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# SEVEN COMPOSERS RECEIVE TOTAL OF \$100,000 IN DISCOVERY GRANTS FROM OPERA AMERICA'S OPERA GRANTS FOR FEMALE COMPOSERS

**Supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation**

March, 26, 2020 (New York) — **OPERA America** is pleased to announce the recipients of the **2020 Discovery Grants** from the **Opera Grants for Female Composers** program. These seven composers will receive a total of \$100,000 to support development activities of theatrical works for the trained voice and instrumental ensemble. Opera Grants for Female Composers promote the development of new works by women and raise the visibility of women writing operas. The grants are made possible through the generosity of the **Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation**.

This year's recipients are:

- **Lisa Bielawa** for *Centuries in the Hours*
- **Justine F. Chen** for *Seven Sisters*
- **Melissa Dunphy** for *Alice Tierney*
- **Johanny Navarro** for *¿Y los Pasteles? Ópera Jíbara en Dos Actos (Where Are the Pasteles? Jibaro Opera in Two Acts)*
- **Milica Paranosic** for *Penelope and the Geese*
- **Kirsten Volness** for *Letters That You Will Not Get: Women's Voices from the Great War*
- **Mary D. Watkins** for *Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story*

See below for profiles of the composers and their works.

Grantees were selected from an applicant pool of 47 composers by a panel of industry leaders consisting of **Mark Adamo**, composer/librettist; **Troy Cook**, baritone; **Kristine McIntyre**, stage director; **Evans Mirageas**, the Harry T. Wilks artistic director of Cincinnati Opera; **Brandon Neal**, associate producer, Office of the President at The Julliard School; and **Laurie Rogers**, conductor.

Over the past four decades, OPERA America has awarded more than \$20 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 over \$1.2 million in operas by women to date, including support for **Laura Kaminsky's** *As One*, now the most performed American opera in the country, and **Ellen Reid's** *p r i s m*, which went on to win the Pulitzer Prize.

"OPERA America is focused on increasing gender parity across all sectors of the industry, both artistic and administrative, through initiatives like the Opera Grants for Female Composers, which have been enthusiastically received by the field as a whole," stated **Marc A. Scorca**, president/CEO of OPERA America. "Thanks to the generosity of the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, these grants bring new voices, perspectives and stories influenced by a broad spectrum of personal, musical and cultural influences."

In addition to the grants, OPERA America invites and subsidizes all grant recipients to attend its annual Opera Conference and its New Works Forum, enabling them to develop relationships with potential collaborators and producers. The grant recipients also receive mentorship from creative consultant Peggy Monastra, senior advisor and former artistic director of G. Schirmer Inc./AMP, who provides guidance 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.

## **ABOUT THE DISCOVERY GRANT RECIPIENTS AND THEIR WORKS**



### **LISA BIELAWA**

Composer: *Centuries in the Hours* | Librettists: Claire Solomon and Laurie Rubin, with found texts (17<sup>th</sup>- to 20<sup>th</sup>-century diaries of American women)

Composer-vocalist Lisa Bielawa is a winner of the Rome Prize in Musical Composition. In fall 2019, her pop-up choral piece *Mauer Broadcast*, commissioned by Kulturprojekte Berlin, was performed for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Her works have also been performed recently at the NY PHIL BIENNIAL, Washington National Cathedral, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, SHIFT Festival and the Naumburg Orchestral Concert series. She received an Emmy nomination for her made-for-TV-and-online opera *Vireo: The Spiritual Biography of a Witch's Accuser*.

*Centuries in the Hours* brings forward the lives of American women; through the opera, dozens of manuscripts rejoin the flow of public discourse. Based on extensive research undertaken by Lisa Bielawa at the American Antiquarian Society in 2019, resulting in a collection of 72 American women's diaries spanning three centuries, the opera asks the question: What if these women could be lifted out of their historical contexts and respective life circumstances to encounter one another?



**JUSTINE F. CHEN**

Composer: *Seven Sisters* | Librettist: Stephanie Fleischmann

Composer Justine F. Chen has had her works commissioned and performed by New York City Opera, Juilliard, NYFOS, JACK Quartet, American Lyric Theater and Chicago Opera Theater. *The New York Times* has described her work as “propulsive, emotionally resonant,” “lyrical, atmospheric,” and balancing “despair and humor.” Recent work includes an opera based on the life of Alan Turing. She has received grants from the Jerome Fund for New Music, the Frances Goelet Charitable Lead Trust and OPERA America, and has been featured on WBAI and WNYC.

Composer Justine F. Chen’s mother is one of seven sisters, offspring of a powerful, complicated Taiwanese matriarch. Framed by the ritual of a Taiwanese funeral, and threaded through with a myth of the Pleiades reimagined, this boldly theatrical, sharply comic opera looks at the hard truths of a family rooted in a culture that demeans and disempowers women. How does the next generation — now Taiwanese American — move beyond this legacy, bridging the fallout of a cultural chasm that privileges silence?



