

OBERLIN

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

From Off the Streets of Cleveland Comes...
**LEAVE ME ALONE!, A JAZZ OPERA BY HARVEY PEKAR AND DAN PLONSEY,
TO PREMIERE AT THE OBERLIN CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC AND VIA WEBCAST
ON JAN. 31, 2009**

American Splendor Icon Pekar Focuses His Sardonic Wit on the Everyday Struggles of Avant-Garde Artists, with Music from Cleveland-born Composer and Saxophonist Plonsey

OBERLIN, OHIO (December 10, 2008)— The iconic underground comic book author Harvey Pekar will make his operatic debut at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in *Leave Me Alone!*, an autobiographical jazz opera. A collaboration by two Cleveland natives, the opera combines a libretto by Pekar with music by saxophonist and composer Dan Plonsey. *Leave Me Alone!* depicts the lives of its creators in quotidian detail while asking big questions about the place of cutting-edge art in our society. Amidst the demands and interruptions of day-to-day life, Pekar and Plonsey wonder, how can artists carve out time for their creative work? More importantly, they ask, how do we cultivate a society that is receptive to the avant-garde? The opera, which is presented by Oberlin in cooperation with Real Time Opera, will receive its world premiere in a free performance on Saturday, January 31, 2009, at 8 p.m. in Finney Chapel. The performance will also be streamed live to an international audience online at www.LeaveMeAloneOpera.com.

Finney Chapel is located at 90 N. Professor Street in Oberlin, Ohio, just 40 minutes southwest of Cleveland.

"There ought to be a place for cutting edge work," says Pekar, who believes that many major cultural institutions have shirked their responsibility to support contemporary art and challenge audiences. "I thought there wasn't much out there being said about this, and I wanted to open up some discussion."

Called "the blue-collar Mark Twain" by *Variety*, Pekar is best known for his autobiographical comic book series *American Splendor*, in which he elevated the mostly mundane details of his life as a working-class Clevelander to the level of art. The series won the American Book Award and a film adaptation took top honors at the Cannes and

Sundance film festivals. Composer Plonsey, who was born and raised in Cleveland Heights, has been a lifelong proponent of new music, and has founded several new music series in and around his current home in El Cerrito, California.

“The opera, simply put, is the non-fictional account of its own creation,” says Plonsey. In the story, Pekar and Plonsey engage in discussions about music, the state of the avant-garde, and the creation of the opera itself from their Cleveland and San Francisco Bay Area living rooms. A taped conversation between Pekar and comics illustrator Robert Crumb provides an additional perspective on the opera’s themes. The wives of Plonsey and Pekar, Mantra Ben-ya’akova Plonsey and Joyce Brabner (who portray themselves in the production), enter the plot, as does Josh Smith, the opera’s music director. Oberlin Conservatory students will also be involved in the production; four singers will double the protagonists on stage and an ensemble of six jazz musicians will back them in the pit, playing alongside Plonsey and Smith.

Plonsey and Pekar are deeply committed to the notion that art transcends distinctions of class and hence ought to be available to all. Accordingly, both the live performance and the webcast of the opera will be offered free of charge. Those wishing to support the production may do so by purchasing a comic about the opera, written by Pekar and illustrated by Joseph Remnant, at www.LeaveMeAloneOpera.com. The comic is available as a signed, limited-edition print (\$300) or digital download (\$5). Visitors may also purchase a cell-phone ring tone featuring Harvey’s inimitable voice (\$5) on the site.

Performers and Production Team

Several of the performers in the opera will play themselves, including Dan Plonsey, Harvey Pekar, Mantra Ben-ya’akova Plonsey, and Joyce Brabner. Oberlin Conservatory and College singers Patty Stubel ’09, Kate Rosen ’11, Joanna Lemle ’10, and Christopher Rice ’10 will double the characters on stage; students, including drummer Noah Hecht ’10, trombonist Aaron Salituro ’11, saxophonist David Schwartz ’12, and trumpeter Gregory Zilboorg ’13, will also play in the band.

The production team includes Paul Schick, executive producer for Real Time Opera; Josh Smith, musical director; Associate Professor of Opera Jonathon Field, stage director; Robert Katkowski, set designer; Barry Steele, lighting designer; Victoria Vaughan, stage manager; and Dan Michalak, musical preparation. The webcast will be produced with help from Oberlin professional staff and students, including Associate Dean of Technology and Facilities Michael Lynn, Director of Audio Services Paul Eachus, Director of Networking Barron Hulver, and Technology Consultant Todd Brown.

About the Librettist: Harvey Pekar

Harvey Pekar, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, is best known for his autobiographical comic book series *American Splendor*. Pekar began self-publishing the series in 1976, at the urging of friend and noted illustrator Robert Crumb. Unique among comic books of the time, Pekar's stories documented the minutiae of his daily life: working as a file clerk in the VA hospital, grocery shopping, or simply searching for a lost set of keys. In 1987, Pekar was honored with the American Book Award for his work on the series, and in 2003 *American Splendor* was adapted as a movie to widespread critical acclaim. An avid record collector, Pekar began his writing career as a book and music critic, with a particular interest in jazz. His reviews have been published in the *Boston Herald*, the *Austin Chronicle*, *Jazz Times*, *Urban Dialect* (Cleveland), and *Down Beat* magazine. Pekar's commentary for public radio station WKSU, starting in 1999, won him several journalism awards, including the 2001 Regional Edward R. Murrow Award for Best Writing. Pekar was a frequent guest on *Late Night with David Letterman* in the late 1980s; his infamous on-air criticism of General Electric got him temporarily banned from the show, although he did make two more appearances in the early 1990s. In 2001, Pekar retired from his job as a file clerk at the local VA Hospital. He lives in Cleveland Heights with his wife Joyce and their foster daughter Danielle.

