



Washington National Opera
The Kennedy Center

Timothy O'Leary
General Director

Francesca Zambello
Artistic Director

PRESS RELEASE

FOR RELEASE:

Thursday, December 15, 2022

Washington National Opera Presents Washington Premiere of
The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson

**Emmy® and Grammy® Award-winning Mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves Stars as
Mary Cardwell Dawson, Founder of the National Negro Opera Company**

**Music by Kennedy Center Composer-in-Residence Carlos Simon and
Text by Playwright Sandra Seaton**

**Terrace Theater
January 20–22, 2023**

**Mary Cardwell Dawson to Posthumously Receive
The Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award,
Jan. 22, 2023**

**The Denyce Graves Foundation and The Kennedy Center to Curate Exhibit Featuring
Photographs and Artifacts from Dawson and the National Negro Opera Company,
On Loan from the Heinz History Center,
Jan. 18–Feb. 1, 2023**

**Library of Congress and American Musicological Society to present
Mary Cardwell Dawson Lecture,
Jan. 19, 2023**

(WASHINGTON)—The **Washington National Opera** presents the Washington premiere of *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson* in the **Terrace Theater, January 20–22, 2023**. The play with music shines a light on the trailblazing founder of the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC) and was created by Kennedy Center Composer-in-Residence and Sphinx Medal of Excellence-winner **Carlos Simon** and Theodore Ward prize-winning playwright **Sandra Seaton**. The two previously collaborated in 2020 at WNO's American Opera Initiative. The play with music was commissioned by WNO Artistic Director Francesca Zambello and premiered in 2020 at the Glimmerglass festival and reprised in a revised form at the festival in 2021.

The story of *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson* takes place in Washington, D.C. in 1943, on a day when Dawson's National Negro Opera Company is set to perform on a floating barge to evade racially-segregated venues. But when bad weather threatens, Dawson must find a new venue that does not enforce segregated

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seating. The play combines Simon's original compositions with selections from NNOC's repertory. The work will star Marian Anderson Vocal Award-winning mezzo-soprano **Denyce Graves**, "an operatic superstar of the 21st century" (*USA Today*) who reprises her "searing performance" (*Classical Voice America*) in the title role. The production is directed by **Kimille Howard**.

Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award, January 22, 2023

Following the evening performance on Sunday, January 22, 2023, Mary Cardwell Dawson will posthumously receive the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award for providing opportunities for gifted African American performers and challenging systemic racism. This award was established in 2003 by executive order by President George W. Bush for individuals who have volunteered more than 4,000 hours of service and is the highest honor in the President's Volunteer Service Award system. It will be presented by Dr. Beverly Kee, Certifying Agent, Premiere Coalition Partners Association. The late Dawson's grandniece, Debra Evans, will accept the award on Dawson's behalf.

The life of Mary Cardwell Dawson had a profound effect on Denyce Graves. The legendary mezzo-soprano's study of Dawson's contributions prompted her to create The Denyce Graves Foundation (DGF). The foundation's educational initiative, *Hidden Voices*, will launch during the Kennedy Center and Library of Congress events. Through *Hidden Voices*, DGF shares the contributions of the many outstanding underrepresented artists whose stories have been left out of the American narrative. Through the production at the Kennedy Center and related events, and the DGF's launch of *Hidden Voices*, WNO and DGF are together revealing a missing part of American history that had been previously overlooked.

Introducing Mary Cardwell Dawson, January 18–February 1, 2023

The Kennedy Center in partnership with the Denyce Graves Foundation will curate an exhibit, *Introducing Mary Cardwell Dawson*, to be installed in the Kennedy Center's Hall of States from January 18–February 1, 2023. The exhibit will include photographs and artifacts from the Dawson estate and on loan from the Heinz History Center, that tell the story of Dawson's life and the National Negro Opera Company. The exhibit is free and open to the public.

Library of Congress and American Musicological Society Lecture, January 19, 2023

To coincide with WNO's performances of *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*, the American Musicological Society and the Music Division of the Library of Congress will present a lecture by DGF board member Dr. Karen Bryan, "Self-Determination on the Operatic Stage: Mary Cardwell Dawson and African American performance in Washington, DC and New York City," on Thursday, January 19, 2023 at 7:00 p.m. in the Montpelier Room at the Library of Congress, located on the 6th floor of the James Madison Building at 101 Independence Ave., Washington D.C. SE. This lecture is part of the AMS / Library of Congress Lecture series, a public lecture program oriented to a mix of professional musicians, musicologists, music lovers, and music educators. There will also be a small exhibit of archival material selected from the Music Division's National Negro Opera Company Collection, including photographs, programs, correspondence, and more. The lecture is free and open to the public.

The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson Production Information

Music by Carlos Simon
Libretto by Sandra Seaton
In English with projected English subtitles

Cast/Creatives

| | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson | Denyce Graves |
| Isabelle | Amber Monroe [^] |
| Phoebe | Taylor-Alexis Dupont [*] |
| Frank | Jonathan Pierce Rhodes ^{^*} |
| Playwright/Librettist for Original Song | Sandra Seaton |
| Composer | Carlos Simon |
| Director | Kimille Howard |
| Music Director/Pianist | Marvin Mills |
| Lighting Designer | A.J. Guban |
| Costume Designer | Jessica Jahn |
| Hair and Make-Up Designer | Anika Seitu |

* *Washington National Opera debut*

[^] *Current CYA*

+ *CYA alum*

The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson Performances

Friday, January 20, 2023 at 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, January 22, 2023 at 2:00 p.m.

Sunday, January 22, 2023 at 5:00 p.m.

Running time: 70 minutes

Visit WNO's [website](#) for complete production details and casting information.

FUNDING CREDITS

The Presenting Sponsor of WNO is General Dynamics.

The Official Airline of the WNO Season is American Airlines.

Major support provided by Jacqueline Badger Mars and Mrs. Eugene B. Casey.

The Cafritz Foundation and the Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation are sponsors of the *Introducing Mary Cardwell Dawson* exhibit and events celebrating DGF's launch of *Hidden Voices*.

TICKET INFORMATION

Tickets may be purchased online at [kennedy-center.org](https://www.kennedy-center.org), in-person at the Kennedy Center Box Office, or by calling (202) 467-4600.

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