

Houston Grand Opera Announces Concert of Arias 2019 Winners and Appoints Ana María Martínez as Artistic Advisor

Six Singers Awarded Top Honors of 31st Annual Eleanor McCollum Competition

International star soprano joins HGO's artistic team as the first ever artistic advisor

Houston, February 1, 2019—Houston Grand Opera (HGO) announced today the winners of the 31st annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers Concert of Arias, which took place in the Cullen Theater of the Wortham Theater Center. This is the third year the Concert of Arias was streamed live on Facebook, and the second for livestreaming on YouTube. The livestream was hosted by HGO Studio alumna **Andrea Carroll**. She is currently performing in *The Pearl Fishers* as Leïla and placed first in the 2012 Concert of Arias. The winners were announced during the second portion of the program.

1st Place prize of \$10,000 was awarded to William Meinert

2nd Place prize of \$5,000 went to William Guanbo Su

3rd Place prize of \$3,000 was won by Nicholas Newton

The **Ana María Martínez Encouragement Award** of \$2,000 went to Yunuet Laguna. This award was established in 2015 by renowned soprano and HGO Studio alumna Ana María Martínez to identify a young singer of exceptional promise who would greatly benefit from additional support of his or her continued training. Ms. Martínez won first prize in the competition in 1994.

The **Audience Choice Award** of \$1,000 was won by Elena Villalón.

The **Online Viewers' Choice Award** of \$500 was given to Katherine DeYoung.

Winners of the Concert of Arias, one of the most highly esteemed singing competitions in the United States, were chosen by a distinguished panel of judges that included HGO Artistic and Music Director **Patrick Summers**, HGO Managing Director **Perryn Leech**, and guest judge **Lawrence Brownlee**, the renowned tenor now appearing in HGO's *The Pearl Fishers*.

In remarks from the stage, HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers announced that internationally acclaimed soprano and Houston resident, **Ana María Martínez**, currently singing the title role in *Florencia en el Amazonas*, will join the artistic team as the first-ever artistic advisor. Beginning her three-year appointment as of today, Martínez will advise on casting and future productions, mentor the HGO Studio artists, adjudicate the Concert of Arias competition, and work with HGOco to develop programming that connects to Houston's various communities.

“She is no stranger to Houston audiences, as she has sung a more diverse repertoire here than any artist in our history,” said Summers. “She has deep connections to Concert of Arias and the Studio, as she was the first place winner of this event 25 years ago. I’m elated that Ana María is joining us.”

Concert of Arias supporters raised more than \$600,000, with proceeds benefiting the Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers and Houston Grand Opera Studio’s ongoing outreach efforts to identify, attract, and nurture young artists who have the potential for major careers in opera. Past prize winners who are now leading international artists include Jamie Barton, Joyce DiDonato, Ana María Martínez, Ryan McKinny, and Tamara Wilson.

Chaired by **Elizabeth** and **Richard Hussein**, the Concert of Arias began with a champagne reception before 700 guests arrived in the Cullen Theater to enjoy the competition. As the judges made their decisions, guests enjoyed performances by current HGO Studio members and were invited to vote for the Audience Choice Award. Following the concert, more than 500 artists, patrons, and underwriters were seated for the sold-out dinner in the Grand Foyer of the Wortham Theater Center, catered by City Kitchen Catering and with modern décor by The Events Company.

Today’s concert was the final event in a months-long process. Now in its 31st year, the competition received 525 applications from singers around the world. Auditions were conducted in November and December. After careful consideration, 14 semifinalists were chosen to come to Houston for further rounds of the prestigious competition. The field of semifinalists was narrowed to eight finalists on January 28. The selected finalists had the opportunity to learn more about HGO and work with HGO music staff leading up to the Concert of Arias, where they performed two arias each, accompanied by **Kirill Kuzmin**, HGO assistant conductor.

Since its inception 42 years ago, the HGO Studio has grown to be one of the most respected young artist programs in the country. Each of the young artists in the HGO Studio has access to a learning environment that emphasizes practical experience within the professional opera world. This includes regular coaching sessions with industry professionals, roles in HGO mainstage productions, recital performances, and a variety of other concert engagements.

