Does an American musical like Carousel deserve a place alongside Siegfried at the Wortham Theater Center?

From its very beginnings, HGO has pushed the boundaries of what an opera company should be—and we’ve done it with pride! We define opera in broad terms, and that is why we have commissioned new works and programmed existing works that some would consider to be outside the realm of opera.

Our Great American Musical series, which began in 2013 with Show Boat and continued with 2015’s Sweeney Todd—and, this spring, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Carousel—is one important example. HGO has programmed all of those works previously, and in fact was the first opera company ever to stage Sweeney Todd. But other opera companies have increasingly followed the trail we blazed, adding certain musicals to their seasons as well. They have found that Jerome Kern, Stephen Sondheim, and Rodgers and Hammerstein fit in quite nicely with Mozart, Puccini, Verdi, and Wagner.

Why do musicals, selectively chosen, belong in the opera house? Because they are intensely operatic in the style of the vocal writing, the complexity of the orchestration, and the scale of the story and characters. HGO has included only musicals with those characteristics in our series.

Musicals like Carousel—and Show Boat and Sweeney Todd—stand to benefit when they are performed by opera singers. When Richard Rodgers was composing Carousel, he knew he was writing for singers who had classical training: they sang “pure” vowels, were able to sustain notes, had a broad range and crisp diction, and could be heard over an orchestra. Two of the most popular songs in Carousel, “June Is Bustin’ Out All Over” and “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” were written specifically for an opera singer—Christine Johnson, the original Nettie Fowler.

Although some Broadway singers today have classical training—think Nettie Fowler (sung by Christine Johnson) comforts Julie (Jan Clayton) in the original Broadway production of Carousel, 1945.
There are still musicals being written that mesh with what opera companies do best. Will HGO ever perform any of them? Maybe so…but only if they are in sync with our core artistic values.

Audra McDonald, Kelli O’Hara, and Paolo Szot—it’s not a given these days. We’ve cast our singing roles in *Carousel* with opera singers, so our production will sound very much like it did in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s day.

And an opera company has resources that Broadway theaters don’t have. What Broadway theater of today would mount a production of any musical with an orchestra of 40 players—the size of the original *Carousel* orchestra, which was unusually large even for 1945? The correct answer is “no Broadway theater.” We’ll have 47 musicians of the HGO Orchestra in the pit for *Carousel*.

When sound amplification became prevalent during the late 1940s and 1950s—Richard Rodgers said that *Carousel* was the last of his unmiked shows—the demands upon singers suddenly changed. No longer did a singer need classical training in order to be heard over an orchestra. Singing styles changed accordingly, and so did tastes. By the time body microphones became commonplace in the late 1960s, rock and pop influences led to musicals like *Hair* and the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

There are still musicals being written that mesh with what opera companies do best. Will HGO ever perform any of them? Maybe so…but only if they are in sync with our core artistic values.

Thank you for your role in passing the Great American Musical tradition along: through these performances, many people will hear these works sung and played the way the original audiences heard them.

“Musical theater is an incredible American legacy, and *Carousel* is an exceptional musical gem. We are only able to bring these powerful pieces of musical theater to life through the passion and generosity of our wonderful donors.”

—HGO Artistic & Music Director Patrick Summers
The Young Patrons Circle (YPC) is a special group of HGO supporters under the age of 40. Members make generous annual contributions of at least $2,000. They receive exclusive benefits—valet parking, access to the Green Room and Founders Salon, discounts on tickets to HGO special events, exclusive invitations to private events, recitals, and social gatherings.

The best benefit of all? The chance to build long-lasting relationships with fellow young opera lovers.

Carrie Brandsberg-Dahl and her husband, Sverre, became YPC members in 2011. Carrie shares, “Being part of HGO has introduced us to some of our closest friends through the YPC group. YPC is more than a community, it has become part of our family.”

YPC is especially wonderful for people who are new to Houston or who are trying to connect socially or professionally. In fact, some members bravely take the YPC plunge without prior knowledge of opera! They simply desire to connect with a diverse network of young professionals and philanthropists, and decide to give the art form a try. Ten times out of ten they get hooked.

When asked why HGO matters to them, Young Patron Circle members Darrin Davis and Mario Gudmundsson say, “We found an amazing community within HGO, and our lives are forever changed.”

To join the YPC fun, please contact Kristina Bergeron, associate director of development, at 713-546-1276 or kbergeron@hgo.org.

Friends of HGO can help ensure the company’s future: include HGO in your will! 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.

“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.”

Your generous gift will be well cared for. The Houston Grand Opera Endowment, Inc., manages all legacy gifts with professional investment managers and an independent board of directors overseeing the fund.

For information regarding charitable estate gift planning and how it might positively impact you, your loved ones, and Houston Grand Opera, please contact Richard Buffett, director of major gifts and legacy giving, at 713-546-0216 or visit HGO.org/LaureateSociety.
Getting into the *Ring*

HGO supporters prep for *Siegfried* by attending Beyond the Basics: A *Ring* Study Day.

Admit it. You’re as crazy about Wagner’s *Ring* cycle as we are. When the curtain goes up on April 16, you’ll finally meet Siegfried, the dragon-slaying hero destined to reclaim Wotan’s sword and seize the Ring of power.

