

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – July 2, 2009 – Walnut Creek, CA

Michael Morgan to direct Festival Opera's *FAUST* on 150th anniversary

Cast to include Brian Thorsett, Kristin Clayton and Kirk Eichelberger



A dream cast and innovative staging will be among the highlights of Festival Opera's first presentation of *Faust*, opening August 8, 2009, to be directed and conducted by Michael Morgan. Coinciding with the 150th anniversary of Gounod's enduring work, *Faust* is one of the top 20 operas performed annually, according to Opera America.

The powerful tale of a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the return of his youth and the love of the innocent Marguerite will feature such notable Bay Area talent as tenor **Brian Thorsett** in his debut performance as Faust, soprano **Kristin Clayton** as Marguerite, **Kirk Eichelberger** reprising a critically-acclaimed recent turn as Méphistophélès, **Eugene Brancoveanu** as Valentin, **Patrice Houston** as Marthe, **Erin Neff** as Siébel and **Zachary Gordin** as Wagner.

Marking his first appearance with Festival Opera, Thorsett is the recipient of the Grand Prize at the 30th Annual Carmel Music Society Competition and a former participant in both the San Francisco Opera Merola Program and the Glimmerglass Young American Artist Program. Clayton, a former Adler

Fellow making her third appearance with Festival Opera, has worked extensively with composer Jake Heggie, for whom she originated the role of Beatrice for his new opera, *Three Decembers*, at both Houston Grand Opera and San Francisco Opera in the past year. Kirk Eichelberger recently won critical praise for his performance of Méphistophélès at Grand Rapids Opera in May. *Grand Rapids Press* critic Jeffrey Kaczmarczyk wrote: "Eichelberger, suave, satirical and supremely confident, took great pleasure as the Devil in manipulating Faust or taunting villagers with man's love of mammon. His lyric bass voice pierced the auditorium with laser-like precision and menace."

The creative team behind *Faust* includes assistant director Mark Foehringer and production designer Matthew Antaky. *Faust* marks the second collaboration between Morgan and Foehringer, who worked together on the stage direction of Festival Opera's critically-acclaimed production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* last season. "Mark has a rare gift for interpreting the story dramatically and elegantly," Morgan says of the Fulbright Award-winning choreographer whose work has been characterized by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as possessing "a depth and naturalism rarely seen in dance."

To symbolize the relevancy today of Gounod's classic morality tale, Morgan will feature his performers in contemporary dress. "The story is timeless, it doesn't have to be set in any particular period. Some operas you can do that with, some you can't."

Rather than traditional three-dimensional sets, *Faust* will be staged with the illusion of physical environments – which will be projected onto backdrops to create a magical interplay between story and setting. Replacing the need to change sets, gradual dissolves will transport the audience visually through the story. "It will be like the way you experience a sunrise," says Morgan. "You don't notice each different gradation of light, but at some point you realize the sky is bright and the sun is up."

As an example, Morgan says, "our modern setting for *Faust* will begin with Faust as an old man living in a retirement facility. As a backdrop, we will use projections to show the effects of time on Faust's surroundings, beginning with the wallpaper of his room, which will gradually transform into the vivid flowers of Marguerite's garden and then decay. This happens over the course of the entire evening. As the garden decays, a spider web becomes superimposed on the flowers symbolizing the trap set for Faust by Méphistophélès. This will be Festival Opera's first use of large scale projections, as well as employing this kind of visual symbolism, to tell a story through both sound and light."

Performances of *Faust* are scheduled for 8 pm on Saturday, August 8, and Tuesday, August 11; and at 2 pm on Sunday, August 16, 2009. Location: Hofmann Theatre, Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek, CA. Tickets: \$39 - \$100; \$10 discount for age 18 and under. Tickets can be ordered now by calling (925) 943-SHOW or purchased online at www.LesharArtsCenter.org. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.com or call (925) 944-9610.

* * *

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Lyla Foggia
Foggia Public Relations LLC
(503) 622-0232
lyla@foggiapr.com

Helen Sheaff
Executive Director
Festival Opera
(925) 944-9610
info@festivalopera.com