

Despite #MeToo protest, Berlin audience applauds opera singer Placido Domingo

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Attempts by #MeToo campaigners last week to prevent one of the world's leading opera singers, Placido Domingo, from performing in Berlin failed miserably. The Berlin Staatsoper [Berlin State Opera] refused to comply with the call for a ban on Domingo demanded by the "Pro Quote Bühne" group and various Green Party politicians.

The director of the opera house, Matthias Schulz, explained that Domingo had "always behaved in exemplary fashion" and that there was no "basis for any prejudgement." For that reason, the opera house would stick to the terms of a contract agreed before the #MeToo allegations were made: "Many discussions were conducted with representatives of staff and co-workers based on the clear understanding that Placido Domingo be allowed to perform."

Last Thursday, Domingo sang in Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La traviata* (1853) to stormy applause from the Berlin audience. His concert on Sunday was also sold out and ended with standing ovations.

The campaign against Domingo was launched in August and September 2019 with two shoddy articles published by the Associated Press, in which 20 women, 18 of them anonymously, accused the opera star of inappropriate behavior. Some of the vague accusations dated back 30 years.

The allegations remain entirely unsubstantiated. The claims range from inappropriate shows of affection to unwanted touching, repeated requests for meetings and late-night phone calls.

When asked in an interview whether she had suffered "any professional disadvantages" because she had "repeatedly rejected Domingo," Patricia Wulf, the only person to be quoted by name in the first AP article, replied: "No, I didn't. I didn't suffer anything careerwise. In fact, it was interesting: He and the

company kept hiring me. And that was great."

Spanish soprano Davinia Rodríguez told Europa Press she "never felt the least indication of what they [the women in the AP story] accuse the maestro of." She added that Domingo had always shown her and other performers and theatre workers "the greatest respect, with the humility and generosity that so characterises him." Other singers who had worked with Domingo made similar comments.

Helga Rabl-Stadler, president of the Salzburg Festival in Austria, also issued a statement in Domingo's defence. She wrote, "I have known Plácido Domingo for more than 25 years. In addition to his artistic competence, I was impressed from the very beginning by his appreciative treatment of all Festival employees. He knows every name, from the concierge to the secretary; he never fails to thank anyone performing even the smallest service for him. Had the accusations against him been voiced inside the Festspielhaus in Salzburg, I am sure I would have heard of it."

Rabl-Stadler continued: "Furthermore, as a jurist by training, my assumption is 'in dubio pro reo' [when in doubt, for the accused]. I would find it factually wrong and morally irresponsible to make irreversible judgments at this point, and to base decisions on such judgments."

In the US, Domingo's planned appearances were canceled following the AP's #MeToo campaign. In Europe, however, he has been able to continue to perform to highly appreciative audiences in Vienna, Milan, Valencia, Hamburg and Salzburg.

This was also the case last week in Berlin. Despite suffering from a cold, the 78-year-old singer won over the hearts of his audience on Thursday at the Staatsoper with his performance as Giorgio Germont in Verdi's classic opera. He also lived up to the role as an actor.

As a young singer, then a tenor, Domingo sang the role of Alfred Germont, the son, in *La traviata*. Alfredo falls head over heels in love with the courtesan Violetta Valéry. Now, Domingo, as a baritone, sings Alfredo's father.

Before and during the performance, a handful of individuals from the group "Pro Quote Bühne," which calls for more opportunities for women on German theatre stages, demonstrated in front of the Staatsoper (just three people feature in a photo published in the Berlin newspaper *Morgenpost*). They handed out a witch-hunting leaflet "on the responsibility of Berlin's opera houses to offer protection following the allegations of sexual harassment made against Plácido Domingo."

In advance of the protest, the group sent an open letter to Berlin's mayor. The letter called on Berlin's Senator for Culture, the Left Party's Klaus Lederer, to support a ban on Domingo's appearing, based on the city's Equal Treatment legislation aimed at protecting state employees "from all sexualised behaviour and activities." The letter claimed that the director of the Staatsoper had violated the legislation.

A local Green Party politician, Sabine Bangert, jumped on the bandwagon and the issue was debated in the Berlin Senate. Bangert asked why Domingo's concerts had not been canceled. She pointed out that this had happened on several occasions in the US. In reply, Lederer referred to the legal principle of the presumption of innocence. He respected the "artistic freedom of the opera house direction," but then said that any decisions were "up for discussion" and sought to invite the Staatsoper to talks "at short notice."

Bangert, who chairs the Senate Committee on Cultural Affairs, dismissed Lederer's response and the stance of the Staatsoper: "I would have liked Berlin to have taken a clear position, as was the case in the United States—opera houses there are refraining from employing Plácido Domingo until the allegations have been resolved." Via Twitter, she added: "#Sexual harassment #abuse of power is not a trivial offence, even for world stars!" Her Green group colleague June Tomiak agreed and said that it was "impermissible" for Domingo to perform at the Staatsoper.

In the past, the Green Party posed as a party that fought for "civil rights." The Greens have shifted far to the right and are trampling basic rights underfoot.

Leading Green party politicians demand that an outstanding artist be banned from exercising his profession, despite the lack of any serious evidence.

Up until now Domingo has been able to perform freely in Germany and Europe. The fact that #MeToo protests have taken place against him in Berlin indicates a change in the political situation.

Sexual abuse and oppression must be condemned and subject to prosecution, but that is the job of the courts. The #MeToo campaign raises these issues with quite different aims in mind. Upper middle class layers engaged in bitter competition for positions and privileges in universities, the media and cultural institutions are pursuing their own economic interests. Important artists such as Domingo, James Levine and others are condemned out of hand, regardless of their artistic merit and the actual gravity or status of the allegations made against them.

This sexual witch-hunt is being used to divert attention from broader, more threatening dangers in society and political life. The aim is to suppress left-wing, progressive resistance against the emergence of the extreme right, warmongering and astronomical levels of inequality. The campaign is an intrinsic part of the attempt by the ruling elites to undermine and abolish democratic rights in the face of growing resistance from the working class.

Despite the equivocation on the part of the Berlin Senate, it is an encouraging sign that the attempt to intimidate Domingo has fallen flat. It remains to be seen what role this issue will play at this year's Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale.

The author also recommends:

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