

WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

2025–26 | 70th Anniversary Year in Review

BOLD. FORWARD. TOGETHER.



The production of this report is underwritten by a generous donor who wishes to remain anonymous.

A Story of Collaboration and Community

Dear Friends,

Our 2025–26 Year in Review tells a story unlike any other in our seven decades of producing opera in Washington. During advance planning for this 70th Anniversary celebration, we could not begin to envision the events that would unfold, which resulted in a season begun in the Kennedy Center Opera House and concluded in four venues across the region.

Following acclaimed productions of *Aida* and *The Marriage of Figaro* in the Opera House in the fall of 2025, conversations that we had previously begun with Kennedy Center leadership about our future continued. In January 2026, after months of mounting operational challenges, WNO made the difficult but inevitable decision to bring the affiliation with the Kennedy Center to an end and resume fully independent operations to preserve our mission.



To describe the complexity of what happened next could fill volumes; but in brief, thanks to an extraordinarily supportive Board and an amazingly talented and dedicated staff, we were immediately ready with essential funding, a website and communications plan to reach our audiences, a reserve fund to be used, in part, for cash flow as we establish regular ongoing income, and venues lined up for several theaters across the D.C.-Metro area, underscoring our mission to make opera accessible to everyone.

The New York Times called our ability to seamlessly continue with our planned spring season "a miracle." Our ability to rapidly shift our productions of *Treemonisha, The Crucible, West Side Story* and our *American Opera Initiative* to Baltimore, Bethesda, our Takoma Studio and Lisner Auditorium—where Washington Opera began 70 years ago—was warmly welcomed and widely praised. Perhaps most encouraging were the standing ovations we received as we stepped on stage to welcome audiences at each venue, a recognition of WNO's importance to the cultural landscape of our Nation's Capital.

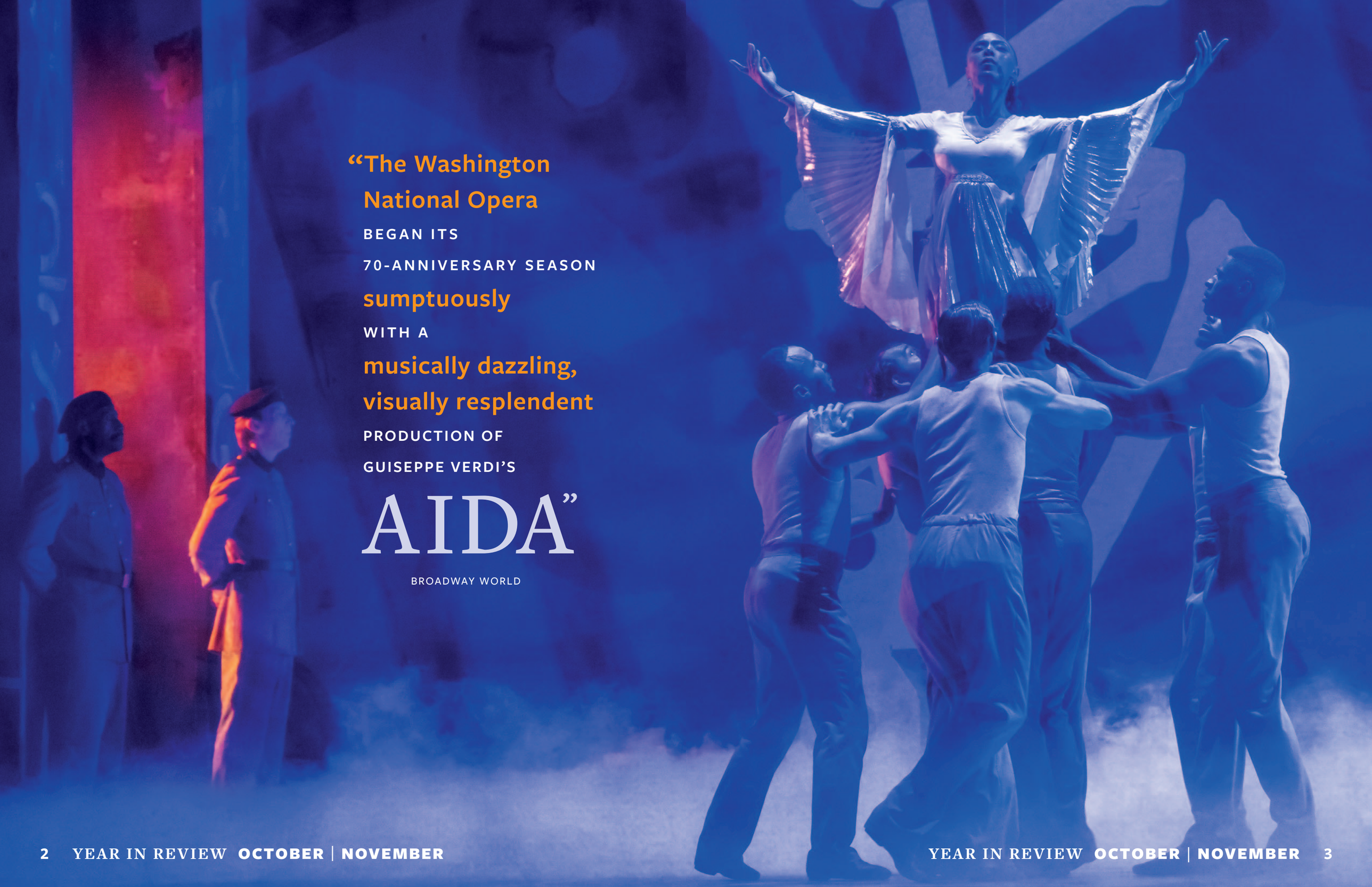
More than 2,000 donations arrived—from local loyal and new friends to first-time supporters from across the country. Many were accompanied by heartfelt notes and comments, cheering us on and speaking to our courage and integrity. This rallying of support inspired us to establish the National Friends of Washington National Opera to include everyone throughout the country who believes in the power of our contributions to American opera.

Throughout all of this is the story of how our extraordinary Board, staff, artists and ethos of collaboration made the seemingly impossible possible.

We now look forward to a new future, and with the support of so many who believe in our mission, vision and values, miracles can indeed continue to happen.

With gratitude,

TIMOTHY O'LEARY, *General Director and CEO* | FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO, *Artistic Director*



“The Washington National Opera BEGAN ITS 70-ANNIVERSARY SEASON sumptuously WITH A musically dazzling, visually resplendent PRODUCTION OF GUISEPPE VERDI’S AIDA”

BROADWAY WORLD

“WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA IS CELEBRATING ITS 70TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON ON AN UPBEAT. AS ANNOUNCED LAST SPRING, THE DALLAS MORSE COORS FOUNDATION MADE AN EXTRAORDINARY ENDOWMENT GIFT OF $8.6 MILLION TO WNO WHEN THE FOUNDATION CLOSED ITS DOORS. IN RESPONSE, WNO HAS PLEDGED TO DEDICATE A ‘STANDARD REPERTORY OPERA PRODUCTION’ EACH SEASON TO THE MEMORY OF DALLAS MORSE COORS …



… Let lovers of grand opera rejoice.”

