
Houston Grand Opera Sustains Growth in Season Offerings, Fundraising

Houston, June 1, 2016— Houston Grand Opera announced at its annual meeting today that its 2015–16 season sustained recent growth in season offerings and fundraising. During its 61st season HGO presented eight main-stage productions, as it did in 2014–15, for a total of 47 performances. Attendance remained strong, with several sold-out performances. Operating support exceeded that of previous years.

Houston Grand Opera Board Chair Dr. John Mendelsohn said, “It has been a great honor to lead this wonderful organization through three years during which we established ourselves at the top of operatic art with Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, among other innovative productions, and sustained our continued growth. I plan to remain active on the Board and I look forward to our completion of the *Ring* with *Götterdämmerung* next season.”

HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers said that this season the company “continued to broaden the art form with three new operas by living composers: Carlisle Floyd (*Prince of Players*), Gregory Spears (*O Columbia*), and David Hanlon (*After the Storm*).” Other highlights included *Siegfried*, the third installment of the company’s first *Ring* cycle; Dvořák’s *Rusalka* with Ana María Martínez in the title role; a new production by Rob Ashford of Rodgers & Hammerstein’s classic musical *Carousel*; and a holiday revival of HGO’s beloved 2003 production of *The Little Prince*.

HGO Managing Director Perryn Leech observed, “HGO continues to serve Houston with top quality productions in a broad range of styles and scales that generate excitement locally and globally. People are finding beauty and meaning in our art. Audiences came from 27 countries and 44 states; several performances of *Siegfried* and *The Little Prince* played to over 100% capacity; and we were thrilled to welcome thousands to our community performances, including many newcomers.”

Leech added, “It is a challenge to close out the year on a balanced budget in a difficult fundraising environment, but we are striving to do so.”

Main-stage attendance remains strong

HGO’s attendance at main-stage productions was 75,925. Total sales represented 84% of capacity.

Nine performances were sold out, including performances of *The Little Prince*, *Siegfried*, and *Carousel*. An extra performance of *The Little Prince* was added to meet the strong demand.

Annual operating support reaches new high

The company forecasts it will have received a total of \$16.8 million in annual operating support by the end of the fiscal year on July 31, an increase of \$600,000 over 2014–15. HGO added 68 new patrons and trustees during the past season, with more than 500 added since 2009.

Community and education programs connect with new audiences

HGOco, HGO's community collaboration initiative, engaged more than 67,500 Houstonians through commissioned works, partnerships, and arts education programs. The flagship Song of Houston program expanded connections with larger Houston communities by exploring contemporary Houston life and the city's workforce. The new chamber operas *O Columbia*, developed with input from the NASA community, and *After the Storm*, which dramatized the impact of hurricanes on Gulf Coast residents, brought opera to new audiences across the region. *What Wings They Were*, a chamber opera based on a true 19th-century Houston court case involving an African American woman unjustly enslaved, was premiered in partnership with two Houston theaters and performed for students across the city. Veterans Songbook, a multi-year project, continued showcasing the stories of Houston's veteran community, the largest in the U.S.

HGO presented main-stage performances of *The Little Prince* for two student matinees and of *Tosca* for High School Night. Opera *to Go!*, a touring opera program for new and young audiences, presented *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Puffed-Up Prima Donna* in 180 schools and other community venues across the region, including 23 free performances. For many of the more than 4,400 students who came to the Wortham Center for the Student Performance Series, it was their first exposure to opera. "In a school like Reagan, or in the neighborhood or environment we grew up in, we never really heard, 'Let's go to the opera,'" said Reagan High School senior Denise Morales. "It's showing us how to be diverse, and how to be in different environments that we might not be comfortable in. But we get to experience something that's so cultural."

Said HGOco Committee Chair Cynthia Petrello, "We were proud to see Houstonians' strong embrace of our work this year, and our approach of partnering with communities continues to be a model for performing arts practice across the nation. We were also deeply moved by the outpouring of support from our Houston community after the tragic loss of our visionary founding director, Sandra Bernhard."

Nurturing and training young talent

The HGO Studio continued to fulfill its mission as one of the nation's leading training programs for outstanding operatic talent. Seven new artists joined the program, for a total of 12. In addition to appearances on the HGO stage, artists performed in community venues and at major competitions. Two of our incoming Studio artists for 2016–17, Ukrainian-American soprano Yelena Dyachek and Korean baritone Sol Jin, were among the five winners of the Metropolitan Opera's 2016 National Council Auditions. Former Studio artists continue to make appearances at major houses, and soprano Tamara Wilson (Studio 2005–07) received one of opera's most prestigious prizes, the Richard Tucker Award.

Sixteen outstanding young undergraduate singers participated in two week-long sessions of the Young Artists Vocal Academy (YAVA), now in its sixth year. The program introduces these talented singers to the level of training and skills required to advance a professional career. Three current Studio artists are alumni of the YAVA program.

Free and low-cost access to opera continues

HGO's 2015–16 Miller Outdoor Theatre production, *Tosca*, played to a combined audience of 6,000 on May 20 and 21, and the company was delighted to return to The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion in The Woodlands for the fourth consecutive season.

The performances at Miller Outdoor Theatre—free to the public—are made possible through HGO's unique NEXUS initiative. Underwritten by leading donors, NEXUS has made it possible for HGO to share opera with families, children, students, and seniors during the last eight seasons. The program enables the company to perform for free in venues like Miller Outdoor Theatre and to sell deeply discounted tickets for just \$15 at select Wortham Theater Center offerings. Since NEXUS was launched in 2007, more than 225,000 discounted or free NEXUS tickets have been sold or distributed.

“We are enormously grateful to our partners, corporate and foundation supporters, and individual donors who make it possible for us to aim high and succeed,” said Leech. “The loyalty and generosity of our audience and this city’s wonderful spirit have helped to make this season a spectacular one for opera in Houston and our region.”

Leadership change underscores continuity

In March the company announced that James Crowover will begin a two-year term as chair of HGO's board of directors on August 1, succeeding John Mendelsohn. Crowover has been a member of the board since 1987. Mendelsohn served for three years (one and a half terms) during a period of growth for the company. The company also extended the contract of Managing Director Perryn Leech until 2021.

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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 61 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 225,000 Houstonians to experience first-quality opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

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