

Metropolitan Opera announces the banning of soprano Anna Netrebko

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World-famous Russian soprano Anna Netrebko has been banned by the Metropolitan Opera for this year and next, in the latest fallout from the anti-Russian war drive in the cultural arena.

Met General Manager Peter Gelb issued a statement on Thursday punishing Netrebko because of the ongoing war and the US-NATO response. Netrebko has been replaced in half a dozen performances of Puccini's *Turandot* beginning April 30, as well as in next season's performances of Verdi's *Don Carlo*, scheduled for next November.

"It is a great artistic loss for the Met and for opera," Gelb said with self-conscious solemnity. "Anna is one of the greatest singers in Met history, but with Putin killing innocent victims in Ukraine there was no way forward." While Netrebko's dates were canceled for the next two seasons, Gelb also added, "It's hard to imagine a scenario in which she will return to the Met."

In fact, even though her position on the war should not affect her career, Netrebko had issued a statement of opposition to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Earlier in the week, she had made her position clear. "I am opposed to this senseless war of aggression, and I am calling on Russia to end this war right now, to save all of us," she said.

Undoubtedly anticipating announcements like Gelb's, Netrebko added, "We need peace right now. This is not the time for me to make music and perform. I have therefore decided to take a step back from performing for the time being. It is an extremely difficult decision for me, but I know that my audience will understand and respect this decision." The singer later said, "I am Russian, and I love my country, but I have many friends in Ukraine, and the pain and suffering right now breaks my heart. I want this war to end and for people to be able to live in peace."

Netrebko's public position, because it did not include a specific denunciation of Vladimir Putin, did not satisfy Mr. Gelb and others. As the headline in the *New York Times* cynically summed it up, "Met Opera to Russian Diva: No Disavowal, No Bookings." Behind-the-scenes discussions apparently failed to get Netrebko to issue a more complete endorsement of NATO war aims, including perhaps an implicit endorsement of regime change in Moscow. The announcement that she had been banned followed.

Gelb and other arbiters of free speech for singers and musicians were particularly dissatisfied with Netrebko's further statement that "forcing artists, or any public figure, to voice their political opinions in public and to denounce their homeland is not right." "I am not a political person, I am not an expert in politics," she also wrote. "I am an artist, and my purpose is to unite people across political divides."

Gelb, somewhat nervous over the implications of his action, attempted to justify the blackballing of Netrebko by saying "We're not undertaking an artistic witch-hunt. We're not interviewing or interrogating any artists about their positions." But they *are* in fact "interrogating" Netrebko, and clearly suggesting that artists at the Met would be risking their careers if they contradict the policies of the U.S. State Department and the propaganda of the corporate media.

In the world of opera, Anna Netrebko is the most prominent casualty of the imperialist war drive. Conductor Valery Gergiev, who has often appeared at the Met but whose career is mainly in the symphonic concert hall, has also been ostracized.

Now 50 years old, Netrebko made her Met debut almost exactly 20 years ago, in Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. She quickly endeared herself to opera audiences in North America as well as Europe. She has made

nearly 200 appearances at the Met, singing in Russian, Italian and French in more than 15 operas, including Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Don Pasquale* and *L'Elisir d'Amore*, Bellini's *I Puritani*, Verdi's *Macbeth*, *Il Trovatore* and *Rigoletto*, Puccini's *Tosca* and *La bohème*, Massenet's *Manon*, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and more.

The WSWS has already made clear the outrageous hypocrisy of the demands placed before Netrebko, Gergiev and others, in light of the record of US and NATO aggression, especially since the dissolution of the USSR 30 years ago. There were no demands for American musicians to denounce the invasion of Iraq 19 years ago as a condition for continuing to perform, nor were such demands made in connection with the numerous war crimes since then, under every US president.

New York Times chief music critic Zachary Woolfe, in a lengthy article this week trying to justify the banning of Gergiev and Netrebko, compared them to Wilhelm Furtwängler, the famous conductor who continued his career under the Nazis while claiming that music stood above politics. Woolfe's unstated premise is the equation of the Putin regime with that of Adolf Hitler. But it is not the reactionary Putin regime that has played the main role here, but rather the imperialist powers which have encircled Russia in the last three decades, shamelessly breaking promises they made in the final days of the Gorbachev regime in Moscow.

All of this is conveniently overlooked in the interests of depicting Ukraine as the victim of Russian "imperialism," while the imperialists, who have laid waste to numerous oppressed and poor countries while presiding over historically unprecedented social inequality in their own countries and all over the world, are presented as the saviors of "democracy"!

Woolfe ignores a far more appropriate comparison. Although the circumstances are different, including the social and class character of the Soviet Union and present-day Russia, there is a definite similarity between the treatment of Netrebko and that meted out to the greatest bass-baritone of his day, the incomparable Paul Robeson. Because he would not abandon his political views during the Cold War and the McCarthyite witch-hunt, Robeson's passport was confiscated and his national and international career

was virtually destroyed.

Self-described "progressives," a label that Woolfe would probably embrace, today proclaim themselves ashamed of the McCarthy period and the treatment of figures like Robeson and Pete Seeger. However, they hypocritically see nothing wrong with applying the same censorship and blacklisting to musical figures today.



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