

# Visionary Fervor

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**Khori Dastoor is the new general director of Houston Grand Opera.**

*By Fred Cohn*



Dastoor speaks at an HGO event, 2021

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**WHEN KHORI DASTOOR** was named general director and CEO of Houston Grand Opera, in June 2021, her appointment garnered immediate national attention. HGO had never had either a woman or a person of

color at its top; the Pasadena-born Dastoor, daughter of an Indian father and Dutch mother, is both. A former lyric soprano who sang roles such as Susanna, Gilda and Lucia with a number of American companies, she gave up performing to take a program-director position at the Packard Humanities Institute. In 2019, she was named general director of Opera San José. She assumed the reins in October; less than six months into the job, she was faced with the challenge of leading the company through the pandemic. She responded in innovative fashion with a production of Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*, starring Susan Graham—part of the initial wave of digital opera productions that emerged from the crisis.



A months-long interview process for HGO ended with a four-hour session in which she presented the company's board with three fully programmed seasons. "When I left the final interview," she says, "I said to my husband [data scientist BenJoaquin

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Gouverneur], 'I have no idea if I'm the right person for the job, but I have been authentic in who I am.'" She got the job, of course, and interviewing Dastoor via Zoom, I could immediately sense why. She is engaged and animated, with a near-visionary fervor about her ideas. "Khorie is such an appealing presence," says her mentor Charles MacKay, retired general director of Santa Fe Opera. "She doesn't have a hard-edged nature, but she exudes a kind of strength that's combined with warmth. She makes you feel, 'This person is going to take care of business.'"

When Dastoor moved into her HGO position, the company was suffering from a management vacuum. Until late 2020, its leadership had been shared equally by managing director Perryn Leech and artistic director Patrick Summers. When Leech resigned, the company announced that it would revert to a more traditional management structure. Dastoor now reports to the board; Summers reports to her.

"Patrick was very supportive of the new structure, and I think he felt a responsibility to make space for my priorities," Dastoor says. "I wouldn't know how to make management decisions without thinking about programming. Otherwise the team thinks, 'Where are we going?' It's not so much the 'what' of the decision as making it and communicating it relentlessly so that everyone can get on board."

Dastoor sees the job of sustaining the company into the future as her top priority. “To pretend that money is the challenge is to focus on the deck chairs instead of the iceberg,” she says. “The iceberg is the fact that the people who care most that we exist are in their eighties. We have to engage with people in a different generation who live in a different way, who think about purchases in a different way, who want personal enrichment rather than a passive experience. Without that real honesty about where we will be fifty years from now, we can’t call ourselves innovative, future-minded or leaderly.”

The process involves keeping the company open to a broad spectrum of ideas. “Having people in my office regularly who come from different perspectives is one way,” says Dastoor. “Hearing directly from customers is another. Hearing from people who are *not* our customers should be another. You really want to make sure you’re spreading out who gets to talk to you—and it shouldn’t just be the people who have the Bat-phone to the decision-makers.”

Dastoor has made a point of talking to people all around the city, connecting at arts events and even at the Houston Rodeo. “I’ve discovered that tradition is a big deal in Houston,” she says. “*Houston* is a big deal in Houston. Even people who don’t care about the opera care about Houston being on the map. They’ve got a natural, healthy competitiveness—‘We’re coming for you, Chicago!’ ‘San Francisco has nothing on us!’”

HGO’s 2022–23 season is the first that will be entirely Dastoor’s. It includes repertory favorites such as *Le Nozze di Figaro*, role debuts from Tamara Wilson (Tosca) and Amanda Majeski (Salome), and Angel Blue’s company debut, in *La Traviata*. The one bona fide rarity is Dame Ethel Smyth’s 1906 opera *The Wreckers*. One other significant Dastoor innovation is the recent appointment of Joel Thompson as HGO’s first composer-in-residence.

Dastoor sees her performing background as a definite strength. “Look, I had wonderful roles, and I was paid more than my talent warranted,” she says. “But it was the worst possible life, and I wasn’t willing to continue to make those sacrifices. So I’m operating from a place of ‘Thank you so much for being willing to give up what you did in order to be sitting in my office.’”

“Every opera company is sort of a miracle,” Dastoor adds. “There are so many reasons why it shouldn’t work—so many things that could go wrong. But HGO will thrive in its next chapter, whether it kills me or not.” ■