

HoustonGrandOpera



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Music samples and reviews of the world premiere performance at [www.houstongrandopera.org/threedecembers](http://www.houstongrandopera.org/threedecembers)

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## Houston Grand Opera's 38<sup>th</sup> World Premiere Released on Albany Records: Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*

Artist: Jake Heggie

Title: Three Decembers

Label: Albany Records

Number: 1073/74

Average Retail price: \$35.98

2 CDS; 1:27:37 music

HOUSTON — **Houston Grand Opera (HGO)** is pleased to announce the commercial release of its 38<sup>th</sup> world premiere, Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*, on the Albany label, December 1, 2008. *Three Decembers*, which had its premiere on February 29, 2008 at the Wortham Center in Houston, has been called "a touching 'peeling back' of family secrets" by *The Houston Chronicle* and "a score filled with pleasures" by *Opera Today*. According to *Opera Now*, Heggie draws the audience in "with a refined sense of theater," and *ArtsHouston* exclaims that "it is hard to imagine any other work in recent years that has filled us with so much hope for the survival of the art form."

The emotional story over three decades of Madeline Mitchell, a glamorous Broadway actress and her dysfunctional relationship with her two adult children through phone calls and Christmas letters, *Three Decembers* is based on an original play by **Terrence McNally** entitled *Some Christmas Letters*. Mezzo-soprano **Frederica von Stade** sings the role of Madeline Mitchell the Broadway actress and absent mother who struggles to hide the truth of her husband's suicide. *Opera Today* wrote of Frederica von Stade in the role of Madeline Mitchell, "She charms, she rants, she belts, she caresses, she provokes, she soothes and she pours out phrase after phrase of plangent sound." Baritone **Keith Phares** sings the role of her gay son Charlie who is dealing with the death of his lover to AIDS, and

soprano **Kristin Clayton** sings Madeline's daughter Beatrice whose unfaithful husband leads her to alcohol.

The libretto was created by **Gene Scheer**. Houston Grand Opera Music Director **Patrick Summers** conducts the eleven piece chamber orchestra and plays piano alongside composer Jake Heggie. The opera was directed and designed by **Leonard Foglia**, with costumes by **Cesar Galindo** and lighting by **Brian Nason**.

This recording of Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers* is Houston Grand Opera's 14<sup>th</sup> CD release. Houston Grand Opera also commissioned and presented Heggie's second opera, *The End of the Affair*, in 2004.

## **The Cast**

### **JAKE HEGGIE - Composer**

Jake Heggie is the composer of the operas *Dead Man Walking* (libretto: Terrence McNally), *Three Decembers* (libretto: Gene Scheer), *The End of the Affair* (libretto: Heather McDonald), *To Hell and Back* (libretto: Scheer), and the musical scene *At the Statue of Venus* (libretto: McNally). He has also composed more than 200 songs, as well as concerti, orchestral works and chamber music. Future operas include *Moby Dick* (libretto by Gene Scheer) for the opera companies of Dallas, San Francisco, San Diego, and Calgary; and a project for the Metropolitan Opera in association with Lincoln Center Theater. Heggie's operas have been produced throughout the US and in Australia, Canada, Europe and Ireland. Since its premiere in 2000, *Dead Man Walking* has received more than 100 performances, making it one of the most performed new operas of our time. Heggie was the recipient of a 2005/06 Guggenheim Fellowship and his work is championed by singers who include Frederica von Stade, Susan Graham, Audra McDonald, Kiri Te Kanawa, Isabel Bayrakdarian, Patti LuPone, Zheng Cao, Joyce DiDonato, Paul Groves and Bryn Terfel. Heggie has accompanied many of these singers on recordings and in recital. Recordings include *Three Decembers* (Albany), *Dead Man Walking* (Erato), *For a Look or a Touch* (Naxos), *Flesh & Stone* (Americus/Classical Action), *The Deepest Desire* (Eloquentia), *The Faces of Love* (RCA), *My Native Land* (Teldec), and *Holy the Firm: Essay for Cello and Orchestra* (Oakland East Bay Symphony with cellist Emil Miland).

