

**Houston Grand Opera Announces Next Season's 2021–22 HGO Studio Artists**  
*Nine returning members and three new artists complete the prestigious program*

HOUSTON—March 23, 2021—After an international search, Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is proud to announce the three new singers and nine returning artists who will train with the HGO Studio for 2021–22. One of the most respected and highly competitive young artist programs in the world, the HGO Studio provides comprehensive career development to young singers and pianist/coaches who have demonstrated potential to make major contributions to the artform.

First year HGO Studio artists include:

- **Luke Sutliff**, baritone (*finalist in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers Concert of Arias*)
- **Eric Taylor**, tenor (*second place winner of the competition*)
- **Emily Treigle**, mezzo-soprano (*third place winner of the competition*)

Returning HGO Studio artists include:

- **Blake Denson**, baritone
- **Ricardo Garcia**, tenor
- **Cory McGee**, bass
- **Raven McMillon**, soprano
- **Alex Munger**, pianist/coach
- **Sun-Ly Pierce**, mezzo-soprano
- **Bin Yu Sanford**, pianist/coach
- **William Guanbo Su**, bass
- **Elena Villalón**, soprano

“The resilience that our returning HGO Studio artists have shown over the past year is awe-inspiring. It’s been an incredibly difficult time for the artistic community, and we are extremely proud to have been able to pivot our efforts to create art for this digital world we are living in,” said HGO Studio Director Brian Speck. “Next season, we look forward to once again offering our artists the opportunity to perform for audiences live and in person. And we are beyond excited to welcome three new talented first year artists to our program.”

The HGO Studio receives hundreds of applications from singers and pianists each year for this highly competitive program. During the pandemic, HGO reimagined the audition process in order to keep artists safe and accommodate travel restrictions. Over the past year, HGO partnered with multiple opera companies nationwide to coordinate and streamline virtual auditions for their young artist programs and competitions. For singers interested in HGO, the audition process culminates in the company’s annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers Concert of Arias, which was held on February 5, 2021.

The HGO Studio trains young artists in their chosen discipline of classical singing, piano, and coaching, and the artists commit to an intense, individualized study program while living in Houston from mid-August through May. During a residency of up to three years, HGO Studio artists receive specialized training in voice, movement, and languages and are afforded numerous performance opportunities with the organization. Studio artists are cast in both major and supporting roles in mainstage productions, giving them direct access to work with world-renowned artists, directors, and conductors. Studio artists also participate in recital series and perform in venues across the city and state for numerous events. Additionally, the artists have one-on-one guidance and coaching with HGO Artistic Advisor and acclaimed soprano **Ana María Martínez** and **HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers**.

Since its inception 44 years ago, the HGO Studio has grown into one of the most respected young artist programs in the world. 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.

2021–22 HGO Studio Artist Biographies:

**BLAKE DENSON – Second Year Artist**

*Baritone—Paducah, KY*

*HGO Digital appearances: Giving Voice; Peter in Hansel and Gretel; Suite Española: Explorando Iberia.*

*Previously at HGO: 2018 Alumnus of HGO’s Young Artists Vocal Academy*

*Underwriters: Drs. Elizabeth Grimm and Jack Roth/Carolyn Levy/ Gloria Portela and Dick Evans*

Blake Denson was a Grand Finals winner in the 2020 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and is a 2018 alumnus of HGO’s Young Artists Vocal Academy (YAVA). He obtained his Bachelor of Music in voice degree from the University of Kentucky School of Music and recently completed his Master of Music degree at Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music. Denson was a studio artist at Wolf Trap Opera in 2018 and was set to return to Wolf Trap Opera for a second season in the summer of 2020 to perform the Commander and cover the title role in *Eugene Onegin*, as well as cover the role of Marcello in *La bohème*, but those productions were canceled due to COVID-19.