One of the most thrilling aspects of the *Ring* cycle is that there is no limit to the knowledge, history, background, and intrigue that come along with it. We approach this stunning work with a thirst to learn more, and attendance at our educational opportunities always exceeds our expectations.

This can be attested to by the 80 HGO supporters who attended Beyond the Basics: A *Ring* Study Day.

HGO Dramaturg Paul Hopper hosted this engaging seminar at the Wortham on March 12. Beginning with an exploration of the *Ring*’s roots in Norse mythology, this six-hour event was an exciting component of HGO’s series of educational events surrounding the four-season presentation of Wagner’s masterpiece.

Production Director David Feheley gave a captivating, behind-the-scenes look at the technical challenges of bringing the magic of *Siegfried* to the stage, and Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers illuminated the orchestral revolution incited by Wagner’s daring work. Buck Ross, the founder and director of the Moores Opera Center at the University of Houston fascinated attendees with an examination of the *Ring*’s performance history.

“Wagner has stuck with me since I was fifteen,” says Corbyn Cravero, a recent graduate of Texas A&M University. “I tend to study each opera for six months in advance of watching it, so this event was perfect for what I do in terms of preparing for more than just background knowledge. Sometimes you attend a performance, and you don’t always get to talk to the people who make it happen, but hearing Patrick Summers’s perspective in person was greatly appreciated.”

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Be among the Houston Grand Opera Patrons who set out to explore the historic city of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Enjoy art, spectacular dinners at private Santa Fe home, and three Santa Fe Opera performances including *Don Giovanni*, *La fanciulla del West*, and *Roméo et Juliette*.

For more information, contact Scott Ipsen at 713-546-0242 or visit HGO.org/SantaFe.
When Donald Sweeney took his future wife, Rhonda, to see her first opera—Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena*—it put her right to sleep.

Thirty years later, HGO is extremely fortunate that Rhonda’s passion for opera survived that nap.

Rhonda and Donald have become invaluable members of the HGO family. They’re part of several leadership groups of supporters, including the Founders Council for Artistic Excellence and the Laureate Society. Rhonda volunteers on many HGO committees—she serves as a trustee, and with the HGO Guild, she is a past president and was named Volunteer of the Year in 2001. She also supports the University of Houston Moores School of Music as president of the Moores Society and serves as president of Opera Volunteers International and district director for the Metropolitan Opera’s National Council.

So what was it that turned the Sweeneys from casual fans into the dedicated opera lovers they are now? We have Wagner’s *Ring* to thank.

In 1989, Donald and Rhonda traveled to the Metropolitan Opera in New York to see their first complete *Ring* cycle. There were no supertitles, so Rhonda knew that they were going to have to do their research. They studied the libretti, watched documentaries, and read books—doing about 60 hours of preparation for what Rhonda describes as “a marathon of operas.”

“Wagner was a genius,” Rhonda says. “It’s the best kind of storytelling and fabulous music… you just get caught up in it.”

The Sweeneys have been *Ring* enthusiasts ever since. In fact, they helped make HGO’s historic first-ever *Ring* production possible with a leadership contribution.

“Wagner was a genius. It’s the best kind of storytelling and fabulous music… you just get caught up in it.”

—Rhonda Sweeney

The Sweeneys are not offended by the nickname “Ring Nut.” Donald can be seen in the audience of HGO’s *Ring* operas sporting souvenir t-shirts from different *Ring* productions around the world. This May, they will experience their remarkable eighth full *Ring* cycle in Washington, D.C.

Rhonda and Donald are especially delighted by HGO’s production of the *Ring* from La Fura dels Baus. “I think our production is lively, energetic, and colorful…it is really different, and that makes it attractive even for people who’ve seen it many times.”
**ASK RUDY!**

The wit and wisdom of Rudy Avelar, HGO Director of Patron Services

Q: Hey, Rudy, I see in *Opera Cues* that some people give thousands of dollars to the Opera every year. I can’t. Does my small gift really matter?

**Rudy:** You bet it does, amigo! Some people are fortunate enough to be able to make large gifts to the Opera; others can make small gifts. *Every* gift makes a difference. Ticket sales only cover a small percentage of the budget, so every dollar is critical in order to produce great opera. Whether you can give a little or a lot, every time you make a gift to HGO you are taking a stand that great art, great music, great opera matters. Not everyone feels the way we do. We have got to stick together!

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**In the Media**

**The Marriage of Figaro**

“HGO assembled a talented cast representing North America, Europe and Asia, who sang beautifully and caught the madcap spirit of [producer Michael] Grandage’s take on the familiar story.”

—*Opera Warhorses*

**Rusalka**

“Houston Grand Opera scores one of its greatest triumphs of recent seasons with its revelatory production of Dvořák’s enchanting *Rusalka*...Ana María Martínez...attains a new level of artistry with her splendidly sung, movingly acted performance in the title role.”

—*Houston Chronicle*

**Prince of Players**

“Houston Grand Opera has a great success with [Carlisle Floyd’s] *Prince of Players*, the company’s most beautiful premiere in many years...Conductor Patrick Summers was clearly inspired on opening night.”

—*CultureMap*