

INSPIRING PERFORMANCE

The Campaign for Houston Grand Opera

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST BROUGHT TO YOU BY HGO DONORS

Imagine you are sitting in the audience of the Brown Theater. The lights dim, and your heart begins to race with the thrill that always hits you just before the conductor raises the baton. The curtain rises, and onstage, basked in light, stands the leading soprano, ready to transport you and your 2,000 neighbors to another world for the next three hours. You take in the painstakingly designed set before focusing on the singer's beautiful costume and finally her face. When her voice begins to fill the darkness, your excitement is mingled with a note of pride as you realize that *you* were the one who made her presence possible. This is the memorable experience of an HGO main-stage artist underwriter.

At HGO, we never forget that every aspect of our work, from the supertitles projected above the stage to the HGOco teaching artists who engage with communities throughout Houston, can only happen through the tremendous generosity of our friends and donors. Even during seasons of record-breaking attendance—and we have been fortunate in recent years—ticket revenue makes up a relatively small percentage of our income. HGO must rely on donor contributions for seventy percent of our annual operating expenses.

Main-stage artist underwriting is a giving opportunity that allows donors to contribute to HGO's artistic work in a direct and tangible way—by financially supporting an individual artist in a production or series of productions. Opera is an expensive art form to produce, and HGO is committed to providing Houston

audiences with the highest-quality opera available anywhere. The main-stage artist underwriting initiative, which has its roots in the longstanding HGO Studio underwriting program, helps to guarantee that HGO can continue to bring to Houston the best and brightest talent that opera has to offer.

Artist underwriter contributions support artist contract fees, housing, and other expenses. For Mathilda and Michael Cochran, longtime subscribers who underwrote HGO Studio alumna and 2013 Cardiff Singer of the World Jamie Barton as Fricka in last season's *Das Rheingold*, the decision to focus their giving on a specific artist came easily.

Says Mathilda, "I've been an HGO trustee for several years, so I've had the opportunity to learn about the company's operations from the financial side. My husband [Michael] and I have been so impressed by how responsibly and efficiently HGO is run—all while consistently producing marvelous opera. We usually designate our annual gift to general support and trust that HGO will use it wisely.

"But last year marked the first-ever Houston production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, and we understood the magnitude of the event, for both the company and the city. When [HGO Managing Director] Perryn Leech asked us to support Jamie, it seemed natural to increase our giving level and dedicate our contribution in that direction."

HGO donors Jack Roth and Liz Grimm also found the *Ring* to be the right project to begin supporting a main-stage artist.



**BY
MICHELLE
MARIANO**
HGO DEVELOPMENT
COMMUNICATIONS
OFFICER



Photos by Wilson Parish and Felix Sanchez



Clockwise from top: Mathilda and Michael Cochran; Lynn Wyatt with her inaugural Great Artist, Ana Maria Martinez; Jack Roth and Liz Grimm

“The prospect of following one artist’s career, of getting to know her as her star continues to rise, of watching her take the stage and being able to say, ‘We did that. We made that happen’—here was an opportunity to be concretely involved in something really special.”

—*Mathilda Cochran*

“We have seen how artists can create new insights into a piece, and in Wagner’s work—with its musical and dramatic richness—this can happen with each performance. Christine [Goerke] is part of an exciting new generation of Wagnerian singers, and Liz and I wanted to ensure that the HGO production would benefit from her superb talents.”

—*Jack Roth*

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Convinced that the *Ring* operas must be experienced live for audiences to fully appreciate their meaning, they were thrilled when HGO announced plans to stage a complete cycle right here in Houston. But the couple also understood that Wagner's greatest masterpiece needed world-class singers to fully realize the composer's intentions, and made the decision to underwrite Christine Goerke as Brünnhilde for the full cycle.


Jack explains, "We have seen how artists can create new insights into a piece, and in Wagner's work—with its musical and dramatic richness—this can happen with each performance. Christine is part of an exciting new generation of Wagnerian singers, and Liz and I wanted to ensure that the HGO production would benefit from her superb talents."

Although the Cochrans and Jack Roth and Liz Grimm chose the *Ring* to

take the plunge into main-stage artist underwriting, the practice is not new to HGO. In 2010, the Lynn Wyatt Great Artist Fund was established with a gift of \$1 million from Oscar Wyatt in honor of Lynn Wyatt's years of philanthropy and service to the company. The endowed fund was designed to ensure that HGO could continue to bring the world's best operatic artists to Houston. HGO's inaugural Lynn Wyatt Great Artist was Ana María Martínez, who opened the 2010–11 season as Cio-Cio San in a sold-out run of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Since then, honorees have included Joyce DiDonato (2011–12), John Caird (2012–13), Susan Graham (2013–14), and Simon O'Neill (2014–15).

After years of contributing to HGO's general operations, Mathilda Cochran describes the gratification that comes with underwriting a main-stage artist: "Michael and I always knew when we gave to HGO that our gift would be put to the right use, from process to product. But the prospect of following one artist's career, of getting to know her as her star continues to rise, of watching her take the stage and being able to say, 'We did that. We made that happen'—here was an opportunity to be concretely involved in something really special."

Donors who underwrite main-stage artists also point out the unexpected joys of developing relationships with the singers. Mathilda and Michael were able to attend one of the rehearsals of *Das Rheingold* and had a memorable dinner with Jamie Barton after the premiere, during which the singer shared with them the story of her journey into opera. Jack Roth and Liz Grimm hope to have the chance to meet Christine Goerke when she arrives in Houston to begin rehearsals for *Die Walküre*. The day after the couple made their pledge to support the renowned soprano in the role of Brünnhilde, she wrote them personally to express her gratitude.

HGO is tremendously indebted to the Opera's main-stage underwriters, whose generosity enables artists from all over the world to perform at the Wortham Center. Their gifts benefit Houston audiences most of all. 

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