**RICARDO GARCIA – Second Year Artist**

*Tenor—Castro Valley, CA*

*HGO Digital appearances: Hans Sach’s Trainer in Vinkensport; The Making of The Snowy Day, an Opera for All; Suite Española: Explorando Iberia.*

*Underwriters: Michelle Beale and Dick Anderson/Dr. Ellen Gritz and Mickey Rosenau*

Ricardo Garcia completed his Master of Music in Voice at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM) and holds a Bachelor of Music in Voice from the University of the Pacific. He was a studio artist at Wolf Trap Opera, where he covered Roméo in *Roméo et Juliette* and Giocondo in *La pietra del paragone*, and a voice fellow with Music Academy of the West, where he sang Jenik in *The Bartered Bride*. Recent roles include Lamplighter/Drunkard in *The Little Prince* and Fenton in *Falstaff*. As a first-year apprentice at Santa Fe Opera, he covered Parpignol in *La bohème* and sang Fenton/Normanno in the *Apprentice Scenes Night*. Recently, Garcia won the New Orleans District of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and advanced to the Gulf Coast Region finals. This summer, he will sing the role of Grimoaldo in *Rodelinda* at the Aspen Music Festival.

**CORY MCGEE – Second Year Artist**

*Bass—Stafford, VA*

*HGO Digital appearances:* Billy in *The Making of The Snowy Day, an Opera for All; Giving Voice.*  
*Previously at HGO:* Second prize winner in HGO's 2020 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias.  
*Underwriter:* Beth Madison

Cory McGee recently completed his Master of Music degree at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. In summer 2019, he joined Santa Fe Opera as an apprentice artist, portraying the role of the Gardener in Ruder's *The Thirteenth Child*. In 2018 he was a studio artist with Wolf Trap Opera, where he played La Voce in Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Ranger Nat in David Hanlon's children's opera, *Listen, Wilhelmina!*, and was a soloist in "Bernstein at 100 – A Celebration." Recent engagements include the title role in *Le nozze di Figaro* and Pandolfe in Massenet's *Cendrillon* (Oberlin Opera Theater) and Leporello in *Don Giovanni* (Oberlin in Italy). He will return to Santa Fe this summer for a second summer as an apprentice artist, performing the role of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### **RAVEN MCMILLON – Second Year Artist**

*Soprano—Baltimore, MD*

*HGO Digital appearances:* Rona Richards in *The Impresario*; Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel*; Peter in *The Making of The Snowy Day, an Opera for All; Giving Voice.*

*Also this season:* Sister Margaretta in *My Favorite Things: Songs from The Sound of Music.*

*Underwriter:* Brenda Harvey-Traylor

Raven McMillon received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Vocal Performance at Carnegie Mellon University and completed her graduate degree at the University of Cincinnati College - Conservatory of Music (CCM). Her opera credits include Adele in *Die Fledermaus*; the title role in *Goldie B. Locks and the Three Singing Bears*; Linfea in *La Calisto*; and Barbarina in *Le nozze di Figaro*. In addition to her opera credits, McMillon has also workshopped new roles such as Mary in Chiao's *The Secret Codes of Mary Bowser* and Lucy in Picker's *Awakenings*. Her recent roles included La Princesse in *L'enfant et les sortilèges* with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Papagena in *Die Zauberflöte* at CCM in the summer of 2020, which were canceled due to COVID-19. This season, McMillon was named winner of the Connecticut District and New England Region in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, and she will advance to the national semifinal round in May. In the summer of 2021, she will perform the role of Frasquita in Cincinnati Opera's production of *Carmen*.

### **ALEX MUNGER – Third Year Artist**

*Pianist/coach—New Berlin, Wisconsin*

*HGO Digital appearances:* Coach for *Vinkensport* and *Hansel and Gretel*.

*Also this season:* He will appear with HGO Studio singers in recitals and other performances and serve as coach for *My Favorite Things: Songs from The Sound of Music.*

*Previously at HGO:* Coach for *Rigoletto*, *La favorite*, and *The Magic Flute* (COVID-19 cancelation). He also appeared with HGO Studio singers in recital and other performances.

