Band of Believers
Passionate supporters are making HGO’s American premiere of The Passenger a reality.

A shared dream, four years, and one extraordinary network—that’s the magic combination that brings Polish composer Mieczysław Weinberg’s The Passenger to HGO this January for its American premiere.

One of only a few operas addressing the Holocaust, The Passenger is based on a 1959 radio play and 1962 novel by Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz. The opera tells the story of Liese, a former SS guard en route to Brazil with her diplomat husband. It is the early 1960s. On the ship, Liese spots a fellow passenger with an uncanny resemblance to Marta—one of the inmates she tormented at Auschwitz twenty years earlier. The story unfolds as Liese is forced to grapple with the terrible truths she thought she had permanently locked away.

The Passenger’s journey across the Atlantic began in early 2010. British director David Pountney was preparing to stage the opera that summer in Austria at the Bregenz Festival. Although composed in 1968, The Passenger had never before been fully staged, and had been largely forgotten, until Pountney’s production offered it new life.

Meanwhile, former HGO General Director Anthony Freud had caught wind of the project and introduced HGO Board member Morris Gelb and his wife, Amanda, to The Passenger. The vision of an American premiere for the newly discovered work quickly formed. In February 2010, the Gelbs hosted an event to raise awareness about the project. Pountney was the featured speaker. Morris recalls, “When we first learned of The Passenger from Anthony Freud and David Pountney, we knew that traveling to Bregenz for the world premiere would be an imperative. We were not disappointed.” In Bregenz, the Gelbs were floored by what they saw—and resolved to do whatever they could to bring The Passenger to Houston. Soon after, they pledged their leadership support.

Paula Pozmantier, an arts patron, was present at the Gelbs’ event. Although Paula and her husband, Irving, had never before been involved with HGO, she explains, “The content of this production, and the way it is being used to educate and inform the community beyond just those people normally attracted to opera, touched us

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deeply and made it necessary for us to support the efforts of all the dedicated people involved in the American debut.” She began spreading word of *The Passenger* around town.

New HGO friends Naomi Warren and her son, Benjamin, who had also attended the Gelbs’ event, volunteered to host a luncheon with longtime HGO champions Ann and Stephen Kaufman to gather more support.

In anticipation of that second event, the Kaufmans, the Warren family (including Benjamin’s wife, Joy, and his sister, Helen Spector), the Pozmantiers, and HGO subscribers Joan and Stanford Alexander formed a consortium of donors, combining to form a $100,000 pledge. They issued the challenge to others to help.

Says Stephen, “When we viewed the video from its first performance [Bregenz], we were moved both by its artistry and by the wrenching human lessons from the dark history of the Holocaust. We immediately wanted to help launch the North American premiere… so that it could both educate and entertain the widest possible audiences for the longest possible time.”

Before long, it became clear that *The Passenger* had found its first American audience right here in Houston. The charge was led by people willing to put crucial financial support behind HGO’s production. These supporters, many from Houston’s Jewish community, appealed to others to help ensure Weinberg’s haunting masterpiece would not be lost again.

By the time Paula teamed up with another dedicated HGO supporter, Lila Rauch, to host the next informational event, *The Passenger’s* momentum could not be stopped. Dedicated subscribers Shirley and Bruce Stein were brought into the fold at that gathering.

For the Warrens, it is especially important that stories of the Holocaust like *The Passenger* continue on: Naomi is a survivor of Auschwitz. A staunch advocate of remembrance initiatives, Naomi says, “Big changes, the kind that transform the way human beings handle being human, start with small changes.”

Most operas are backed by a team of donors. Over the years, HGO has attracted a wonderful, loyal support base, including an eclectic mix of individuals and institutions. So it’s not surprising that many of our most dedicated friends believed in us and our vision for *The Passenger*. What makes this story remarkable, however, is how the team was assembled. By word of mouth and perseverance, a handful of passionate people managed to expand into a diverse web of supporters—some completely new to opera. Combined, the group has managed to raise more than half a million dollars in funding for the production.

The entire HGO community is incredibly fortunate that this team of generous and committed individuals recognized the vital importance of continuing to rescue *The Passenger* from near-obscurity. It is only fitting that Weinberg’s powerful work about remembering communal history be brought to Houston through such a robust community effort.
As part of the HGO community, you have probably heard about the Houston Grand Opera Endowment (HGOE). However, you may be curious about how the endowment functions in relation to HGO—or even what an endowment is. Here is a simple explanation.

• An endowment is made up of donated funds that are usually restricted for future use.

• Professional money managers often oversee endowment funds, investing the money in stocks, bonds, and other instruments.

• Only the gains (interest, dividends, and capital gains) can be spent; the principal that anchors the endowment is never touched.

• Usually, only a portion of the earnings from the endowment (typically 5 percent) is distributed on an annual basis—this is to ensure that the original funds will grow over time.

• Because they are designed to grow at a healthy rate, endowments help organizations achieve stability.

• An endowment diversifies an organization’s income and helps reduce its vulnerability.

Now, how does the Houston Grand Opera Endowment benefit HGO?

Established and incorporated in 1968, HGOE is a vital financial management tool that ensures the company has a reliable, regular source of income. Today, the Endowment contains fifty-four named funds, including unrestricted funds—funds whose returns are available for use at the company’s discretion—and funds restricted to specific purposes, such as HGOco. HGOE annually distributes 5 percent of the last twelve quarters’ average market value to the HGO Association, making it the largest single annual funder of the Opera.

Although the endowment market value has fluctuated over the past forty-five years, the performance of the fund has generally outpaced stock and bond indices. As of July 31, 2013, HGOE’s value equaled $46 million.

