

WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

January 10, 2026

To our friends, artists, and supporters,

As Washington National Opera begins its 70th anniversary year, the Board and staff have made the difficult decision to seek an end to our 15-year Affiliation Agreement with the Kennedy Center. We will be moving our performances to new venues as we return to operating as a fully independent organization.

The Kennedy Center has been Washington National Opera's home since it opened in 1971, and we have enjoyed a successful formalized affiliation since 2011. It has also been a great honor to be one of the anchors of our Nation's cultural center and all the prestige that such an association implies. As a result, it was with much deliberation that our Board and staff reached this decision.

The determination to pursue separate operational paths follows a period of robust change at the Kennedy Center under the leadership of President Ambassador Richard Grenell. Since his appointment last February, the Center has attracted millions of dollars in corporate sponsorships, as well as \$257 million from Congress for capital repairs, maintenance, and operations. However, the Center's current Board and leadership have also established a new business model that is unfortunately at odds with how most not-for-profit opera companies operate.

In broad terms, ticket sales cover between 30%-60% of the costs of an opera company's operations, with the balance provided by contributions from individuals, grants, and corporate sponsorships. The current requirement from the Center's management is for WNO to demonstrate that each production or event is fully underwritten through anticipated ticket sales and secured contributed revenue sources before it can be approved. This is impractical for WNO, since seasons must be conceived and developed well in advance of funding opportunities and the timing of when it is optimal to project revenue from ticket sales.

WNO's Kennedy Center email addresses and access to our offices have been discontinued. We want to be as prompt and responsive to your inquiries as possible. For now, please contact WNO staff at info@washnatopera.org. More complete contact information will be announced shortly.

Opera is perhaps the most complex art form, comprised of exceptional musicianship, grand visual designs, lighting, costumes, multi-media, and often dance. Nearly 200 individuals are involved in creating, presenting, and performing a run of an opera like *Macbeth* or *Aida* (in addition to administrative, marketing, and fundraising staff). To conceive such grand productions, companies of the scale of WNO begin work on each offering two years or more in advance and often contract in-demand talent even further out.

While every effort is made to secure this advance leadership funding for future projects, the majority of our individual supporters, grantors, and corporations are not prepared to commit this far ahead. Yet, even without securing the majority of advance funding, WNO has successfully operated within a balanced budget for several years, in part thanks to past support from the Kennedy Center.

CELEBRATING 70 YEARS AND SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE FUTURE

6955 Willow Street NW #377 | Washington DC 20012 | www.washnatopera.org

WNO's seasons are also designed with a diverse mix of offerings, balancing popular operas with lesser-known work or smaller events that appeal to a broad range of audiences. As a result, the "very popular" offerings help pay for the "lesser-known," making it impossible to demonstrate in advance that a production like *Blue* (2023) or *Songbird* (2024) would pay for themselves, as their projected costs would be covered, in part, by the financial success of their seasons' grand offerings. This repertory balance underscores WNO's mission to create work for a broad citizenry, and to perpetuate the company's legacy of beauty, free expression, and civic connection, tenets which are only supported through a range of offerings.

As an affiliate of the Kennedy Center, WNO's marketing, multi-media communications, development operations, education, legal, finance, and HR resources were centralized. For 15 years, this was a great benefit to WNO. However, the Center's new approach has also reduced or eliminated a number of these services or positions, leaving an already lean group of WNO staff to take on multiple functions in addition to their own assignments, which is unfortunately not sustainable.

Our formalized affiliation with the Kennedy Center was never intended to be permanent, and this has become the ideal moment to move forward on different paths. This parting gives both organizations maximum flexibility to pursue our respective goals.

WNO is committed to continuing our work and celebrating our 70th anniversary as a fully independent, non-profit producing entity, separate from the Kennedy Center.

Please see the enclosed announcement with the relocation of our March performances of *The Crucible* and *Treemonisha*. In the coming weeks, we will be rolling out information on the remainder of our 2025–2026 season, followed by the announcement of our 2026–2027 season. We will also be scheduling a series of virtual town halls for those of you who would like to ask questions and hear more about our vision for the future. And please visit our new website, www.washnatopera.org, for updates, or contact us at info@washnatopera.org.

Fostering new work, rethinking the classics, enriching the community, launching the next generation of opera stars through our Cafritz Young Artists training program, sending our productions to cities throughout the U.S., and expanding the imaginations of young people through opera have been and always will be who we are.

