

The pianist Igor Levit and the defense of culture against fascism

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The 33-year-old Russian-German pianist Igor Levit ranks among the most important pianists and musicians of his generation. His brilliance does not consist merely of a flawless technique, which is more or less expected of keyboard artists in an age when pianists are so intensively trained that it is often said, and only partly in jest, that they never learn how to make a mistake. Levit's musical reputation rests on his immense interpretative imagination, which combines emotional subtlety with great intellectual depth. His recent recording of Beethoven's 32 sonatas—works that stand at the pinnacle of human culture and which impose upon pianists the greatest physical and mental demands—has been welcomed enthusiastically by critics and the public throughout the world.

Levit's view of art as a force for enlightenment and human solidarity has won him the respect and affection of a global audience. During the first months of the pandemic, Levit initiated an extraordinary series of nightly "Twitter concerts," streamed live. For more than 50 evenings in a row, Levit gave concerts that could be freely watched all over the world. He introduced each concert with a brief explanation of the significance of the compositions that were to be performed. Levit's Twitter concerts attracted audiences that numbered in the tens of thousands.

This great artist is also active in left-wing politics. A portrait of the pianist published in the *New Yorker* this past May noted: "Other pianists of Levit's generation may have achieved wider mass-market fame ... but none have comparable stature as a cultural or even a political figure. In German-speaking countries, Levit is a familiar face not only to classical-music fans but also to a broader population that shares his leftist, internationalist world view."

Levit has emerged as a powerful voice against the resurgence of neo-Nazism in Germany, which finds its most putrid expression in the growing political power of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). As a consequence of its elevation within the *Bundestag*—the German parliament—to the rank of official opposition party, fascism is once again being promoted by the political elites as a legitimate political force. Within this increasingly reactionary environment, neo-Nazi violence—accompanied by anti-Semitism and violent attacks on Jews—is becoming commonplace.

Levit, who is Jewish, began receiving anti-Semitic death threats last year. He refused to be intimidated and has continued to denounce neo-Nazi violence. Following an attack on a Jewish student in Hamburg on October 4, Levit tweeted: "so tired. So, so tired. And so angry." On the following day, he tweeted:

"Yesterday: Hamburg. Today: phrases. Never again hashtags. As always. Simply tiring. Fatiguing." On October 9, Levit sent out another Twitter message: "How very, very tired this time makes you..." And on October 10, Levit wrote: "Hardly anything is more tiring these days than reading the news."

Levit's tweets, read by thousands, were more than the AfD and its sympathizers and apologists in the media could stand. Last Friday, October 16, Germany's leading liberal newspaper, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), published a filthy attack on the pianist, cynically titled "Levit is tired." The piece, by Helmut Mauró, employed literary tropes and stereotypes whose distinctly anti-Semitic connotations are immediately obvious to a German public.

Mauró began by contrasting Levit's "theatrical pathos" to the Russian pianist Daniil Trifonov, who "plays in an entirely different league." Every musically educated German, familiar with Richard Wagner's disgusting anti-Semitic tirades against Jewish musicians, knows exactly what is being implied by Mauró. Lacking genuine national roots, according to this trope, the Jew is incapable of achieving the emotional depth of a genuine Russian. (It should be noted that Trifonov, a wonderful pianist in his own right, bears no responsibility for the misuse of his name by Mauró.)

After a brief complaint about Levit's "legato," Mauró gets to the real source of his anger. Levit's prominence is not due to any musical talent, but, rather, to his "connections" and his public political stance. Moreover, Levit's denunciations of the right and anti-Semitism in Germany are part of an "ideology of claiming victimhood" and "downright emotional excesses."

Mauró seems to have forgotten—or, more likely, he resents being reminded—that the German government in power between 1933 and 1945 organized the industrial murder of six million Jews. He proceeds to question whether Levit's political tweets should be taken seriously. The death threats received by Levit are not mentioned. But Mauró bitterly recalls Levit's remark in an interview published in *Der Spiegel* that "Germany has a contempt-for-mankind problem." How dare he!

Finally, after denouncing the tweets about the attack in Hamburg, Mauró contrasts Levit's political concerns to a recent tweet by Trifonov, who had informed his readers that he is playing the music of Prokofiev. How much more appropriate that is, Mauró implies, than Levit publicly complaining about a Jew being attacked in Hamburg.

The message of the piece could not be clearer: If the Jewish artist Levit does not like the fact that the AfD is sitting in the German parliament and that anti-Semitic terrorist attacks are again on the agenda in Germany, he should keep it to himself. And, the article implies, there is no place for him at the highest level of the classical music scene anyway.

