In March, HGO will stage *Prince of Players*, our fifth world premiere of an opera by Carlisle Floyd, this year’s Lynn Wyatt Great Artist. A world premiere from the elder statesman of American opera is a very big deal in itself. But it’s the relationship between HGO and the composer, who will turn 90 in June, that goes to the heart of his career and set HGO on its path as a leading producer of new works and as a training ground for young talent.

The association between HGO and Carlisle Floyd reaches back to 1972, when Floyd first met HGO’s then-new general director, David Gockley. The two men couldn’t have known that this would be the beginning of something historical: the longest ongoing relationship between a living composer and an organization.

In 1972, Gockley had big plans in which he hoped Carlisle Floyd would play a starring role. Floyd was already a prominent opera composer—his *Susannah* had won the New York Music Critics Circle Award for Best New Opera in 1956 and was well established in the operatic repertoire, and his 1970 work *Of Mice and Men* was well on its way.

Floyd had also proven himself to be a gifted teacher, as a professor of music at Florida State University since 1947, and his unique combination of skills led Gockley to make him a dual proposal: Gockley asked Floyd to create a new work for HGO to premiere during the American bicentennial year and also to help him establish a state-of-the-art training program for young artists.
During the summer of 1972, Floyd and his wife, Kay, came to Houston to check out their prospective new home city and saw an HGO performance of *Susannah* at Miller Outdoor Theatre. About the experience of seeing his work performed in Houston, Floyd told music journalist Alan Rich, “I had no other connection with Houston at the time, but something about that crowd, its size and reaction, told me that this was where I belonged.”

So when the University of Houston, at Gockley’s urging, offered Floyd the M. D. Anderson professorship in music, Floyd accepted. It was January 1976.

By then, rehearsals were already underway for the bicentennial opera, *Bilby's Doll*, starring Catherine Malfitano, Alan Titus, and Samuel Ramey. The next Floyd premiere at HGO was *Willie Stark* (1981), followed by a new version of an earlier opera, *The Passion of Jonathan Wade* (1991), and finally (or so it was thought), *Cold Sassy Tree* (2000), starring Patricia Racette and conducted by HGO’s Patrick Summers.

The dream of the training program—the HGO Studio—came to fruition in 1977, and along with his composing and teaching duties, Floyd was extremely active in it, personally hearing every audition and working with the young artists. Floyd still enjoys teasing Gockley about the “seedy hotels” Gockley booked for their audition tours, all in the name of saving the Opera’s money.

In recent years, Floyd decided he just wasn’t ready to stop composing. After seeing *Mary Stuart* at HGO in 2012, he declared that he wanted to compose one more opera and premiere it at HGO. Now HGO is proud to present his *Prince of Players*, the first among all his HGO premieres that is set outside the American South. Patrick Summers conducts.

As significant as the relationship has been to both sides, others have benefited from it as well: the young artists, now numbering more than 200, who have trained in the HGO Studio; the audiences who have sat spellbound at premieres; and the composers who benefited from the new opportunities in American opera brought about through this partnership. All of this was made possible because our audiences have generously opened their hearts and their pocketbooks to the adventure of producing new work.

As Alan Rich wrote, the legacy of the HGO–Carlisle Floyd connection is “the opening of doors. Through them the institution of American opera, once regarded as a poor relation up against the grand masterworks from abroad, has passed on to its own kind of glory.”

1. Carlisle Floyd (right) and HGO’s then—music director John DeMain prepare to work with HGO Studio artists, late 1970s. 2. *Willie Stark* opening night, April 24, 1981, from left: radio commentator Lowell Thomas, Floyd, Gockley, Robert Penn Warren (author of *All the King’s Men*, on which *Willie Stark* was based, and director Hal Prince. 3. HGO’s Patrick Summers and Floyd collaborate on *Cold Sassy Tree* in 2000. 4. Introduced by Summers, Floyd prepares to address supporters gathered to dedicate two sixth-floor rehearsal rooms in the Wortham to Gockley and Floyd. Behind Floyd at right is a photo of former President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush presenting him with the National Medal of Arts, November 2004. 5. Artists of the 2014–15 HGO Studio workshoped *Prince of Players* in fall 2014. Floyd is flanked by his niece, Jane Matheny, and Bradley Moore, HGO’s head of music staff and music director of the HGO Studio.
Mary Hanks has been volunteering at HGO in the little-known craft of audio description since 2001, “translating visual images into words” for opera goers who can fully appreciate the music but can’t see the costumes, sets, or special effects.

