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## Houston Grand Opera Announces Concert of Arias 2016 Semifinalists

*Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers, February 4, 2016*

Houston, January 29, 2016—Houston Grand Opera (HGO) has chosen the semifinalists for the 28<sup>th</sup> annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers Concert of Arias, to be presented in the Cullen Theater at the Wortham Theater Center on Thursday, February 4, at 7 p.m. This year's semifinalists are:

Sopranos: Yelena Dyachek, Jessica Fasel, Madison Leonard, Noluvuyiso Mpofu, Alexandra Razskazoff, Jemeesa Yarborough

Mezzo-sopranos: Zoie Reams, Alisha Rosa

Tenors: Matthew Arnold, Ian Koziara, Jamez McCorkle, Jack Swanson

Baritones: Sol Jin, Benjamin C. Taylor

The Eleanor McCollum competition is a crucial recruitment tool for the Houston Grand Opera Studio, one of the most highly respected and prestigious young artist programs in the country. For more than 35 years, the HGO Studio has served young singers and pianist/coaches who have completed their academic training and are preparing to embark on full-fledged operatic careers. Each year after an exhaustive international search, a hand-selected group of the most exceptionally talented individuals is brought here to Houston to work on the main stage and in recital alongside the best in the business at Houston Grand Opera. During a residency of up to three years, each performer collaborates with an expert team while gaining invaluable experience at the highest professional level.

Alumni of the HGO Studio perform at the best opera houses all around the world, and internationally renowned artists such as Joyce DiDonato, Ana María Martínez, Jamie Barton, and Ryan McKinny still regularly return to their home stage at the Wortham Center. For many, the HGO Studio is just the beginning of a lifelong relationship with HGO.

Now in its 28<sup>th</sup> year, the competition received 475 applications from singers and 24 applications from pianists from around the globe. Auditions were conducted in New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and Houston. Fourteen semifinalists have been chosen after careful consideration for a chance to compete in the final round of the prestigious competition. The field of semifinalists will be narrowed down to around eight finalists on the Sunday prior to the Concert of Arias. The selected finalists then have the opportunity to find out more about HGO and work with HGO musical staff leading up to the concert. Each will perform two arias and compete for \$25,000 in cash prizes.

The judging panel will be led by HGO Artistic and Music Director **Patrick Summers** and HGO Managing Director **Perryn Leech**. Serving as guest judges are two distinguished alumni of the HGO Studio, soprano **Heidi Stober** and baritone **Joshua Hopkins**, both of whom are now appearing on HGO's main stage in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Finalists will be accompanied by HGO Head of Music Staff **Bradley Moore**. The audience also has the opportunity to participate in the evening's events when they choose their favorite singer for the Audience Choice Award. All proceeds from Concert of Arias 2016 benefit The Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers and Houston Grand Opera Studio.

Last year a new award of \$2,000 was established by renowned soprano and HGO Studio alumna Ana María Martínez to identify a developing young singer with exceptional promise who would greatly benefit from the additional support for his or her continued training. The **Ana María Martínez Encouragement Award** will again be given this year.

This year's Concert of Arias, chaired by **Cynthia and Anthony Petrello**, honors **Pat and Daniel Breen** for their many years of generous support of HGO and Studio events. The evening begins with a champagne reception at 6 p.m. The vocal competition will commence at 7 p.m. in the Wortham Theater Center's Cullen Theater and will also feature a performance by current artists of the HGO Studio. Following the concert, artists, patrons, and underwriters will be seated for dinner catered by Jackson and Company in the Grand Foyer.

## **Biographies:**

### **Matthew Arnold**

Tenor—United States

Hailing from New Jersey, Matthew Arnold spent this past summer at the Chautauqua Institution, where he received the Chautauqua Opera Encouragement Award. He also received an Encouragement Award at the 2015 Heafner/Williams Vocal Competition, and in April 2014, he won the Verdi Award from the Orpheus National Vocal Competition in Tennessee. He sang Prince Yamadori in *Madame Butterfly* at the Castleton Festival under the baton of the late Maestro Lorin Maazel and has also performed with the A. J. Fletcher Opera Institute at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, where he is currently a fellow; Piedmont Opera; Opera Roanoke; North Carolina Opera; Greensboro Light Opera and Song; and Chautauqua Opera. Recent performances include Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus*, Don José in *Carmen*, and Florestan in scenes from *Fidelio*. He holds degrees in voice from the University of Delaware (BM) and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (MM).

### **Yelena Dyachek**

Soprano—Ukraine/U.S.

Yelena Dyachek is a student at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, where she has performed Vitellia in *La clemenza di Tito*, the title role in *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and Madama Cortese in *Il*

*viaggio a Reims*. With the Aspen Opera Theater Center, she performed Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte* and Tatyana in *Eugene Onegin*. While an undergraduate student at University of the Pacific Conservatory of Music, Dyachek appeared in a National Opera Association Award–winning production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as Mrs. Ford, Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, and Mrs. Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera*. She has won awards in the National Mondavi Young Artist’s Competition and the Pacific Musical Society Competition, and in March, she will represent the Western region in the semifinals of the Metropolitan National Council Auditions. Upcoming performances include Frau Von Daubek in the concert premiere of Thomas Morse’s *Frau Schindler* and the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos* at USC.

