

Toronto Symphony bans pianist critical of Kiev regime

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Under pressure from right-wing Ukrainian-Canadian groups, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) removed Ukrainian-born pianist Valentina Lisitsa as the featured soloist at two Toronto concerts that were to be held this week. The TSO sought to replace Lisitsa with another pianist, but after a public outcry simply cancelled the concerts.

An internationally recognized pianist who has played with major orchestras in North America and Europe and has a large online following, Lisitsa has drawn the ire of the right wing because she has challenged their false narrative about the “democratic” character of the pro-western Kiev regime.

In Twitter postings stretching back to the weeks following the US-German-orchestrated, fascist-led coup that drove Ukraine’s elected president from office, Lisitsa been heavily critical of the Kiev regime. She has denounced it for its rampant corruption, ties to Nazi sympathizers like the Right Sector, and mistreatment of the Russian minority, and for the brutal war it has waged against the pro-Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine.

The cancellation of Lisitsa’s performances of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 is a brazen act of political censorship.

The management of the TSO, one of the country’s leading cultural institutions, initially sought to cover up why it had cancelled Lisitsa’s performances. It simply said she was no longer available to play in Toronto and had been replaced.

Only after Lisitsa revealed that she had been dumped from the TSO program and instructed by management not to reveal why did TSO President Jeff Melanson acknowledge that the cancellation was due to pressure from Ukrainian nationalists.

Melanson justified the decision by citing “ongoing accusations” from “Ukrainian media outlets” that Lisitsa has used “deeply offensive language.” In an attempt to intimidate the musician, the TSO had previously forwarded Lisitsa a letter from a prominent lawyer at the country’s largest law firm, Borden Ladner Gervais, that said she could be denied entry into Canada under section 319 of Canada’s

criminal code, which makes the “willful promotion of hatred” illegal.

The TSO’s actions threaten artistic freedom and freedom of speech and have ominous implications for musicians and artists everywhere. As Cara Zwibel of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association put it in comments to the CBC, “I think there is a problem with the message that this sends to artists that they may have trouble getting jobs or keeping jobs if they express views that are unpopular or controversial.”

The TSO’s banning of Lisitsa represents a cowardly capitulation to reactionary political forces—forces that enjoy the strong backing of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper.

Protests against Lisitsa’s appearance came from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC), a right-wing organization that purports to represent Canada’s large Ukrainian diaspora community. Heavily influenced by extreme Ukrainian nationalism, the UCC is virulently anti-communist and anti-Russian. Some of its affiliates were founded by veterans of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), which collaborated with the Nazis in World War II, including in the mass extermination of Jews, and many continue to venerate OUN leader Stepan Bandera.

Lisitsa has for some time been a target of the Ukrainian right because she has rejected the Western-backed propaganda that the Ukraine crisis has been caused by Russian aggression. Her concerts have repeatedly become the occasion for protests by Ukrainian nationalist groups. Last September, the EuroMaidan Press website published an appeal for supporters to join them in calling for a boycott of Lisitsa’s concerts in Pittsburgh.

The TSO’s ban will encourage these right-wing elements to go after Lisitsa elsewhere, as well as other artists who take a critical position towards the pro-western Kiev regime.

So as to ostracize Lisitsa, her Ukrainian nationalist opponents have labelled her a stooge of Russian president Vladimir Putin. This is a slur. What they object to is her heartfelt challenge to their false narrative.

As Lisitsa explained in the Facebook posting announcing the TSO's banning, she initially had great hopes that what she terms the "Maidan Revolution" would end the domination of Ukraine by a corrupt oligarchy, but these hopes were quickly dashed.

"I was so proud of my people!" wrote Lisitsa. "But the ruling class doesn't let go easily. They managed to cunningly channel away the anger, to direct it to other, often imaginable, enemies—and worse, to turn people upon themselves. Year later, we have the same rich people remaining in power, misery and poverty everywhere, dozens of thousands killed, over a million of refugees."

In her statement, Lisitsa explains that she felt she could not remain silent as "the country of my birth, of my childhood, of my first falling in love...was sliding ever faster in to the abyss. Children die under bombs, old ladies die of starvation, people burned alive"

She said that she has been seeking to expose the abuses going on in Ukraine, particularly against the Russian-speaking minority. "I took to Twitter in order to get the other side of the story heard, the one you never see in the mainstream media.

"To give you just one example: one of my feats was to confront French fashion magazine *Elle* who published a glowing cover story about women in Ukrainian army. After the research I have shown to the magazine in my Twitter posts that the 'cover girl' they have chosen to show was in fact a horrible person, open Neo-Nazi, racist, anti-Semite who boasted of murdering civilians for fun! The magazine issued a written public apology."

The ability of the UCC and its supporters to aggressively target those hostile to its right-wing positions is made possible thanks to the close collaboration they enjoy with the Canadian government and more generally the unanimous support the ruling class and political elite have given to the US-NATO drive to transform Ukraine into a Western satellite.

Canada has been one of the most outspoken supporters of the Kiev regime since the February 2014 coup and is participating in the build-up of NATO forces on Russia's borders.

The Harper government is supplying non-lethal military aid to the Ukrainian army. But it is also facilitating the supply of weapons, including guns and drones, to the Ukrainian army and aligned ultra-nationalist and fascist militias through the UCC and its Army SOS organization. Two Conservative MPs attended a recent Army SOS fundraising event in Toronto that raised more than \$50,000 to be spent on arms and military gear (see "Canada helping arm Kiev regime to fight Ukrainian civil war").

At a UCC gathering in Toronto on February 22,

Conservative immigration minister Chris Alexander delivered an inflammatory speech in which he gave the government's full backing for an aggressive course towards Russia. He called the conflict with Russia "the biggest issue facing the world today," stressed that "*every* option" is "on the table" in regards to defeating Putin—a euphemism for all-out war with Russia—and said there was "*no* scenario" for peace and security for this world" that does not involve defeating Russia in Ukraine.

Such are the sentiments being encouraged by the Harper government among its far right allies in the UCC, and it is in this context that the targeting of Lisitsa must be seen. Anyone who questions the official narrative of the Ukraine crisis is to be demonized as a supporter of Putin and Russian aggression.

That the TSO has bowed to this campaign is a disturbing development. Under conditions in which democratic rights are under sustained attack, the TSO has made it clear that it is willing to sacrifice the rights of freedom of speech and artistic freedom to meet the demands of the Canadian ruling class and its far right allies.

The justification the TSO has provided for its decision could hardly have been more hypocritical. The TSO statement read, "As one of Canada's most important cultural institutions, our priority must remain on being a stage for the world's great works of music, and not for opinions that some believe to be deeply offensive."

The TSO has not merely provided a platform for groups defending the reactionary politics of the Kiev regime, including the persecution of Ukraine's Russian minority. Its capitulation to the censorship demands of the UCC has strengthened precisely those forces pushing for the US and its allies to intervene militarily in Ukraine against Russia, a move that threatens to trigger an all-out conflict between the major powers.



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