

September 18–29

Festival O19 Guide

*Opera
Phila
delphia*



20
19



A FESTIVAL
NOT TO
BE MISSED

**“A hotbed of operatic
innovation.”**

The New York Times

**“A model for innovation in
the classical music industry.”**

Opera News

**“Opera in Philadelphia really can claim
to offer something for everyone.”**

The Washington Post

FESTIVAL O19

September 18 - 29

The Love for Three Oranges

September 20, 22, 27 & 29 | Academy of Music

Semele

September 19, 21, 24, 26 & 28 | Perelman Theater

Denis & Katya

September 18, 21 - 23, 25, 28 & 29 | The Suzanne Roberts Theatre

Let Me Die

September 21, 22, 25 - 28 | FringeArts

Curtis in Concert

September 21, 22, 28 & 29 | Curtis Institute of Music

FESTIVAL EXTRAS

Opera on the Mall: La bohème

September 14 | Independence National Historical Park

Festival Kickoff

Late Night Snacks

September 7 - 29 | South Philadelphia

Your Nightly O19 Nightcap



COMPANY PREMIERE

THE LOVE FOR THREE ORANGES

September 20, 22, 27 & 29

Academy of Music

Music by **SERGEI PROKOFIEV**

Libretto by **SERGEI PROKOFIEV**

and **VERA JANACOPOULOS**

PERFORMED IN ENGLISH WITH ENGLISH SUPERTITLES

This zesty love story is a pithy fairytale about a sweet young prince, cursed by a sour witch and forced to voyage into distant lands in search of three oranges, each of which contains a princess. Will he run out of juice, or can he concentrate on his mission to find sun-kissed true love with a new main squeeze?

100 years after composer Sergei Prokofiev wrote this endlessly inventive opera, best known for its famous "March," the time is ripe for *The Love for Three Oranges* to finally make its Opera Philadelphia debut in a "masterful new production" (*Opera News*). Orange you glad tickets are still available?

Production of Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

Opera at the Academy is underwritten, in part, by Judy and Peter Leone

THE LOVE FOR THREE ORANGES

The Struggle for *Three Oranges*: Prokofiev's Improbable Path to an Opera Premiere in America

BY LEO SARBANES

Sergei Prokofiev was just hitting his stride as a trailblazing modernist composer when the Russian Revolution of 1917 upended his homeland and his budding musical career. Seeking refuge and new artistic horizons, Prokofiev departed for America – but not before receiving *The Love for Three Oranges* from Russian playwright Vsevolod Meyerhold as a possible subject for an opera.

An amalgamation of traditional Italian fairy tales, the story follows the bizarre quest of a hypochondriac Prince. He is cured of his affliction by laughing at an evil witch, who responds by cursing him to search obsessively for three oranges; after he steals the oranges from a giant cook, he marries a Princess who emerges from within the fruit. The convoluted tale was concocted by 17th century Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi, who triumphantly mocked the emerging realist theatre movement by proving that pure silliness still won the day. Meyerhold's adaptation added to the madness with fourth-wall-breaking "spectators" who react to the action on stage.

None of this sounds like operatic material, which may be why the unconventional Prokofiev was drawn to it. Yet the spectators' commentary reveals that *Three Oranges* has it all: tragedy, comedy, romance, farce, and fantasy. Recognizing the opportunity to channel these elements into an unprecedented musical hybrid, Prokofiev arrived in San Francisco in August 1918 as fixated on his potential opera as the Prince on his three oranges.

A few months later, he got his opening: the president of the Chicago Opera enthusiastically agreed to a production of *Three Oranges*. Prokofiev had already begun to craft his own libretto, in which he expanded the role of the Prologue's spectators to reflect his own critics, pre-empting the inevitable backlash to writing an absurd comic opera in a time of worldwide upheaval. By the end of the year, Prokofiev had plunged into the score, well on his way to becoming the first-ever foreign composer to have an opera commissioned and premiered by an American company.



Despite a vicious case of scarlet fever, Prokofiev completed *Three Oranges* on October 1, 1919. There was no shortage of buzz around the impending premiere, which was rapidly approaching \$80,000 in expenses (over \$1 million in today's dollars!), mostly for the extravagant sets. In fact, citrus growers began to battle over advertising rights for the first performance, with one Florida company promising to give a blood orange to everyone in attendance if it could put a fruit stand in the lobby reading: "This succulent and healthful brand inspired Prokofieff [sic] and is used exclusively by him in this opera and at home."

