

## **Houston Grand Opera closes extraordinary 2017–18 season with hurricane losses offset by major philanthropic support**

Houston, May 30, 2018—Houston Grand Opera (HGO) announced at its annual meeting today that its 2017–18 season, dramatically relocated after Hurricane Harvey, closed on a strong financial footing despite nearly \$15 million of losses due to the storm and related costs. Lower sales income than in previous seasons was significantly offset by a Harvey recovery fundraising campaign that has raised more than \$9.5 million to date. HGO presented its entire 63<sup>rd</sup> season in the HGO Resilience Theater, a temporary venue the company built in Houston’s George R. Brown Convention Center after its home in the Wortham Theater Center was seriously damaged by flooding. The company will return to the Wortham in the fall with a gala benefit concert featuring **Plácido Domingo** and **Ana María Martínez** on September 26.

“‘Historic’ cannot begin to describe this past season,” noted **HGO Board of Directors Chairman Jim Crownover**. “It’s amazing that it happened at all with the opera house out of commission. We are so grateful for the support of Mayor Turner, David Minberg, and the leadership of the Houston First Board of Directors for making it possible. To see how this company pulled together under the leadership of Perryn and Patrick to create not just a season, but a great season of outstanding opera, was inspiring not just for our audience, but for all of Houston.”

“We knew that the city of Houston would need art to help heal,” observed HGO **Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers**. “Thanks to the dedication and sacrifices of so many in the HGO family of supporters, stakeholders, artists and creative teams, and company, we didn’t cancel or postpone a single performance.” Added **HGO Managing Director Perryn Leech**, “Our company was challenged like never before. But we are so proud to uphold the resilient spirit of this can-do city. And although there are still some recovery costs to be clarified, the tremendous support we have received from our board and our greater community will enable us to return to the Wortham stronger and more determined than ever to share the inspiration of great opera with our fellow Houstonians.”

HGO presented seven mainstage productions for a total of 43 performances in the HGO Resilience Theater, along with three special performances of the mariachi opera ***Cruzar la Cara de la Luna***, by José “Pepe” Martínez and Leonard Foglia, at the close of the season.

The season opened with a new production of Verdi’s ***La traviata***, featuring HGO Studio alumna **Albina Shagimuratova**, directed by **Arin Arbus**, and conducted by **Eun Sun Kim** in her United States debut. Ms. Kim will become HGO’s principal guest conductor beginning with the 2019–20 season. Other productions included R. Strauss’s ***Elektra*** with internationally renowned soprano **Christine Goerke** in the title role; the world premiere of **Ricky Ian Gordon** and **Royce Vavrek**’s ***The House without a Christmas Tree***; a new production of Bernstein’s ***West Side Story*** directed by **Francesca Zambello** honoring the composer’s centennial; revivals of Handel’s ***Julius Caesar*** with **Anthony Roth Costanzo** as Caesar and the whimsical **Els Comediants** staging of Rossini’s ***The Barber of Seville***; and the company’s first presentation of Bellini’s ***Norma*** in 25 years, featuring **Liudmyla Monastyrska** in the title role and HGO Studio alumna **Jamie Barton** as Adalgisa.

In the fall of 2017, HGO was recognized with a regional Emmy award for ***HGO: The Ring Cycle***, a video produced the previous season by Sculpting With Time Productions. This raises the company’s total number of Emmys to three.

### ***Seeking the Human Spirit* initiative proves unexpectedly resonant**

In May 2017, HGO announced ***Seeking the Human Spirit***, a six-year multidisciplinary initiative from 2017 through 2023 that includes mainstage performances and partnerships with Houston arts and health and human services organizations designed to highlight connections between art and the human spirit. The first season’s thematic focus was “sacrifice.” After the hurricane, many audience members experienced these connections in powerful ways. “It was really important to me to see opera,” noted one patron whose home was flooded during the storm. “I needed to be reminded of all that goodness, beauty, and hope.” Said another, “Opera offers the real-time live drama of what it is to be human. At the end of the day, the Resilience Theater was an opera.”

The first season of ***Seeking the Human Spirit*** included performances and activities organized around ***La traviata***, ***The House without a Christmas Tree***, and ***Norma***. Among the partners were **Houston Methodist** hospital, whose music therapists worked with HGO Studio artists to create a mini-residency for psychiatric patients. Clients of **The Womens Home**, an organization that helps women rebuild their lives after homelessness, expressed inspiration and emotional release after experiencing performances of ***La traviata*** and ***Norma*** and conversations with company members. High school students participating in **Sacred Sites Quest**, which sponsors interfaith projects, learned “to see the power of music and how creativity connects with spiritual consciousness,” according to the group’s founder and CEO, Reginald Adams. Public programs presented by **The Jung Center, Houston**; **Museum of Fine Arts, Houston**; and **The Rothko**

**Chapel** offered fresh perspectives on the themes of the operas, sacrifice, and the role of art in social action. Click [here](#) for a video review of the first season.

Seeking the Human Spirit will continue next season with the theme of “transformation.”

### **Attendance down from previous year but more performances sold out**

Attendance was 10% lower than the previous season, for a total of 58,038 compared to 64,533 in the 2016–17 season. This was due to the lingering effects of the hurricane on arts attendance across Houston, the unfamiliar venue, and the smaller capacity of the temporary theater. Still, 9 performances— *Elektra* (1), *The Barber of Seville* (4), *West Side Story* (4)—were sold out. Audiences came from 25 countries and 44 states and Washington, D.C. More than 7,000 attendees were new to HGO.

### **Harvey recovery campaign augments increase in annual operating support**

HGO estimates that its direct and indirect losses from Harvey will total approximately \$15 million over the three-year period from FY 2018 through FY 2020. Some costs are still to be determined, such as those associated with the relocation of the company’s costume shop. So far, HGO has raised more than \$9.5 million through a Harvey recovery campaign launched soon after the disaster.

