

“Opera & Democracy: Transatlantic Conversations & Concerts” – The Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles launches a music and discussion series on the democratic potential of opera – starting January 20, 2024

In the centenary year of the iconic Kroll Opera in Berlin and at a time when Western democracies are facing increasing challenges, the new music and discussion series “Opera and Democracy” is dedicated to the political mandate of art and discusses the role of musical theater on both sides of the Atlantic. The Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles, the former residence of the Mann family in American exile and today an important German American cultural forum, is cooperating with renowned opera houses in Germany and partners in the USA to bring together international academics and artists for an exciting dialogue about opera and democracy, past and present. The series commences on January 20, 2024, at the Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles, featuring, among others, Alex Ross, Kira Thurman, Daniela Smolov Levy, Kai Hinrich Müller, and Michael Steinberg. The program includes piano operas and compositions by composers such as Kurt Weill and Lily Reiff, Edmond Dédé and other composers, which will be performed by the Kaleidoscope Chamber Ensemble with Jan Vogler as the guest of honor. The German debut of the series is scheduled for March 3, 2024, at the Bayerische Staatsoper in München with general music director Vladimir Jurowski. Further stations currently planned include Hamburg (Hamburgische Staatsoper), Dresden (Dresdner Musikfestspiele), Berlin (Bauhaus-Archiv / Museum für Gestaltung, Berlin) and New York (1014 - space for ideas, Goethe-Institut, Leo Baeck Institute and Austrian Cultural Forum).

Panel discussions will consider the commitment of opera professionals to democratic societies, and deal with the central significance of artistic freedom for democracy. They will also highlight the darker aspects of this history, such as the persecution and silencing of opera professionals, performance bans, and works created in exile. Finally, they will also cover opera industry perspectives on diversity, participation, and democratization, and discuss the institutional responsibility of opera houses to amplify the voices of those historically silenced. Concert performances of operas by pianists will feature lesser-known or rediscovered works, many of them related to the exile narrative encompassing the USA and Germany. Insights from this transatlantic event series will culminate in a musicological book publication. “If we’re talking about the political mandate of the arts, we also need to talk about opera, an art form with significant political influence and reach. Thomas Mann notably did so at the ‘Das freie Wort’ congress in February 1933 at Berlin’s Kroll Opera – the very building that, following the Reichstag fire, became the seat of the German parliament and a symbol of fascism. The last major intellectual protest in Germany took place in the leading opera house of its time, which for years had been a beacon of a more open, accessible, and contemporary form of opera. We are proud to explore this topic, which held personal significance for Thomas Mann, together with our new Fellow Kai Hinrich Müller,” said Dr. Markus Klimmer, chairman of Villa Aurora and Thomas Mann House e.V.

100 Years of the Kroll Opera

This series commemorates the centennial of Berlin's Kroll Opera, a cultural institution emblematic of the fusion of politics and art. Founded in the 19th century, it underwent a rebirth in 1924, initially as an offshoot of the Berlin State Opera, then as an independent entity under Otto Klemperer (1927–31). Recognized as a haven for the avant-garde and the “intersection of social and artistic interests” (Thomas Mann), it was regarded as a theater of the living present. With its basic social democratic orientation in correspondence with the democratic achievements of the Weimar Republic, it was a thorn in the side of reactionary movements and was closed after heated debates. Shortly afterwards, the Nazis came to power. After the Reichstag fire, “the Kroll”, which today is an important place for the history of democracy and culture, served as the seat of the last parliament – it was there that the Weimar Republic came to an end in 1933. Many Kroll Opera artists, including Otto Klemperer, were persecuted and forced into exile, with Klemperer eventually moving to the USA and becoming the music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. This historical context sets the stage for the series.

Fellow Kai Hinrich Müller

The series is directed by Dr. Kai Hinrich Müller, a 2023 Thomas Mann Fellow, who is also responsible for its overall design. Müller is the first musicology fellow at the Thomas Mann House, and his research encompasses Richard Wagner and his legacy, the manifestations of antisemitism in music history, the musical life of the interwar and Nazi periods, and transatlantic opera history, with a particular emphasis on the American exile experience. He teaches at the Cologne University of Music and Dance, directs projects both in Germany and abroad, and serves as the academic and artistic director of the Terezín Music Academy in the former Theresienstadt ghetto and of the Bauhaus Music Weekend.

Thomas Mann House, Los Angeles

During his exile in California, Thomas Mann in 1942 built a house in Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles, which for the next ten years was to become a place for artistic creation and for scientific, artistic, and intellectual dialogue. Since 2016, the house has been owned by the German Federal Foreign Office. The Thomas Mann House in Los Angeles sees itself as a vibrant place for transatlantic debate, where outstanding individuals and thought leaders work on fundamental political, social, and cultural issues of the present and future in dialogue with each other and with the host country, the United States of America. Committed to Thomas Mann's legacy, the interdisciplinary program reflects his extensive engagement, both in his literary works and through his lectures and essays, with the roots of fascism, democratic renewal, freedom, migration, and exile. Continuing this socio-political legacy,

the fellowship program of the Thomas Mann House engages with contemporary challenges by fostering dialogue among German and American experts representing diverse fields, traditions, and political backgrounds. The 2023 annual theme was "The Political Mandate of the Arts," while the 2024 residency program will focus on "Democracy and Vulnerability."

Further information on the Thomas Mann-Fellows 2023:

<https://www.vatmh.org/en/newsreader-en/thomas-mann-fellows-2023-2.html>

Further information on the Thomas Mann-Fellows 2024:

<https://www.vatmh.org/en/newsreader-en/selection-of-the-thomas-mann-fellows-2024-en.html>



Further information on the "Opera & Democracy" series

<https://www.vatmh.org/en/opera-democracy.html>

Further information on the programme of events

<https://www.vatmh.org/en/eventreader/opera-and-democracy-los-angeles.html>

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