

Houston Grand Opera Launches HGO Digital, The Sarah and Ernest Butler Performance Series, This Fall

In lieu of canceled performances in the 2020–21 season, HGO Digital to premiere new digital productions, Live from the Cullen Recital Series, and a re-envisioned HGO Studio Showcase with global streaming partner Marquee TV

Digital productions will include David T. Little and Royce Vavrek’s Vinkensport, or The Finch Opera; a double bill of Mozart’s The Impresario, featuring a new libretto by Jim Luigs, and Lee Hoiby’s Bon Appétit!; Humperdinck’s Hansel and Gretel; and a Zarzuela project created by HGO Artistic Advisor Ana María Martínez

Live from the Cullen Recital Series will kick off the season on September 11 with a performance by HGO Studio alumna and international star soprano Tamara Wilson

HOUSTON – August 11, 2020 – Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is pleased to announce HGO Digital, its all-new program of digital works for the 2020–21 season. Starting in September and extending through April 2021, HGO will release original video content bimonthly for audiences to enjoy from the comfort of their homes, free of charge. Programming includes one three-act opera, three one-act operas, three concert events, and a special documentary project on the making of HGO’s world-premiere opera based on the children’s book *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. In addition, HGO Digital will present the Live from the Cullen Recital Series, featuring opera stars **Tamara Wilson, Arturo Chacón-Cruz, Reginald Smith Jr.**, and select HGO Studio artists in the fall 2020 releases.

To support the series, Sarah and Ernest Butler, longtime HGO supporters, have made the extraordinarily generous pledge of \$1 million to help underwrite HGO Digital programming. The pledge will support both Houston Grand Opera and Austin Opera, creating a strategic partnership between the two Texas companies.

“Sarah and Ernest’s wonderful commitment is a vote of confidence in HGO and Austin Opera and their support for our exciting future artistic programming. We are deeply appreciative of their continued investment in the operatic art form that they love so much. This gift allows us to share that love with so many others in both cities, Texas, and around the world,” says HGO Managing Director **Perryn Leech**.

“The arts have always played a critical role in our lives and it was important for us to support Houston Grand Opera and Austin Opera with this gift. Collaboration between HGO and Austin Opera is a win for all with extra creativity, cost savings and support for opera. Our hope is that through this new programming and content that HGO is producing, more people will be able to access this wonderful art form that has meant so much to both of us over the years,” states Sarah and Ernest Butler.

Viewers around the world will be able to transport themselves to a front row seat and stream exclusive HGO Digital content worldwide through Marquee TV, an on-demand streaming platform dedicated to global arts and culture. This season’s partnership between HGO and Marquee TV, the first of its kind between the streaming service and a US-based performing arts organization, grants audiences access to

Marquee TV so they can stream HGO's 2020–21 season using their televisions. Dubbed the “Netflix of the Arts” by *The Financial Times*, the subscription-based arts channel will host HGO's brand-new content and allow users to access it for free through Marquee TV's website or app, or through Roku, Apple TV, Fire TV, and other platforms.

“Partnering with Marquee TV allows us to deliver the highest-quality audio and video content directly to the televisions of our patrons. The need for crowding around a laptop or tablet to enjoy HGO content will be eliminated, and everyone in the household can enjoy the performances in comfort,” says **Dale Edwards**, HGO director of marketing and communications.

HGO opens its 66th season on September 11 with the debut of the Live from the Cullen Recital Series, featuring a performance by beloved soprano and HGO Studio alumna **Tamara Wilson**. The Live from the Cullen Recital Series will take place monthly from September through March 2021. On September 25, viewers will be treated to the **Studio Showcase**, an evening with tomorrow's stars as they perform a variety of scenes from history's most beloved operas. The 2020–21 HGO Studio features 11 artists: six first-year artists and five returning artists.

In October, HGO presents the chamber opera *Vinkensport, or The Finch Opera*, by composer **David T. Little** and librettist **Royce Vavrek**. Conducted by HGO Artistic and Music Director **Patrick Summers** and co-directed by HGO Studio alumnus **Ryan McKinny** and frequent HGO collaborator **E. Loren Meeker**, this comic opera in one act is sure to delight.

November brings a double bill for viewers, with back-to-back presentations of Mozart's *The Impresario* and Lee Hoiby's one-woman opera *Bon Appétit!* A new video production of *The Impresario*, originally composed in 1786, receives an English-language retelling from librettist **Jim Luigs**. HGO Principal Guest Conductor **Eun Sun Kim** conducts, and **E. Loren Meeker** again directs. Audiences will then devour *Bon Appétit!*, with renowned mezzo-soprano and HGO Studio alumna **Jamie Barton** as Julia Child. Based on an episode of Child's television program *The French Chef*, this short, critically acclaimed confection brings audiences into the chef's storied kitchen as she bakes a chocolate cake. **Ryan McKinny** returns as director.