This \$9.5 million, which will be received over the next three years, is in addition to \$17.2 million in annual operating support that the company forecasts it will receive by July 31. This amount represents an increase of \$1.2 million in annual operating support over 2016–17. HGO has added 86 new patrons and trustees thus far during the season, with more than 670 added since 2009.

### **Community and education programs served Houston in new ways**

HGOco, HGO’s community collaboration and education arm, engaged more than 65,000 Houstonians through arts education programs, commissioned works, and partnerships this season. The team reached out to community groups and evacuee shelters following Hurricane Harvey, offering comfort and entertainment in the form of **Storybook Opera** at the shelter at NRG Stadium. Later, when HGOco leaders learned of the financial and logistical issues faced by principals, teachers, and students in the wake of the disaster, they decided to offer their student programs to schools and community centers on a “pay what you can” basis for the entire season. The touring **Opera to Go!** program gave 56 performances at free and reduced rates.

This year's Opera to Go! offerings included the world premiere of ***Monkey and Francine in the City of Tigers*** by **Kamala Sankaram** and **David Johnston**, commissioned by HGOco in collaboration with American Lyric Theater. Inspired by Indian and Chinese mythology and including music influenced by Bollywood, the rollicking multicultural children's fable received rave reviews from its young audiences as well as critics.

HGOco presented mainstage performances of *The House without a Christmas Tree* for two student matinees and of *La traviata* for High School Night.

HGOco also proceeded with the launch of new opera immersion residencies in Missouri City and Marshall middle schools. In this model, opera is integrated into the curriculum across disciplines over a six-week period by two teaching artists and an HGOco staff member, working with teachers of English and social studies along with music and theater. Students also attended Opera to Go! and HGO student matinee performances in the Resilience Theater.

HGOco marked Veterans Day in November with two presentations. A free ***Veterans Songbook Concert*** at Christ Church Cathedral featured songs, poetry, and stories created by area veterans who participated in the four-year *Veterans Songbook* program. The team also presented **Tom Cipullo's** powerful chamber opera, ***Glory Denied***, about an American prisoner of war in Vietnam, in an unusually realistic venue: the Hangar Building at Houston's 1940 Air Terminal Museum near Hobby Airport.

In April, HGOco's flagship *Song of Houston* initiative introduced its newest innovation in telling the stories of Houstonians. ***Star-cross'd*** is a project in which composer **Avner Dorman** and librettist **Stephanie Fleischmann** transform true contemporary *Romeo and Juliet* stories into original short operas that are filmed for an online audience. The first episode, "Boundless," was based on a story that was first told at a Houston storytelling gathering held by ***The Moth***. The episode was released on the opening night of HGO's production of *West Side Story*.

Said **HGOco Committee Chair Judy Agee**, "We are so proud of all that HGOco accomplished in this incredibly challenging season. With school districts' resources stretched in the aftermath of Harvey, our educational programs became more important than ever, and we saw the evidence in the wide embrace of our 'pay what you can' offerings. The team's innovative artistic strengths also engaged Houstonians in exciting new ways."

### **Nurturing and training young talent**

The **HGO Studio** continued to fulfill its mission as one of the nation's leading training programs for outstanding operatic talent. Six new artists joined the program this season, for a total of 12. Studio pianist/coaches served on the music staff for each of HGO's 2017–18 productions. In addition to appearances on the HGO stage, artists performed in community venues and with local and national arts organizations.

HGO's **Eleanor McCollum Concert of Arias** competition was streamed live on social media for the second consecutive season. The livestream was hosted this year by award-winning soprano and HGO Studio alumna **Tamara Wilson**. The online audience was invited to vote for the Online Viewers' Choice Award; attendees in the theater voted for the Audience Choice Award.

Sixteen outstanding young undergraduate artists, including one pianist, participated in two week-long sessions of the **Young Artists Vocal Academy (YAVA)**, now in its eighth year. The program introduces these talented young people to the level of training and skills required to advance a professional career. Two current Studio artists are alumni of the YAVA program.

### **Free and low-cost access to opera continues**

HGO's 2017–18 Miller Outdoor Theatre production, *The Barber of Seville*, played to a combined audience of approximately 7,000 on May 18 and 19. The company was delighted to return to The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion in The Woodlands for the sixth season.

The performances at Miller Outdoor Theatre—free to the public—are made possible through HGO's unique NEXUS initiative. Underwritten by leading donors, NEXUS has made it possible for HGO to share opera with families, children, students, and seniors during the last nine seasons. The program enables the company to perform for free in venues like Miller Outdoor Theatre and to sell deeply discounted tickets for just \$15 at select Wortham Theater Center offerings. Since NEXUS was launched in 2007, more than 275,000 discounted or free NEXUS tickets have been sold or distributed.

“During this difficult post-Harvey season,” said Leech, “we are so indebted to our partners in the the community who rallied around us to provide venues and other assistance. Of course we are incredibly grateful to the corporate and foundation supporters and individual donors whose generosity enabled HGO to provide a season of artistic excellence that helped to keep our great city Houston Strong.”

Houston Grand Opera announced its 64<sup>th</sup> season at the end of January. The mainstage season will include 33 performances of six productions, including two free community performances. Details are available at [HGO.org](http://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 at the 2017 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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**Media Contact:** Jennifer Roberts, [jennie@elmorepr.com](mailto:jennie@elmorepr.com) 713-524-0661

**HGO Director of Marketing and Communications:** Dale Edwards, [dedwards@hgo.org](mailto:dedwards@hgo.org)  
713-546-0249

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