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**SKYLIGHT OPERA THEATRE PRESENTS THE WORLD PREMIERE OF
KIRKE MECHEM'S *THE RIVALS***

MILWAUKEE, Wisconsin – August 5, 2011 –Skylight Opera Theatre of Milwaukee, WI, presents the world premiere of Kirke Mechem's *The Rivals* on September 16, 2011 running through October 2, 2011 in the Cabot Theatre at the Broadway Theatre Center. This cleverly adapted new opera focuses on an American heiress as she chooses between two rival lovers, ending with a twist that sends things spiraling into utter hilarity. Directed by Dorothy Danner and conducted by Richard Carsey, both of whom were part of the artistic team for Skylight's highly regarded production of Mechem's *Tartuffe* in 2007, this comic opera is a delightful new celebration of words and music.

After the success of Kirke Mechem's first comic opera, *Tartuffe*, Mechem composed the serious historical drama, *John Brown*, which premiered in 2008. *The Rivals* marks his highly anticipated return to the comic opera genre. When asked why he chose Richard Sheridan's 18th-century play as the inspiration for his next opera, Mr. Mechem replied, "I wanted a good story, but in particular one with a rich variety of characters. I have come to believe that the main reason – perhaps the only one – for turning a play or a novel into an opera, is the opportunity for music to make the characters and their actions come alive in a new and more palpable existence."

Mechem describes his opera as being loosely based on Sheridan's play. The first noticeable change is its setting. *The Rivals* is set in Newport, Rhode Island circa 1900. Mechem explains some additional changes he made, "Those who know Sheridan's play may be confused by the changes I have made in some of the characters' names. In bringing this play from 18th-century England to turn-of-the-20th century America, I felt it advisable to update the characters as well, and that often necessitated new names. Lydia Languish becomes the very feisty modern girl, Lydia Larkspur. Bob Acres, an amiable bumpkin, becomes Jasper, of the Kentucky Vanderbilts, and Falkland is now Nicholas Astor. The Vanderbilts and Astors were owners of some of the elaborate 80-room "cottages" which can still be seen in Newport. The belligerent Irishman Sir Lucius O'Trigger has become Baron von Hakenbock, a Prussian fortune hunter, with some features borrowed from Isaac Mendosa, a character in another of Sheridan's plays, *La Duenna*. Opera librettists have historically had license to radically revise plays and novels."

It was Kirke Mechem's attendance at Skylight's 2007 production of *Tartuffe* that started the multi-year track to giving *The Rivals* its world premiere on the Cabot Theatre stage. "The Skylight had the best performance of *Tartuffe* I had ever seen. Skylight does great work and has an excellent reputation. In addition, the Skylight's

intimate Cabot Theatre is the perfect space for this opera. You can hear every word without the use of supertitles," says Mechem.

It was ultimately Skylight Artistic Director, Bill Theisen who finalized the production in the 2011-12 Season. When Theisen was hired at Skylight in 2004 he had a goal of performing at least one contemporary American opera each year. He has fulfilled that goal with the production of *Little Women*, *Tartuffe*, *Midnight Angel*, *Rent* and this past June with *Adding Machine*. Theisen explains his criteria for a new comic opera at the Skylight, "In order for a work to be a good fit for the Skylight, which has a long history of producing comic opera, the work would ideally be based on classic literature and hopefully be set in a more contemporary world." *The Rivals* is the perfect fit! "In addition, a production that is text-driven with a priority placed on a strong story line plays particularly well in the intimate Cabot Theatre. To do this show is an absolute gift and Skylight is tremendously honored to host the first production of this innovative new work."

About Skylight Opera Theatre

As a nonprofit, professional performing arts organization, Skylight endeavors to bring the full spectrum of music theatre works to a wide and diverse audience.

Skylight Opera Theatre was formed in 1959 in a small sky-lighted attic above a coffeehouse on the east side of Milwaukee. Its original focus was on operas and operettas, particularly Gilbert and Sullivan. Over the years, it began to include musical revues and musicals. Today, Skylight is the only professional nonprofit theatre company in the nation that produces a wide variety of music theatre on an annual basis, including world premieres and modern takes on classic works.

Skylight owns and operates the Broadway Theatre Center, home to the Skylight's administrative offices, production facilities and performing venue and also home to five other arts organizations and a commercial tenant. In addition to musical theatre, Skylight produces *Enlighten*, its arts education programming. *Enlighten* brings comprehensive arts education to schools, with a particular emphasis on Milwaukee Public Schools, who receive programming free of charge. Over 10,000 students each year participate in *Enlighten* workshops, residencies and touring programs.