WASHINGTON CLASSICAL REVIEW





AS THE SEASON OPENED TO A GLORIOUS REVIVAL OF ARTISTIC DIRECTOR FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO'S 2017 PRODUCTION OF AIDA, WITH REVIEWERS DESCRIBING THE DOUBLE CAST PRINCIPAL PERFORMERS, CORPS OF DANCERS, AND THE WNO ORCHESTRA AS

"magnificent," "winning,"
"triumphant," "graceful,"

... and "compelling,"

ANOTHER STORY WAS SIMULTANEOUSLY UNFOLDING.

A few months earlier, when the possibility of producing outside of the Opera House started to emerge, prompted by growing uncertainty about WNO's future at the Kennedy Center, staff began researching alternative performance spaces throughout the D.C.-Metro area. The decision whether to leave WNO's home of more than 50 years was still far from settled; but because opera requires extensive advance planning, the company needed to have a failsafe plan in place, just in case.

Which venues could accommodate WNO's sets and orchestra? Were there spaces available to "tech," rehearse and perform that coincided with existing artists' contracts and the WNO season schedules? How far would patrons be willing to travel? Where would they park? Where could they eat nearby? To retain WNO's high level of artistic excellence, which venues would allow us to work within their spaces to create unique theatrical and patron experiences?

Production leadership was charged with this creative, time-consuming and at times mind-boggling task, all the while overseeing the hefty work of running the fall season. Their energy and commitment were indicative of the dedication, collaboration and camaraderie that have always been a hallmark of the company and which this year truly shone, enabling all that followed to happen.

6 PERFORMANCES

Kennedy Center Opera House

AIDA

forces involved

CREATIVE TEAM

- 1 CONDUCTOR
- 1 DIRECTOR
- 1 ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
- 1 ARTISTIC DESIGNER
- 1 SET DESIGNER
- 1 COSTUME DESIGNER
- 2 LIGHTING DESIGNERS
- 1 CHOREOGRAPHER
- 1 FIGHT MASTER
- 1 INTIMACY COORDINATOR
- 1 COVER CONDUCTOR
- 1 CHORUS MASTER
- 3 ASSISTANT CONDUCTORS
- 1 DICTION COACH

PERFORMERS

- 11 PRINCIPAL SINGERS
- 2 SOLO DANCERS
- 6 CORPS DANCERS
- 10 YOUTH DANCERS
- 60 CHORISTERS
- 8 SUPERNUMERARIES
- 69 WNO ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

STAGE MANAGEMENT

- 1 STAGE MANAGER
- 2 ASSISTANT DIRECTORS
- 3 ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
- 1 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

RUNNING CREW

- 14 CARPENTERS
- 5 PROPS CREW
- 8 WARDROBE CREW
- 6 HAIR AND MAKEUP CREW
- 9 ELECTRICIANS
- 2 AUDIO TECHNICIANS
- 1 SUPERTITLES COORDINATOR AND OPERATOR

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

"WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA PRESENTS A MAGICAL 'MARRIAGE OF FIGARO.' … OPERA IS A TRULY MAGICAL ART FORM THAT SHOULD BE EXPERIENCED BY ALL … **Let's start with getting everyone to witness this incredible performance of the classic comedy."** DC THEATER ARTS



6 PERFORMANCES

INCLUDING THE ANNUAL CAFRITZ YOUNG ARTISTS PERFORMANCE

Kennedy Center Opera House

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

forces involved

CREATIVE TEAM

1 CONDUCTOR
1 DIRECTOR
1 SET DESIGNER
1 COSTUME DESIGNER
2 LIGHTING DESIGNERS
1 CHOREOGRAPHER
1 INTIMACY COORDINATOR
1 COVER CONDUCTOR
1 CHORUS MASTER
2 ASSISTANT CONDUCTORS
1 DICTION COACH

PERFORMERS

20 PRINCIPAL SINGERS
12 CHORISTERS
9 SUPERNUMERARIES
52 WNO ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

STAGE MANAGEMENT

1 STAGE MANAGER
1 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
2 ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
1 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

RUNNING CREW

12 CARPENTERS
6 PROPS CREW
8 WARDROBE CREW
5 HAIR AND MAKEUP CREW
7 ELECTRICIANS
1 AUDIO TECHNICIAN
1 SUPERTITLES COORDINATOR
1 SUPERTITLES OPERATOR





"THE STAGING … COMBINED WITH STELLAR SINGING … GAVE FRIDAY NIGHT'S OPENER EVERYTHING THAT DELIGHTS OPERA LOVERS. **Robert Spano,** IN HIS FIRST PODIUM STAND AS THE COMPANY'S MUSIC DIRECTOR, **presided masterfully.**"

WASHINGTON CLASSICAL REVIEW

Marian Anderson

VOCAL AWARD RECITAL

The annual Marian Anderson Vocal Award celebrates excellence in performance by recognizing a young American singer who has achieved initial professional success in opera, oratorio, or recital repertory, and who exhibits promise for a significant career. Honoring Marian Anderson's personal and humanitarian achievements, the award encourages service and education. In addition to a $10,000 cash prize and a Washington National Opera recital, winners participate in residencies with the opera workshop of Washington's Duke Ellington School of the Arts.

The 2025 winner was acclaimed American bass-baritone Nicholas Newton, who gave this year's award recital on November 3, at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater. A passionate researcher of African American art song, his recital included pieces by William Grant Still, often referred to as the "Dean of Afro-American Composers," and traditional spirituals arranged by African American women composers, along with works by Johannes Brahms and Jacques Ibert.

WNO is extremely grateful to the Denyce Graves Foundation, which again hosted HBCU students for the recital and a post-performance meet-the-artist reception, as they have generously done for several years.



"WITH *THE LITTLE PRINCE*, FIRST TIME OPERA ATTENDEES WERE ONCE AGAIN INTRODUCED TO GORGEOUS ARIAS SUNG BY A TOP-NOTCH CAST … EYE POPPING COSTUMES … GENIUS DESIGN … SUPERB SOUNDING 14-PIECE ORCHESTRA … STRIKING IMAGES … A SOARING CHOIR OF VOICES. …

***The Little Prince* took off and never looked back. Let's make sure WNO continues to soar for years to come."**

BROADWAY WORLD



3 PERFORMANCES

Kennedy Center Terrace Theater

THE LITTLE PRINCE

forces involved

CREATIVE TEAM

- 1 CONDUCTOR
- 2 DIRECTORS
- 1 SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER
- 2 LIGHTING DESIGNERS
- 1 CHOREOGRAPHER
- 1 COVER CONDUCTOR
- 1 YOUTH CHORUS MASTER
- 3 ASSISTANT CONDUCTORS
- 1 DICTION COACH

PERFORMERS

- 10 CAFRITZ YOUNG ARTISTS
- 20 YOUTH CHORISTERS
- 15 WNO ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

STAGE MANAGEMENT

- 1 STAGE MANAGER
- 1 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
- 2 ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
- 1 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

RUNNING CREW

- 3 CARPENTERS
- 2 PROPS CREW
- 5 WARDROBE CREW
- 3 HAIR AND MAKEUP CREW
- 4 ELECTRICIANS
- 1 AUDIO TECHNICIAN
- 1 SUPERTITLES OPERATOR

Building the future of American opera is a cornerstone of WNO's vision and values. Training a new generation of performers through the Cafritz Young Artists program, bringing new works to the stage through the American Opera Initiative, reimagining classic operas and making them more accessible for today's audiences, presenting recent premieres and commissioning new work like next season's *O'Keeffe: Kiss the Sky* are among the ways WNO fulfills this mission.

