

## Press Release

San Francisco CA, May, 2022: [Ninth Planet](#) announces the world premiere at Herbst Theatre in San Francisco of a major new chamber opera, **PROSPERO'S ISLAND**, based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, by composer Allen Shearer and librettist Claudia Stevens on the evening of March 25, 2023. In this riveting story of magic, deception and revelation, Shearer and Stevens transport Shakespeare's great play to the Falkland Islands and fast forward the action to the 1950's. With vivid imagery and compelling music, the opera evokes the atmosphere of a desolate island and raging surf, adorable penguins, young lovers, and fantastical beings created by Prospero. Audiences will meet the sheltered Mandy, cut off from the world, discovering love and her own identity, the earnest co-pilot Andy, on the trail of her father for his past crimes against humanity, and the over-the-top air crew of Steffi and Trish as they carouse and dance. For this is Shakespeare, but it is also takes us beyond Shakespeare.

In two acts with a running time of just over 90 minutes, **PROSPERO'S ISLAND** features seven of the play's main characters, portrayed by leading singers Andrew Dwan, Shawnette Sulker, Bradley Kynard, Amy Foote, Sergio Gonzalez, Candace Johnson and Julia Hathaway. The cast is accompanied by a chamber orchestra of Ninth Planet players and invited performers. Nathaniel Berman will conduct and Philip Lowery will direct. A pre-show celebration of the premiere and the fifty-year career of its distinguished composer is being planned. Watch for details.

*The Tempest*, Shakespeare's last play, has long been a favorite of audiences. In it, Shakespeare presents a father and daughter: Prospero, exiled on an island, having been forced from power in Italy, and his beloved daughter Miranda, who has known nothing but life on the island for fourteen years. Prospero hopes to see her married, and this drives him to create a storm and shipwreck that brings the ship's crew to his shore. Some scholars believe Prospero is Shakespeare himself, as he uses the action of his play to say a final farewell to the theater, return home and reconnect his own neglected daughter. Stevens' libretto for **PROSPERO'S ISLAND** retains the basic narrative of Shakespeare's drama, along with the play's essential characters and their dramatic interplay: the complex but loving relationship of Prospero and teenage Miranda; the strange, chimera-like servants of Prospero: Ariel, who is both bird and human, and the vulgar Caliban, one devoted, the other full of anger; the raucous Stephano and Trinculo, reimagined as female members of the air crew who parachute down to the island.

Our fragile relationship with the natural world is a compelling subtext of **PROSPERO'S ISLAND**. For Shakespeare, "unnatural" meant something abhorrent, destructive, even evil. The opera's Prospero had defied nature. Committing a terrible breach of medical ethics and human decency, under the Third Reich he had crossed human with animal subjects in his lab. The products of his egregious experiments fifteen years later have grown into troubled teenagers Ariel and Caliban. And Prospero has not given up his attempts to subvert nature and bend it to his will. On his island, he has compelled Falkland penguins to mimic human speech and culture. The consequences may be amusing, both for the audience and for the performers who portray those penguins. But it is clear that Prospero has violated the natural order, and in the end the penguins must, and will, return to their own ways. The opera also will foretell the war yet to come to the Falklands, an even worse violation of nature's sanctity by humankind. Projections that celebrate the untamed magnificence of the Falklands will add powerfully to the opera.

Shearer's and Stevens' last major operatic works were *HOWARDS END*, *AMERICA*, its 2019 world premiere at San Francisco's Z Space (Earplay's first production of chamber opera) attended by press coverage at the national level; and *MIDDLEMARCH IN SPRING*, produced on "New Works" at Z Space and named "one of the ten best opera events of 2015" by Joshua Kosman. ***PROSPERO'S ISLAND*** is an opera unlike those, with a creative genesis spanning two decades. Pertinent to current issues, it meditates on the deepest of human concerns: the demands of love and loyalty; the capacity for forgiveness; the nature of freedom; the possibility for reconciliation. Composer Shearer writes of his process, "I am reminded of a quote from Louis Simpson that, in composing this score I 'must have a stomach that can digest rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.' It has been an amazing journey." Librettist Stevens writes, "Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is not just a much-loved play about a powerful magician on an island. It is a work, adapted many times for film, theater and opera, whose fantasy and deeper significance transcend its time and setting. The opera ***PROSPERO'S ISLAND*** provocatively transforms the play's plot and characters to become a story about and for all of us."

