The Mermaid of Rye

A new community opera in development 2026-2028

By StrongBack Productions in partnership with **Barefoot Opera**

Join forces with us

We're inviting you to join our **Patrons Circle** to contribute to the commission fees of **£50,000** over two (2) years. StrongBack Productions and Barefoot Opera have joined forces in a unique partnership that will develop and produce a new community opera inspired by Rye, between 2026 and 2028. This is an opportunity for you to support this inspirational new project engaging community choirs and choirs for children and young people.

This proposal outlines the context of our request to support the commission fees of **£50,000** for the librettists, composer and sound designer for the creation **of Act 1 in 2026 and Act 2 in 2027.**
Here you will find a description of the project, the creative team, a synopsis of the opera and how you can join this exciting new development for Rye as part of our Patrons Circle.

Creative Team



Stephen Plaice and
Marcia Bellamy, Libretto



Dominique Le Gendre
Composer



James Stewart
Sound Design



Jenny Miller-Director
AD Barefoot opera

The Mermaid of Rye, an opera in two acts.

Libretto by Stephen Plaice and Marcia Bellamy. Music by Dominique Le Gendre

Synopsis

At the heart of the opera is the myth of the mermaid, so important to the town, with Rye itself as the mermaid: the upper body of the town on land and its fishy tail in the sea. In four related stories we follow the singing spirit of the Mermaid as she is transformed from an object of fear to an agent of creativity. Beginning on the sea in the 16th century with the irrational, superstitious male view of her as a destructive threat, the opera brings that threat directly into the town with the seventeenth century witch trials of Rye. It then turns the 'mermaid principle' positive with the arrival of the WW2 Land Girls on the marshes finally realising her full agency and power as a woman becomes the civic leader of the town. One singer embodies the four manifestations of the mermaid throughout Rye's history. Our opera shows how her creative spirit born of the sea, rises to power and articulacy through each generation to be better understood as a force for good.

Why should we all care?

The town of Rye - poised between marsh, sea and countryside - stands at a crossroads. On the frontline of rising seas and climate change, its defining livelihoods of fishing and farming are under threat. At the same time, it bears the scars of the

man-made decline that has affected coastal communities across our island nation. Beneath its cobbled streets and pristine medieval beauty lies a quieter story of social and cultural deprivation. And within that story are the women — central to the fishing industry for generations — whose labour, resilience and leadership have too often been overlooked and undervalued.

Our opera will weave together myth, history and the present day to tell a story of both warning and hope. It seeks to rekindle our connection to the natural world and to remind us of our own power to shape change. Through music and storytelling, we will ask urgent questions: *What are we doing about the climate crisis already reshaping our daily lives? Who is truly listening? How do we choose to pay attention? What action is possible now?*

At its heart, this project confronts our shared fragility — environmental, economic and social — and transforms it into collective strength. It is an invitation not only to witness change, but to become part of it.

Cultural ecology of Rye

Our ambition is twofold: to enrich the cultural confidence and creative ecology of Rye, and to contribute a distinctive, contemporary work to the operatic repertoire. By combining professional artistic leadership with deep community collaboration, we will produce an opera that is both locally grounded and widely relevant - a work that speaks to urgent contemporary concerns while resonating far beyond its place of origin.

Driving the project are Susan Benn, chair of StrongBack Productions and Dominique Le Gendre composer, and artistic director. Their partnership with Barefoot Opera brings expertise in community and opera engagement and production. Susan Benn, a Ryer since 2017, founded and led the charity Performing Arts Labs (PAL) that over 25 years identified, nurtured and attracted artists such as composers Tom Ades (*Powder her Face*), Harrison Birtwistle (*Gawain)* Orlando Gough and film director, the late Anthony Minghella (*The Mathematics of a Kiss)* among many other artists across disciplines.

Support the Creation of *The Mermaid of Rye*

We need to raise **£50,000** over the next two years to bring *The Mermaid of Rye* to life. Your support directly funds the artistic commissions that will make this work possible:

- Composer – £30,000
- Librettists – £17,000
- Sound Design – £3,000

Joining *The Mermaid of Rye* Patrons Circle

In joining our Patrons Circle, you will enjoy a raft of benefits including acknowledgements on all programmes, publicity materials and our websites (unless you wish to be an anonymous donor). You will receive invitations to exclusive Patrons' receptions, complimentary tickets and exclusive access to rehearsals and to the artists and more.

Suggested donation levels:
£2,500 | £5,000 | £7,500 | £10,000

To find out more about benefits to Patrons and to discuss a donation, please contact:
Dominique Le Gendre: strongbackproductions@gmail.com
Jenny Miller: jennymiller.@barefootopera@gmail.com