But another beloved cornerstone of this objective is WNO's annual holiday opera, which brings together local young performers, Cafritz Young Artists and the WNO Orchestra for a professionally realized production that year after year sells out and wows audiences.

Francesca has often said, **when children see children on stage, they realize opera can be part of their lives.** She believes creating performance opportunities for young people each season instills in them a love of the art form. By annually including a holiday opera and repertory with children's choruses, or by creatively adding young performers to grand productions, as in this season's *Aida* or as supernumeraries among the chorus of refugees in *Macbeth* the previous year, WNO is building audiences and even performers for a not-too-distant future.



2026 began with an operatic level of drama. On January 9, the Board of Trustees voted to seek to end WNO's Affiliation Agreement with the Kennedy Center. In anticipation, staff had researched and purchased the best available domain name and was ready to launch a Washington National Opera website to seamlessly maintain communications with the public. A prior logo was unearthed and revived to mark WNO's return to fully independent operations.

Board Chairman Eric Larsen, Board President Andy Pharoah, General Director Timothy O'Leary, and Artistic Director Francesca Zambello sent a letter to patrons, which was also posted on the new "WashNatOpera.org" website, which began:

"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."

Under the Affiliation Agreement with the Kennedy Center, WNO was responsible for its own annual budget—which covered the Opera's executive administration and all the artistic and production costs associated with creating each season—and for funding that budget through ticket sales, other earnings, contributions, and endowment distributions. In turn, the Kennedy Center provided a direct financial subsidy as well as performance spaces (the Opera House, the Eisenhower and Terrace Theaters, and the Millennium Stage) and all marketing, communications, development, IT, education, HR and financial services, generally at no cost to WNO. (Regrettably, as 2025 progressed, many of the Kennedy Center staff in development and marketing, who were assigned to WNO and who were essential for fundraising and ticket sales, had either been let go by the Kennedy Center or resigned.)

Throughout the affiliation, contributions to WNO and ticket sales for WNO performances were all processed through the Kennedy Center finance department, which also issued all payments to artists and vendors on behalf of WNO. The Kennedy Center signed all contracts with artists, contractors, and vendors; was the signatory on WNO's leases for its administrative offices at the Watergate, its production studios in Takoma, and its warehouse in Baltimore; issued payroll for all WNO staff; provided box office services; and managed all centralized communications, including staff email addresses, the Opera's web pages within the larger Kennedy Center website, and the entire patron database and history.

Following the WNO Board's communication to Kennedy Center leadership on the evening of January 9th, the Kennedy Center terminated WNO staff, who also lost access to their emails and offices. Contracts with the Cafritz Young Artists, principal artists lined up for the spring performances and future seasons, and vendors all had to be transferred to WNO.

Our extraordinary and dedicated staff tackled the daunting work of returning to fully independent operations with unwavering resolve. By the end of January, WNO had completed the steps needed to resume employing personnel for the first time since its 2011 affiliation with the Kennedy Center. This enabled the company to hire 28 full-time and 3 part-time administrative, production, and artistic staff formerly employed by the Kennedy Center. Since then, WNO has continued to hire additional full-time staff to perform functions previously handled by the Kennedy Center. WNO also began directly engaging the hundreds of artists and backstage personnel required to put on a season.

The lengthy list of needs and tasks tackled to re-establish and re-start the company also included:

- Obtaining corporate insurance policies such as General Liability, Workers Comp, etc.
- Engaging legal counsel
- Revivifying WNO's corporate registrations in D.C., MD, VA and with the Federal government
- Setting up payroll and all financial systems
- Acquiring health insurance plans
- Establishing an HR structure and employee policies
- Drafting new WNO governance policies, practices and Board committees
- Developing a new IT infrastructure
- Purchasing computers
- Installing badging, WiFi and security systems
- Selecting a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and overseeing the migration of data into the new system

... and much more

All the while, production staff did not miss a beat.
Negotiations that had begun in 2025 with Lisner Auditorium for the March performances of *Treemonisha* and *The Crucible* were successfully concluded by the time the January 16th letter to patrons was posted, making it possible to list the dates and venues for those performances in the letter. Soon after, as rental and scheduling details with the Lyric Baltimore, the Music Center at Strathmore, and the National Building Museum in D.C. were finalized, the performances of *West Side Story* and the 70th Anniversary Gala were announced.

Miraculously, even as WNO resumed operating as an independent organization, the season came off seamlessly.

As Tim aptly described the experience, **"We were building the plane as we were flying it."**



Composer Christopher Tin and his daughter crossing Abbey Road in London à la The Beatles' famous album cover. The recording used by Yuma Kagiyama for his Olympic event is on the album, *Turandot: Christopher Tin Finale,* which was made at the legendary Abbey Road Studios Room 2—the room made famous by The Beatles—with Christine Goerke, Clay Hilley, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and English National Opera Chorus.

Christopher and Christine reunite at WNO in March 2027 for the world premiere of *O'Keeffe: Kiss the Sky*, a hybrid ballet-opera by Christopher, librettist Kelley Rourke and choreographer Jessica Lang. Christine sings the role of Mabel Dodge Luhan, the renowned arts patron who encouraged Georgia O'Keeffe to come to Taos with historic results.

WNO at the Olympics!

In February, in a thrilling break from rebuilding WNO, we were honored when the world witnessed the Silver Medal-winning Men's Singles Free Skate performance by the preeminent Japanese figure skater, Yuma Kagiyama, at the 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Milano-Cortina, Italy, performed to Washington National Opera's commissioned ending for Puccini's *Turandot* from our 2024 production.

The story about the creation of this recording for Yuma's routine attracted tremendous attention. The music was singled out for praise in color commentary at the Olympics, and in a pre-Olympic event, NBC Sports commentator Mark Hanretty expressed what so many felt:

