

**Press Release**  
August 30, 2018

**Washington National Opera  
expands American opera repertory during**

## **American Opera Initiative Festival**

**January 11–13, 2019**

**Kennedy Center Terrace Theater**

**World Premiere of**

### ***Taking Up Serpents***

**by Kamala Sankaram and Jerre Dye**

**plus**

**Three new one-act operas:**

***75 Miles* by Matt Boehler and Laura Barati**

***Relapse* by Molly Joyce and James Kennedy**

***Pepito* by Nick Benavides and Marella Martin Koch**

(WASHINGTON)—Washington National Opera (WNO) presents the seventh season of its acclaimed American Opera Initiative (AOI) with four world premieres from January 11–13, 2019, in the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater. A comprehensive commissioning program that originates and develops new works, the American Opera Initiative provides rare opportunities for emerging composers and librettists to partner and write for the opera stage. The Initiative encourages and ensures the future of contemporary American opera through development, mentorship, and performance, with works based on American themes and stories. Since its inception, the annual program has commissioned 28 chamber operas, with some going on to future productions around the country; notables include this summer's successful production by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis of *An American Soldier*, an AOI commission in 2014, and Opera Omaha's and Miller Theater's new productions of AOI's 2018 commission, *Proving Up*.

“The American Opera Initiative has now supported the work of some 50 young American composers and librettists, in a field where securing first commissions is notoriously difficult and risk-laden. This has helped them develop their craft and gain invaluable experience in a safe environment, mentored by some of the leading American creative artists, with their works being realized by world-class performers and production teams,” says Robert Ainsley, AOI program director. “America is renowned world-wide for its appetite for and support of contemporary opera, and under the leadership of Artistic Director Francesca Zambello, it is one of WNO’s missions as the national opera company to be a beacon for the field in this repertoire. We are immensely proud of the Initiative’s contribution to the canon of contemporary American Opera, and to the experience and guidance it has provided to a young generation of composers and librettists.”

The AOI Festival weekend begins with the world premiere of *Taking Up Serpents*, a new hour-long work by composer Kamala Sankaram and librettist Jerre Dye, on January 11 and 13, 2019. Each performance will be followed by a Q&A session with the creative team. Three new pairings of composers and librettists—Matt Boehler and Laura Barati, Molly Joyce and James Kennedy, Nick Benavides and Marella Martin Koch—offer new, one-act operas during the festival. Two semi-staged concert performances of each 20-minute opera are presented on January 12, 2019.

### ***Taking Up Serpents* takes on misperceptions**

Following the sold-out successes of *Approaching Ali* (2013), *An American Soldier* (2014), *Penny* (2015), *Better Gods* (2016), *The Dictator’s Wife* (2017), and *Proving Up* (2018), WNO presents the world premiere of *Taking Up Serpents* by American composer Kamala Sankaram and librettist Jerre Dye on January 11, 2019, at 7:30 p.m. and January 13, 2019, at 2:00 p.m. Dye pulls from his own experiences growing up in the Deep South in *Taking Up Serpents*, which explores themes of faith, family, and the patriarchy through the lens of snake-handling practices in the “Church of Lord Jesus Christ with Signs Foretold.” Sankaram’s distinctive and eclectic compositional style paints a vivid picture of this highly-charged world by adding contemporary instruments—acoustic and electric guitars and drum kit—to the orchestra pit.

“I write opera with the goal of using musical storytelling to create empathy for unfamiliar people and places. *Taking Up Serpents* is operatic as the characters’ faith imbues the world with meaning that is larger than life. To capture this world, I explored musical expressions of numerology and Christian mysticism,” remarks composer Kamala Sankaram. “Each theme, chord, and rhythmic choice reflects a gnostic connection to man, God, or the devil. Through musical mysticism, I hope to provide a window into a culture that is far removed from the typical urban opera audience.”

“My hope is always to tell a fine story that begs to be sung. *Taking Up Serpents* was written to honor the spirit of this ecstatic, religious universe and the extraordinary people who inhabit it,” adds librettist Jerre Dye. “It was also written to lift the veil a little and serve up some modern-day, ecclesiastical redemption, celebrating the spiritual struggle in all of us.”

