

CHORUS!

**World premiere performance – January 30, 2009
Wortham Theater Center, Houston**

This fully-staged production of *Chorus!* focuses on the chorus and orchestra of Houston Grand Opera. Drawing on a wide variety of contrasting choruses by different composers, the production spins and weaves a musical and dramaturgical thread, drawing on choral music from opera, oratorio, and American musical theater. The repertoire chosen for the production juxtaposes music which is popular and well known, with music which HGO audiences may be hearing for the first time, some if it taken from operas as yet unperformed by the company. The repertoire spans over 300 years, from the baroque music of the 17th century English composer, Henry Purcell, to the music of the 20th century American composer, Leonard Bernstein.

David Pountney's vision for the production is to present the chorus as the 'people', a mirror image of us, the audience. By creating a slender narrative based on popular operatic themes which include patriotism, religion, sex, and vice, and by clustering together choruses based on these themes, a lively collage of opposites and contrasts unfolds. Through the art of transition these themes then flow seamlessly from chorus to chorus as one is juxtaposed with another.

The production traces the development of the chorus over the centuries. For example, in the 17th century their input was minimal, setting the scene, or echoing the sentiments expressed by the main protagonists. Even in the 18th century their role was fairly marginal, one has only to think of the chorus writing in the three great operas by Mozart in collaboration with Lorenzo da Ponte: *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, and *Don Giovanni*, to see just how marginal their role was at that time.

However things changed in the 19th century, and in this production you will see in the operas of Wagner, and Verdi, how the chorus no longer languished on the shadowy side-lines, but shone far more brightly, playing the role of active participant. Also the surge of nationalist fervor which swept across

Europe during the 19th century influenced the role of the chorus in operas of the period. In these nationalistic works, the chorus was depicted as the people, insistent that their collective voice be heard shaping and influencing their future. Nowhere is this more evident than in many of the Russian operas dating from the second half of the 19th century, and into the first half of the 20th century.

Without a doubt the gravitas of HGO's production focuses on four Russian masterpieces: Mussorgsky's **Khovanschina**, Prokofiev's **War and Peace**, Stravinsky's **The Rake's Progress**, and Shostakovich's **Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk**, all four operas as yet unperformed by HGO. Then in 1945 the British composer, Benjamin Britten, without doubt the greatest operatic composer of his time, and the most important British operatic composer since Henry Purcell, composed his searing masterpiece, **Peter Grimes**, elevating the role of the chorus to even greater heights.

***Chorus!* – the music....**

Part One

Epigraph	<i>War and Peace</i>	Sergei Prokofiev
Who holds himself apart	<i>Peter Grimes</i>	Benjamin Britten
Spinning chorus	<i>The Flying Dutchman</i>	Richard Wagner
Murderers' chorus	<i>Macbeth</i>	Giuseppe Verdi
Anvil chorus	<i>Il Trovatore</i>	Giuseppe Verdi
Hush no more	<i>The Fairy Queen</i>	Henry Purcell
Humming chorus	<i>Madam Butterfly</i>	Giacomo Puccini
With air commanding	<i>The Rake's Progress</i>	Igor Stravinsky
Alabama song	<i>Mahagonny</i>	Kurt Weill

Chorus	<i>Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk</i>	Dimitri Shostakovich
Cigarette chorus	<i>Carmen</i>	Georges Bizet
A Policeman's lot	<i>The Pirates of Penzance</i>	Gilbert and Sullivan
Barcarolle	<i>The Tales of Hoffmann</i>	Jacques Offenbach
O Fortuna	<i>Carmina Burana</i>	Carl Orff

Part Two

Entry of the Guests	<i>Tannhauser</i>	Richard Wagner
With cat-like tread	<i>The Pirates of Penzance</i>	Gilbert and Sullivan
Witches chorus	<i>Macbeth</i>	Giuseppe Verdi
Hallelujah chorus	<i>Messiah</i>	Georg Frederic Handel
Alleluja	<i>The Sound of Music</i>	Rogers and Hammerstein
Chorus	<i>Khovanschina</i>	Modest Mussorgsky
Chorus of Hebrew slaves	<i>Nabucco</i>	Giuseppe Verdi
You'll never walk alone	<i>Carousel</i>	Rogers and Hammerstein
Make our Garden Grow	<i>Candide</i>	Leonard Bernstein

***Chorus!* – Synopsis**

The people fight the outsider (*War and Peace*)

The people fight and hunt down another outsider even though this time he is one of them (*Peter Grimes*) Some women take pity on him and hide him while they spin at their wheels (*The Flying Dutchman*) However there are evil men on the prowl, who overpower the women (*Macbeth*)

These men reveal themselves as noisy rebels (*Il Trovatore*) but quiet spirits urge them to rest and sleep (*The Fairy Queen*) Night (*Madam Butterfly*) is also a time for sensual pleasures and vice (*The Rake's Progress*, and *Mahagonny*)

These sensual pleasures (*Carmen*) need to be policed, but sadly the police can be as corrupt as anyone else (*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*) although they can have a comical side as well (*The Pirates of Penzance*) Night and its pleasures (*The Tales of Hoffmann*) eventually surrender to the power of fickle fortune (*Carmina Burana*)

Today people idolize celebrity, no more so than watching them arrive for a special occasion (*Tannhauser*) Sadly, in all societies not everyone is upstanding and 'respectable', and although they dress and behave well, there are some pirates lurking (*The Pirates of Penzance*) However the more 'respectable' refuse to notice the less respectable amongst them (*Macbeth*) and of course, these 'respectable' people attend church (*Messiah*) basking in the sound of the music (*The Sound of Music*)

However, outside in the streets some drunken policemen are indulging in some rowdy behavior induced by alcohol. Disgusted at their husbands' dissolute behavior, their wives chastise them and insist they return to their homes to sleep it off! Suddenly word spreads that soldiers have been sighted coming to deal with this group of corrupt and drunken policemen. They appeal to their leader, who realizes that force is hopeless. Faced with the prospect of imminent death the people howl a heartrending lament (*Khovanschina*)

The power of music can make us feel human sympathy for even this band of drunken hypocrites - indeed, sympathy for all the persecuted people of the

world (*Nabucco*) Music can lift spirits and inspire, and from out of the depths of despair, a feeling of hope returns for the future (*Carousel*, and *Candide*)

Cast

Caitlin Lynch	soprano	*
Jon Kolbet	tenor	
Shon Sims	tenor	
Octavio Moreno	baritone	*
Ryan McKinny	bass-baritone	

Chorus and Orchestra of Houston Grand Opera

Director	David Pountney
Conductor	Patrick Summers
Chorus master	Richard Bado
Set and costumes	Johan Engels

* Member of Houston Grand Opera Studio