

Earplay proudly presents HOWARDS END, AMERICA in partnership with RealOpera

World Premiere of a New Opera Composed by Allen Shearer, libretto by Claudia Stevens

Based on E. M. Forster's novel Howards End

Three performances February 22-24, 2019: Friday, and Saturday Evenings at 8:00 pm, Sunday Matinee at 2:00 pm, Z Space, 450 Florida Street, San Francisco.

Run time: 2 hours, plus one intermission

General Admission: \$40; students, seniors, disabled persons, and groups of 8 or more, \$25.

Advance ticket purchase recommended!

Watch this space for online purchase (under construction); or purchase at the Z Space box office beginning one hour before the show.

Photos and additional information available at <http://www.howardsendamerica.com>

San Francisco, CA, April, 2018: Earplay proudly announces the world premiere at Z Space in San Francisco of a major new chamber opera HOWARDS END, AMERICA by composer Allen Shearer and librettist Claudia Stevens in co-production with RealOpera. Three performances are set for Feb. 22-24, 2019. In this riveting story of betrayal, race and real estate, composer Shearer and Stevens transport E. M. Forster's great satirical novel Howards End from Edwardian England to 1950's Boston. With powerful imagery and compelling music, the opera evokes the atmosphere of the McCarthy era in an America as divided over race and politics as it is today. Audiences will meet two sisters: the kind but cautious Margaret and the younger Helen, an impulsive social activist with camera in hand. What damage will they cause, and what romantic entanglements will befall them, when they set out to become the patrons of gifted young black poet Leonard?

In three acts with a running time of just under two hours, HOWARDS END, AMERICA features seven of the novel's main characters, portrayed by leading singers Nikki Einfeld, Philip Skinner, Sara Duchovnay, Michael Dailey, Lori Willis, Daniel Cilli and Erin Neff. The cast is accompanied by a chamber orchestra of thirteen, with core players from San Francisco's Earplay ensemble. Mary Chun will conduct and Philip Lowery will direct. A pre-show discussion with celebrity guests is scheduled for opening night. Watch for details.

Howards End is considered one of the greatest works of early 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature. In it, author E. M. Forster presents three families of contrasting social standing in a satirical drama about cold hearts, broken promises and manslaughter, exposing the shallowness of the wealthy and their denial of feeling, while challenging us to connect as human beings despite our differences. Stevens' libretto for HOWARDS END, AMERICA retains the basic narrative, dramatic interplay and essential character of the family groups: the crude and grasping businessman Henry Wilcox and his vulgar son, Charles; the cultured, high-minded sisters Margaret and Helen Schlegel, who meddle in the lives of a disadvantaged African-American couple and find themselves out of their depth; Leonard and Jacky Bast, struggling with discrimination, poverty and broken dreams. Only through bitter experience will all of them, and we, come to view each other through the same lens and realize our responsibility to one another.

Composer Allen Shearer writes, "I had to pull together a lot of different things to make this opera. I am reminded of Louis Simpson writing of American poetry that '... it must have a stomach that can digest rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.' Throughout the process I had a strong libretto to rely on, drawn

from a great novel with finely drawn characters, all tightly interrelated--characters who, in this American adaptation, are types we know and recognize. It has been an amazing journey."

Librettist Stevens writes, "Forster's Howards End is not just an amusing costume drama about British class struggle and hypocrisy, ripe for adaptation by BBC television. It is a book whose significance and power transcend its time and setting. In the opera HOWARDS END, AMERICA, the novel's riveting plot and realistic characters transfer so easily to our own shores that, with shocking immediacy, it becomes a story about all of us."

This is also the story of a house called Howards End. At first it is the embodiment of tranquility and family heritage to the ailing Ruth. After her death, it will become the source of her husband Henry's guilt and the object of their son's greed. Later, Henry's new wife Margaret will defy her husband and help her sister give birth out-of-wedlock within its walls. At last, Howards End is the refuge where the emotionally exhausted Henry and Margaret can hunker down. The changing "face" of the house will be conveyed by imagery and scenic design that charts a metamorphosis from gracious, welcoming family home to the colorless, shuttered, and empty dwelling that reflects the depleted character of its owners. Projections of black-and-white photographs as they are being developed, morphing from negatives to real images, or the reverse, will add a level of provocative visual symbolism.

With HOWARDS END, AMERICA, the venerable Bay Area new music ensemble Earplay features the work of the East Bay-based creative team of composer Allen Shearer and librettist Claudia Stevens, its first ever production of chamber opera. Shearer's and Stevens' last major operatic work, MIDDLEMARCH IN SPRING, produced by Composers, Inc., received its world premiere at Z Space in 2015 and has been honored by subsequent new productions by Charlottesville Opera (2017 East Coast premiere) and Opera Theatre at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (at Bijou Theatre, 2018), and as a finalist for the American Prize in classical opera.

A segment from HOWARDS END, AMERICA, conducted by Jonathan Khuner in Berkeley and San Francisco, received high praise from San Francisco Classical Voice when previewed by West Edge Opera on its 2017 "Snapshot" series of scenes from new operas. And, the opera's upcoming premiere is being heralded by the International E. M. Forster Society.

