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# Opera

**Jake Heggie—composing America**  
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## JAKE HEGGIE

REBECCA PALLER

Heggie's operas open the seasons at the Met and Houston Grand Opera



Jake Heggie writes plush and emotionally charged music influenced by Britten, Ravel and Puccini, yet with a distinctly American sound reminiscent of Leonard Bernstein and Carlisle Floyd. Heggie knows America well, having lived in towns ‘from sea to shining sea’. He was born in 1961 in tony West Palm Beach, Florida, spent his formative years in the picturesque Ohio suburb of Bexley, and as a teenager moved to California’s San Francisco Bay Area—where he returned to live in 1993 and resides today with his husband, Curt Branom.

I had a brunch date scheduled with the composer in Manhattan in early April. But his mother died a few weeks earlier, so we made do with a long telephone conversation instead. Heggie’s warmth and unpretentiousness were in evidence during the interview; after nearly a quarter-century of success, at 62 he still exudes youthfulness and optimism. He is thrilled that his first and best-known opera, *Dead Man Walking*, which has received more than 70 worldwide productions since its 2000 premiere at San Francisco Opera, opens the Metropolitan Opera season on September 26—followed by the premiere of his tenth opera, *Intelligence*, at Houston Grand Opera on October 20.

I asked about his childhood. ‘Music was always around. My dad, a physician, was an amateur jazz saxophonist and my mom loved Broadway musicals. The record player was going constantly. Ella Fitzgerald, Shirley Horn, Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Doris Day—and *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific* and *My Fair Lady*.

‘Music represented fun and storytelling. I was drawn to solo singers—Barbra Streisand, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Linda Ronstadt. They inhabited and became the songs. I’d walk around singing *my* version of those songs.’

But there was an underlying sadness. ‘My father suffered from depression, and he liked to move a lot. We moved to Bexley in 1966 when he got a job at Ross Laboratories. Bexley was a great place to be a kid. I rode my bike everywhere. I went to the local movie theatres and saw everything.’ The 1972 screwball comedy *What’s Up, Doc?* remains a favourite—he can quote every line from it.

‘When I was six we got a piano. All of us including my two older sisters and younger brother took lessons but I was the only one who fell in love with it. My piano teacher introduced me to Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy and Bach and I felt like they



A work that has travelled widely: 'Dead Man Walking' at Cape Town Opera in 2009

understood me. When I was ten and my dad died by suicide, I was lucky to have that community of composer friends who spoke to me so deeply. I read through all their music and listened to every recording—and discovered manuscript paper so I could write my own music.' Heggie, at 11, began composing pop songs and piano music.

A few years later he heard Janet Baker sing Ravel's *Shéhérazade*. That recording 'transformed' him, affecting him much more than 'a cheap touring production of *Aida* with Lorna Haywood that my mother took me to in Columbus'.

When he was 16 his mother, who'd returned to work in nursing after her husband's death, moved the family to Orinda, California, near San Francisco. She found a piano teacher for Jake and a local composers' group overseen by Ernst Bacon—the same composer Carlisle Floyd worked with 35 years earlier when *he* was 16. 'The group was women in their 50s, 60s, 70s—and me! We met once a month with Mr Bacon. He graciously went over our music with us and gave me private lessons for a year and a half. He introduced me to the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the joys of setting text. That's when I started writing art songs.' (Heggie's songs—more than 300 to date—are rich in melody, easy dissonances and distinctive harmonies, and since the 1990s have been favoured recital pieces of Frederica von Stade, Renée Fleming, Kiri Te Kanawa and Bryn Terfel, among others. One of the best of several recordings of Heggie songs is *Passing By*, released in 2000, with von Stade, Susan Graham, Joyce DiDonato, Isabel Bayrakdarian, Zheng Cao, Paul Groves and Keith Phares.)

'Mr Bacon assigned me fugues and two- and three-part inventions based on the name of someone I loved. I'd bring him the assignment and we'd talk about it, see if there were missed opportunities and what I could learn from my mistakes. He gave me technique, broadened my horizons and opened my ear.' Bacon also talked about his most famous student. 'He told me Carlisle Floyd knew how to capture a character's inner life and psychology, how to capture the moment in a way that worked for opera.'



After high school Heggie attended the American College in Paris. 'I wanted to go to Europe, where my musical heroes had lived. That's when opera opened up to me.' It was 1979. Heggie was 18. 'One of my first vocal concerts was Jessye Norman singing Berlioz's *The Death of Cleopatra*. It was so theatrical and dramatic. Then I saw the Strehler production of *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Palais Garnier with Frederica von Stade as Cherubino. Every single moment was magical. I didn't want it to end.'

