

Russian conductor barred from German music festival

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The internationally renowned conductor Valery Gergiev has been barred from participating in the Saarland Music Festival in 2015, because he is Russian and has expressed support for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Although Gergiev is scheduled to conduct the same concert in Paris on March 9, he will not be allowed to perform it in Saarland with the Munich Philharmonic on the following day. Festival manager Robert Leonardy sought to justify this action by referring to opposition from the Polish embassy, the November 9 online edition of the German tabloid *Bild* reported.

According to *Bild*, Leonardy said, “we received a clear message from the Polish Embassy in Berlin, that Gergiev’s presence is not desirable. ... It is really impossible for a Russian well known to be a friend of Putin to appear there.”

The main theme of the festival—which begins in February 2015 and lasts until July—is Polish culture. German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier and former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk are both patrons of the festival. Tusk is said to have threatened to withhold his sponsorship if Gergiev appears. Polish conductor Michal Nesterowicz will now lead the concert in Saarbrücken, the capital of the state of Saarland.

Valery Gergiev has conducted the Orchestra of the Petersburg Mariinsky Theater for many years and is especially famous for his interpretations of Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky. He was also chosen to be the conductor of the Munich Philharmonic beginning in the 2015-16 season. Following the death of the former head conductor, Lorin Maazel, at the end of October, Gergiev was due to begin touring with the renowned Munich Orchestra in March 2015, performing Antonín Dvorák’s cello concerto with

soloist Sol Gabetta.

Festival Manager Robert Leonardy, himself an excellent pianist, tried to play down and justify the exclusion of Gergiev. In a discussion aired on a Bavarian radio station, Leonardy said, “we never barred him because we had not invited him in the first place.” After the death of Maazel, Leonardy said, he received word from Munich that there would “obviously” be an effort to hire Gergiev. Then, Leonardy said, he informed the Polish embassy in Berlin, who “naturally could not endorse this.” In retrospect, Leonardy rationalized Gergiev “could not have conducted the entire tour anyway.”

The Munich Philharmonic issued a similar press release the same day, stating Gergiev had “other responsibilities” in St. Petersburg. This of course does not explain why Gergiev’s responsibilities do not interfere with his Paris concert.

The barring of the renowned Russian conductor from the festival has added fuel to the vicious months-long campaign by the media, the Green Party and other anti-Russian forces to prevent Gergiev from becoming head conductor of the Munich Philharmonic.

Peter Jungblut of *BR Klassik* gloated in a November 11 comment on Gergiev’s exclusion, “The Munich Philharmonic wanted to shine with him on the international stage, and hoped for prestigious tours and high earnings. Nothing has come of it ... He is entirely the wrong choice for the ambassador of the liberal musical city of Munich, regardless of his artistic profile.”

Jungblut, a long-time radio host, was referring to issues from the spring and summer. This included remarks the conductor made to the Dutch media expressing support for the Putin regime’s homophobic laws, which he later distanced himself from, and most

importantly, Gergiev's denunciation of Ukrainian "fascists" and his signing of a letter of 300 artists supporting the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Allegations of supposed "anti-gay" discrimination served as a cover for a hysterical campaign against Gergiev aimed at drumming up anti-Russian and pro-war sentiment. The Green faction of the Munich city council organized protests at Gergiev's concerts, demanding a ban on the conductor. (See: Munich Greens demand cancellation of Russian orchestra conductor's contract)

Following a discussion between Gergiev and the head of the division of culture, Hans-Georg Küppers, in which Küppers demanded he distance himself from Putin, Gergiev wrote an open letter to the Munich concert subscribers. In it, he said, "I am a musician and conductor. However, I am also a Russian citizen with close connections to my native country."

The letter deplored the rift between east and west, which the Ukrainian crisis had torn open, and described music "as the best bridge builder" to maintain "dialogue." He also rejected any suggestion he was anti-gay, saying, "One of my most important principles is respect for others and their personal lives."

Despite this, the media hate campaign continued. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a long article on June 2 by Rainer Erlinger under the title "I am really only a musician." Erlinger, who holds degrees in medicine and law, has for some time cultivated a public profile as a "specialist" in questions of morality and conscience.

In the article, he denounces Gergiev's plea for tolerance and accuses him of a "to put it mildly, a reserved attitude toward freedom." Erlinger then raises the issue of "free-thinking"—which should apply towards homosexuals, but not evidently to Russian musicians. The "freedom of their way of life" demands freedom of opinion for gays, he says, insinuating that Gergiev opposes this.

In fact, in censoring Gergiev, these forces are attacking the freedom of expression and exercising bigotry and intimidation against an artist simply because of his national origin and political associations. This recalls the grimmest chapters of German history.

An internationally renowned artist is not permitted to appear, because he is a citizen of the wrong country and has non-conformist political views. In the 1930s, conductors, actors and other artists were fired, because

they were Jewish or had a Jewish mother or grandmother. Today "Russians are not wanted," at least those Russians who are enemies of the putsch in Ukraine and attacks on Russia.

As is often the case with the Greens and other layers of the better off academic milieu who are obsessed with identity politics, their witch-hunt against Gergiev and promotion of anti-Russian war propaganda demonstrates the real attitude of these forces regarding fundamental democratic rights. Their support for the suppression of such rights will ultimately rebound in Germany, where they stand at the head not only of a hate campaign against Russia, but also for ideological control in their own country.

The exclusion of Gergiev from the music festival in Saarland serves as a warning. German Foreign Minister Steinmeier and former Polish Prime Minister Tusk are not sponsors of the festival by chance. The war-mongering of the German government against Russia, which is coordinated closely with the Polish government, has growing repercussions for society as a whole. Serious intellectuals, journalists and artists must decisively oppose the attempts to subordinate culture and art to war propaganda.



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