

The Gift of a New Opera House, With a Grim Family History Attached

A billionaire will fund the construction of a new home for the Hamburg State Opera. But questions linger over his company's actions during World War II.



Klaus-Michael Kühne, a German billionaire who is financing the construction of the new opera house in Hamburg. Credit...Christian Charisius/picture alliance, via Getty Images

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When the Hamburg State Opera's new general director, Tobias Kratzer, explained his plans to revitalize the company earlier this year, he said his first season was all about embracing risk.

As images of models dressed in gender-bending costumes flashed across the screen at a presentation in March, Kratzer outlined a season of reinvented classics and new commissions that combined avant-garde stagings with big political themes.

The creative shift is happening alongside an even riskier development for the institution: a flashy new opera house near the city's waterfront. Sitting alongside Kratzer, Hamburg's culture minister, Carsten Brosda, unveiled the plans for the new building, which is expected to cost approximately 340 million euros, around \$394 million.

In a rarity for Germany, where flagship cultural projects are usually financed with public funds, the construction will be financed by a private benefactor. The city will only need to provide the land and

some infrastructure, like flood protection measures. Brosda said it was “incredible” that someone was willing to “donate an opera house to a city.”

Brosda didn’t mention that benefactor’s name: Klaus-Michael Kühne, 88, a German billionaire. Nor did Brosda mention the controversy around the source of Kühne’s fortune. His family’s company, Kühne + Nagel, is one of the world’s largest logistics firms, and collaborated with the Nazi regime to transport goods stolen from Jews during World War II.

Unlike the leadership of most other companies implicated in the crimes of the Third Reich, Kühne has resisted calls for an investigation by independent historians into its actions during the war and publicly stated that its behavior in the Nazi era is no longer relevant.



An aerial view of the designated building site for the new opera house, near Hamburg’s waterfront. Credit...Martin Elsen

To some observers, the decision to let Kühne bankroll the project is out of step with the cultural mood. In recent years, global cultural institutions — including the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in New York and [the National Portrait Gallery](#) in London — have faced increased scrutiny about their donors. Kühne’s reticence to examine his company’s past stands out in an era where most German companies with connections to the Nazi regime have publicly reckoned with their actions.

Annette Jael Lehmann, a professor in cultural studies at the Free University in Berlin who researches German institutions, said in a phone interview that the decision to build a flagship civic project with Kühne’s funds sat uneasily with Germany’s culture of remembrance.

“One could say that art is meant to whitewash Kühne’s company,” she said. She added that it also risked alienating the kinds of forward-thinking artists that Kratzer’s appointment is meant to attract.

Most critics agree that a new opera house would help establish Hamburg on the international cultural map. The State Opera’s current home, opened in 1955, has long needed costly renovations. Some hope that a new building might replicate the global allure of the Elbphilharmonie concert hall, an architectural showpiece that debuted in 2017 [after numerous delays](#) and cost overruns.

But Kühne's involvement is likely to spur further scrutiny of his family's company, which specializes in the transport of international freight and had a revenue of \$31 billion last year. Co-founded by Kühne's grandfather in 1890, it was later run by the family with a Jewish partner, Adolf Maass. Maass left the company in 1933, following Hitler's rise to power, ceding control of the company to Klaus-Michael Kühne's father, Alfred, and his uncle Werner.

In an interview, Maass's granddaughter, Barbara Maass, said that her grandfather's descriptions of the departure had led family members to believe he was forced out "because he was Jewish." Maass was later murdered at Auschwitz in 1944. A Kühne + Nagel spokesman said, "Maass's departure occurred by mutual agreement."



From left: Alfred Kühne, an unknown man, August Kühne, Adolf Maass and Werner Kühne, in 1927 during the 25th anniversary of the Hamburg branch of Kühne + Nagel. Credit...Montreal Holocaust Museum collections

Shortly after Maass's exit from the company, Alfred and Werner Kühne joined the Nazi party and were awarded contracts from the regime. The firm was awarded the title of "National Socialist model company," which singled out businesses that embodied Nazi values.

Kühne + Nagel says that most of its files from the Nazi period were destroyed during the war. Little was known publicly about its actions from that time until 2015, after details were uncovered by the historian Wolfgang Dressen and the journalist Henning Bleyl in public archives.

They found that Kühne + Nagel had played a major role in carrying out a program called M-Aktion — the looting of furniture and valuable goods from Jews who had been forced to leave their homes or murdered — in several Western European countries, including France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Many of these items were brought to Germany, where they were sold at a discount or distributed to Germans.

