Houston Grand Opera Presents American Premiere of Mieczyslaw Weinberg’s Holocaust Opera *The Passenger* (1968) in David Pountney’s Hit Production (Jan. 18–Feb. 2)

Houston TX, October 4, 2013— On January 18, 2014, Houston Grand Opera (HGO) presents the American premiere of *The Passenger* (1968), a powerful Holocaust opera by exiled Polish-Jewish composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg. Based on a novel by Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz, *The Passenger* was recognized as “a perfect masterpiece” by Shostakovich but was censored by the Soviet establishment and never performed in Weinberg’s lifetime. It premiered at the 2010 Bregenz Festival, and its subsequent U.K. premiere at the English National Opera took place only thanks to award-winning British director David Pountney, whose staging inspired the Telegraph to write: “Risky though it may be to label a first production ‘definitive,’ it is hard to imagine it ever being done better.” Now HGO brings the same production across the Atlantic, complete with mezzo Michelle Breedt, who “excelled” (New York Times) in the leading role at two European premieres. All five of *The Passenger*’s first American performances (Jan. 18–Feb. 2) will be led by Patrick Summers, HGO’s artistic and music director.

Houston Grand Opera boasts a longstanding tradition of creating and presenting important premieres, from the centuries-overdue first American staging of Handel’s *Rinaldo* with Marilyn Horne in the title role, to world premiere productions of such contemporary classics as Leonard Bernstein’s *A Quiet Place*, John Adams’s *Nixon in China*, Mark Adamo’s *Little Women*, and the American premiere of Philip Glass’s *Akhnaten*. Among HGO’s most recent world premieres are presentations of Jake Heggie’s *Three Decembers* (2008), André Previn’s *Brief Encounter* (2009), and Leonard Foglia and José “Pepe” Martinez’s *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna* (2010), all of which were commissioned by the company. By bringing *The Passenger* to America, Houston Grand Opera now also plays a key role in restoring to the canon a nd pioneering those operas that have been unjustly suppressed or neglected. Thanks to HGO, Weinberg will soon join the ranks of composers like Ernst Krenek, Franz Schreker, and Sergei Taneyev, whose operas have only recently been staged in America.

Polish-born composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg (1919–96) was the only member of his immediate family to survive the Holocaust, having escaped in 1939 when Germany invaded his homeland. Sadly, his relocation to the Soviet Union only meant a second period of danger and discrimination under Stalin. Many of Weinberg’s works were banned; others, like *The Passenger*, were deemed “cosmopolitan”—a euphemism for Jewish—and never performed. Today, however, his works are enjoying a posthumous resurgence. He was the subject of a recent monograph titled *Mieczyslaw Weinberg: In Search of Freedom* and is recognized as “an artist of fierce honesty and compositional dexterity” (Observer, U.K.).
Weinberg’s magnum opus was his first opera, *The Passenger* (1968), which was set to a libretto by Alexander Medvedev and based on *Passenger from Cabin Number 45* (1959), a Polish radio play by Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz. Set in the late 1950s, the opera depicts a German couple, Liese and Walter, on board an ocean liner where Liese, a former SS officer, thinks she recognizes among their fellow passengers one of her erstwhile Auschwitz prisoners. Juxtaposed with scenes on board the luxury ship are flashbacks to the railway tracks, ovens, and barracks of the camp where she once wielded control. Liese is never able to confirm whether the woman she sees is truly Marta, the Jewish woman she once manipulated, and *The Passenger* makes no attempt at closure or reconciliation. Instead, the harsh and complex realities of the mass murder Liese helped perpetrate, and of her inescapable guilt feelings, are unsparingly confronted.

Despite the Soviet suppression of Weinberg’s masterwork, it had the staunch support of Shostakovich, who wrote in 1974:

> “I shall never tire of the opera *The Passenger* by M. Weinberg. I have heard it three times already and have studied the score. Besides, I understood the beauty and enormity of this music better and better on each occasion. It is a perfect masterpiece.”

Nonetheless, the opera was not heard in concert until 2006 and would not be fully staged until the efforts of David Pountney bore fruit. The English director, whose honors include a CBE and Chevalier in France’s Ordre des Arts et Lettres, serves as chief executive and artistic director of Welsh National Opera and as intendant of the Bregenz Festival. It was at the 2010 Bregenz Festival that he finally found a platform for the overdue premiere of *The Passenger*. The *New York Times* reported:

> “The work was brilliantly served by David Pountney’s production. Johan Engels’s two-level set, with the ship above and the camp below—bleakly characterized by railroad tracks and wooden bunks—facilitated the shift in action from one to the other. Marie-Jeanne Lecca’s realistic costumes, which dressed all those on board ship in white, heightened the contrast.”

