

New Hop-Commissioned Opera by Jim Jarmusch and Phil Kline Examines Life and Times of Inventor and Cult Figure

HANOVER, NH—As part of its 50th Anniversary season, Dartmouth’s Hopkins Center for the Arts has co-commissioned a new opera by film auteur **Jim Jarmusch** and the innovative composer [Phil Kline](#). (See below for **Hop interview with Kline** about Tesla project.)



On April 5 and 6, the Hop will preview an in-progress, concert presentation of [Tesla in New York](#), which examines the life of Nikola Tesla, one of history’s most iconic and enigmatic scientists. This in-progress, concert version of the work features the versatile new-music instrumentalists the [American Contemporary Music Ensemble, or ACME](#) (called by *The New York Times* “vital,” “brilliant,” and “electrifying”); six guest vocalists including, in the lead role, Grammy-nominated British countertenor [Ryland Angel](#) (whose voice *Opera News* called “angelic . . . clothed in a truly unique charm”); and elements of the eventual visual design by the theater collective [Phantom Limb](#), whose Hop-commissioned *69°S*. premiered here in 2011. The production will also include a small ensemble of Dartmouth student singers.

The presentation at Dartmouth will follow a weeklong campus residency by the creative team, during which they will develop the performance in the Hop’s facilities. The residency significantly involves Dartmouth’s Thayer School of Engineering, which is holding a “[Tesla TechFair](#)”

on Thursday, April 4. The event is free and open to the public. In addition, on Friday, April 5, at 7 pm, Associate Professor of History Leslie Butler offers a free talk on Tesla’s times and milieu, titled “[Ambition and Invention in the Gilded Age.](#)”

Slated for completion in late 2013 or early 2014, *Tesla in New York* advances the Hopkins Center’s 50-year tradition of commissioning new work from the world’s leading artists, and is among numerous Hop projects supported by a \$575,000 grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Widely considered the progenitor of modern electrical engineering, Nikola Tesla (1856–1943) was one of the most influential inventors of the 19th and 20th centuries, a mysterious genius who revolutionized the study of electromagnetism before descending into poverty and madness in a pigeon-filled room in the Hotel New Yorker. *Tesla in New York* will employ a non-chronological structure, encompassing flashbacks to Tesla’s early life in Croatia, his ill-fated collaborations with Thomas Edison, and other biographical highlights. Expected, in

its completed form, to incorporate photography, film and video in addition to live musical performance, *Tesla in New York* marks the first theatrical collaboration for Jim Jarmusch, an acclaimed director best known for such award-winning independent films as *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Broken Flowers*.

The Hop's preview presentation of *Tesla in New York* will offer audiences a first look at the work in progress, which will include a musical score and early visual designs. In the week leading up to the performance, Phil Kline, the musicians, and the artists of Phantom Limb Company will engage with the campus and community through a weeklong residency program that will include class visits, public workshops, and a collaborative research project with graduate students at Dartmouth's Thayer School of Engineering. The artists will also have complete access to the Hop's theatrical facilities as part of their residency, enabling them to develop and refine the performance.

An icon of American independent cinema, Jim Jarmusch first came to prominence with his 1984 breakout feature *Stranger Than Paradise*, which received the prestigious *Camera D'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival and is regarded as an early landmark of the independent film movement. Jarmusch's films are renowned for their distinctly idiosyncratic style, a sensibility that can be seen in works as diverse as the Memphis-set ensemble comedy *Mystery Train*; the Neil Young concert documentary *Year of the Horse*; and the revisionist neo-Western *Dead Man*, starring Johnny Depp. Jarmusch is currently in post-production on *Only Lovers Left Alive*, a vampire romance starring Tilda Swinton and John Hurt. Jarmusch has long been fascinated by Tesla and included a Tesla Coil in a scene in his 2003 film [Coffee and Cigarettes](#).

Phil Kline is known for compositions across many genres and contexts, from experimental electronics and sound installations to song cycles and choral, theater, chamber and orchestral music. He first gained wide renown with his Christmas piece *Unsilent Night*, which debuted in the streets of Greenwich Village in 1992 and is now performed annually in dozens of cities around the world. Other compositions include *Zippo Songs* (a song cycle based on poems Vietnam vets inscribed on their Zippo lighters that was recently an acclaimed offering of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's 30th Next Wave Festival), and commissions for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the La Jolla Symphony Orchestra, the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble and the gigantic Kotschmar Organ of Portland, Maine. Kline made a splash this past fall with a much lauded run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music of a program featuring ACME and vocalist Theo Bleckmann performing *Zippo Songs* and a new song cycle, *Out Cold*.

The Hopkins Center's commissioning support for *Tesla in New York* marks the latest installment of the Hop's robust commissioning program, which extends back to the institution's founding and has become a national model for the growing role of collegiate arts centers in supporting the development of new work from acclaimed artists. The co-commission is supported by a grant from the Mellon Foundation, which has enabled the Hop to continue advancing new models of engagement for the next generation of classical music audiences. Given in recognition of the Hop's leadership as one of the nation's premier university arts presenters, the Mellon grant is also supporting several other highlights of the Hop's 50th Anniversary season—including performances by (and commissions for) Brooklyn Rider, Gabriel Kahane, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and others—as well as a national multi-campus research project on student engagement with classical music resulting in a symposium that will take place on the Dartmouth campus in June 2013.