HGOE leadership includes Chairman Janet L. Kelly; Senior Chairman Terrylin Neale; and board members Albert Chao, James Crownover, Robert Hunter, Stephen Kaufman, Yolanda Knull, Thomas Rushing, and Scott Wise.

Inspiring Performance—The Campaign for Houston Grand Opera includes a $22 million goal for the Endowment, of which $15.2 million has already been reached. HGOE’s assets are two times the company’s current annual budget. Ideally, the Endowment should have assets five times the budget.

Donors may make direct gifts to HGOE. To make a contribution, please contact Richard Buffett at rbuffett@hgo.org or 713-546-0216.
Welcome to the HGO Family

New members of HGO’s senior management team bring experience and passion to their work.

Judith Kurnick, Director of Communications

“There’s a positive, can-do energy in the air here in Houston. Combined with Southern hospitality, it’s very appealing,” says Judith Kurnick, a transplant from New York City.

What’s even better is that, in HGO, she found a company that shared her vision of what arts organizations should be doing. “My experience has convinced me that most arts groups have not done a good job of connecting their art with the rest of the city,” she says. “I was drawn to HGO because that commitment had already been made, and I hope to build on it.”

Trained as a violinist, she was accepted to play in the orchestra for the Spoleto Festival Italy early in her career. While in Europe, she began writing about music on a freelance basis and ended up staying three years in Paris, where she was in demand because she could interview visiting artists in English and write her articles in French. She interviewed such luminaries as Itzhak Perlman, Pierre Boulez, Riccardo Muti, Jessye Norman, and Leonard Bernstein—“people I never would have had access to in the States,” she explains.

When she came back to the States, she pursued opportunities in public relations, working for such organizations as The Philadelphia Orchestra and, most recently, the League of American Orchestras, where she was vice president of strategic communications.

Opera has always been a presence in her life, and her daughter, Susanna, is named for the character in The Marriage of Figaro. Susanna and her brother, Daniel, are both studying to be veterinarians.

Judith still enjoys playing the violin and would love to get together with other musicians to play chamber music. For the time being, she is having fun exploring Houston on her bike.

David Feheley, Technical and Production Director

David Feheley (pronounced without the h) began to develop an interest in technical theater in high school in Toronto, Canada. “I worked on a lot of shows, but always on the technical side,” he says.

He began freelancing while still a student in theater production at York University. Then the Stratford Festival—North America’s largest classical repertory theater company, located in Stratford, Ontario—hired him on an eight-month contract. He ultimately became the technical director and stayed for nine years! But he missed Toronto, so when Canadian Opera Company offered him an eight-month contract (sound familiar?) to cover for a production manager on leave, he jumped at it. And he ended up staying ten years—six as the technical director.

He explains his job this way: “I coordinate all the technical aspects of a show. Actually, I don’t do anything—I facilitate the work of others. I’m always amazed at the ability of the people around me: watching a stage manager call a show, watching a director work, seeing how lighting is cued—I get to facilitate that. It’s cool.”

During his tenure with Canadian Opera Company, which has been a co-producer with HGO on several productions, he occasionally traveled to HGO. “I always liked HGO as a company,” he says. “I love the challenging work this company does, and I want to be part of it.”

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David and his wife, Renée Brode, a lighting designer, are the parents of two children: thirteen-year-old Taryn and nine-year-old Miles. All are adapting well to Houston, David says. It must have felt a little bit more like home when they met a family who had recently moved from Toronto to Houston—and found that they had lived only two blocks away from each other in Toronto!
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If you own a business, you can get your message in front of the most coveted demographic in Houston. How? By advertising in our official house program, *Opera Cues*. At the same time, you would be helping HGO cover the costs of producing this beautiful, glossy publication.

Who reads *Opera Cues*? People who are a lot like you. Since you are an HGO supporter, you already know that anyone who attends an HGO performance receives a copy of *Opera Cues* to peruse before the opera begins and during intermission. The program is also available online—with links to advertisers’ websites—for even more bang for your buck.

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To get more information, including rates and specs, please contact Matt Ross at 713-956-0908.
Q: Hey, Rudy, how can I get my car valet parked when I come to the Opera?

Rudy: Valet parking is a benefit of being a member of the Patrons Circle. I greet every Patron at the valet podium on Prairie Street before every performance. Patrons Circle members donate a minimum of $4,000 each season to HGO and are vital to ensuring we have the resources to present the great opera you love. There are lots of other benefits besides valet parking as well. If you have been coming to the Opera for any time at all, you should be a Patron. All my best friends are Patrons. I would love to greet you at the valet podium!

For information on joining the Patrons Circle please contact Angela Lane at alane@hgo.org or 713-546-0346.

Got a question for Rudy? Contact him at ravelar@hgo.org or 713-546-0271.

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Can't Make Your Performance?

Picture this: Aunt Helen calls to announce she is coming in for an unscheduled visit tomorrow. Among all the other complications that come with visits from Aunt Helen, you’ve got tickets to an HGO performance tomorrow night. Taking her with you is out of the question because her sciatica is acting up, but you really wanted to see Rigoletto. What to do?

All you have to do is pick up the phone to exchange your tickets to a different performance. There is no exchange fee for subscribers—either full-season or Opera-to-Order subscribers—and only a $10 service fee for non-subscription single tickets. Naturally, if you exchange for tickets of greater value, you would be responsible for the difference.

Exchanges by phone can be made until 24 hours before the performance begins. If you need to exchange your tickets within the 24-hour period, you can still do it with an in-person visit to our Box Office.

So you really don’t have to choose between Aunt Helen and the Opera. What a deal!

Call HGO Customer Care for telephone exchanges at 713-228-OPERA (6737) or 800-62-OPERA (800-626-7372).