***Taking Up Serpents*** was the recipient of a Commissioning Grant from OPERA America’s Opera Grants for Female Composers program, and will receive an orchestral workshop with Metro West Opera in Boston from September 28-30, 2018. It is performed in English and conducted by Lidiya Yankovskaya, Music Director of Chicago Opera Theater, making her WNO debut in this production; she conducts a 13-piece chamber orchestra consisting of members of WNO’s Orchestra. Directing the production is Alison Moritz, who returns to WNO after her highly successful staging of last year’s AOI premiere, *Proving Up*. The cast features members of WNO’s Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program.

***Taking Up Serpents***

**Friday, January 11, 2019, at 7:30 p.m.**

**Sunday, January 13, 2019, at 2 p.m.**

**Terrace Theater**

Music by Kamala Sankaram

Libretto by Jerre Dye

**Creative team**

Conductor: Lidiya Yankovskaya \*

Director: Alison Moritz

Costume Designer: Lynly Saunders

Lighting Designer: Andrew Guban

**Cast**

Kayla: Alexandria Shiner ‡  
Nelda: Eliza Bonet ‡  
Daddy: Timothy J. Bruno ‡  
Bus Driver/Holiness Congregation Member: Arnold Livingston Geis ‡  
Queer Kid/Holiness Congregation Member: Marlen Nahhas ‡  
Reba/Passenger/Holiness Congregation Member: Hannah Hagerty ‡

### Synopsis

25-year old Kayla, a Save Mart employee in Gulf Shores, Alabama, is the estranged daughter of a fire-and-brimstone preacher of the “Church of Lord Jesus Christ with Signs Foretold.” When her father is severely bitten during one of his snake-handling services, an unexpected phone call from her mother sends Kayla on a journey home to Birmingham to see him in the hospital, forcing her to confront her troubled upbringing. Once home, Kayla discovers her strength and overcomes her traumatized childhood in a dramatic and shocking conclusion. *Taking Up Serpents* brings themes of faith, family, and abuses of the patriarchy to the stage.

### American life drives new one-act operas

The three original one-act operas presented on January 12, 2019, at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m., showcase different aspects of American life and culture on the stage. Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist alumna Andrea Dorf McGray directs these two semi-staged concert performances, with Steven Osgood conducting a chamber orchestra of WNO Orchestra members. A Q&A session with the creative teams follows the second performance.

The three composer-librettist teams (Boehler/Barati, Joyce/Kennedy, and Benavides/Koch) have been collaborating on their one-act operas with distinguished mentors who have each enjoyed professional success with American operas: composer Jake Heggie (*Dead Man Walking*, *Moby Dick*, *Three Decembers*), librettist Gene Scheer (*An American Tragedy*, *Moby Dick*, *Cold Mountain*), and conductor Steven Osgood (General and Artistic Director of Chautauqua Opera, Artistic Director of American Opera Project’s Composers and the Voice Program).

**AOI 20-Minute Operas**  
**January 12, 2019, at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m.**  
**Terrace Theater**

### 75 Miles

Music by Matt Boehler  
Libretto by Laura Barati

### Synopsis

It’s twenty minutes before dinner in rural Pennsylvania and sixteen-year-old Avery just discovered she’s pregnant—and the nearest women’s health clinic is halfway across the

state. Inspired by true events, *75 Miles* follows a family forced to grapple with their faith, beliefs, and economic limitations in the face of an unexpected pregnancy.

### Cast

Avery: Alexandra Nowakowski ‡\*  
Marianne: Alexandra Christoforakis  
Jason: Joshua Conyers ‡

### Relapse

Music by Molly Joyce  
Libretto by James Kennedy

### Synopsis

Marina wakes up in a hospital room after a serious drug overdose. As she pieces together the details of how she wound up so debilitated by her dependence on the pills, the formidable challenges of overcoming her addiction slowly come into fresh focus. In the chaos of influence from those who want her to make a full recovery and those who would perpetuate her cycle of dependency, Marina has to decide for herself if and how she will move forward.

