



**AMAZON OFFERS SUPPORT FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI)
EFFORTS IN THE MUSIC COMMUNITY WITH
SPONSORSHIP OF MEROLA RECITAL**

WHAT THE HEART DESIRES

PLUS TWO MASTER CLASSES BY WORLD RENOWNED ARTISTS

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (23 June 2021) – **Amazon** offers its support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the music and arts community with a sponsorship of **Merola Opera Program’s *What the Heart Desires*** recital featuring works by women and people of color, as well as two master classes by world renowned artists. Co-curated by tenor Nicholas Phan and mezzo-soprano Ronnita Miller (Merola '05), ***What the Heart Desires*** will be performed 2:00pm, Saturday, July 3, for a limited audience of Merola donors at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music Concert Hall. The filmed performance will be made available to stream for Merola members on July 16, and to the public beginning July 30. In addition, Amazon will sponsor artist residencies of acclaimed mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves and Howard Watkins, leading American pianist and assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera. Graves (July 7) and Watkins (July 14) will lead master classes for Merola participants which will be made available for online viewing by Merola members. Merola will also invite community groups, particularly organizations representing people of color and underserved populations, to view the two master classes. “Amazon is committed to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion across the Bay Area and a key part of that is working together to elevate and celebrate all voices,” said Sally Kay, Amazon’s San Francisco Senior Manager of External Affairs. “By supporting the Merola Opera Program and two master classes, we can help ensure the arts are not only accessible to more of our neighbors, but that the artists reflect the rich diversity of our local community.”

“I’m delighted that Amazon and the Merola Opera Program, in partnership, are providing opportunities for the community to experience a recital of musical gems by underrepresented composers, performed by some of the nation’s most talented young artists,” adds Jean Kellogg, Executive Director of the Merola Opera Program. “The added benefit of getting a ‘behind the scenes’ glimpse of master classes directed by celebrated, world-renowned artists promises new insight to the demands of opera performance. It is our hope that these presentations may inspire a whole new generation of diverse artists and audience members.”

Celebrating diversity in song, ***What the Heart Desires*** kicks off Merola’s season with a recital of music that expresses romantic desire, as well as the yearning for home, for rest, for peace, and for a better world. First on the bill is a performance of African American composer Robert Owens’ *Havana Dreams*, featuring Merola artists Celeste Morales (Soprano) and Erica Xiaoyan Guo (Pianist). This vivid work launches with a flamenco-inspired frenzied desperation that

segues to a lilting, seductive, and sensual waltz of yearning for beautiful things – a woman’s face, a lace fan, a rose.

Passion is represented by a set of songs by Henry Thacker Burleigh, performed by Edward Graves (Tenor), Tianchi Zhang (Tenor), and Bryan Banowetz (Piano). Burleigh is the late 19th century musician who introduced Czech composer Antonin Dvořák to African American spirituals during his sojourn in the United States, leading Dvořák to believe that the pathway to an American style of music lay through the music of African Americans. Burleigh went on to play a pivotal role in the development of American art song, becoming America’s first prominent Black composer with more than 200 published works. Selections to be performed include *Tide; Among the Fuchsias* from *Five Songs of Laurence Hope*; and *Her Eyes, Twin Pools*, and *Your Lips are Wine*, from his *Passionale* song cycle.

Tianchi Zhang (Tenor) will join Bryan Banowetz (Piano) for works by American composer, professor, and civil rights activist Zenobia Powell Perry, as well as pieces by Howard Swanson, who is known for his setting of texts by Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Zhang and Banowetz will perform Swanson’s *I Will Lie Down in Autumn* and Perry’s *Pastourelle*, highlighting peace and rest.

A trio of works will focus on the longing for home and a beloved place. Gabrielle Beteag (Mezzo-soprano) and Erica Xiaoyan Guo (Piano) will perform Zenobia Powell Perry’s *Alien*. Edward Graves (Tenor) will join with Guo to present *Bright Moonlight* by Chinese American violinist and composer Chen Yi, the first woman to receive a Master of Arts in Music Composition from the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, and a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Music. Laureano Quant (Baritone), who is also a composer, will perform his own composition, *Ahora hablo de gaitas*, with pianist Guo.

The essence of Eleanor Roosevelt is captured in a selection from American composer Stacy Garrop’s *In Eleanor’s Words*, a song cycle of settings from Roosevelt’s 1935-1962 syndicated newspaper column, *My Day*. Gabrielle Barkidjija (Mezzo-soprano) and Marika Yasuda (Piano) will perform the final song of the cycle, *What Can One Woman Do?*, in which Roosevelt ruminates on the difference an individual can make towards creating a more peaceful world.

