

Houston Grand Opera receives \$22M gift, largest in 68-year history

By Sofia Gonzalez

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The Houston Grand Opera welcomed a \$22 million gift — the largest gift in its 68-year history — from Sarah and Ernest Butler, an Austin-based couple who have been subscribers for 35 years and attendees for even longer.

The gift was announced Feb. 3 at HGO's annual Concert of Arias, the 35th Annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers. The company also announced its training program for young artists has been renamed the Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio.

"The trust the Butlers have placed in this organization, their belief in HGO's impact as a world-class cultural institution, their decision to invest in the company as an industry leader that nourishes the careers of the most talented young artists in the field — it is both inspiring and humbling," said Khori Dastoor, HGO's general director and CEO. "All of us at the company are thrilled to honor them not only through our renamed Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio, but also through our pursuit of artistic excellence of the highest order."

The Butler Studio is one of the most highly competitive programs for young artists in the world, the opera said. It provides comprehensive career development to young singers and pianists/coaches who have potential to make contributions to the art form. Artists residencies for the program last up to three years. During that time, artists receive individualized study programs in classical singing, piano, coaching, movement and language instruction. They also are given opportunities to perform in major and supporting roles in mainstage productions, providing experience working with world-renowned artists, directors and conductors.

Ernest Butler said he and his wife have been following the program since its inception, "watching its graduates go on to successful careers in opera. We've decided to create a new fund within the HGO Endowment that supports the program because we've seen the endowment's careful fiscal management firsthand. We have tremendous confidence in HGO and want to help this great company expand its mission and its reach throughout our region and beyond."

With the strategic gift, the couple hopes to support the organization through the next century and make an impact on opera worldwide, Sarah Butler said.

"The arts are a reflection of who we are," she said. "For our society to be healthy, we must invest in art and culture, which is critical to the wellbeing of humanity."

When the onset of Covid-19 made live performing arts events impossible in 2020, the couple donated \$1 million to HGO for the creation of HGO Digital, the Sarah and Ernest Butler Performance Series. HGO Digital is now in its third season with virtual programming that complements the opera's live mainstage performances. The 2020 gift helped support the Texas Opera Alliance, a partnership between the HGO, Austin Opera, The Dallas Opera, Fort Worth Opera and Opera San Antonio to share digital productions.

In the past, the native Texans have contributed multiple gifts to arts organizations in the Austin area as well. In 2008, the couple gave a \$55 million gift to the University of Texas' school of music, which was renamed the Sarah and Ernest Butler School of Music. The following year, a new scholarship was created thanks to an additional gift. The couple also gave \$1.5 million to Ballet Austin in 2013 and \$1 million to the Austin Symphony Orchestra in 2014.

For almost 20 years, Sarah has served on the Ballet Austin Board of Directors. Currently, she serves as the ballet's board chair and foundation chair. Meanwhile, Ernest currently serves as the chairman of the board and the endowment investment committee chair of the Austin Symphony Orchestra.