### **Jessica Fasel**

Soprano—United States

Jessica Fasel is pursuing her master’s degree at the University of Cincinnati College–Conservatory of Music (CCM). She was the recipient of the Corbett Award at the 2015–16 Corbett Opera Scholarship Vocal Competition. She was a Gerdine Young Artist with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in the summer of 2015 and is engaged with the company for the summer of 2016. She recently competed in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions Middle/East Tennessee District and moved on as a finalist for the Mid-South regionals; she previously won third place at the Central regionals. In January 2015, she advanced to the Upper Midwest regionals and won an Encouragement Award. Performances include Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*, Hanna in *The Merry Widow*, Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus*, Vitellia in *La clemenza di Tito*, and Mrs. Grose in *The Turn of the Screw*.

### **Sol Jin**

Baritone—Korea

Sol Jin, one of 25 young singers called rising opera stars by *Opera News* last October, most recently performed at Carnegie Hall and with San Francisco Opera’s Merola Program as Germont in *La traviata*, the role with which he made his opera debut at Long Island Opera Company. He has also appeared as Rodrigo in *Don Carlo* and Prince Yeletsky in *The Queen of Spades* and covered the title role in *Gianni Schicchi* with the Merola Program; he performed the title role in *Macbeth* with the Manhattan School of Music. Other credits this season include the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro* with Long Island Opera Company. He studied at The Manhattan School of Music (master’s degree) and Yonsei University (bachelor’s degree). Among his awards, he received first prize in The Gerda Lissner Foundation International Vocal Competition and fourth prize in The Licia Albanese–Puccini Foundation Annual International Vocal Competition. He recently won first prize in the Eastern region of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and will proceed to the semi-final round at the Met this March.

### **Ian Koziara**

Tenor—United States

A native of Chicago, Illinois, Ian Koziara is in his second year of study for his master of music degree at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, having received his bachelor of music degree from Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. He has recently appeared with Wolf Trap Opera in *Madame Butterfly* and *The Ghosts of Versailles*, with the Rice University Opera Program as the Witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, and as a soloist with the Ravinia Festival’s Steans Music Institute. This summer, he will join the Glimmerglass Festival as Ezekiel Cheever in Ward’s *The Crucible*.

### **Madison Leonard**

Soprano—United States

This spring, Madison Leonard will complete her master’s degree at Northwestern University, where she appeared as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Geraldine in *A Hand of Bridge*, Ginevra in *Ariodante*, Kitty Hart in *Dead Man Walking*, and Madame Herz in *The Impresario*. With San Francisco Opera’s Merola Program, she performed Monica in *The Medium* and Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel* in the Grand Finale Concert. A finalist at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions for the Illinois district, Leonard received the 2015 Lynn

Harvey Foundation Scholarship from the Musicians Club of Women, the Coates Scholarship from the North Shore Musicians Club, and first place in the Central region of the NATS (National Association of Teachers of Singing) competition. An alumna of Pepperdine University, where she sang Adina in *The Elixir of Love* and Despina in *Così fan tutte*, Leonard will cover Nannetta in *Falstaff* as an apprentice artist at Des Moines Metro Opera this summer.

### **Jamez McCorkle**

Tenor—United States

Jamez McCorkle was a top prize winner in the 2013 vocal competitions of both the Sullivan Foundation and the George London Foundation, was voted Audience Favorite in the 2013 Lyric Opera of Chicago Ryan Final Auditions, and won first prize in the 2013 Brava! Opera Theater and James M. Collier Young Artist Program Vocal Competition. He has also received awards from the Gerda Lissner Foundation, Bagby Foundation for the Musical Arts, Licia Albanese–Puccini Foundation, National Opera Association, and the S. Livingston Mather Scholarship competitions. He has performed with the Curtis Opera Theatre, Music Academy of the West, I Sing Beijing, and the International Vocal Arts Institute. In concert, he has worked with the New York City Opera Orchestra, Chelsea Symphony, Curtis Symphony Orchestra, and the Gamac Orchestra. He is pursuing a degree at the Curtis Institute of Music.

### **Noluvuyiso Mpfu**

Soprano—South Africa

Noluvuyiso Mpfu was born in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa. She studied music at the University of Cape Town Opera School and participated as a chorus member since 2009. She was selected to sing with Bryn Terfel in a 2014 concert in Cape Town. In 2015 she participated in both the Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition and Plácido Domingo's Operalia Competition; she won third prize in Operalia, hosted by Domingo in London, and was a finalist in the Belvedere competition. Noluvuyiso recently finished her post-graduate diploma in opera at the South African College of Music at University of Cape Town, where she studied with Patrick Tikolo and Kamal Khan. She has been a member of the Cape Town Opera Studio Program since 2015.

