



## Houston Grand Opera commissions

# ***PIECES OF 9/11*** Memories from Houston

Jake Heggie, Gene Scheer honor 9/11 victims and responders

Houston, TX June 20, 2011. To commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, Houston Grand Opera presents the premiere of ***Pieces of 9/11, Memories from Houston***, a specially commissioned song cycle by renowned US composer **Jake Heggie** (*Dead Man Walking, Three Decembers, Moby Dick*,) and librettist **Gene Scheer** (*Three Decembers, Moby Dick*).

Commissioned as part of the HGOco Song of Houston project, a unique initiative designed to connect a great opera company to its community through collaboration, the work commemorates those Houstonians who were affected by, and responded to, events on September 11, 2001. HGO will perform *Pieces of 9/11, Memories from Houston* on **Friday, September 9, Houston City Hall Reflection Pond** and **Sunday, September 11** at the world renowned **Rothko Chapel**.

Through the transformative power of music and song, Heggie and Scheer seek to honor not only those who lost their lives on that fateful day, but also to pay tribute to the actions and thoughts of rescue team and community members.

On Sept 11, 2001, an unprecedented rescue and recovery effort began and continued for over nine months. Houston Fire Department and Texas Task Force One, the elite search and rescue team, sent 88 members to Ground Zero in New York to help in the search and recovery efforts.

“This should be done in memory of those who never got home.” -*member of Texas Task Force One*

Sung by a soprano, lyric baritone and girl soprano, the libretto is based on interviews conducted by Gene Scheer with first responders from the Houston area as well family members of some victims.

Heggie said that the score was inspired not only by the stories, but the language and personalities of the people interviewed. He has orchestrated an affecting score, with a prelude influenced by Bach’s G Major cello suite. Scored for flute, violin, guitar and cello the songs are overlaid with elements of folk and rock. The use of these instruments allows for portability so the song cycle can be performed in a variety of non-theatrical venues including fire stations, city halls, outdoor plazas and places of worship.

Scheer said, “the conversations were serious, honest, frequently surprising, and without exception, profoundly moving. The songs Jake and I wrote are based on the stories, observations and heartfelt memories of the people I had the honor of interviewing.”

“I keep a box under the bed – you know, the kind a wedding dress is kept in, with the things I brought home, my gear and things I found, like paper, picture frames and things.” –*member of Task Force One*

This project is made possible through the very generous support of Bill and Sara Morgan. HGOco Committee Chair Sara Morgan exemplifies the best qualities of leadership and support, always giving of her time freely and generously. She said, “we feel it’s an enormous privilege to partner with Houston Grand Opera in providing the city of Houston an opportunity to come together and share our collective experiences. We invite the community to hear the haunting score and poetic beauty created by composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer.”

HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers elaborated on those comments, “We have a duty as artists to reflect on our world, but how does one respond with meaning on an event so momentous and young as the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks, a

day of such universal heartbreak? Here at HGO, we have chosen to focus on the response of the responders, setting to music poetry which has emerged from their sadness and shock, stories of our own community. No work of art can heal a wound so profound, but we hope through this project to contribute to easing the pain of remembrance, and to provide a forum to celebrate the small moments of joy which become available when we do so."

Coinciding with the premiere, a series of events in Houston honoring the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 includes a weekend of activities and community service:

**Thursday, September 8, 7:00 p.m. Rothko Chapel / HGOco Community Conversations:** Remembrance (Why do we memorialize?)

**Friday September 9, 12noon:** World Premiere of HGOco's *Pieces of 9/11 – Memories from Houston*, in a tribute at Houston's City Hall Reflection Pond.

**Saturday September 10:** "Compassionate Houston" - a weekend of volunteer activities and opportunities including community clean-up and beautification projects, building projects, visitations to hospitals and nursing homes.