### **GENE SCHEER - Librettist**

Lyricist, librettist and composer Gene Scheer has collaborated on a number of projects with Jake Heggie, including the 2006 one-act opera *To Hell and Back*, the song cycles *Statuesque* and *Rise and Fall*, and a chamber work titled *For a Look or a Touch*. He was the librettist for two projects with composer Tobias Picker: *An American Tragedy*, which had its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 2005, and *Thérèse Raquin*, which premiered at The Dallas Opera in 2001 and was subsequently performed in Montreal (in French translation), San Diego, and London. The live recording of the opera's premiere (Chandos) was cited by *Opera News* as one of the ten best of 2002. Songs composed by Scheer have been performed by such artists as Renée Fleming, Denyce Graves, Sylvia McNair, Stephanie Blythe, Jennifer Larmore and Nathan Gunn. Scheer's song "American Anthem" is sung by Norah Jones in *The War*, the seven-part film about World War II by Ken Burns, which was telecast on

PBS in 2007. Nathan Gunn recently performed Scheer's song cycle *Voices from World War II* with the Isis Chamber orchestra, having debuted the work with piano accompaniment at London's Wigmore Hall. He has subsequently performed it in New York; Berkeley, California; Washington, DC; and at the Monnaie in Brussels. Upcoming commissions include collaborations with Heggie, Steven Stucky and David Shire.

### **PATRICK SUMMERS - Conductor**

*Mr. and Mrs. Albert B. Alkek Music Director Chair*

Houston Grand Opera Music Director Patrick Summers is known for his extensive experience and formidable grasp of diverse repertoire. Maestro Summers became HGO's Music Director in 1998, and has since led some thirty HGO productions, among them the world premieres of Tod Machover's *Resurrection* (Albany, 2002), Carlisle Floyd's *Cold Sassy Tree* (Albany, 2005), Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince*, and two operas by Jake Heggie: *The End of the Affair* (Albany, 2005) and *Three Decembers*. Mr. Summers' discography also includes the 2002 Grammy Award-winning recording *Bel Canto* (Decca) featuring soprano Renée Fleming and the Orchestra of St. Luke's. Recent engagements as a guest conductor include the Bregenz Festival, Welsh National Opera, Barcelona Liceu, Rotterdam Philharmonic, and London Philharmonic. Formerly its Principal Guest Conductor, Mr. Summers has been closely associated with the San Francisco Opera for many years, and conducts regularly at the Metropolitan Opera and Opera Australia.

### **FREDERICA VON STADE - Madeline Mitchell (Maddy)**

Described by *The New York Times* as "one of America's finest artists and singers," mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade has enriched the world of classical music for three decades. Her career began when she received a contract from Sir Rudolf Bing during the Metropolitan Opera auditions, and since her debut in 1970 she has sung nearly all of her great roles with that company. Her repertoire includes the heroines of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Bellini's *La sonnambula*; Thomas's *Mignon*; Offenbach's *La Périchole* and Marguerite in Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust*; as well as her renowned trouser roles, from Strauss's Octavian and Composer to Mozart's Sesto, Idamante and Cherubino. She has created a number of roles for world premieres, including the role of Madame de Merteuil in Conrad Susa's *Dangerous Liaisons* and Mrs. Patrick De Rocher in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, both for San Francisco Opera. Her discography of more than seventy recordings has garnered numerous prizes, including six Grammy nominations, two Grand Prix du Disque awards, the Deutsche Schallplattenpreis, Italy's Premio della Critica Discografica, and "Best of the Year" citations from *Stereo Review* and *Opera News*.

### **KRISTIN CLAYTON - Beatrice (Bea)**

American lyric soprano Kristin Clayton made her Houston Grand Opera debut in 2008 as the First Lady in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, followed quickly by the world premiere of Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*. She also gave the premiere of Heggie's scene, *At the Statue of Venus* for the grand opening of Denver's Ellie Caulkins Opera House. Ms. Clayton made her debut with the San Francisco Opera in 1994, in the world premiere of Conrad Susa's *Dangerous Liaisons* (telecast nationally on "Great Performances" on PBS), and has appeared there frequently in roles as diverse as Wellgunde (*Das Rheingold*), Nedda (*Pagliacci*) and Fiordiligi (*Così fan tutte*). She has also appeared at Wolf Trap Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Walnut Creek Opera, Opera Colorado, and Chautauqua Opera, and has performed with San Francisco Symphony and the Florida West Coast Symphony Orchestra. Her recordings include Massenet's *Hérodiade* with Plácido Domingo and Renée Fleming (Sony Classical) and *The Faces of Love – The Songs of Jake Heggie* (RCA-Red Seal).

