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Houston Grand Opera Announces *Seeking the Human Spirit 2017–2023*

Comprehensive artistic and community initiative will break new ground for Houston

Houston, May 22, 2017— **Houston Grand Opera (HGO)** today announced plans for ***Seeking the Human Spirit (STHS)***, a six-year multidisciplinary initiative designed to highlight the universal spiritual themes raised in opera and to expand and deepen Houstonians’ connections to opera and to art. Launching in the fall of 2017, *STHS* comprises three mainstage operas each season—one of which will be a new work—united by a single theme, and complementary projects by HGO and partner organizations created to enhance and enrich the community’s experience of the themes. Some of these activities will be available to the public; others will offer personal access to opera and HGO artists and staff for groups such as hospital patients, women who are rebuilding their lives after homelessness, and young people pursuing interfaith projects.

A video of the project can be seen [here](#). Click [here](#) for photos. For a livestream of the announcement, please go to HGO’s [Facebook page](#).

“Opera takes the human spirit in this grand cathartic way and sings it back to you,” explained **HGO Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers**. “I wanted us to explore a set of pieces that have some vein of spirituality as their artistic core, and invite partners here in the Houston community to help us ignite a set of conversations about what art is for that will be meaningful to audiences and to the broader community.”

Adds **HGO Managing Director Perryn Leech**, “At a time when conflict and division are all around us, two things that unite all people and cultures are spirituality and music. HGO is thrilled to inaugurate the most ambitious and inclusive initiative in our 62-year history and to invite Houstonians to discover the powerful experiences that

great opera can provide. We are proud to break new ground in this city by collaborating with partner organizations who are doing vital artistic and community work and creating meaningful connections for new and nontraditional audiences as well as opera lovers.”

HGO will launch *Seeking the Human Spirit* in 2017–18 with three works tied to the theme of Sacrifice: Verdi’s *La traviata* (October 20–November 11) featuring **Albina Shagimuratova** as Violetta in a new production by **Arin Arbus**; the world premiere of **Ricky Ian Gordon** and **Royce Vavrek**’s *The House without a Christmas Tree* (November 30–December 17) with **Heidi Stober** as Adelaide Mills; and Bellini’s *Norma* (April 27–May 11, 2018) with **Liudmyla Monastyrska** as Norma and **Jamie Barton** as Adalgisa. The 2018–19 mainstage operas, speaking to the theme of Transformation, will be Wagner’s *The Flying Dutchman* (fall 2018) with **Andrzej Dobber** as the Dutchman, **Rachel Willis-Sørensen** as Senta, and **Kristinn Sigmundsson** as Daland; Catán’s *Florencia en el Amazonas* (winter 2019) with **Ana María Martínez** as Florencia, directed by **Francesca Zambello**; and the world premiere of *The Phoenix* by **Tarik O’Regan** and **John Caird**, featuring **Thomas Hampson** as Lorenzo da Ponte and **Luca Pisaroni** as Young Lorenzo da Ponte. Also in the 2018–19 season, mezzo-soprano superstar and HGO Studio alumna **Joyce DiDonato** will perform her acclaimed recital program *In War and Peace: Harmony through Music*, which explores discord and harmony in times of war through her powerful interpretations of Baroque arias.

Future seasons of *Seeking the Human Spirit* will include productions of Handel’s *Saul*, Donizetti’s *La favorite*, R. Strauss’s *Salome*, Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, and the world premiere of a new opera by **Adam Guettel** based on H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man*.

Presentations by HGOco, the company’s community and education arm, will include performances of **Tom Cipullo**’s *Glory Denied*, a chamber opera based on the true story of America’s longest held prisoner of war; a concert of songs created from the stories of Houston veterans; *The Armadillo’s Dream*, a newly created book by **Dennis Arrowsmith** and **Eduard Hakobyan** for HGOco’s Storybook Opera program for young children; and *Star-Cross’d*, the pilot for a web-based serial opera on love in the face of obstacles. *Star-Cross’d* will follow a modern-day *Romeo and Juliet* storyline to be chosen from public submissions and will be created by composer **Avner Dorman** and librettist **Stephanie Fleischmann**.

Six artistic and community organizations will participate in *Seeking the Human Spirit* by presenting projects that speak to the individual operas or the annual themes. These groups and examples of their projects follow. Other partners will be invited to join the initiative in the future.

Houston Methodist and its Center for Performing Arts Medicine

- The Center for Performing Arts Medicine at Houston Methodist will partner with HGO to further integrate music and song into the environment of care at the hospital. As part of the Margaret Alkek Williams Crain Garden Performance Series, patients, staff, and guests of Houston Methodist will experience public performances in Crain Garden shaped to illuminate healing aspects of music.
- HGO performers will partner with select units such as inpatient rehabilitation and the psychiatric department to offer arts experiences as therapeutic tools.
- A panel on human creativity led by **Dr. Mauro Ferrari**, president & CEO of Houston Methodist Research Institute, will focus on Dr. Ferrari’s theory of the four quadrants of human creativity and feature medical researchers and composers.

- HGO artists will also be given functional brain MRIs to help further understanding of how creativity works at a neurological level.

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH)

- Thematic tours of the Museum's collections, led by Museum Docents, will draw connections between the visual arts and HGO featured operas.
- Performances by HGO Studio artists in the MFAH galleries will be included as part of a pop-up concert series.
- In conjunction with the MFAH Book Club program, one book will be selected per year to complement an opera featured in the HGO season, beginning with *Norma* in the spring of 2018.
- This collaboration will also utilize the expertise of the Mellon Foundation Undergraduate Curatorial Fellows at the MFAH, who will curate a digital exhibition of artworks from the MFAH collections that represent the motifs embodied in the *Seeking the Human Spirit* initiative. The selected artworks will be printed and/or projected for *Seeking the Human Spirit* audiences to enjoy.

