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Houston Grand Opera Opens 2015 with Two Stellar Productions and a 60th Anniversary Celebration

Houston, January 6, 2015—After a resoundingly successful fall season and the launch of its new holiday opera series with the world premiere of Iain Bell and Simon Callow's *A Christmas Carol*, Houston Grand Opera (HGO) rings in 2015 with two beloved productions: a reprise of Michael Grandage's knockout staging of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, which triumphed at its 2010 Houston debut, and the American premiere of **Sir Nicholas Hytner's** iconic English National Opera staging of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in a revival directed by **Ian Rutherford**.

HGO's December world premiere of the 90-minute one-man show *A Christmas Carol* drew mixed response from critics. The *Financial Times* acclaimed the opera as "brilliant," and tenor Jay Hunter Morris's performance as one of "astounding stamina and vigor," also noting the excellence of the chamber orchestra and calling the "stark production a major plus." The *Houston Chronicle* found the opera "compelling...with fresh, powerful impact" and Mr. Morris's performance a "tour de force." But to the *Wall Street Journal*, the opera "has the tone of a lecture with a lesson attached" and that "the evening never warmed up."

A "breathtaking" *Madame Butterfly*, a classic *Magic Flute*, and more....

Opening January 23, **Michael Grandage's** stellar staging of *Madame Butterfly* scored a veritable hit when it premiered at HGO in 2010. The *Houston Chronicle* reported:

Breathtakingly beautiful to see and to hear, Houston Grand Opera's new production of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* launches the company's 56th season on a note of subtle yet complete triumph. With artfully focused direction by the renowned Michael Grandage in his notable HGO debut and soprano **Ana María Martínez** making a memorable role debut with her gloriously sung and powerfully acted Cio-Cio-San, this is a textbook example of how to refresh a beloved "warhorse" while remaining true to all its core values.

HGO is delighted to welcome back Grammy Award-winner Ana María Martínez to reprise her extraordinarily rich portrayal of the title role; an HGO Studio alumna, the lyric soprano was the inaugural recipient of the company's annual Lynn Wyatt Great Artist Award. Revival director **Louisa Muller** maintains a similarly strong relationship with the house, where she recently directed the 2013 HGO Studio Showcase. The upcoming production marks her HGO main-stage directorial debut.

Joining Martínez as Pinkerton is Siberian tenor **Alexey Dolgov**, who enjoyed success in the role at Washington National Opera. HGO Studio alumnus and Texas native **Scott Hendricks** sings Sharpless; the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* writes: “Hendricks’s voice is rich and agile, and as an actor he has an incredible presence.”

Making his U.S. operatic debut, multiple Grammy Award–winner **Giancarlo Guerrero**—music director of the Nashville Symphony—will lead from the podium.

In describing Sir Nicholas Hytner’s *Magic Flute* production, which opens at HGO on January 30, the London *Telegraph* reports that “few productions articulate this opera’s profound message quite so simply yet engagingly, and Hytner strikes an ideal balance by acknowledging the work’s Enlightenment values and Masonic messages, while never allowing that symbolism to weigh things down.”

Two of *The Magic Flute*’s principals are making their HGO debuts: Houston resident **David Portillo** brings “his warm, sexy lyric tenor” (*Opera News*) to the role of Tamino, while **Kathryn Lewek**, a double prize-winner at the 2013 Operalia World Opera Competition, imbues the Queen of the Night’s high notes with “clarity, color, sparkle, and a seamless line” (*Financial Times*). HGO Studio alumna. Houstonian **Nicole Heaston** sings Pamina, a role she has performed at HGO and the Metropolitan Opera, among others. Bass **Morris Robinson**, fresh from success at Washington National Opera, sings her antagonist, Sarastro, and bass-baritone **Michael Sumuel**, an HGO Studio alumnus most recently heard in Houston’s *Die Fledermaus*, returns as the comical birdcatcher, Papageno.

The Magic Flute will be conducted by **Robert Spano**, a former *Musical America* Conductor of the Year and winner of six Grammy Awards for his recordings with the Atlanta Symphony.

HGO will celebrate the company’s 60th anniversary with a gala concert on March 19, featuring renowned mezzo-soprano and HGO Studio alumna Joyce DiDonato. April 18 marks the opening of *Die Walküre*, the second installment of Wagner’s epic *Ring* cycle in the stunning **La Fura dels Baus** production, featuring **Iain Paterson** as Wotan, **Christine Goerke** as Brünnhilde, **Simon O’Neill** as Siegmund, **Karita Mattila** as Sieglinde, and **Jamie Barton** as Fricka, with HGO Artistic and Music Director **Patrick Summers** on the podium.