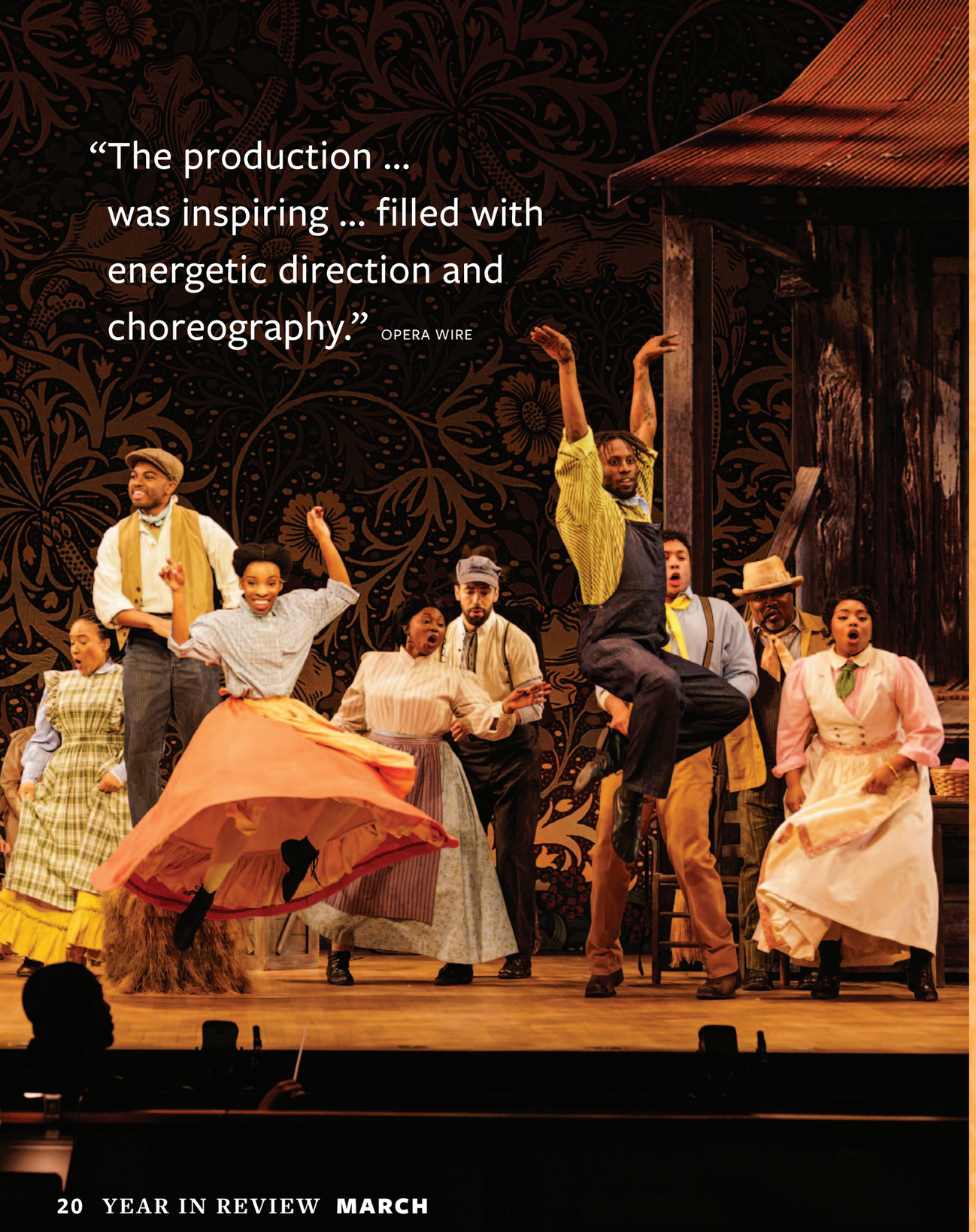
"I defy anybody not to be moved by the emotion of the music, the story behind the creation of this piece, specially recorded for Yuma ... the music is so extraordinary, and the skater just sublime, and the combination of the passionate movement that Yuma gives to that music is so emotional ... it just has Olympic moment written all over it. I feel and sense it's set to be an iconic piece in the history of our sport to come."

"Before a single note was heard, the **audience at Lisner Auditorium rose to their feet in a spontaneous standing ovation** as Artistic Director Francesca Zambello and General Director Timothy O'Leary took to the stage to welcome returning audience members to Washington National Opera's 70th season and the celebration of what can only be described as a hero's victory wrested after a protracted battle." DC THEATER ARTS

"When Timothy O'Leary, the company's general director, came out onstage, **he received perhaps the most raucous ovation I have ever heard bestowed on an arts administrator.** It was testimony not only to the logistical difficulty of what O'Leary and Francesca Zambello, WNO's artistic director, have achieved — moving an opera company on short notice is no easy matter — but also to the spirit of independence in which it was done." – THE NEW YORKER

After a full five minutes of cheering, Tim responded to the palpable joy: **"Are we glad to see you!** Welcome to the uninterrupted, slightly relocated 70th anniversary season of Washington National Opera. **We deeply appreciate your understanding and your solidarity, and your belief in creative freedom."**





"The production … was inspiring … filled with energetic direction and choreography." OPERA WIRE

***Treemonisha*, WNO's first production after its transition to independence, was in itself a powerful symbol of rebirth.** This rarely seen opera by Scott Joplin is part of our national inheritance and was one of the works programmed as such for this year in celebration of America's semiquincentennial. Critics praised the sold-out run as **"a triumphant declaration of artistic self-determination."** Treemonisha's story of freedom, identity, hope and the power of knowledge to dismantle fear, resonated deeply as WNO charted its own path forward.

The production also represented WNO's commitment to furthering the legacy of American opera. The orchestral score for *Treemonisha* was sadly lost, and WNO was fortunate to be able to collaborate with the Library of Congress to reconstruct the opera with a team that included composer and arranger Damien Sneed, playwright Kyle Bass, and director and opera icon Denyce Graves.

It was another great American operatic icon, Jessye Norman, who, Damien explained, brought *Treemonisha* to his attention years earlier, when, as his mentor, "she spoke with deep conviction about a composer she believed had not received his rightful due: Scott Joplin. She urged me to promise that I would devote myself to *Treemonisha* … **This adaptation seeks not to replace Joplin, but to amplify him** — to honor his genius while addressing the dramaturgical and structural questions that have long surrounded the work."

3 PERFORMANCES
Lisner Auditorium

TREEMONISHA forces involved

CREATIVE TEAM

- 1 CONDUCTOR
- 1 DIRECTOR
- 1 SET DESIGNER
- 1 COSTUME DESIGNER
- 1 LIGHTING DESIGNER
- 1 CHOREOGRAPHER
- 1 SOUND DESIGNER
- 1 FIGHT AND INTIMACY COORDINATOR
- 1 COVER CONDUCTOR
- 3 ASSISTANT CONDUCTORS
- 1 DICTION COACH

PERFORMERS

- 14 PRINCIPAL SINGERS
- 1 BANJO PLAYER
- 1 PIANO PLAYER
- 4 CORPS DANCERS
- 6 SUPERNUMERARIES
- 21 WNO ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

STAGE MANAGEMENT

- 1 STAGE MANAGER
- 1 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
- 2 ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
- 1 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

RUNNING CREW

- 5 CARPENTERS
- 4 PROPS CREW
- 5 WARDROBE CREW
- 4 HAIR AND MAKEUP CREW
- 5 ELECTRICIANS
- 4 AUDIO TECHNICIANS
- 1 SUPERTITLES COORDINATOR AND OPERATOR

THE CRUCIBLE

"... an evening to remember IN AN OPERA THAT POWERFULLY PORTRAYS A REALITY NOT TOO FAR FROM OUR SOCIETY TODAY. IT ALSO DEMONSTRATED WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA'S RESILIENCE IN TIME OF CHANGE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COMPANY MORE THAN EVER."

OPERA WIRE

"ROOTED IN THE COUNTRY'S LITERARY AND HISTORICAL IDENTITY, THIS PRODUCTION PROVIDES AUDIENCES AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE WITH A WORK THAT REMAINS urgently relevant TO THE CHALLENGES WE STILL FACE, THE VALUES WE HOLD DEAR, AND THE ONGOING PURSUIT OF LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL."

