

## The History of the Washington National Opera Women's Committee

The Women's Committee of the Washington National Opera (WNO) is the oldest and most prominent WNO support group.

Established originally in 1975 to raise funds with an elegant Opera Ball, the Committee proceeded to organize and manage not only the hugely successful Opera Ball, but later created the glamorous, annual "Mid-Winter Galas" at the Mellon Auditorium. These soon became "One of the Top 10 Social Events in Washington", attracting hundreds of potential new operagoers, plus individual and corporate sponsors.

Currently, the focus of the Women's Committee is on raising additional funds for the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program with annual "Special Events" (such as an "Evening at the Supreme Court" and a "Botanical Gardens Concert"), on community outreach projects, and building the next generation of the Committee with enthusiastic opera attendees. Monthly meetings in member's private homes feature distinguished guest speakers, Young Artist performances, and educational programs about operas and composers.

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The Women's Committee was established during the Opera Company's 1975-76 season when it was still known as the Opera Society of Washington, under the direction of the great baritone and General Manager George London. The Society's Board of Trustees decided that the time had come to establish support groups and inject a new vitality to enable its own members to focus exclusively on fundraising and managing company activities. So the Women's Committee was born.

Behind this effort was Board member Louise Cox who proposed joining forces with two young women, Sally Davidson and Chris Hunter, to create a Women's Committee. The idea was to replace the Opera Society's Women's Board, which had run the Opera Ball for years. So for the next 25 years (1975-2000) the new Women's Committee focused on making the Opera Ball one of Washington's premiere social events. One critic called it "magical theatre in Embassy settings." Committee members planned, raised money for, worked on, and attended these "dramatic, star-filled", lucrative balls, making them an important component in the company's annual budget.

In addition, the Women's Committee sponsored a parade of smaller events including four ambitious successful auctions, luncheons, opening night parties, cast parties, and fashion shows. (Placido Domingo once donated his Rolls Royce, and Constance Mellon donated 94 items including valuable antiques, and jewelry to the lavish auctions.) Always the goal was to raise funds for the Opera Company and to bring together opera fans and supporters for fun and glamorous supporting events.

In the year 2000, the Opera company's budget and its expensive productions ballooned to where more than the Women's Committee's efforts were needed. At this point, the responsibilities for the Opera Ball reverted back to a new Board of Trustees. The Ball became chaired by various donors and was managed by professional fundraisers.

Beginning a new chapter, the Women's Committee launched a highly successful event, its Mid-Winter Gala, always in February. It was quickly well received within the Washington, D.C. social and diplomatic communities. Each Gala, affiliated with an Embassy, featured a lavish auction and promoted international themes: "Imperial City of Fez" (Morocco), "The Ancient City of Edo" (Japan), "Stockholm, City of Northern Light" (Sweden), "The Taj Mahal by Moonlight" (India). Other Midwinters showcased Brazil with "Carnival, A Rio Revelry" and "Thessaloniki: Jewel of Ages" (Greece). Partygoers often dressed in costume and many Ambassadors and political figures attended with their families. Designer Jack Lucky created original themed settings and sumptuous flower arrangements for each gala. Always at the elegant Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium, they became top social events with as many as 500 guests in attendance.

During this 11-year span, the Women's Committee also staged after-opera Cast Parties at the Kennedy Center, educational evenings with Saul Lilienstein, wine-tasting parties, a "Tea and Tribute to opera singer Marta Domingo" at the Mexican Embassy, annual holiday parties in December, a fashion show at the Indian Embassy, and many more highlighted events.

In the year 2011, the Washington National Opera became affiliated with the Kennedy Center, as did the Women's Committee. Originally working with the Kennedy Center's Development Department, the Women's Committee is now under the wing of WNO's Executive Director, Michael Mael, and his staff.

With this change in affiliation, the Women's Committee added the purchase of full-season opera subscriptions (and often Circle memberships) to its support of WNO. They continued payment of annual membership dues, attending monthly meetings, contributing financially to the Young Artists program, and creating their own annual special event.

For devoted opera fans, which make up the core of today's Women's Committee, the new association with the Young Artists and the Opera company is a tremendous reward. And the potential for introducing new opera lovers to the WNO is now more appealing than ever.