DUKE MUSIC

Duke Opera Theater presents

ART OF THE DIVINE

Daniel Seyfried, pianist
David Heid, director

April 18, 2025 **7:00 PM** **Baldwin Auditorium**

Esther — George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

Ahasuerus: Nate Jones
Esther: Dolce Feenaghty
Haman : Devon Carter
Guard: Abraham Palmer

In the final act of Handel's *Esther*, the Jewish people are saved from destruction when Queen Esther bravely reveals her identity to King Ahasuerus and exposes the sinister plot of Haman. The king, moved by Esther's plea and Mordecai's loyalty, condemns Haman and elevates Mordecai in his place.

Sister Angelica — Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Touriere (Turn Sister) Helena He
Sister Angelica: Faye Hardek
Sister Genevieve: Sarah Poinsette
The Abbess: Lilla Timperman
Princess: Julia Leeman
4 Sisters
#1 Abigail Pickens
#2 Melissanthi Guthold
#3 Lauren Strauch
#4 Paige Marino

This *Suor Angelica* scene begins with the arrival of an unexpected visitor to the convent. The sisters react with curiosity and anticipation, hoping for news or gifts from loved ones. But for Angelica, the visitor is her cold and unyielding aunt—the Princess—who banished her to the convent years ago after she bore a child out of wedlock. The Princess has not come out of concern but to demand that Angelica renounce her inheritance so that her younger sister can marry. Desperate for news of her son, Angelica pleads for information, only to receive the devastating truth: her child died years ago. Overcome with grief, she collapses in despair, setting the stage for her tragic decision which follows.

Amahl and the Night Visitors

Gian Carlo Menotti
(1911–2007)

Amahl: Isabella Murray
Mother: Amanda Treston
Melchior: Jay Warrier
Balthazar: Harris Tong
Kaspar: Robert Miron

In our interpretation of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Amahl and his mother live on the outskirts of a homeless encampment, protected by fences that offer some safety and privacy. When three regal strangers arrive seeking shelter, Amahl is initially fearful but quickly bonds with the elderly Kaspar, who carries a parrot and a fantastical box filled with treasures. With no food to offer, Amahl's mother sends Amahl to seek help from neighbors. Left alone, she notices the kings' lavish gifts and, in a moment of desperation, wonders who they are meant for. This leads to a breathtaking quartet, where the kings describe their search for a holy child-king, while the mother processes this revelation through the lens of her own beloved Amahl.

Faust

Charles Gounod
(1818-1893)

Faust: Miles Jenkins*
Mephistopheles: Grant Bryden
Margarite: Claire Hardek

Earlier in *Faust*, the title character sells his soul to Mephistopheles in exchange for youth, knowledge, and power, ultimately seducing Marguerite and leaving her pregnant and abandoned. In the opera's harrowing final scene, Marguerite, imprisoned for killing her child, awaits execution. Faust, aided by Mephistopheles, rushes to save her, urging her to flee. But Marguerite, delirious and repentant, rejects his pleas and turns to God for salvation. As Mephistopheles condemns her, a heavenly choir proclaims her redemption. She ascends to heaven, while Faust collapses in devastation and Mephistopheles is left defeated.

Cavalleria rusticana

Pietro Mascagni
(1863–1945)

Santuzza: Emma Ren
Mama Lucia: Sarah Gorbato
With full Duke Opera Theater cast

The *Easter Hymn (Regina Coeli, laetare)* from *Cavalleria Rusticana* is one of the most iconic moments in opera. On Easter morning, villagers gather outside the church, their voices soaring in a prayer to the Virgin Mary. Amid this joyous celebration, Santuzza stands apart, pleading for divine mercy. She has been betrayed and abandoned by Turridu, who seduced her and left her with child. As the villagers rejoice, Santuzza's anguish remains, adding a poignant contrast to the scene

*Miles Jenkins, guest artist
Vicky Yang, harpsichord

To give each audience member the opportunity to enjoy the performance fully, please silence all electronic devices. Flash photography, recording, food, and beverages are not permitted.

One of the most frequent questions I receive from audience members is about how we develop ideas for our productions. Most of the time, I don't have a straightforward answer—many ideas begin as fleeting thoughts that evolve through research, practical constraints, and creative opportunities. However, *Art of the Divine* had a distinct moment of inspiration.

