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## Houston Grand Opera Announces World Premiere of *What Wings They Were: The Case of Emeline*

*Based on a true Houston story, free performances April 30 & May 1*

Houston, April 6, 2016—Houston Grand Opera (HGO) will present the world premiere of ***What Wings They Were: The Case of Emeline***, a chamber opera by composer **John L. Cornelius II** and librettist **Janine Joseph**, directed by **Eileen J. Morris**, in two free public performances on April 30 at 11 a.m. at **The Ensemble Theatre** (*limited availability*) and on May 1 at 3 p.m. at **The DeLuxe Theater**. Presented under the auspices of HGOco, the company's community collaboration and education initiative, *What Wings They Were* is based on a landmark Harris County court case from 1847. The opera will be HGO's 60<sup>th</sup> world premiere.

*What Wings They Were: The Case of Emeline* tells the true story of Emeline, a young African-American woman in the 1840s who sued the Texas man who was unlawfully holding her and her two children as slaves and won the case—thus securing their freedom. Peter Gray, the brilliant young Houston lawyer who represented Emeline, went on to found what is now known as the Baker Botts law firm.

This historic case was discovered in the court archives by State District Judge Mark Davidson, and after years of research has been transformed into a 40-minute English-language chamber opera. Many members of Houston's legal community, including Judge Davidson and Baker Botts partner Bill Kroger, collaborated closely with HGO to bring this work to life.

"This true Houston story is an extraordinary tale of courage and justice," says HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers. "We hope that by giving voice to these characters, we will offer Houstonians an exciting and meaningful connection with our region's past."

The cast of *What Wings They Were* features a talented trio of local artists: soprano **Gwendolyn Alfred**, who makes her HGO debut as Emeline/Lucy, bass-baritone **Christopher Besch** as Peter Gray, and tenor **Brian Yeakley** as The Figure/Jesse Bolts/Dr. Seip.

Composer John L. Cornelius II is on the music staff at Prairie View A&M University and has worked with local theaters including The Ensemble Theatre, Main Street Theatre, and Theater Under the Stars's Humphreys

School. Cornelius has previously composed song cycles for HGOco, including *The Kashmere Cycle*. He is a native of Jackson, Mississippi, and received his D.M.A. in composition from Rice University.

Librettist Janine Joseph is the author of *Driving without a License*, winner of the 2014 Kundiman Poetry Prize. She has taught creative writing, literature, and composition at New York University and the University of Houston, and has worked with Writers in the Schools (WIT). Joseph previously crafted librettos for HGOco's *From My Mother's Mother* (2012) and the song cycle *On This Muddy Water: Voices from the Houston Ship Channel* (2015).

Stage Director Eileen J. Morris serves as the artistic director of Houston's Ensemble Theatre; in that role she has produced more than 78 productions with the company. Under her leadership the theater received the 2013 Best Season Award from the *Houston Press*. Morris directed the 1993 HGO world premiere of Craig Bohmler and Mary Carol Warwick's *The Achilles Heel*.

On May 3 and 4 at 7 p.m., the Houston Bar Association will host two special benefit performances of *What Wings They Were* at the 1910 Courthouse, the original site of Emeline's trial, in support of Houston Volunteer Lawyers. In April and May the chamber opera will tour Houston schools, presenting performances for middle and high school students. Former Houston First Lady Andrea White has written a book for young readers based on Emeline's story in collaboration with celebrated illustrator Dan Burr. Thanks to a generous donation, HGO is pleased to be able to partner with Books Between Kids to make copies of *Emeline* available to the schools we will visit with this opera, as well as other underserved schools in the Houston area.

*What Wings They Were: The Case of Emeline* is made possible through generous support from Baker Botts LLP and a special gift by Glen Rosenbaum in honor of Judge Mark Davidson. Community partners for this project include Houston Bar Association, Houston Volunteer Lawyers, Communities in Schools, and Books Between Kids. The creators dedicate this production to the memory of Sandra Bernhard, the founding director of HGOco, whose passion and interest in this story led to the opera's creation.

Since 2007, HGOco has commissioned 17 new works and three song cycles and has conducted innovative community projects reaching more than one million people in the Greater Houston metropolitan area. HGOco creates opportunities for Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to observe, participate in, and create art. Through projects like *What Wings They Were*, HGOco endeavors to make opera relevant to its changing audiences by connecting the company with the diverse and changing Houston community through creative collaboration.

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### **World Premiere**

**John L. Cornelius II/ Janine Joseph: *What Wings They Were: The Case of Emeline***

Sung in English

Emeline/Lucy                      Gwendolyn Alfred\*

Peter Gray                        Christopher Besch

The Figure/

Jesse Bolls/Dr. Seip            Brian Yeakley

Music Director                 Bethany Self

Stage Director                 Eileen J. Morris

\*HGO debut

### **Free Public Performances:**

Tickets to public performances are free and may be reserved in advance through each venue.

- **Saturday, April 30 at 11 a.m. at The Ensemble Theatre**, 3535 Main Street  
This performance is fully reserved but some seats may be available 15 minutes before performance.
- **Sunday, May 1 at 3 p.m. at The DeLuxe Theater**, 3303 Lyons Avenue  
Tickets available at <http://thedeluxetheater.tix.com/Event.aspx?EventCode=859276>

### **Special Benefit Performances:**

The Houston Bar Association will present two special performances at the 1910 Courthouse, the original site of Emeline's trial, for the benefit of Houston Volunteer Lawyers.

- **Tuesday and Wednesday, May 3 and 4; events begin at 6 p.m.; performances at 7 p.m. at the 1910 Courthouse**, 301 Fannin

Tickets available through EventBrite: <http://www.eventbrite.com/e/houston-grand-operas-what-wings-they-were-the-case-of-emeline-tickets-21097571404>

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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 59 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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