He returned to California in 1981 and enrolled at UCLA, studying piano with Johana Harris, 'a magnificent teacher and a brilliant artist who believed in my talent as a performer,' and composition with Roger Bourland, 'who taught me about authenticity, about writing what feels true to you. Roger, who knew I was gay and struggling with it, helped me break through that.' Heggie's life took an unusual turn when Harris (the widow of the composer Roy Harris and mother of five grown children) fell in love with him and proposed marriage. It felt like a 'safe refuge', says Heggie, and they wed in 1982. He was 21; she was 69. They travelled and performed together, but he began to break away from the relationship in 1988 and moved back to San Francisco in 1993. (Harris died in 1995.)

Two productions had a major effect on him. 'In 1981 I saw the first national tour of *Sweeney Todd*. It was terrifying and hilarious—pure genius from beginning to end. Then in 1984 the LA Olympics Arts Festival imported the Royal Opera production of *Peter Grimes* with Jon Vickers. Both these works became a foundation for me. There was a lot of possibility on the lyric stage and maybe I could have a place on that stage.'

Another 'life-altering experience' occurred in 1987 when Heggie was a page-turner for the pianist David Garvey at a Leontyne Price recital. 'At the end of the recital,



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The premiere of *'Dead Man Walking'* at San Francisco Opera in 2000, with Susan Graham as Sister Helen and John Packard as Joseph De Rocher

Leontyne fell into her brother's arms in the wings. "I can't go back. In the front row there's a young man in a wheelchair dying of AIDS and he keeps trying to stand up to applaud." Her brother said, "Go back out there and sing the encore directly to him." She returned to the stage and looked directly at that man and sang "Vissi d'arte". That's what it's all about. Giving it away, making someone's life better, keeping the circle going.

'I finally came out in the late 1980s and it changed my life. But I also developed a focal dystonia in my right hand and suddenly

couldn't play the piano any more. I stopped composing and began programming music. I ran a little series at a hotel in Beverly Hills where I met Frederica von Stade—"Flicka". I also began working as a writer—first for Cal Performances at the University of California, Berkeley, and then for the public relations department at San Francisco Opera.'

By 1994 he had started playing the piano again. 'During the week I was the PR/marketing guy, and on weekends I was writing songs as fast as I could. I gave songs to Flicka, to Sylvia McNair, to Renée Fleming before she had a recording contract. A year after I started working at the San Francisco Opera, Lotfi Mansouri—the general director—asked me if I had ever thought of writing an opera. "Let's talk about it. I want you to do something for the main stage."

'He made me the first Composer in Residence at SFO. At the time I was performing concerts with Flicka through a Chase Bank initiative, and Lotfi got Chase to underwrite the residency. It unfolded in this very magical way that could not have happened anywhere but in San Francisco with the SFO.

'Lotfi suggested Terrence McNally'—the playwright of *Master Class*, about Maria Callas—as my librettist. I met with him in 1996 and we hit it off immediately. Terrence wanted to write a big American drama. He made a list of ten ideas for an opera, saying, "There's only one that I want to do and I'm not going to tell you which one. We need to have the same feeling about it." The first title on the list was *Dead Man Walking* (Sister Helen Prejean's 1995 book about her work as a spiritual adviser to a death row inmate), and I caught completely on fire. I could imagine the ensemble, the emotion of it. It felt in line with the great tradition of operatic stories—and yet was so current and resonant and alive. Terrence asked me to read Sister Helen's book and to circle events or words that had resonance. "You have to be inspired and the music has to lead the way," he said. In early 1998 we had a press conference in Manhattan to announce the project, then flew to Terrence's house in Key West, Florida, to begin work on the libretto. He

wanted a hymn that would anchor Sister Helen and go with her through the opera. As we got in the cab to the airport the entire hymn suddenly came to me. I started singing “He Will Gather Us Around”, and Terrence got excited.’ (Performed initially by Sister Helen and a group of schoolchildren, the hymn goes through several potent transformations and becomes a key component of the opera.)

‘At Key West we’d meet twice a day and share ideas. At the end of the week Terrence read me the first-act libretto. I started hearing and feeling music. Terrence put the murders at the very beginning of the opera. He didn’t want a courtroom drama; he wanted to focus on the people struggling to come to terms with the guilt of this man and what he did—and what we do as a society. Sister Helen’s journey became the journey of the audience.’

For the premiere, Frederica von Stade declined the role of Sister Helen but wanted the role of the convict’s mother, ‘to explore what it’s like when you lose complete control of your child yet feel partly responsible for the path he went down’. Susan Graham was Sister Helen, John Packard was the convicted killer Joseph De Rocher, Joe Mantello directed and the conductor was Patrick Summers—with whom Heggie developed a ‘transformative’ friendship. Summers would go on to conduct two recordings of *Dead Man Walking* (the live CD set of the San Francisco production and a live 2011 Houston Grand Opera recording), the premiere of the composer’s second opera, *The End of the Affair*, and the premieres and recordings of Heggie’s *Three Decembers*, *Moby-Dick*, *Great Scott* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

From its first performance *Dead Man Walking* has profoundly affected audiences. If the most staggering scene in the opera is the execution—done without music, with only the sound of the heart monitor as the lethal injection machine dispenses the container of fluids—the most moving is the Act 1 sextet (‘You don’t know what it’s like to bear a child’) for the grieving parents of the slain teenagers, Sister Helen and Joseph De Rocher’s mother.

