

UNLEASHED

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Band of Believers

Passionate supporters are making HGO's American premiere of *The Passenger* a reality.

A shared dream, four years, and one extraordinary network—that's the magic combination that brings Polish composer Mieczysław Weinberg's *The Passenger* to HGO this January for its American premiere.

One of only a few operas addressing the Holocaust, *The Passenger* is based on a 1959 radio play and 1962 novel by Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz. The opera tells the story of Liese, a former SS guard en route to Brazil with her diplomat husband. It is the early 1960s. On the ship, Liese spots a fellow passenger with an uncanny resemblance to Marta—one of the inmates she tormented at Auschwitz twenty years earlier. The story unfolds as Liese is forced to grapple with the terrible truths she thought she had permanently locked away.

The Passenger's journey across the Atlantic began in early 2010. British director David Pountney was preparing to stage the opera that summer in Austria at the

Bregenz Festival. Although composed in 1968, *The Passenger* had never before been fully staged, and had been largely forgotten, until Pountney's production offered it new life.

Meanwhile, former HGO General Director Anthony Freud had caught wind of the project and introduced HGO Board member Morris Gelb and his wife, Amanda, to *The Passenger*. The vision of an American premiere for the newly discovered work quickly formed. In February 2010, the Gelbs hosted an event to raise awareness about the project. Pountney was the featured speaker.

Morris recalls, "When we first learned of *The Passenger* from Anthony Freud and David Pountney, we knew that traveling to Bregenz for the world premiere would be an imperative. We were not disappointed." In Bregenz, the Gelbs were floored by what they saw—and resolved to do whatever

they could to bring *The Passenger* to Houston. Soon after, they pledged their leadership support.

Paula Pozmantier, an arts patron, was present at the Gelbs' event. Although Paula and her husband, Irving, had never before been involved with HGO, she explains, "The content of this production, and the way it is being used to educate and inform the community beyond just those people normally attracted to opera, touched us

(continued)



Karl Foster

The Passenger



▶ **Aida**
OCTOBER 18–NOVEMBER 9

▶ **Die Fledermaus**
OCTOBER 25–NOVEMBER 10

▶ **The Passenger**
JANUARY 28–FEBRUARY 2

▶ **Rigoletto**
JANUARY 24–FEBRUARY 9

▶ **A Little Night Music**
MARCH 7–23

▶ **Das Rheingold**
APRIL 11–26

▶ **Carmen**
APRIL 25–MAY 10

2013–14 Season

▶ HGO.org



Amanda and Morris Gelb

deeply and made it necessary for us to support the efforts of all the dedicated people involved in the American debut.” She began spreading word of *The Passenger* around town.

New HGO friends Naomi Warren and her son, Benjamin, who had also attended the Gelbs’ event, volunteered to host a luncheon with longtime HGO champions Ann and Stephen Kaufman to gather more support.

In anticipation of that second event, the Kaufmans, the Warren family (including Benjamin’s wife, Joy, and his sister, Helen Spector), the Pozmantiers, and HGO subscribers Joan and Stanford Alexander formed a consortium of donors, combining to form a \$100,000 pledge. They issued the challenge to others to help.

Says Stephen, “When we viewed the video from its first performance [Bregenz], we were moved both by its artistry and by the wrenching human lessons from the dark history of the Holocaust. We immediately wanted to help launch the North American premiere... so that it could both educate and entertain the widest possible audiences for the longest possible time.”

Before long, it became clear that *The Passenger* had found its first American audience right here in Houston. The charge was led

by people willing to put crucial financial support behind HGO’s production. These supporters, many from Houston’s Jewish community, appealed to others to help ensure Weinberg’s haunting masterpiece would not be lost again.

By the time Paula teamed up with another dedicated HGO supporter, Lila Rauch, to host the next informational event, *The Passenger*’s momentum could not be stopped. Dedicated subscribers Shirley and Bruce Stein were brought into the fold at that gathering.

For the Warrens, it is especially important that stories of the Holocaust like *The Passenger* continue on: Naomi is a survivor of Auschwitz. A staunch advocate of remembrance initiatives, Naomi says, “Big changes, the kind that transform the way human beings handle being human, start with small changes.”

Most operas are backed by a team of donors. Over the years, HGO has attracted a wonderful, loyal support base, including an eclectic mix of individuals and institutions. So it’s not surprising that many of our most dedicated friends believed in us and our vision for *The Passenger*. What makes this story remarkable, however, is how the team was assembled. By word of mouth and perseverance, a handful of passionate people managed to expand into a diverse web of supporters—some completely new to opera. Combined, the group has managed to raise more than half a million dollars in funding for the production.

The entire HGO community is incredibly fortunate that this team of generous and committed individuals recognized the vital importance of continuing to rescue *The Passenger* from near-obscure. It is only fitting that Weinberg’s powerful work about



Paula and Irving Pozmantier

remembering communal history be brought to Houston through such a robust community effort.

We are grateful to these generous supporters of *The Passenger*

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Amanda and Morris Gelb

Joan and Stanford Alexander/ Ann and Stephen Kaufman/ Paula and Irving Pozmantier/

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