



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Opera Colorado to Present
World Premiere of New American Opera
*Steal a Pencil for Me***

**World War II Romance Based on a True Story
By Composer Gerald Cohen and Librettist Deborah Brevoort**

Engagement Marks Company's Second World Premiere in Two Years

DENVER, CO (April 04, 2017) — Opera Colorado will present the world premiere of *Steal a Pencil for Me* by composer Gerald Cohen and librettist Deborah Brevoort in January 2018. A moving love story based on the real-life experiences of a Dutch man, the woman he loves, and his estranged wife, *Steal a Pencil for Me* chronicles the trio's struggle to survive in two Nazi concentration camps. The secret lovers exchange passionate letters written with stolen pencil stubs, keeping their hopes and hearts alive in a time of darkness. *Steal a Pencil for Me* will be presented January 25–30, 2018, at the Elaine Wolf Theatre at the Mizel Arts and Culture Center (MACC) in Denver.

The production marks the second world premiere for the company in two years, following the debut of *The Scarlet Letter* in May 2016, and will be the first world premiere to be presented as part of [Scene Change](#), Opera Colorado's new venture presenting opera outside the traditional grand opera house setting. The premiere of *Steal a Pencil for Me* will be directed by Omer Ben Seadia in her Opera Colorado debut and conducted by Music Director Ari Pelto. Inna Dukach, Gideon Dabi, and Adriana Zabala portray the love triangle's respective roles of Ina Soep, Jaap Polak, and his wife Manja Polak.

"Supporting new American opera is core to our artistic vision. We believe it is vital for artists to test new ideas and continue to innovate within the opera form," said Greg Carpenter, General Director of Opera Colorado. "We are proud to premiere *Steal a Pencil for Me*, and to be a creative partner in realizing an insightful depiction of this poignant story of three lives that intersect during one of the most horrific moments in history."

Opera Colorado's Music Director Ari Pelto worked closely with Gerald Cohen and Deborah Brevoort to develop *Steal a Pencil for Me*—including guiding semi-staged presentations in advance of the Opera Colorado premiere.

"In telling the story, it is crucial to avoid caricature, both for the Jews and the Nazis. This is not a story of outsized characters and deeds, or villains and heroes," said Pelto. "Ina, Jaap, and Manja wrestle with the challenges, complications, and emotions of life, love, and partnership. We aim to create an intimate and natural connection between the three leads against the backdrop of the war."

In 1943, Jaap and Ina were introduced by a mutual friend in Amsterdam. Six months later, Ina, Jaap, and his wife Manja were taken to the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands. The trio spent 15 months

together in Westerbork, and in Bergen-Belsen in Germany. Jaap and Manja divorced in August 1945, after their liberation. Jaap and Ina married the following year, moving to the United States shortly thereafter where they settled in Westchester, NY. Manja Polak never remarried.

Composer Gerald Cohen developed a close friendship with Jaap and Ina Polak over the course of nearly 30 years. Their love letters were published in 2000, *Steal a Pencil for Me: Love Letters from Camp Bergen-Belsen and Westerbork*. Their full story was the subject of a documentary broadcast on the PBS series *Independent Lens* in 2007. With their blessing, Cohen began developing *Steal a Pencil for Me* in 2011; he and librettist Deborah Brevoort interviewed Jaap and Ina many times in the process of creating the opera, which was presented in a semi-staged workshop in 2013 with Ina and Jaap in attendance.

“My parents were World War II refugees, and for a long time I contemplated creating an opera set during the Holocaust because of this personal connection,” Cohen said. “I had always loved Jaap and Ina’s story, but it was upon seeing the documentary for the second time that the idea of creating an opera about it really came together. Their experience presents an unexpectedly optimistic story that I felt needed to be told. I hope *Steal a Pencil for Me* inspires audiences to see the power of love and the human spirit, even in dreadful situations that can seem hopeless.”

Jaap Polak helped found the Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect (formerly named Anne Frank Center USA), where he was chairman emeritus. He was knighted by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands in 1992 for his work in sharing lessons from his Holocaust experience. After 68 years of marriage, Ina died in 2014. Jaap passed away just eight months later.

“What stood out to me in this beautiful tale was how important stories were to Ina and Jaap’s survival,” said Brevoort. “Every day they would meet behind the barracks to imagine what their future life could be. It was a simple story that they imagined for themselves—of ordinary breakfasts, and butter for the bread—but it nevertheless held great power and ultimately enabled them to survive. When everything is taken away, only the essential remains.”