That first-night audience in October 2000 included Tim Robbins, the director of the 1995 film adaptation of Sister Helen’s book, and the film’s stars Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, along with Sister Helen herself and Julie Andrews. Demand for tickets was so great that an extra performance had to be scheduled. Heggie acknowledges, ‘The power and the impact of that brilliant movie cannot be ignored. It’s what allowed us to move forward with an opera because the piece had tremendous cultural resonance. And this is what we look for in the opera world, pieces that are resonating in popular culture. Thank God Tim Robbins had the vision for that story, or maybe the opera would never have happened.

*Heggie’s second opera: ‘The End of the Affair’, premiered at Houston Grand Opera in 2003 with Cheryl Barker and Teddy Tahu Rhodes*



‘Before I had written a note of *Dead Man Walking*, I sent Carlisle Floyd a tape of my songs. He told me, “You’re not going to have a problem because you’re all about vocal storytelling. You understand momentum, structure, form, pacing. These are the keys to telling a story operatically. And you have this innate lyricism.” He was so helpful. Any time I had a question he was there. We laughed that we both studied with Ernst Bacon when we were teenagers!

‘Stephen Sondheim also became a mentor. After *Dead Man Walking* premiered we began a correspondence that lasted until shortly before his death. He was very encouraging and had great perspective—always asking me a lot of questions. The best mentors and teachers are the ones who know the right questions to ask—not telling you what you should do but asking a question that brings clarity.’

Floyd, Sondheim and McNally encouraged Heggie to ‘keep writing, keep exploring things that challenge and excite you. Take chances. Maybe people aren’t going to like it. Who cares? It’s a body of work. It’s not necessarily about every single moment in your career.’

Though McNally (who died in 2020) and Heggie were to collaborate on only one more full-length opera, the 2015 comedy *Great Scott*, it was McNally who wrote the unpublished play on which *Three Decembers* (2008) was based and who longed to adapt *Moby-Dick* (2010), though he was forced to exit the project for health reasons. Gene Scheer became the librettist for both works (the powerful, haunting *Moby-Dick* is Heggie’s second most successful opera) and several others including a trio of one-acters based on Holocaust writings (*For a Look or a Touch*, 2007; *Another Sunrise*, 2012; *Farewell, Auschwitz*, 2013) and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (2016). In an unexpected twist Heggie and Scheer wrote the role of Pip in *Moby-Dick* for the soprano Talise Trevigne,

Ben Heppner (l.) in the title role of Heggie’s ‘Moby-Dick’ at its premiere in Dallas in 2010







The premiere of 'It's a Wonderful Life' in Houston in 2016

who also played a female version of the angel Clarence—renamed Clara—in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Their new work, Houston Grand Opera's *Intelligence*, is inspired by historic events that happened during the Civil War. 'I was performing a concert with Susan Graham at the Smithsonian, and a docent came up to me and said, "Have you ever heard of Elizabeth Van Lew and Mary Jane Bowser? They were spies in Richmond during the Civil War getting information for the North. Their story should be your next opera." I was intrigued and did some research. It is one of those stories, like *Hidden Figures*, that nobody knows and everybody needs to know. Gene talked to the documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. He had heard about these two women but said, "So little is known about them that there is going to be a lot of mythology." And I thought, Opera! Mythology! Perfect.'

They found the 'perfect collaborator' to co-create, direct and choreograph *Intelligence*: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the founding choreographer of the Urban Bush Women, an ensemble of black women dancers known for their sharp social commentary. Eight members of that company will perform in *Intelligence*. Jamie Barton is Elizabeth, Janai Brugger is Mary Jane and the conductor is Kwamé Ryan.

Heggie is gratified to be stretching his wings. 'One of the hardest parts of composing an opera is to figure out: what is the musical world in which all these characters live? With *Intelligence* it came so quickly because it's rooted in movement and dance. There is that big lyricism, but there's an innate rhythmic vibrancy that is very different from my other palettes. I don't know of another piece like this. I think people are going to be blown away.'

*Ivo van Hove's new production of 'Dead Man Walking' opens the season at the Metropolitan Opera on September 26, with Joyce DiDonato and Ryan McKinny, c. Yannick Nézet-Séguin; for more dates see 'Opera calendar abroad'. 'Intelligence' opens at Houston Grand Opera on October 20.*