

Media Contact:
April Thibeault | AMT PR
april@amtpublicrelations.com
212.861.0990

Acclaimed Composer Scott Wheeler Celebrates the Album Release of his Fourth Opera, *Naga*

“...imaginative and often dazzlingly three-dimensional” – *Opera News*

“*Naga*...stakes out new operatic terrain...richly suggesting some of the ways in which contemporary opera might engage not just with the intensity of human emotions but also with the complex relation between human beings and the natural world.”

– Larry Wolff, music critic

“Wheeler’s score, and the musicians who brought it to life, filled the intentions of the narrative in every way. The score has chamber music at its heart but turns swashbuckling and sensitive with facility.” – WBUR Radio

Boston, MA (For Release 02.15.21) – Hailed for his vocal and operatic music, composer/pianist/teacher/conductor **Scott Wheeler** today announced the upcoming release of his fifth album *Naga* (New World Records, TBR 03.12.21), a fairy tale two-act opera set to a libretto by Singapore-born **Cerise Lim Jacobs** and creatively produced by **Beth Morrison Projects**. Wheeler’s mastery of finding surprising new connections between modern musical language and traditional classical technique is on full display. Led by conductor **Carolyn Kuan** (Hartford Symphony Orchestra, New York City Opera, Glimmerglass), the score employs a full orchestra, a double Greek chorus of adults and children (**Boston Children’s Chorus**) and five vocalists including soprano **Stacey Tappan** (Los Angeles Opera) and countertenor **Anthony Roth Costanzo** (Metropolitan Opera) in the title roles of Madame White Snake and Green Snake.

Naga is the first part of *The Ouroboros Trilogy*, a cycle of three grand operas with different composers including the 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Madame White Snake* by Zhou Long and *Gilgamesh* by Paolo Prestini. All with libretto by Jacobs, the central theme is ouroboros, an ancient Greek icon depicting a serpent eating its own tail, which has become a symbol of eternal renewal. “The Ouroboros trilogy takes on the great themes of spiritual ideals, the inevitable human failure of those ideals, and the sort of passion that confronts the limits of reality, including the reality of death. These are recurring themes in operas throughout history, but anyone encountering Cerise’s work will recognize her take on these themes as very modern,” explains Wheeler.

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Naga is the supernatural story of a young Buddhist Monk who renounces everything to find nirvana under the tutelage of a stern Buddhist master, but is tempted to abandon the path when he encounters two fiercely passionate snakes, the “naga” of the title, designating Hindu and Buddhist serpentine deities. Inspired by this rich libretto, Wheeler reflects chorally on the mythology of creation, intermingling Hindu-Buddhist and Judeo-Christian strands. He returns to the domain of fairy tale and legend in opera and the precedent of Mozart’s *Magic Flute* throughout the score while reflecting some of the musical values of mid-20th century composers such as Barber, Britten, and Bernstein, as well as his teacher Virgil Thomson. According to Wheeler, his orchestration and vocal characterization “draw on many devices from the history of opera. To me, this sort of reaching into history is the best way to move forward in creating something new.” According to Jacobs, “Scott Wheeler is an amazing craftsman. He’s an architect as well as a composer, and he structures his music the way you would design a building.”

Following the opera’s 2016 premiere in Boston, Massachusetts, *La Scena Musicale* cited Wheeler’s score as offering “a rich array of stylistic references. There are hymn motifs, soaring sublimities, aural landscape painting, and pastoral passages reminiscent of William Walton and Benjamin Britten.” Wheeler utilizes a harp, electric guitar, two choruses, the English horn and saxophone for the two principal snakes, rich percussion (timpani, vibraphone, glockenspiel, rain stick, slapstick, anvil, maracas tam-tam, and more) as well as more traditional means: pizzicato, solo strings or winds. The beautiful yet disturbing pair of singing snakes dominates the top of the musical staff throughout the entire opera. Wheeler vocalizes the high soprano Madame White Snake and the plaintive countertenor with otherworldly timbres and “thrilling and ingenious neo-Mozartian flights of coloratura, like modernist reimaginings of the Queen of the Night,” (*La Scena Musicale*).

Naga is Wheeler's fourth opera. His first opera *The Construction of Boston* premiered in 1990. Another opera, *Democracy: An American Comedy*, premiered in 2005 by the Washington National Opera, and *The Sorrows of Frederick* (2013) premiered in 2015 by the Fort Worth Opera. According to Wheeler, it was Verdi and Puccini's dramatic subtlety more than their vocal thrills that attracted him to opera. "The avoidance of the vulgar, the ability to mingle comedy and tragedy, the pervasive sense of musical and dramatic irony, achieves as much rich humanity as the most elegant string quartet," explains Wheeler.

About Scott Wheeler

Composer Scott Wheeler’s operas have been commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, Washington National Opera, the Guggenheim Foundation and White Snake Projects. His music has been performed by violinist Gil Shaham, conductor Kent Nagano, and singers Renee Fleming, Sanford Sylvan, and Susanna Phillips. Mr. Wheeler has appeared as conductor in New York, Berlin, Boston, and on several recordings, often with the Boston-

based ensemble Dinosaur Annex, which he co-founded and directed for many years. He has also conducted many productions of opera and musical theatre works and has appeared as a pianist in a wide repertoire of classical, jazz, and cabaret.

Scott Wheeler studied at Amherst College, New England Conservatory, and Brandeis. His principal teachers were Lewis Spratlan, Arthur Berger, and Virgil Thomson, along with studies at Dartington with Peter Maxwell Davies and Tanglewood with Olivier Messiaen. His many awards include the National Endowment for the Arts, the Koussevitzky Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, the Bogliasco Foundation, the American Academy in Berlin, and the Classical Recording Foundation. He is Senior Distinguished Artist in Residence at Emerson College in Boston, where he teaches musical theatre and songwriting. scottwheeler.org



Naga

Composer: Scott Wheeler (b. 1952)

Release Date: March 12, 2021

Label: New World Records (#80814)

TRT: Disc One: 55:14 Disc Two: 35:00

Work: *Naga* (2016)

Performers: countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo (Xiao Qing/Green Snake), bass David Salsbery Fry (Master/Abbot), soprano Stacey Tappan (Madame White Snake), baritone Matthew Worth (Young Monk), mezzo-soprano Sandra piques Eddy (Young Wife), White Snake Projects Chorus conducted by Lidiya Yankovskaya, Boston Children's Chorus conducted by Michele

Adams, Emily Kang (Children's Chorus soloist), Andy Papas (Voice knocking at Master's door), White Snake Projects Orchestra conducted by Carolyn Kuan

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Online Streaming: <https://soundcloud.com/amtpublicrelations/sets/naga/s-b28dE0LM3pn>

Download Press Kit/Audio:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/e5dvwemwwt1w5da/AADJ_UUUcOwKhv1H19_m-Y3_a?dl=0

Editor's Note: For all press queries including photos, interview + CD copy requests, please contact April Thibeault, AMT PR, 212.861.0990, april@amtpublicrelations.com.