

# PATRONS CIRCLE: A POWERFUL VISION

BY MICHELLE MARIANO



Collaborative by nature, opera—with its unique blend of music, theater, and storytelling—requires large-scale efforts to produce. As you experience today's performance at the Wortham, you will be witnessing the fruits of that collaboration at its best, because the artistic team of Houston Grand Opera is among the finest in the world. But, as with all endeavors of this scope, there are equally vital forces at work that never appear onstage. These forces, including the company's administrative staff and donors of all stripes, are vital in both senses of the word—they are lively, engaged, brimming with energy, and they are absolutely essential to HGO's ability to present top quality opera in Houston.

The Patrons Circle is one such offstage presence that is indispensable to maintaining HGO's position as a premier cultural institution. The impact of Patrons—often as subscribers and single-ticket buyers of our most premium seats, as funders through annual gifts and special events contributions, and as ambassadors who attract new audiences and community supporters—cannot be overstated. Their generosity is the fuel for everything we do, both here at the Wortham and in the larger Houston landscape. Patrons arrive at HGO from different paths, but they are drawn together by a shared love of opera and a passion for ensuring that succeeding generations of Houstonians continue to have access to the best the art form has to offer.

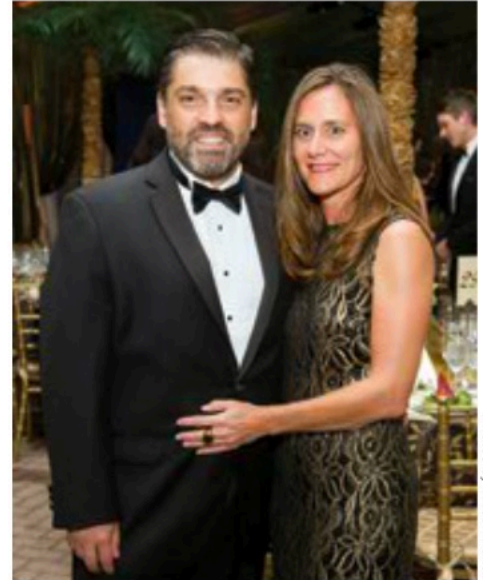
The **Young Patrons Circle** was established to present HGO enthusiasts under forty with the opportunity to experience full Patrons Circle benefits at a donation level commensurate with their means and lifestyle. Young Patrons engage meaningfully with the art form through access to exclusive Patrons Circle educational and artistic events—with additional events to promote camaraderie among opera lovers in the younger demographic. Trustee Gabriel Loperena describes the community aspect of his and his wife, Sara's, service: "Involvement as Patrons blurs the lines between our social, professional, and philanthropic networks in a satisfying way. The opera is truly integrated into the fabric of our lives."



## INSPIRING PERFORMANCE

### The Campaign for Houston Grand Opera

*Patrons Circle members Sara and Gabriel Loperena, from left, and Alfredo and Marcia Vilas*



Photos by Wilson Parish

HGO's Patrons Circle comprises more than 500 individuals who give at least \$4,000 annually to support the company's activities, both on the main stage and within the community through HGOco, the Opera's education and community engagement initiative. The Patrons Circle also includes all HGO trustees, individuals who donate at the \$10,000 level and above.

#### **PATRONS ENJOY A HOST OF BENEFITS:**

- complimentary valet parking at the Wortham Theater Center
- Masterson Green Room privileges
- a pair of tickets to all open dress rehearsals
- an annual, exclusive guest artist recital (this season's recital will feature Jamie Barton, HGO Studio alumna and winner of the 2013 Cardiff Singer of the World competition)
- invitations to *Opera Unwrapped*, a lecture series by HGO Dramaturg Mena Mark Hanna exploring the historical, musical, and dramaturgical themes of each opera
- concierge care from HGO's Patron Services team, led by Rudy Avelar

For most Patrons, these advantages tell only a small part of the story. The rewards of membership in HGO's Patrons Circle extend far beyond the tangible benefits.

HGO trustee Gabriel Loperena, an attorney, sees his and his wife, Sara's, involvement with HGO as a counterpoint to his professional life. "A lawyer's work engages a different part of the

brain—my passion for opera provides a sense of balance. As a lifelong opera lover, I sought out ways I could contribute to the art form without being an artist. Serving as a trustee has made me realize the importance of all kinds of talents in creating and promoting artistic work of HGO's caliber."

Alfredo Vilas, another trustee, adds, "You get married, you have kids, you establish your career—you reach certain milestones and then you start to shape what you want to do with the rest of your life, what else you want to build." Similar to many Patrons, Alfredo feels a keen responsibility to engage with, and help improve, the world around him. He is also involved with a local sports association and a charity that provides prosthetic limbs to children in the Dominican Republic—but his arts support is dedicated exclusively to HGO. Alfredo explains, "I have been a fan of opera for over twenty years, but the reason [my wife] Marcia and I committed to HGO is that behind the truly great quality of the art is a well-organized institution, consistently seeking to grow and improve."

After becoming Patrons and trustees, both Gabriel and Alfredo found they wanted to deepen their involvement with HGO and decided to join the Patrons Circle Committee. Committee members are bursting with smart and innovative ideas for attracting new Patrons—many specifically designed to appeal to newcomers to opera. Says Alfredo, "Close encounters with artists

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The **Patrons Circle Committee's** thirty-plus members—all Patrons themselves—work together to recruit and retain Patrons and trustees. In the five seasons since the committee was established in 2008, more than 300 new Patrons have joined, resulting in more than \$2.7 million in increased support for the company across all years—\$1.2 million in 2012–13 alone. The committee meets quarterly to share ideas and brainstorm strategies, and has been steered by the deft leadership of inaugural chair Michele Malloy, current chair Helen Shaffer (right) and immediate past chair Rhonda Sweeney (far right).



and key HGO staff through backstage tours and more intimate gatherings, events like *Concert of Arias* that provide a 'softer' entry into the art form—we'd love to increase those opportunities to invite people who aren't already initiated into opera to learn more about the artistic process."

Gabriel agrees: "The events you can participate in as a Patron allow you to get much closer to the art in a way that feels organic. They increase accessibility for those who might otherwise find opera daunting, and provide a richer experience for seasoned subscribers that goes beyond sitting in the audience."

Rhonda Sweeney, a Patron since HGO's 1987–88 season and former Patrons Committee chair, says, "The person-to-person aspect of being a Patron or a trustee is what's most infectious." Like many Patrons, Rhonda and her husband, Donald, use benefits such as dress rehearsal tickets to help share their love of opera with others—and to draw them into the HGO family. Her involvement with the committee provides her with an outlet for the skills she developed in the corporate world, such as networking and organizing. She describes her committee work as "asking people to commit to something they love, something that knocks their socks off."

Rhonda adds that peer recruitment of new Patrons has become more robust in recent years, and especially since the launch of *Inspiring Performance—The Campaign for Houston Grand Opera*. The results have been tremendous: In 2012–13, \$7.7 million of HGO's total contributed income came from those supporting at the Patrons level or higher—that's *nearly half* of total contributions.

Alfredo, who discovered his love of opera as a teenager, says, "I want to change the idea that opera is not for young people. The future relevance of the art form depends on today's young people becoming advocates now, and sharing their passion with each other and with their children, who will hopefully become the next young opera fans."

Alfredo's words underscore the reasons why many people choose to become Patrons in the first place—to keep opera relevant, and to preserve cultural institutions like HGO that help to make our city great. HGO is fortunate to be in the hands of the Patrons Circle, which has a powerful vision for the future. 