Over the next two years, however, *Three Oranges* suffered first a postponement, then a full cancellation – financial disasters for Prokofiev, who was barely scraping by in America on concert piano performances. It took the miraculous appointment of soprano and notorious diva Mary Garden as head of the Chicago Opera to resuscitate the fading opera. Neither were the rehearsals smooth sailing: Prokofiev's legendarily

explosive feud with the producer included a 20-minute battle over whether the sick Prince should spit or sneeze. Yet when *Three Oranges* finally premiered on December 30, 1921, it was a brilliant success. A packed house roared with laughter at the comic moments and thundered with applause for Prokofiev. Unfortunately, traditionalist American critics were befuddled, grinding the opera's momentum to a halt.

Although *The Love for Three Oranges* quickly became a staple in European opera houses, the work has been largely neglected in the United States ever since. With the inclusion of *Three Oranges* in Festival O19, Opera Philadelphia is not only celebrating the work's special place in American musical history, but also highlighting its modernisms as proof of why opera continues to matter in the 21st century. Given his years of passionately fighting for an opera he felt the world needed to see, Prokofiev would be proud.



SEMELE

September 19, 21, 24, 26 & 28
Perelman Theater

Music by **GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL**
Libretto derived from a drama by
English playwright **WILLIAM CONGREVE**

PERFORMED IN ENGLISH WITH ENGLISH SUPERTITLES

Semele is engaged to a prince, but she's really in love with the king of the gods, Jupiter. This forbidden passion between mortal and immortal brings them endless pleasure and endless love... until his wife, the goddess Juno, plots a fiery finish to their hot affair.

Handel's glorious music and story of unbridled love, jealousy, and revenge get an energetic makeover in this new co-production from director **James Darrah** (*Breaking the Waves*) and a stellar cast led by soprano **Amanda Forsythe** as Semele, mezzo **Daniela Mack** (*Carmen*) as Juno and Ino, and tenor **Alek Shrader** as Jupiter.

*Co-production of Opera Philadelphia and Opera Omaha
Aurora Productions in the Perelman Theater are underwritten, in part, by the Wyncote Foundation at the recommendation of Frederick R. Haas
This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts*

SEMELE

Exploring the Collision of Human Desire and Immortal Beings

BY MARGARET ZHANG

Marilyn Horne, the esteemed mezzo-soprano who introduced San Francisco Opera audiences to Handel's *Orlando* in 1985, was quoted in that company's program as saying that the composer's intricate vocal lines demand that, "sometimes you have to just stand still and sing in order to get it the way you want it."

But for artist James Darrah, for whom the score is always the basis of inspiration, the music in *Semele* inherently calls for movement.

Los Angeles-based Darrah is known for his innovative and unconventional body of work in classical music at the intersection of opera, film, and theater, pairing intimate character studies with otherworldly senses of time and place.

The dynamic story of *Semele*, a three-part musical drama by George Frideric Handel, comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It follows mortal Semele as she, in love with Jupiter, king of the gods, attempts to delay her marital engagement with a prince, with whom her sister Ino is in love. Her passionate affair with



Photo by Kent Sievers

Jupiter persists until Jupiter's jealous wife Juno schemes for Semele's downfall.

Darrah, who is delving into this production for the third time, admitted that his attitude toward the libretto has changed over the past few years, specifically in terms of how he incorporates dance and movement. "Some of that depends on how we've consciously chosen to

shift our focus,” he said, “but a lot of it just comes from studying the piece for a longer period of time.”

In the 2016 production with Opera Omaha, Darrah not only cast a dancer to play Ino, but also allowed movement in general to seep through the entire cast and style of production. “Ino is the character who is the most silent,” explained Darrah. “She doesn’t feel like she has much agency, and she can’t express what she truly wants.” The creative team wanted to experiment with giving Ino a voice through dance by portraying the dancer as an extension of Ino’s character, whose passiveness allowed movement to manifest in a significant way. For September’s performances in Philadelphia, however, the dancer will portray not just Ino – instead, the dancer will occupy multiple roles, evoking emotional currents present throughout the opera rather than assigning traits to specific characters.

As a result, this production will evolve to feel like an entirely new show. The elements of dance and movement combine with costume and scenic design in order to differentiate, from a logistical standpoint, between the earthly realm and the godly, Olympian world, within a singular setting on stage. At the same time, Darrah also recognizes how similar in nature the worlds really are – after all, gods in stressful situations tend

to exhibit their most human traits: their jealousy, their rage, their lust. Mortal beings are characterized by their untethered longings and heavy emotional currents, and yet the gods often act in ways that directly resemble those human traits.