**Sunday September 11, 8.45a.m, Lauren's Garden.** Songs from HGOco's *Pieces of 9/11 Memories from Houston*.

**Sunday September 11, 2pm + 4pm; Rothko Chapel.** Performances of HGOco's *Pieces of 9/11 Memories from Houston*. Full song cycle

**Monday September 12, 12noon or 5p.m, Midtown Fire Station.** *Pieces of 9/11 Memories from Houston*.

**Tuesday, September 13, 7:00p.m, Rothko Chapel / HGOco Community conversations:** Reflection and Healing

**Thursday, September 15, 7:00 p.m, Rothko Chapel/ HGOco Community Conversations:** Hope (Where do we go from here?)

Non- denominational services and Tolling of the Bells will be held at City Hall, Rothko Chapel, The Menil Collection, MFAH and Lauren's Garden (downtown Houston).

"In all of this destruction, there was a tree covered in grey dust. The closer you got, you realized that the things hanging from the branches weren't leaves, but things like paper, memos, pictures...ordinary things from peoples' desks."  
*member of Task Force One*

And everything belonged to somebody,  
To somebody gone.  
And we all belonged to each other  
From that moment on –  
That moment on.

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### **JAKE HEGGIE – Composer**

**Jake Heggie** is the American composer of the internationally acclaimed operas *Moby-Dick* (libretto: Gene Scheer), *Dead Man Walking* (libretto: Terrencia McNally), *To Hell and Back* (Scheer), *Three Decembers* (Scheer), *For a Look or a Touch* (Scheer), *The End of the Affair* (McDonald), more than 200 art songs, orchestral and chamber music. As pianist and composer, he collaborates with many of the world's most beloved singers, including Joyce DiDonato, Susan Graham, Frederica von Stade, Audra McDonald, Kiri Te Kanawa, Patti LuPone, Ben Heppner, Stephen Costello, Paul Groves, Morgan Smith and Nathan Gunn. His songs are programmed internationally and the operas have been produced by dozens of companies around the world; since its premiere in 2000 at San Francisco Opera, *Dead Man Walking* has been performed more than 150 times in great international opera houses in Vienna, Sydney, Dublin, Copenhagen, Dresden, New York, Cape Town, and Houston, to name a few. *Moby-Dick* will receive four productions in the coming year: in South Australia, Calgary, San Diego and San Francisco. Upcoming projects include his first symphony for the University of North Texas ("Ahab" Symphony), as well as commissions from San Francisco Performances (for Joyce DiDonato), The Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Seattle's Music of Remembrance, Pacific Chorale, and the Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Heggie coaches and teaches young singers and composers at universities and

conservatories throughout the US, as well as at summer festivals like SongFest and Ravinia. Jake Heggie lives in San Francisco. [www.jakeheggie.com](http://www.jakeheggie.com)

### GENE SCHEER - Librettist

Lyricist, librettist and composer Gene Scheer has collaborated on a number of projects with Jake Heggie, including the one-act opera *To Hell and Back*, the opera *Last Acts*, the song cycles *Statuesque* and *Rise and Fall*, a chamber work titled *For a Look or a Touch*, and the full-length opera, *Moby Dick* (Dallas Opera) 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.

**ROTHKO CHAPEL:** The Rothko Chapel, founded by Houston Philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil, is a sacred space open to all every day to provide a place of worship, meditation and prayer for persons of all faiths; to provide a forum for people to gather and explore spiritual bonds common to all; to discuss human problems of worldwide interest; and to share a spiritual experience, each loyal to his or her belief, each respectful of the beliefs of others. A tranquil meditative environment inspired by the mural canvases of Russian born American painter, Mark Rothko (1903 – 1970), in 2011 the Chapel celebrates its fortieth anniversary. The Chapel has two vocations: contemplation and action. It is a place alive with religious ceremonies of all faiths, and where the experience and understanding of all traditions are encouraged and made available. Action takes the form of supporting human rights, and thus the Chapel has become a rallying place for all people concerned with peace, freedom, and social justice throughout the world.

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