The cast of HOWARDS END, AMERICA features leading Bay Area and international artists. Canadian lyric coloratura soprano Nikki Einfeld appears as the opera's heroine, Margaret. Ms. Einfeld, praised by the New York Times for her "high flying virtuosity," has appeared with leading opera companies and orchestras. She is a former Adler Fellow and Grand Finalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. Philip Skinner, in the role of Henry, enjoys an international career, having performed major bass-baritone roles of the repertoire with companies throughout the world, many at San Francisco Opera. He created the role of Edward Casaubon in the Shearer/Stevens 2015 opera, MIDDLEMARCH IN SPRING at San Francisco's Z Space and for the Charlottesville Opera 2017 East Coast premiere. Soprano Sara Duchovnay, as the reckless and willful Helen, appears on opera stages throughout America; she created the major role of Dorothea in MIDDLEMARCH IN SPRING, praised for her "expressive grace" by the San Francisco Chronicle, and repeated that performance for Charlottesville Opera. Tenor Michael Dailey, as an African-American Leonard Bast, ensnared in the schemes of Henry, Margaret and Helen, has performed a range of roles as a Principal Resident Artist with San Jose Opera. Opera News described his as a voice "blessed with freshness." Baritone Daniel Cilli, as the shallow, nasty fraternity jock Charles, also was a Principal Resident Artist at San Jose Opera. His recently acclaimed performances range from Kurt Rhode's *Death with Interruptions* to Don Quixote in *Man of la Mancha*. Mezzo soprano Erin Neff, as Ruth, has appeared in numerous San Francisco Opera productions, ranging from Rigoletto to The

Bonesetter's Daughter. Lori Willis, in the poignant role of fading club singer Jacky, is a leading area soloist, appearing with Oakland Opera, Oakland-East Bay Orchestra and Sacramento Philharmonic.

Composer Allen Shearer is recognized widely for his work in many media, but especially vocal music and opera. His choral works have been performed throughout the United States as well as in many cities in Europe, the former Soviet Union, and South Africa. The recipient of the Prix de Rome (at the American Academy in Rome), the Aaron Copland Award, the Charles Ives prize and many grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Shearer's commissions include a number from San Francisco-based vocal ensemble Chanticleer. His 2015 chamber opera MIDDLEMARCH IN SPRING, created with librettist Claudia Stevens, received critical acclaim in local media and in the UK, and has had several subsequent East Coast productions. HOWARDS END, AMERICA is his eighth opera and seventh in collaboration with Stevens.

Librettist Claudia Stevens began her career as a composers' pianist, advocate for new music, monologue artist and playwright. Her work has been recognized by grants including "New Forms" from the National Endowment for the Arts, residencies at RS9 Szinhaz in Budapest, the Baltimore Theater Project, Gitameit Art Center in Rangoon, Burma, and the MacDowell Colony. Support for her thirty-year touring career has come from the International Theater Institute, Virginia Commission for the Arts and scores of colleges and universities. Several of her monologue plays, and her libretto for the whimsical Allen Shearer chamber opera, A VERY LARGE MOLE, appear in the poetry journal Exquisite Corpse.

Mary Chun, Resident Conductor of San Francisco's renowned Earplay Ensemble, has established herself as a leading and sought-after conductor of new music, contemporary opera and musical theater. Her credits include conducting of John Adams premieres in Canada and Europe, work with Kent Nagano in Lyon, and with companies ranging from the East Slovakian State Opera to the Texas Shakespeare Festival. More locally, she has been on the conducting staff of San Francisco Opera; led the Empyrean Ensemble at UC Davis; and has worked with West Edge Opera and Opera San José. Director Philip Lowery, whose lively and canny direction of the Z Space premiere of MIDDLEMARCH IN SPRING helped to bring honor to that work, now will bring to the Z Space stage all the richness, intensity and social significance of HOWARDS END, AMERICA. With directing credits at Berkeley Opera, North Bay Opera, Lamplighters Music Theatre, and Berkeley Contemporary Opera (of which he was a co-founder), he is also an actor and a Resident Artist of San Francisco Shakespeare Festival and has directed for such local theatre companies as Central Works, Altarena Playhouse, Berkeley Playhouse and Shotgun Players.

Earplay, San Francisco's premiere new music ensemble, has been linking audiences, performers, and composers through concerts, commissions, and recordings of the finest music of our time. It has performed over 550 works by more than 300 composers in its 34-year history, including 140 world premieres and 80 new works commissioned by the ensemble. Its concerts feature the Earplayers, a group of artists who have developed a lyrical and ferocious style: Tod Brody, flute and piccolo; Peter Josheff, clarinet and bass clarinet; Terrie Baune, violin; Ellen Ruth Rose, viola; Thalia Moore, cello; and Brenda Tom, piano. These players will comprise the core of a HOWARDS END, AMERICA chamber orchestra selected from among the area's best instrumentalists. This stunning world premiere at Z Space will be a significant feature of the Bay Area's spring, 2019 opera season. Audiences attending the opera will enjoy the ambience of a unique, intimate performing arts space, regarded as among the best venues for the experience of chamber opera. Z Space has hosted many of the Bay Area's most acclaimed and important opera productions and new music events. Don't miss this one!