This juxtaposition is what Darrah wants to explore. Despite the clear parallels between gods and mortals, there lies a fundamental difference: gods don’t experience the downfall that humans do when they make mistakes. After all, there are privileges that gods take for granted, such as the immortality Semele becomes so obsessed with, that negate any suffering that a mortal committing the same act would experience. “I want to experiment with this collision of human desire and larger-than-life, immortal beings,” said Darrah.

Although Darrah has spent a lot of time working with Handel operas, *Semele* is refreshing in that it doesn’t ever really feel finished. “It continues to yield new discoveries,” he said, “showing us new possibilities upon each revisit.” In the company premiere of *Semele*, Opera Philadelphia audiences will experience this unique vision, one that continues to transform and prosper with time.



FAMOUS

WORLD PREMIERE

DENIS & KATYA

September 18, 21 – 23, 25, 28 & 29
The Suzanne Roberts Theatre

Music by **PHILIP VENABLES**
Libretto by **TED HUFFMAN**

PERFORMED IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN WITH ENGLISH SUPERTITLES

They could have been your teenage children, best friends, or classmates. Two beautiful 15-year-olds who lived every moment – including their last – online. What led to their violent deaths? Why did they choose to broadcast their final moments on social media? And what does it say about the voyeuristic society who watched, liked, and objectified them, transforming two kids into clickbait?

Co-commissioned and co-produced with Music Theatre Wales and Opéra Orchestre National Montpellier
Major support has been provided by the William Penn Foundation
Winner of the FEDORA - GENERALI Prize for Opera 2019

DENIS & KATYA

He Clicked on a Story in His Newsfeed. You Won't Believe What Happened Next!

BY SHANNON EBLEN

The event that inspired *Denis & Katya* played out in real time before going viral, eventually reaching scores of strangers around the world who watched the pixelated images of two teenagers in their final hours.

That this played out online is no surprise. Social media is where we all live our lives these days, sharing our every move – at least the ones we want people to see.

What the masses didn't see was the quiet Russian town where the teens grew up; the fight that led them to run away together and end up in a standoff with Russian Special Forces; the friends and family also watching along, not knowing it would end in tragedy.

"This virtual world is a huge part of our lives," said *Denis & Katya* co-creator Ksenia Ravvina. "We often don't know where reality ends."

How do you tell the story of something that happened on the internet? Something that is at once very real, yet divorced from reality?

Librettist and director Ted Huffman first learned of Denis Muravyov and Katya Vlasova from an article that appeared in his Facebook newsfeed. He sent the article to his frequent collaborator, composer Philip Venables. They messaged about it on WhatsApp, shocked and captivated by the story of these teens, the graphic images from inside their hideout, the cultish fascination on message boards.

There was no doubt in their minds this was a story for opera. But how would they tell it?

"Our very first question was, there's this video that exists," Huffman said, "Should we make a piece that responds to the video in a very direct way?"

As Huffman and Venables discussed it with Ravvina and projection designer Pierre Martin, they all decided that the direct approach of showing the videos wouldn't be right.

"It would be too obvious, too simple to show the video," Martin said.

Instead, the opera became about perspective.

Rather than portraying Denis and Katya themselves, a mezzo-soprano and baritone embody the people around them, switching seamlessly between several characters as they relive the events and the aftermath.

There are those who were close to them, such as their friends and teachers. Outsiders, such as the journalist who covered the story. And, finally, those on the fringes: the online audience who never knew them at all. People like Venables and Huffman. Like you and me.

“How far does empathy go when you’re that far from a real event?” Huffman asked. “We now take in so much of the world through our computers and phones, and I think it’s attempting to ask that question – what is it like now for all of these experiences to be filtered through this technology? I think it’s a big and dangerous question.”

The setting for the opera is abstract, the “locus of a conversation,” as Huffman described it, a convergence of the vantage points of the teacher, the friend, the reporter, the ambulance medic.

“We want to push this question of, where are we meeting to speak about this subject,” Huffman said. “Is that a good place? What is the conversation like?”



Composer Philip Venables, librettist/director Ted Huffman, mezzo-soprano Siena Licht Miller, co-creator and dramaturge Ksenia Ravvina, and baritone Johnny Herford. Photo by Dominic M. Mercier

Fast-moving and quick-changing, the piece demands the audience’s attention and – more of a rarity in our over-saturated society – their imagination.

“The way we cut quickly between different music, different characters, different stories, in a way is a little more related to the modern media world,” Venables said.