Lust is the theme of works by two modern American composers: Mohammed Fairouz, declared “one of the most talented composers of his generation” by the BBC, and Justine F. Chen, an award-winning composer who has been commissioned by the New York City Opera, Chicago Opera Theater, New York Festival of Song, and the Washington Ballet. Sensual celebrations of being human and alive are depicted in Fairouz’s *After the Revels*, to be performed by Laureano Quant (Baritone). Chen’s *Whilst Alexis Lay Press’d*, set to Dryden’s ribald poem that slyly recounts the pleasures of love, will be performed by Gabrielle Barkidjija (Mezzo-soprano). Marika Yasuda (Piano) joins both artists to perform the selections.

Also on the program are works of yearning by Métis composer Ian Cusson; Florence Price, the first African-American woman to have a composition performed by a major orchestra; Robert Owens; and Belize-born British composer Errollyn Wallen, CBE, whose many commissions include works for the Royal Opera House, Welsh National Opera, and the BBC Proms, where she was the first Black woman composer to have her work featured in performance in the history of the prestigious summer festival since its founding in 1895. Performed by Celeste Morales (Soprano), Gabrielle Beteag (Mezzo-soprano), Edward Graves (Tenor), and Shiyu Tan (Piano), selections from these composers include Cusson's *Where There's a Wall*, a setting of a poem by Japanese Canadian poet Joy Kogawa; Price's *Sympathy*, a setting of Paul Laurence Dunbar's seminal poem that inspired the title of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Wallen's *Daedalus*, a retelling of the tragic story of Daedalus and his son Icarus; and *Heart*, Owens' musical treatment of Langston Hughes' depiction of the *commedia dell'arte* character Pierrot displaying his heart on the town wall, only to have it be ignored.

The program rounds out with a celebration of love in works by Undine Smith Moore, called "the Dean of Black Women Composers"; California-born, multi-award-winning composer Viet Cuong; and María Grever, who became the first female Mexican composer to achieve international fame, with an early 20th century career that included 1,000 songs that gained popularity around the world. Celeste Morales (Soprano), Edward Graves (Tenor), Laureano Quant (Baritone), and Anna Smigelskaya (Piano) will perform Moore's *Lyric for Truelove* and *I Want to Die While You Love Me*, Viet Cuong's *O Do Not Love Too Long*, and María Grever's first international hit *Júrame* ("Promise Me"), a passionate cry from a lover begging not to be forgotten.

About the co-curators:

Described by *The Boston Globe* as "one of the world's most remarkable singers," American tenor **Nicholas Phan** is increasingly recognized as an artist of distinction. An artist with an incredibly diverse repertoire that spans nearly 500 years of music, he performs regularly with the world's leading orchestras and opera companies. A celebrated recording artist, Phan's most recent album, *Clairières*, a recording of songs by Lili and Nadia Boulanger, was nominated for the 2020 Grammy Award for Best Classical Solo Vocal Album. His album, *Gods and Monsters*, was nominated for the same award in 2017. He remains the first and only singer of Asian descent to be nominated in the history of the category, which has been awarded by the Recording Academy since 1959. Sought after as a curator and programmer, in addition to his works as Artistic Director of the Collaborative Arts Institute of Chicago (CAIC), Phan has created programs for broadcast on WFMT and WQXR, and served as guest curator for projects with the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Laguna Beach Music Festival, Apollo's Fire, and San Francisco Performances, where he served as the vocal artist-in-residence from 2014-2018. His programs often examine themes of identity, highlight unfairly underrepresented voices from history, and strive to underline the relevance of music from all periods to the currents of the present day.

Ronnita Miller (Merola '05) received her Masters of Music from the Manhattan School of Music and graduate diploma from The Juilliard School before spending two years in the Domingo-

Thornton Young Artist Program at Los Angeles Opera. In 2013 she became a principal artist in the ensemble at Deutsche Oper Berlin where she remained until 2020, singing many roles including Mama Lucia in *Cavalleria rusticana*, Fenena in *Nabucco*, Third Lady in *Die Zauberflöte*, Mary in *Der fliegende Holländer*, Madelon in *Andrea Chenier*, Ulrica in *Un ballo in maschera*, and Fidès in *Le prophète*. Miller appeared in several roles in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, most notably Erda and First Norn, roles she also sang at San Francisco Opera, Teatro Real Madrid, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Semperoper Dresden, and the Metropolitan Opera of New York. Miller sang concert performances of the work at Tanglewood Festival, the Edinburgh International Festival, and in Amsterdam at the Concertgebouw. She has appeared in many concerts worldwide, and has shared the concert stage with Christian Thielemann, Simon Rattle, Andrew Davis, Alexander Vedernikov, Donald Runnicles, Fabio Luisi, and Riccardo Muti, among others. Returning to the U.S. in 2020, Miller joined The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra for a gala concert last fall, and recently appeared as Mrs. Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera* at The Atlanta Opera. She returns to the Metropolitan Opera next season for the role of Big Stone in Matthew Aucoin's *Eurydice*.

