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HGO Announces Six New Members for the Prestigious 2020-21 HGO Studio

Blake Denson, Ricardo Garcia, Cory McGee, Raven McMillon, Sun-Ly Pierce, Bin Yu Sanford are set to join the returning HGO Studio Artists in August 2020

Houston – March 12, 2020—After an international search ending last month with the 32nd Annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers, “Concert of Arias,” Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is excited to announce five new singers and one new pianist for the 2020–21 HGO Studio.

The 2020-21 HGO Studio will consist of eleven artists. One of the most respected and highly competitive young artist programs in the world, the HGO Studio provides comprehensive career development to young singers, and pianist/coaches who have demonstrated potential to make major contributions to the field of opera.

“Each year we are blown away by the number of applications and the high-level talent we see while selecting our Studio members,” said HGO Studio Director Brian Speck. “The accomplished artists selected to join the HGO Studio are destined for major careers, and we are excited to be a part of developing their extraordinary talents through the HGO Studio program.”

First-year HGO Studio artists are:

- **Blake Denson**, baritone
- **Ricardo Garcia**, tenor
- **Cory McGee**, bass, second place winner for the 32nd annual Concert of Arias competition
- **Raven McMillon**, soprano
- **Sun-Ly Pierce**, mezzo-soprano, first place winner for the 32nd annual Concert of Arias competition
- **Bin Yu Sanford**, pianist/coach

Returning HGO Studio artists are:

- **Lindsay Kate Brown**, mezzo-soprano
- **Alex Munger**, pianist/coach
- **Nicholas Newton**, bass-baritone
- **William Guanbo Su**, bass
- **Elena Villalón**, soprano

The HGO Studio received applications from over 650 singers and pianists this year. Of those applications, over 250 were heard during auditions in New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Houston. For singers, the audition process culminates in HGO’s annual Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias, which was held on February 7, 2020.

During a residency of up to three years, HGO Studio artists receive specialized training in voice, movement, and languages. Studio artists are cast in major and supporting roles in mainstage productions, giving them the

opportunity to work with world-renowned artists, directors, and conductors. The members also participate in recital series and perform in venues across the city and state for numerous events.

Founded in 1977 by HGO's then-General Director David Gockley and composer Carlisle Floyd, the HGO Studio was established to help young artists transition from their academic training to careers in opera. Members commit to an intense, individualized study program while living in Houston from mid-August through May.

2020–21 HGO Studio Artist Biographies

LINDSAY KATE BROWN (returning)

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Mr. and Mrs. James W. Crownover/Lynn and Henry Gissel Fellow

HGO Studio artist Lindsay Kate Brown won third prize in HGO's 2018 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. This year she won first place in the Upper Midwest Region of The Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and competed in the national Grand Finals in March 2020. She earned an artist diploma in opera studies at Rice University, where she portrayed the roles of Cecilia March in *Little Women*, Zita in *Gianni Schicchi* and Cornelia in *Julius Caesar*. She made her professional debut with Tri-Cities Opera in 2014. In the summer of 2018, she was a young artist at Des Moines Metro Opera, where she reprised the role of Ma Moss in Copland's *The Tender Land* and covered the role of Ježibaba in Dvořák's *Rusalka*. This past summer she sang the role of the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos* with Wolf Trap Opera. She will join The Santa Fe Opera as an Apprentice Artist in summer 2020. Her 2019–20 roles at HGO are Giovanna in *Rigoletto* and Second Lady in *The Magic Flute*.

WILLIAM GUANBO SU (returning)

BASS

Anne and Albert Chao Fellow

HGO Studio artist William Guanbo Su won second prize in HGO's 2019 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias and was a Grand Finals Winner of the 2019 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. He has been a Gerdine Young Artist at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and a voice fellow at the Aspen Music Festival. Roles include Pluton in Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, Herr Reich in Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Seneca in Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*. He has studied German lieder at the Franz Schubert Institute in Vienna, and in 2017 won first prize in the Gerda Lissner Lieder Competition. During the summer of 2019, he sang Count Ceprano in Verdi's *Rigoletto* with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis as a Gerdine Young Artist. His 2019–20 roles at HGO are Usher in *Rigoletto*, Fifth Jew in *Salome*, Second Armored Man in *The Magic Flute*, and Sparafucile in HGO's outdoor performances of *Rigoletto*. He will return to Aspen in summer 2020 to perform the role of Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*.

