On April 11, 2014, HGO launches its first-ever complete staging of Wagner’s Ring cycle with the opening of Das Rheingold. The first notes of Wagner’s stunning Prelude herald nothing less than the creation of the world. And the ride will last until the fourth and final opera, Götterdämmerung, in 2017.

HGO has been preparing for this moment for years, and Houston audiences have been dreaming of the day when Wagner’s magnum opus would appear in our city. The Ring announces HGO’s full development as a top-tier opera company, able to meet the greatest challenge of the operatic repertoire.

Composed between 1848 and 1874, Wagner’s Ring is among the supreme achievements in Western music. To stage this four-opera epic—Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, and Götterdämmerung—places extraordinary demands on all aspects of an opera company’s activities: artistic, technical, and financial.

Now, for the first time since HGO was founded in 1955, we are ready.

And, as an HGO donor, you have directly contributed to our reaching this milestone.

An Artistic Challenge
Under the direction of Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers, the HGO Orchestra has evolved into one of the opera world’s finest ensembles, ready to perform these masterworks.

Summers calls the Ring “a gigantic work of art. It’s more than just a series of four operas—it’s an experience that we connect with on every level: intellectual, emotional, natural, organic, material. At every point of the Ring, you can find an extraordinary amount of depth.”

“It’s demands are among the greatest in the operatic repertoire. So for HGO to be able to finally deliver the Ring cycle to its public is something I’m tremendously excited about.”

**A Twenty-first-century Vision**

The Ring operas follow the struggles of the gods and multiple generations of humans over a magic gold ring that grants the power to rule the world.

HGO searched the world to find the right production of the Ring. We must tell Wagner’s story clearly and engagingly for a contemporary audience in a vibrant twenty-first-century city.

The production we have chosen was created by the Barcelona-based theater company La Fura dels Baus. This internationally acclaimed group has achieved renown in the genres of theater, opera, digital theater, and street theater. La Fura first received worldwide acclaim for creating the opening ceremony of the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics.

Patrick Summers was mesmerized by La Fura’s production of the Ring when he saw it in Valencia, Spain, describing it as one of the most powerful theatrical experiences of his life.

Directed by Carlus Padrissa, the production makes use of stunning mobile 3D computer projections. Large structures, such as Valhalla, are created by groups of acrobats twisting and turning in the air. The video component of the production, which helps to portray the story with clarity and breathtaking images, was created by filmmaker Franc Aleu.

**You Are a Part of HGO’s Ring**

The Ring is a monumental cultural event in any city that stages it. Houston’s first Ring will be a major milestone in our city’s arts community, providing the first Ring experience for many Houstonians and drawing audiences from around the world to see these operas done in a new way.

We simply would not be able to stage the Ring without the help of contributors like you. More than an artistic accomplishment, the HGO Ring is also a testament to the generosity of Houstonians who have built one of America’s great opera companies here in Houston.

Watch for updates in the pages of Unleashed and Opera Cues. To contribute to the Ring, contact Greg Robertson at 713-546-0274 or grobertson@HoustonGrandOpera.org.
**Inspiring Performance** Rolls On

Since the public announcement of *Inspiring Performance—The Campaign for Houston Grand Opera*, the campaign total has risen from $107 million to over $131 million.

**H**

GO donors are supporting the company as never before. Last month, for instance, we received a wonderful $1 million gift from Ernest and Sarah Butler to endow the concertmaster position in the HGO Orchestra.

The Butlers have been very generous patrons of the arts and education in Austin, their hometown. Their support of the University of Texas and arts organizations in Austin—including establishing the Sarah and Ernest Butler School of Music—has earned them a Texas Medal of Arts. We’re thrilled that they chose HGO as the recipient of their largest contribution to an arts organization outside the capital.

We are awed by the generosity of everyone in the HGO family. *Thank you* for helping us toward our goal of at least $165 million. The total we’ve reached is impressive—but what does it mean?

HGO is one of America’s great opera companies. Your gifts and dedication are helping us in our ambition to become one of the world’s great opera companies—an internationally recognized Houston institution like the Texas Medical Center, NASA, the Port of Houston, the University of Houston, and Rice University.

The art we create—with your help—contributes to Houston’s status as one of America’s most attractive places in which to live and work.

This is what *Inspiring Performance* is about. The campaign has established a record of success, but we still have a long way to go. When you contribute to the success of *Inspiring Performance*, you help build one of the world’s great cultural institutions.

Right here in Houston.

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**Make a Gift That Lasts**

Friends of HGO can help ensure the company’s future by including HGO in their wills. Contributions made through a will, trust, or life-income arrangement are all forms of legacy giving—and anyone can make a legacy gift at any time.

It can be as easy as naming HGO on the beneficiary form of an IRA, pension account, or charitable trust, but making a bequest in a will is the easiest way to create your legacy. The following is an example of how you might word an outright bequest.

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“I give, devise, and bequeath to the Houston Grand Opera Endowment, Inc., with offices located at 510 Preston Street, Houston, TX, 77002-1504, the sum of _____ (state amount or use percentage of) to be used for general endowment purposes.”

Ultimately, including HGO in your will means that you have become a partner with HGO in perpetuating the art form we love, ensuring its vibrant good health for future generations.

To find out more, contact Richard Buffett at rbuffett@HoustonGrandOpera.org or 713-546-0216.
Fighting the Good Fight
Fight director Brian Byrnes is a master of HGO’s stage skirmishes.

Brian Byrnes teaches sword combat for Il trovatore.

Brian Byrnes has been HGO’s go-to fight director ever since he came to Houston in 1996. Whether it’s a shoving match, a sword fight, or a full-out battle, Brian can stage it so that it looks realistic and nobody gets hurt. His Society of American Fight Directors credentials include certified teacher, fight director, and the highest—fight master.

