

## Fourth Year Soprano Elizabeth Hanje Wins Houston Grand Opera's Eleanor McCollum Competition

The operatic singer emerged from 900 international applicants.

by Cathy Strauss

*Reposted courtesy of Oberlin College and Conservatory*



After an exhaustive international search and multi-round competition, Oberlin Conservatory fourth-year soprano Elizabeth Hanje has won first prize and \$10,000 at the 36th Annual Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers. Hanje is a student of Professor Salvatore Champagne.

While this is a highly anticipated vocal competition, the event also serves as a job interview for the Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio, one of the

world's most prestigious operatic training programs for young artists. Each of the young artists in the Studio has access to regular coaching sessions with industry professionals, roles in Houston Grand Opera (HGO) mainstage productions, recital performances, and other concert engagements. HGO is one of the largest, most innovative, and most highly acclaimed opera companies in the United States.

During this past week, Hanje had the opportunity to learn more about HGO and work with company music staff in the lead up to the Concert of Arias. "I'm living my dream," she says.

Hanje's journey to the finals began last fall. She emerged from 900 applications followed by 300 live auditions in four cities. From those early rounds, 20 singers were brought to

Houston for the semifinal round of competition held on Monday, January 29. As one of the eight finalists chosen for the [2024 Concert of Arias](#) on February 2nd, Hanje performed two works—”Il est doux, il est bon” from *Hérodiade* by Jules Massenet and “Ain’t it a Pretty Night” from *Susannah* by Carlisle Floyd.

The competition was presented for a live audience in Houston in the Wortham Theater Center and it was broadcast on [Facebook Live](#) and [YouTube Live](#), capturing the attention of nearly 6000 online viewers. (The full finals performance video remains online. An interview with Hanje begins at 47:23, with her first aria performance immediately following. Her second aria begins at 1:22:02.)

Born and raised in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, Hanje is the child of first generation immigrants from Tanzania, Africa. Her first musical experiences in school were as a trombonist. She played for six years in middle school and high school performing in marching band, wind ensemble, and jazz ensemble. In high school, Hanje began singing in choir where her outstanding voice was identified and she had her earliest voice lessons. She then attended Interlochen Arts Academy for her senior year of high school. In Oberlin Conservatory’s Opera Theater program, Hanje’s lead roles have included Ernestina in *L’occasione fa il ladro*, Comedian in Matthew Recio’s *Puppy Episode*, and Lyra in Melissa Dunphy’s *Alice Tierney*. She also performed in the chorus of *Acis and Galatea*. Hanje has sung in master classes with director Michael Capasso, soprano Christine Goerke, mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, and soprano Harolyn Blackwell. She is a winner of the 2023 Duncan Williams Voice Competition and the 2022 George Shirley Vocal Competition. In 2021, she received the Richard Miller Award for Fine Singing and a YoungArts Award. She is an alumna of HGO’s Young Artist Vocal Academy and the Des Moines Metro Opera Apprentice Program.

Other recent Oberlin alumni who have earned placement as Fellows in the HGO Butler Opera Studio during the last decade are soprano Meryl Dominguez ‘14 (2022-24), bass-baritone Corey McGee ‘18 (2020-23), and Kevin Ray ‘07 (2012-14).

*Photo credit: Michael Bishop*

*Re-published on ClevelandClassical.com February 5, 2024.*

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