About the master teachers:

Recognized worldwide as one of today's most exciting vocal stars, mezzo-soprano **Denyce Graves** continues to garner unparalleled acclaim in performances around the world. This season, she makes her debut at the Glimmerglass Festival in the title role in the world premiere of *The Passion of Mary Caldwell Dawson*, with music by Carlos Simon set to text by Sandra Seaton. Recent engagements include performances in a program hosted by Tulsa Opera, entitled *Greenwood Overcomes*, honoring the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, as well as appearances at the Teatro Colón as Erda in *Das Rheingold* and at Cincinnati Opera as Madame de la Haltière in *Cendrillon*. Graves has become most beloved to operatic audiences for her portrayals of the title roles in *Carmen* and *Samson et Dalila*, which have brought her to the world's most renowned opera houses, including the Metropolitan Opera, Vienna Staatsoper, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, San Francisco Opera, Opéra National de Paris, and Lyric Opera of Chicago. Additionally, she has worked with the finest symphony orchestras and conductors in a wide range of repertoire, and for two decades has been a prolific recording artist. A native of Washington, D.C., Graves received her education at the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music and New England Conservatory. She is the recipient of many awards, including the Grand Prix du Concours International de Chant de Paris and Marian Anderson Award. She is a member of the voice faculty at the Peabody Institute, and recently became a distinguished visiting faculty member at The Juilliard School. Graves has sung at a number of major national events, most recently at the funeral of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, where she gave a moving rendition of Gene Scheer's *American Anthem*.

American pianist **Howard Watkins** is an assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera and frequent associate of some of the world's leading musicians on the concert stage. His appearances throughout the Americas, Europe, Asia, Russia, and Israel have included collaborations with Joyce DiDonato, Diana Damrau, Kathleen Battle, Grace Bumbry, Mariusz Kwiecien, Anna Netrebko, and Matthew Polenzani. His current and former faculty affiliations

include The Juilliard School, Bard College Conservatory of Music, Yale School of Music as a Visiting Presidential Fellow, Tanglewood Music Center, Aspen Music Festival, Mannes School of Music, North Carolina School of the Arts, International Vocal Arts Institute (Israel, Japan, and China), IIVA in Italy, Brancaloni Music Festival in Italy, Tokyo International Vocal Arts Academy (TIVAA), and VOICEperience in Orlando, Tampa, and Savannah. Currently a guest Master Coach for the Cafritz Young Artists of Washington Opera and Opera Theater of St. Louis, Watkins has worked on the music staffs of Palm Beach Opera, Washington National Opera, and Los Angeles Opera. A native of Dayton, Ohio, Watkins completed the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Accompanying and Chamber Music at the University of Michigan. Honored as the 2004 recipient of the Paul C. Boylan award from the University of Michigan for his outstanding contributions to the field of music, Watkins is also the 2019 recipient of the Lift Every Voice Legacy Award from the National Opera Association.

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The **Merola Opera Program** is widely regarded as the foremost opera training program for aspiring singers, pianists/coaches, and stage directors. Merola nurtures the opera stars of tomorrow with master classes and private coaching with opera's most accomplished singers, pianist/coaches, conductors, and directors. Participants also receive training in operatic repertoire, languages, diction, acting, stage movement, and professional development. Offered free of charge for all participants, the Merola Opera Program is unique in the industry in many ways. It is the only young artist program to provide financial support to developing artists for five years following their participation, offering aid for essential career development expenses including coaching, language classes, and audition travel. In summer 2020, the company initiated the Merola Artists Emergency Fund to offer much-needed financial assistance to those artists who have lost wages and incurred unreimbursed expenses as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FOR CALENDAR EDITORS:

WHAT: **Amazon** offers its support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the music community with a sponsorship of **Merola Opera Program's *What the Heart Desires*** recital of works by women and people of color. In addition, Amazon will sponsor artist residences of acclaimed mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves and Howard Watkins, leading American pianist and assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera. They will lead master classes for Merola participants which will be made available in late July for online viewing by Merola members.

SHOW: **2:00pm (PDT), Saturday, July 3** – in-person recital for Merola donors (limited space)
Friday, July 16 – Video performance available to Merola members
Friday, July 30 – Public release of video performance

TICKETS: FREE. Streaming on-demand will be available to Merola members beginning July 16, and to the public beginning July 30.

INFO: For information or to become a Merola member, visit <http://merola.org>.

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PHOTOS: Downloadable high-res photos are available here:
<http://www.cbpr.co/press/MerolaOperaProgram>