The evening’s guests included chairs Elizabeth and Richard Hussein, David Duthu, Dominic Domingo, Dian and Harlan Stai, Judy and Dick Agee, Beth Madison, Frances Marzio, Steve Hamilton and Tom LeCloux, Janet and John Carrig, Linda and Willie Chiang, Anne and Albert Chao, Cynthia and Tony Petrello, Abby and Chris Venegas, Dr. Lorenzo Cohen and Alison Jefferies, Reinnette and Stan Marek, Jill and Allyn Risley, Glen Rosenbaum, Drs. Liz Grimm and Jack Roth, Zane Carruth, Ishwaria Subbiah, Rini Ziegler, Damon Chargois and Rebekka Peltzman, Dr. Larry and Mary Ann Faulkner, Bryn Larsen, Terrylin Neale, Laura and Brad McWilliams, Doug and Sarah McMurrey, Marcia and Alfredo Vilas, Monica Fulton, Gabriel and Sara Loperena, Tony Bradfield, Marguerite Swartz, Ann and Stephen Kaufman, Teresa and José Ivo, John Evatz, Louise Chapman and Shoocha Kuqi, Sid Moorhead, Kellie and Robert Collier, C. C. and Scott Ensell, John Serpe and Tracy Maddox, DonNell and Tom Rushing, Katherine Thomasson and Michael Talbot, and Sholto Davidson and Laura Bielinski.

Concert of Arias Winners

1st Place \$10,000

William Meinert

Bass

This season, William Meinert performs the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* with Baltimore Concert Opera, Commentator in Derrick Wang’s opera *Scalia/Ginsburg* with Opera North, Vodník in Dvořák’s *Rusalka* with Madison Opera, and Le Duc in

Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* with Pensacola Opera. During the 2017–18 season, he was the baritone soloist in Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Baltimore Youth Orchestra, the bass II soloist in Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* with American Bach Soloists, as well as Uberto in Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* with Commonwealth Lyric Theater, Dulcamara in *L'elisir d'amore*, and Le philosophe in Massenet's *Chérubin* at Peabody Institute. Meinert has studied privately with Russell Penney, with Dolora Zajick at her Institute for Young Dramatic Voices, and currently studies with William Institute.

2nd Place \$5,000

William Guanbo Su

Bass

A native of China, now based in New York City, William Guanbo Su is pursuing his master's degree at the Juilliard School under the guidance of Cynthia Hoffmann. In 2018, he was a member of Gerdine Young Artist program at at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, and he has also been a voice fellow at the Aspen Music Festival and School, where he played the principal role of Don Basilio in *The Barber of Seville*. Other opera roles include Pluton in Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, Herr Reich in Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Seneca in Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*. He has also concentrated on German lieder at the Franz Schubert Institute in Vienna, where he was coached by Emmy Ameling, Helmut Deutsch, Robert Holl, and others. In 2017, he made his Carnegie Hall solo debut with the Cecilia Chorus of New York and won first prize in the Gerda Lissner Lieder Competition the same year.

3rd Place \$3,000

Nicholas Newton

Bass-baritone

A San Diego native, Nicholas Newton has pursued his passion for singing through gospel, jazz, musical theater, and now operatic performance. Notable performances include the roles of Count Ceprano in *Rigoletto* and Capulet (cover) in *Roméo et Juliette* with Wolf Trap Opera, Achilla in *Julius Caesar* at Rice University, and L'arbre and Le fauteuil in *L'enfant et les sortilèges* at Aspen Music Festival under the baton of Robert Spano. Newton recently won the Western Region finals of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and will advance to the semifinals in New York in March. He was also the first place winner of the 2018 Virginia & Susan Hawk Competition and has won top prize in voice three years in a row at the Musical Merit Foundation Scholarship Auditions. An alumnus of HGO's Young Artists Vocal Academy, he will perform the role of Blitch in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* at Rice University in March, under the baton of Patrick Summers.