The cast of ***PROSPERO'S ISLAND*** features leading Bay Area and national artists. New York-based bass-baritone Andrew Dwan, a 2021 Merola artist and twice a finalist in regional Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, appears as the opera's protagonist, Prospero. Dwan boasts a growing reputation for his masterful portrayal of characters ranging from comic Nick Bottom in Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* to Mephistopheles in *Faust*. Soprano Amy Foote, as the opera's Miranda, delighted Bay Area audiences in the title role of a recent West Edge Opera production of *The Cunning Little Vixen*. As the transcendent Ariel, coloratura soprano Shannette Sulker has appeared in major roles with nearly every Bay Area company, performing a wide repertoire ranging from Mozart's *Queen of the Night* to *River Woman* in Tarik O'Regan's *Heart of Darkness* with Opera Parallèle. Lyric tenor Sergio Gonzalez, as Andy, the opera's heart-throb vying for Miranda's love, has earned a Bay Area following for his performances in romantic roles from Don Ottavio to Laurie in *Little Women*. Bradley Kynard, baritone, appears as a disgruntled teenage Caliban at war with the island penguins. He enjoys a growing reputation for performance of a variety of roles ranging from Terence Blanchard's *Champion* with Opera Parallèle to *Manon* with San Francisco Opera. Soprano Candace Johnson, a favorite with Bay Area audiences for her one-woman shows, concert and opera appearances, will bring to life the opera's comic "security agent," Trish. Candace appeared as fading club singer Jackie in the 2019 San Francisco premiere of Shearer/Stevens' opera *Howards End*, *America*. Soprano Julia Hathaway, as Trish's comic side kick, Steffi, has appeared frequently in West Edge Opera Snapshot productions.

Composer [Allen Shearer](#) is recognized widely for his work in many media, but especially vocal music and opera. His choral works have been performed throughout the United States as well as in many cities in Europe, the former Soviet Union, and South Africa. He received the Prix de Rome, the first residency of an American composer at the Aaron Copland House, the Charles Ives prize, four MacDowell Colony residencies and many grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. His commissions include a number from San Francisco-based vocal ensemble Chanticleer. Librettist [Claudia Stevens](#) began her career as a composers' pianist and advocate for new music. Later, as a monologue artist, she channeled first-hand accounts of the Holocaust, and its impact on her own family, in solo performances at hundreds of universities and Holocaust and Human Rights centers in America, as well as internationally at theaters from Toronto to Budapest to Burma. Her creative work has been recognized by grants including "New Forms" from the NEA and many artist residencies. The San Francisco premiere of Shearer's and Stevens' 2015 chamber opera *MIDDLEMARCH IN*

SPRING <http://middlemarchinspring.com/> with two subsequent East Coast productions, received critical acclaim in the Bay Area press, as well as in the UK and Australia. Their 2019 chamber opera HOWARDS END, AMERICA <http://howardsendamerica.com/>, featured in The Los Angeles Times and numerous other media, made headlines for its striking and courageous adaptation of Forster's novel as an American story.

[Ninth Planet](#) is a new music ensemble and service organization dedicated to the commissioning, performance and furthering of new music, especially the works of young composers and artists and those from underrepresented communities. Created in 2019 as a merger of Wild Rumpus and Composers, Inc., Ninth Planet continues the traditions of both organizations by commissioning new works, offering the Suzanne and Lee Ettelson Composer's award instituted by Composers, Inc., and performing existing, innovative pieces that stretch the genre's limits. Concert programs represent a range of styles, with emphasis on local composers, women and LGBTQA+ composers, and composers of color. Ninth Planet prioritizes close interaction with our guest composers, seeking to invite them into our rehearsal process and the thoughtful presentation of their work in concert.

***PROSPERO'S ISLAND*** is the first opera production by Ninth Planet. With its content and its diverse cast, the opera reflects the values, as well as the level of performance excellence, with which Ninth Planet has become associated. Ninth Planet is a registered not-for-profit organization.