

touch



# A New Opera on the Radical Life of Helen Keller

by Carla Lucero & Marianna Mott Newirth

# Dear opera friends, leaders and allies:

**We are thrilled!** The world premiere of *touch* with Opera Birmingham was a resounding success with sold out performances.

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The emotional responses from the audience ranged from joy and laughter to sobbing and then spontaneous cheering as Helen leads the Suffragists! It was remarkable to observe the audiences immersed in Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan's story. We are honored and humbled to recognize what it meant to the audience members with disabilities who experienced opera for the first time, as well as to know they were represented at every level in the making and presenting of this opera. The actor who portrayed Helen Keller, [Alie B. Gorrie](#), is a longtime disability activist and has Low Vision. She took immense pride in her role as Disability Consultant, as well as the lead in this project. Her performance was nothing less than stunning, as was [Michelle Allie Drever](#) who starred as Anne Sullivan.

**t o u c h** is a story about communication, love and forgiveness. We implemented unconventional methods within the field of opera to honor and explore new ways of reaching beyond predictable storytelling, making it more accessible for everyone. In this premiere production, conducted by Maestro [Mary Chun](#) and staged by our visionary Director, [Sara Widzer](#), American Sign Language and ProTactile Language was incorporated into the staging. It was conveyed throughout the opera by professional translators as well as our extraordinary performers. During the premiere, enhanced visual description was offered, as well as a more detailed synopsis printed in Braille for our Low Vision, Blind and DeafBlind audiences. Additionally, two members of our esteemed design team, [Alexa Behm](#) and [Annie Wiegand](#) (Costume and Lighting Designers), are Low Hearing and Deaf.

**Helen's musical motif is based on the notes D-E-A-F.** Through the symbiosis of music and words, Helen's poetic voice is embedded into the very fabric of this opera. The Low Vision, Blind, Deaf and DeafBlind communities are present in every note and word of this score and libretto, as well as in the directorial choices, set, costume and lighting design of an amazing creative team. **t o u c h** is a rare opportunity for opera to expand into untapped realms and foster greater representation of disability and agency on stage. We respectfully invite you to take this groundbreaking journey with us. Helen and Anne's story is an American success story. It is also a story of struggle that is relevant today.

# World Premiere at Opera Birmingham 1.19.2024



Photographs by Stuart Edmonds



“★★★★★ **Beautiful opera!**”

- Tehvon Fowler-Chapman, Vice President, LA Opera Connects



“**[An] extraordinary operatic drama...**”

- Douglas Mackaye Harrington, Over the Mountain Journal





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***“A triumphant opening—beautiful, moving, innovative and stunning!”***

- Stacy Brightman, Executive Director, The Ebell of Los Angeles

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***“[The Miracle Worker] was only the beginning... The story that Lucero and co-librettist Marianna Mott Newirth have chosen to tell is more penetrating. Chun’s execution of Lucero’s music was flawless. ”***

- John Henry Martin, The Napa Valley Register



***“In ‘touch’, Helen is a three-dimensional character. She’s an activist, she’s conniving, she has sex!”***

- Kelsey Shelton, NPR



## What our audiences have to say...



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*“Loved seeing an opera written by women, about women, conducted by a woman.”*

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*“I left impressed and a good bit more interested in opera as a whole. I was impressed even more at the accuracy and depth of the story as it was told. I would definitely recommend this Opera to others if the chance to see [it] ever came up again.”*



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*“This was a fantastic opera. All the details, from the gossamer curtains as a metaphor for low vision, to the set design with the orchestra behind the set to the keen choices of the “players” made for a very entertaining, polished performance. I hope you reprise this opera and it gains a wider national/international audience.”*

# More audience comments...

*“Not a fan of Opera, BUT I loved the story and was moved to tears at the end. Excellent performances and creative telling of the story.”*

*“This is the first opera I've attended that made sense to me and I could see why opera was so enjoyable to others.”*

*“It was amazing to see the creativity in giving Helen Keller a voice and presence through the 4 opera singers that expressed her thoughts and emotions . Truly brilliant and inspirational .”*

*“This was a very polished production - musically, vocally and technically. The subject was new to opera and the results very positive.”*

*“As someone who works in the Opera industry, I thought everything about the performance was so smart from the additional resources available, to the pre-show talk and talkback after the show. I felt like I learned a lot, especially with an art form that I've been working in for several years.”*





Another one of the unconventional methods of portraying Helen Keller's story is our use of a Soprano leading a small chorus, (Helen's Choir), made up of the cast when not singing in their principal roles. Helen uses her choir to voice her communications with the people in her life, as well as her inner thoughts. We experience Helen talking to herself as she assesses a person or a situation. We are privy to her deepest thoughts and feelings, sometimes expressed through her own exquisitely written poetry. This proved to be very successful and provided much levity to some of the more serious scenes.

Shortly before production, the decision was made to place the orchestra on stage behind the singers. This was initially discussed because of pit space limitations. Once this conversation was in play, we recognized the benefit to the Low Hearing/Deaf audience members if the orchestra could be seen. With this concept in mind, our magnificent Conductor, Mary Chun, worked diligently with the orchestra, cast, Sara Widzer, the design team and production crew to make sure the music would be effective and immersive and that the visual impact would be another layer of information for the audience. To our surprise, the benefit of this decision extended throughout the audience, with and without disabilities.

*Emily Pulley, David Morgans, Catherine Goode, Alie B Gorrie, Michelle Allie Drever, Patrick Bessenbacher, Sarah Coit, Caleb Clark & Hunter Enoch*



*Lighting Designer, Annie Wiegand & her translator giving ASL coaching to the cast before opening night.*



# Please contact us for licensing opportunities.

We are invested in uplifting the status of artists and opera professionals with disabilities in our field and by doing so, keeping Helen Keller's story alive for all of us.

- **Carla Lucero, Composer/Librettist**  
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- **Marianna Mott Newirth, Co-Librettist**  
[librettist@wordperson.art](mailto:librettist@wordperson.art) 917-533-5937

## touch FORCES

A 90 Minute Chamber Opera in Two Acts

### 1 actor - 8 voices

|                             |                                              |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Helen Keller                | non-singing Deaf/Blind or Low Vision/Hearing |
| Anne Sullivan               | Soprano                                      |
| Helen's Voice               | Soprano                                      |
| Kate Keller/Helen's Choir   | Mezzo Soprano                                |
| Polly Thomson/Helen's Choir | Mezzo Soprano                                |
| John Macy/Helen's Choir     | Tenor                                        |
| Peter Fagan/Helen's Choir   | Tenor                                        |
| James Keller/Helen's Choir  | Tenor                                        |
| Arthur Keller/Helen's Choir | Bass-Baritone                                |

### 10 Piece Orchestra

Bassoon  
French Horn  
Percussion  
Harp  
Piano  
String Quintet