

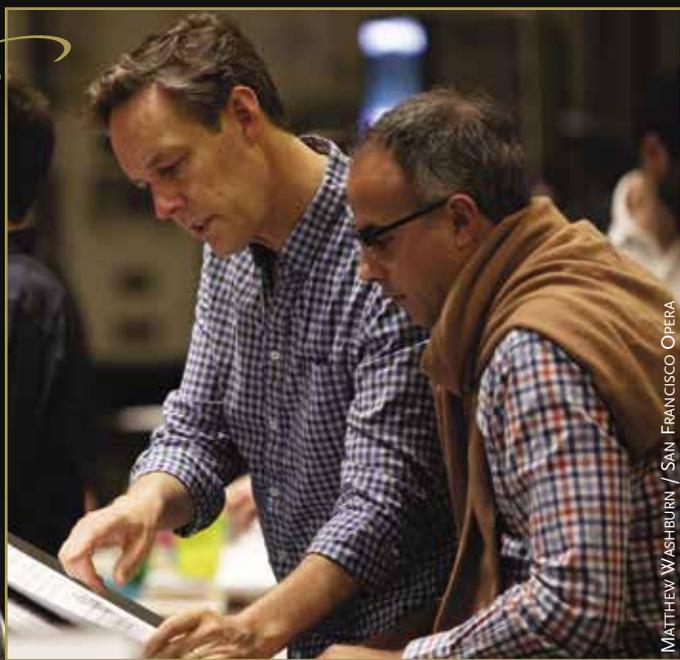
# Composer's Note

Just after the remarkable 2010 premiere of *Moby-Dick*, my great friend Patrick Summers invited me to create a holiday piece for the Houston Grand Opera. Patrick has been one of my closest artistic partners through the years and has led the world premieres of my operas *Dead Man Walking* (2000), *The End of the Affair* (2004), *Three Decembers* (2008), *Moby-Dick* (2010), and *Great Scott* (2015). He said he was looking for a work that opera companies could produce in big or small houses while the ballet was performing *Nutcracker*.

We considered beloved stories that return every Christmas that would make sense as an opera. (*Charlie Brown* was out. So were *Frosty the Snowman* and the *Grinch*.) I sought an American story that was innately operatic but had yet to be developed for the opera stage. I don't know when *It's a Wonderful Life* actually came to mind, but I knew it was exactly the story I wanted to pursue: an American classic about the ripple effect of good deeds in a community. Isn't that a message we always need?

Filled with beloved characters, it is a journey of extraordinary transformation with a sense of wonder, magic, mystery, and high stakes. The story has romance, humor, and big, open-hearted emotions that offer a world of musical possibilities. HGO said yes, and so did my most frequent collaborator, the brilliant librettist Gene Scheer. And then, much to my immense joy, the San Francisco Opera—my beloved home company—also jumped on board! The spectacular production team from *Moby-Dick* also joined in. So with all that talent and possibility in place, all we had to do was write it. Easy, right?

The greatest challenge of the project is that the story exists only as an iconic movie. Director Frank Capra used Philip Van Doren Stern's story "The Greatest Gift" as source material for his movie, but there is no novel in the library called *It's a Wonderful Life*. Every reference we have is from that indelible movie. But you can't put a movie on the opera stage. So how could we honor the



MATTHEW WASHBURN / SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

Above: The composer at a *Wonderful Life* rehearsal, consulting with assistant conductor Joseph Marcheso.

source, reconceive the story as an opera, and bring the audience with us? The job was immense.

Gene set to work inventing theatrical devices that could take us through the story. He came up with the idea of a magical attic with many doors representing all the days of George Bailey's life. That led to other discoveries and possibilities: a hat for Clara to stop time, a dance called the Mekee-Mekee, a quartet of angels to guide Clara, a spoken dialogue scene without music to represent the world without George Bailey, and so on.

Once the libretto was in good shape, I set to work. Due to my own overwhelming schedule, I pushed the deadline and wrote the opera in a very short time period, from January to June 2016. My collaborators were very understanding, but by pushing that deadline, I put them all in a difficult position. We were fortunate to have an enormously helpful workshop at University of Colorado

KAREN ALMOND / HOUSTON GRAND OPERA



*How could we honor the source, reconceive the story as an opera, and bring the audience with us? The job was immense.*

Boulder through the fabulous CU NOW program (Leigh Holman, director). A few rewrites and then I orchestrated in July and August 2016. The piece received its premiere on December 2. It was a beautiful, very successful (sold-out!) premiere run of performances. We were all pleased. But, we also recognized there was still work to do—as there always is after an initial run!

