



## HoustonGrandOpera

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## HGOco Commissions New

### *Song of Houston Operas*

*Stories to focus on Houston's Third Ward and Rodeo*

Houston, August 3, 2017— HGOco, Houston Grand Opera's community collaboration and education arm, has launched the next phase of its *Song of Houston* initiative with commissions from two rising composer/librettist teams. *Home of My Ancestors*, by composer **Nkeiru Okoye** and librettist **Anita Gonzalez**, will premiere in March 2019. The not-yet-titled second opera, by composer **Nell Shaw Cohen** and librettist **Megan Cohen**, will premiere in March of 2021. A third commission will be announced at a later time. The award-winning *Song of Houston* is an initiative within HGOco that has been creating new works based on stories that define the unique character of Houston since 2007.

#### ***Home of My Ancestors* (March 2019)**

It's Juneteenth (the holiday commemorating the June 19, 1865, announcement of the abolition of slavery in Texas). Olivia, a Chicago-based African American doctor, returns to her childhood home in Houston's Third Ward for her Grandma Rose's memorial service. Her ex-boyfriend Barron hopes to rekindle their relationship as they reminisce and pack her grandmother's living room. When Olivia falls asleep and dreams of her ancestors, she awakens with a new understanding of home and heritage.

*Home of My Ancestors* is supported by a grant from OPERA America's Opera Grants for Female Composers program, made possible through the generosity of the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation.

Composer Nkeiru Okoye's [in-KEAR-roo oh-KOY-yeh] orchestral works have been performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Detroit, Indianapolis, and New Jersey symphonies, among many others. Her opera *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom* received a 2013 works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and was premiered by American Opera Projects in 2014. Dr. Okoye has garnered numerous additional

awards, commissions, and commendations from American Opera Projects; Meet the Composer; MetLife Creative Connections; John Duffy Composer Institute; Composer's Collaborative, Inc.; the Walt Whitman Project; Yvar Mikhashov Trust for New Music; OPERA America; Composers Now; and ASCAP. Dr. Okoye is a board member of Composers Now. She is the director of music theory and composition at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She holds degrees from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Rutgers University.

Anita Gonzalez, Ph.D., is professor of theater and drama at University of Michigan, where she heads the minor in global theater and ethnic studies. Her innovative stagings of historical and cross-cultural experiences have appeared nationally on PBS and at Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors, The Working Theatre, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, New York Live Arts, Tribeca Performing Arts Center, and other national and international venues. Recent plays and musicals include *Ayanna Kelly*, *The Living Lakes*, and *Ybor City*. Recent directing projects include *Sun and Shadows*, a large-scale shadow puppet event; *The Snark*, a project mapped nightmare; *Momentum* by Cindy Sanabria (2013); *Nobody* by Richard Aellen for the Juneteenth Festival (2011); and two short plays for Manhattan Theatre Source's Estrogenius Festival (2009/2010). Gonzalez is a Michigan regional representative for the Dramatists Guild, an executive board member of the National Theatre Conference, and a founding member of the Urban Bush Women.

### **Untitled Rodeo Opera (title TBD) (March 2021)**

In the second *Song of Houston* opera, composer Nell Shaw Cohen and librettist Megan Cohen's original story, informed by interviews with contemporary Texans, will offer a feminist perspective on rodeo culture. Small-town barrel racing champion Shayla Taylor and her sponsor, powerful businesswoman Jamie Mendoza, aim for a big win at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. When a bronc rider with a tragic past threatens Shayla's career-defining race, the women discover each other's strength in adversity with the help of a spirited rodeo queen.

Brooklyn-based composer, librettist, and multimedia artist Nell Shaw Cohen (b. 1988) evokes visual art and natural landscapes with works ranging from orchestral tone poems to iPad apps. She's a 2015–17 Composers and the Voice Fellow with American Opera Projects, a participant in the 2017 New Dramatists Composer-Librettist Studio, and recent Artist-in-Residence at The Helene Wurlitzer Foundation. Cohen is currently developing *Mabel's Call*, a chamber opera inspired by the life of Mabel Dodge Luhan. In 2014, her monodrama *The Coming of Spring* was given a workshop staging in NYC and she was composer-in-residence with the New York University Symphony. She has presented work at the Parrish Art Museum, Harwood Museum of Art, and Peabody Essex Museum, and received commissions from Boston Guitar Fest, WordSong, and others. As director of LandscapeMusic.org, a publication and composers network, she advocates for music inspired by nature.

Megan Cohen is one of the most-produced playwrights under 35. In over 100 readings, workshops, and productions, her scripts have popped up in theaters across the United States and the world. She also works as a dramaturg and opera librettist. Called "funny, erudite, and poignant" (*Poetry Monthly*), "a ruthless innovator" (*San Francisco Weekly*), a "local luminary" (*San Francisco Chronicle*), and "one insightful and confident woman with a devilish sense of humor" (*Huffington Post*), she was named a 2014 Theater Bay Area "Eye On" Emerging Artist honoree. She lives, works, and teaches in the San Francisco Bay Area.

### ***Song of Houston***

Recent *Song of Houston* productions include *O Columbia* (2015) by composer Gregory Spears and librettist Royce Vavrek, which celebrated the American spirit of space exploration and the NASA community; *After the Storm* (2016) by composer David Hanlon and librettist Stephanie Fleischmann, a story of how hurricanes have affected generations of Gulf Coast families; and *Some Light Emerges* (2017) by composer Laura Kaminsky and librettists Mark Campbell and Kimberly Reed, about the creation of Houston's iconic Rothko Chapel by philanthropist Dominique de Menil. Other notable *Song of Houston* projects include 2007's *The Refuge*, a groundbreaking musical tapestry of immigrant stories from various Houston communities; 2010's *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna / To Cross the Face of the Moon*, the world's first mariachi opera; and *East + West* (2010–14), a four-year series of eight chamber operas telling contemporary stories from Houston's Asian communities. In 2009 the program received the Leading Lights Diversity Award in Arts and Culture from the National MultiCultural Institute (NCMI).

## **HGOco**

Now in its ninth year, HGOco has commissioned 22 new works and 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 create, participate in, and observe art. Through projects like *Home of My Ancestors*, HGOco endeavors to make opera relevant to contemporary audiences by connecting the company with the diverse Houston community through collaboration.

More information about Houston Grand Opera and HGOco is available at the company's website, [HGO.org](http://HGO.org).

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## **About Houston Grand Opera**

Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is one of the largest, most innovative, and most highly acclaimed opera companies in the United States. HGO was the only American finalist for "Opera Company of the Year" at the 2017 International Opera Awards. In fulfilling its mission to advance the operatic art to serve an ever-evolving audience, HGO has led the field in commissioning new works (63 world premieres to date) and in training and nurturing promising young artists and administrators. The company 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's pioneering community engagement initiative, HGOco, has served as a model for other arts organizations.

The NEXUS Initiative is HGO's multi-year ticket underwriting program that allows Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy opera without the barrier of price. Since 2007, NEXUS has enabled more than 250,000 Houstonians to experience superlative opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

HGO has toured extensively and has won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards. It is the only opera company to win all three honors.

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