### **Alexandra Razskazoff**

Soprano—United States

Alexandra Razskazoff, from St. Paul, Minnesota, is a second-year graduate voice student at Juilliard. She received her bachelor's degree in music from the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. While in Baltimore, she portrayed Abigail Williams in Ward's *The Crucible*, as well as Blanche de la Force from *Dialogues des Carmélites* and Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* on the stage of the Modell Performing Arts Center at the Lyric. In summer 2015, Razskazoff worked as an apprentice with the Santa Fe Opera, where she covered roles in *Rigoletto* and in the world premiere of Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain*. This summer, she will return to Santa Fe, where she will cover the role of Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*. This spring, Alexandra will portray the First Lady in Juilliard's production of *The Magic Flute*. She is the recipient of the Toulmin Scholarship at Juilliard.

### **Zoie Reams**

Mezzo-soprano—United States

Zoie Reams, a student of Dennis Jesse, is a second-year graduate student at Louisiana State University. She is a Turner-Fischer scholar and has performed as an apprentice with Minnesota Opera. She won first place in the Emerging Artist category of the 2015 *Classical Singer* competition and received an Encouragement Award at the 2015 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. Past roles include Béatrice in *Béatrice et Bénédict*, Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, and Katisha in *The Mikado*. She was a young artist with the Glimmerglass Festival in the summer of 2015 and sang in master classes for Deborah Voigt, Frederica von Stade, and Eric Owens. This coming summer, she will return to make her Glimmerglass debut as Tituba in Ward's *The Crucible*.

### **Alisha Rosa**

Mezzo-soprano—United States

Hailing from Boston, Alisha Rosa has performed Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, Ursule in *Béatrice et Bénédict*, and the Sorceress in *Dido and Aeneas* at Louisiana State University, where she is a graduate student in vocal performance. Other roles include La Principessa in *Suor Angelica* (Operafestival di Roma); Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible* (Southern University); Orfeo in *Orfeo ed Euridice*; Florence in *Albert Herring*; and Zita in *Gianni Schicchi* (Temple University, where she earned her bachelor's degree). She was the first place winner at the Mobile Opera Competition in 2015, and the vocal category winner of the Temple University Concerto Competition in 2014. In the spring, she will sing Isabella in *L'italiana in Algeri* with LSU Opera.

### **Jack Swanson**

Tenor—United States

Stillwater, Minnesota, native Jack Swanson is studying vocal performance at Rice University with Dr. Stephen King. In 2014, he joined the Santa Fe Opera Apprentice Program where he sang the 1st Japanese Envoy in Stravinsky's *Le rossignol*. While pursuing his undergraduate degree at the University of Oklahoma, he sang Nemorino in *L'elisir d'amore*, Fenton in *Falstaff*, and Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*. He was a young artist with the Seagle Music Colony for two summers, performing the title role in *Albert Herring*. Last year, he won first place in Florida Grand Opera's Young Patroness Competition and also in the competitions of the San Antonio Music Club and the National Opera Association. In concert he has been the tenor soloist in Dubois's *The Seven Last Words of Christ*.

### **Benjamin C. Taylor**

Baritone—United States

Benjamin C. Taylor is in his final year at Boston University's Opera Institute. He received his bachelor of arts degree from Morgan State University and his master of music degree from Boston University. His performances include Masetto in *Don Giovanni* and Escamillo in *The Tragedy of Carmen* with the Opera Institute, Harlekin in *Ariadne auf Naxos* as a resident artist at Opera Theater of Pittsburgh, Alfio in *Cavalleria rusticana*, Anthony in *Sweeney Todd*, Tom in Gershwin's *Blue Monday* with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Fiorello in *The Barber of Seville* as a Gerdine Young Artist at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, and the title role in *Don Giovanni* with Repertory Opera Theater of Washington. He was a district winner and regional finalist (New England) in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. He will return to Opera Theatre of Saint Louis this summer to perform Cowardly Giant in the world premiere of *Shalimar the Clown* by Jack Perla and cover the Music Teacher in *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Marcello in *La bobème*. He will also perform Marcello with Crested Butte Music Festival.

### **Jemeesa Yarborough**

Soprano—United States

Jemeesa Yarborough, a native of Baltimore, Maryland, received her bachelor's degree in voice from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts (UNCSA). She has performed the title role in *Suor Angelica* with Music Academy International, Lay Sister in the same opera at the Savannah Music Festival, and Mercy Lewis in Ward's *The Crucible* for her house debut with Piedmont Opera. While a candidate for her master of music degree at Florida State University, she performed the title role in *Rusalka*. She has been featured as a soloist with the UNCSA Cantata Singers, Florida State University Chamber Choir, and Tallahassee Civic Chorale. Yarborough has won awards from the National Association of Teachers and Students, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and Euterpe Music Club of Greensboro, North Carolina.

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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 58 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 honors.

Through HGOco, Houston Grand Opera creates opportunities for Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to observe, participate in, and create art. 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 200,000 Houstonians to experience first-quality opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

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