



Immigrant

Houston Grand Opera's ground-breaking production of *The Refugee* offers a model of how an arts organization can achieve civic stature: by engaging the hearts and minds of diverse communities.



Songs

by Henry Fogel



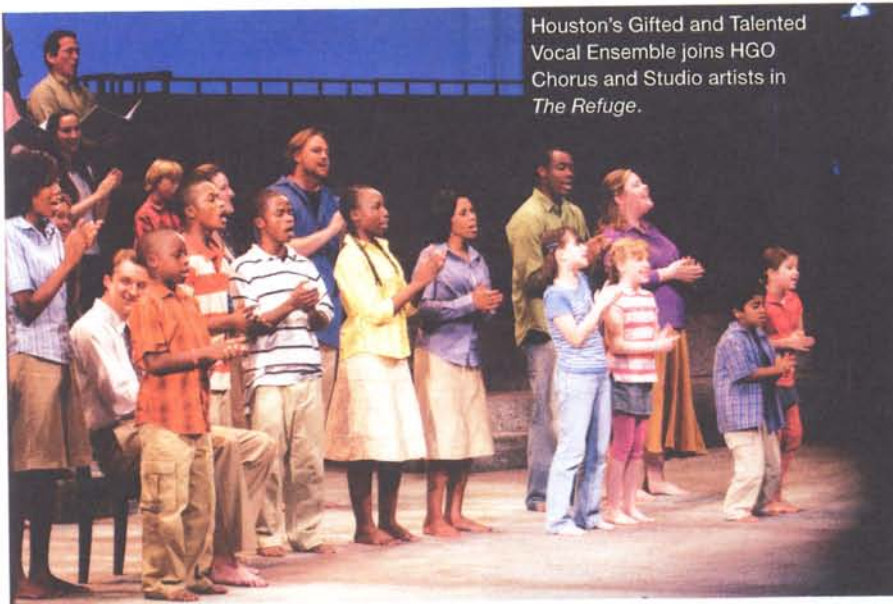
The Refuge included projected photographs.

Juanico Rubin



HGO Studio artist Beau Gibson in the Vietnamese movement of *The Refuge*

Juanico Rubin



Houston's Gifted and Talented Vocal Ensemble joins HGO Chorus and Studio artists in *The Refuge*.

Juanico Rubin

THIS STARTED OUT TO BE AN ARTICLE ABOUT A remarkable musical-dramatic work, *The Refuge*, by composer Christopher Theofanidis and librettist Leah Lax (it's key to credit the two equally, since the libretto is as important as the music to the overall impact of the work). Commissioned, organized, and even inspired by the Houston Grand Opera and its general director and CEO, Anthony Freud, the piece appears to be just the kind of community-engagement project that the League of American Orchestras tries to encourage—and that merits coverage in *Symphony*. That opinion was strengthened after hearing a recording of its premiere performances and attending a performance in Houston last November.

The Refuge will still occupy a significant place in this article, but won't dominate it, because the scope and breadth of the Houston Grand Opera's community programs are so sweeping that they can serve as models for any arts organization that wishes to develop more meaningful relationships with the people of its community. The programs are all run through an arm of the company called HGOco, and at the center of those is the ongoing Song of Houston effort, of which *The Refuge* is the first project. As Freud puts it, "The Song of Houston is the company's ongoing project to tell Houstonians' own stories in music and words."

A conversation with Freud on the subject of community engagement is inspiring and energizing. When he came to HGO in March 2006, following David Gockley's long tenure at the helm, Freud immediately began to lead a re-examination of the company's place in Houston. Central to his philosophy, and what makes it a bit different, is that community engagement should *not* be thought of as programs that will lead to ticket buyers for your main work on your main stage. This idea, fundamental to Freud and to the HGO, will seem radical to many. Why create these programs if their purpose is not to support the core mission, which is mainstage performance? To Freud, the answer is self-evident. "Our job," he says, "is to make connections between people and the music we present and help to create,

and those connections cannot be made exclusively in an opera house and at our normal ticket prices. We have to figure out how to bring our music to all the people who make up our communities, figure out how to connect with those people, and engage with them on *their* terms, not ours." Freud pauses, and adds, "This is not a means to another end. This is an end in itself."