The last character to appear for any opera is the audience. New operas don't get previews during which the creative team gets to make changes and see how they work with an audience. New operas are shot out of a cannon at the audience on opening night. By this time, Indiana University had joined as a co-producer. This was excellent news, because it meant we could try out changes so that the piece would be in great shape for San Francisco.

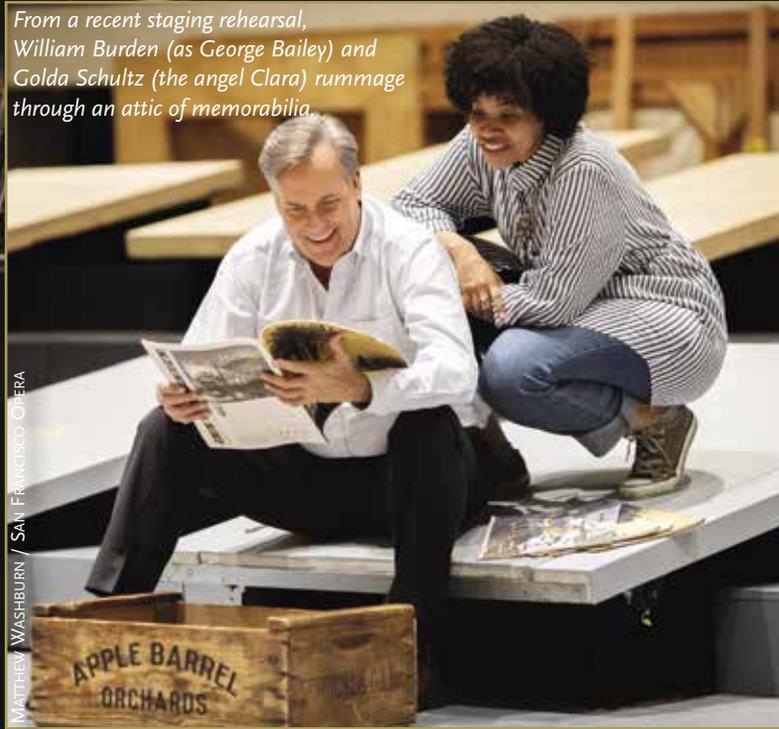
For the Indiana University production in November 2017, we cut almost 15 percent of the opera and made some rewrites starting with the opening music for the opera. The prelude went from being mysterious and otherworldly to an explosion of holiday joy. We cut down the time it took Clara to get from the Heavens to Earth. We cut the character of Mr. Gower, the pharmacist. (I've never cut a character from an opera!) His scene seemed to block the dramatic flow, and we decided to focus more on Young George rescuing his brother Harry. Then we expanded the Act I arias for George and Mary so that they would really take flight and let us deep into the hearts of those characters. In Act II, we added a new duet between Clara and Mary as well as a duet scene between Mr. Potter and George. Even after having composed eight operas, every day seems to be a school day.

We were all confident with the new material and the Indiana performances went very well, but then we realized the set would need to change to reflect the new material! Thanks to General Director Matthew Shilcock, several incredibly generous donors, our HGO partners, and the SFO family, the director and design team were able to revise the production for San Francisco. Among

other things, they removed the mirrored doors of the original and painted the deck a lighter color to better catch new projections and light. There are other surprises, but I don't want to give everything away!

Two years after the premiere in Houston, we are all eager for the final character—you, the San Francisco Opera audience—to show up to experience this exciting new vision of the opera. Personally, it is immensely gratifying to bring it home here in the place where it all started for me. A wonderful life, indeed. Welcome! 🌟

*From a recent staging rehearsal, William Burden (as George Bailey) and Golda Schultz (the angel Clara) rummage through an attic of memorabilia.*



MATTHEW WASHBURN / SAN FRANCISCO OPERA



*Cast members of It's a Wonderful Life dance the Mekee-Mekee.*