Ana María Martínez Encouragement Award \$2,000

Yunuet Laguna

Soprano

Yunuet Laguna, from Zacatecas, Mexico, is completing her degree in vocal performance at the National Conservatory of Music (CNMM) in Mexico City. Other training includes the Irma González Master Course, led by professors of the School of Music from Arizona State University. In 2015, she was a semifinalist in the Carlo Morelli Vocal Competition and in 2018 was named a finalist in the Sinaloa International Vocal Competition, where she earned the San Miguel Institute of Bel Canto McClain Prize. She was a winner of the inaugural San Miguel, Mexico, district in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and recently won second place in the Gulf Region auditions in New Orleans. Laguna has been a soloist with the CNMM Orquesta, Toluca Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Mexiquense Symphonic Orchestra, and most recently was the soprano soloist for Mozart's Requiem with the San Miguel Allende Opera Chorus.

Audience Choice Award \$1,000

Elena Villalón

Soprano

Originally from Austin, Texas, soprano Elena Villalón is finishing her undergraduate degree at the University of Cincinnati College–Conservatory of Music (CCM) under the tutelage of William McGraw. She recently won the Central Region finals in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and will move on to the semifinals in New York in March. She has been a vocal fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center and is an alumna of HGO’s 2018 Young Artists Vocal Academy. Upcoming performances include Adele in *Die Fledermaus* at CCM, Barbarina in *The Marriage of Figaro* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis as a Gerdine Young Artist, and a return to the Tanglewood Music Center as a soprano fellow. Previous appearances at CCM include Lucy in *The Telephone* and Miss Wordsworth in *Albert Herring*. She is the Nippert Scholar at CCM and has won first prize in the 2018 Three Arts Competition, 2018 Dayton Opera Guild Competition, and the 2017 CCM Undergraduate Voice Competition.

Online Winner

Katherine DeYoung

Mezzo-soprano

Katherine DeYoung, originally from Traverse City, Michigan, is currently a member of the Michigan Opera Theatre Studio. Recently, she completed her master’s degree at the University of Houston, where she performed Isabella in *L’italiana in Algeri*, Gertrude in *Roméo et Juliette*, and Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible*. Her favorite role is the title role in *Carmen*, which she performed with Opera in the Ozarks. This summer, she will return to Santa Fe Opera for a second year as a member of the apprentice singer program. This season with Michigan Opera Theatre, she will perform Sandman and cover Hansel in *Hänsel und Gretel* and sing the roles of Old Lady in *Candide*, Mae in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Mother in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*; she will cover Olga in *Eugene Onegin*. DeYoung is a district winner of the 2018 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and is an alumna of Michigan State University.

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Ana María Martínez

Grammy Award winner Ana María Martínez is currently singing the title role in Daniel Catán’s *Florencia en el Amazonas* at Houston Grand Opera. This past September, she and Plácido Domingo performed in a sold-out concert to welcome HGO audiences back to the Wortham Theater Center after displacement by Hurricane Harvey.

The HGO Studio alumna (1994–95) returns to HGO regularly for such roles as Marguerite in *Faust* and the title role in *Rusalka* (2016); her first Cio-Cio-San in *Madame Butterfly* (2010, also 2015) and her first *Carmen* (2014), both of which have become signature roles; Rosina in *The Barber of Seville* (2011); Nedda in *Pagliacci* (2008); and numerous others including Rosalba in *Florencia en el Amazonas* (2001). Earlier this season, she sang Elisabetta in *Don Carlo* with the Los Angeles Opera and will return to the company later in the season as Solea in *El gato montés* opposite Plácido Domingo. She also will join the Vienna State Opera as Cio-Cio-San. Recent performances include the title role of *Carmen* with Los Angeles Opera; *Rusalka* with Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires; Lyric Opera of Chicago as both Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte* and Marguerite in *Faust*; the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, as Alice Ford in *Falstaff*; Florida Grand Opera as the title role in *Florencia en el Amazonas*; and Santa Fe Opera as Cio-Cio-San.

She regularly collaborates with Plácido Domingo on international multi-city concert tours, and has also been a frequent concert partner of classical crossover tenor Andrea Bocelli. She voiced the role of opera singer Alessandra in season three of *Amazon’s Mozart in the Jungle*.



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 North American finalist for Opera Company of the Year at the 2017 and 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 (65 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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