NICHOLAS NEWTON (returning)

BASS-BARITONE

Dr. and Mrs. Theodore J. Haywood/Kathleen Moore and Steven Homer/Jill and Allyn Risley Fellow

First-year HGO Studio artist Nicholas Newton is an alumnus of HGO's Young Artists Vocal Academy (2016) and won third prize in HGO's 2019 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. Notable performances include the roles of Count Ceprano in *Rigoletto* and Capulet (cover) in *Roméo et Juliette* with Wolf Trap Opera, Achilla in *Julius Caesar* at Rice University, and L'arbre and Le fauteuil in *L'enfant et les sortilèges* at the Aspen Music Festival. Newton was a 2019 national semifinalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and the first-place winner of the 2018 Virginia & Susan Hawk Competition. In summer 2019, he sang Monterone in *Rigoletto* with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. In the

summer of 2020, he will return to Wolf Trap Opera as Colline in *La bohème*. During the 2019–20 season at HGO, he will reprise Monterone and portray the Second Soldier in *Salome*.

ALEX MUNGER (returning)

PIANIST/COACH

Dr. Saúl and Ursula Balagura/Mr. Trey Yates Fellow

Prior to joining the HGO Studio, Alex Munger was a staff pianist at the University of Illinois, where he helped prepare *La bohème* and *The Rape of Lucretia*, among other duties. In 2018, Alex was a fellowship pianist with the Aspen Opera Center, where he worked on *Il barbiere di Siviglia*; he returned to Aspen this past summer. He received his master of music degree in vocal coaching and accompanying from the University of Illinois, where he worked on productions of *Don Giovanni* and *Hansel and Gretel*. Previous engagements include the Bay View Music Festival (*Carmen*), where he returned in 2019 as a faculty pianist for its two-week opera and art song program. Next summer, he will be a coaching fellow at Wolf Trap Opera. During the 2019–20 season at HGO, he coached *Rigoletto*, *La favorite*, and will coach *The Magic Flute* this spring. He appeared with tenor Richard Trey Smagur in a recital of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* at Houston's Jones Hall in a program of songs and choruses presented by the Houston Symphony. Additionally, he appeared with HGO Studio singers in recital and other performances throughout the season.

ELENA VILLALÓN (returning)

SOPRANO

Mr. and Mrs. Harlan C. Stai Fellow

HGO Studio artist Elena Villalón was a Grand Finals winner of the 2019 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and the Audience Choice Award winner in HGO's 2019 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. She recently performed the role of Inès in the HGO premiere of *La favorite*. She is a recent graduate of the Cincinnati College–Conservatory of Music (CCM), has been a vocal fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, and is an alumna of HGO's 2018 Young Artists Vocal Academy. Previous appearances at CCM include Adele in *Die Fledermaus*, Lucy in *The Telephone*, and Miss Wordsworth in *Albert Herring*. In summer 2019, she performed Barbarina in *The Marriage of Figaro* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis as a Gerdine Young Artist and returned to the Tanglewood Music Center as a soprano fellow. During the 2019–20 season at HGO, she performs the Page in *Rigoletto*, Woman in selected performances of *El Milagro del Recuerdo/The Miracle of Remembering*, and Inès in *La favorite*. This summer, she will make her Santa Fe Opera debut as the First Wood Sprite in *Rusalka*.

SUN-LY PIERCE (incoming)

MEZZO- SOPRANO

Originally from Clinton, New York, Chinese American mezzo-soprano Sun-Ly Pierce recently won first place in the 32nd annual Concert of Arias competition. She completed the graduate vocal arts program at the Bard College Conservatory of Music and holds a bachelor's degree in vocal performance from the Eastman School of Music. As a winner of the Marilyn Horne Song Competition, Pierce will perform on an international recital tour with pianist Chien-Lin Lu. The tour includes appearances in Santa Barbara, Chicago, New York City, and London and will feature the premiere of a new song cycle written by two-time Grammy Award winning composer, Jennifer Higdon. This past fall, Pierce joined the Broad Street Orchestra as Dorinda in Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. She returns to the Music Academy of the West this summer as a 2020 Vocal Fellow, performing the role of L'enfant in Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* and covering Hänsel in Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*.

CORY MCGEE (incoming)

BASS

Hailing from Stafford, Virginia, Cory McGee recently won second place in the 32nd annual Concert of Arias competition. He is currently pursuing his master of music degree at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. This past summer, he joined Santa Fe Opera as an apprentice artist, portraying the role of the Gardener in Ruder's *The Thirteenth Child*. He recently performed the role of Sodbuster in The Shepherd School of Music's production of Missy Mazzoli's *Proving Up*. Previous roles include Elder Ott in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*, La Voce in Mozart's *Idomeneo*, and Ranger Nat in Wolf Trap's commissioned children's opera, David Hanlon's *Listen, Wilhelmina!*. McGee was also a soloist in *Bernstein at 100 - A Celebration*, at Wolf Trap's Filene Center. Recent engagements include Sylvano in Cavalli's *La Calisto* (Rice University), the title role of *Le nozze di Figaro* and Pandolfe in Massenet's *Cendrillon* (Oberlin Opera Theater), and Leporello in *Don Giovanni* (Oberlin in Italy).

