

Houston Grand Opera announces cancellation of remaining 2020–21 mainstage operas, replaces in-person performances with extended digital season

In lieu of canceled performances from the 2020–21 season, HGO Digital, the Sarah and Ernest Butler Performance Series, extends through June 2021 with additional digital productions and recitals

The Snowy Day Project brings in award-winning documentarian Annalise Ophelian

A special presentation of Jake Heggie, Margaret Atwood, and Joshua Hopkins’s song-cycle, Songs for Murdered Sisters, premieres in early 2021

HOUSTON—November 3, 2020—After carefully weighing options, in accordance with recommendations from global health leaders, Houston Grand Opera has made the difficult decision to cancel the remaining mainstage productions for the 2020–21 season. The company now plans to resume live, in-person performance in the fall of 2021.

Previously, HGO had canceled all productions until spring of 2021, when the company hoped to resume live performances with the HGO premieres of **Missy Mazzoli** and **Royce Vavrek’s** *Breaking the Waves* and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music*. The two productions would have closed the 2020–21 season in May 2021. Safety of audiences, artists, and staff remains at the forefront of all decisions the organization makes regarding in-person performances and events. Alternative programming for these productions will be announced later this year.

“We of course want to return to live opera on the mainstage as soon as possible,” says **HGO Managing Director Perryn Leech**. “But we must continue to prioritize safety above all else. We are taking every advantage of this opportunity to flex our creative muscles in novel ways. We are very proud of the work and collaboration that have gone into producing HGO Digital and look forward to bringing more digital work to life.”

During HGO’s hiatus from performing live, the organization will extend the HGO Digital, the Sarah and Ernest Butler Performance Series, season through June 2021 and expand the roster of artistic offerings planned. The company remains focused on keeping the artform alive and bringing great opera to Houston.

“It’s a heavy blow that we have to cancel the two HGO premieres we had planned for next spring,” says **HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers**. “Unfortunately, we have no choice. But there is so much to look forward to in the expanded HGO Digital season: performances by some of the greatest singers in the world, exciting and innovative productions that approach opera in a new way, and some of the most beautiful music of all time. I know this wonderful art form will see us through this difficult period.”

Just in time for the holidays, HGO has added a holiday celebration with the talented artists training with the HGO Studio. The company also will continue its annual partnership with Discovery Green for “Carols on the Green.” Both the recital and holiday sing-along will be presented in a digital format.

Other additions to the HGO Digital season include a filmed version of HGO world premiere song cycle, **Jake Heggie** and **Joshua Hopkins’s** *Songs for Murdered Sisters* with text by renowned author **Margaret Atwood**; new Live from The Cullen recitals, including a special evening with beloved soprano, HGO Studio alumna, and Houston favorite Nicole Heaston; and a digital presentation of HGO’s 68th world premiere, *Marian’s Song*, which follows the life and success of barrier-breaking entertainer Marian Anderson.

Exciting new details on previously announced HGO Digital productions also are now available. December's *The Snowy Day Project* will be a collaboration between the opera's creative team and documentarian **Annalise Ophelian**, whose films have received multiple awards and international distribution. The filmmaker will take audiences through the creation and design of HGO's 70th world premiere, *The Snowy Day*, based on the beloved children's book by Ezra Jack Keats, and explores the creative process of composer **Joel Thompson** and librettist **Andrea Davis Pinkney**. The full production will premiere in the 2021–22 season on The Cullen stage.

"There's such wonder and joy in this work, and it absolutely comes through each of the creative team who've collaborated so beautifully to bring it to life," says documentarian Annalise Ophelian. "And just as the creative team have found workarounds and new ways of coming together, I've been interviewing over video calls, and reviewing footage remotely, and employing all sorts of techniques I wouldn't have considered this time last year. And that's the power of art, I think. It's resilient, it finds a way to persevere even in the most unprecedented circumstances."