Shortly after arriving at HGO, following several years as head of Opera Europa, the service organization for European opera companies and festivals, Freud and his board leadership instituted a major strategic planning process that began with a review of the HGO's mission statement. The operative mission statement when he arrived read: "The mission of the Houston Grand Opera is to bring larger and more diverse audiences together for exciting

opera in a financially responsible way." It went on to specify these "supporting principles":

- *Be defined by the excellence and innovation of its work*
- *Provide a memorable experience*
- *Be artistically and administratively imaginative, balanced, and responsible*
- *Make an impact locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally*
- *Communicate a welcoming atmosphere, be accessible to all, and create an atmosphere of inclusiveness*

There is nothing wrong with that as a mission statement, but it is somewhat generic and its convictions about community engagement are fairly generalized. After much institutional discussion, led by Freud, the new mission statement was:

VISION

An opera company, which is recognized nationally and internationally for:

- World-beating artistic excellence and innovation
- Breaking down social, ethnic and economic barriers
- A motivated and efficient company of people
- Financial stability and sustainability and which enjoys dynamic, proactive and deepening relationships with the stakeholders, constituencies and communities which it serves.

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA'S MISSION STATEMENT

MISSION

Why we exist

Houston Grand Opera exists to contribute to the cultural enrichment of the city of Houston and the nation by:

- Producing and performing world-class opera
- Creating a diverse, innovative and balanced program of performances, events, community and education projects which reaches the widest possible public

CORE VALUES

What we stand for

Artistic	Public	Finance	Operation
Artistic Excellence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World-class standards • Opera as music theater Innovative and Balanced Programming <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting both core and rare repertoire, including new work 	Accessible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through attitude, geography, price and participation • Working to break down social, economic and ethnic barriers 	Financially Responsible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximizing income and controlling costs to optimize the value of the cultural services which HGO provides 	Participative Culture (Internal and External) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to ideas, and develop regular and effective communication and collaboration • Provide opportunities for stimulation, development and fulfillment Flexible Working Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize talent, hard work and loyalty

STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES

Guiding principles for what we do

Artistic	Public	Finance	Operation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellence—musical and theatrical • Opera as music theater • Balanced programming • New work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaching more people • Developing audiences • Stimulating and capturing loyalty • Developing the brand • Building the reputation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating income (earned & contributed) • Creative partnerships • Sustaining the business through robust and rigorous processes for budgeting, monitoring and measuring the business performance of the company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operating efficiently and collaboratively • Motivating, empowering and developing staff



Refuge composer
Christopher Theofanidis



Refuge librettist Leah Lax



Anthony Freud, general
director and CEO of Houston
Grand Opera

Photos courtesy Houston Grand Opera

“We have to figure out how to bring our music to all the people who make up our communities, figure out how to connect with those people, and engage with them on *their terms, not ours.*”

—Anthony Freud

Making community commitment integral to the vision, mission, and core values of the company bespeaks a level of institutional belief that goes far beyond the old mission statement. When I met with members of the company’s staff and board, it became clear just how central these beliefs are to the culture of the organization. HGO trustee Glen Rosenbaum is so committed that he headed efforts to fund the entire project, including \$50,000 to make a recording. For him, *The Refuge* is “the beginning of true, deep community engagement.”

At the center of this institutional commitment is HGOco, the community-engagement arm of the company; its tag line is “connecting our company to our community through collaboration.” Key phrases in the HGOco descriptive material stand out. HGOco is:

- A playground and a laboratory
- An artistic home for our community
- The part of HGO most firmly rooted in Houston
- The whole company in the whole city
- The catalyst for a revolution in cultural service

Perhaps the most telling line in the material: “HGOco changes the way people involve opera and the arts in their lives.”

The material speaks specifically and even movingly about core beliefs: “We believe that if opera is to survive and thrive in today’s society, it must re-establish its relevance to the people it serves. There is an urgent need for dramatic change in the way HGO relates to its community and utilizes its resources to provide more effective cultural service.”

