Pianist Igor Levit joins rally against far-right Alternative for Germany in Potsdam

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1 November 2020

Only days after several German newspapers published vicious denunciations of Igor Levit, the world renowned pianist participated in a rally against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Potsdam, the state capital of the German state of Brandenburg.

He was the leading figure at a protest last week called to oppose the taking over of the leadership of the AfD in the Brandenburg state parliament by a representative of the openly fascist and right-wing extremist faction within the party, known as "the Wing" or "Flügel." Since the German word "Flügel" also means grand piano, the protesters' slogan "The grand piano instead of the Wing" (Flügel statt Flügel) was a clever play on words. Levit entertained the AfD opponents by playing on a concert grand piano on a stage set up in front of the state parliament.

Levit thus made clear that he would not be intimidated by the agitation and anti-Semitic attacks against him over recent weeks. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* music critic Helmut Mauro attacked him and claimed that it was not his musical talents, but his political attacks on the far right on Twitter that had made him famous and secured him success. Laced with anti-Semitic allusions, Mauro accused Levit of "the vehement exclusion of those who allegedly or actually hold different points of view."

When the article appeared two weeks ago, a storm of protest erupted, forcing the editors of the SZ to issue an apology. Levit was overwhelmed with messages of support. The number of his followers on Twitter rose sharply. Many emails encouraged him not to give ground or be intimidated by the right-wing agitation.

In Potsdam last Tuesday, he thanked everyone for their support. As noted, the slogan "Flügel statt Flügel" is a jab at the far-right "Flügel" AfD faction, which was officially dissolved but continues to dominate the party. The former leader of the AfD's parliamentary group in the Brandenburg state parliament, Andreas Kalwitz, was one of the Flügel's leading members. Hans-Christoph Berndt was elected his successor on Tuesday, a figure who like Kalwitz belongs to the far right.

"One right-wing extremist was exchanged for another in this election," said the Brandenburg-based artist Rainer Opolka at the beginning of the rally. Opolka participated as the initiator and organiser of the protest against the AfD election. They wanted to counteract "the stupidity and hate" with music, he told the crowd, which was limited to 250 due to coronavirus restrictions.

"We want to expose a party that constantly ridicules foreigners and immigrants," stated Opolka, and appealed to the participants "not to be spectators as this Republic shifts to the right." The AfD mocks democracy and is destroying it, he continued. This occurred once before in German history. "That ended in Auschwitz," declared Opolka.

Later, he responded to a journalist's question about the reason for his political engagement by saying that ten years ago, he stood in front of a pile of children's shoes in the Lublin-Majdanek extermination camp. Shoes of children who were killed by the Nazis. These images were burned deep into his consciousness.

A participant in the rally carried a homemade cardboard sign with the statement, "Fascists in the state parliament. For risks or side effects, read a history book or ask your grandfather."

Alongside Levit, musical performances were given by the concert pianists Björn O. Wiede, Andy Schulte and Simone Seyfarth. The pop singer Sebastian Krumbiegel (*Die Prinzen*) also took part in the event. He sang "Germany, embarrassment of the West" and sang at the piano, "The loving people around the world are my nation–without borders." He wore a hat with the slogan, "Birds of paradise instead of the imperial eagle."

Between the musical performances, young actors from Potsdam's Hans-Otto Theatre performed. One cited a poem from the poet Mascha Kaléko, which says, "We don't know what tomorrow will be, we sow and plough today."

On Saturday, Levit received the annual prize for understanding and tolerance, which is awarded by the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB). The press release from the JMB declared, "Igor Levit does not recognise any separation

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between the aesthetic and everyday, between music and social engagement."

Levit was among the most important political voices of his generation and took a clear stand against anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and sexism towards women, according to the JMB. "For Igor Levit, who sent a signal of togetherness with more than 50 concerts streamed on Twitter earlier this year in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, showing solidarity in his artistic work is also essential," it continued.

The jury from the executive of the Friends of the Jewish Museum Berlin was not merely recognising an exceptional pianist, "but an exceptional human being with an engagement that is as persistent as it is humane," it explained.

In addition, support for Levit continues to grow. This makes clear how widespread the opposition to the AfD is among broad layers of the population. In magazines and on Twitter, anger over the anti-Semitic diatribes against Levit continues, while his political engagement against the right-wing and openly fascist AfD is winning strong support.

"He should carry on what he's doing," wrote a *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reader from Mainz. He had to read Mauro's article twice because he could not believe what was in it and "just felt angry." It used a "music critique with which I do not agree" as a cover for a political attack. The applause from the far right is revealing. It is inexplicable why "the SZ offers the author a platform for this." "I can only encourage Igor Levit to continue his engagement outside the concert hall," the reader continued.

An SZ reader from Hamburg wrote that while one can always argue over musical interpretations, it is unacceptable to "mockingly take him to task for combatting the right-wing enemy on a daily basis." "This pianist from a Russian-Jewish family, who grew up and trained in Germany, needs to be led onto the stage in the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg by four bodyguards because he has received death threats (!)." It is to be welcomed that he did not allow acts of violence like that in front of a synagogue in Hamburg to silence him. "It is incredible to link this with an 'ideology of victimhood' and accuse Levit of 'his *ceterum censeo* ,' that the AfD is a Nazi Party."

Under the heading "grey zone for anti-Semitism," a reader wrote, "Using Daniil Trifonov so shabbily in this disgusting game is repugnant, cheap, and totally unprofessional." The statements by "Mr. Mauro on the theme of anti-Semitism" are for her "repugnant and terrifying."

A reader from Cologne wrote that the article on Levit deeply affected her. "As the descendant of someone who was pursued during the Third Reich, it feels threatening when the public positions of a Jew are criticised in the SZ (!) in such a way." Precisely at a time "when anti-Semites are sitting in Germany's parliament and there are massive neo-Nazi activities in the security forces," it is "outrageous" to "stab a Jewish artist and public intellectual in the back or dismiss his right to be one."

With his public appearances during the coronavirus pandemic, Levit has made "a tremendous contribution to the revival of musical performances," and has thus justly received public acclaim. The SZ diatribe does not disqualify Levit, but the offending article's author, wrote readers from Berlin.

The sustained support for Levit makes clear that the mood in the population is left-wing, opposed to the AfD and its far-right policies, while on the other hand the right-wing parties are celebrated and promoted by the media. The anti-Semitic attacks on Levit were not a one-time blunder by an excessively daring writer, but rather part of a systematic campaign to intimidate politically serious artists. This is why the article is still celebrated and promoted in right-wing media outlets.

The ruling elite fears socially conscious and politically engaged artists that set themselves the task of raising the political and cultural level of the working class.

The correctness of our assessment made several days ago has been shown, when we wrote, "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."

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