*Underwriters:* Saúl and Ursula Balagura and Trey Yates

Alex Munger previously served as a staff pianist at the University of Illinois, where he helped prepare *La bohème* and *The Rape of Lucretia*. In 2018, Munger was a fellowship pianist with the Aspen Opera Center, where he worked on *Il barbiere di Siviglia*; he returned to Aspen in the summer of 2019. He received his Master of Music degree in Vocal Coaching and Accompanying from the University of Illinois. Previous engagements include the Bay View Music Festival (*Carmen*), where he returned in 2019 as a faculty pianist for its two-week opera and art song program. He appeared with tenor Richard Trey Smagur in a recital of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* at Houston's Jones Hall in a program presented by the Houston Symphony. In the summer of 2020, he served as a coaching fellow at Wolf Trap Opera. In the summer of 2021, he will return to Wolf Trap Opera as a Coaching Fellow.

**SUN-LY PIERCE – Second Year Artist**

*Mezzo-soprano—Clinton, NY*

*HGO Digital appearance: Hansel in Hansel and Gretel.*

*Also this season: Liesl in My Favorite Things: Songs from The Sound of Music.*

*Previously at HGO: First prize winner in HGO's 2020 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias.*

*Underwriters: Charlene and Chuck Nickson/Tracy Maddox and John Serpe*

Originally from Clinton, NY, Chinese American mezzo-soprano Sun-Ly Pierce completed the graduate vocal arts program at the Bard College Conservatory of Music and holds a bachelor's degree in vocal performance from the Eastman School of Music. As a winner of the Marilyn Horne Song Competition, Pierce was set to perform on an international recital tour with pianist Chien-Lin Lu featuring the premiere of a new song cycle by two-time Grammy Award-winning composer Jennifer Higdon, which was canceled due to COVID-19. In the fall of 2019, Pierce joined the Broad Street Orchestra as Dorinda in Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. In the summer of 2021, she will return to Music Academy of the West as a vocal fellow.

**BIN YU SANFORD – Second Year Artist**

*Pianist/coach—Seoul, Korea*

*HGO Digital appearances: Coach for The Impresario and The Making of The Snowy Day, an Opera for All.*

*Also this season: She will appear with HGO Studio singers in recitals and other performances and serve as coach for My Favorite Things: Songs from The Sound of Music.*

*Underwriters: Stephanie Larsen and Lynn Des Prez/Valerie and Miguel Miro-Quesada*

Bin Yu Sanford has established herself as a solo pianist, vocal coach, and chamber musician. Yu Sanford earned her Master of Music in Solo Piano Performance and an Artist Diploma in Opera Coaching at the University of Cincinnati College - Conservatory of Music (CCM). Recently, she was selected as one of the vocal piano fellows at Music Academy of the West, where she worked on Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain*. From 2017–20, Yu Sanford served as a graduate assistant in the opera department at CCM. She was the first prize winner of the Pennsylvania MTNA Young Artist Piano Competition. In the summer of 2020, she was scheduled to join the Glimmerglass Festival as an apprentice pianist, however the festival was canceled due to COVID-19.

**WILLIAM GUANBO SU – Third Year Artist**

*Bass—Beijing, China*

*HGO Digital appearance: Bowie Krebs in The Impresario.*

*Previously at HGO: Usher in Rigoletto; Fifth Jew in Salome (COVID-19 cancellation); Second Armored Man in The Magic Flute (COVID-19 cancellation). Second place winner in HGO's 2019 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias.*

*Underwriters: Anne and Albert Chao*

William Guanbo Su is a Grand Finals Winner of the 2019 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. He has been a Gerdine Young Artist at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and a voice fellow at the Aspen Music Festival. He has studied German lieder at the Franz Schubert Institute in Vienna, and in 2017 won first prize in the Gerda Lissner Lieder Competition. During the summer of 2019, he sang Count Ceprano in Verdi's *Rigoletto* with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis as a Gerdine Young Artist. This summer, he will return to Aspen to sing Sarastro in *The Magic Flute* and Garibaldo in *Rodelinda*. This season, he makes his Austin Opera debut as Angelotti in *Tosca*.

