

The anti-democratic targeting of Russian pianist Alexander Malofeev

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The cancellations of concerts by Russian pianist Alexander Malofeev in Vancouver and Montreal in Canada are inexcusable and reactionary. They only encourage and deepen the anti-Russian frenzy gripping certain social layers.

Malofeev, born in Moscow, is an acclaimed performer at the age of 20, the latest, as critics have observed, in the long line of Russian piano virtuosos dating back to the 19th century.

Only 20, “but looks much younger,” as the critics also invariably comment.

The Vancouver Recital Society, under pressure from various right-wing elements, announced the cancellation of Malofeev’s concert last week. Leila Getz, founder and artistic director of the Society, told the media that she felt “horrible” about the decision.

Getz, who said she had been trying to book Malofeev for years, told the *Vancouver Sun*: “I’m not a monster. I’m not a bigot. I care deeply about Alexander Malofeev.” She added, “But I feel more comfortable doing this than I do bringing him to Vancouver. I feel like I’m damned if I do, damned if I don’t.”

It is revealing how these things work out in such circles. Getz feels “horrible,” she is apparently very conflicted, yet individuals like this at present almost always capitulate to the worst social elements and the basest moods.

On Tuesday, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (OSM) announced the cancellation of three performances by Malofeev with conductor Michael Tilson Thomas scheduled for this week, on the grounds of “the serious impact on the civilian population of Ukraine caused by the Russian invasion.” It would be “inappropriate to receive Mr. Malofeev this week,” according to the OSM. What does one part of this statement have to do with the other? How is Malofeev responsible for the situation in Ukraine? Why in the world would his performing be inappropriate?

More generally, what does it say about the “democratic” content of the mind-numbing US, Canadian and European propaganda campaign that it relies on the whipping up of chauvinism and ethnic hatred?

Hypocritically, Montreal orchestra officials went on, “We continue, however, to believe in the importance of maintaining relationships with artists of all nationalities who embrace messages of peace and hope.” In other words, “we believe” in such relationships except when “we” come under any pressure and when standing up for principle might have some actual consequence. “We look forward to welcoming this exceptional artist when the context allows it,” i.e., when we can do so without sticking our necks out by so much as six inches.

The *Montreal Gazette* reports that the decision followed a “request” by members “of the Ukrainian community that the orchestra cancel Malofeev’s performances. Initially, the OSM declined, noting that the young pianist had distanced himself from the Russian regime,” but then proceeded to give in to this right-wing, nationalist lobby, which has the endorsement of the Canadian government.

The *Gazette* was honest enough to note that the current boycott of

Russian musicians “contrasts sharply with the role the music world played in building bridges at the height of the Cold War. In 1958, Texan pianist Van Cliburn sparked a rare moment of détente when he won the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, coming home to a ticker-tape parade in New York.” The newspaper further cited the comments of Yakov Rabkin, a professor emeritus of history at the Université de Montréal, who said he opposed the boycott of Russian musicians. “I don’t think it helps anyone. It just creates hatred against Russians,” Rabkin said.

The Vancouver Recital Society claimed it was canceling Malofeev’s concert because he had not yet spoken up about the war. In response to that cancellation, Malofeev explained his position. On March 2, on Facebook, he observed “that every Russian will feel guilty for decades because of the terrible and bloody decision that none of us could influence and predict.” Then the Montreal symphony went ahead and canceled their performances anyway! Brave, principled souls!

On March 7, Malofeev commented further on Facebook that it was very “painful” to see what was happening. “I have never seen so much hatred going in all directions,” he said, “in Russia and around the world. Most of the people with whom I have personally communicated these days are guided by only one feeling—fear.” The pianist explained that he had felt “uncomfortable” about making a public statement on the war, concerned as well “that it can affect my family in Russia.”

He continued, “I still believe Russian culture and music specifically should not be tarnished by the ongoing tragedy, though it is impossible to stay aside now. Honestly, the only thing I can do now is to pray and cry.”

Malofeev observed that there were obvious conclusions to be drawn, “no problem can be solved by war, people cannot be judged by their nationality.” But why, in the course of a few days, he wondered, “has the whole world rolled back into a state where every person has a choice between fear and hatred?” After acknowledging that his problems were insignificant compared to those of people in Ukraine, including his relatives there, the young musician wrote, “The most important thing now is to stop the blood. All I know is that the spread of hatred will not help in any way, but only cause more suffering.”

Sadly, he later added on Facebook, “I have already arrived in Montreal. But unfortunately, it is impossible to hold them [the concerts] due to political reasons. I sincerely apologize to the audience.”

On Facebook, numerous commentators responded sympathetically. Obviously, many of these people were already admirers of Malofeev and predisposed to react positively. Still, it is encouraging to see that not everyone falls for the current warmongering vitriol.

One comment read, “You are young and vulnerable. Your real thoughts come through loud and clear. As a sensitive and educated person, no doubt you feel great sadness at what’s going on but, unfortunately, it’s going to be hard to stop it.”

A second observed, “As a world, we have managed to get ourselves into a shameful mess. Please know that your music has lifted our hearts

out of this tragedy. We admire you and we love you.”