Other artists involved in the Hop presentation of *Tesla in New York* include singers [James Harrington](#), [Rosalie Sullivan](#) and [Brandon Snook](#).

Founded in 1962, the Hopkins Center for the Arts is a multi-disciplinary academic, visual and performing arts center dedicated to uncovering insights, igniting passions, and nurturing talents to help the Dartmouth

community engage imaginatively and contribute creatively to our world. Each year the Hop presents more than 300 live events and films by visiting artists as well as Dartmouth students and the Dartmouth community, and reaches more than 22,000 Upper Valley residents and students with outreach and arts education programs. During the 2012-13 season, the Hop celebrates its 50th anniversary with heightened programming that emphasizes the Hop's missions of mentoring young artists, supporting the development of new work, and providing a laboratory for participation and experimentation in the arts. The Hop's 50th celebration is one of the major elements in Dartmouth's designation of 2012-13 as the college's Year of the Arts.

[Download high-resolution photos and Word version of press release](#)

* * *

CALENDAR LISTINGS:

Tesla in New York, featuring the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME)

An in-progress concert presentation of a new opera about scientist and cult-figure Nikola Tesla by innovative composer Phil Kline, film auteur Jim Jarmusch (*Down By Law, Stranger Than Paradise*) and Phantom Limb, whose Hop-commissioned *69°S*. premiered here in 2011. Tesla (1856–1943) invented modern electrical distribution and the radio, yet died poor and mentally unstable, with a trove of unpublished inventions he believed would save the world. These “workshop” performances offer the first glimpse of Kline's score—performed by noted vocal soloists and instrumentalists—and elements of the visual design by Phantom Limb.

Friday & Saturday, April 5 & 6, 8 pm

The Moore Theater, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hanover NH

Tickets \$25; Dartmouth students \$10; 18 & under \$13

Information: Hopkins Center Box Office, 603.646.2422 or hop.dartmouth.edu

Tesla TechFair

Discover the mark Nikola Tesla's inventions have left on modern society. Panel discussion with Thayer Associate Professor of Engineering Charles Sullivan; David Perreault, MIT Department of Electrical Engineering; and Bernard Carlson, UVA Department of History, author of *Tesla: Inventor of the Electrical Age*. Reception and student demonstrations of Tesla technology to follow. Cosponsored by Thayer School of Engineering and supported by the Office of the President and the Office of the Provost as part of Dartmouth's Year of the Arts initiative.

Thursday, April 4, 4 pm

Spanos Auditorium, Great Hall, Thayer School, Dartmouth College, Hanover NH

Free

Information: Hopkins Center Outreach, 603.646.2010

Pre-Show Talk: Ambition and Invention in the Gilded Age

Welcome to turn-of-the-century New York City—a town of immigrants and entrepreneurs, artists and inventors, reformers and robber barons. Associate Professor of History Leslie Butler introduces the cultural world behind Kline and Jarmusch's opera.

Friday, April 5, 7 pm

Room 219, Wilson Hall, Dartmouth College, Hanover NH

Free

Information: Hopkins Center Outreach, 603.646.2010

Interview with Phil Kline, composer

By Rebecca Bailey, Hopkins Center

March 2013

It's hard enough to make a new work of literature, music, theater or visual arts succeed. Try doing all four at once.

Such is the plate-spinning involved in that most precarious of performing arts, opera. Text, music, acting, staging and visual design all must dove-tail to tell a convincing and compelling story.

The Hop presentation of *Tesla in New York* on Friday and Saturday, April 5 and 6, in The Moore Theater, offers an in-progress view of one such ambitious undertaking, based on the life and times of Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), the Serbian-American inventor, engineer and scientist best known for his contributions to the design of the modern alternating current electrical supply system.

Tesla in New York is the brainchild of filmmaker Jim Jarmusch and composer Phil Kline, both known for work that investigates Offbeat America. The Hop presentation offers the first airing of the opera's score, performed by four vocal soloists plus ACME (the American Contemporary Music Ensemble, one of New York's leading new-music groups) and additional instruments and voices, with elements of the visual design by Phantom Limb (whose Hop-commissioned *69°S* premiered here in 2011).

The work is one of five Hop co-commissions in the 2012-13 season, including two world premieres of works for the Dartmouth College Wind Ensemble; the January 18 world premiere of *Brooklyn Rider Almanac* by the string quartet Brooklyn Rider; and the dance work *Another Night* by choreographer Kyle Abraham, part of the March 1, 2 and 3 programs by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Kline and Jarmusch go back about a half-century: they met in grade school near Akron, OH, when Jarmusch was the kid selected to show newcomer Kline around Silver Lake Elementary School. They at first went separate ways for college, Jarmusch to Northwestern and Kline to Columbia. Then Jarmusch transferred to Columbia, where he and Kline both studied literature, Jarmusch following it with film studies from New York University's Tisch School of Arts (his long-shot application consisted of still photos and an essay about filmmaking).

