



High-resolution production photos and headshots can be found at
www.houstongrandopera.org/PressPhotos/PressPhotos.htm

HGOCo: UNIFYING A COMMUNITY THROUGH ART

(HOUSTON, TX) — Houston Grand Opera has established a new initiative that aims to provide opportunities for observation, enjoyment and participation in the creation of art for the entire Houston community. HGOCo through its programs and initiatives aims to contribute to the cultural enrichment of the cities residents by providing a new way for all Houstonians to connect, share and learn about arts and culture.

“Houston Grand Opera believes that encountering art is vital to people at all ages and stages of life and in all circumstances,” said Freud. “Through HGOCo, the creative resource of our entire company will be available to Houston through an innovative suite of projects and events, and through collaboration with other arts, educational and community institutions. We’re calling this program HGOCo because it expresses and embodies the value of collaboration between our company and our community.”

According to Patrick Summers, HGO music director, there is a compelling need for a sustained and broadly diverse center for arts education in Houston.

“Houston Grand Opera firmly believes the arts play an essential role for many people in the expression of our own time, our desires and frustrations, our joys and sorrows,” Summers said.

“The arts are not simply a diversion from life, but an expression of it. The telling of stories through words and music, through visual representations in their many forms and through writing and composing is our oldest and most important expression of the complex experiences of consciousness. We leave to future generations only what we create now. Exposure and access to the arts, embraced at any age, are fundamental to the future memories of mankind.”

Some programs and initiatives proposed through HGOC Co include:

- Artist-led workshops for teachers
- Collaborative multi-disciplinary residencies in schools and community centers
- Community- and schools-based recitals, performances and workshops
- Composition, Writing, Performance, Stage Design workshops and competitions for teens
- Community Choir Collaboration
- Creation and development of computer and web-based resources for all sectors of the community

Expansions of specific existing programs include:

- High School Voice Studio program
- Student opera matinees and High School Nights
- Expansion of HGO's acclaimed children's chorus to permit training and performances throughout a full academic year
- Performances outside the opera house
- Opera Camp

SONG OF HOUSTON

The first project currently underway under the auspices of HGOC Co is *Song of Houston*, a model of the type of activity for which HGOC Co is being founded, according to Freud.

Early in 2006, Freud in partnership with Houston Mayor Bill White's office, HGO Director of Education and Outreach Dr. Gary Gibbs and HGO Project Coordinator Susan Elliott identified six immigrant communities to engage in the initial *Song of Houston* project.

As part of the project, a large-scale community oratorio aptly named *Song of Houston* will serve as a tangible representation of the connection between company and community by the sharing of stories through words and music.

HGO commissioned Grammy award nominee Composer Christopher Theofanidis and poet Leah Lax to collaborate on a work that would tell the stories of the ways in which people from the focus communities have come to Houston, re-shaping not only their own lives but Houston's vibrant and diverse culture.

The oratorio includes a movement that integrates story and musical elements of each focus community, as well as an introduction and finale. Its source material is the stories and music of immigrants from Houston's Vietnamese, African, Mexican, Central American, Russian Jewish and Indian-Pakistani.

Lax and Theofanidis collected stories and musical elements from each community over many months. Photographer Janice Rubin documented many of the storytellers and their daily lives as part of the project, creating visual elements that will be part of the performance and the materials for HGOCO activities in each community.

Song of Houston will have its world premiere on the stage of the Brown Theater at the Wortham Center in downtown Houston on November 10, 2007.

With a musical score composed by Christopher Theofanidis and a libretto by poet Leah Lax, *Song of Houston* will unite hundreds of performers from the six focus communities with the Orchestra, Chorus and Children's Chorus of the Houston Grand Opera, and the artists of the Houston Grand Opera Studio, under the direction of HGO Music Director Patrick Summers.

The *Song of Houston* project is conceived and undertaken with a suite of HGOCO school- and community-based programs designed to inspire and develop observation and participation in creative activity. These programs include:

- Writers in the Schools (WITS) partnership through which hundreds of school-aged children will produce writings and art reflecting the unique cultural details of their lives (through Dec. 2007).
- A photography workshop produced in collaboration with the National Geographic Society which will teach African immigrant high-school students to explore their Houston community through the camera's lens.
- Traveling exhibits of photography and visual art created by community members.
- A section of HGO's website dedicated to fostering connection, as well as sharing and learning about the journeys that we have all undertaken in our lives.
- Continuing education courses for adults to explore the cultural identities and diversity of Houston.
- Performances of each community's *Song of Houston* musical segment in locations around Houston prior to the oratorio's premier at the Wortham Center; these community events

may also include readings of the journey stories from other communities, as well as performances from local individuals and groups.