A third: “Russian Culture has nothing to do with war and it is very sad that the most beautiful expression of beauty and peace, Art and Music, should be related to violence and war.”

Other comments:

“Damn stupid war! That war is not your responsibility ... so stay strong and stay safe!!!”

“I hope that people who are rightly upset by the ‘operation’ in Ukraine will try to contribute to peace and goodness by treating a Russian person with fairness and respect.”

“Wise words from a 20-year-old and peaceloving musician. He should be an example for many older people.”

“Like you I’m filled with sadness at the situation you, your family and friends are in. I’m always asking myself, why do we so often end up with useless, self-serving, corrupt and cruel leaders?”

“Reason needs time to be heard. You are right and I think it is only a kind of desperation that causes this situation.”

“Please know that most Americans understand that the Russian people are not our enemies. Unfortunately, all nations are subject to their leadership.”

Malofeev came to international prominence after winning the first prize and Gold Medal at the 2014 International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians held in Moscow.

As a soloist, Malofeev has already appeared with many leading orchestras in Russia. He has also toured Asia with the Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala under conductor Riccardo Chailly and performed with the Mariinsky Orchestra in St. Petersburg commemorating the 175th anniversary of Rimsky-Korsakov’s birth, with the Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra in Tokyo and with the Orchestra of the National Academy of Santa Cecilia in Rome.

Chailly told the *Corriere della Sera* in 2019, “I first heard Malofeev when [conductor] Valery Gergiev performed with him at the Teatro alla Scala [in Milan] three years ago. He was only 14, and he amazed me with his talent. Because that is not just a child prodigy: he is very young, but already possesses depth and technical abilities, and also musical and mnemonic, which makes him an excellent interpreter of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 3, which is a problem for many pianists in the world.”

More recently, the *Boston Classical Review* commented that it was all too common “for many young virtuosos to offer more flair than substance. But Alexander Malofeev is no ordinary prodigy.” Although only 20, the publication wrote, “the Russian pianist plays with the probing interpretative depths of renowned artists twice his age. His maturity and sense of phrasing, balance, and direction were even evident as a child.”

In a 2020 interview with the Russian magazine, *Musical Life*, in answer to a question as to how his concerts were changing as he matured, Malofeev explained that “new colors” appeared with “every new performance. Something elusive and unrepeatable happens on stage, something, that cannot be played the same way ever again. Of course, a performance of Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 3 requires serious technical skills, which have clearly evolved since I was 13. But this concert is like a spark, like a meteor, and only after playing it more than 20 times, it feels like it shrinks to a single tiny pixel, flying overhead, like a comet, and disappearing. That’s the way I feel it.”

Many of Malofeev’s performances are available online, including his renditions of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 3, Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 3, Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No.1, Gershwin’s Piano Concerto in F and others.

Meanwhile, the reactionary attacks continue.

•On March 5, according to *Hyperallergic*, “a group of 15 artists and activists from Ukraine and elsewhere” released 350 paper planes from the top of the rotunda at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. The paper planes called for a “No Fly Zone Over Ukraine.” The planes further

asserted that Vladimir Putin was planning “to blow up the largest nuclear plant in Europe, in order to wipe out the Ukrainian population.”

The “artists” in question were demanding in effect that the US and NATO take significant steps toward launching a Third World War. On Twitter, the reactions to this reckless and deranged leaflet were overwhelmingly negative. One commentator wrote: “What happened to artists being anti-war and anti-nukes? Or do they just not understand that a no fly zone means shooting down Russian jets? That would start WW3, with nukes 1000X more powerful than the 2 dropped in WW2.”

• The Cardiff (Wales) Philharmonic Orchestra has canceled an all-Tchaikovsky concert scheduled for March 18. “In light of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine,” the announcement read, the orchestra “feel the previously advertised programme including the 1812 Overture to be inappropriate at this time.” Tchaikovsky was unceremoniously ousted in favor of John Williams, Dvořák and Elgar. The orchestra “hope you will continue to support them and enjoy the revised programme.”

• Netflix has halted “production on all upcoming Russian-language series,” according to the Hollywood Reporter, and is “pausing future acquisitions from Russia.” Netflix had four Russian series planned or already shot: “*Zato*, a Neo-noir detective drama; *Anna K*, a contemporary retelling of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* that would be Netflix’s first Russian original series; *Nothing Special*, a drama about a young actor working at a charity for people with disabilities; and a fourth untitled series.”

•Tugan Sokhiev, music director and principal conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre, has resigned under pressure “due to calls to take a position on the war in Ukraine.” Sokhiev, considered a protégé of Valery Gergiev, resigned “with immediate effect” from the Moscow theater, reports *Al Jazeera*, as well as from “his equivalent position at France’s Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse.”

The conductor indicated he decided to resign after “being forced to face the impossible option of choosing between my beloved Russian and beloved French musicians.” According to *Al Jazeera*, Sokhiev said that “I have never supported and I will always be against any conflicts in any shape and form.” He added that musicians were becoming “victims of so-called ‘cancel culture’” and suggested Russian music could come under threat. “I will be soon asked to choose between Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy,” he commented ominously.



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