

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Houston Grand Opera Announces 2023 Concert of Arias Winners

Four Singers Awarded Top Honors of 35th Annual Eleanor McCollum Competition

*Evening closes with announcement of a new \$22 million fund within the HGO Endowment;
renaming of HGO Studio to Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio*

HOUSTON – February 3, 2023 – Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is proud to announce the winners for this year’s Concert of Arias, the 35th Annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers, held this evening at the Wortham Theater Center and livestreamed for audiences at home.

The 2023 Concert of Arias winners include:

- **1st Place prize** of \$10,000 was awarded to Natalie Lewis, mezzo-soprano
- **2nd Place prize** of \$5,000 went to Demetrious Sampson, Jr., tenor
- **3rd Place prize** of \$3,000 was won by Michael McDermott, tenor
- The **Ana María Martínez Encouragement Award** of \$2,000 went to Gabrielle Turgeon, soprano
- The **Audience Choice Award** went to Demetrious Sampson, Jr., tenor
- The **Online Viewers’ Choice Award** went to Natalie Lewis, mezzo-soprano

Following the concert and announcement of winners, HGO General Director and CEO **Khori Dastoor** shared exciting news with the audience: the company has received the largest gift in its history from longtime supporters **Sarah and Ernest Butler**, who have created a new fund within the HGO Endowment valued at \$22 million. “I am thrilled to announce that this visionary couple is the new naming partner for our Studio,” said Dastoor, “which from this moment forward will be called the Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio.”

The winners of this year’s competition were chosen by a panel of distinguished judges: Dastoor, Grammy Award-winning mezzo-soprano **Isabel Leonard**, and HGO Artistic and Music Director **Patrick Summers**. The evening’s livestream host was Butler Studio alumna **Nicole Heaston**, who kept at-home viewers apprised of all the action happening behind-the-scenes. HGO Artistic Advisor and soprano **Ana María Martínez** selected the Encouragement Award virtually, an award she created eight years ago to celebrate artists developing their craft. The event was available to stream via HGO Digital and the company’s YouTube and Facebook pages.

The highly anticipated Eleanor McCollum Competition is held annually to identify candidates for HGO’s internationally acclaimed young artist training program, the newly renamed Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio. The Concert of Arias is the final stage of the competition, which brings

young singers from all over the world to Houston. Each finalist performed two arias from the opera repertoire for the panel of esteemed judges.

“It was positively thrilling to see these remarkable young artists give it their all tonight as they stepped onto the Wortham stage,” said Dastoor. “Their passion filled our hearts, and the evening was an inspiring reminder of why we do what we do at HGO: nurture the gifts of the most talented emerging artists in opera, who in turn will push our entire art form forward.”

“What a special thing it is to watch the dreams of our finalists come to life as they sing their arias,” said Butler Studio Director **Brian Speck**. “We are humbled that we are able to celebrate and uplift these young artists as they continue to reach new heights in the opera world. I am honored to welcome this incredible group of singers to the HGO community.”

After careful consideration of over 900 candidates, HGO narrowed the applicants to 14 semifinalists before selecting the eight talented finalists for the final round of the competition. All the selected semifinalists had the opportunity to learn more about HGO and work with company music staff leading up to the Concert of Arias.

The full list of finalists included Samuel Kidd (baritone), Ani Kushyan (mezzo-soprano), Natalie Lewis (mezzo-soprano), Emma Marhefka (soprano), Michael McDermott (tenor), Demetrious Sampson, Jr. (tenor), Gosh Sargsyan (bass), and Gabrielle Turgeon (soprano).

This year’s Concert of Arias was graciously chaired by **Rita Leader and Glen Rosenbaum**. The event raised over \$660,000 to benefit the Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers and the Houston Grand Opera Studio.

Since its inception 45 years ago, the Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio has grown into one of the most respected young artist programs in the world. Each of the artists in the Butler 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.