**LUKE SUTLIFF – First Year Artist**

*Baritone—Littleton, CO*

Luke Sutliff is currently pursuing his Master of Music degree at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. Sutliff will be joining Santa Fe Opera as an Apprentice Artist in summer 2021. Last summer, he had been set to make his debut in the role of Elder McLean in *Susannah* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, but that was canceled due to COVID-19. At the Shepherd School, he has appeared as Kaiser Overall in *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* and Johannes Zegner in *Proving Up*. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the Juilliard School, where he studied with the late Sanford Sylvan and made his Alice Tully Hall debut performing Fauré's *L'horizon chimérique*. In past summers, Sutliff performed the roles of Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Belcore in *L'elisir d'amore* at the Chautauqua Institute. In the summer of 2021, he will cover the roles of Jon Seward in *The Lord of Cries* and Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an Apprentice Artist at Santa Fe Opera.

#### **ERIC TAYLOR – First Year Artist**

*Tenor—Saint George, UT*

Eric Taylor is currently pursuing his Master of Music degree at Rice University, where he has performed the roles of Sam Polk in *Susannah* and Tito in *La clemenza di Tito*. While pursuing his undergraduate degree in music at Westminster College, he performed several leading roles, including Nemorino in *L'elisir d'amore* and Rodolfo in *La bohème*, in addition to appearing in *Carmina Burana* with Salt Lake City's Ballet West. Taylor has participated in Apprentice Artist programs with Santa Fe Opera, Central City Opera, and Utah Lyric Opera. He had been set to perform in Santa Fe Opera's *Tristan und Isolde* and HGO's *Werther* and *Parsifal* this season, but those engagements were canceled due to COVID-19. He was named a semi-finalist at the Metropolitan Opera's National Council Auditions in 2017. He will join Santa Fe Opera in the summer of 2021 to cover the role of Lensky in *Eugene Onegin*.

#### **EMILY TREIGLE – First Year Artist**

*Mezzo-soprano—New Orleans, LA*

Emily Treigle is currently pursuing her Master of Music degree at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, where she received her Bachelor of Music degree last year. This spring, she will cover the title role of L'enfant in *L'enfant et les Sortilèges* at Rice. This season, Treigle was named winner of the New Orleans District and Gulf Coast Region in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, and she will advance to the national semifinal round in May. In summer 2021, she plans to return to Wolf Trap Opera as a Studio Artist for a second summer. In 2019, Treigle trained with HGO's Young Artist Vocal Academy and participated in the Aspen Music Festival, where she portrayed Madame Armfeldt in *A Little Night Music*. Previous roles include Bradamante in *Alcina* and Mrs. Ott in *Susannah*, an opera made famous by her grandfather, world-renowned bass-baritone Norman Treigle.

#### **ELENA VILLALÓN – Third Year Artist**

*Soprano—Austin, TX*

*HGO Digital appearances:* Farinelli's Trainer in *Vinkensport*; Amy in *The Making of The Snowy Day, an Opera for All*; Dew Fairy and Sandman in *Hansel and Gretel*.

*Previously at HGO:* Page in *Rigoletto*; Woman in selected performances of the world premiere of *El Milagro del Recuerdo/The Miracle of Remembering*; Inez in *La favorite*.

Audience Choice Award winner in HGO's 2019 Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. Alumna of HGO's Young Artists Vocal Academy (2018).

*Underwriters:* *Dian and Harlan Stai*

Elena Villalón was a Grand Finals winner of the 2019 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. She is a recent graduate of the University of Cincinnati College - Conservatory of Music (CCM), has been a vocal fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, and is an alumna of HGO's 2018 Young Artist Vocal Academy. In summer 2019, she performed Barbarina in *The Marriage of Figaro* at Opera Theatre of



Saint Louis as a Gerdine Young Artist and returned to the Tanglewood Music Center as a soprano fellow. In the summer of 2020, she was set to make her Santa Fe Opera debut as First Wood Sprite in *Rusalka*, but this was canceled due to COVID-19. She will return to Opera Theatre of Saint Louis this summer as Laretta in *Gianni Schicchi*.

To learn more about the Houston Grand Opera Studio, visit [HGO.org/Studio](https://www.hgo.org/Studio)

### **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. In fulfilling its mission to advance the operatic art to serve an ever-evolving audience, HGO has led the field in commissioning new works (70 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 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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