

The campaign against Russian conductor Valery Gergiev: Middle-class hysteria in the service of war

Tom Hall
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Following the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and after months of endless pro-war propaganda by Western governments and the corporate media, a chauvinist anti-Russian campaign is now underway in the US and Western Europe. Its targets include Russian musicians, conductors and singers.

Late Thursday, management at New York City's Carnegie Hall announced that acclaimed Russian conductor Valery Gergiev would no longer be conducting the Vienna Philharmonic at the famed venue on Friday. Management also canceled a performance by respected pianist Denis Matsuev, who had been scheduled to perform Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No.2.

Gergiev, 68, is among the most accomplished and respected figures in world classical music today, a field in which Russian and formerly Soviet artists have excelled. His international career began during the Cold War with a performance in Britain in 1985, at a time when the Reagan administration had ratcheted up tensions with the Soviet Union to the extreme. A quarter century ago, Gergiev was made principal guest conductor of New York's Metropolitan Opera.

No reason was given for the removal of Gergiev from the program, but it was clearly carried out in retaliation for his support for Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom Gergiev met in St. Petersburg in the 1990s shortly after the dissolution of the USSR. Protests were evidently planned to take place in front of Carnegie Hall during the performance, prompting management to buckle to pressure. The *New York Times*, one of the chief clearinghouses for CIA propaganda, noted the cancellation with cynical satisfaction, labeling Gergiev not a musician but an agent of Russian soft-power politics, a "cultural ambassador" who has "built a busy international career while maintaining deep ties to the Russian state."

Gergiev's other international engagements are also threatened as well, and the continuation of his international career is being made subject to modern-day loyalty oaths. Milan's La Scala opera house has threatened to drop a March 5 appearance if Gergiev does not publicly denounce Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Munich's mayor has given him three days to issue such a statement or face removal as chair of the

Munich Philharmonic. Rotterdam is also reportedly considering canceling a Gergiev Festival scheduled for September.

There is staggering hypocrisy behind this campaign. It goes without saying that not a single figure in American music has ever faced any retribution for supporting the wars in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya ... and the list goes on. The *Times* and the Democratic Party also make no attempt to reconcile their support for banning Russian musicians with their opposition to boycotts of Israeli intellectuals and academics for that country's oppression of the Palestinians and recurring mass atrocities in the tiny Gaza Strip.

The claim is being made that Gergiev is being singled out not because he's a Russian, but because of his backing for Putin. Should every US musician, artist or scientist who ever visited the White House, or served on an advisory panel on cultural or scientific affairs, have his or her career ended because of the American government's vast crimes? Is every Hollywood celebrity who publicly endorsed Barack Obama responsible for his "Terror Tuesday" meetings where the president and other officials went over "kill lists" of potential drone strike targets?

Many other Russian classical performers now face similar threats, and the campaign has even expanded beyond individuals with any connection to Putin, to Russian music and culture in general. The Eurovision Song Contest has announced it will not accept entries this year from Russia, claiming the presence of musicians who happened to have been born in that country "would bring the competition to disrepute." Various orchestras have even begun removing pieces by Pyotr Tchaikovsky and other Russian composers who died a century or more before the war in Ukraine began.

This disgusting spectacle is the product of war fever whipped up by the US government with the help of the pliant capitalist press, including the *Times*, the *Washington Post* and other pillars of what once passed for American liberalism.

This campaign to promote anti-Russian hatred has little popular support. It is largely centered in sections of the privileged middle class. Polls have consistently shown that the vast majority of the US public opposes war with Russia, or even significant American involvement in Ukraine, but one

would have no sense of this by reading through the comments sections of the *Times*. The latter are dominated by furious statements blaming Putin for every conceivable social ill both foreign and domestic. Shamefully, hardly a single major academic, writer or intellectual can be found to oppose this.

This social layer has proven extremely vulnerable to this type of manipulation. For years, the affluent petty bourgeoisie has been in the grip of one witch-hunting campaign after another, which have destroyed innumerable careers on the basis of allegations and innuendo. This includes the #MeToo attacks on opera singer Plácido Domingo and Metropolitan Opera director James Levine.

Dominating these campaigns are appeals to emotion, attacks on due process, the denigration and falsification of history and a worldview dominated by race and ethnicity, which have led to a shocking deadening of democratic consciousness within this milieu. But this outlook also reflects the class interests of this social stratum, which long ago made its peace with world imperialism.

Such people write and speak as though they lived the past three decades in a parallel universe in which the “Global War on Terror” and numerous “wars of choice” by American imperialism, all of them based on a torrent of lies and misinformation, never took place.

The attack on Gergiev and other artists—and this is only the start—has disturbing historical parallels. Some of the worst political crimes in 20th century US history were preceded by the creation of this type of frenzied jingoistic atmosphere. Vicious attacks on German immigrants occurred during World War I, including the murder of socialist coal miner Robert Prager in Collinsville, Illinois in April 1918. World War II witnessed the infamous mass internment of Japanese Americans by the Roosevelt administration.

These chauvinist campaigns also created the conditions for a wide-ranging assault on socialist opponents of war, including the arrest of Eugene Debs in 1918 and the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party in 1941.

There are currently 2.4 million Russian-Americans living in the US, including nearly 400,000 born in Russia or the former Soviet Union. Are they to be treated as well as potential enemy agents, organized and directed by Putin through RT and other Russian media outlets? Will they also be forced to publicly denounce the Russian government and its actions as a condition for keeping their jobs? Indeed, on Thursday Democratic congressman Eric Swalwell floated the possibility of expelling Russian international students from the United States as a form of collective punishment for the actions of the Kremlin.

There is a disturbing similarity between the campaign against Gergiev and the attack during World War I on Karl Muck, the German-born director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Muck was forced out of his position, arrested at night and interned for 17 months as an “enemy alien” after a press campaign over his supposed “refusal” to perform the *Star*

Spangled Banner before concerts.

In response, Muck pointed to the universality of music and rejected its subordination to nationalism, declaring, “Art is a thing by itself, and not related to any particular nation or group. Therefore, it would be a gross mistake, a violation of artistic taste and principles for such an organization as ours to play patriotic airs. Does the public think that the Symphony Orchestra is a military band or a ballroom orchestra?”

The campaign against Russian musicians is aimed at poisoning public consciousness and depriving people of the sensitivity and human solidarity that great music always encourages.

The exchange of musicians between the US and the Soviet Union played a role in alleviating tensions, and inculcating mutual respect for the cultural achievements of both countries, largely limiting the spread of the most visceral forms of anti-Russian hatred to the extreme right. This history includes tours by great Soviet musicians in the US and the renowned international tours by American jazz musicians. In 1958, Texas-born Van Cliburn made an enormous impact on the Soviet public when he won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow.

Within the working class, a different attitude prevails. Decades of US invasions and wars, whose victims include American working class youth, have produced a deeply ingrained skepticism about Washington’s claims to be fighting for “national sovereignty” and “human rights.” Workers have learned through bitter experiences that behind such rhetoric lie the interests of the ruling elite. And they know, as always, it will be the workers of the world who will be made to pay the price.

The greatest danger, however, is that this latent opposition remains diffuse, unorganized and politically inarticulate. If the drive towards World War III is to be stopped, the working class must mobilize on a socialist, internationalist basis to stop it.



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