

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA



Houston Grand Opera's 1995 Plazacast production of *La Cenerentola* starring Cecilia Bartoli

Photo: Bruce Bennett

Visitors strolling the grid of Houston's theater district can't miss the dizzying array of performing arts complexes. Stages and concert halls emanate in architectural splendor from the Bayou Place hub, belying the struggle theater presenters face in keeping their art forms relevant.

Against such a backdrop, and against many odds, Houston Grand Opera—which celebrates its 50th anniversary this season—has established a far-flung presence well beyond its backyard. For five decades, it has built a rich legacy to American opera and Houston's stage tradition.

Housed in the Wortham Theater Center, HGO is revered among the world's renowned opera companies. Its influence can be seen in the names of A-list singers listed on the Wortham marquee, as well as in nationally

televised productions, 17 touring productions since 1975, audio recordings by labels such as Decca and Deutsche Grammophon, and radio broadcasts heard all over the United States and in Australia, Europe and Canada.

Opera insiders say the ability to translate artistic vision into a reality of international import is rare. HGO's steady rise to prominence goes back to 1972, when David Gockley took the baton as general director, overseeing a \$420,000 budget. For three decades, Gockley and his team have pursued a zealous policy of mounting new productions and new works, a results-oriented method of training new artists, and a savvy use of technology to broaden audiences.

Since 1974, HGO has staged 30 world premieres of works it has commissioned from mostly American composers, including

The End of the Affair (2004), *The Little Prince* (2003), *Cold Sassy Tree* (2000), *Little Women* (1998), *Jackie O* (1997), *Florencia en el Amazonas* (1996), *Harvey Milk* (1995), and *Nixon in China* (1987). "HGO went from an ordinary regional company to a company that virtually controlled the new opera business in the US," says Buck Ross, director of the Moores Opera Center at University of Houston's Moores School of Music.

The embrace of nontraditional opera has paid off. "I count *Nixon in China* as being one of the most important operatic premieres of the second half of the 20th century," says Ross. "It was both uncompromising and accessible." *Nixon in China* earned the company a Grammy award and an Emmy in 1987, making HGO the only opera company to have earned two Grammy



L to R—Mark S. Doss as Riolo in HGO's 2001 revival of *Florencia en el Amazonas* (photo by George Hixson); Carolann Page and James Maddalena as Pat and Richard Nixon capture a historic moment in HGO's 1987 world premiere of John Adams's *Nixon in China* (photo by Jim Caldwell); Margaret Lloyd (Amy), Stacey Tappan (Beth), Stephanie Novacek (Jo) and Joyce DiDonato (Meg) in HGO's 2000 revival of Mark Adamo's *Little Women* (photo by George Hixson); a scene from the 2001 Multimedia Modular Stage production of *Carmen* at Miller Outdoor Theatre (photo by George Hixson); a local billboard advertising HGO's 1956-57 season.

awards, two Emmy awards and one Tony.

The big three—the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and San Francisco Opera—started doing new works only after they saw that HGO's policy worked over a long period, Ross says. "Our more aggressively modernist productions have given [major US opera companies] the confidence that they can go beyond the humdrum," says David Gockley.

With a budget of \$21.5 million for the 2004-05 season, the company will mount two world premieres, including *Salsipuedes, a tale of Love, War and Anchovies* by Daniel Catán and *Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess* by Mark Adamo. Catán and Adamo created previous works for HGO that were great popular successes, *Florencia en el Amazonas* and *Little Women*, respectively. Carlisle Floyd, whose *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men* have become part of the standard operatic repertoire, has also enjoyed a longstanding relationship with HGO: the company has presented four world premieres by Floyd. "Our goal is success with audiences, not academicians," sums up Gockley.

Not every HGO world premiere has caught on. "When a production doesn't quite work perfectly, you can still see that it was a calculated, soundly based risk," Ross feels. "[Gockley's] not a gambler, and he's not reckless."

HGO's eye for emerging talent is part of that vision. The company helped launch Renée Fleming's career in 1988 after placing her in the role of the Countess in its production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Houston Grand Opera Studio, the company's highly ranked apprenticeship program, has nurtured many others. Successful alumni include Denyce Graves, Susanne Mentzer, Bruce Ford, Ana Maria Martinez, Joyce DiDonato, Raymond Very and Marquita Lister among others.

HGO was the first opera company to produce Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1976) as it was originally composed. When *Porgy* embarked on a 25-city tour of the US, Canada, France, Switzerland, Italy, and the UK, it set off a firestorm of attendance, breaking box office records and winning both Tony and Grammy awards. "It wasn't until the HGO production that the world really saw *Porgy* as an opera and not an overblown musical," says Ross.

By establishing strong musical and theatrical values, HGO raised the bar for local theater companies, Gockley says. For 50 seasons HGO has focused on all dimensions of musicality and stagecraft. It consistently hires international stars, guest conductors who specialize in certain repertoire, renowned stage directors, and noted designers of lighting, costumes and scenery. HGO's sophisticated in-house costume and wig and makeup departments lend their own signatures.

Mindful of how technology improves a production, HGO was the first to employ an automated, computerized surtitle system in 1984, and a patent is pending on Houston Grand Opera Titles, a new Windows-based surtitle system developed in 2000.

HGO's bent for using technology has also helped the company thrive during the economic downturn following September 11, 2001. With its season-opening production of *Carmen* in 2000, HGO pioneered OperaVision, installing a system of plasma and projection screens in the upper tiers of the Wortham Center's Brown Theater. The company has brought opera to the masses using its Multimedia Modular Stage—a portable outdoor stage, with MTV-style video and screens, at the Miller Outdoor Theatre, the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion and Philadelphia's Mann Center. HGO is also the first American opera company to offer free "Plazacasts," or live feeds from the show unfolding on stage, projected on a giant screen mounted outside the Wortham Center.

"In many ways it is the only kind of opera company the biggest city in Texas should have," Ross says. "It has forged its own path, ignoring all others and creating its own special brand of opera." And over the years, HGO's international renown has given the city's theater and Broadway-oriented musical presenters good reason to sit up and take notice.