Finally, to make certain that everyone understands the centrality of HGOco to the work of the opera company, there is this: “Perhaps the most significant

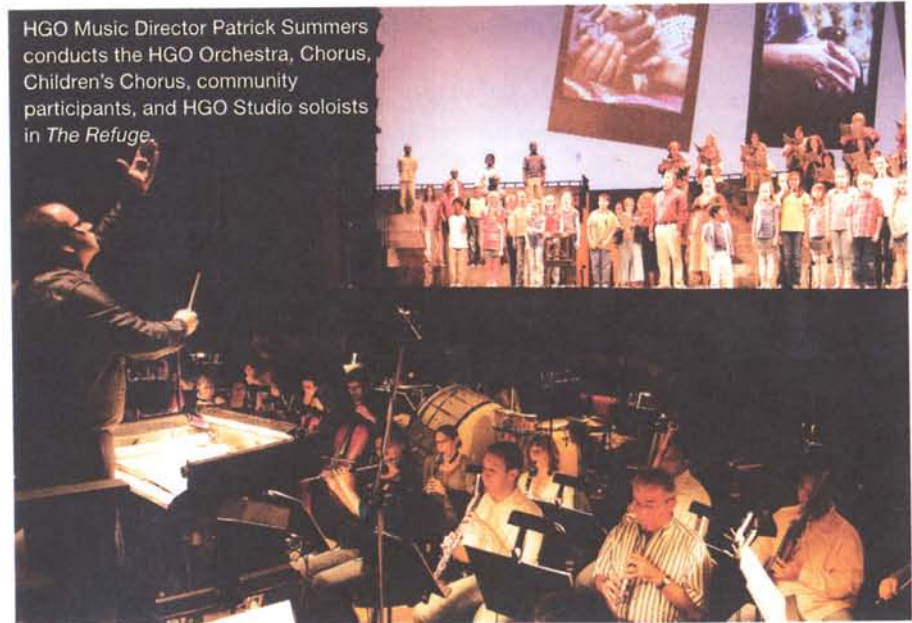
innovation of HGOco is the realignment of HGO’s resources. HGOco is comprised of a staff of trained educators and community development professionals who create and coordinate unique programs.”

Everyone involved discusses HGOco with infectious energy. Sandra Bernhard, the director of HGOco, stresses not only the cooperation but the enthusiasm of everyone from Music Director Patrick Summers to the entire staff and board for the vision of what HGOco can mean to the company—and to Houston. Sue Elliott, the manager of *Song of Houston*, brings passionate devotion to her work.

All individual *Song of Houston* projects will, like *The Refuge*, be based on the voices of the people of the greater Houston community. In 2010 the program will celebrate the centenary of Mexico’s declaration of independence from Spain. In 2011 it will launch a multi-year Asian project, which will focus, for example, on Vietnamese, Indian, Pakistani, Taiwanese, and Chinese immigrants. As part of *The*

Refuge, HGO featured an exhibition of kites by local and international artists, and the afternoon before a performance at the outdoor Miller Theater featured a participatory kite-making event—just one example of the all-encompassing nature of the thinking behind *Song of Houston*.

Shirin Herman, an outreach worker with the Houston School District, works with refugee students as a liaison between home and school, helping new refugees adjust to language, customs, and culture in the U.S. HGO brought her in at the beginning of the project, and with her the company linked up with National Geographic for a photo camp where newly arrived children were given cameras and sent to community centers, mosques, households, and neighborhoods to take pictures. The goal was to allow the children to share their view of America through their own photographs. Herman coordinated the project with 22 children in grades eight through twelve, who took 7,000 pictures over three days. Editors



HGO Music Director Patrick Summers conducts the HGO Orchestra, Chorus, Children’s Chorus, community participants, and HGO Studio soloists in *The Refuge*.

Jessica Rubin

Orchestral Engagement

Want to understand more about what role your orchestra could—or should—play in the larger community? The League of American Orchestras has just launched an online resource for orchestras, *On the Road to Authentic Civic Engagement: An Assessment Resource for Orchestras in Their Communities*. This diagnostic tool is designed to help orchestras think deeply about their role in their communities and assess their own readiness for growth and improvement. At a time when orchestras must make tough decisions and think differently about overall relevance, this tool can help provoke new thinking and honest conversation that may help orchestras better earn community affirmation and support. For further information or to purchase the resource, visit americanorchestras.org and look for *On the Road to Authentic Civic Engagement* under Learning and Leadership Development.

On the Road to Authentic Civic Engagement is made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts, MetLife Foundation, and Target. Funding is also provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Argosy Foundation, and The Hearst Foundation, Inc.

On the Road to Authentic Civic Engagement

An Assessment Resource for Orchestras in their Communities

League of American Orchestras



chose photos from that collection for a public showing; some of them became part of *The Refuge* and were projected onstage during performances.