With our gratitude for your loyalty and continuing support,



Andy Pharoah
PRESIDENT
WNO Board of Directors



Timothy O'Leary
GENERAL DIRECTOR



Francesca Zambello
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



Eric Larsen
CHAIRMAN
WNO Board of Directors

Spring Performances Announced

Following its recent separation from the Kennedy Center, Washington National Opera's 2025–2026 season will continue in new venues across the greater-Washington, D.C. area. WNO's long-announced spring programs include the premiere of a new version of **Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*** directed by **Denyce Graves** and **Robert Ward's** Pulitzer Prize-winning ***The Crucible***, starring **J'Nai Bridges** and **Ryan McKinny**, both taking place at Lisner Auditorium, the same venue where WNO gave its very first performances 70 years ago. WNO Cafritz Young Artists and the WNO Orchestra will also perform several events throughout the region.

WNO will announce details and venues at a later date for its May productions of ***West Side Story*** and annual **Opera Gala**, which will be hosted this year by famed *Wicked* composer **Stephen Schwartz**, as previously announced, and **Jamie Bernstein**, author and daughter of Leonard Bernstein. Performances of WNO's **American Opera Initiative**, which is a cornerstone of WNO's mission to build the future of American opera, have been postponed, and the rescheduled dates and venues will be announced soon.

Tickets will go on-sale for *Treemonisha* and *The Crucible* on January 23, with a special pre-sale option for WNO subscribers beginning January 20. To purchase tickets visit www.WashNatOpera.org. Patrons who have already purchased tickets for WNO events previously held at the Kennedy Center are receiving refunds.

TREEMONISHA

Music and Libretto by Scott Joplin | Musical Adaptation and Orchestration by Damien Sneed
Additional Lyrics by Kyle Bass

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, LISNER AUDITORIUM | 730 21ST STREET NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20037

- SATURDAY | MARCH 7, 2026 | 7PM
- SUNDAY | MARCH 8, 2026 | 2PM
- SUNDAY | MARCH 15, 2026 | 2PM

America's "King of Ragtime," Scott Joplin, died before he could complete this opera. WNO brings this powerful work to the stage in a newly commissioned adaptation by composer **Damien Sneed** and playwright **Kyle Bass**, under the direction of legendary mezzo-soprano **Denyce Graves**. One of the richest operas in the American repertoire, it blends ragtime, Black folk-songs, spirituals, ballet, and traditional operatic elements. Set in 1884, the story follows Treemonisha, an educated freedwoman on a former plantation, as she challenges superstition and defies "conjurers" to become her community's teacher and leader.

THE CRUCIBLE

Music by Robert Ward | Libretto by Bernard Stambler

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, LISNER AUDITORIUM | 730 21ST STREET NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20037

- SATURDAY | MARCH 21, 2026 | 7PM
- FRIDAY | MARCH 27, 2026 | 7PM
- MONDAY | MARCH 23, 2026 | 7PM
- SUNDAY | MARCH 29, 2026 | 2PM
- WEDNESDAY | MARCH 25, 2026 | 7PM

WNO Artistic Director **Francesca Zambello** directs Robert Ward's Pulitzer Prize-winning opera ***The Crucible***, based on Arthur Miller's Tony Award® winning play, which tells the story of the 17th-century Salem witch trials and serves as an allegory for the 1950s Red Scare—widespread fear of communism in the United States that led to political oppression and blacklisting.

Additional programs featuring Cafritz Young Artists and members of the WNO Orchestra

WNO **Cafritz Young Artists** will be performing with the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra in **“Beethoven & Bohème,”** on **February 14** at Rachel M. Schlesinger Concert Hall and Arts Center, and **February 15** at George Washington Masonic Memorial. The program features scenes from Puccini’s *La bohème*. The Italian composer Gian Carlo Menotti had a special relationship with America and a long association with the company. In a full circle moment, on **April 16**, Cafritz Young Artists will perform **Menotti’s *The Old Maid and the Thief***, which was staged by the composer for the Opera in its inaugural season.

The musicians of the **Washington National Opera Orchestra** will be performing in several upcoming concerts in the area. Events include a recital of **Russian opera and songs** on **January 23** at St. Dunstan’s Episcopal Church; **Mendelssohn Piano Trio** benefit concert for Jamaica on **February 15** at National Presbyterian Church; works by **Caroline Shaw and Mendelssohn** at St. Thomas Episcopal Church on **February 22**; a program of **favorite operatic moments** featuring the Cafritz Young Artists on **March 1** at the Hylton Center; and a program by women composers on **March 17** at The Rectory on Princess Street.