RICARDO GARCIA (incoming)

TENOR

A native of Castro Valley, California, Ricardo Garcia recently completed his master's degree in voice at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM) and holds a bachelor's degree from the University of the Pacific. Previous roles at SFCM include Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw*, Male Chorus in *The Rape of Lucretia*, and Younger Thompson in *Glory Denied*. He was a studio artist at Wolf Trap Opera, where he covered Roméo in *Roméo et Juliette* and Giocondo in *La pietra del paragone*. Garcia was a voice fellow with Music Academy of the West where he sang Jenik in *The Bartered Bride*. Recent roles include Lamplighter/Drunkard in *The Little Prince* and Fenton in *Falstaff*. As a first-year apprentice at Santa Fe Opera, he covered Parpignol in *La bohème* as well as sang Fenton/Normanno in the Apprentice Scenes Night. Recently, Ricardo won the San Francisco district of the Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions and advanced to the region finals in Los Angeles.

RAVEN MCMILLON (incoming)

SOPRANO

Baltimore native Raven McMillon received her bachelor of fine arts in vocal performance at Carnegie Mellon University. She is currently a student at the University of Cincinnati-College Conservatory of Music (CCM). Her opera credits include Adele in *Die Fledermaus*; the title role in *Goldie B. Locks and the Three Singing Bears*; Linfea in *La Calisto*; and Barbarina in *Le nozze di Figaro*. In addition to her opera credits, McMillon has also workshopped new roles such as Mary in Chiao's *The Secret Codes of Mary Bowser* and Lucy in Picker's *Awakenings*. Her upcoming roles include La Princesse in *L'enfant et les sortilèges* with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Papagena in *Die Zauberflöte* at CCM. McMillon contributes regularly to the professional choruses of companies such as Cincinnati Opera and Pittsburgh Opera.

BLAKE DENSON (incoming)

BARITONE

A native of Kentucky, baritone Blake Denson was a Grand Finals winner in the 2020 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and is a 2018 alumnus of HGO's Young Artists Vocal Academy (YAVA). He obtained his bachelor of music in voice degree from the University of Kentucky School of Music and is currently a second-year master's student at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, where he studies with Dr. Stephen King. While at Rice, he has performed as Elder McLean in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* and Mercurio in *La Calisto*. Denson was a Studio Artist at Wolf Trap Opera in 2018, where he covered Emperor Kaiser in *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* and Pierrot in *L'île de Merlin*. He will return to Wolf Trap Opera for a second season this summer and will perform the Commander and cover the title role in *Eugene Onegin* as well as cover the role of Marcello in *La bohème*.

BIN YU SANFORD (incoming)

PIANIST/COACH

Korean native Bin Yu Sanford has established herself as a solo pianist, vocal coach, and chamber musician. Sanford earned her master of music in solo piano performance from West Chester University of Pennsylvania and bachelor of music in solo piano performance from Seoul National University. Currently, she is pursuing her doctorate degree in solo piano performance and an artist diploma in opera coaching at the University of Cincinnati, College Conservatory of Music (CCM). Recently, she was selected as one of the vocal piano fellows at Music Academy of the West, where she worked on Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain*. Since 2017, Sanford has been serving as a graduate assistant in the opera department at CCM. During her time at CCM, she has worked as a rehearsal pianist and coach for *Die Zauberflöte*, *Falstaff*, *The Bartered Bride*, *La Clemenza di Tito*, *La Calisto*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Suor Angelica*, and *Ariodante*. She was the first prize winner of the Pennsylvania MTNA Young Artist Piano Competition. This summer, she will join the Glimmerglass Festival as an apprentice pianist.

To learn more about the HGO Studio, visit HGO.org/studio.

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About Houston Grand Opera

Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is one of the largest, most innovative, and most highly acclaimed opera companies in the United States. HGO is the only American finalist for Opera Company of the Year for the 2019 International Opera Awards. In fulfilling its mission to advance the operatic art to serve an ever-evolving audience, HGO has led the field in commissioning new works (65 world premieres to date) and in training and nurturing promising young artists and administrators. The company contributes to the cultural enrichment of Houston and the nation through a diverse and innovative program of performances, community events, and education projects that reaches the widest possible public. HGO's pioneering community engagement initiative, HGOco, has served as a model for other arts organizations.

The NEXUS Initiative is HGO's multiyear ticket underwriting program that allows Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy opera without the barrier of price. Since 2007, NEXUS has enabled more than 250,000 Houstonians to experience superlative opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

HGO has toured extensively and has won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and three Emmy awards. It is the only opera company to win all three honors.

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