MD THEATER GUILD



“ emotionally riveting ”

DC THEATER ARTS

“ mesmerizing from the beginning ”

OPERA TODAY

In Tim and Francesca’s *Crucible* program book Welcome Letter to the audience, they noted that Robert Ward’s opera, based on the 1953 play by Arthur Miller about the Salem Witch Trials as an allegory for the era’s Red Scare, “is not an easy one. **But for us, the presentation of difficult stories is an expression of unfettered optimism and belief in the promise of America.** At Washington National Opera, we are committed to providing space for reflection and dialogue. As John F. Kennedy famously said, we will be remembered ‘not for our victories or defeats in battle or politics, but for our contributions to the human spirit.’ … As we chart a course for the years ahead, we remain firmly committed to providing space for dialogue with you about who we are and what we wish to become.”



5 PERFORMANCES

Lisner Auditorium

THE CRUCIBLE

forces involved

CREATIVE TEAM

- 1 CONDUCTOR
- 1 DIRECTOR
- 1 SET DESIGNER
- 1 COSTUME DESIGNER
- 2 LIGHTING DESIGNERS
- 1 SOUND DESIGNER
- 1 CHOREOGRAPHER
- 1 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR AND CHOREOGRAPHER
- 1 INTIMACY COORDINATOR
- 1 COVER CONDUCTOR
- 3 ASSISTANT CONDUCTORS
- 1 DICTION COACH

PERFORMERS

- 17 PRINCIPAL SINGERS
- 25 WNO ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

STAGE MANAGEMENT

- 1 STAGE MANAGER
- 1 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
- 2 ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
- 1 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

RUNNING CREW

- 5 CARPENTERS
- 4 PROPS CREW
- 5 WARDROBE CREW
- 5 HAIR AND MAKEUP CREW
- 5 ELECTRICIANS
- 4 AUDIO TECHNICIANS
- 1 SUPERTITLES COORDINATOR AND OPERATOR



WNO Leadership Receives National Honors

Ovations for WNO continued on March 20, when 500 attendees at OPERA America's annual awards dinner responded with extended cheers to opening remarks from the organization's Board Chair, Lee Anne Myslewski, recognizing WNO's courage and integrity, and again as WNO Trustee, Jeffrey Cunard, and Artistic Director Francesca Zambello were honored. Jeff, whose six-year tenure as president of the WNO Board included overseeing the development of the company's strategic plan and guiding WNO through the pandemic and its return to live performances, received a National Opera Trustee Recognition Award for "exemplary leadership, support, and service." Francesca was inducted into the Opera Hall of Fame in recognition of her "achievements in strengthening the art form and the field."

"... the score soared to great emotional heights."

OPERA WIRE, *THE CRUCIBLE*



Among the challenges of finding venues for the spring productions that matched the planned season schedule, the idea of using Lisner Auditorium was at once an emotional as well as practical choice. The scenery and staging would fit, and it was also fitting during this anniversary season to return to this very hall where WNO began 70 years ago and at a time when the Opera was celebrating a new beginning.

But where to place the full complement of musicians for *Treemonisha* and *The Crucible* in Lisner Auditorium was a challenge. The hall was designed for onstage concerts and does not have a traditional orchestra pit. As a result, players were divided between an auditorium-level pit and a basement room, where brass, harp and percussion had monitors to follow the conductor from above, with their sound piped back into the house.

It was a musical and acrobatic feat on the part of Maestros Kendrick Armstrong (*Treemonisha*) and Robert Spano (*The Crucible*) to lead this split arrangement, which was so masterfully handled that audiences and reviewers only felt the brilliance of what was delivered.



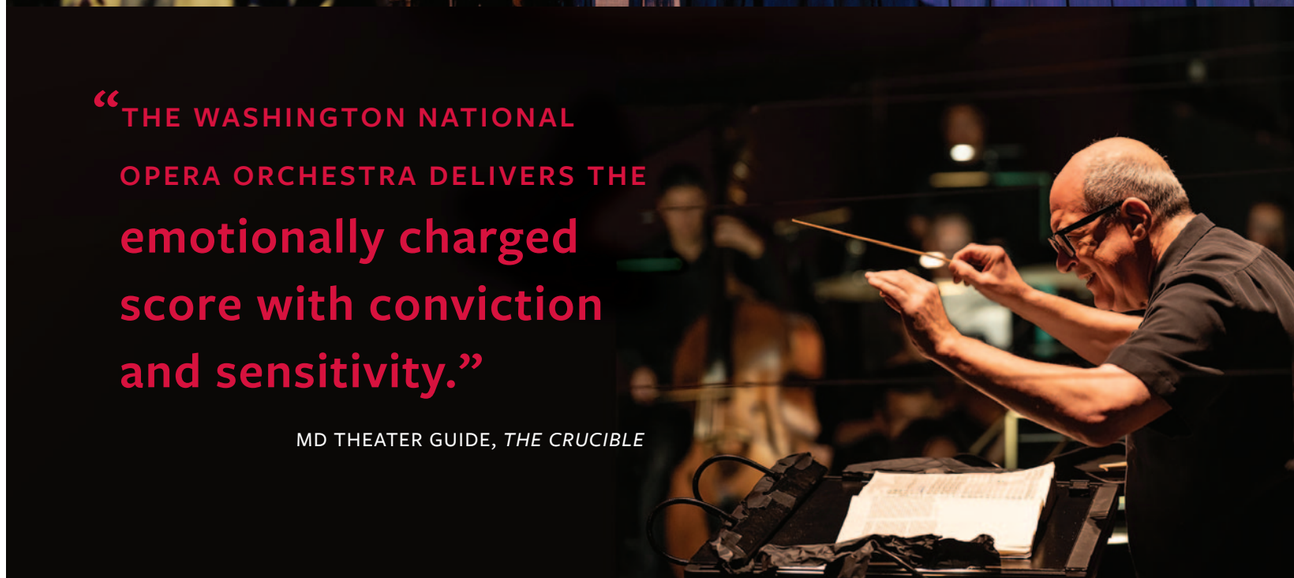
"musically dazzling"

BROADWAY WORLD, *TREEMONISHA*



"THE WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA ORCHESTRA DELIVERS THE **emotionally charged score with conviction and sensitivity.**"

MD THEATER GUIDE, *THE CRUCIBLE*





CAFRITZ YOUNG ARTISTS

Creating Careers

The top 10 American opera companies each have their own young artists programs and each have a different way of bringing these artists to the next phases of their careers. At WNO, we produce grand opera, classics, smaller more intimate pieces and new works. A full range of repertory. As a result, I believe it's important that each of our Cafritz Young Artists have exposure to all of this repertory. I want them to have the level of training that only a top tier company like WNO can provide.

"My philosophy has always been that performance is the most important aspect of developing a career."

You need to learn repertory, you need to train, you need to practice; but performance alongside seasoned accomplished artists is really where the truth comes out. And that offers the biggest learning curve. At WNO, we give Cafritz Young Artists the experience of performing leading roles, secondary roles and participating in the process of bringing a new work to fruition.