Mauró's article evokes memories of the persecution and denunciation of Jewish artists by the fascist thugs of the 1920s and 1930s. Countless Jewish artists and intellectuals were forced to flee the country after the Nazi seizure of power; those who stayed were virtually all murdered in the Holocaust.

The public backlash against Mauró and the SZ has been enormous. On social media, countless users, including public figures but also many readers of the SZ and classical music lovers, denounced the piece as a vicious attack on Levit that was reeking of anti-Semitism. The *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, one of the most important classical music radio stations, published a principled response, pointing to the anti-Semitic connotation of the piece and stating that it had crossed all borders of what can be considered legitimate musical criticism.

After an initial statement in which the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung's* editor-in-chief backed Mauró's attack on Levit, the newspaper published on Tuesday a public apology "to Levit and readers of the SZ." The newspaper acknowledged that an overwhelming number of its readers and a substantial portion of its own editorial board felt that the text was, in fact, "anti-Semitic." Why then, it must be asked, was it published in the first place?

The retreat by the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* has outraged two other major establishment newspapers. The editor-in-chief of the right-wing *Die Welt*, Ulf Poschardt, declared on Wednesday that the public controversy over Levit was a "culture war." He accused the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* of having bowed before "the first violins of the Jacobin orchestra" and the "Twitter brigade of a new left-wing thought police." "Open season" is being declared on "right-wing figures who dare to contradict," he fumed. Similarly, the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* echoed Mauró's denunciations of Levit and accused the *Sueddeutsche* of caving in to "the pressure of the masses."

The denunciations of Levit are reminiscent of the attacks by these same outlets on the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* (SGP, the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International) and its youth organization, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which have opposed the rehabilitation of Adolf Hitler by prominent academics like Jörg Baberowski. The warnings that the SGP has issued since 2014 have been fully confirmed: the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* poses a real and growing danger to democratic rights and culture.

This growth of fascist forces in Germany is the product of a conscious political operation by the ruling class and a conspiracy at the highest level of the state. There is a stark contrast between the reactionary attack on Levit organized by powerful media outlets and the massive public defense of the beloved artist.

The attack on Levit has a political and cultural significance that extends beyond Germany. The ruling class fears socially conscious and politically engaged artists who seek to raise the cultural level

of the working class.

Levit has become the target of the right not just because of his political stance. His efforts to make the works of Beethoven and other composers accessible to broad layers of the population and thereby increase interest in culture as a whole are viewed by the ruling class not just with suspicion, but considered a threat.

Moreover, with his focus on works by composers like Beethoven, who was profoundly influenced by the French Revolution, and on Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, a piece on the CIA-backed 1973 coup in Chile, Igor Levit expresses a shift to the left and a turn toward politically serious thought among the most advanced sections of the cultural intelligentsia. It is this development, and its intersection with a growing movement by the working class, that the neo-fascists and the ruling class in Germany hate and fear.

For the revolutionary socialist movement, the fight for the full political emancipation of the working class and its cultural enlightenment are inseparably connected. Nowhere has this been as clearly demonstrated as in Germany, where the Marxist working class movement emerged out of a process of profound political, intellectual and cultural progress that encompassed not just the scientific breakthroughs of Marx and Engels, but also the great works of their philosophical and cultural predecessors.

Beginning with Heinrich Heine, who was a friend of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and Ferdinand Freiligrath, major cultural figures have always had close ties to the revolutionary movement. The Nazis' assault on the German working class and its organizations was accompanied by a barbarous destruction of all genuine culture and cultural figures.

The courage of Igor Levit and the support he has received from thousands of German working people and youth should encourage and inspire other artists to follow his example.

Discussing the relation between the crisis of bourgeois society and the arts in 1938, Leon Trotsky noted, "Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably—as Grecian art rotted beneath the ruins of a culture founded on slavery—unless present-day society is able to rebuild itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character."

These words resonate powerfully today, as the pandemic and the crisis of world capitalism have thrown the very survival of major cultural institutions and countless artists into question, while the bourgeoisie is moving to dismantle all remaining social, democratic and cultural rights of the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* proudly continues the revolutionary Marxist tradition of the defense of progressive artists like Levit and calls upon all its readers to forcefully denounce the attacks on him. The fight to defend the arts and the right of the working class to culture are an inseparable component of the fight against capitalist reaction and for socialism.



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