



6955 Willow Street NW, #377 | Washington, DC 20012

January 10, 2026

To our friends, artists, and supporters,

As Washington National Opera begins its 70<sup>th</sup> 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 entity.

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 of 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.

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.

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 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a fully independent, non-profit producing entity, separate from the Kennedy Center.

In the coming weeks, we will be reaching out with more specific information about our reformation plans and performances. Please know that we will be honoring our commitments to our artists, and as we announce the details of performances, we will be in touch with ticket holders regarding changes. 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](http://www.washnatopera.org), for updates, or contact us at [info@washnatopera.org](mailto: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.

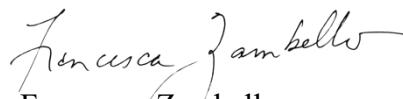
With our gratitude for your loyalty and continuing support,



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