The Cafritz Young Artists create the roles for each season's *American Opera Initiative* commission, giving them the opportunity to work with living composers and writers. We select a standard opera every season—*Figaro, Traviata, Bohème,* etc.—and make sure each year's class is given a full performance of that offering as part of the regular season schedule. We cast everyone in supporting named roles in all of the productions. The scope and breadth of performing, rather than just 'covering', or 'understudying', is what sets WNO apart.

Developing a Library of Roles

Covering, however, is indeed also an important aspect of all of this, as it allows young artists to develop a library of roles, because for many, their break-out opportunity comes when someone cancels or is sick and they're called on at the last minute. I'm always telling them to 'be prepared.' And we also provide language, movement, vocal coaching, etc., but it only comes together when there is the chemistry with an audience.

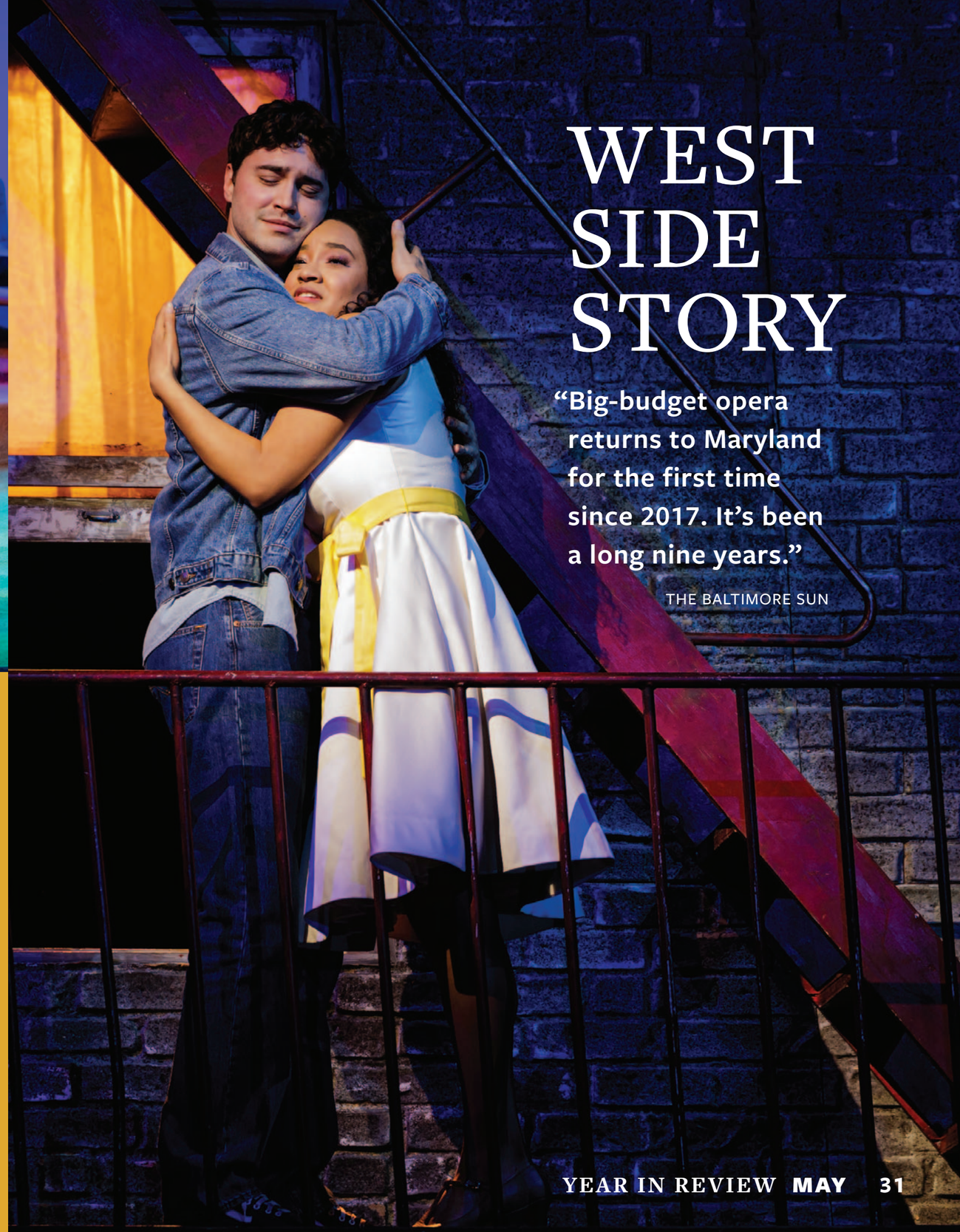
As our Cafritz Young Artists careers take off, we always look for ways bring alumni back in leading roles for additional opportunities and to reconnect with the audiences where they began.

– Francesca Zambello



During 2025–26, Cafritz Young Artists and alumni …

- Sang the leading role in *Aida*
- Sang two of the key comprimario roles in *The Marriage of Figaro*
- Were given the 11/15 performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*
- Sang 8 of the 9 principal roles in *The Little Prince*
- Sang 4 of the principal roles in *Treemonisha,* including the lead
- Sang 11 of the 17 principal roles in *The Crucible*
- Sang all of the 11 roles in the *American Opera Initiative* premieres
- Served as teaching artists for WNO's Use Your Voice residency at the NVJDC
- Brought tears of joy to Gala attendees with their musical offerings and presence
- Performed at the two public behind-the-scenes WNO Open Houses
- Sang at WNO community programs, patron gatherings and for other organizations
- Were cultural ambassadors throughout the broad Washington, D.C. community



WEST SIDE STORY

"Big-budget opera returns to Maryland for the first time since 2017. It's been a long nine years."

THE BALTIMORE SUN



“... glorious voices ... explosive dancing ... Jerome Robbins’ original choreography ...”

THE BALTIMORE SUN

“‘West Side Story’ ignites the Lyric stage.”

THE BALTIMORE SUN

During the search for venues, there was a palpable pull to bring a grand production to Baltimore. The beautiful and historic **Lyric Baltimore** was a draw and could house the large scale of WNO’s *West Side Story*. But there were also questions about D.C. residents wanting something closer to home, and the more proximate availability of the acoustically glorious concert hall at the **Music Center at Strathmore** was equally attractive.

As a result, Francesca and her creative team devised a hefty schedule that included bringing the fully staged version first to Baltimore, followed by a staged concert version to Strathmore, without the large-scale set but with full costuming, props, lighting, and all of the action and Jerome Robbins iconic choreography happening in front of the Orchestra. For many, having the opportunity to see the WNO Orchestra behind what the Baltimore Sun called **“a hormone-infused production ...** [with dancers] ricocheting around the stage like balls in a video game” was as thrilling as its full-scale counterpart.

WNO engaged Marin Alsop, the highly lauded and beloved Baltimore Symphony Music Director Laureate and protégé of *West Side Story* composer Leonard Bernstein, to conduct three of the five performances, making the Maryland experience even more meaningful. And with program notes by Bernstein’s daughter, Jamie Bernstein, the relevance of this repertory selection during America’s semiquincentennial was further enriched.

