On May 13, 16, and 17, 2015, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán lit up the stage again with a moving story of one family traced through generations. *El Pasado Nunca Se Termina* / *The Past is Never Finished* is the second mariachi opera from the team of composer José “Pepe” Martínez and librettist Leonard Foglia. Over 5,300 people attended the three performances with over half purchasing a ticket to HGO for the first time. HGO first commissioned Martínez and Foglia in 2010 to create *Cruzar la Cara de La Luna* / *To Cross the Face of the Moon*, the world’s first mariachi opera, and it was an incredible success.

After *Cruzar’s* sold-out world premiere at HGO in 2010, the production toured to Paris, Chicago, San Diego, Tucson, and Phoenix, and made a triumphant return to HGO in March 2013. The overwhelmingly positive response showed us that HGO needed to bring a second mariachi opera to Houston.

David Ruiz, senior vice president, Houston market manager, corporate social responsibility for Bank of America, notes, “Bank of America is particularly proud of *El Pasado*, as we have supported HGO’s mariachi opera projects since the very beginning with 2010’s *Cruzar*. Seeing our community embrace *El Pasado*, with its exciting hybrid of opera’s storytelling coupled with the bold emotional impact and cultural resonance of mariachi, has been unforgettable.”

Alfredo Vilas, president of Novum Energy, an underwriter of *El Pasado*, adds, “I’m so very proud of HGO and the kind of work we’re doing. *El Pasado* means a lot to me and the Hispanic community in Houston. I would like to see more!”

Abigail Santos Villalobos and Daniel Montenegro in *El Pasado Nunca Se Termina*, 2015. Photo by Lynn Lane.
Set on a hacienda in Morelos, Mexico, *El Pasado* begins in May 1910 on the eve of the Mexican Revolution as conflict brews between the owners of the property and the indigenous Mexicans who work for them. Amorita, a young indigenous worker on the hacienda, and Luis, the hacienda owner’s son, fall in love—with tragic results.

The opera then moves to the present day, as Enrique, a Mexican-American politician and his young son, Daniel, travel to Morelos to learn more of their family’s heritage, revealing secrets from the past.

*El Pasado* visited Houston after premiering at Lyric Opera of Chicago and San Diego Opera to glowing reviews. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the opera has “all the sweetness and tang of a freshly made margarita, right down to the salt around the edges.”

Houston audiences went wild for *El Pasado* in its special three-performance run with standing ovations for the singers and Mariachi Vargas at every performance.

*El Pasado* featured exciting voices from both the mariachi and opera worlds, including soprano Abigail Santos Villalobos (Amorita), tenor Daniel Montenegro (Luis), baritone Paul LaRosa (Enrique), and baritone Ricardo Rivera (Amorita’s revolutionary-minded brother, Acalán), who all made their HGO debuts. Octavio Moreno, the HGO Studio alumnus who starred as the patriarch Laurentino in *Cruzar*, returned in *El Pasado* as the mystical character Xihuitl and showed off his mariachi chops as Pepe.

Vanessa Alonzo, who created the role of Lupita in *Cruzar*, sang Amorita’s mother, Juana, and 13-year-old mariachi singing sensation and native Texan Sebastien E. De La Cruz made his HGO debut as Daniel, Enrique’s young son. Sebastien earned thousands of fans as a semifinalist on *Americas Got Talent* in 2012 and through his performance of the National Anthem during two NBA finals games in 2013.

Dynamic new works like *El Pasado* bring new operagoers and members of our HGO family together. Your support helped bring this innovative new work to life!

From top—Sebastien E. De La Cruz; Vanessa Alonzo and Ricardo Rivera; and Octavio Moreno with Mariachi Vargas. Photos by Lynn Lane

Houston Grand Opera thanks these generous donors to *El Pasado*:

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HGO Studio artists are getting ready to scatter for the summer, headed to performance destinations across the United States. Here’s where you can find them—why not catch a performance during your summer travels?

