

PROGRAM NOTE

The Radio Hour: A Choral Opera

Jake Heggie (b. 1961) and Gene Scheer (b. 1958)

We've all experienced "one of those days." When everything in the world seems to be set against you, ready to mock and make life more difficult.

If only a magic door would open and transport you to a different place. After all, Alice fell into Wonderland, Dorothy barreled to Oz, and Wendy flew with Peter Pan to Neverland. But what about Nora? A lonely, hard-working, middle-aged woman no longer in the playground of childhood fantasy. Is there still a magic door for her?

Welcome to *The Radio Hour*, where sound tracks and sound waves are going on inside, around and through us all the time: It's up to us to decide what to tune in and what to turn off. But first, along with Nora, we have to discover that the connection begins within. By now, Gene Scheer and I have created two full-length operas (*Moby-Dick*, *Three Decembers*), a one-act opera (*To Hell and Back*), numerous song cycles (*Camille Claudel*, *Rise and Fall*, *Pieces of 9/11*, etc.), as well as *Out of Darkness*, a Holocaust remembrance opera in three parts (*Another Sunrise – Farewell*, *Auschwitz – For a Look or a Touch*). One of our guidelines for taking on a new project is that it has to terrify us a little bit. We actively seek out challenging projects, but, truthfully, when John Alexander (artistic director and conductor of the Pacific Chorale) asked us to create a choral opera, our first response was:

A what?

John had a feeling that there was new territory to be explored in the choral repertoire, and that it had to do with the mixing of genres. But, operas require action, characters, conflicts, journeys, transformation, movement. Choirs stand still and make beautiful sound. Right? Still, loving a challenge, Gene and I said: "Yes! Of course. A choral opera!"

What seemed like a challenge turned out to be a mind-bending, extraordinarily difficult climb. What does a choral opera look and sound like? We thought of existing stories, but soon realized we'd need an original story. The biggest question was what were all those choristers going to DO on stage? We needed a goal, a motivation that would bring it all together.

Choirs are about community, participation, a collective of human voices working together to express emotions. We decided we wanted to find a way to celebrate the transformative power of singing in our lives. But we needed a unifying focus for our journey, and we needed an actor.

That's when Gene found our central character, Nora, to be played by a silent actress. The choir would be her inner voice as well as the sounds she "channels." With the choir split in two at the beginning, we could hear Nora's inner voice as well as the sounds she chooses to hear. Recalling Ravel's magical *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, the choir could become objects in Nora's apartment, too. And the transformative journey would be actually to enter the sound waves, to open a portal into the radio, to make the choice to connect and become joyful, youthful and energized again.

This concept also allowed us to explore a wonderful variety of textures, colors and sounds: traffic noise, swing tunes, radio ads, a quasi-rap song, big band, a touch of 12-tone music, and finally a full, celebratory flowering of grand choral singing. It was an immensely challenging world to enter; and all of us experienced many "Nora days" along the way. But always, the magic of the choir, of connection, of community through singing, took us to the hopeful place on the other side of a door marked "possibility."

— Jake Heggie

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HAPPY HOUR
with Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer
after Radio Hour on Saturday, March 14



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