The two singers perform onstage within a stark white square, surrounded by projections that help to tell the story, with a cellist stationed at each corner playing into the space. This staging isolates the artists from the outside world while creating unity among them.

“It’s all about, for me, this idea of these things being in a kind of closed space where they all exist together,” Huffman said, “and you could say that is the internet.”



WORLD PREMIERE

LET ME DIE

September 21, 22, 25 – 28
FringeArts

Created by **JOSEPH KECKLER**

PERFORMED IN ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES WITH ENGLISH SUPERTITLES

Joseph Keckler brings his rich voice and vision to this world premiere, which combines death sequences drawn from the canon of tragic opera with original narratives and music. Absurd yet affecting, this ensemble performance collage is at once a festive meditation, strange ritual, and morbid medley of epic proportions.

*Presented in partnership with FringeArts as part of the 2019 Fringe Festival
Major support has been provided by the William Penn Foundation*

LET ME DIE

Q&A: Joseph Keckler on the Intersection of Life, Death, and Opera

How did you develop an interest in opera?

Strangely, I think it stems from being interested in the voice, and singing, and then being pulled into a training that involved this whole other art form and being attracted to the discipline of it, and also the sensuality of it. The otherworldly quality. The first opera I was ever into was *Dido and Aeneas*. As a kind of teen goth, I would sit in my room listening to *Dido and Aeneas*, the Jessye Norman recording, over and over again.

What inspired Let Me Die?

This is a project that incorporates a bunch of operatic death sequences. I think the impulse for this was probably present for me at a young age. I think as many children do, I enjoyed pretending to die, as a child, and pretending to be dead. I would go out in the front yard and put my tricycle on top of myself and pretend that I'd been in a terrible accident until somebody driving by would stop and ask if I was okay, and that was the end.

How often did this happen?


I don't know how often it happened, but it was definitely formative.

But somebody always stopped to check on you?

I think they did. In my mind, I had invented that, in a performance art way, that was the end of the performance. Otherwise the performance didn't have an end. Somebody had to stop and ask if I was okay, and then I would say yes. There was no drama after that.

What do you think they thought as they continued on their way?

I don't know. They probably just thought, that kid's a piece of work. So, I think this project is fueled by a similar impulse. I thought about, in tragic operas, the death is the event you anticipate for the whole opera, the event up to which we are building. So why not just take that event and let it occur right away? And do it again, and again, and again.



When you start to study voice, one of the first songs that a lot of people are given, and I was given, is (Monteverdi's) *Lasciatemi morire*, "Let Me Die." I like this idea that somehow if you're a student of opera, of voice, you have to be sort of a student of dying. And that's where I took the title of this from, is from that aria, which is also the only existing part of the Monteverdi opera. The rest of the opera has been lost, except for an extended sequence, the center of which is that aria, the lament of Ariadne, who is stranded on the island of Naxos. I liked that conceptual rhyming — that she is lost, bereft, stranded, and the aria is also stranded. It has survived its own context. So, what if all the rest of the operas were lost, but all the deaths survived?

Why do you think it is opera is so fascinated with death?

Tragedy does seem to be at the center of the art form. There are lots of delightful operas that don't really surround death, but somehow as an art form it seems tragedy is its strong suit.

Without giving too much away, can you tell us any of the scenes that will be making an appearance in Let Me Die?

Well, there are a lot of old chestnuts, a lot of favorites, a lot of greatest hits in there. This is all subject to change. And I also don't want to say — it's sort of morbid and perverse if people are coming — "well, I love watching

Carmen die and I can't wait to see her die again."

Tosca's death might be done, but it might just last a few seconds. Carmen may be in there. Butterfly may be in there. Turandot may be in there, but it might just be a line from that. Sometimes we're taking lines that are surrounding the death, but maybe we don't see Mimi die, but we hear that plaintive "Mimi" when that theme comes in. Maybe Elektra is in there, but kind of joined with Salome, and maybe Salome is going to participate in Elektra's dance. It's not all hits. We're going into weird corners of the repertoire to pull out certain moments as well.

Was it your intent to appeal to a very broad opera audience? Because it really feels like, in a way, this has something for everyone.

In most of what I do — and this is a departure for me — but in most of what I do I tend to be a kind of diplomat between different areas of culture.

[*Let Me Die*] will be interesting for opera audiences because there's a lot of familiarity there, and it's a kind of, hopefully, fun and maybe subversive and an interesting proposition to do all these deaths, and I think it would be rich for people who really know that work to see it. And I'm hoping that it will be interesting for other people to see it.