In December, HGO will release a special video project documenting the upcoming HGO world premiere of *The Snowy Day*, a new opera by composer **Joel Thompson** and librettist **Andrea Davis Pinkney** based on the award-winning children's book by **Ezra Jack Keats**. The special video project includes excerpts of the score, documentary footage of the creation of the opera, and readings from the book itself. Originally slated to premiere on the Wortham stage this winter, the fully realized production will be presented in a future season.

After the triumphant sold-out concert at the Wortham last year—*Giving Voice: Lawrence Brownlee and Friends Sing Opera, Gospel, and Standards*—internationally renowned tenor **Lawrence Brownlee** returns with his co-host, celebrated soprano, HGO Studio alumna, and frequent HGO collaborator **Nicole Heaston**, in January 2021. The pair will be joined by an all-Black group of opera all-stars for a new digital installment of this wonderful celebration of Black voices. The second annual concert series will be livestreamed.

Later in the spring, audiences will be enchanted by an English-language production of Engelbert Humperdinck's family-friendly classic *Hansel and Gretel* and a Zarzuela project created by HGO Artistic Advisor **Ana María Martínez**. More details will be released later in the fall.

“The arts have the power to transform and heal. While we will not be able to come together in person, it is exciting to know that we can still experience opera as one. This move to virtual programming has provided us with the unique opportunity to explore different works and share them with a global audience,” says Artistic and Music Director **Patrick Summers**.

The 33rd annual Concert of Arias, the culmination of HGO’s Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers, also will be livestreamed in February. The competition and its final round, the Concert of Arias, are held annually to identify candidates for HGO’s internationally acclaimed Studio program, which nurtures young artists who have the potential for major careers in opera. For the first time ever, the HGO Studio is partnering with other opera companies across the country to streamline a virtual audition process for their respective young artist programs.

HGOco, HGO’s community and learning arm, has reconceived its yearly Opera to Go! tour to best serve schools navigating the challenges of digital instruction. Originally slated for in-person performances at schools and community venues, **Faye Chiao** and **Anton Dudley’s** *Katie: The Strongest of the Strong* will be offered in an all-digital format, including resource materials for teachers and students, plus opportunities for virtual conferencing with teaching artists or creative team members. This new, HGOco-commissioned, all-female production tells the story of strongwoman-turned-suffragette Katie Sandwina, with mezzo-soprano and frequent HGO collaborator **Cecilia Duarte** in the title role. More information can be found at HGO.org/HGOco.

HGO’s virtual programming will be staged in spaces including the outdoors, artists’ homes, and the Cullen Theater at the Wortham Theater Center. The HGO Health Advisory Committee, composed of healthcare professionals from our partner Houston Methodist, will inform, evaluate, and advise on the creation of safe working environments for the company, with recommendations covering the planning, implementation, and evaluation of procedures to allow a return to rehearsals, performances, and office work. That partnership has proven more important than ever at this moment, as specialists from the hospital are providing crucial advice and oversight on how to protect HGO’s audiences, staff, and artists. As more information and research becomes available, the HGO Health Advisory Committee will continue to adapt to best serve the organization.

“Planning for a standard opera season begins years in advance, which was not the case for this virtual lineup. I am proud of how quickly the HGO team was able to pivot in their creative thinking to present this diverse lineup of digital programming,” says Managing Director Perryn Leech. “It was important for us to give back to our patrons and audiences who have shown unwavering support of the opera. If the past few years have taught me anything, it’s that this city and its people have a resiliency that cannot be matched.”

In appreciation of their continued support, those who purchased season tickets for 2020–21 will have their subscriptions moved to the 2021–22 season automatically and will be given complimentary tickets to *Breaking the Waves* and *The Sound of Music* in spring 2021.

HGO Digital Schedule:

- Friday, September 11, at 7:30 p.m. – Live from The Cullen: Tamara Wilson
- Friday, September 25, at 7:30 p.m. – Studio Showcase
- Friday, October 9, at 7:30 p.m. Live from The Cullen: Reginald Smith Jr.