She became so absorbed in her work that she sought training with the Audio Description Institute of the American Council of the Blind. She prepares for each season at HGO by listening to each of the operas over and over, reading the librettos, watching rehearsals, and familiarizing herself with the director’s take on each opera. “Many of the people who use descriptive services know opera very well, so I’m not there to explain the opera to them,” she says. “I’m there to describe the visual elements in terms that will be meaningful to them.”

During a performance, Mary sits in the glassed-in booth at the rear of the theater speaking into a microphone. Patrons listen through headsets furnished by Houston First. She begins her description about 10 minutes before the opera begins and continues during a portion of the intermission. She keeps her remarks brief because she is a true fan and knows that opera is about the music. “This is not the time for me to be clever or chatty,” she says. “I’m a support service.”

HGO offers the service free of charge and by request rather than designating one particular performance for audio description, as other companies often do—if they offer the service at all. Mary emphasizes, however, that 48 hours’ notice is required. “We aren’t HGO staff members,” she explains, referring to herself and her fellow describer, Dr. Jo Lyday, a retired English professor. “That means we have to make plans to be here.”

Mary has described for a number of other organizations, including Houston Ballet, the Alley Theatre, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, TUTS, and many others: “Sometimes it’s the Rodeo one night and opera the next!”

For information about audio description services or to reserve, please call 713-546-0203.

The Journey Continues
Join us for upcoming Ring events!

Ring of Power: Insights from the Author
February 11, 2016, 6:30 p.m.
Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston (MATCH)
$20 per person

Jungian psychiatrist and celebrated speaker Dr. Jean Bolen, author of Ring of Power and 12 other titles, dissects the mythical figures of Wagner’s Ring. Learn about the authoritarian father (Wotan), the abandoned child (Brünnhilde), and the lonely hero (Siegfried) in this stimulating guest lecture on the psychology of the Ring.

Beyond the Basics: A Ring Study Day
March 12, 2016, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Rehearsal room, Wortham Theater Center
$79 per person (lunch included)

Join us for a day-long symposium discussing the mythology and mysticism of the Ring, the cultural repercussions of Wagner’s work, and a return of “lightning round leitmotifs” for Siegfried. HGO Dramaturg Paul Hopper will be joined by Wagner scholars in this immersive, informative event.
Love, Opera Style

From *Tristan and Isolde* to *The Elixir of Love*, love potions are not uncommon on the operatic stage. But sometimes the love spell can drift into the audience!

Something about the romance and drama of an HGO performance pulls people together—sometimes “until death do us part.”

Judge Mark Davidson shares a wonderful story about meeting someone special at HGO:

“In November of 1996, a dear friend of mine (HGO Board member Glen Rosenbaum) put together an opera party centered around the opening of *Tosca*. I was invited to bring a date, and did so. We enjoyed the performance, and went to a post-opera dinner. My date left early, and I ended up sitting next to a woman whose date, by coincidence, also left early. We started talking, and learned that we had a lot in common. We were married ten months later. The silver lining beyond the dark cloud of Tosca’s fall from the Castel Sant’Angelo was the love we found that night, and share 19 years later.”

Founders Council members and longtime opera-goers Richard and Elizabeth Husseini shared many date nights at HGO… and eventually got engaged at the Wortham following a performance of one of their favorites, *Don Giovanni*.