About the Composer: Dan Plonsey

Saxophonist and composer Dan Plonsey was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. Drawing inspiration from musicians as diverse as Sun Ra and Charles Ives, Plonsey's music defies easy categorization. "No doubt," writes *All About Jazz*, "Plonsey is a creative soul who possesses a Renaissance spirit." In recent years Plonsey's instrumental work has focused on large ensembles of mixed instrumentation and ensembles of multiple saxophones. His more than 200 works for large and small ensembles include commissions from Bang on a Can, the Berkeley Symphony, and New Music Works in Santa Cruz. He has written numerous operas, including three collaborations with Paul Schick of Real Time Opera. From 1994-99, he was the resident composer and chief librettist for Disaster Opera Theater in El Cerrito, California, where he currently lives. He also founded the weekly Beanbender's creative music concert series in Berkeley, which is ongoing on an occasional basis. Plonsey earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in math and music from Yale University and a Master of Arts degree in composition from Mills College. He has studied composition with Martin Bresnick, David Lewin, Anthony Braxton, and, more briefly, Roscoe Mitchell and Terry Riley. He currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife Mantra and their two sons, Cleveland and Mischa.

About the Director: Jonathon Field

Jonathon Field is one of America's more versatile and popular stage directors, having directed more than 100 productions in all four corners of the United States. He served as artistic director of Lyric Opera Cleveland for six seasons, where he presented the operas of Mozart, Rossini, and Donizetti as well as the Ohio premieres of works by John Adams, Mark Adamo, and Philip Glass. Several of Field's productions for the Lyric Opera of Chicago were so successful they were repeated at the Illinois Humanities Festival with Stephen Sondheim as keynote speaker. His productions for San Francisco Opera's Western Opera Theatre and Seattle Opera have played in more than 20 states. Over the past eight years Field has directed 10 productions with the Arizona Opera, being deemed by the press "their most perceptive stage director." In February 2007, Field directed—at Oberlin and at Miller Theatre in New York City—the critically acclaimed U.S. premiere of *Lost Highway*, a dramatic music theater work by noted Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth based on the David Lynch film. This is Field's 11th season as director of Oberlin Opera Theater.

About Real Time Opera: Artistic Director Paul Schick

Under the artistic direction of Paul Schick, Real Time Opera (RTO) has presented world premieres of new operas in New York, San Francisco, and New England, where the company is based. In 2005, RTO premiered *Feynman* (2005), a chamber opera by composer Jack Veas, with a libretto by Schick, about Nobel Prize-winning physicist and cult figure Richard Feynman, with SO Percussion as the pit orchestra. The opera premiered at the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival and was reprised in Brattleboro, Vermont at Dartmouth College, in Concord, New Hampshire, and in New York at the Knitting Factory. A future online production of *Feynman* from Yale is in the planning stages. RTO's debut production, in 2003, was *Korczak's Orphans* by composer Adam Silverman and librettist Susan Gubernat. Based on the life of Polish pediatrician, orphanage director, and Holocaust martyr Janosz Korczak, the opera was also performed by New York City Opera on their VOX Festival of new American works. RTO's second production, *Hawaiian Tan Ratface*, a quasi-opera by John Trubee, premiered at San Francisco's Studio Z in 2004. Schick is librettist and producer of the forthcoming music-dance-theater piece *A House in Bali* by composer Evan Ziporyn, scheduled to premiere in Bali, Indonesia, followed by an international tour, in 2009. As an administrator, Schick has worked with Opera North, Boston Lyric Opera, the American Gamelan Institute, and the composers' collective Frog Peak Music. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Hamilton College and a Master of Philosophy degree and PhD in musicology from Yale University.

The Oberlin Conservatory of Music, founded in 1865 and situated amid the intellectual vitality of Oberlin College since 1867, is the oldest continuously operating conservatory in the United States. The Conservatory is renowned internationally as a professional music school of the highest caliber and has been pronounced a “national treasure” by the *Washington Post*. Oberlin’s alumni have gone on to achieve illustrious careers in all aspects of the serious music world. Many of them have attained stature as solo performers, composers, and conductors, among them Jennifer Koh, Steven Isserlis, Denyce Graves, Franco Farina, Christopher Robertson, Lisa Saffer, George Walker, Christopher Rouse, David Zinman, and Robert Spano. All of the members of the contemporary sextet eighth blackbird, most of the members of the International Contemporary Ensemble, and many of the members of Apollo’s Fire are Oberlin alumni. In chamber music, the Miró, Pacifica, Juillard, and Fry Street quartets, among other small ensembles, include Oberlin-trained musicians, who also can be found in major orchestras and opera companies throughout the world. For more information about Oberlin, please visit www.oberlin.edu/con.

CALENDAR LISTING

Saturday, January 31, 2009, 8 p.m.

The Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Real Time Opera present

Leave Me Alone!

Libretto by Harvey Pekar

Music by Dan Plonsey

Josh Smith, *music director*

Jonathon Field, *stage director*

Live on stage:

Finney Chapel

90 North Professor Street

Oberlin, Ohio

Online:

www.LeaveMeAloneOpera.com

FREE

Oberlin Conservatory 24-Hour Concert Hotline: 440-775-6933

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