### Cast

Marina: Amanda Palmeiro \*  
Jessie: Alexandra Nowakowski ‡\*  
Aaron: Alexander McKissick ‡  
Nurse: Samson McCrady ‡\*

### Pepito

Music by Nick Benavides  
Libretto by Marella Koch

### Synopsis

Pepito, a lonely shelter dog, searches for solace in the memories of his old life as another long day draws to a close—but when Camila and David, young married professionals, arrive eager to find the perfect dog for their little family, it seems as though things may finally be looking up. Yet as Camila and Pepito's bond deepens, the cracks in her and David's unfulfilling marriage become more apparent. Are she and David as ready to move forward together as they thought?

### Cast

Camila: Alexandra Nowakowski ‡\*  
Angie: Alexandra Christoforakis  
David: Joshua Blue ‡  
Pepito: Samuel Weiser ‡

\* Washington National Opera Debut

‡ Current member of the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program

‡ Alumnus of the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program

## **TICKET INFORMATION**

Tickets to [\*Taking Up Serpents\*](#) (\$35-\$45) and [\*Three 20-Minute Operas\*](#) (\$19-\$35) are available by visiting the Kennedy Center box office, by calling (202) 467-4600, or through the Kennedy Center [website](#). Groups of 10 or more may contact the Group Sales office at (202) 416-8400.

## **MENTOR BIOS**

[Jake Heggie](#)

[Gene Scheer](#)

[Steven Osgood](#)

## **COMPOSER and LIBRETTIST BIOS**

[Kamala Sankaram](#)

[Jerre Dye](#)

[Matt Boehler](#)

[Laura Barati](#)

[Molly Joyce](#)

[James Kennedy](#)

[Nicolas Lell Benavides](#)

[Marella Martin Koch](#)

## **ABOUT WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA**

Washington National Opera (WNO) is one of the leading opera companies in the United States. Under the leadership of newly appointed General Director Timothy O'Leary and world-renowned Artistic Director Francesca Zambello, the company presents a diverse repertory of grand opera across three main venues of the Kennedy Center. From classic operas to more contemporary pieces each season, WNO's artistic output also includes several commissioned American works and a variety of special concerts, youth operas, and events.

Recent celebrated productions have included the world premiere of Philip Glass's reconceived *Appomattox*, presented in conjunction with cultural events throughout Washington, D.C.; the powerful performances of Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars*; and the massive feat of WNO's first-complete *Ring* cycle, which was helmed by Zambello and played to sold-out houses following international acclaim.

Founded in 1956 and an artistic affiliate of the Kennedy Center since 2011, WNO has a storied legacy of more than 100 new productions, plus world premieres, international tours, live recordings and radio broadcasts, as well as innovative education and community-engagement programs. Throughout its history, WNO has been led by titans in the opera field, including the legendary Plácido Domingo who headed the company for 15 years, as well as luminaries such

as Music Director Emeritus Heinz Fricke, and former Director of Artistic Operations Christina Scheppelmann.

Among the company's most successful programs is the American Opera Initiative (AOI), a commissioning program that develops new one-act works for WNO's annual festival. By mentoring emerging composers and librettists, the Initiative works to expand the American operatic repertory and enhance its relevance to our time. Since its inception, AOI has commissioned 28 chamber opera world premieres, with some going on to future productions around the country.

With a commitment toward youth, WNO contributes to the future of opera through two signature artist-development programs. The Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program, now in its 17th season, is one of the nation's most competitive professional training programs, providing two years of intensive study to a highly selective cadre of young singers and collaborative pianists. Alumni of the program have won major competitions and gone on to successful careers at major opera houses worldwide. The WNO Opera Institute nurtures the ambitions of high-school-age singers from across the nation during an intensive three-week summer program held at American University in Washington.

The most popular of WNO's community-engagement programs is *Opera in the Outfield*<sup>®</sup>, a free Kennedy Center Opera House production broadcast on the high-definition scoreboard at Nationals Park. The company's other education programs include the Kids Create Opera program at local elementary schools, Look-In performances for students in grades 3–8, and the Student Dress Rehearsal Program for middle and high school students. The company also offers free Opera Insights programs before every performance in the Opera House.

Discover [Washington National Opera](#) on social media:



**#AmericanOperaDC**

### **FUNDING CREDITS**

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**David M. Rubenstein** is the Presenting Underwriter of WNO.

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WNO's Presenting Sponsor  
General Dynamics

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**TICKETS & INFORMATION**

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[www.kennedy-center.org/wno](http://www.kennedy-center.org/wno)