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Lyric Opera of Chicago announces 2015-16 world premiere

Bel Canto

commissioned as part of Lyric's Renée Fleming Initiative.

Music by composer Jimmy López, libretto by playwright Nilo Cruz,
conducted by Sir Andrew Davis, directed by Stephen Wadsworth;

based on the best-selling novel by Ann Patchett.

Soprano Danielle de Niese stars in central role.

Anthony Freud, general director of Lyric Opera of Chicago, today announced details of its latest world premiere. *Bel Canto*, by the gifted young Peruvian composer **Jimmy López**, with libretto by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright **Nilo Cruz**, is based on the best-selling novel by **Ann Patchett**. To premiere in Lyric's 2015-16 season, the new opera will be conducted by Lyric music director **Sir Andrew Davis** and directed by **Stephen Wadsworth**.

Both the 2001 book and the new opera are inspired by the Lima Crisis of 1996-97, when members of a revolutionary movement in Peru held hostages at the Japanese ambassador's house for 126 days (Dec. 17, 1996-April 22, 1997). Central to the story is the fictional famed American soprano, Roxanne Coss, who will be portrayed by Australian-born American soprano **Danielle de Niese**. Like the novel, the opera will explore the tensions and unexpected alliances that develop when a group of culturally disparate strangers – the terrorists and their hostages – are confined in close quarters for months.

Bel Canto will be the seventh world-premiere opera that Lyric Opera of Chicago has commissioned for its main stage since 1961. Joining Freud for the announcement were López, Cruz, Fleming, Patchett, Davis, and Wadsworth.

“The creation of new work is a fundamental, vital part of a major opera company’s activity,” Freud said. “I couldn’t be more excited at the start of my tenure here that Lyric is embarking on its latest mainstage commission.”

As Lyric’s creative consultant, Fleming is curator for this world premiere, which is a keystone of the company’s Renée Fleming Initiative. Fleming selected the book *Bel Canto* as the subject for the commission because she was moved by it and found it “opera-worthy. It’s about terrorism on one level, but it’s also about what happens when people are forced to live together for a long time, and how art can raise their level of humanity as a group,” Fleming said. “Most of us crave a cathartic emotional experience when we’re at the theater, and I believe *Bel Canto* has the components to do that.”

Fleming researched more than a hundred composers for the commission, coming up with a short list that she and Sir Andrew Davis further distilled in consultation with Anthony Freud. The composer they chose, Jimmy López, has a unique intimacy with the story’s setting and source material that will help to inform his work.

Of López, Davis said, “I was struck by his intelligence and the way he understands both the problems in bringing this piece to the stage, but also the possibilities that opera as a medium offers for illuminating a story. For example, the orchestra can accentuate the dramatic situation onstage, but it can also convey the underlying turmoil that one might not see. This is something that many composers miss and that Jimmy understands completely.”

In pairing López with Wadsworth, who has directed premieres of operas by composers such as Peter Lieberson and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Fleming and Davis were eager to give the first-time opera composer an experienced collaborator for meeting the challenge of taking the opera from score to stage. Fleming said, “Stephen has done this often in his career, where in addition to directing, he also has an important dramaturgical role in the creation of the piece.”

Speaking of Lyric’s world premiere, Stephen Wadsworth said, “I think there is a terrific opera in *Bel Canto*. There’s a vivid political story, at least two love stories, and a larger story about art and its healing power. There is also an intriguing mélange of languages in play – including English and Spanish. My job is to shepherd all parties through the period of creation and development with specific attention to the dramaturgy of the piece. We want it to be fresh and arresting, concentrated and tight in narrative and dramaturgy. All the while I will be imagining it onstage, developing the production.”

Jimmy López’s music has been heard at Carnegie Hall and the Aspen Music Festival, and performed by prestigious orchestras including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Boston and Atlanta symphony orchestras, and by the leading orchestras of Chile, Peru, and Finland. In May the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France will premiere his new orchestral piece, *Synesthésie*.

López possesses a distinctive musical style and a broad musical worldview influenced by his studies in his native Peru, at the Sibelius Academy in Finland (2000-07), and the University of California at Berkeley (2007-12). His influences range from Bach and Mozart (“the ideal opera composer”) to Magnus Lindberg, Anders Hillborg, G. F. Haas, and John Adams.

The New York Times has described López as “an expert in orchestration,” while the *Chicago Sun-Times* declared that he is “one of the most interesting young composers anywhere today.”