## **KEITH PHARES - Charlie**

Baritone Keith Phares made his Houston Grand Opera debut in the world premiere of Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*. Acclaimed both on the opera and concert stage as one of today's most versatile artists, he has appeared at the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, New York City Opera, Washington National Opera, Opera Company of Philadelphia, Santa Fe Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Arizona Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, and Portland Opera, as well as at the Spoleto Festival (USA), and with the New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, and Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. Lauded not only for his performances of the operas of Britten, Donizetti, Mozart, and Rossini, he has earned great respect for his fervent commitment to bringing the works of living composers to the stage, including performances of *Elmer Gantry* by Robert Aldridge, *Miss Havisham's Fire* by Dominick Argento, *The Little Prince* by Rachel Portman, *Nixon in China* by John Adams, *The End of the Affair* by Jake Heggie, and *The Tempest* by Thomas Adès. Mr. Phares is a graduate of Juilliard Opera Center and the New England Conservatory of Music.

## **The Musicians**

Piano	Jake Heggie Patrick Summers
Oboe/ English Horn	Elizabeth Priestly
Woodwinds	Scott Plugge
Clarinet	Carol Stinson *
Violin	Jonathan Godfrey, Acting Concertmaster * Hae-a Lee * Chavdar Parashkevov *
Cello	Erkia Johnson *
Bass	Dennis Whittaker *
Percussion	Richard Brown *

Houston Grand Opera Orchestra  
Core Member \*

## The Recording

### CD1 (Act I)

#### Part 1: 1986

1. Prelude	0:56
2. Scene 1: A Christmas Letter	4:41
3. Trio: "Once, before you were born..."	4:35
4. Aria (Charlie)	3:28
5. Scene 2: Christmas Party in Barbados	1:57
6. Song (Maddy): "About to break"	4:10
7. Scene 3: Backstage, Maddy's Dressing Room	4:08
8. Duet (Maddy & Bea): "In the months, in the years ahead..."	6:38
9. Scene 4: Charlie & Bea on the Golden Gate Bridge	3:38
10. Duet: "What do you remember about Dad?"	4:38

CD 1 Total = 38:55

### CD2 (Act II)

#### Part 2: 1996

1. Scene 1: Charlie's Apartment	5:32
2. Scene 2: The Moon's Lullaby	5:44
3. Scene 3: Maddy's Apartment	1:25
4. Aria (Bea)	6:31
5. Shoes Duet (Bea & Charlie)	4:55
6. Maddy: "You look lovely, dear..."	7:32
7. Trio: "I don't believe you..."	5:07
8. Interlude	1:17

#### Part 3: 2006

9. Maddy's Memorial at a Broadway theater	7:20
10. Farewell: "All in all, isn't life simply grand?"	3:42

CD2 Total = 49:12

Recording Total = 1:27:37

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*Three Decembers* was commissioned by Houston Grand Opera in association with San Francisco Opera and Cal Performances (Robert Cole, Director). It was developed with generous support from Meet the Composer, Betty Freeman, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Houston Grand Opera gratefully acknowledges lead funders for its stage production: Carol Franc Buck Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Hinda and Barry Simon, Franci and Jim Crane, Sheridan and John Eddie Williams and The National Endowment for the Arts. The release on CD was made possible thanks to Luci and Rich Janssen, Bill and Sara Morgan, and Marge and Adrienne Vincent. *Three Decembers* was recorded in performance at the Wortham Theater Center in March 2008

through the facilities of KUHF-88.7 FM, Houston Public Radio; the recording was produced, engineered on location and edited by Marlan Barry. Houston Grand Opera records its performances thanks to major grants from The Ford Foundation and The Wortham Foundation, Inc.



Since its inception in 1955, Houston Grand Opera has swiftly grown from a small regional organization into an internationally renowned opera company. The company has a reputation for commissioning and producing new works (38 world premieres and six American premieres since 1973) as well as for reaching out to new audiences. HGO has toured extensively, including trips to Europe and Asia, and it is the only opera company to have won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards. Houston Grand Opera's productions are broadcast nationally and internationally over National Public Radio, the WFMT Radio Network, New York City's WQXR, the European Broadcasting Union, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.