They also both majored in rock and roll, coming together in The Del-Byzanteens, an early-80s "No Wave" band whose sole LP *Lies to Live By* was a minor underground hit in the United States and Britain in 1982. "At that time everyone in New York had a band," Jarmusch recalled in a 1984 *The Washington Post* interview. "The idea was that you didn't have to be a virtuoso musician to have a band. The spirit was more important than having technical expertise, and that influenced a lot of filmmakers."

The band would be their last project together until *Tesla in New York*. In 1984, Jarmusch's first major film, *Stranger Than Paradise*, won a string of high-profile awards and established him as an exciting new voice. He's remained an international indie-film force ever since, with a deadpan and unpredictable style evinced in such films as *Down By Law* (1986), *Mystery Train* (1989) and *Broken Flowers* (2005). His casts have included sought-after screen actors like Bill Murray, Johnny Depp and Robert Mitchum, as well as such hipster presences as Tom Waits and Jack White.

Kline, meanwhile, toured the world as a member of the ensemble of avant-garde American composer/guitarist Glenn Branca. His first stroke of fame, however, came from a distinctly un-punk project: *Unsilent Night*, which debuted in New York's Greenwich Village in December 1992. Individuals carrying boomboxes dispersed

throughout the crowd and, at a given time, pressed “play.” Out poured ethereal synthesized sound evoking night, ice crystals and shimmering stars. The piece is now performed annually in dozens of cities around the world.

Along with sound installations like *Unsilent Night* and a growing body of instrumental works, Kline has also created remarkable text settings for voice, including the 2004 *Zippo Songs*, a rock-influenced song cycle based on poems that American GIs inscribed on their cigarette lighters in Vietnam; the 2009 choral mass *John the Revelator*; and the 2012 *Out Cold*, which had a much lauded run this past fall at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, on a bill that paired it with *Zippo Songs*, performed by the singer Theo Bleckmann.

Tesla in New York was born when Kline and Jarmusch talked in 2008 about doing a project together. It could have “no deadline,” he proposed, and Jarmusch could propose a topic. Jarmusch suggested Tesla, with whom he’d long been fascinated. (Jarmusch’s 2004 film *Coffee and Cigarettes*, in fact, include a scene with a “Tesla coil,” an ominous-looking electrical transformer Tesla invented in 1891).

Kline and Jarmusch hammered out two successive drafts of a synopsis. Jarmusch then had to turn his attention to a film project he’s now in the latter stages of (*Only Lovers Left Alive*, with Tilda Swinton, John Hurt and others). As Kline wrote the third draft of the synopsis, crafted a full libretto and set that text to music, he and Jarmusch have continued to speak weekly to make sure that the music and the staging ideas move in the same direction.

From the start it has been clear that Tesla, as a subject, is “fraught with problems,” Kline said. Tesla was colorful, his early brilliance followed by mental instability and a solitary death in a pigeon-infested room of the New Yorker Hotel. Over the past two decades, however, his futurist visions and disrespect for authority have given him a second life as a cult figure. “He’s too fabulous, in both the figurative and literal sense. He’s become this folk hero. At the same time, most of what you read is distortion and half-truth. He’s very enigmatic—it’s hard to figure him out. I felt from the beginning what could be worse subject matter than the most interesting man on earth?”

Also, Tesla was apparently celibate. “There goes the love part of opera. No love, no murder.”

Tesla did have a close relationship with a woman who, judging from her letters to him, had strong feelings for him. She was Katherine Johnson, the wife of Robert Underwood Johnson, editor of the hippest publication of the time, *The Century*. At the Johnsons’ Lexington Avenue apartment, Tesla met and befriended the great people of the time—including Mark Twain, Sarah Bernhardt, Rudyard Kipling and Antonín Dvořák.

These and other characters of the time make appearances in the opera, which Kline says is emphatically not a “bio-opera” but rather an impressionistic portrait of Tesla and his times, their grandeur and grotesqueries. “It was crossroads in history, when the 19th century runs into the 20th century like a meat grinder. It’s the gilded age, it’s poverty, socialism, anarchy.”

The opera does have a villain—not Thomas Edison, who’s often misrepresented as having stolen Tesla’s work, Kline said. Edison, in fact, was supportive, giving Tesla a new lab after Tesla’s burned down in 1888. Rather, the heavy is financier J.P. Morgan, who signed Tesla to a major project then withdrew his support, ruining Tesla financially. “He’s our Mephistopheles, for sure,” Kline said.

Throughout most of this four-year gestation period, Kline has worked on *Tesla in New York* alongside other projects. There were times, he admits, when it felt like the simultaneously spinning plates might smash, but

now, as the April due date nears, the opera is coming together. "I've reached the point where I can see it coming into focus and I'm feeling, 'You know, we really have something here.'"

#

CONTACT:

Rebecca Bailey, Publicity Coordinator/Writer
Hopkins Center for the Arts, Dartmouth College
rebecca.a.bailey@dartmouth.edu
693.646.3991