Among the four singers who are leaving the HGO Studio to begin their careers, two of them are performing Figaro at Wolf Trap Opera this summer—in different operas. Morgan Pearse sings Figaro in John Corigliano’s *The Ghosts of Versailles* (with fellow alum Emily Senturia as pianist/coach) and Thomas Richards performs the title role in Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Another graduating artist, Reginald Smith Jr., will also be at Wolf Trap to sing the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and returning singer D’Ana Lombard will perform Rosina in *The Ghosts of Versailles*. D’Ana will then head to Seattle Opera to create the role of Eva in the world premiere of Jack Perla’s *An American Dream*.

Peixin Chen will head to The Santa Fe Opera to make his house debut as Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* and sing First Nazarene in *Salome*. While he is among the graduating singers, we won’t have to wait long to see him again: he returns next season as Bartolo in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

In the lovely setting of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival in central New York, returning artist Megan Samaran will sing Marzia in *Cato in Utica* and incoming singer Ben Edquist will perform Papageno in *The Magic Flute*, both as Glimmerglass Young Artists.

Two returning artists will beat the Houston heat at the Aspen Music Festival: Pureum Jo singing Juliette in *Roméo et Juliette* and Sofia Selowsky performing Despina in *Cosi fan tutte*.

Incoming Studio artist Chris Bozeka will sing Rinuccio in *Gianni Schicchi* with the San Francisco Opera’s Merola Program, where incoming pianist/coach Kirill Kuzmin will be an apprentice coach.

The other incoming pianist/coach, Geoffrey Loff, will be working in the Twin Cities—at Skylark Opera (St. Paul) and Mill City Opera (Minneapolis). Returning pianist/coach Sahar Nouri will study Czech in Prague, in preparation for coaching *Rusalka* at HGO next season.

And finally, pianist/coach Christopher Turbessi and conductor/pianist Emily Senturia are leaving the HGO Studio, but both are returning as members of the music staff. Among other duties, Chris will be the music director for HGOco and Emily will conduct performances of *The Little Prince*.

Thanks to all those who support the work of the HGO Studio. The artists’ continuing success is proof you have made a sound investment in the future of opera!
HGO’s Anniversary Gala: Shining Bright at 60

On March 19, 2015, HGO marked 60 years of world-class opera with an unforgettable concert starring HGO favorite Joyce DiDonato and a dazzling gala dinner.

Joyce, an HGO Studio alumna and internationally renowned mezzo-soprano, wowed an adoring audience in the Cullen Theater with thrilling selections from Rossini, Handel, and Pacini paired with some well-loved musical theater pieces, including “All the Things You Are” from *Very Warm for May*.

The HGO Studio and Orchestra were also a part of the celebration, with Patrick Summers leading the Orchestra onstage. HGO Studio artists sang the Sextet from *La Cenerentola* and joined Joyce for the apt “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” which Joyce prefaced by sharing fond memories of her days in the HGO Studio.

After the concert, 200 of HGO’s lead supporters sat down to an elegant seated dinner on the Brown Theater stage as Joyce treated guests to a lively encore, performing “I Love a Piano.” Terrylin Neale, senior chairman of the Houston Grand Opera Endowment, chaired this unforgettable evening. Guests also took a moment during the dinner to recognize guest of honor Will McLendon, a dear member of the HGO family and a season subscriber since HGO’s very first season.

The 60th Anniversary Gala was more than a party—funds raised from this special evening benefited the HGO Endowment, ensuring that we will continue to create and share great opera for future generations of Houstonians. With your help, the 60th Anniversary Gala raised $600,000 for the HGO Endowment.

And since it was HGO’s Diamond Anniversary, we did not skimp on the sparkle—a stunning set of diamond jewelry was generously provided for Joyce DiDonato by Tenenbaum & Co. as she lit up the stage.

Your support and dedication has helped HGO celebrate 60 years of unforgettable opera, and we look forward to 60 more! Joyce said it best, as she reflected on HGO’s six decades of great performances and her own time at HGO: “There’s no place like home.”
HGOco’s *Song of Houston* program, which tells the stories of our city through words and music, continues to chart new creative territory with *O Columbia*, a new chamber opera created with input from Houston’s space exploration community.