5 PERFORMANCES
Lyric Baltimore
The Music Center at Strathmore

WEST SIDE STORY
forces involved

CREATIVE TEAM

2 CONDUCTORS
1 DIRECTOR
1 ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
1 CHOREOGRAPHER
1 ASSOCIATE CHOREOGRAPHER
1 SET DESIGNER
1 COSTUME DESIGNER
1 ASSOCIATE COSTUME DESIGNER
2 LIGHTING DESIGNERS
2 ASSISTANT LIGHTING DESIGNERS
1 AUDIO DESCRIPTOR
1 SOUND DESIGNER
1 INTIMACY AND FIGHT COACH
1 DANCE CAPTAIN
1 INTIMACY COORDINATOR
3 ASSISTANT CONDUCTORS
1 DICTION COACH

PERFORMERS

9 PRINCIPAL SINGERS
13 SHARKS
11 JETS
1 ACTOR
73 WNO ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

STAGE MANAGEMENT

1 STAGE MANAGER
1 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
3 ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
1 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

RUNNING CREW (2 venues)

13 CARPENTERS
8 PROPS CREW
16 WARDROBE CREW
10 HAIR AND MAKEUP CREW
12 ELECTRICIANS
10 AUDIO TECHNICIANS
1 SUPERTITLES COORDINATOR AND OPERATOR

"... A 50-PIECE LIVE ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY LEONARD BERNSTEIN PROTÉGÉ (AND BALTIMORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA MUSIC DIRECTOR LAUREATE) MARIN ALSOP. AND A STORY THAT'S AS **thought-provoking and deeply moving** IN 2026 AS IT WAS WHEN IT DEBUTED 69 YEARS AGO."

THE BALTIMORE SUN





Treemonisha panel presentation with Timothy O'Leary, Denyce Graves, Damien Sneed, Kyle Bass

Artistic Citizenship

WNO established the term Artistic Citizenship to define its commitment to connecting with the community and inspiring people of all ages and circumstances to make opera part of their lives.

In addition to creating onstage performance opportunities for families and local youth through the annual holiday opera, children's chorus, and as supernumeraries, WNO responds to invitations from clubs, churches, organizations, and senior living residences for musical previews, and provides talks and social opportunities at performances for its affiliate groups—the Women's Committee, Women Who Opera, and BravO—and others.

Taking fans and newcomers behind the scenes during annual Open House tours brings patrons into the process of what it takes to produce on the scale of Washington National Opera. This past year, nearly 400 people toured WNO's studios and production facility in Takoma in September, and during the run of *Aida*, another 600 were given technical tours backstage at the Kennedy Center—with visitors treated to performances by the Cafritz Young Artists and members of the Washington National Opera Orchestra. WNO's ongoing partnership with the Library of Congress brought musical previews and in-depth panel discussions on the history and relevance of *Treemonisha* and *West Side Story* to the Library in February and April.

Making an Impact

"I didn't know people like me did this kind of thing."

"It was like community. I felt safe and loved and cared for. And I haven't felt that for a very long time."

"My favorite part was being able to show my vision and then making it all come together."

A very special educational initiative is WNO's Use Your Voice residency project with the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center. This program was inaugurated the prior year in partnership with Sound Impact, a musicians collective comprised of local musicians and members of the WNO Orchestra. Working with WNO guest artists and Cafritz Young Artists, each residency centers on the dramatic themes of an opera or musical, giving students opportunities to connect the material to their own lives and experiences.

This year's series of three-day residences expanded from two in 2024–25 to six for 2025–26, and included opera, musical theater, storytelling, and creative expression centered around *Aida*, *Treemonisha*, *West Side Story* and *Hamilton*. Themes of character development, identity, power, freedom, belonging, understanding, adversity, stereotypes, education as empowerment, self-determination and community leadership were explored through group singing, creative writing, spoken word, artwork, and collaborative music-making. Each residency culminated in a performance blending students' original words, music, movement, narration and visual art.

The impact on participants was heartfelt.

"I learned I can do hard things. I can be confident in myself and know that there are people out there who will listen."



2 PERFORMANCES

WNO Rehearsal Studio

AMERICAN OPERA INITIATIVE

forces involved

CREATIVE TEAM

- 3 COMPOSERS
- 3 LIBRETTISTS
- 1 CONDUCTOR
- 1 ARTISTIC ADVISOR
- 1 COMPOSER MENTOR
- 1 LIBRETTIST MENTOR
- 1 DIRECTOR
- 1 COVER CONDUCTOR
- 1 LIGHTING DESIGNER
- 13 WNO ORCHESTRA MUSICIANS

STAGE MANAGEMENT

- 1 STAGE MANAGER
- 1 ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

RUNNING CREW

- 1 CARPENTER
- 1 PROPS CREW
- 1 WARDROBE CREW
- 2 ELECTRICIANS
- 1 AUDIO TECHNICIAN

Each year, WNO's American Opera Initiative has commissioned a trio of short operas from teams of composers and librettists selected from across the country. A cornerstone of AOI is connecting the awardees to professional mentors, who have successfully brought new American operas to the stage, for guidance during the development of their work. This season's mentors were Anthony Davis, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer of *The Central Park Five* and *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, among others, and the interdisciplinary scholar, journalist, author and librettist, Thulani Davis.

AOI was originally scheduled to be held in the Terrace Theater of the Kennedy Center in January, but the separation from the Center collided with those plans. The authors had completed their scores and the productions were ready to be mounted on a stage, but doing so was not possible that month. After rounds of creative deliberations, the company decided to move the premieres to WNO's own Takoma Studios theater, which proved to be an artistically thrilling as well as logical choice, setting the stage to continue performances there in future seasons.

"When 'Cesca and Tim invited me to become AOI Artistic Advisor, ten years in, the first thing I did was survey alumni to better understand the past success and future potential of the program. WNO was the first professional opera company to offer an annual opportunity for untested composers and librettists to create, develop, and premiere operas in a real-world setting, and AOI's success has now inspired companies across the country to launch similar programs. The response to the survey was overwhelming and proved the value of the model — while pointing out some areas for growth. Over the next four years we implemented a more inclusive and rigorous application process; strengthened the role of the guest mentors; created opportunities for creators to learn from other opera professionals, from stage directors to press reps to company leadership; added video features with the creators and performers; increased production values; and even took AOI to NYC. January 2027 will see AOI's 47th world premiere. I can't wait to see how the program continues to evolve to serve artists and the art form." KELLEY ROURKE

CHRISTOPHER DIETZ | FAIZA ALEX MANAA

THE CURSE OF THE MAGI

An homage to O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*, with a macabre twist. When marriage counseling is too time-consuming, and Christmas gifts get more expensive, what other option is there but to take drastic measures. In this dark comedy, each spouse secretly meets with an unusual consultant for help in bringing their marriage to an end.





DAN VAN HASSEL | HANNAH NIKKA OSDINADA

THE MOLD AND I

A pandemic-era comedy that dives headfirst into the absurd as the isolated Kerry develops an affection for a sentient, organic manifestation in her apartment, putting her relationship with her boyfriend, Devon, in direct competition with "The Mold."