- Friday, October 23, at 7:30 p.m. – *Vinkensport, or The Finch Opera*
- Friday, November 13, at 7:30 p.m. – Live from The Cullen: Arturo Chacón-Cruz
- Friday, November 27, at 7:30 p.m. – *The Impresario* and *Bon Appétit!*
- Thursday, December 10, at 7:30 p.m. – *The Snowy Day* documentary
- Friday, January 8, at 7:30 p.m. – Live from The Cullen: Singer to be announced soon
- Friday, January 22, at 7:30 p.m. – Giving Voice II
- Friday, February 5, at 7 p.m. – Concert of Arias

For more information, visit 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 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 (68 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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HGO Digital Cast Listing:

* HGO debut † HGO Studio artist ‡ Former HGO Studio artist

HGO Studio Showcase**Bizet: *Carmen*****Act II – “Nous avons un tête une affaire”**

| | |
|-----------|----------------------|
| Frasquita | Raven McMillon *† |
| Carmen | Sun-Ly Pierce *† |
| Mercedes | Lindsay Kate Brown † |
| Remendado | Ricardo Garcia *† |
| Dancaire | Blake Denson *† |
| Pianist | Bin Yu Sanford *† |

Massenet: *Werther***Act III – “Bonjour, grande sœur... Va! laisse couler mes larmes”**

| | |
|-----------|----------------------|
| Sophie | Elena Villalón † |
| Charlotte | Lindsay Kate Brown † |
| Pianist | Alex Munger † |

Massenet: *Don Quichotte***Act II – “C’est vers ton amour...”**

| | |
|-----------|-------------------|
| Sancho | Nicholas Newton † |
| Quichotte | Cory McGee * † |
| Pianist | Kevin Miller |

Donizetti: *L'elisir d'amore*
Act I – “Caro elisir!... Chi è mai quel matto?”

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|----------|------------------|
| Adina | Raven McMillon † |
| Nemorino | Ricardo Garcia † |
| Pianist | Kevin Miller |

Donizetti: *Anna Bolena*
Act I – “Oh! qual parlar fu il suo!... Tremate voi?”

| | |
|----------|----------------------|
| Giovanna | Lindsay Kate Brown † |
| Enrico | William Guanbo Su † |
| Pianist | Alex Munger † |

Mozart: *Don Giovanni*
Act II Finale – “Già la mensa è preparata”

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|--------------|----------------------|
| Donna Elvira | Lindsay Kate Brown † |
| Don Giovanni | Blake Denson † |
| Leporello | Nicholas Newton † |
| Commendatore | William Guanbo Su † |
| Pianist | Bin Yu Sanford † |

Monteverdi: *L'incoronazione di Poppea*
Act III – “Pur ti miro”

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|---------|------------------|
| Poppea | Elena Villalón † |
| Nerone | Sun-Ly Pierce † |
| Pianist | Kevin Miller |



HoustonGrandOpera

Ravel: *L'heure espagnole*
Scenes 9–13 – “Évidemment, elle me congédie”

| | |
|------------|------------------|
| Conception | Sun-Ly Pierce † |
| Ramiro | Blake Denson † |
| Don Inigo | Cory McGee † |
| Pianist | Bin Yu Sanford † |

Berg: *Lulu*
Act I – “Gnädige Frau... Machen Sie auf!... Auf einmal springt er auf...”

| | |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Lulu | Elena Villalón † |
| Der Maler | Ricardo Garcia † |
| Der Medizinalrat | Nicholas Newton † |
| Pianist | Alex Munger † |

Vinkensport, or The Finch Opera
Music by David T. Little
Libretto by Royce Vavrek

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|---|--|
| Sir Elton John’s Trainer | Nicole Heaston ‡ |
| Farinelli’s Trainer | Elena Villalón † |
| Holy St. Francis’s Trainer | Alicia Gianni ‡ |
| Prince Gabriel III of Belgium’s Trainer’s Son | TBD |
| Hans Sachs’s Trainer | Ricardo Garcia † |
| Atticus Finch’s Trainer | Ryan McKinny ‡ |
| Conductor | Patrick Summers HGO Artistic and Music Director <i>Margaret Alkek Williams Chair</i> |
| Co-Directors | E. Loren Meeker & Ryan McKinny ‡ |

The Impresario

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Original Libretto by Gottfried Stephanie Jr.
New English Libretto by Jim Luigs

Rona Richards

Raven McMillon †

Yolanda Cantrell

Nicole Heaston ‡

Edna Mendenhall (The Impresario)

Nova Thomas *

Wiley Stonecrop

Frederick Ballentine *

Bowie Krebs

William Guanbo Su †

Conductor

Eun Sun Kim
HGO Principal Guest Conductor

Director

E. Loren Meeker

Bon Appétit!

Music by Lee Hoiby
Libretto by Julia Child, adapted by Mark Shulgasser

Julia Child

Jamie Barton ‡

Director

Ryan McKinny ‡