



Cultural Citizen

Gay arts leader Thor Steingraber takes the reins at Vivo Performing Arts

For Thor Steingraber, who recently became the fifth executive in its 88-year history to lead Boston's Vivo Performing Arts (formerly Celebrity Series), the time was right to return to Boston.

Steingraber is no stranger to the city. He earned his master's degree from Harvard's Kennedy School, where he was its first Fellow for Arts and Culture at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations. Besides staying in touch with his Kennedy School cohorts, Steingraber often stopped in

Boston on one of his regular trips to Maine, a place that's been "a constant in my life for 30 years," he says.

The Chicago native for the past 20 years has led two arts institutions that redefined public performance in Los Angeles. At the Los Angeles Music Center, he oversaw the 2012 opening of Grand Park, 16 acres of reclaimed green space that transformed downtown L.A. into a year-round destination for arts programming and civic events. During his 12 years as

executive and artistic director of The Soraya, Steingraber established a new 1,700-seat performance venue as a destination for orchestras, dance companies and cultural artists from more than 40 nations, including extensive Spanish-language concerts and programs.

The opportunity to spark innovations that will propel Vivo Performing Arts into the future is directly tied to the growth and diversity of Boston and its neighborhoods. "When I came back to visit, I realized Boston has developed at a breakneck pace. I love walking down the streets and feeling the energy," he says. "I love the youthfulness of Boston, the tech hub in Kendall

Square, the architecture of the Seaport, the neighborhoods from East Boston to Roxbury. It felt like the right moment to come to Boston."

Boston's LGBTQ+ community and its history also impressed Steingraber, who's been out not just for all of his professional life but since he was 16, he says. Besides the social aspect of a vibrant queer community, he cites the vitality of "great organizations, advocates, allies and policymakers, which is also true of California. There's a lot in common, so I feel positive about being in Boston at this time in my life."

Vivo has earned a global reputation for regularly showcasing world-class and

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Thor Steingraber

emerging performers from a variety of disciplines. This season marks the return of Broadway legend Audra McDonald, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and author David Sedaris, as well as the farewell performance of Wynton Marsalis as an active member of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. Steingraber, whose background includes directing operas in the United States, Europe and Asia, and producing an award-winning jazz festival at the Soraya, will continue that commitment to excellence while expanding Vivo's reach beyond Boston proper and bringing its artists to new audiences in their own communities.

“I ran one of the most beautiful theaters in the world in the Soraya, which is an extraordinary venue in every way,” he says. “But a significant part of every day [was] running a venue and managing a building and everything that means [such as] parking and maintenance which consumed a lot of my time. At Vivo, we perform anywhere and everywhere. That has challenges but it presents a huge world of possibility. One of the distinct differences between audiences of a generation ago and today is that [today's] are looking for a full experience—an opportunity to network and socialize, food, a bar. Rather than view multiple venues as a liability, they are an opportunity. Boston's not a big town, so it's nice to have performances in your own neighborhood.”

That's evident from “Let's Dance Boston,” a free, outdoor event open to the public that takes place on the Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston September 23–27, bringing five nights of social dancing, dance lessons and live bands offering up the sounds of salsa, soul, Latin Afro Caribbean and more.

“It's not a passive performance; it's about participating, being amongst community and dancing in the heart of Boston,” Steingraber says.

As a veteran arts administrator, Steingraber understands the present-day challenges, from economics to AI to increasing competition for audiences' time and money, that pose obstacles for arts organizations, many of which are still struggling post-pandemic. “We are competing with people's sofas—with endless [entertainment] choices on any given night,” he says. “But despite our present-day challenges and the draw of our phones, human beings still have to connect. That can be better provided with venues more social in nature,” Steingraber says.

“I have worked with the greatest artists in the world. I know what excellence is, and I know how to collaborate and present it. But what excites me most, as an arts executive, LGBTQ individual and citizen of the world, is to explore how culture will bring us together at a time when everything else will tear us apart.” ■

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