So, what does a fight director do? “Opera stories have violence in them,” says Brian. “It’s my job to tell the physical side of the story in a dramatically effective way.”

And also in a way that is compatible with the style of the production, he adds, comparing HGO’s spring productions of Tristan and Isolde and Il trovatore. Tristan is a psychological opera—most of the “action” takes place in the minds of the characters. So the fighting in this particular production was done in a stylized fashion, in slow motion. “This made the violence more psychologically affecting,” says Brian. On the other hand, the fighting in Il trovatore “had to be more visceral, because the story is harsh and raw.”

His overriding concerns are safety and dramatic effectiveness. If a character is supposed to be an accomplished swordsman, for example, the performer must give the appearance of knowing how to fight. So, how does that work out with opera singers? Very well, says Brian. “Part of the job is to assess their abilities and use the skills they have. If they know how to think like an actor, they can adapt to stage combat.”

Brian now lives in San Diego, but his energy, professionalism, and creativity have earned the greatest respect from those with whom he has worked at HGO. Brian feels the same about them: “With a good fight crew like I have here, I can realize what I envision in my head.”

Young Leaders in Philanthropy Honored

The 2013 recipients of the Houston Grand Opera Ovation Awards were announced on March 13 at a cocktail reception held at Abrahams Oriental Rug Showroom in the Decorative Arts Center of Houston. The awards acknowledge young Houstonian philanthropists.
Three HGO Studio artists will work on their language skills abroad, courtesy of generous sponsorships. It’s off to Italy for soprano Andrea Carroll, who received the Jackson Hicks Career Development Award to study Italian in Milan. Andrea will also perform Corinna in Il viaggio a Reims at Wolf Trap Opera. The HGO Guild is sponsoring language study for mezzo-soprano Carolyn Sproule in Germany and pianist/coach Elena Lacheva in Italy. Carolyn also sings Meg Page in Falstaff as a Filene Young Artist at Wolf Trap Opera, and Elena will catch up with her family in Bulgaria.

Kevin Ray will sing the title role in Peter Grimes at Chautauqua, and will then sing Don José in Carmen at the Lyrique-en-Mer Festival, held on the picturesque island of Belle-Île, off the coast of Brittany. Soprano Natalya Romaniw will spend her summer in the United Kingdom, first singing in recital at the Leeds Festival and then performing Maliella in I gioielli della Madonna with the adventurous Opera Holland Park. But it is Peixin Chen who will be traveling the farthest—to his native China for two roles at the National Center of the Performing Arts in Beijing, Bartolo in The Marriage of Figaro and Basilio in The Barber of Seville.

Scott Quinn will escape the Houston heat at the Northern Lights Opera Festival in Minnesota, where he will sing Rodolfo in La bohème. Nicholas Masters will head to the Caramoor Festival just outside Katonah, New York, to sing Robert in Les vêpres siciliennes. He’ll also be preparing for another journey—a trip to the altar in September!

Soprano Lauren Snouffer will cover the leading role of Agnes in George Benjamin’s Written on Skin at the Vienna Festival, and will sing Agnes in the American premiere of the work at Tanglewood. She will also perform in concert with baritone Mark Diamond and pianist/coach Ana Maria Otamendi in a recital in Vermont arranged by Jackson Hicks. Ana Maria will also visit her family in Venezuela, and Mark will sing recitals in Georgia and Swallow in Peter Grimes at the Aspen Music Festival. And finally, pianist/coach Patrick Harvey will serve on the music staff of The Santa Fe Opera. Like Lauren, Mark, Ana Maria and Nicholas, he is completing his training with the Studio at the end of this season. We will stay in touch with all of them and will bring them back as opportunities arise. Mark is already slated to sing Count Carl-Magnus in A Little Night Music at HGO next season, and we’ll be seeing a lot of Patrick—he’ll join the full-time music staff at HGO this fall!

Thanks to all those who sponsor HGO Studio artists—their continuing success proves you have made a wise investment in the future of opera.
Earlier this month, HGOco premiered *The Memory Stone*, a short chamber opera by composer Marty Regan and librettist Kenny Fries that focuses on Houston’s Japanese community. In addition to being HGO’s fiftieth world premiere, *The Memory Stone* is the sixth opera in HGOco’s East + West series of chamber operas that celebrate the city’s diverse Asian communities.

*The Memory Stone* opened at Asia Society Texas Center on April 9, 10, and 11, followed by special concert performances at Houston’s annual Japan Festival in Hermann Park on April 13 and 14. The opera follows two women affected by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan and explores themes of remembrance and healing.

The following donors helped make this unique and beautiful work possible: The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Andrews Kurth LLP, PwC, Akemi and Yasuhiko Saitoh, Nanako and Dale Tingleaf, Katie Flaherty, and Cole Chemical.

### Plaudits from the Media

**Cruzar la Cara de la Luna**

“The mariachi music by José ‘Pepe’ Martínez…[is] suave and melodious, [and] its almost unceasing glow reaches into the souls of the characters.” —*Houston Chronicle*

**The Memory Stone**

“This enchanting chamber opera is a gorgeous and stirring piece that examines the power and necessity of memory for the advancement of the human species...Haunting, gorgeous, and spellbinding.” —*Broadway World*

**Tristan and Isolde**

“...thanks to a magnificent soprano, a laser-focused production and an energetic conductor, the Houston Grand Opera’s performance is an enthralling theatrical event.” —*Wall Street Journal*

**Il trovatore**

“Filled completely with music that not only fully delineates its characters but has solidly entered our consciousness, it’s a veritable steamroller, and HGO does it proud.” —*Houston Press*