Born in Lima in 1978, López has strong memories of the 1996-97 hostage crisis there, which was covered extensively by local and international media. The bonding between terrorists and hostages was an example of “inverted Stockholm syndrome,” he said. “The terrorists started falling in love with the hostages. Many of the terrorists were only teenagers. They looked up to the hostages as adult, educated, cultured people who spoke many languages.”

In 2003, **Nilo Cruz** became the first Latino to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, for his play *Anna in the Tropics*. Other major works include *Night Train to Bolina* and *Two Sisters and a Piano*. For Cruz, the allure of *Bel Canto* as an opera libretto came from “this material at the center of the book where there are a couple of love stories,” he said. “Whenever there is love, there’s the possibility to sing and to create soaring music. And the clash of people from different social strata offers great possibilities for dramatic conflict. I feel a real affinity for Ann Patchett’s language,” Cruz continued. “There’s humor in this material, there’s lyricism and an enormous amount of beauty. She’s not afraid to be emotional, and I’m not afraid to be emotional. I feel an enormous amount of responsibility, and I’m going to work hard to make something beautiful and powerful.”

López was drawn to Cruz as a librettist by his play *Two Sisters and a Piano*, which is about siblings living under house arrest in Cuba. “The whole play happens within the house from beginning to end,” López explained. “This is what made me think Nilo might be the one, that he is someone interested in pieces with political overtones.”

Ann Patchett won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2002 for her novel *Bel Canto*. Thinking back to 1996-97 and the inspiration for the book, she recalls being “focused on the incident in Lima from the start. It had so many elements that were compelling to me: confinement, survival, a group of strangers thrown together, the construction of family. Also, it was such an un-terrifying terrorist situation: it was a takeover where the terrorists were teenagers who kept asking for more soccer balls and take-out pizza. I was very attracted to that.”

While writing the book, Patchett listened to recordings of opera singers, including Fleming, as she created the character of American soprano Roxanne Coss. Before writing *Bel Canto*, the author knew “as much about opera as I did about baseball, which is nothing,” she said. “But once I came up with Roxanne, I threw myself into learning about it wholeheartedly, playing opera all the time and attending operas whenever possible. I absolutely fell in love with opera. It’s been such a wonderful bonus of writing this book. I feel like I learned a second language.”

Over the past decade there have been various attempts to turn the best-selling novel into a movie, a Broadway musical, and an opera. Of the Lyric Opera commission Patchett said, "I am absolutely thrilled about this and about Lyric. It seems just a perfect fit. It's an opera company I've always admired, and I think that if anybody can break the spell and get *Bel Canto* into three dimensions, it's going to be Renée and it's going to be Lyric."

Danielle de Niese will sing the role of Roxanne Coss, Patchett's fictional heroine in the book.

"I am honored to return to Lyric Opera of Chicago for the world-premiere commission of *Bel Canto*," said de Niese. "I am very moved by the compositions of Jimmy López and am so excited to bring Ann Patchett's iconic diva, Roxanne Coss, to life through Mr. López's haunting music. I can't wait to collaborate with director Stephen Wadsworth, having worked with him as a young artist in the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. I am also thrilled to reunite with Sir Andrew Davis after performances together of *Le nozze di Figaro* at Lyric in 2010. It will be a privilege to create this new role under his tutelage. Making this role come alive with the Lyric Opera family will no doubt be a highlight of my life."

Renée Fleming said, "Danielle de Niese has the star quality, vocal charisma and spunk of Roxanne. She sings beautifully, and her star is rising fast. We are fortunate to have enlisted her to premiere this work."

Information regarding further casting, production design, and sponsorship for *Bel Canto* will be announced at a later date.

Creating and cultivating new opera is a long-held tradition at Lyric, from the American professional stage premiere of Britten's *Billy Budd* (1970) to the commissioning and world premieres of such diverse operas as Vittorio Giannini's *The Harvest* (1961), Krzysztof Penderecki's *Paradise Lost* (1978), Anthony Davis's *Amistad* (1997, libretto by Thulani Davis, directed by George C. Wolfe) and William Bolcom's *McTeague* (1992), *A View from the Bridge* (1999), and *A Wedding* (2004, Lyric's 50th anniversary season). All three Bolcom operas had libretti by Arnold Weinstein. Robert Altman directed *McTeague* and *A Wedding*, and served as co-librettist; Frank Galati directed *A View from the Bridge*.