True to Life

So what is *The Refuge*? It is a full-length musical theater work that tells, in an astonishingly communicative and powerful way, the stories of actual refugees who have settled in Houston and now make up its fabric. *The Refuge* gives remarkable insights into the human condition, into why people are forced to leave their homelands and why they come to America, often overcoming staggering obstacles. The communities chosen by HGO, with assistance from the mayor and his office, were from Africa, Vietnam, Mexico, Pakistan, India, Central America, and Russian Jewish groups. *The Refuge* goes beyond explicating the emotions and thoughts of these people. It amplifies them, gives them a resonance that only music can.

When I spoke with Christopher Theofanidis, he mentioned the project's challenges for a composer. A major concern was coming up with a work that includes musical elements from each of the chosen refugee groups and that incorporates community musicians while avoiding something that sounds like pastiche or is in

any way amateurish. Unifying those widely varying immigrant communities and their musical traditions into a composition that has internal integrity and shape, while honoring those varied traditions, was a real test of compositional skill—and one that, to my ears, Theofanidis met triumphantly. In addition to traditional vocal soloists, chorus, children's chorus, and orchestra, the HGO's staging of *The Refuge* included: Gifted and Talented, a vocal ensemble; Windsor Village United Methodist Church Gospel Company; Julie Trinh Dang, playing two Vietnamese instruments, the dan bau and dan tranh; Sacred Heart Co-Cathedral Spanish Choir; Qawwali singer Ali Durrani; Chandrakahtha Courtney, sitar; David Courtney, tabla; Giridhar Kalamanglam, tanpura; Samhitha Murthy, tanpura; and Vadim Angerov, bayan.

A range like that offers the composer an infinite variety of musical colors, along with the task of retaining structural and musical integrity. In addition, although the piece was composed specifically to a text based on actual stories of refugees who settled in Houston, no composer (or librettist) wants to invest the time and emotional commitment in a major work that can only be performed in one city. The music had to be timeless and universal—so it would

resonate in different times and places. This is not a new problem for composers: Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony does not rely on your having lived through World War II or Stalinist repression to be affected by its humanistic message, and John Corigliano's First Symphony will live on and speak to people even if AIDS were wiped off the face of the planet, because the tragedy of death is always with us. Having experienced *The Refuge* in performance and on a recording, I believe it will have universal resonance. "I tried to create a heart to each of the movements," says Theofanidis, "to take something from each culture and let it be the thread that unifies the piece. Keeping the focus on the stories, and using just hints of ethnic music, helped to unify the score."

Theofanidis composed the music after the texts were written. Librettist Leah Lax conducted the interviews in various communities and listened to them all again on tape. Theofanidis went on some of the interviews, but he also listened to many of the tapes—trying to absorb the human experiences of these stories so that they would inhabit his score.

Theofanidis worked with Lax in choosing which excerpts of the hundreds of stories to use, compressing them to fit seven different countries into a 90-minute work. In addition, the composer worked with the participating community musicians, coaching them and learning their musical idioms so he could blend them with his own voice. He got involved in the performances of each movement in the community from which it was derived, during which that country's segment of *The Refuge* was part of an evening of ethnic music. These individual performances were hugely popular in each community—some 3,000 people attended the Pakistani musical evening. Because the community performances preceded the premiere of the entire work, thus building enthusiasm, the first two complete performances at the Wortham Theater Center (HGO's home) were not only full, but had an incredibly diverse audience. The same was true of the outdoor performance I attended at the Miller Theater. "I've never been involved in a project that created so much good will," Theofanidis remarks. "There were so many people who were interested in making this work sing." Elise Sandell was the director

of the original performances of *The Refuge* in the Wortham Center, and the revival in May at the Miller Theater was directed by Louisa Muller with original production by Sandell.

As Lax and Theofanidis began to discuss with Freud how they might go about capturing the refugees' stories, and how they might incorporate the color and culture of each country into their work, Freud kept saying, "I don't know...we'll figure it out as we go." Theofanidis and Lax indicate that this uncertainty scared and enticed them—they felt like they were all learning as they worked. They worried at first about bringing non-professional community performers onstage with professionals. But all along the way, Freud and the HGO staff continued to explore new ideas and approaches, and avoided defining a final product too soon in the process.

