
Courtesy PhotoThe world premiere opera of “The Secret Garden” is designed by painter and video artist Naomie Kremer.

Opera, families come together in ‘Secret Garden’

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David Gockley is again the catalyst for a rare venture: an opera created with families in mind.

With Engelbert Humperdinck’s “Hansel and Gretel” among the few operas written for children, the San Francisco Opera and Cal Performances aim to add to the under-represented genre with “The Secret Garden.” Opening this week, the opera-commissioned world premiere is by Bay Area composer Nolan Gasser and librettist Carey Harrison.

Opera general director Gockley — who collaborated with Cal Performances five years ago to stage composer Rachel Portman’s “The Little Prince” — and Gasser hope the production attracts new audiences for opera.

“The music is very vibrant, very accessible,” Gasser says. “There are a lot of arias, with very strong melodies — melodies that, by the end of the opera, I hope people will be humming.”

Based on Frances Hodgson Burnett's famed 1910 novel (often adapted for stage and screen), the story is about an angry 10-year-old British girl, residing in India, whose life takes a dramatic turn when a cholera epidemic kills her parents and her family's servants.

Sent to England to live with her uncle and left to herself, her nasty disposition changes when she discovers a fantasy world, a rose garden, where she spends time with a kind maid, gardener and special robin, and becomes friends with a similarly troubled young boy.

During the Indian scene, Gasser's music is reminiscent of ragas. In the Yorkshire setting, themes are drawn from English folk melodies.

Sara Jobin, who led "The Little Prince" (and was the first woman to conduct Wagner in San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House), returns to conduct "The Secret Garden."

"It is a sweet and touching piece bringing the book to life," Jobin says, "in a musical language that will be very easy for American audiences to take in. We have a great cast of young and talented singers, with members of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra in the pit. I think kids and families will really enjoy it."

Naomie Kremer, who created remarkable abstract projections for the Berkeley Opera's "Bluebeard's Castle," designed a "slightly surreal and sort of

dreamlike” look for “The Secret Garden,” while Merola-Adler program alumnus Jose Maria Condemi is stage director.

The cast includes Sarah Shafer, Michael Kepler Meo, Philippe Sly, Laura Krumm, Erin Johnson and Marina Harris.

The Secret Garden: Presented by the San Francisco Opera and Cal Performances

- Where: Zellerbach Hall, near Bancroft Way and Telegraph Avenue, UC Berkeley campus
- When: 7:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday and March 9, 3 p.m. Sunday and March 10
- Tickets: \$15 to \$80
- Contact: (415) 864-3330, www.sfopera.com

Select special events

- **Exploration workshops:** Stage manager Rachel Henneberry leads interactive workshops for ages 6 and older based on the opera. [3:30 to 4:30 p.m. and 5 to 6 p.m. Saturday and March 9, Alumni House, UC Berkeley]
- **Scavenger hunt:** Families with children 5–12 are invited

to explore secret gardens while assembling materials
for a secret art project. [1 to 4 p.m. March 9, S.F.
Botanical Garden, Golden Gate Park, Ninth Avenue at
Lincoln Way, S.F.]