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The Kennedy Center's 2016-17 announcement, classical music edition

By Anne Midgette March 8, 2016



Jake Heggie's opera "Dead Man Walking," one of the most popular contemporary operas of recent memory, will come to the Washington National Opera as one of the innovations of the Kennedy Center's 2016-17 season, announced today. Also on the program: Yo-Yo Ma, Renee Fleming, Lang Lang, and Joshua Bell. (Photo: Cade Martin.)

The Kennedy Center is embarked on a new and different trajectory – or so we've been told, since the arrival of Deborah Rutter as president in 2014. So when the season announcements for 2016-17 landed in my inbox, I clicked with some anticipation on the one titled "Kennedy Center names new artistic partners." And there the names were: Q-Tip, Renee Fleming, and Yo-Yo Ma.

Let me be clear: I'm happy to see the Kennedy Center reaching outside its traditional comfort zone. And I'm delighted about Q-Tip and the new hip-hop arm of the center's programming — though Rutter's claim at the press conference that the focus would "bring this art form to DC audiences" seems slightly myopic, given that the art form has a much larger footprint in DC in general than anything the Kennedy Center has to offer.

But it was the Renee Fleming and Yo-Yo Ma part that gave me pause. Two of the most overexposed musicians in the field are coming to DC to extend work they're already doing in Chicago. Yes, I admire what Fleming did here with her American Voices program in 2013; yes, I applaud Ma's enthusiasm and ability to generate excitement in communities, and maybe when he brings his Citizen Musician initiative here (under the rubric of "Citizen Artistry"), I will figure out exactly what it's all about.

"Even when he uses words that he has used before in other settings, it inspires you to think even further," said Rutter at the press conference, after Ma's prepared video. I hope that happens for me; but right now, I have trouble embracing the arrival of either of these artists as a major innovation.

My reaction to this news pretty much summarizes my feelings about the Kennedy Center's classical music offerings for 2016-17. There are a lot of new things, and things that should excite me, but they're mingled with the overly familiar in such a careful balance that they seem less trailblazing than very deliberately cautious. A Joshua Bell residency at the NSO? I rest my case.

Another example is the Washington National Opera. I can only applaud the company for once again offering two works by living composers in a season of only five operas: Jake Heggie's "Dead Man Walking" and "Champion," a jazz opera about boxing composed by Terence Blanchard, who is one of this year's Kennedy Center artists-in-residence. The rest of the season is designed to reassure those of more conservative tastes: "The Marriage of Figaro," "The Daughter of the Regiment," and "Madame Butterfly" in the

beautiful, colorful production by Jun Kaneko, whose “Magic Flute” was seen here in 2014. Amanda Majewski will sing the Countess; Laurence Brownlee is one of the Tonios in “Daughter of the Regiment,” and the dazzling Kate Lindsey will sing Sister Helen in “Dead Man Walking.” So yes, there are things to like.



Laurence Brownlee and Lisette Oropesa will star in “The Daughter of the Regiment” at the Washington National Opera in 2016-17. (Photo: David Bachman.)

But the most innovative, and arguably most exciting, thing on the program is this year’s hour-long entry in the American Opera Initiative, “The Dictator’s Wife,” by the popular young composer Mohammed Fairouz. Fairouz is currently writing mainstage works for the Netherlands Opera (“The New Prince”) and the Pittsburgh Opera (“Bhutto”), and to have a new work by him is a pretty big deal. I wish more of the season had that kind of freshness.

The NSO is bidding farewell to its current music director, welcoming its next one, and celebrating a bygone one with a four-week emphasis on Mstislav Rostropovich, “Slava at 90,” including a tour to Russia. Eschenbach, in his eight weeks in DC, will lead the Mahler 2nd, the Shostakovich 8th, and the Beethoven 9th as a grand finale. Nosedá, in a piece of canny programming, will lead an all-American concert as part of a year-long focus on JFK, including John Williams screenplays as well as Gershwin and Copland — a nice way for the incoming Italian conductor to emphasize his openness to his new American ensemble right from the start.

In general, the NSO offers its usual emphasis on standards with perhaps a few more excursions into less-known territory than in years past. We'll hear Elgar's "Falstaff" for the first time (conducted by Edward Gardner); Weinberg's violin concerto performed by Gidon Kremer; and new works by Mason Bates (for Ma) and Christopher Rouse (an organ concerto for Paul Jacobs), as well as several other pieces by each of those composers. Donald Runnicles will return in a program of Debussy and Duruflé; Jaap van Zweden (the next music director of the New York Philharmonic) will lead the Brahms 2nd symphony; Alice Sara Ott will play the Tchaikovsky piano concert, and Lise de la Salle, the Prokofiev 1st; and Ton Koopman will lead a program of Bach and Handel. And the Declassified series, the alternative Friday-night programming, will forge ahead. So will Lang Lang, who — once again — will be featured on the season-opening gala.

Much of the responsibility for innovation in the classical realm has fallen heavily on the shoulders of Mason Bates, who is playing a more active role in the center's life than most composers-in-residence could dream of. His KC Jukebox series is expanding to five new-music events, ranging from an evening with the vocal ensemble Chanticleer and a new string quartet by John Adams to an evening with the Thievery Corporation, a leading DC-based collective that melds electronica with world music and hip-hop. Also on the program is one of his signature events, Mercury Soul, which mingles classical and techno in a concert-cum-club evening, and which I've been eager to see for a while.

Deprived of its home at the Terrace Theater, which will be under renovation for the entire season, and of its new music programming, which has shifted over to Bates, the Fortas series has gone a little more mainstream: highlights include Joyce DiDonato appearing with the Brentano Quartet; the Takacs Quartet in an all-Beethoven evening; and a night with the Harlem String Quartet and Aldo Lopez-Gavilan, who was raised in Cuba while his brother, Ilmar, the quartet's first violinist, was raised in the States. (The two will perform together for the first time.)

A lot of the season's offerings are being shoehorned into the catchall festival that's the season's overarching theme: a celebration of the centennial of John F. Kennedy's birth. The Kennedy Center has distilled Kennedy's ideals into a few buzzwords, and is applying them to a range of programming that it would have done anyway: all of WNO's contemporary American opera; the Joshua Bell residency; the Shift festival of American orchestras (the reincarnation of "Spring for Music" at Carnegie Hall, announced long ago and finally coming to fruition); the annual Alvin Ailey season, and the list goes on. One of the exceptions is the Serenade Festival, an international choral festival which has been held in DC for several years; this year, it will move (in part) to the Kennedy Center and present choruses from countries where the Peace Corps, a Kennedy initiative, has been active.

My slight sense of disappointment may stem from my own misapprehension of the Kennedy Center's goals. Is the Kennedy Center's role to bring to the nation's capital what is already out there — to curate American art in a series of DC-based shows? Or is it to forge new paths ahead? I think the Kennedy Center wants the answer to be both. I just wish it weren't offering so many things we've already seen before. Its mission statement of 2016-17 seems to me to be, "We want to do new things — but we really, really don't want to scare you away."