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SERVING NORTHWEST ARKANSAS AND THE RIVER VALLEY

Celebrating U.S. sound



World premiere, powerhouse soloist highlights of Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra's American Essence concert
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World premiere, powerhouse soloist highlights of Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra's American Essence concert



The American Essence concert with Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra opens with a world premiere of "Arethusa" by composer Heather Neimi Savage at 7 p.m. Feb. 7 at Thaden School Performing Arts Center in Bentonville.
(Courtesy Photo/Claire Marchand)

MONICA HOOPER

NWA Democrat-Gazette

The Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra opens 2026 with a celebration of American composers. For Maestro Steven Byess the concert checks all the boxes of the symphony's mission to highlight under-heard pieces and uplift new classical music in an approachable way.

"One of my peeves for orchestras in the 21st century is that you can go to multiple programs, and truly, you could be looking at a program from the 1920s the 1820s or even the 1720s, without a sense of connecting the music to the times of today," Byess exclaims. "I think it's absolutely essential that orchestras reflect the 21st century culture."

Highlighting American composers — especially those who need more representation in classical programming — lends him an abundant source of material, like the opening piece "Arethusa" by composer Heather Niemi Savage, who will hear her award-winning piece in person for the first time during the Feb. 7 concert.

"Of course, I can hear the piece in full when I listen to the completed recording. But it is still different hearing a piece live," she says.

One of the key differences for her when hearing recorded music is the absence of vibrations she says.

"When you are in a room with the orchestra, there are more sources of vibration: all the instruments individually, plus the energy of the conductor, the audience and even the space. But when you're listening to a recording, there are fewer sources of vibration, only the one track from the speaker, and you might be the only one listening. Plus, your home space is 'ordinary' to you, so the effect is not the same."

First conceived in 2015, the five-minute movement is named for Arethusa Falls, the tallest accessible single-drop waterfall in the White

Mountains of New Hampshire. A recording of "Arethusa" by the Budapest Art Orchestra, won second place in the Reno Pops Orchestra 2024 Composers Showcase, but she wasn't present when the work was recorded, though she got up at 3 in the morning to communicate with the sound engineer while it was being recorded.

Savage's work is infused by her background in classical, jazz, musical theater and sacred music. Her award-winning work has been performed throughout the U.S. including Carnegie Hall.

When researching the myth of Arethusa, a river nymph transformed into a spring by Artemis as she tried to flee the river god Alpheus, Savage related her own story of trauma to Arethusa. Later while writing a paper for a musicology class at Appalachian State University, long after "Arethusa" was finished, she discovered both conscious and unconscious implications in the music.

"While researching, I was able to see how the choices I made flew in the face of traditional forms. I flipped things on their head by starting out with a softer, more 'feminine' theme played by the strings and woodwinds which is disrupted by a more masculine theme played by the brass," she says, which was completely subconscious.

"In the music, Arethusa is not a victim. She is the hero. At the end of the piece, when all the instruments are playing the theme together, she is whole and completely integrated," she realized. "I now see Arethusa as a 'fight back' of sorts, saying that the heroic in music does not belong just to men, that trauma can be overcome, that those who experience trauma cannot simply endure, but can become whole and even bring renewal. Arethusa became a life-giving spring, and music springs out of me."

She says she hopes the piece and the paper help change the conception of what a hero is.

"Some may dismiss the claim that there are still gendered ideas about

FAQ

Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra: American Essence

WHAT — The Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra presents American Essence featuring a world premiere of Heather Niemi Savage's "Arethusa" and George Walker's "Lyric for Strings," the first movement of Symphony No. 1 in E Minor by Florence Price and George Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F major with pianist Artina McCain.

WHEN — 7 p.m. Feb. 7

WHERE — Thaden School Performing Arts Center, 805 S. Main St., Bentonville

TICKETS — \$50 adults, pay-what-you-can for 18 years and younger; free for Ovations+ members

INFO — aphil.org



Artina McCain performs George Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F major with the Arkansas Philharmonic at a 7 p.m. Feb. 7 performance at Thaden Performing Arts School in Bentonville. (Courtesy Photo/YNOT Photography)

music, saying that they were gone long ago," she says. "But as we see in politics nowadays with some people publicly calling to end the right of women to vote, we know that the desire to keep women in limited spaces festers under the surface. The strides women have made are fragile. It's a very timely piece."

The world premiere of "Arethusa" is followed by George Walker's "Lyric for Strings," famously dedicated to the composer's grandmother, a former slave who died just before the work's completion. It's one of the Walker's most performed pieces.

"It's an absolutely sublime, gorgeous piece just for the strings in the orchestra," says Byess. The first movement of Florence Price's Symphony No. 1 in E Minor brings back the full orchestra to highlight a composer with roots in the Natural State. Originally from Little Rock, Price was the first female composer and first composer of color to have music performed by a major symphony orchestra.

"Here's an Arkansas composer who was forced to move to Chicago to be able to find a way to have her music performed, and it's just very important

that her music is heard, because it's equal to almost everything else (which) was being written in the early 20th century."

A fellow champion of under-heard composers, pianist Artina McCain joins the symphony to conclude their first concert of 2026 with George Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F major.

"The concerto is so accessible and listenable," Byess says explaining the use of a Charleston rhythm in the first movement, the ode to French composers in the second movement and the "crazy party of rhythms" in the last movement.

"The language is so native to the country, and so there's so much improvisation," says soloist McCain. "I can't wait to play it with the Arkansas Philharmonic."

Byess has previously worked with McCain and lauds her talents at the keys and in the classroom.

"It's difficult to choose which superlative to use to describe her," says Byess. "She is a wonderfully, amazingly talented piano virtuoso. She's a great teacher and pedagogue, but she's a tremendous advocate for music that is deserving to be heard and performed, presented, studied, and especially pieces

that people have never met before that really deserve to be in the standard repertoire."

Her recital credits include prestigious venues such as Wigmore Hall, Barbican Centre, Walt Disney Concert Hall and Carnegie Hall. Her story of overcoming a performance injury to achieve a thriving career was in the PBS documentary "Roadtrip Nation" and on the BBC podcast Sideways.

The Dallas Texas-born performer, now a professor of piano at the University of Memphis in Tennessee, will offer masterclasses to students in the University of Arkansas' music department when she comes to Northwest Arkansas for the concert.

"As a professional, I can really add to the value of a student experience when I get to go to institutions and speak to them, either one on one or in a class setting."

Tickets for APO's American Essence concert are \$50 for adults, pay-what-you-can for attendees 18 years and younger and free for Ovations+ members. Information at aphil.org.

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ON THE COVER

The Arkansas Philharmonic Orchestra presents American Essence featuring a world premiere of Heather Niemi Savage's "Arethusa" and George Walker's "Lyric for Strings," the first movement of "Symphony No. 1 in E Minor" by Florence Price and George Gershwin's "Piano Concerto in F major" with acclaimed pianist Artina McCain.

(COURTESY PHOTO/ARKANSAS PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA)