



# Bizarre emails from acting Kennedy Center director Richard Grenell

By Shania Shelton, CNN

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President Donald Trump speaks to the media alongside Richard Grenell, President of The Kennedy Center Board of Trustees, during a guided tour of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts before leading a board meeting on March 17, 2025, in Washington, DC. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

**(CNN)** — A heated email exchange between Richard Grenell, the interim head of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and one of its artists left the musician “shocked” by what she called a “bizarre” interaction.

Grenell seemed “aggressively upset” during the exchange on Tuesday, musician Yasmin Williams told CNN in an interview Thursday. She had initially emailed Grenell, who is also currently serving as President Donald Trump’s envoy for special missions, about concerns she’s heard from other musicians and former patrons about the center’s moves to roll back diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, cancel certain shows, and eliminate board members

"I was shocked at first if anything because, honestly, I thought it was fake. I thought it was just like, is this ChatGPT? Like, what is this?" Williams said. "He's not responding like I assume the executive director, interim or not, of the Kennedy Center would respond to an email. It was just bizarre."

The musician questioned Grenell about recent changes, writing over email, "Does the President actually care about artists cancelling shows at the Kennedy Center? What, if anything, has changed about the Kennedy Center regarding hiring practices, performance booking, and staffing?"

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Grenell, a longtime Trump confidant already serving in multiple administration positions who Trump named to the director role in February, said in response in the email thread, "Let me ask you this question, would you play for Republicans or would you boycott if Republicans came to your show?"

Williams told CNN Grenell's response "made absolutely no sense."

CNN has reached out to the Kennedy Center and Grenell for comment.

The exchange puts Trump's aggressive push to reshape the Kennedy Center into sharp focus, as the Washington, DC-based performing arts complex has been thrust into the middle of the culture wars.

"Just last year, the Kennedy Center featured Drag Shows specifically targeting our youth — THIS WILL STOP. The Kennedy Center is an American Jewel, and must reflect the brightest STARS on its stage from all across our Nation," the president posted on social media in February.

The president has targeted the center in a slew of changes, including dismissing its board and installing himself as its chairman in February.

Artists including Issa Rae, Shonda Rhimes and Ben Folds have resigned from their leadership roles or canceled events at the space in response to the changes, while the center has canceled performances, including the children's musical "Finn."

During the exchange, Williams wrote back in an email that she has played for Republicans

before and that “boycotting anything because Republicans exist and may be at a show of mine makes no sense to me.” Grenell responded that the artists who cancelled their shows did so because they couldn’t be in the presence of Republicans and advised the musician to not “be gullible” and “swallow what the media tells you.”

Yasmin Williams performs onstage during day two of the 2022 Pilgrimage Music & Cultural Festival on September 25, 2022, in Franklin, Tennessee. Erika Goldring/Getty Images

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“Your people also booed and harassed the vice president who simply wanted to enjoy music with his wife for a night. Who is the intolerant one?” Grenell continued, referring to an incident last month in which Vice President JD Vance was booed as he entered a concert hall at the Kennedy Center.

In another email, Grenell told the musician, “Yes, I cut the DEI bullshit because we can’t afford to pay people for fringe and niche programming that the public won’t support. Yes, I cut the people making over \$500k a year because we are in debt.”

Williams, who is Black, criticized his comments on DEI as “egregiously unprofessional and ridiculous.”

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The musician said current and former employees who recently worked at the center have reached out to her since [her Instagram post](#) detailing the email exchange went viral, telling her it was “really nice and refreshing to see how they talk to us and how they treat us come to light,” she said.

The Kennedy Center is among a number of cultural institutions Trump has targeted as part of a broader push to influence American arts and culture since the start of his second term. He directed his administration last month to scrutinize and threaten funding for the [Smithsonian Institution](#) to force federal museums to “remove improper ideology” from their exhibits. And he specifically targeted the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Smithsonian American Art Museum for carrying exhibits and promoting language he deemed inappropriate.

The president also signed an order last month directing the Institution of Museum and Library Services, among several other government entities, to be “eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law.”

*CNN's Kylie Atwood contributed to this report.*

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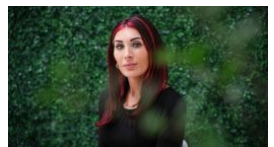
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