Excerpts from *Steal a Pencil for Me* will be presented by the American Lyric Theater in New York on April 23 at the Morgan Library and on April 26 at the Jewish Theological Seminary (Broadway at 122nd Street), where Cohen will be participating in a moderated discussion with composer Laura Kaminsky about their creative process.

Steal a Pencil for Me

Music by Gerald Cohen

Libretto by Deborah Brevoort

Based on the book of the same title by Jaap Polak and Ina Soep

World Premiere

January 25, 27, 28, 30, 2018

Elaine Wolf Theatre at the Mizel Arts and Culture Center (MACC)

Denver, CO

Creative team:

Ari Pelto Conductor

Omer Ben Seadia Director

Cast:

Inna Dukach Ina Soep

Gideon Dabi
Adriana Zabala

Jaap Polak
Manja Polak

About Gerald Cohen, Composer

A noted synagogue cantor and baritone, Gerald Cohen's experience as a singer informs his dramatic, lyrical compositions for opera, chorus, chamber ensembles, and orchestra. Recognition of Cohen's body of work includes commissioning grants from Meet the Composer, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, American Composers Forum, and residencies including those at The MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and American Lyric Theater. Cohen's music has been commissioned by ensembles including the Cassatt String Quartet, Verdehr Trio, Franciscan String Quartet, Chesapeake Chamber Music, and New York Virtuoso Singers, with other performances by such groups as the Borromeo String Quartet, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and New York Concert Singers. Cohen received a BA in music from Yale University and a DMA in composition from Columbia University. His compositions are published by Oxford University Press, G. Schirmer/AMP, and Transcontinental Music Publications. He is cantor at Shaarei Tikvah, Scarsdale, NY, and is on the faculties of The Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College.

About Deborah Brevoort, Librettist

Deborah Brevoort is a playwright and librettist from Alaska who now lives in the New York City area. She is an alumna of New Dramatists, one of the original company members of Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, and a co-founder of Theatre Without Borders, a group of individual artists dedicated to international theatre exchange. She is best known for her play [*The Women of Lockerbie*](#), which won the Kennedy Center's Fund for New American Plays Award and the silver medal in the Onassis International Playwriting Competition. It was produced in London at the Orange Tree, Off-Broadway at the New Group and Women's Project, and in Los Angeles at the Actors' Gang. It is produced all over the U.S. and internationally. Published by DPS and No Passport Press, the play has had over 400 productions to date and is translated into 10 languages. She has done residencies in Canada, Mexico, Australia, Denmark, and the Czech and Slovak Republics. She is a resident artist at the American Lyric Theater. She is a member of ASCAP and serves on the board of the National Theatre Conference. She holds MFAs in playwriting from Brown University and in musical theatre writing from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where she was the Yip Harburg Fellow. She currently teaches in the NYU graduate musical theatre writing program and in the MFA playwriting programs at Columbia University and Goddard College.

About Ari Pelto, Music Director and Conductor

Ari Pelto, Music Director of Opera Colorado, is widely known for performances that have been called poetic, earthy, vigorous, and highly individual. He is in demand in opera houses and with symphony orchestras throughout the United States. At the age of 24, Pelto was appointed Assistant Conductor at the Spoleto Festival and has gone on to conduct on stages worldwide. His international appearances include symphonic performances with the Bochumer Philharmoniker, productions of *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Falstaff* at New National Theatre of Tokyo, and *Faust* at the Teatro Nacional Sucre in Quito, Ecuador. In 2004 he made his highly praised debut with New York City Opera conducting *La Traviata*, after which he became a regular guest conductor, returning for productions of *Madama Butterfly*, *La Bohème*, and *Carmen*. In 2015, Pelto was named Opera Colorado's first-ever Music Director, where he has conducted acclaimed performances of *Don Giovanni*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Aida*, and the recent world premiere of Lori Laitman's long-awaited work, *The Scarlet Letter*, a recording of which will be released in fall 2017 on the Naxos label. This season at Opera Colorado, Pelto lead a production of *La Fanciulla del West* and will lead *Lucia di Lammermoor*. For the 2017–18 season, Pelto will lead productions of *La Bohème*, *Steal a Pencil for Me*, and *Falstaff*. Highlights of his 2015–16 season included *Aida* at Utah Symphony and Opera, for which the *Salt Lake Tribune* raved "Whether in the grandeur of the triumphal scene or the exquisite beauty of the Nile scene, one couldn't have asked for a more inspiring performance of Verdi's score"; a double-bill of *La*