Lyric's Brena and Lee Freeman Jr. Composer-in-Residence program, 1984-2003, also produced seven new operas, six of which were fully staged by the Ryan Opera Center (formerly the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists): *The Guilt of Lillian Sloan* (William Neil, libretto by Frank Galati, 1986), *The Fan* (Lee Goldstein, libretto by Charles Kondek, 1989), *The Song of Majnun* (Bright Sheng, libretto by Andrew Porter, 1992), *Orpheus Descending* (Bruce Saylor, libretto by J. D. McClatchy, 1994), *Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk)* (Shulamit Ran, libretto by Charles Kondek, 1997), *Lovers and Friends (Chautauqua Variations)* (Michael John LaChiusa, composer-librettist, 2001), and *Morning Star* (Ricky Ian Gordon, libretto by William M. Hoffman, 2003 workshop). *The Song of Majnun* premiered on the mainstage of the Civic Opera House (following the regular 1991-92 Lyric Opera season); others were staged in venues around Chicago.

Biographies

Composer **Jimmy López** (b. 1978), a native of Lima, Peru, is quickly proving himself to be one of today's most original voices in contemporary classical music. His works have been performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Fort Worth Symphony, the Helsinki Philharmonic, the National Symphony Orchestra of Peru, and the Symphony Orchestra of Chile; at Carnegie Hall, Germany's Darmstadt Music Festival and Donaueschingen Music Festival; the Aspen, Tanglewood, and Grant Park music festivals; and the 2010 Youth Olympic Games in Singapore. His first recording, an overview of his work called *Musiq Peru*, was released by Filarmonika LLC in 2008. He was awarded the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis at the 2008 Darmstadt International Course for Contemporary Music, and is the recipient of the 2008, 2011, and 2012 Nicola de Lorenzo Prize in Music Composition (Berkeley) for his works *Epiphany*, *15 Études for String Octet*, and *Synesthésie*, respectively. Future projects include performances with Finland's Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra and Sweden's Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. The composer recently completed an orchestral piece commissioned by Radio France, to be recorded by conductor Pierre-André Valade and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France in May 2012. He is vice president of kohoBeat, a non-profit music organization based in Helsinki. He is a current member of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), the Society of Finnish Composers, the Circle of Composers of Peru, and the San Francisco Chapter of the Recording Academy. López began his studies in 1998 with Enrique Iturriaga at the National Conservatory of Music in Lima. He earned a master's degree in music in 2007 from the renowned Sibelius Academy in Finland, where he studied with Veli-Matti Puumala and Eero Hämeenniemi. He will conclude his PhD work in May at the University of California at Berkeley. For a complete list of López's works and performances, visit www.jimmylopez.com.

Nilo Cruz won the Pulitzer Prize and the Steinberg Award for Drama in 2003 for his play *Anna in the Tropics*, which was also nominated for a Tony Award. The Cuban-American playwright's work has been produced widely across the U. S., with plays seen at Princeton's McCarter Theatre, New York's Public Theater, Manhattan Theatre Club, New York Theatre Workshop, and Repertorio Español; Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum, Washington's Arena Stage, Chicago's Victory Gardens, South Coast Repertory (Costa Mesa, CA), San Francisco's Magic Theatre, Minneapolis Children's Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and West Palm Beach's Florida Stage, among many others. Internationally, his plays have been produced in Canada, England, France, Australia, Germany, Belarus, Costa Rica, Colombia, Panama, and in cities throughout Spain. In 2009, Cruz won The Helen Merrill and The Laura Pels Mid-Career Playwriting Award, as well as the Fontanals-Cisneros USA Fellowship in literature. Cruz is a frequent collaborator with noted composer Gabriela Lena Frank, with whom he recently wrote a set of orchestral songs, *La centinela y la paloma (The Keeper and the Dove)*, for Dawn Upshaw and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. His new set of songs, *Farhad and the Secret of Being*, composed by Jim Bauer, will be performed next season in New York. Cruz is writing the screenplay for the film *Castro's Daughter*, starring Antonio Banderas as Fidel Castro. <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/nilocruz/home>

Ann Patchett is a bestselling author who first made headlines in 1992 when her debut novel, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. She has maintained a high level of success since; her novel *Taft* won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize in 1994, and 2001's *Bel Canto* received the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Orange Prize, the Book Sense Book of the Year prize, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. It has been translated into more than 30 languages. Her other novels are *The Magician's Assistant* and *Run*. Her most recent novel, *State of Wonder*, was released in June 2011. Her nonfiction has been published in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Gourmet*, the *New York Times*, *Vogue*, and the *Washington Post*. She has also published two books of nonfiction: *Truth and Beauty*, in 2004, a memoir detailing her friendship with writer Lucy Grealy; and *What Now?*, an essay based on her 2006 commencement address at Sarah Lawrence College. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute, and is a winner of the Harold D. Vursell Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Patchett lives in Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband, Karl VanDevender. She is the co-owner of Parnassus Books, <http://www.parnassusbooks.net/>. <http://www.annpatchett.com/>