2023 Concert of Arias Winner Biographies:

1st Place

Natalie Lewis, mezzo-soprano

Mezzo-soprano Natalie Lewis is a 2021 alumnus of HGO’s Young Artists Vocal Academy. Hailed for her “velvet mezzo-soprano sonic cushion” (*San Diego Story*) and her “sly lyricism” (*Opera News*), she was a 2022 Renee Fleming Fellow at the Aspen Music Festival, where she performed Mistress Quickly in *Falstaff* alongside Sir Bryn Terfel in the title role. Other roles include Third Lady in *The Magic Flute* and Marcellina in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Recently, Lewis won the New York District round of The Metropolitan Opera’s Laffont Competition. Upcoming appearances include the roles of Zita (*Gianni Schicchi*) and La Zia Principessa (*Suor Angelica*) in Juilliard Opera Theater’s Puccini double bill, as well as her Carnegie Hall debut in April 2023, singing the alto solos in Marianna Martines’s *Dixit Dominus* and Bela Bartok’s *Three Village Scenes*. This summer she will attend the Merola Opera Program to perform the title role in Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia*.

2nd Place

Demetrious Sampson, Jr., tenor

Demetrious Sampson, Jr. is a rising tenor from Georgia. A 2022 alumnus of HGO's Young Artists Vocal Academy, he made his professional debut with Atlanta Opera at the age of 20 as Crab Man in *Porgy and Bess*, a role he reprised at Des Moines Metro Opera in summer 2022 as an apprentice artist. At Georgia State University, he has performed the roles of Vanderdendur in *Candide* and the title role in John Musto's *Bastianello*. A previous Encouragement Award winner, he recently won the Georgia District in the 2023 Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition and will compete in the Southeast Region Finals later this month. This spring Sampson will receive his bachelor's degree from Georgia State University, where he studies with Kathryn Hartgrove.

3rd Place

Michael McDermott, tenor

Tenor Michael McDermott is a 2021 alumnus of HGO's Young Artists Vocal Academy. He recently returned to the Aspen Music Festival for a second summer, covering the role of Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*. At The Juilliard School in New York, he performed the roles of Spärlich in *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* and Filippo in Hadyn's *L'infedelta Delusa*, as well as appearing in liederabends and recitals coached by Brian Zeger and Pierre Vallet. His recent competition wins include first prize in the 2021 Schmidt Vocal Competition and first prize in the Scholarship Division of the National Opera Association's Carolyn Bailey Argento Competition. McDermott received his Bachelor of Music degree from The Juilliard School, and is currently pursuing his master's degree at Rice University studying with Robin Rice.

The Ana María Martínez Encouragement Award

Gabrielle Turgeon, soprano

American/Canadian soprano Gabrielle Turgeon is an alumnus of both the Aspen Music Festival and School and the 2022 HGO Young Artists' Vocal Academy. Turgeon was a 2020 YoungArts National Finalist and a 2022 finalist in the Schmidt Vocal Arts Undergraduate Awards. Performance highlights this year include Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (Orpheus Choir of Toronto) and Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* (Chorus Niagara). Recent operatic and musical theater roles have included Sister Sophia in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* (Aspen Music Festival and School) and Iris in Handel's *Semele* (Toronto Lyric Opera Centre). This season, Turgeon performed the role of Blanche de la Force in Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM), where she is currently pursuing her master's degree. She received her Bachelor of Music degree with honors from the University of Toronto in 2022.

Audience Choice Award

Demetrious Sampson, Jr., tenor

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Online Viewers' Choice Award

Natalie Lewis, mezzo-soprano

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To learn more about the evening, visit HGO.org/COA.

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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. General Director and CEO Khori Dastoor assumed leadership of the organization and responsibility for its strategic vision in 2021. 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 advance the operatic art, to serve the Houston community, and to be a global leader in the future of opera, HGO has led the field in commissioning and producing new works (73 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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