On April 24 HGO presents the American premiere of **Lee Blakeley**’s new staging of **Stephen Sondheim**’s macabre masterpiece *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. When it premiered in Paris, the *Wall Street Journal* punningly pronounced the black comedy “a cut above... [in] Lee Blakeley’s brilliant production.” HGO’s stellar cast includes **Nathan Gunn** as Sweeney Todd, **Susan Bullock** as Mrs. Lovett, and HGO Studio alumnus **Nicholas Phan** as Tobias Ragg. Grammy-nominated conductor and HGO Studio alumnus **James Lowe** will lead from the pit.

The 60th anniversary season closes in May with three performances of *El Pasado Nunca Se Termina/The Past Is Never Finished*, a new mariachi opera by José “Pepe” Martínez and Leonard Foglia, the same creative team behind HGO’s wildly popular *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna/To Cross the Face of the Moon*. Like *Cruzar*, *El Pasado* will also feature the renowned ensemble Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán.

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About Houston Grand Opera

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 55 world premieres and seven 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 has won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards—the only opera company to have won all three awards.

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 175,000 Houstonians to experience first-quality opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

* HGO debut

+ current or former HGO Studio artist

Puccini: Madame Butterfly

Jan. 23, 25m, 28, 31; Feb. 6, 8m, 2015

Conductor: Giancarlo Guerrero*

Production: Michael Grandage

Revival Director: Louisa Muller

Set and Costume Designer: Christopher Oram

Original Lighting Designer: Neil Austin

Chorus Master: Richard Bado

Cio-Cio-San: Ana María Martínez+

Pinkerton: Alexey Dolgov

Sharpless: Scott Hendricks+

Suzuki: Sofia Selowsky*+

Goro: John Easterlin*

A co-production with Grand Théâtre de Genève and Lyric Opera of Chicago

Mozart: The Magic Flute

Jan. 30, Feb. 1m, 4, 7, 14, 2015

Conductor: Robert Spano

Production: Sir Nicholas Hytner

Revival Director: Ian Rutherford

Set and Costume Designer: Bob Crowley*

Original Lighting Designer: Nick Chelton

Chorus Master: Richard Bado

Tamino: David Portillo*

Pamina: Nicole Heaston+

Queen of the Night: Kathryn Lewek*

Sarastro: Morris Robinson

Papageno: Michael Sumuel+

Speaker: Patrick Carfizzi

Monostatos: Aaron Pegram*

First Lady: D'Ana Lombard+

Second Lady: Megan Samarin*+

Third Lady: Renée Tatum

Papagena: Pureum Jo*+

Production originally created by English National Opera

**60th Anniversary Concert
March 19, 2015**

Joyce DiDonato, mezzo-soprano
Conductor: Patrick Summers
HGO Studio artists
HGO Orchestra

**Wagner: Die Walküre
April 18, 22, 25, 30; May 3m, 2015**

Conductor: Patrick Summers
Director: Carlus Padrissa / La Fura dels Baus
Associate Director: Esteban Muñoz
Set Designer: Roland Olbeter
Costume Designer: Chu Uroz
Lighting Designer: Peter van Praet
Video Designer: Franc Aleu
Brünnhilde: Christine Goerke
Wotan: Iain Paterson
Sieglinde: Karita Mattila
Siegmund: Simon O'Neill
Fricka: Jamie Barton+
Hunding: Ain Anger

A co-production of Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía, Valencia, and Maggio Musicale, Florence

**Stephen Sondheim: Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street
April 24, 26m, 29, May 2, 8, 9, 2015**

Conductor: James Lowe+
Director: Lee Blakeley
Set and Costume Designer: Tanya McCallin
Lighting Designer: Rick Fisher
Choreographer: Lorena Randi*
Chorus Master: Richard Bado
Sweeney Todd: Nathan Gunn
Mrs. Lovett: Susan Bullock
Johanna: Megan Samarin+
Anthony Hope: Morgan Pearse+
Tobias Ragg: Nicholas Phan+
Judge Turpin: Jake Gardner
Beggar Woman: Cynthia Clayton

*Production originally created by Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris
Premiered at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris on April 22, 2011
Co-owned by Houston Grand Opera, San Francisco Opera, and Théâtre du Châtelet*

***El Pasado Nunca Se Termina/The Past Is Never Finished*
May 13, 16, 17m, 2015**

Music: José "Pepe" Martínez
Libretto: Leonard Foglia
with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán

A co-production with Lyric Opera of Chicago

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