Stephen Wadsworth is a director, writer and teacher. He has three productions in the active repertoire at the Metropolitan Opera—*Boris Godunov* and *Iphigénie en Tauride*, both seen last season in the house and live on HD worldwide, and *Rodelinda*, which was revived this season with Renée Fleming and also telecast live in HD. His recent Broadway production of Terrence McNally's *Master Class*, starring Tyne Daly as Maria Callas, is now playing in London's West End. Upcoming operatic work includes Szymanowski's *King Roger* at Santa Fe Opera (2012), the final reprise of his famous *Ring* cycle at Seattle Opera (2013), and productions of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan Tutte* at The Juilliard School with his students at Juilliard and the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. His opera work—at La Scala, Vienna State Opera, Covent Garden, the Edinburgh Festival, San Francisco Opera, among others—and his productions of plays by Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Molière, Marivaux, Goldoni, Wilde and Coward have established him as a master of the classical repertoire.

Wadsworth wrote the opera *A Quiet Place* with Leonard Bernstein, premiered in Houston in 1983 and in New York last season, and wrote the story for *Amelia*, with music by Daron Hagen and libretto by Gardner McFall, which was premiered by Seattle Opera in 2010. He served as Dramaturg and director on the premieres of Peter Lieberman's *Ashoka's Dream* (1997) and Hagen's *Shining Brow* (1993), and on new plays by Beth Henley and Anna Deavere Smith. He is a frequent consultant on new opera projects and a regular script consultant for the Sundance Theatre Lab. His translations include operas by Handel (*Xerxes*, *Partenope* and *Alcina*), Mozart (*La Clemenza di Tito*) and Monteverdi (*L'Orfeo* and *The Return of Ulysses*), and plays by Goldoni (*La Locandiera*), Molière (*Don Juan*) and Marivaux (*The Game of Love and Chance*, *The Triumph of Love*, and *Changes of Heart*). For his ground-breaking scholarly and literary work on Molière and Marivaux he was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 2004. The Marivaux translations are published as *Marivaux: Three Plays* by Smith and Kraus.

An acknowledged master teacher for over a quarter century, he is the James S. Marcus Faculty Fellow and Director of Opera Studies at The Juilliard School and Head of Dramatic Studies for the Met's Lindemann program. He has overseen the increasing cooperation of these two programs and directed their first co-production last season at Juilliard—*The Bartered Bride* conducted by James Levine. The two-year Juilliard post-graduate training program, formerly Juilliard Opera Center, is the first intensive acting course for singers. Wadsworth's students have included Dawn Upshaw, Stephanie Blythe, Mariusz Kwiecien, Nathan Gunn, Kate Lindsey, Michèle Losier, Paul Appleby, and many others.

Soprano **Danielle de Niese** has triumphed at Lyric as Cleopatra/*Giulio Cesare* (2007-08) and Susanna/*Le nozze di Figaro* (2009-10). Of her company debut, the *Chicago Tribune* declared her "strikingly beautiful to look at and to listen to...De Niese was such a magnetic presence...that you couldn't take your eyes off her if you tried." Earlier this season she created the role of Ariel in the Baroque pastiche opera *The Enchanted Island* (including HD transmission) at the Metropolitan Opera. Other recent engagements include Susanna in San Francisco, Despina/*Così fan tutte* at the Met, the title role/Handel's *Rodelinda* in Vienna, and her first Adina/*L'elisir d'amore* at Glyndebourne Festival Opera. De Niese has also appeared with great success at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and Opéra National de Paris, Netherlands Opera, Opernhaus Zurich, Madrid's Teatro Real, and Japan's Saito Kinen Festival. Born in Australia, de Niese moved with her family to Los Angeles to further her dance and music studies. At 16 she won an Emmy as guest host of the television show *L.A. Kids*. Her operatic career began at 18 as the youngest singer ever to enter the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. A year later she made her house debut as Barbarina/*Le nozze di Figaro* (new production with Renée Fleming, Bryn Terfel, and Cecilia Bartoli). The 2005 Glyndebourne season marked de Niese's breakthrough to international stardom, as Cleopatra/*Giulio Cesare* in the premiere of David McVicar's production. De Niese debuted as a Decca exclusive artist with "Handel Arias," which won the 2008 Echo Award's New Artist of the Year and the Académie du Disque Lyrique's "Orphée d'Or." Her much-lauded second recording "The Mozart Album" (2009) was followed by "Diva" (2010) and "Beauty of the Baroque," an album of favorite arias from the English, German, and Italian traditions, accompanied by The English Concert under Harry Bicket (2011). www.danielledeniese.com