Originally slated as a live, in-person performance, the much-anticipated world premiere of Margaret Atwood, Jake Heggie, and baritone Joshua Hopkins's *Songs for Murdered Sisters* will now be presented as part of the HGO Digital season and released on February 19, 2021. The stunning new film will be directed by San Francisco-based **James Niebuhr**. Five years ago, Joshua Hopkins's life changed forever when his sister Nathalie, along with two other women, was murdered by her ex-boyfriend in a spree that is now considered one of the worst cases of domestic violence in Canadian history. In his grief, Hopkins conceived of this song cycle. Co-commissioned by HGO with Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra, with music by Jake Heggie set to poems by Margaret Atwood, this powerful new work is Hopkins's way of honoring his sister's memory and speaking out against domestic violence.

"We conceived of this new musical work not only to commemorate my sister but also to bring social awareness to domestic violence and abuse against women. The intention was to develop a song cycle, melding the power and beauty of poetry and music to tell a story through my voice as someone who has suffered a great loss," says Joshua Hopkins. "From the beginning, my amazing friends at Houston Grand Opera gave their love and support to me and my family. Patrick Summers offered his condolences and asked if there was anything he could do. I told him about this new project, and without hesitation, he set about putting HGO's incredible resources behind co-commissioning our song cycle."

May's opera, *Hansel and Gretel*, will allow audiences to experience Engelbert Humperdinck's gorgeous work as never before, with live performances and original animated settings by **Hannah Wasileski**. The award-winning visual artist will bring a whole new look and feel to the production, which will be led by Maestro Summers and director-on-the-rise **Lileana Blain-Cruz**. Blain-Cruz's unique concept, Wasileski's incredible visuals, and **Montana Levi-Blanco**'s creative costume design will add new layers of storytelling and visual theatrics to the enchanting opera about a pair of children who encounter a witch after being sent into the woods to forage for strawberries for dinner.

The updated lineup of HGO Digital recitals and productions for 2020–21 is as follows:

- Live from The Cullen: Arturo Chacón Cruz and Kirill Kuzmin – November 13, 2020
- Double Bill: *Bon Appétit* and *The Impresario* – November 27, 2020
- *The Snowy Day Project* – December 10, 2020
- HGO Studio Holiday Celebration – December 18, 2020 – **NEW**
- Live from The Cullen: Sasha Cooke and Kirill Kuzmin – January 8, 2021
- *Giving Voice* – January 22, 2021
- 33rd Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers "Concert of Arias" Livestream – February 5, 2021



- Margaret Atwood, Jake Heggie, and Joshua Hopkins's *Songs for Murdered Sisters* – February 19, 2021 – **NEW**
- Live from The Cullen: Jack Swanson and Richard Bado – March 12, 2021
- *Suite Española* – March 26, 2021 – **NEW DATE**
- Live from The Cullen: Nicole Heaston and Richard Bado – April 9, 2021 – **NEW**
- *Hansel and Gretel* – May 28, 2021 – **NEW DATE**
- *Marian's Song* – June 19, 2021 – **NEW RECORDING**

All HGO Digital productions will be staged according to strict safety protocols, under the guidance of the HGO Health Advisory Committee, composed of healthcare professionals from our partner Houston Methodist.

Leech continues, "A profound thank you to our generous donors, who believe that especially now, having great opera in our community is essential. Their financial support at this critical time is truly inspiring."

HGO continues its partnership with Marquee TV, an on-demand streaming platform dedicated to global arts and culture, for the remainder of the season. This season's partnership between HGO and Marquee TV, the first of its kind between the streaming service and a US-based performing arts organization, grants audiences access to Marquee TV so they can stream HGO's 2020–21 season using their televisions through Marquee TV's website or app, or through Roku, Apple TV, Fire TV, and other platforms.

Additional information about the HGO Digital season will be released later this year. For more information on HGO Digital, visit www.HGO.org/Digital

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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 (69 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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