

WASHINGTON CONCERT OPERA

Washington Concert Opera Mourns the Passing of WCO Founder Stephen Crout



Former opera and ballet conductor Stephen Crout, who founded Washington Concert Opera in 1986 and served as Music Director of The Washington Ballet from 1989-2001, died on November 23 at Washington Hospital Center in Washington, DC. He was 77.

A native of Elmira, New York, he was the younger of two sons of Dorothy Frank Bly and Walter Bly, taking the surname “Crout” upon his mother’s second marriage to Norman Crout and the latter’s adoption of Stephen and his older brother Glenn. Upon his completion of a bachelor’s degree as a piano performance major at Ithaca College in 1966, he was drafted into the U.S. Navy to serve in the Vietnam War. Following the war, he joined the New York-based chorus The Gregg Smith Singers as both accompanist and a member of its tenor section, touring the U.S. and Europe and recording music from Gesualdo to Stravinsky for the Columbia and Vox labels.

Work as a studio pianist and rehearsal accompanist for some of New York’s smaller opera companies led to an invitation to join the music staff at Washington National Opera in the autumn of 1980. He remained with the company through the 1984-1985 season, eventually becoming chorus master and chief of music staff.

In the spring of 1986, Crout had lunch in Washington with a friend from his WNO years who was singing the title character in Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* with the National Symphony—the late tenor Jerry Hadley, by then very popular with DC audiences. He asked the singer to take a chance on opening Crout’s new opera company, founded to present rarely-performed works in concert form. Hadley agreed, and Washington Concert Opera opened its doors on May 3, 1987, with Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* starring Hadley, soprano Hei-Kyung Hong and baritone Gordon Hawkins at GWU’s Lisner Auditorium. During Crout’s tenure as general and artistic director, which ended with his move to Colorado in 2001, WCO highlights included the Washington debuts of soprano Renée Fleming (her first performance of the title role in Massenet’s *Thaïs*, followed by a 1993 return in another signature role, Dvořák’s *Rusalka*) and Deborah Voigt (Weber’s *Der Freischütz*, 1992), mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves (Delibes’ *Lakmé*, 1989, with returns in Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* in 1992 and Saint-Saëns *Samson et Dalila* in 1995) and Canadian tenor Ben Heppner (Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier*, 1994). Washington Concert Opera, now celebrating its 35th season, also saw the first local professional performances under Crout’s leadership of Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell*, Donizetti’s *Linda di Chamounix* and Verdi’s *I vespri siciliani*.

As Music Director of The Washington Ballet from 1989 – 2001, Crout not only conducted over 200 performances of *The Nutcracker* at GWU Lisner Auditorium and the Warner Theater but also Orff’s *Carmina Burana* in the Kennedy Center Opera House. In 1989 and 1990, he conducted performances of Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors* staged by the composer at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater and GWU Lisner Auditorium, respectively.

As a guest conductor, he appeared at The Virginia Opera, Wolf Trap Opera Company, Opera Memphis, Lyric Opera Cleveland, Colorado Ballet, and Central City Opera, and he served as artistic director of Charlottesville’s Ash Lawn-Highland Festival from 1991-1993.

He is survived by his husband of 10 years and partner of 40, Peter Russell of Washington, D.C., sister-in-law and brother-in-law Joann Desy and Matthew Desy of South Windsor, CT, and sister-in-law and brother-in-law Susan Russell and William Thompson of Easton, MD. He was predeceased by his brother Glenn. His first marriage ended in divorce.

Donations in his memory can be made to Vocal Arts DC, Washington Concert Opera, and Urban Arias. No funeral service is planned.



Washington Concert Opera

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