Gregory Spears, who composed HGOco’s 2012 chamber opera *The Bricklayer*, teamed up with librettist Royce Vavrek (*Dog Days, 27*) to create *O Columbia*, a piece that celebrates the spirit of exploration. From Sir Walter Raleigh setting sail for “the new world” to modern-day astronauts traveling through space, *O Columbia* celebrates the intrinsic human need for exploration and discovery.

As with all *Song of Houston* projects, *O Columbia* took shape thanks to direct input and collaboration from the people closest to the subject—in this case, members of Houston’s space exploration community. Originally envisioned as a musical response to NASA’s 2003 *Columbia* disaster, the opera quickly evolved as Spears and Vavrek interviewed current and retired employees of NASA, contract employees, engineers, and shuttle mission trainers, and even took a behind-the-scenes tour at the Johnson Space Center.

The creative team learned that Houston’s space community does not wish to dwell on the tragedy of *Columbia* and that to truly honor the lives lost in *Columbia*, the opera must celebrate curiosity, hope, and progress, reinforcing the message that “now more than ever” we must continue to explore beyond what we know.

HGO supporter and subscriber David Rose spent his career as an engineer for the shuttle program and has been a key contributor to *O Columbia* since the beginning. He says, “It is impossible to portray the triumph and tragedy of human space flight without providing context to the underlying motives for exploration and discovery beyond the confines of our Mother Earth. In today’s world, the awesome challenge of flying a rocket into space (along with all the inherent risks) takes us just another step on the same path of human destiny that was shared by our ancestors. This message has resonated with the HGO team in our interviews with them, and is stunningly portrayed in the resulting production.”

*O Columbia* will premiere on September 23 and 24, 2015, at downtown Houston’s Bayou Music Center. Members of the HGO Studio will sing the leading roles and they will be joined by a chamber orchestra and chorus. We hope you will join us on this musical journey celebrating innovation and exploration.

For more information on how you can support *O Columbia*, please contact Kelly Finn at 713-546-0265 or kfinn@hgo.org.
Q: Hey Rudy, HGO’s season ended in May. Where can I get my summer opera fix?

Rudy: There are numerous possibilities. I love going to Santa Fe! It is easy to get to from Houston and is a great place to visit. HGO is planning a trip to Santa Fe for HGO Patrons July 29–August 2. It will be fantastic! Santa Fe Opera presents five productions each summer. Its season begins in early July and runs until the end of August. Besides opera, there are great art galleries, restaurants (Tia Sophia’s, The Compound, Santacafé, The Shed), spas, and wonderful outdoor activities including hiking trails and golf. Santa Fe is my destination of choice for summer opera!

In the Media

Die Walküre

“In the competition for Brünnhilde assoluta, [Christine] Goerke lays down a marker that will be hard to top. She easily sails over Wagner’s huge orchestra...[and] as an actor, she brings Brünnhilde to life. She is at her best when confronted with the severity of her punishment... When Wotan opens his heart to her, before banishing her to an inaccessible ring of fire, watch her face. Wotan’s grievous tale of theft, power grabbing, and the disastrous results—it is all reflected in her reactions.”

—TheaterJones.com

Sweeney Todd

“It’s especially satisfying to hear a full complement of musicians, vividly conducted by James Lowe, playing Jonathan Tunick’s splendid orchestrations; likewise, to hear a fullthroated chorus of 24, ably prepared by Richard Bado, singing the richly textured choral arrangements... Having opera caliber voices in all the roles unleashes the full beauty and expressive power of Sondheim’s most ambitious score. Its sweeping lyricism, shortchanged in many recent revivals, is given full measure here.”

—Houston Chronicle

Christine Goerke as Brünnhilde in Die Walküre, 2015.
Photos by Lynn Lane.

Nathan Gunn as Sweeney Todd and Jake Gardner as Judge Turpin in Sweeney Todd, 2015.