



MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM'S *LA BELLA VOCE: A NIGHT OF MEROLA* HONORS DEVOTED LONGTIME SUPPORTER RAISES OVER \$380,000 TO SUPPORT MEROLA'S RENOWNED TRAINING PROGRAM

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (11 March 2026) — The **Merola Opera Program** welcomed a distinguished gathering of arts supporters and professionals to celebrate its 2026 Benefit Gala, *La Bella Voce: A Night of Merola*, honoring **Bernice Lindstrom**, a longtime supporter recognized for her unwavering dedication and passion for the arts. The gala took place on Saturday, March 7, 2026, at the prestigious City Club of San Francisco, under the guidance of Gala Chair **Robert Beadle** and Committee members **Jennifer Brahm**, **Dr. James Cross**, **Sylvia R. Lindsey**, **Ronny Michael Greenberg** ('14), **Dr. Pamela Zell Rigg**, **Ruth Uchimura**, **Zarana Udani**, **Carol Weitz**, and **Patrick Wilken**, with **Diane B. Wilsey** serving as the event's exclusive Magnum Opus Sponsor. The evening raised over \$380,000, supporting Merola's mission to train and develop the world's finest opera singers, pianist/coaches, and stage directors through a model that offers professional training, performance, and individualized support.

The evening began with a cocktail reception stunningly decorated by Tara Pellack and the San Francisco Opera Props Department, and event production provided by The Private Stage. Guests, dressed in lavish attire, arrived to sip champagne, wines from **Rigg Estate Vineyard** and **White Rock Vineyards**, and hand-mixed drinks featuring Merola's signature cocktail, "The Encore," while enjoying a sumptuous antipasti spread. While enjoying the reception, attendees bid high on a silent auction of Merola's renowned "Signature Events"—intimate, salon-style concerts hosted in private homes and unique venues across the Bay Area. These exclusive gatherings feature Merola alumni in up-close performances, offering guests rare access to extraordinary talent beyond the traditional stage, accompanied by curated drinks and appetizers. Guests mingled with Gala Committee members, Merola staff, and Merola alumni, including Merola's Director of Membership & Engagement **Alek Shrader** ('07) before taking their seats at elegantly garlanded tables adorned with floral arrangements by Loop Flowers. The evening continued with a multi-course gourmet dinner paired with fine wines and accompanied by live entertainment.

During dinner, Merola alumni, including current San Francisco Opera Adler Fellows, performed for the audience. Soprano **Sofia Gotch** ('25) captivated the audience with the operatic classic "O mio babbino caro," while mezzo-soprano **Sadie Cheslak** ('25) later joined her to perform a set of compositions by Jake Heggie. The evening concluded with a rousing ensemble performance of "You'll Never Walk Alone" from *Carousel*, featuring **Sadie Cheslak** ('25), **Brian Cho** ('25), **Alexa Frankian** ('24/'25), **Sofia Gotch** ('25), **Mary Hoskins** ('24), **Ji Youn Lee** ('24), and **Gabriel Natal-Báez** ('25).

Following a moving tribute by Grammy Award-winning composer **Jake Heggie**, Merola Board



President **Dr. James Cross**, Board Chair **Barbara Bruser Clark**, and **Alek Shrader** then presented the Exemplary Service Award to **Bernice Lindstrom**, whose extraordinary generosity—most notably through her long-standing support of artist sponsorships—has had a profound impact on the development of emerging opera artists. Lindstrom’s dedication has nurtured countless singers at pivotal moments in their careers, directly shaping the future of the art form, for which she received a rousing and heartfelt ovation.

Following dinner, **Markus Beam** delivered an enthusiastic appeal for guests to “Fund the Future,” inspiring attendees to raise their paddles and contribute an additional \$140,000 in donations to go directly to Merola’s training and operations.

Sponsors of the *La Bella Voce* Gala included Magnum Opus Exclusive Event Sponsor **Diane B. Wilsey**; Exclusive Dinner Sponsor **Robert H. Beadle**; **Janet Cluff**; **Amy Roth & Robert Epstein**; **Bruce & Fran Walker**; **Amii Barnard-Bahn & Michael Bahn**; **Jennifer & Chris Brahm**; **Camille Chan**; **George Crow**; **Jeff & Anne Katz**; **Drs. Pamela Zell Rigg & Richard Rigg**; **Hon. James & Elisabeth Warren**; **Angeles Investments**; **Jennifer Bienaimé & Josh Fiedler**; **Jeanne Dorward**; **Faye Wilson**; **Candace Zander Kahn**; **Bay Area Graphics**; **Piedmont Piano**; **Rigg Estate Vineyard**; and **White Rock Vineyards**.

ABOUT THE MEROLA OPERA PROGRAM

The **Merola Opera Program** is widely regarded as the foremost opera training program for aspiring singers, pianists, and stage directors. Merola nurtures the opera stars of tomorrow through master classes and private coaching with opera’s most accomplished singers, coaches, conductors, and directors. Participants also receive training in operatic repertoire, languages, diction, acting, stage movement, and professional development. Offered free of charge to all participants, the Merola Opera Program is unique in the industry, providing a comprehensive curriculum with a strong emphasis on developing the “whole” artist. This includes personal and leadership development, financial planning, mental and physical wellness, as well as public relations and branding. 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. Learn more at merola.org.

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MEDIA: Contact Paige D'Encarnacao, CBCO Public Relations & Marketing
paige@cb-pr.com | 415-570-2623

PHOTOS: Downloadable high-res photos will be available
here: <https://cbpr.co/press/merolabenefitgala26/>