

Houston Grand Opera Announces Updates for the 2020–21 Season

HGO cancels five productions, reduces workforce, and implements salary rollbacks

*HGO plans to welcome audiences back to the Wortham Theater Center for the HGO premieres of *Breaking the Waves* and *The Sound of Music* in April 2021*

*HGO's world premiere of *The Snowy Day* to be modified and presented on video*

HOUSTON – June 23, 2020 – Guided by the current global health pandemic recommendations, Houston Grand Opera (HGO) recognizes the importance of protecting its audiences, artists, musicians, and staff members. HGO has therefore made the difficult decision to cancel 33 of the 47 mainstage and Cullen Theater performances of the 2020–21 season, through the spring of 2021. The canceled performances include *Carmen* (Oct. 23–Nov. 13), *Werther* (Oct. 30–Nov. 15), the world premiere of *The Snowy Day* (Dec. 10–Dec. 20), *Parsifal* (Jan. 22–Feb. 7, 2021), and *Cinderella* (Jan. 29–Feb. 15, 2021). HGO plans to welcome audiences back to the Wortham Theater Center beginning in April 2021 for the HGO premieres of Mazzoli and Vavrek's *Breaking the Waves* (Apr. 16–May 1, 2021) and Rodgers and Hammerstein II's *The Sound of Music* (Apr. 30–May 15, 2021). The company will perform four of the five originally scheduled performances of *Breaking the Waves*.

During the hiatus, the organization will present bi-monthly video content for its audiences. Additionally, HGO aims to produce a media project about *The Snowy Day* by composer Joel Thompson and librettist Andrea Davis Pinkney, based on the award-winning children's book by Ezra Jack Keats. Audiences can join Peter, a young boy in New York City, as he experiences the joy of a fresh snowfall and finds delight in crunching, sliding, and playing his way through a snowy day. Julia Bullock makes her HGO debut as Peter, and director Omer Ben Seadia brings the wonder and magic of Peter's wintry world to life. HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers conducts the world premiere. The fully realized production will be presented in a future season. A full schedule of content and information on how to access these videos will be available in the coming months.

HGO patrons and subscribers who currently have tickets for the 2020–21 season will have their subscriptions moved to the 2021–22 season automatically. In appreciation of their continued support, existing tickets to *Breaking the Waves* and *The Sound of Music* will be made complimentary. More information and additional options can be found at [HGO.org/coronavirus](https://www.hgo.org/coronavirus).

Like many nonprofits, HGO has been negatively impacted financially during the pandemic, having canceled its spring repertory and major fundraising events earlier this year. Staging grand opera requires hundreds of artists, crew, and staff members for each performance. Social distancing, a key tactic in fighting the spread of COVID-19, makes presenting grand opera financially unviable in the coming months. With the anticipation of lost revenues from not producing a full season, Houston Grand Opera has therefore been forced to make the heartbreaking decision to reduce its workforce by 27 percent—a first in the history of the organization. Staff remaining at HGO, including senior staff, will have a 15 percent pay reduction, or have their hours reduced to a level sufficient for the current programming, beginning July 1 and continuing through February 2021. Senior leadership reduced their own salaries, which started on June 1. This combination of savings will reduce the FY21 expenses from \$30,730,707 to \$20,658,665 and will protect the financial future for HGO.

“Many people depend on HGO for their livelihoods, and this was not an easy decision to make. We are thankful to have a strong board and patron base that will help us get through this upcoming season and remain financially sound,” says Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers. “The arts are transformative and provide an impactful and moving experience. Now, more than ever, the Houston community needs the arts to help it process and heal, and that is not lost on us. We will continue to find ways to connect with our beloved audiences, even if we cannot physically be together.”

Managing Director Perryn Leech adds, “Producing an opera begins years before the piece reaches the stage and its audience. HGO brings in people from all over the world to produce a diverse range of opera on the Wortham stages and in other venues around Houston. This means that hundreds of our singers, musicians, artists, technicians and administrative staff will be impacted by the cancellation. Years of hard work and collaboration have been put on hold as we navigate our current reality.”

“To say this has been a difficult year is an understatement,” says Janet Carrig, HGO board chair. “Our top priority remains the safety of our audiences, our artists, and our staff, and under the guidance of health officials, we had to make this painful decision. We are navigating a situation that still holds a lot of unknowns, and the effect of this pandemic on arts organizations around the world is overwhelming. I have worked with Perryn and Patrick for the past two years and know that they will do everything possible to get the company through this situation”

As the organization faces the future, HGO has formed two working groups with the goal of supporting the company as it discusses and explores various scenarios to ensure the long-term health and viability of HGO: the COVID-19 Working Group and the HGO Health Advisory Committee. The COVID-19 Working Group is composed of board members who will serve as a sounding board to ensure that all future planning scenarios are thoroughly discussed and tested. The HGO Health Advisory Committee comprises healthcare professionals and will inform, evaluate and advise on the creation of safe working environments for the company to resume working. Their recommendations will cover the planning, implementation and evaluation of procedures to allow a return to rehearsals, performances and office work.

Houston Grand Opera, a leader in the opera industry, has contributed nearly 70 new works to the art form. Allyn Risley, HGO board chair-elect, says, “This is a difficult moment for the HGO family. Speaking for myself and the board, we are all heartbroken and ready to support the organization in any way possible. Houston Grand Opera is a vital part of our city’s cultural scene. The organization serves over 200,000 people each season, including visitors from all over the world. HGO is an important and integral part of the theater district that helps generate a portion of the \$1.1 billion in economic activity for the city of Houston. This is a tough blow for HGO, but I am confident that through the support of our wonderful city, foundations and—most importantly—our dedicated patrons, we will be back inspiring audiences soon.”

The new programming for HGO’s 2021–22 season will be announced at a later date. For more information about ticketing options, visit HGO.org/coronavirus.

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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 is the only American finalist for Opera Company of the Year in the 2019 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 (68 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 three Emmy awards. It is the only opera company to win all three honors.

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