In October 2010 the production moved to the Teatr Weikli in Warsaw for its Polish premiere. The following year, Pountney and his team brought that same staging to London’s English National Opera, where the critical response was overwhelming. The *Telegraph* recognized that “in Mieczyslaw Weinberg’s Holocaust opera *The Passenger*, we have one of the most unflinching engagements with this subject ever made.” The *Times* of London agreed: “It’s an opera teeming with overt references, from haunting Russian folksong to blaring German marches, as well as astringent string writing reminiscent of Britten. … A compelling historical document that demanded an airing— lest we forget,” while the *Independent* pronounced it “the most significant opera composed in the Russian language since Prokofiev’s *War and Peace*.”

South African mezzo Michelle Breedt consistently drew praise for her nuanced portrayal of Liese, as seen in the *Arts Desk’s* report on her performance in London:

> “A finer, more secure voice than Michelle Breedt’s hasn’t been heard at ENO. Since Bregenz, she’s tried to further humanize the young camp overseer whose rejected need to be loved or admired by her charges warps into subtle psychological sadism. Breedt has always been totally in command of Liese the older woman with a conscience that won’t let her evade the truth, hard as she tries.”

Making her house debut in Houston Grand Opera’s upcoming revival, Michelle Breedt will be joined by Canadian tenor Joseph Kaiser, best known for his starring role in Kenneth Branagh’s film adaptation of *The Magic Flute*, and by soprano Melody Moore, whose recent house debut in *Show Boat* was praised by audiences and critics alike.
Further examining the themes explored in The Passenger, HGOco—Houston Grand Opera’s community collaboration and education initiative—will present a number of activities and programs throughout the city, focused on remembrance of the past and connection to the present through music, community conversation, and art. A series of three free concerts begins with the world premiere of a new work by HGO Studio alumnus and composer David Hanlon, commemorating the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht and based on the story of his grandfather, one of the thousands of Jewish people arrested on that infamous night and sent to Dachau (Nov. 10 at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center). The series continues with a concert exploring the music, art, poetry, and philosophy that emerged from Terezín, a concentration camp located in what is now the Czech Republic (Dec. 8 at Asia Society Texas center, with Holocaust Museum Houston). The program will be hosted by Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer, professor of English emeritus at Simmons College. The third and final performance features music of memory and hope with world premieres of works by Lawrence Siegel and Paul English based on text, interviews, and inspiration from Holocaust survivor Naomi Warren (Feb. 22 at Congregation Beth Israel).

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Further details of the American premiere of The Passenger are provided below, and more information is available at Houston Grand Opera's website: HGO.org.

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**Houston Grand Opera presents:**

*The Passenger* (American premiere) by Mieczyslaw Weinberg

**Jan. 18, 22, 25, 31; Feb. 2m, 2014**

**Cast:**

Liese: Michelle Breedt *
Walter: Joseph Kaiser
Marta: Melody Moore
Tadeusz: Morgan Smith *
Katya: Kelly Kaduce *
Bronka: Kathryn Day *

**Creative team:**

Conductor: Patrick Summers
Director: David Pountney
Set Designer: Johan Engels
Costume Designer: Marie-Jeanne Lecca
Lighting Designer: Fabrice Kebour *
Fight Director: Leraldo Anzaldúa
Associate Director: Rob Kearley *
Chorus Master: Richard Bado ‡

* HGO debut; † HGO Studio artist; ‡ Former HGO Studio artist

The Passenger is a co-production of Bregenzer Festspiele, Austria; Wielki Teatr, Warsaw; English National Opera, London; and Teatro Real, Madrid.
Since its inception in 1955, Houston Grand Opera has grown from a small regional organization into an internationally renowned opera company. HGO enjoys a reputation for commissioning and producing new works, including fifty world premieres and six American premieres since 1973. In addition to producing and performing world-class opera, HGO 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 has toured extensively, including trips to Europe and Asia, and it is the only opera company to have won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards. HGO's performances are broadcast nationally over the WFMT Radio Network.

Through HGOco, Houston Grand Opera creates opportunities for Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to observe, participate in, and create art. Its Song of Houston project is an ongoing initiative to create and share work based on stories that define the unique character of our city and its diverse cultures. Since 2007, HGOco has commissioned sixteen new works along with countless innovative community projects, reaching more than one million people in the greater Houston metropolitan area. The NEXUS Initiative is HGO's multi-year ticket underwriting program that allows Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy world-class opera without the barrier of price. Since 2007 NEXUS has enabled more than 142,000 Houstonians to experience first-quality opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.