The Jung Center, Houston

- Lectures led by Jungian analysts and depth psychologists will accompany the operas and annual themes. Houston-based Jungian analyst **Gretchen Heyer** will present two lectures on the theme of Sacrifice to coincide with *La traviata* in the fall of 2017 and *Norma* in the spring of 2018.

The Rothko Chapel

- *STHS* panel discussions will be held on art and activism, the role of the arts and humanities in the 21st century, and their importance in framing and addressing important social issues of the day. Potential topics include contemporary opera as a reaction to modern societal issues and the role of the funder-as-activist in supporting the arts.

Sacred Sites Quest

- This experiential program introducing Houston high school students to sacred spaces in the city and around the world will include visits to HGO for each of the three *STHS* operas each season. The visits may include rehearsals, meetings with the cast/creative team, attending a performance, and/or backstage tours.
- Participating students and volunteers will co-create a sacred space incorporating the labyrinth in a local Houston community in conjunction with *Seeking the Human Spirit*.

The Women's Home/Institute for Spirituality and Health

- Residents of The Women's Home Treatment and Transitional program participating in the home's Courage to Search spiritual exploration course will attend two *STHS* performances each season, visit with HGO artists and/or production staff members, and engage in preparatory and debriefing sessions with Courage to Search volunteers.
- HGOco will bring performances of Opera to Go! and the new Storybook Opera to families at the Mabee WholeLife Service Center opening in Spring Branch in the fall of 2017.

HGO will provide opportunities for people to reflect on the themes and spiritual questions and to share their experiences throughout the initiative, using the hashtag #HGOHumanSpirit on social media, on the HGO website HGO.org/HumanSpirit, and in other ways to be announced later.

HGO's *Seeking the Human Spirit* initiative is made possible by the generous support of the following donors and funders: Mr. and Mrs. Oscar S. Wyatt Jr.; Dian Graves Owen Foundation; The Wortham Foundation, Inc.; Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Foundation; Mr. John G. Turner and Mr. Jerry G. Fischer; Louisa Stude Sarofim Foundation; Mr. and Mrs. Byron Dyer; OPERA America; Mr. and Mrs. Donald G. Sweeney; Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel Loperena; Mrs. Pat Breen; and The Alkek and Williams Foundation.

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About Houston Grand Opera

Since its inception in 1955, Houston Grand Opera has grown from a small regional organization into an internationally renowned opera company. HGO enjoys a reputation for commissioning and producing new works, including 63 world premieres and seven American premieres since 1973. In addition to producing and performing world-class opera, HGO 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 has toured extensively, including trips to Europe and Asia, and has won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards—the only opera company to have won all three honors.

Through HGOco, Houston Grand Opera creates opportunities for Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to create, participate in, and observe art. The NEXUS Initiative is HGO's multi-year ticket underwriting program that allows Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy world-class opera without the barrier of price. Since 2007 NEXUS has enabled more than 225,000 Houstonians to experience first-quality opera through discounted single tickets and subscriptions, subsidized student performances, and free productions.

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Seeking the Human Spirit Announcement Event May 22, 2017

Quotes from Artistic and Community Partners

Houston Methodist Center for Performing Arts Medicine

“Music has been shown to assist the healing process through improved clinical outcomes and meaningful patient and caregiver experiences. At Houston Methodist, this is the difference between practicing medicine and leading it.”
J. Todd Frazier, Director

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

“Visual art, like opera, stirs the soul, and has always been used as a form of expression for humanity’s deepest emotions. MFAH is proud to participate in this meaningful project that celebrates the power of art in our lives.”
Gary Tinterow, Director

The Jung Center, Houston

“Developing greater creative expression is not only necessary for human development across the lifespan, it is fundamental to the healthy growth of our community. Great art reflects timeless and profound psychological truths, and this collaboration allows us to draw them into our collective awareness.” **Sean Fitzpatrick, Director**

Rothko Chapel

“Art is a catalyst for change, and opera can shine a spotlight on societal issues. *Seeking the Human Spirit* will serve as an important conduit for social engagement among diverse groups, inspiring people to reflect on both personal and social questions. This sort of collaboration is of great interest to supporters of Rothko Chapel.”

David Leslie, Executive Director

Sacred Sites Quest

“So often we are blind to the sacred qualities of the world around us. *Seeking the Human Spirit* offers a framework for us to share with our students how opera can transmit those qualities. We hope the students will discover that the pursuit of making opera can be a sacred quest, and that the people of HGO will also be inspired by our students.”

Reginald Adams, Creative/Artistic Director

The Women’s Center/ Institute for Spirituality and Health

“The mission of The Women’s Home is to help women in crisis regain their self-esteem and dignity, empowering them to become strong community members and lead healthy, productive lives. Our WholeLife® Model of Care treats the whole person, and spiritual wellness is part of the healing process. In connection with HGO and the Institute for Spirituality and Health, *Seeking the Human Spirit* will give our residents a connection to opera where sweeping music and universal stories can move them in powerful ways.”

Staci Young, Chief Program Officer, The Women’s Home

“The Institute for Spirituality and Health exists to raise awareness of the role that spirituality plays in health and in healing. Over the past three years, our partnership with The Women’s Home has resulted in an ongoing, volunteer-driven program, *Courage to Search*, which focuses on fostering spiritual growth and health amongst their clients. We are extremely excited that *Seeking the Human Spirit* will allow us to explore with these women how powerful operatic themes are woven into the fabric of their own spiritual stories.”

Stuart Nelson, Vice President, Institute for Spirituality and Health

Images for Artistic and Community Partners can be found [here](#).

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