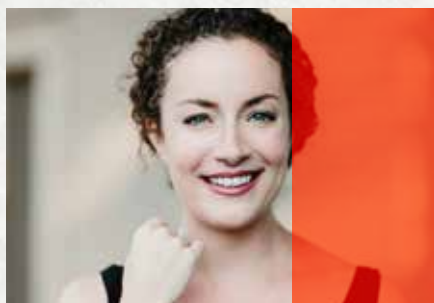


SEPTEMBER 21, 22, 28 & 29 12:00 P.M.

CURTIS

in Concert

FIELD CONCERT HALL



**CO-PRESENTED WITH THE
CURTIS INSTITUTE OF MUSIC**

Building on the success of Festival O18's "Fridays at Field" recital series, emergent singers trained at Philadelphia's prestigious Curtis Institute of Music once again perform in recital at the historic and intimate Field Concert Hall. Hailed as "a delightful afternoon" (*Parterre*), the series has been expanded for O19, with separate Saturday and Sunday recitals repeated over both weekends of the festival.

Two recent Curtis graduates will star in the recital series: Philadelphia native **Karen Slack**, a soprano hailed for her "warm and rich voice" (*Opera News*); and the "lush-toned" (*Wall Street Journal*) soprano **Rachel Sterrenberg**, known to Opera Philadelphia audiences for her leading roles in *The Magic Flute* and *Charlie Parker's Yardbird*.



FESTIVAL

extras

OPERA
ON THE
MALL

Opera on the Mall September 14

Relive the magic of Opera Philadelphia's spring production of Puccini's *La bohème* in a free screening at Independence National Historical Park. Bring friends and a picnic! Registration opens August 14 at operaonthemall.com.

Late Night Snacks September 7-29

After the opera, join the Bearded Ladies and their special guests, including **Stephanie Blythe**, **Justin Vivian Bond**, and **Martha Graham Cracker**, for a series of late-night cabaret performances presented in partnership with the 2019 Fringe Festival. These after-hours performances feature different artists every night, from opera singers to drag queens, from cabaret singers to art clowns, and everything in between. Dates, artists, and ticket information will be announced in August at fringearts.com.

Plan Your Visit

Plan your O19 getaway with the Official Hotel of Opera Philadelphia. Set along the Avenue of the Arts and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, allow **The Bellevue Hotel** to serve as your host for O19 and experience a true Philadelphia icon. Visit thebellevuehotel.com or call 402.592.6446 and **save up to 15%** using corporate code 38596.

The Bellevue
HOTEL



For more tips on planning your Festival experience, visit operaphila.org/festival.



how to
FESTIVAL O

- ▶ Single tickets start at **\$20**
- ▶ Buy tickets to 2 or more operas and save **20%**
- ▶ Festival Passes start at **\$140**

Visit **operaphila.org** or call our Guest Services team at 215.732.8400 to create your ideal Festival O19 experience.

FESTIVAL CALENDAR

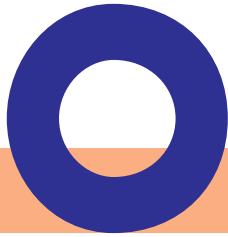
September	W 18	Th 19	Fri 20	Sa 21	Su 22	M 23	Tu 24	W 25	Th 26	Fri 27	Sa 28	Su 29
Academy of Music The Love for Three Oranges			8:00 p.m.		2:00 p.m.					8:00 p.m.		2:00 p.m.
Perelman Theater Semele		7:00 p.m.		2:00 p.m.			7:00 p.m.		7:00 p.m.		2:00 p.m.	
The Suzanne Roberts Theatre Denis & Katya	7:00 p.m.			2:00 p.m. 8:00 p.m.	7:00 p.m.	7:00 p.m.		7:00 p.m.			8:00 p.m.	7:00 p.m.
FringeArts Let Me Die				8:00 p.m.	8:00 p.m.			8:00 p.m.	8:00 p.m.	8:00 p.m.	8:00 p.m.	
Field Concert Hall Curtis in Concert				12:00 p.m.	12:00 p.m.						12:00 p.m.	12:00 p.m.

— INCLUDED IN THE FESTIVAL PASS —

*Opera
Phila
delphia*

1420 LOCUST STREET, SUITE 210
PHILADELPHIA, PA 19102

20
19



**PLAN YOUR OPERA
EXPERIENCE TODAY**

operaphila.org/festival
215.732.8400