Summers noted, “*Song of Houston* is a unique undertaking: the collected stories of our community set alight through song. The pioneering creativity engendered by this commission will set the stage for many new and exciting activities not normally associated with an opera house, and HGOCo is already at work.”

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HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

HGO is committed to the commissioning and performing of new works and has contributed 35 new operas to the repertoire since 1977. It is equally committed to the imaginative presentation of traditional operatic repertoire and to the development of singers, composers, and artisans.

Founded in 1955 through the joint efforts of Maestro Walter Herbert and Houston cultural leader Mrs. Louis G. Lobit, Houston Grand Opera flourished under the acclaimed leadership of General Director David Gockley from 1972 to 2005. Anthony Freud, OBE, formerly the general director of the Welsh National Opera, was appointed third general director and first CEO in July 2005, and began his tenure in March 2006.

Anthony Freud, OBE was born in London in 1957. He was appointed Houston Grand Opera’s third General Director and its first CEO in July 2005; he began his tenure in March 2006. From 1994 to 2005, Freud served as General Director of the Welsh National Opera (WNO) after having served as Executive Producer for Philips Classics where he oversaw large-scale recording projects for such artists as Jessye Norman, Seiji Ozawa, Sir John Eliot Gardiner and Bernard Haitink. Freud graduated, with honors, with a law degree from the University of London King’s College in 1978 and qualified as an attorney in 1979.

In June, 2006, Freud was honored by Queen Elizabeth II of England with an Order of the British Empire (OBE) in recognition of his service to the Arts in the United Kingdom. At its 2006 convention in Seattle, WA, Freud was elected to serve on the board of Opera America, the national service organization for opera in the United States and Canada.

Patrick Summers, music director of Houston Grand Opera, is best known for his formidable grasp of diverse repertoire. Since his 1998 HGO debut, Mr. Summers has led more than twenty operas at HGO, among them several world premieres including Tod Machover’s *Resurrection* in 1999 (CD released by Albany, 2002), Carlisle Floyd’s *Cold Sassy Tree* in 2000 (Albany, 2005), Jake Heggie’s *The End of the Affair* and Rachel Portman’s *The Little Prince*. This season at HGO, Mr. Summers conducts Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra*, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and Janáček’s *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and returns to the Metropolitan Opera for Bellini’s *I puritani* and to the San Francisco Opera for Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride*. Last season he conducted Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale* and Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* at HGO; led performances of Handel’s *Rodelinda* at the Metropolitan Opera followed by a Met tour of Japan conducting *La traviata*; reunited with Renée Fleming for several concerts; and returned to Opera Australia for Puccini’s *Turandot*. Mr. Summers assisted in the creation of André Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* and shared conducting duties with the composer during the opera’s 1998 world premiere in San Francisco. He also led *Streetcar*’s European premiere for the Opéra-National-du-Rhin (Strasbourg). He made his UK debut conducting the Welsh National Opera’s *Rigoletto* and led the European premiere of Carlisle Floyd’s *Of Mice and Men* at the Bregenz Festival with the Vienna Symphony, for which he received international critical acclaim. That production was subsequently mounted in Houston and recorded

(Albany, released in 2004). Mo. Summers conducted the 2002 Grammy Award–winning recording *Bel Canto* featuring Renée Fleming and the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

Christopher Theofanidis, composer, has won numerous awards for his compositions including the Rome Prize, Guggenheim Fellowship, Barlow Prize, Charles Ives' Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Columbia-Bearns Prize, a Fulbright Fellowship to France and six ASCAP Morton Gould Prizes. His music has been performed by the Atlanta Symphony, Houston Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra, Brooklyn Philharmonic, and the orchestras of Monte-Carlo, Oregon, Madison, and Fort Worth, as well as chamber groups such as Speculum Musicae, the Cassatt, Alexander, Muir, Henschel, Cuartetto Latinoamericano string quartets, the Absolute Ensemble, and SONYC. Theofanidis is currently the composer-in-residence with the California Symphony and the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, and his current projects include a viola concerto for Kim Kashkashian and the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, a ballet for the American Ballet Theater, and an opera for the Moores School of Music. Theofanidis also is a member of the faculty at The Juilliard School.

Leah Lax, Librettist holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. She has twice been awarded Artist's Grants from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston. Leah has received several writing fellowships and was the winner of a national short story contest for Moment Magazine. Her short story, "Munya's Story" was the inspiration for The Mikvah Project, a touring exhibit created together with photographer Janice Rubin which has attracted significant press in twenty U.S. cities. This moving and powerful collection is based on a series of interviews and quotes from anonymous women, the model she is using in creating the libretto for Song of Houston.