**MELISSA DUNPHY**

Composer: *Alice Tierney* | Librettist: Jacqueline Goldfinger

Composer Melissa Dunphy specializes in political, vocal and theatrical music. Her music has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, on Fox News and on *The Rachel Maddow Show*. She has worked with Chanticleer, Cantus, Volti, the Singers and the Saint Louis Chamber Chorus. Dunphy is a Barrymore Award-nominated sound designer and the director of music composition for the O’Neill National Puppetry Conference. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and teaches at Rutgers University.

*Alice Tierney* follows four archaeologists as they unearth the mysterious history of the infamous Tierney, and each draw their own conclusion, Rashomon-style, from the evidence found.



**JOHANNY NAVARRO**

Composer: *¿Y los Pasteles? Ópera Jíbara en Dos Actos (Where Are the Pasteles? Jíbaro Opera in Two Acts)* | Librettist: José Félix Gómez

Puerto Rican composer Johanny Navarro has had her works commissioned and performed by leading ensembles and soloists, including the New World Symphony and the American Harp Society. Her catalogue includes works for opera, orchestra, chamber ensemble and choir. The Afro-Caribbean influence is Navarro’s cultural inspiration, and it is especially present in her musical aesthetic. Her music has been performed in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, the United States, France, Italy and Spain.

*¿Y los Pasteles?* is a comic opera, guided by Chica, an empowered young woman deeply in love with her country and culture. Throughout the opera, she encounters different situations that make her trust herself to overcome them. She falls in love with her culture and traditions and also with a beautiful soul. The work takes place during Christmastime, and its traditions, such as food, music and festivities, are emphasized.



### MILICA PARANOSIC

Composer: *Penelope and the Geese* | Librettist: Cheri Magid

Milica Paranosic is a Serbian American composer, performing artist and producer based in New York. Her work has been supported by organizations such as ASCAP, New Music USA, New Dramatists, the Whitney Museum of American Art, HERE Arts Center, American Composers Orchestra, LVMH Moët Hennessy and many others. Paranosic earned her master's degree in composition from The Juilliard School, where she was on the music faculty for 25 years. She runs a music and multimedia nonprofit, Paracademia.

*Penelope and the Geese* is an opera manifesto that is a feminist retelling of the Penelope story from *The Odyssey*. It explores the issue of faithfulness, which has two completely different metrics in *The Odyssey*, one for Odysseus and one — with barely any room to breathe — for Penelope. With this opera, the creative team aims to level that playing field.



### KIRSTEN VOLNESS

Composer: *Letters That You Will Not Get: Women's Voices from the Great War* |  
Librettists: Susan Werbe and Kate Holland

Kirsten Volness is an electro-acoustic composer and pianist whose music is inspired by nature, myth, science, and environmental and sociopolitical issues. She has received commissions from the BMI Foundation, ASCAP/SEAMUS, NOW Ensemble, Transient Canvas and Experiential Orchestra. She performs with Verdant Vibes, a new music collective she co-founded in 2015, and with the homeless advocacy group Tenderloin Opera Company. She is a visiting assistant professor of music at Reed College.

*Letters That You Will Not Get: Women's Voices from the Great War* gives voice to women affected by WWI through a series of vignettes that share their responses to the war — from enthusiasm to resignation; support to opposition; the war's beginning to its end. Combining haunting melodies evocative of the past, contemporary rhythms of the present and women's writings from both sides of the conflict, *Letters* tells the story of the Great War as experienced by the women who lived through it.



### MARY D. WATKINS

Composer and Librettist: *Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story*

Mary D. Watkins is a classically trained composer, arranger and performer. She has written three operas on historical themes: *Queen Clara* (about Clara Barton), *Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story* and *Emmett Till: The Opera*. She has also composed music for theater companies, choral groups, films, symphony orchestras and chamber and jazz ensembles. She was a popular recording artist for Olivia Records in the 1970s, and she continues to perform and record as a keyboard artist.

Mary D. Watkins is working on an opera about Fannie Lou Hamer, who was one of the first African Americans to register to vote in Mississippi. The opera uses a fusion of classical, spiritual, gospel and protest music to bring to life the story of this heroic woman who became a leader in the civil rights movement and endured death threats, beatings and imprisonment in order to obtain voting rights for her people. Watkins will work with a dramaturg to polish the score and then workshop it.

For more information about OPERA America, its many programs and the National Opera Center, visit [operaamerica.org](http://operaamerica.org).



### **About OPERA America**

OPERA America ([operaamerica.org](http://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 1,700 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.