

Ongoing fiasco at the “Kennedy-Trump” center: Musicians, dance companies and others reject effort to associate the US president with the arts

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In its own way, the fiasco produced by the addition of “Donald Trump” to the name of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. reflects the isolation of the American oligarchy as well as its social and political self-delusion. In one arena, where revulsion against the current administration is not blunted by the Democratic Party and its direct or indirect operatives, the results are already in: honest artists are appalled at the thought of appearing at a venue with “Trump” stamped on it. They are carrying out their own version of a “general strike.”

Earlier this month, the Washington National Opera (WNO) announced its decision to move its offices and productions out of the Kennedy Center, its base of operations since 1971. The *New York Times*’ Peter Baker, on social media, asserted that the opera company’s decision was “perhaps the most significant artistic rebuke yet to Trump’s campaign to remake the facility in his image and attach his name to it.”

In an email statement, reports NPR, the WNO indicated “the decision came in response to new policies which the 70-year-old performing arts group said strain its financial model. NPR continued that the opera company

stressed the “amicability” of its decision to end its longtime residency at the Kennedy Center. But it said the center’s new business model, which requires productions to be fully-funded in advance, is incompatible with the usual mix of ticket sales, grants and donations that cannot all be secured ahead. “Opera companies typically cover only 30-60% of costs through ticket sales, with the remainder from grants and donations that cannot be secured years ahead when productions must be planned,” the statement said.

Trump’s frontman at the Kennedy Center, former director of national intelligence Richard Grenell, asserted that the split came about on the center’s initiative. There is no reason to give this latest self-serving and desperate claim the slightest credibility.

As *Variety* pointed out, Grenell first publicly proposed a “breakup” of the long-standing relationship in mid-November, “the same month that [WNO artistic director Francesca] Zambello did [a *Guardian*] interview openly discussing the marked drop in ticket sales.”

In that interview, Zambello spoke of “shattered” donor confidence. She told the *Guardian*,

“They say things like: ‘I’m never setting foot in there until the ‘orange menace’ is gone.’ Or: ‘Don’t you know history? Don’t you know what Hitler did? I refuse to give you a penny,’” she said. “People send me back their season brochure shredded in an envelope and say: ‘Never, never, will I return while he’s in power.’”

Singer-songwriter Sonia De Los Santos announced recently she was canceling February concerts at the center. De Los Santos, born in Monterrey, Mexico, has been nominated for a Latin Grammy and praised by *Billboard* as “one of the Latin Children’s music artists you should know” and for creating “Best Latin Children’s Music.”

She wrote on Instagram that it had “long been a dream” of hers to perform at the Kennedy Center, but “after much reflection,” she had made the “personal decision” to cancel her shows.

As an artist, I treasure the freedom to create and share my music, and for many years I have used this privilege to uplift the stories of immigrants in this country. Unfortunately, I do not feel that the current climate at this beloved venue represents a welcoming space for myself, my band, or our audience. ... We are living in extraordinarily challenging times that call for courage and for standing firmly in who we are.

A center representative responded to De Los Santos' withdrawal in the typically rude, bullying manner of the Trump lackeys.

Renowned banjo player Béla Fleck pulled out of an upcoming appearance at the Kennedy-Trump center on January 6. Fleck is something of a legendary figure, with 18 Grammys and 43 nominations. In 2020, he was inducted into the International Bluegrass Hall of Fame. Fleck was scheduled to play three performances at the center in February with the National Symphony Orchestra.

On social media, Fleck (born in New York City in 1958 and named after Béla Bartók) explained

I have withdrawn from my upcoming performance with the NSO at The Kennedy Center. Performing there has become charged and political, at an institution where the focus should be on the music.

I look forward to playing with the NSO another time in the future when we can together share and celebrate art.

Grenell angrily denounced Fleck in his latest unhinged social media post:

You just made it political and caved to the woke mob who wants you to perform for only Lefties. This mob pressuring you will never be happy until you only play for Democrats. The Trump Kennedy Center believes all people are welcome—Democrats and Republicans and people uninterested in politics. We want performers who aren't—who simply love entertaining everyone regardless of who they voted for.

The claim that the new Kennedy-Trump Center transcends partisan politics, presumably through the figure of the Führer Trump, and stands for something unifying, “national” and even “holy,” is suggested in the sinister, semi-mystical statement to be found currently on the center’s website.

It reads:

A Sacred Continuation of Purpose

Beginning January 2026, TrumpKennedyCenter.org enters a new era of devotion, unity, and inherited authority.

?We exist to preserve what must endure, to honor what must not be questioned, and to gather those who understand that greatness is not chosen, it is recognized.

?Here, tradition is not remembered. It is maintained.

?Ceremonies, recognitions, and sanctioned appearances will be revealed in due time.

Participation is not required, but belonging is expected.

“Devotion, unity, and inherited authority,” “to honor what must

not be questioned,” “greatness is not chosen, it is recognized,” “tradition is not remembered. It is maintained”? Who speaks like this? There is no precedent for it within the confines of official bourgeois politics or culture in the US. It has a Nazi-like flavor.

One of the recent cancellations with the most historic resonance was that of the Martha Graham Dance Company, which announced its withdrawal from spring 2026 programming at the Kennedy-Trump Center on January 16. It offered a brief explanation for its decision.

“The Martha Graham Dance Company regrets that, for a variety of reasons, we are unable to perform at the Kennedy Center in April,” the company wrote in a statement to NPR. “We hope to perform at the center in the future.”

The oldest dance company in the US was scheduled to appear at the Washington venue for two days in April as part of its national tour to celebrate its centennial. Founder Martha Graham was a 1979 Kennedy Center Honoree recognized as the “mother of modern dance.”

Dancer, choreographer and teacher Martha Graham (1894-1991) is an immense name in dance and music not only in the US but worldwide. She is associated with “reshaping” the dance world and her methods, the “Graham technique,” continue to be taught.

In the 1930s, influenced by the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler and the Spanish Civil War, Graham turned her attention to these tumultuous events and registered her response in dance form in a number of pieces. Several members of her company, including Marjorie Mazia (Woody Guthrie’s second wife), Anna Sokolow, Sophie Maslow and Jane Dudley, were associated at one time or another with left-wing politics.

In 1936, the Nazi regime invited Graham to represent the US in the Art Competitions scheduled to be part of the Olympic Games in Berlin.

Graham rejected the invitation:

I would find it impossible to dance in Germany at the present time. So many artists whom I respect and admire have been persecuted, have been deprived of the right to work for ridiculous and unsatisfactory reasons, that I should consider it impossible to identify myself, by accepting the invitation, with the regime that has made such things possible. In addition, some of my concert group would not be welcomed in Germany.

The decision by many artists to repudiate any connection with the fascistic Trump administration or its “performing arts” wing in our day stands in this principled tradition.



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