**Four Questions for Tobias Picker**
**In conversation with Theater St. Gallen dramaturge, Caroline Damaschke**

**How did you come to adapt the story of Lili Elbe as an opera?**

Six years ago, the first time I worked with Lucia Lucas I was artistic director of Tulsa (Oklahoma) Opera. I hired Lucia for the title role in Don Giovanni because I had fallen in love with her highly individual artistry and envisioned her someday appearing in a new opera based on Lili Elbe's life. When I later asked if she'd do it, she said: "Yes! That's my story!" For my librettist, Aryeh Lev Stollman and myself Lucia was an indispensable dramaturg. As a person of transgender experience, she was always there to answer our questions about things she has in common with Lili and to explain the difficulties Lili faced trailblazing, *alone,* a hundred years ago.

**What can you tell us about your musical language in general and how it works in *Lili Elbe*?**

My compositional identity at its core, is an outcome of my German Jewish heritage.
Its melody-driven architecture has roots from ancient Jewish liturgical music through Arnold Schoenberg, Erich Korngold, Kurt Weil, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein. I was born Jewish, gay, and with a challenging neurological condition, Tourette's syndrome. I grew up in the USA at a time when each of those things made me feel very alone. My empathy toward others, such as people of transgender experience, those society shuts out, or is reluctant to let in, is thus entirely logical.

**As your opera focuses on the last years of Lili Elbe's life in the 1920's, did any of the music of that period find its way into a meeting with your own?**

It was important to establish that Lili and Gerda and their friends moved in modern artistic circles, so I wanted to connect with the avant-garde music of their day. For the Orpheus and Eurydice scene I was inspired by a 1925 composition of Anton Webern and Schoenberg's use of *sprechstimme*. The Danish Countess' ball music (Act 1, Scene 6) is an expansion of a fox trot I composed for *Fantastic Mr. Fox* twenty-five years ago. The wedding scene (Act 2, Scene 4) takes place at the legendary Parisian literary café, Les Deux Magots. Here I reference the tone of French cabaret music of the 1920's. *Lili Elbe* is through-composed with recontextualized stylistic building blocks intended to spotlight Lili's time.

**Do you give instruments a special meaning in your score?**

I am a pianist and played violin, viola, and cello. I do not write recitative. Arias and set pieces are connected by arioso. Every instrument in the orchestra is its own character and melodically interchangeable with the characters on stage forming a continuous counterpoint derived from arias and leitmotifs -always telling and commenting on the story. I love singers because they are living, breathing musical instruments themselves capable of love and loss, sadness, and ecstasy – all which life gives and takes away. Unlike the instruments of the orchestra, but like us, they are born, they live, and they die.