Trustees Scott and Gina Gaille set the stage for a lifetime of happiness by taking their vows onstage at the Brown Theater in the middle of the day, just the two of them. They were married on December 12, 2012, at 12:12 p.m.

Did you attend an HGO performance on your first date with someone special? Do you have a favorite memory with your significant other at the Opera?

Share your HGO love stories with us at operaunwrapped@hgo.org.

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Concert of Arias
Thursday, February 4, 2016
Honoring: Pat and Daniel Breen
Chairs: Cynthia and Anthony Petrello

6 p.m. – Champagne Reception
7 p.m. – Vocal Competition
Post-performance Celebration Dinner in the Grand Foyer
Wortham Theater Center

For tickets or information visit HGO.org/SpecialEvents or call Clare Greene at 713-546-0277
Howdy, Heidi!

As if we needed more reasons to be excited about the upcoming new Michael Grandage production of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*. From the over-the-top 1960s-'70s Morocco production complete with beehives and eyeliner, to the fact that the catchy overture has been playing nonstop on every single television monitor in the Wortham Center since August—we are ready!

And we’re especially ready to welcome back HGO Studio alumna Heidi Stober, who will be singing Susanna in an outstanding young cast.

We’ve got three questions for Heidi, a Houston favorite who now makes her home in Berlin.

**Q: What does it feel like each time you come back to HGO?**

A: Coming back “home” to HGO is a wonderful feeling. It’s lovely to come back to HGO and see dear, old friends and colleagues and also to meet the great new additions to the company.

**Q: Sum up your HGO Studio experience in three words.**

A: Incredible, life-changing, thrilling.

**Q: There is a wonderful story about the night you stepped in at the last minute to sing Norina in *Don Pasquale*, a role you had been studying as part of your Studio training. The soprano had fallen very ill, and Diane Zola called you minutes before the curtain, which was held as you raced over to the Wortham to get into costume, wig, and make-up. There is no question that you blew the audience away that night and in another fantastic performance that our audiences still talk about. The question is, **were you in line at H-E-B or Boston Market when you got “the call”?** We’ve heard both versions, so here is your chance to set the record straight.

A: Boston Market. With my friend Bethany Self, my then–Studio mate and roommate.

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YOU DESERVE A STANDING OVATION!

**HGO Giving Day • October 14–15, 2015**

Thanks to the extraordinary generosity of 233 donors—from HGO subscribers to global opera lovers to local Houston activists—we raised $261,995 in 24 hours for our #AllinForHGO campaign.

THANK YOU for raising your voice in support of great art!

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Photo by Lynn Lane.
Q: Hey Rudy, why do you greet all of the HGO Patrons at the valet stand at every performance?

Rudy: For HGO, the Wortham Theater Center is our home. Just as you would greet any visitor to your home, I want to greet all of our Patrons when they come to the Opera. I want their Patron experience to start before they step foot in the theater. Whether that’s giving people extra tickets they ordered, a spare Valet Pass, or reminding them that their tickets are for another performance (“Of course, I’ll get you in tonight”—that’s happened a lot over the 38 years I have been at HGO), I love extending HGO’s hospitality curbside!

In the Media

Tosca

“With a riveting cast, a traditional yet nuanced production, and a powerfully precise and expressive orchestra, this Tosca is a triumph in every regard.”

—CultureMap

Eugene Onegin

“In both his singing and characterization, [Scott] Hendricks lends Onegin strength and stubborn pride....Tatyana is the heart of the opera and [Katie] Van Kooten could scarcely be better, vocally or dramatically.... [Norman] Reinhardt’s Lensky is the other must-see (and hear) performance of the night—arguably a definitive Lensky. His glorious tenor has never sounded more mellow, graceful or sincere.”

—Houston Chronicle

The Little Prince

“The work’s appeal is consistently supported by a marvelous cast, the delightful contributions of a children’s chorus and the expert orchestral performance conducted by Bradley Moore...The success of The Little Prince, as an operatic treatment of a unique tale, is that it sees with the eyes of a child and sings from the heart.”

—Houston Chronicle