Lax is eloquent about this project's impact on her. She is a Houston native who, in an act of adolescent rebellion at the age of fifteen, joined a Lubavitcher community, stayed there for 30 years, marrying and having seven children. She describes this ultra-orthodox Jewish sect as very isolated: She never watched television and didn't read secular literature in a community that interacted only with itself. When she left the community at age 45—on the sly, she had started to read poetry and literature a few years earlier—she felt like a refugee herself. "I didn't know how to use a VCR," she recalls. "I didn't know how to figure the tip at a restaurant. I was a stranger in a new world." This gave her a sense of how an open, free society can be a thrilling but daunting experience to someone coming from a closed, fully homogenous society. "Homogeneity creates isolation and fear," she says. "Nobody can live up to the ideal in such a society. I would now only live in a diverse society." Telling the refugees' stories appealed to her, and she began to think of her interview subjects as tremendous gifts to the community and to society at large, because she believes passionately that diversity is a value all should cherish.

She and Theofanidis were struck by the sounds of the refugees relating their stories in their own accents and voices. Lax conducted all the interviews—about 150 of them, approximately half on the phone, half in people's homes—and got

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The tag line for Houston Grand Opera's community-engagement programs is "connecting our company to our community through collaboration."

high-quality recording equipment from HGO in order to properly preserve the interviews. She took the words from the hundreds of hours of tapes and condensed them into the seven movements of the piece, choosing, shaping, and creating a cohesive libretto that kept to a narrative without losing the individual qualities of those voices. Lax's musical training (she studied cello before entering the Lubavitcher community, and hopes to resume that as a result of this project) probably helped in this, her first musical collaboration. She used some recurring themes, the most powerful of them being the statement, "You are not from here," something that reflected what many of these refugees heard or felt as they entered this new world. Conversely, another recurrent theme is the refugees' celebration of the concept and reality of freedom they found in America.

Prismatic Humanity

I'd like to take the liberty of sharing my personal experience of *The Refuge* in the Miller Theater performance, and a subsequent session listening to the recording (on Albany Records TROY 1024-1025). I found the total experience one of the most moving I have ever had at a concert. The work speaks on so many levels that it acts as a prism reflecting all aspects of what makes up humanity. There is no question that a great deal of the impact comes from the text: the stories themselves and Lax's remarkably sensitive choosing and setting of them. And at the performance, the projected photographs by Janice Rubin (who had earlier worked with Lax on *The Mikvah Project*) added even more texture and poignancy.

But to minimize the importance of the musical score would be a mistake. The music is communicative, powerful, varied, colorful, and it never lets go of its grip on you. Theofanidis's decision to not interrupt the 90-minute work with

an intermission was absolutely correct: The power of the score is cumulative, and an intermission would derail that momentum. The text is central to this piece—be sure to follow the text when listening to the recording. This is not like a Bellini opera where the specifics of the drama (as opposed to their emotional truths) are somewhat fatuous, and where you can appreciate the music with a casual knowledge of the dramatic situation of any scene. *The Refuge* is a complete piece of musical theater that speaks on many levels. There is no question that it would be effective in any community or country with a multi-cultural element. The few references to "Houston" in the text could easily be changed to "America," for instance. Although *The Refuge* benefited from minimal staging, it would work in any orchestra's concert setting, particularly with the photographs incorporated.

The stories are universal, and their impact is right in your gut. The moment when the white children and adult choruses join the Nigerian chorus at the end of the African movement is pure magic. The

tenor aria with Vietnamese instruments is deeply moving. The plea for freedom of speech by the Pakistani interrupted by the FBI after 9/11 is shocking and dramatic.

But it is the work's overall sweep, and its optimistic message of hope and of the nobility of human beings, that ultimately defines *The Refuge* as a very special work of art. What makes *The Refuge* so important is that it is a stunning concept for true, deep community engagement and, at the same time, an important work. As the kick-off to the Song of Houston, and an early centerpiece of HGOco, it has helped Houston Grand Opera leap into the forefront of what we mean when we talk about our major arts institutions achieving civic stature. **S**

HENRY FOGEL is a senior advisor to the League of American Orchestras, having recently retired as its president and CEO.

Hear WFMT's broadcast of *The Refuge* on stations nationwide November 22 in a double bill with *Last Acts: Three Decembers* by Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally.

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