DAVID RAGLANDL | ANITA GONZALEZ

MICKEY DEE AND THE ECLIPSE

Into the somewhat quotidian space of a fast-food restaurant, a polyglot collective of working-class people come together for a brief moment during a solar eclipse. A hopeful take on what might happen if Earth-bound humans really stopped, saw one another and took the time to reimagine what their life might be.



Thank you for maintaining your artistic integrity.

As a professional musician from Houston, I have been following your extraordinary move. This isn't much, but I am encouraging my colleagues to donate.

Bravo! We stand behind you 100%.

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE EXTRAORDINARY WORK YOU CONTINUE TO BRING TO THE DMV AND THE OPERA WORLD EVERYWHERE

Rooting for you from New York!

Thank you for embarking on this new chapter.

Thank you!!!

WE STAND WITH YOU, ALL THE WAY FROM BERLIN!

We stand in admiration for all that you are doing and will continue to support you forever!

... it means a lot to see artists lead with conscience and integrity.

Keep opera alive for DC!!!

... gratitude for your courage and foresight.

... ENCOURAGING EVERYONE IN MY CIRCLES TO SUPPORT WNO.

Sending strength and love from Pittsburgh.

Courage en ces temps obscurs.

NOW IN MY 80s, I GREW OLD WITH YOU. THANK YOU FOR THE MANY GREAT PERFORMANCES IN OVER 70 YEARS AND LOOKING FORWARD TO MANY MORE!

"This has been an inspiring time. A tremendous spirit now pervades the WNO community — a feeling that we're all in this together, doing something important. Artists, staff, trustees, volunteers, audiences, community partners — everyone has felt the electricity of this common cause."

TIMOTHY O'LEARY
General Director and CEO, Washington National Opera

I'M PROUD TO SUPPORT THE WNO AFTER MAKING SUCH A BRAVE, VALUES-AFFIRMING DECISION.

May you thrive wherever you perform.

We love you!!!!!

BOLD. FORWARD. TOGETHER.

Collaboration has always been at the heart of WNO's ethos—it is the very essence of how opera, the most complex of art forms, is produced—and it is now at the very core of why and how the company was able to move forward with alacrity, creativity, excitement and achievement and bring along with it an enthusiastic community of friends, colleagues and supporters.

Artistic Director Francesca Zambello describes her success as a stage director as rooted in this spirit: "As a director, I work hard to make everyone feel comfortable, accepted and part of the process. **The more collaborative the process, the better the performance will be."**

This is true of all aspects of how WNO has always worked and how it now perseveres through untested circumstances for which there was no model.

- It is reflected in the dynamic working partnership between the Board and staff who believed the 70th anniversary season could happen, uninterrupted, despite initially not knowing exactly how.
- It is evidenced by the response from colleague organizations in Baltimore, Bethesda and throughout D.C. who responded to our need for new performance spaces with pride and encouragement, and from colleague companies like Lyric Opera of Chicago which is lending WNO *Madama Butterfly* costumes free-of-charge for the 2026–27 season.
- It is realized through the more than 2,000 contributions received since January 9th, many from across the country, inspiring us to form the National Friends of Washington National Opera.

The ***Washington Post*** described our ability to move forward **"a true act of courage ... WNO deserves applause (and support) for sticking to its work and fighting for opera's life."**

The New York Times proclaimed, "Washington National Opera ... pulled off the risky, difficult feat of abandoning its home, and all the security that came with it, and opening a new production within two months" as **"a miracle."**

With the coming together of the entire WNO community, miracles can and will continue to happen.

70 *for* 70

Washington National Opera's Campaign for the Future

More than a year ago, WNO established a **70th Anniversary Fund** with the goal of raising $70 million over seven years. The campaign to support this fund was announced last June, and in advance, $21.6 million in leadership funding was received from a corps of key supporters. As WNO began deliberating a move from the Kennedy Center, the campaign was paused. Now, with the momentum of recent months and a solid path forward, WNO has reactivated this effort and invites everyone who supports the future of opera in our Nation's capital to join with a contribution designated for this purpose. New and increased donations to the annual fund, gifts designated for a special purpose, or contributions to the WNO Endowment are all avenues for donor participation.

The purpose of the 70th Anniversary Fund is:

- To ensure continued artistic excellence and innovation through the quality, scope, and scale of classic grand, re-imagined and contemporary opera productions and the opera season;
- To ensure creative freedom and organizational resilience;
- To build the future of American opera by producing new works, expanding opportunities for the Cafritz Young Artists and alumni, and sustaining and expanding programs for students and young audiences;
- To serve the community through education programs and partnerships that strengthen WNO's commitment to cultural diplomacy and connecting the greater Washington D.C. community.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY FUND

Please contact:

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With gratitude to the following donors whose contributions of $100,000 and above made possible an exceptional season, an extraordinary organizational transition, and are helping set the stage for the future of WNO:

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With gratitude to everyone who supported our 70th Anniversary Gala

This year's event, held in May at the National Building Museum, was a sparkling celebration of our past, present and future and our commitment to artistic independence. With gratitude to our Chairman Emeritus and Honorary Gala Chair, Jacqueline Badger Mars, and the nearly 500 guests whose joy and enthusiasm helped us reach our $1.3M goal.

Thank you to our season sponsors:

GENERAL DYNAMICS

Jaqueline Badger Mars
Dallas Morse Coors

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PHOTOS: Ellman Studios, Caitlin Oldham, Jeff Reeder/OPERA America, Scott Suchman



Model for *Madama Butterfly* at DAR Constitution Hall

A BOLD FUTURE

THE COMMUNITY AS OUR OPERA HOUSE

WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

2026–27 SEASON

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MUSIC DIRECTOR

NEW PRODUCTION
Puccini | Illica & Giacosa
MADAMA BUTTERFLY
DAR CONSTITUTION HALL
NOVEMBER 7–20, 2026
5 performances

COMPANY PREMIERE
Adams | Goodman
NIXON IN CHINA
DAR CONSTITUTION HALL
NOVEMBER 14–21, 2026
3 performances

NEW PRODUCTION
SPECIAL CONCERT: WE THE PEOPLE
DAR CONSTITUTION HALL
Featuring Renée Fleming, Thomas Hampson, Marian Anderson Award Winner Amber Monroe
NOVEMBER 22, 2026
1 performance

NEW PRODUCTION
Moore | Rourke
ODYSSEY
KREEGER THEATER OF ARENA STAGE AT THE MEAD CENTER FOR AMERICAN THEATER
DECEMBER 18–20, 2026
5 performances

AMERICAN OPERA INITIATIVE
Marlor | Bierman
WOLF/LAMBS
WNO STUDIO
JANUARY 15–16, 2027
2 performances

WORLD PREMIERE
Tin | Rourke
O'KEEFFE: KISS THE SKY
HARMAN HALL AT SHAKESPEARE THEATRE COMPANY
MARCH 12–26, 2027
5 performances

NEW PRODUCTION
Mozart | Varesco
MOZART'S IDOMENEO: A TROJAN TALE
HARMAN HALL AT SHAKESPEARE THEATRE COMPANY
MARCH 20–27, 2027
3 performances

WNO REVIVAL
Verdi | Piave
LA TRAVIATA
THE MUSIC CENTER AT STRATHMORE
APRIL 29–May 1, 2027
2 performances