Voix Humaine starring Patricia Racette and *Gianni Schicchi* at Chicago Opera Theater; and return appearances at Atlanta Ballet and at Opera Memphis. He conducted a variety of symphonic programs with orchestras in the U.S., including Omaha Symphony and the NYU Symphony. After earning his Bachelor of Music in violin performance at Oberlin Conservatory, he studied conducting at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Rubin Academy in Jerusalem, and with Imre Pallo at Indiana University.

About Omer Ben Seadia, Director

Having worked in theater and opera since a very young age, Omer Ben Seadia is now establishing herself as one of the fresh voices in the American opera world. A graduate of the Opera Directing program at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, she directed numerous productions there including *Don Pasquale* (Donizetti), *Le Docteur Miracle* (Bizet), and *Saint John's Passion* (Bach). Additionally, she studied Theater Directing at Seminar Ha'Kibutzim, School of Performing Arts, Tel-Aviv where she received acclaim for her adaptation of Harwood's *The Dresser*. In 2014, she was named the Merola Opera Program's Apprentice Stage Director, directing the Merola Grand Finale on the main stage of the San Francisco Opera. Ms. Ben Seadia has previously directed an array of repertoire including *The Golden Vanity* (Britten), *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (Ullmann), *Brundibár* (Krása). Ms. Ben Seadia has been on staff at Houston Grand Opera, The Israeli Opera, Cincinnati Opera, and The International Vocal Arts Institute.

About Greg Carpenter, General Director

The fourth General Director in Opera Colorado's 35-year history, Greg Carpenter guides both the artistic and administrative operations of the company. His role as General Director began in 2007, prior to which he served as Opera Colorado's Director of Development from 2004 – 2007, overseeing all fundraising and Board of Directors activities. Prior to joining Opera Colorado, he worked for four years for the National Symphony Orchestra at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. His work there included Special Projects Manager for the President of the National Symphony Orchestra from 2000 – 2001 and Manager of Development from 2001 – 2004. Carpenter's extensive experience working in the arts also includes two years as the Artist and Event Services Manager for the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, and Special Projects Coordinator for the University of Maryland School of Music. From 1986 – 1998, Carpenter performed as a professional opera singer. His work as an opera singer included both lead and supporting roles at Glimmerglass Opera, Central City Opera, Sarasota Opera, Opera Theatre of Northern Virginia, Cleveland Opera, and Lyric Opera Cleveland. Carpenter has served on the Board of Directors for OPERA America, the national service organization for the opera industry. For the 2008 National Performing Arts Convention held in Denver, he served as Chairman of the Fundraising Committee. In 2009 Carpenter received a Livingston Fellowship Award in Leadership from the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation. He also regularly serves as a judge for the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and has served as a judge for the Fritz and Lavinia Jensen Foundation Competition. Greg Carpenter received a Bachelor of Music degree in vocal performance from Wittenberg University, a Master of Music degree in vocal performance from Michigan State University, and he completed postgraduate studies at the University of Maryland School of Music.

About Opera Colorado

Great cities need great art, and for more than three decades, Opera Colorado has brought world-class performing arts to Colorado audiences. Today Opera Colorado serves as a cornerstone of Denver's cultural community, bringing grand opera to the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, its Denver home since its opening in 2005. Alongside standard repertoire in the grand opera tradition Opera Colorado presents new works or rarely performed productions each season. The company reaches more than 37,000 students and adults through its many education and community engagement programs throughout the Rocky Mountain region. Opera Colorado's Young Artists, singers at the beginning stages of their careers, perform during their eight-month residency with the company in schools and community centers across the state—

including an annual tour on the Western Slope. Recognized nationally for its excellence, the Young Artists program provides training for the next generation of American opera singers. The 2016 – 2017 season productions at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House featured Puccini's *La Fanciulla de West* in November 2016 and *As One* by Laura Kaminsky, Mark Campbell, and Kimberly Reed, at the Performing Arts Complex at PCS in March 2017. Closing the season will be performances of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in May 2017.
www.operacolorado.org

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