



ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE

COMPOSERS, PLAYWRIGHTS
AND OTHERS LEND THEIR
TALENTS TO ARTS
ORGANIZATIONS—SOMETIMES
IN SURPRISING VENUES.

BY LIBBY SLATE

FOLLOWING TWO L.A. OPERA PERFORMANCES OF *Akhnaten* by Philip Glass, patrons recently assembled in the Founders Room of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion downtown, mingling with cast and crew, enjoying late-night drinks and listening to songs performed by baritone Theo Hoffman.

The gatherings weren't for the arts world movers and shakers usually hosted in the august room; they were open to any opera ticket-holder, space permitting. Called *After Hours: A Musical Nocturne*, the concerts were hosted by L.A. Opera's first artist in residence, Matthew Aucoin, with others scheduled for April 15 and May 13.

"I was shocked that so many people came, after sitting through a three-hour opera," says Aucoin, who had conducted *Akhnaten*. "It was amazing. I thought, why not create this community, to hear new music and hopefully spark new friendships?"

It's that sort of fresh perspective that L.A. Opera had been looking for when it named Aucoin—a Boston-based composer-conductor-pianist-writer

Composer-conductor Eric Whitacre, left, with Los Angeles Master Chorale artistic director Grant Gershon. Whitacre is the chorale's first artist in residence.

still in his 20s—to his three-year appointment, which began this season. The residency fosters the young artist's talents while eliciting his contemporary approach to

opera: Aucoin will spend eight weeks per season with L.A. Opera, conducting, working with the Young Artists program and other endeavors and creating new works, culminating with an opera for the 2018-19 season whose premiere he'll conduct.

Artist residencies run a gamut from intense creation to serene reflection, and benefit the host, artist and community. "When you work with a city, you ask, 'What does the place need? What does the community need?'" Aucoin says. "It struck me that Los Angeles is a place that embraces new music. L.A. Opera is focusing on composers who are still alive. I felt right at home conducting Philip Glass."

Community was the focus when Velina Hasu Houston was named the first playwright in resi-



AS A NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ARTIST IN RESIDENCE, COMPOSER-CONDUCTOR ALAN CHAN 'RESIDED' IN A REMOTE WILDERNESS CABIN WITHOUT PLUMBING OR ELECTRICITY IN ALASKA'S DENALI NATIONAL PARK.

dence at the Pasadena Playhouse, for a term running from November 2015 to December 2016. The author of more than 30 plays, including *Tea* and *American Dreams*, and a USC professor, Houston was hired under the auspices of a grant that aims to build demand for the arts. That mission dovetailed nicely with the goal of then-artistic director Sheldon Epps to further engage the Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) residents of the surrounding San Gabriel Valley.

"I spent a lot of time talking to the people about their lives, what was important to them," recalls Houston, herself of Japanese and other ethnic heritage. One of her resulting plays is a re-telling of *Little Women* set in 1950s Leimert Park, capturing the intersection of Asian- and African-American cultures. The March family has become the Mayeda sisters, released from an internment camp; neighbor Mr. Laurence is African-American.

The other play, the first of a trilogy, is *Where in the World Is Vivian Song?* The title character is an ophthalmologist and amateur detective. Unlike the demure stereotype, "the AAPI woman in the San Gabriel Valley is educated, socially capable and very ambitious," Houston says.

The Los Angeles Master Chorale also has its first artist in residence this season: composer-conductor Eric Whitacre, appointed to a two-year post. During a coffee-house get-together, chorale artistic director Grant Gershon recalls, "we got to talking about Los Angeles, the arts scene, all sorts of world-changing projects we could initiate here."

Whitacre is noted for his Virtual Choir, in which singers the world over upload videos of themselves

performing a particular Whitacre composition. The videos are synchronized to create one performance. In 2018, he'll be involved in the chorale's Big Sing, a global virtual event emanating from the Walt Disney Concert Hall. June 26, he'll be one of five conductors of a free singalong in Grand Park.

Whitacre conducted a chorale holiday concert. And, Gershon says, "Among many other benefits, we're taking full advantage of Eric's social media presence—he has tens of thousands of followers."

★ For these three artists, "in residence" is figurative.

The artist in residence program of the National Park Service takes the term literally. Last July, L.A. composer-conductor Alan Chan spent 10 days in a remote wilderness cabin, without indoor water, bathroom or electricity, along the Toklat River in Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska.

"It was an amazing experience," says Chan, who leads the big-band Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra. Chan spent most of his time outdoors; his composition, *Denali Life*, captures the sounds and colors of his experience. "I heard a lot of water—the rain, the river," he says. "We think about the serenity of the national parks. Denali is full of energy. The piece will be full of energy, whether fast and loud or slow, more hidden. And the colors, of the rain, and the mushrooms—there were at least 30 kinds of mushrooms, with different colors and shapes."

Chan is composing two versions, one to be premiered by the Symphonic Jazz Orchestra on May 7 at the Carpenter Performing Arts Center in Long Beach and a smaller piece for jazz combo he'll premiere at the Denali Music Festival this summer.

Wonder if the bears in Denali like jazz? 🐻