

**Houston Grand Opera Announces Joel Thompson as the Company's First Full-Time
Composer-in-Residence**

*Composer of The Snowy Day, HGO's 71st world premiere,
returns to Houston for a new five-year appointment*

HOUSTON – June 13, 2022 – Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is proud to announce the appointment of rising star Joel Thompson as the first full-time Composer-in-Residence in its history. The company has recruited Thompson to Houston after commissioning and staging the 2021 world premiere of his first opera, *The Snowy Day*. His five-year residency with HGO begins on August 1, 2022.

“This position was created for Joel because he is one of the most brilliant minds of his generation, a transformative artist that is redefining the future of opera and expanding its reach,” states HGO General Director and CEO Khori Dastoor. “We are thrilled for Joel to be joining the artistic leadership of HGO, a company whose commitment to discovery, innovation, and excellence is well-known. We are confident that Joel’s artistic contributions are making the world a better place, and we can’t wait to see and hear what he will do next.”

As Composer-in-Residence for HGO, Thompson will live and work in Houston full time. He will serve as a member of the company’s artistic leadership, in charge of expanding and deepening the company’s relationship with the greater Houston community. Initiatives will include forming music-based educational partnerships with schools and non-profits and identifying and mentoring homegrown composers, librettists, and other artists and creatives who, in turn, will help him forge the path forward.

Over the course of his five-year tenure with HGO, Thompson plans to compose a major mainstage commission, plus a set of smaller-scale original works, informed thematically by his collaborations with the people who live here. These original compositions will premiere at HGO, and advance the company’s fundamental mission of supporting the creation of relevant, vibrant new works that speak directly to this community and attract new audiences to the art form.

Thompson’s compositions incorporate a wide range of influences into a sound that is uniquely his own, from Afro-Caribbean rhythms, to Black American jazz, gospel, and blues, to Rachmaninoff and Ravel. He wrote his acclaimed first opera, *The Snowy Day*, with librettist Andrea Davis Pinkney. Based on the barrier-breaking 1963 Caldecott Medal-winning children’s book by Ezra Jack Keats, the HGO-commissioned work made its world premiere at the Wortham Theater Center on December 9, 2021 and enjoyed a successful nine-performance run. In a historic first, HGO livestreamed the opera’s opening night, attracting viewers in 34 different countries.

HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers got to know Thompson, and brought him on board for *The Snowy Day*, after hearing his music in 2017 at the Aspen Music Festival. “The memory is indelible,” Summers recalls. “I knew within 30 seconds of hearing Joel’s orchestral work that I was in the presence of a rare compositional voice. I am thrilled that as HGO’s new Composer-in-Residence, Joel will receive



the support and resources that only this industry-leading company can provide, so that he can continue to expand his astonishingly prodigious gifts. I cannot wait to see what he creates when he returns to Houston to spend the next five years with HGO, which I am proud to say has become his home company.”

In addition to *The Snowy Day*, Thompson is best known for the choral work, *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, which commemorates the lives of seven Black men killed at the hands of police or authority figures. *Seven Last Words* was premiered in November 2015 by the University of Michigan Men’s Glee Club and Dr. Eugene Rogers and won the 2018 American Prize for Choral Composition; Thompson and Rogers won an Emmy Award for a documentary about the work in 2017. In August 2021 Thompson premiered a new work that sets the writings of James Baldwin to music at the Colorado Music Festival.

Thompson’s works have been performed by esteemed ensembles such as the New York Philharmonic, Kansas City Symphony, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Master Chorale, Los Angeles Master Chorale, and EXIGENCE. He recently joined the Metropolitan Opera/Lincoln Center Theater New Works commissioning program, established to foster leading talents in the field. Also a conductor, pianist, and educator, Thompson was born in the Bahamas to Jamaican parents before his family immigrated to the United States, living in Houston for a time before settling in Atlanta. He is currently a doctoral student at the Yale School of Music.

“This residency will provide me with an opportunity to do the things that matter to me most: creating music through community and creating community through music,” says Thompson. “I’m especially excited to do this in partnership with HGO, the visionary company that has helped me launch my career in opera. I believe that opera can be a space for us to hold each other’s stories and imaginations. HGO is giving me the chance to dream and to create works that I hope will be deeply meaningful to the community we will build together over the next five years.”

HGO is funding the new position of Composer-in-Residence with generous support from the Mellon Foundation. A longstanding partner in the development of innovative world premieres and promising mid-career creatives, the Mellon Foundation invests in visionary artists and arts leaders whose practices catalyze change in our world.

HGO is committed to advancing the artform through new works. To date, the company has commissioned and produced 72 world premieres. For more information about Houston Grand Opera, visit [HGO.org](https://www.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 in the 2019 International Opera Awards, and the only American company to be nominated twice. In fulfilling its mission to enrich our diverse community through the art of opera by creating, curating,



exploring, and producing outstanding experiences centered around the human voice, HGO has led the field in commissioning and producing new works (72 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 and Learning initiative has served as a model for other arts organizations.

The NEXUS Initiative is HGO's multiyear 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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