Renée Fleming, creative consultant with Lyric Opera, is one of today's most celebrated singers and musical ambassadors. Named the No. 1 singer by *Salzburger Festspiele Magazin* in 2010, she continues to grace the world's top opera stages and concert halls even as she extends her reach to include other musical forms and media. Over the past few seasons, Fleming has hosted various television and radio broadcasts, including the Metropolitan Opera's *Live in HD* series for cinemas around the world and *Live From Lincoln Center* on PBS. Fleming has been involved in distinguished media events from the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony to performances in Beijing during the 2008 Olympic Games to *We Are One: The Obama Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial* in 2009. She has performed for the United States Supreme Court, HRH The Prince of Wales at Buckingham Palace and, in November 2009, for the 20th anniversary of the Czech Republic's "Velvet Revolution" at the invitation of Václav Havel. In 2008, Fleming became the first woman in the 125-year history of the Metropolitan Opera to solo headline an opening-

night gala. Among her numerous awards are Sweden's Polar Prize (2008); the *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* from the French government (2005); Honorary Membership in the Royal Academy of Music (2003); and a 2003 Honorary Doctorate from the Juilliard School, where she was also commencement speaker. She is a vice president of Lyric's Board of Directors and serves on the Board of Trustees of the Carnegie Hall Corporation, the Board of Sing for Hope, and the Advisory Board of the White Nights Foundation of America. <http://www.reneefleming.com>

Sir Andrew Davis has served as music director and principal conductor of Lyric Opera of Chicago since 2000 and was named a vice president of Lyric's Board of Directors in 2011. He is conductor laureate of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, conductor laureate of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and former music director of Glyndebourne Festival Opera. With the BBC Symphony Orchestra, he has led concerts at the Proms and on tour to Hong Kong, Japan, the U.S., and Europe. He has conducted all of the world's major orchestras, from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to the Berlin Philharmonic to Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw, as well as at opera houses and festivals from the Metropolitan Opera to La Scala to the Bayreuth Festival. In August he opens the Edinburgh Festival with the Delius *Mass of Life*. Recent releases in his vast discography include works of Elgar, Delius, Holst, and York Bowen. In 1992, Davis was named a Commander of the British Empire for his services to British music; in 1999, he was made a Knight Bachelor in the New Year Honours List. In 1991, he received the Royal Philharmonic Society/Charles Heidsieck Music Award. Born in 1944 in Hertfordshire, England, Maestro Davis resides in Chicago with his wife, soprano Gianna Rolandi, who is the director of The Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago. In Lyric's 2012-13 season, he will conduct *Elektra*, *Simon Boccanegra*, *Werther*, and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. He has led performances of several orchestral world premieres. **Bel Canto** will be his first world-premiere opera. <http://sirandrewdavis.com/>

Anthony Freud became Lyric Opera of Chicago's fourth general director on October 1, 2011, opening night of the company's 57th season. Freud is widely recognized for his achievements as general director of both Houston Grand Opera (2006-2011) and Welsh National Opera (1994-2005). Current chairman of OPERA America and former chairman of Opera Europa, Freud is the only person ever to have served as chairman of both organizations. He chaired the jury for the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Competition (1995-2005) and was also a board member of the National Opera Studio in London (1994-2005). He was an executive producer for Philips Classics (1992-94), where he managed recording projects for some of the world's leading classical artists. He was director of opera planning for Welsh National Opera (1988-92) after beginning his professional life at London's famous Sadler's Wells Theatre. Freud was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in recognition of his services to music by Queen Elizabeth II in her 80th Birthday Honours (2006). Freud was born and raised in London by immigrant parents from Hungary. His father came to the U. K. as a refugee in 1939, and his mother was a survivor of Auschwitz. He attended his first opera at age four, became a regular operagoer in his teens, and by the time he was 14, he knew he wanted to run an opera company someday. Freud graduated with honors with a law degree from the University of London, King's College in 1978 and qualified as an attorney in 1979, but chose instead to follow his passion for opera.

For interviews and more information on the creative team, visit www.lyricopera.org/worldpremiere.