foundation; Linda Jackson, managing director, Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation; David Lomeli, singer and director of artistic administration, The Dallas Opera; Tian Hui Ng, conductor; Bright Sheng, composer, conductor and pianist; and Sarah Williams, new works administrator, Opera Philadelphia.

"Selecting just two teams from more than 60 applications was a serious challenge," said Laura Lee Everett, OPERA America's chief programs officer. "It is inspiring to see such high-caliber work from so many talented artists who are ready and eager to make their mark on the opera industry."

The IDEA Opera Grants program is made possible through the generosity of the Charles and Cerise Jacobs Charitable Foundation, a family foundation committed to promoting equal rights and social justice through education, music and the law.

Cerise Jacobs, president of the foundation, explained, "Creators of color have had limited access to 'mainstream' opera companies, and we are determined to rectify this. We hope the IDEA Opera Grants will be a catalyst for exciting and different stories, soundscapes and perspectives. OPERA America is committed to advancing the operatic art form while expanding equity, diversity and inclusion, which is why we entrusted them with the shepherding of this grant."

“As the national service organization for opera and the nation's leading champion for American opera, OPERA America is uniquely positioned as the field's national convener and connector to advance the careers of the most talented creative artists,” declared Marc A. Scorca, president/CEO of OPERA America. “IDEA Opera Grants enable us to identify and support the development of new American works by emerging composers and librettists of color. By facilitating their work, we will help enrich the art form with new creative voices that reflect the diversity of the nation.”

IDEA Opera Grants are the most recent addition to OPERA America's grant programs designed to increase the depth and breadth of the contemporary American opera repertoire. Since the inception of its granting programs, OPERA America has awarded nearly \$20 million to the opera field to support the work of opera creators, companies and administrators. The next round of IDEA Opera Grants will open in summer 2020.

More information about OPERA America's grant programs is available at operaamerica.org/Grants.

ABOUT HU TONG AND ITS CREATORS

Hu Tong is a fantasy chamber opera based on an original story. The story is told through 15 interrelated scenes centered on the interactions between an eclectic group of characters living in a Beijing hu tong — the series of courtyards and alleyways of traditional Chinese urban living — that is under siege to make way for new construction. They include a French architect, a blind Norwegian sailor, a musician-turned-detective, a phoenix and a Chinese immigrant worker. The opera investigates the ways in which human relations are determined by such architectural structures and explores a set of personal destinies in the face of social, cultural and technological changes.



Monica Datta is a librettist whose writings have appeared in *Blackbird*, *The Collagist*, *Conjunctions*, *The Evergreen* (U.K.) and *The New Inquiry*. She has received support from the Faber Residency (Catalonia), the Divided City/Mellon Foundation, the Fine Arts Work Center, the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, Kundiman and Washington University in St. Louis.



Kui Dong is a composer and pianist whose music has been performed and commissioned by numerous ensembles. She has received honors and prizes from prestigious institutions including Central Ballet Group of China, the National Centre for the Performing Arts, the Tenerife Symphony Orchestra, the Arditti Quartet, Ars Electronica, Tanglewood Music Center, the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation, Library of Congress, the Fromm Music Foundation, Meet the Composer, ISCM and ASCAP. Her music can be found on New World Records, Sono Luminus Records, Other Minds Records and Henceforth Records. Her first novel will be published by Knowledge Press under the Encyclopedia of China Publishing House in early 2020.

ABOUT THE VEIL AND ITS CREATORS

The Veil draws from anecdotes, stories, poetry and prose from a prominent women's movement that fights for equality for the women of Iran and against the country's mandatory veiling laws. This evening-length piece will trace the history of the veil in Iran through a series of interconnected vignettes and historical reflections inspired by the words, images, bravery and artistry of anonymous Persian women.



Daniel Reza Sabzghabaei is a composer who aims to emphasize the malleability of time and how we experience it, not just in the concert hall, but in everyday life, as well. His work has been commissioned and performed by organizations including Intimacy of Creativity Festival, International Contemporary Ensemble, Beth Morrison Projects, [Switch~Ensemble], New York Festival of Song, Israeli Chamber Project, Pro Coro Canada, Moab Music Festival, VocalEssence, Voices of Change, Hartford Opera Theater and the Unheard-of//Ensemble, to name a few. Lately, Sabzghabaei has been studying and taking increasing inspiration from Persian melodic and rhythmic systems, folk music, art and poetry. He holds degrees from the University of North Texas and the Peabody Conservatory. He is currently a doctoral student and Sage Fellow at Cornell University.



Yashar Saghai is an American, Iranian and French librettist, philosopher and futurist with a passion for new music, literature, history and politics. He spent part of his childhood in Tehran, an experience that turned him into a feminist from an early age. A true cosmopolitan, he now lives in the "Far East" of the Netherlands, where he teaches the philosophy of technology at the University of Twente. He is also an associate senior scholar at the Millennium Project: Global Futures Studies and Research, a D.C.-based think tank with 63 nodes around the globe. He was awarded graduate degrees from the University of Paris and a Ph.D. from Georgetown. He then worked at Johns Hopkins University, doing interdisciplinary research on bioethics and global food ethics. While living in Baltimore, he spent his free time attending new music concerts, where he met his friend and collaborator, composer Daniel Sabzghabaei.



Librettist **Mina Salehpour** was born in Tehran. She was the assistant director at the Schauspiel Frankfurt from 2007 to 2009 and at the Schauspiel Hannover from 2009 to 2011. At the Schauspiel Hannover, she staged *Invasion!* by Jonas Hassen Khemiri (2010), selected for the Kaltstart Festival in Hamburg; *Monster* by David Greig (2012); *Everything Is Illuminated*, an adaptation of the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer (2015); and *Mein Kampf* by George Tabori (2015). She also directed *Über Jungs* by Daniel Gieselmann (Grips Theater, 2013), which was awarded the German theater prize Der Faust in the category of children's and youth theater; *Montecore: The Silence of the Tiger* (Staatstheater Braunschweig, 2013) and *Apathy for Beginners* (Staatstheater Braunschweig, 2013), both by Jonas Hassen Khemiri; *Das Ding* by Philipp Löhle (Staatstheater Braunschweig, 2014); and *Traurigkeit und Melancholie* by Bonn Park (Theater Bonn, 2015).



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 support and 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 160 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 50,000 subscribers and followers on digital 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. Currently, OPERA America awards more than \$2 million each year through its range of grant initiatives.