At Duke Opera, we are fortunate to perform each spring in Baldwin Auditorium, a stunning space with remarkable acoustics. The piano is world-class, and the audience enjoys true comfort in this facility. Of course, such a premier venue is in high demand, leading to scheduling challenges. To accommodate as many groups as possible, our performance dates are largely assigned. Every few years, Duke Opera Theater finds itself performing on Easter weekend.

Upon seeing our Easter weekend slot, I immediately thought of the powerful *Easter Hymn* from *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni. That led me to reflect on the rich tradition of operatic works centered around themes of religion and divinity.

Given the diversity of our Duke and Durham communities, we approached this project with care, discussing its themes during our first rehearsal and in individual conversations with students. Not everyone in our ensemble or audience identifies with the religious traditions represented in these works. However, at the heart of every great piece of theater is a compelling story. In opera, as in all theater, we do not expect performers to personally embody the beliefs or actions of their characters—just as an actor cast in *Sweeney Todd* is not assumed to be a serial killer or cannibal. More importantly, great stories operate on multiple levels: beyond the literal narrative, they often convey deeper universal truths.

For example, Esther is, at its core, about a courageous woman standing against powerful men in a male-dominated society. *Amahl and the Night Visitors* illustrates how a small act of kindness can have a profound impact. *Faust* explores the struggle between power and morality, with different characters arriving at vastly different conclusions. The religious elements in these works serve as a framework upon which these broader themes resonate.

No matter your personal beliefs, I hope you find both the music and the stories compelling. As an added milestone, many of tonight's selections mark premieres for Duke Opera Theater. *Esther, Suor Angelica, Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and *Cavalleria Rusticana* are all new to our repertoire, while we have only once before performed a scene from *Faust*—this very scene, in fact.

Through these works, we explore stories of faith, resilience, redemption, and the human struggle for meaning. We invite you to experience their beauty, complexity, and emotional depth.

-David Heid, director

Recognized for his "sensitive precision" and "vivid" performances, pianist **Daniel Seyfried** has performed widely as a soloist and chamber musician at venues and academic institutions across the United States. Equal parts soloist, collaborator, and teacher, Daniel finds inspiration from colleagues and students at Duke University where he serves as a collaborative pianist and is a member of the teaching faculty. With a special affinity for Claude Debussy's work, Daniel recorded the complete Douze études, a particularly vibrant and explorative collection of late works by the French composer. Daniel also has a thriving career as a freelance musician and serves as Assistant Minister of Music at Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian church. He earned his D.M.A. in Piano Performance and a Cognate in Pedagogy from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Daniel's playing was shaped by his past teachers including Andrew Willis, Sean Duggan, and Steven Spooner.

Thanks for the generous support of the Duke University Department of Music, the John Hanks Fund, and the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation.

Duke Opera Theater

Special thanks from the director:

Any success you find this evening starts with the Duke Music Voice faculty. I thank them for the myriad ways they support Duke Opera Theater. John Santoianni – let's just say it's good to have a friend and opera supporter who has carpentry skills and a generous heart. My peeps on the administrative staff are so great – Gretchen Hoag, Brandi Melvin-Scammell, and Dyllan Wrenn. They might not be on stage, but they are crucial to our survival and success. Rick Nelson and his staff truly deserve a separate curtain call for their work. Rick is a creative force in his own right and our shows look better because of his artistry and Colin keeps it all on track backstage. Finally, a special mention to NC Opera for supporting us and all opera development around the region.

Thanks to Rich Kless and the Venue & Production Management folks for their ongoing support of Duke Opera Theater in big and small ways. Special shout out to Nick Bria for building our fencing units and constructing the cross which anchors so many of these scenes and Haze Grissett for help with our lighting emergency. If costumes were left in my hands, all the students would be wearing jeans and sweatshirts on stage. But Hannah Haverkamp somehow manages, despite her crushing workload and my limited budget, to help bring these characters to life through her extensive costume assistance.

And finally, the true bedrock of Duke Opera Theater – pianist Daniel Seyfried. In addition to the gorgeous playing you hear from him during our show, Dan wears so many hats. He creates the evocative orchestral reductions, helps the students decipher these complex scores, while being a positive force in rehearsals. He delivers this level of excellence with a kindness that is infectious to all of us. We are fortunate to have him on our team.

Concert Manager, Broadcast Producer: Rick Nelson
Senior Production Technician, Stage Manager: Colin Booy
Costume Coordinator: Hannah Haverkamp
Wardrobe Assistant: Gloria Bao
Scenic Fabricator: Nick Bria
Stagehands: Keyan Miao and Ethan Song