Although Kühne + Nagel has acknowledged its involvement in M-Aktion, Klaus-Michael Kühne has publicly stated that there is no point in scrutinizing his father and uncle's actions during the Third Reich. Kühne declined to be interviewed for this article, but in an interview with [Der Spiegel newsmagazine](#) in March, he said, "This chapter is closed for me, and I won't open it again."

Like about 6,500 other German companies, Kühne + Nagel has paid into the [Remembrance, Responsibility and Future Foundation](#), a fund supporting projects related to Holocaust remembrance. But the size of the contributions are confidential and a company spokesman did not respond to emails asking how much it had paid.

Bleyl said in an interview that the company's "proximity to Nazi crimes" was greater than that of many other large companies that collaborated with the regime, such as Hugo Boss, which designed Nazi uniforms.

M-Aktion was "crucial to the war," he said, because the availability of cheap furniture for German families was important for maintaining public support for the regime. He also argued that the furniture transports were intimately connected to the deportation and murder of Jews because, in some cases, households were targeted by the Nazi authorities to gain access to their belongings.



Barbara Maass, center, the granddaughter of a Jewish partner at Kühne + Nagel who was murdered in Auschwitz, during a 2023 memorial unveiling in Bremen, Germany. Credit...Juliane Sonntag/picture alliance, via Getty Images

Documents found by Bleyl in archives showed that the company had moved the equivalent of approximately 30,000 train wagons of goods to Germany from the Netherlands and Belgium alone. "Kühne + Nagel were involved on a very large scale," he said.

Following the war, two denazification proceedings, meant to ascertain the level of involvement of prominent figures in the Nazi regime, offered a critical view of the Kühnes' actions.

In the conclusions of one proceeding, in the State Archive of Hamburg, a denazification committee found that the brothers were “profiteers broadly speaking” and that “Kühne & Nagel cooperated to a large extent in carrying through the transportation of requisitioned Jewish property.”

After the war, Alfred and Werner Kühne were initially classified by another denazification board, in the city of Bremen, as “offenders,” which was the second-highest level of collaboration in the denazification process, which would have required them to give up control of their company. But they were later reclassified as “collaborators,” the second-lowest level of cooperation, allowing them to retain the business.

According to a letter in the Bremen State Archives, the change in classification was carried out at the request of British and American intelligence agencies for reasons concerning “the security of the British and American Zones.” (Following the war, the Allied forces sometimes softened the punishment of Nazi collaborators if they viewed them to be important to their goals.)

In recent years, many large German companies implicated in the Nazi regime, including Bertelsmann, Hugo Boss and Deutsche Bank, have commissioned outside historians to compile reports of the company’s actions during the Third Reich and released them to the public. But the destruction of Kühne + Nagel’s offices by wartime bombing made a similar review of the company’s records impossible, a spokesman said.

Hamburg’s culture ministry said that it had taken into account that the company had “acknowledged its work for the Nazi regime” before agreeing to the opera project. An architectural competition is planned for the design of the building, which will be along the city’s harbor. Kühne [told the broadcaster NDR](#) that he expects the project to be completed by 2032.



Tobias Kratzer, the Hamburg State Opera's new general director. "Even just the discussion about the building," he said, "is going to attract more eyes to the opera." Credit...Violette Franchi for The New York Times

In an interview, Kratzer, the Hamburg State Opera's new general director, said that the building would offer new resources for the company and bring greater public attention to its performances, but that it was too early to speak concretely about it — especially given that his contract expires in 2030.

Kratzer, 45, has drawn acclaim in recent years for his work in many of Europe's most prominent opera houses, including the Paris Opera and the Bayreuth Festival, where he has been praised for his ability to attract younger audiences. He has already invited the rapper Shirin David to work with the Hamburg State Opera. At Kratzer's season unveiling, he emphasized wanting to find "new angles" on older works.

His first season includes experimental new stagings of Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" and Glinka's "Ruslan and Lyudmila," as well as a performance for children with music by the famously challenging composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. (Kratzer admitted that "sounds a bit like a joke.")

He also had plans, he said, to engage with the regressive nature of some works in the opera canon: A repertoire performance of "Madame Butterfly," he said, would be accompanied by a panel about its colonial themes.

German media have reacted enthusiastically to his vision. BR, a public broadcaster, described it as a "paradigm change" for the Hamburg opera landscape. The Hamburger Abendblatt, a local newspaper, said his plans were "beyond brave."

In an interview after his presentation, Kratzer was asked about his views of the new building. He said he was happy that the debate about Kühne's plans had, at the least, driven more attention to the State Opera's offerings. "I think even just the discussion about the building," he said, "is going to attract more eyes to the opera."