

Giving in to anti-Russian prejudice, New York Philharmonic cancels appearances by conductor Tugan Sokhiev

David Walsh
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The New York Philharmonic announced on Friday that Russian conductor Tugan Sokhiev would not appear as scheduled with the orchestra at performances March 31 to April 2. The Philharmonic, in its press release, asserted that the change had been made “out of regard for the current global situation” and “following discussions” with Sokhiev.

The program of the three concerts, which features works by Russian composers (Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev), will remain the same. Sokhiev will be replaced by Anna Rakitina, Assistant Conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in her Philharmonic debut. According to her website, Rakitina was born in Moscow to a Ukrainian father and Russian mother.

The Philharmonic attempted to obscure its capitulation to anti-Russian chauvinism and war fever in a number of self-contradictory ways. First, the press release announcing the cancellation of Sokhiev’s appearances explained that the Philharmonic “very much looks forward to welcoming him [Sokhiev] next season.”

Furthermore, the *New York Times*, which operates to interpret and make palatable this sort of unpleasant business for its upper middle class readership, asserted that the orchestra “described the change as a mutual decision.” The newspaper cited the comment of Sylvie Bouchard, Sokhiev’s manager, to the same effect, that the decision “was made mutually.” It may have been, but how much genuine choice were Sokhiev and his management team given in the matter?

The *Times* then noted that the Philharmonic’s president and chief executive Deborah Borda commented in an interview that the orchestra “had a ‘wonderful relationship’ with Sokhiev, who led a week of performances in New York in 2018. ‘We pray for peace,’ she said. ‘We pray for peace for him.’”

Borda added, according to the *Times*, “that the Philharmonic was committed to presenting Russian musicians and works by Russian composers. But she said

that the orchestra would not present artists if they had direct ties to Putin or his government. ‘These are very nuanced decisions,’ she said. ‘One cannot make blanket decisions about this. It’s not black or white.’”

Very nuanced indeed. The decision in this case apparently hinges on Rakitina having at least one parent with the proper bloodline. There is no indication that Sokhiev has ties to Vladimir Putin or the Russian government. And he has publicly spoken out against the invasion of Ukraine.

Reading between the lines, the Philharmonic officialdom seems to be saying, “This is not a decision of our liking, we are not anti-Russian hysterics, but we are under pressure from such people ...” Which is worse, to openly advocate chauvinism and warmongering, or to acknowledge caving into it? “We don’t make the poison, we just pass it on.”

In any case, we are not the only ones confused by the Philharmonic’s mixed signals. Below an article on the *Slipped Disc* website regarding Sokhiev’s replacement, a commentator wrote pointedly, “I actually don’t understand. So he’s ‘welcome next season’ but not this season, just because ... he’s Russian? And not for any particular view he has voiced in support of Putin in the past? And if Putin’s war extends to next season, he’ll be re-postponed and re-welcomed the following season? If every American conductor was treated like that during every American war, American conductors would have no job.”

As we have previously reported, Sokhiev resigned two weeks ago as music director and principal conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre, as well as from the same position at France’s Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, under pressure to take a position on the war in Ukraine.

In a Facebook comment on March 6, Sokhiev explained, “I have never supported and I will always be against any conflicts in any shape and form. For some people even to question my desire of peace and think that me, as a musician could ever speak for anything other than Peace on our planet is shocking and offensive.”

Sokhiev further observed that during the “various catastrophic geopolitical events” of the past two decades, “I always remained with my fellow musicians and we always, together, showed and expressed the support and compassion for all the victims of those conflicts. This is what we musicians do, we express things with music, we say emotional things with music, we comfort with music those who need it. We musicians are the lucky ones to be able to speak this international language that can sometimes express more than any words known to civilisation.”

The conductor, considered to be one of the most promising of his generation, added that he was proud to come “from such a rich cultural country as Russia and I am also very proud to be part of rich French musical life since 2003. This is what music does. It connects people and artists from different continents and cultures, it heals souls across the borders and gives hope for peaceful existence on this planet. Music can be dramatic, lyrical, funny, sad but never offensive!”

Sokhiev pointed out that during his tenure at the Bolshoi and in Toulouse, “I regularly invited Ukrainian singers and conductors. We never even thought about our nationalities. We were enjoying making music together. And it still remains the case.”

He criticized local politicians and administrators in Toulouse for opposing the Franco-Russian festival he had launched in that city: “What a shame. And they want *me* to express myself for peace! I believe that this festival can achieve more in building bridges than political words.”

The conductor, born in 1977 in Vladikavkaz, Ossetia in the North Caucasus, expressed his dismay at having “to make a choice and choose one of my musical family over the other. I am being asked to choose one cultural tradition over the other. I am being asked to choose one artist over the other. I am being asked to choose one singer over the other. I will be soon asked to choose between Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy. It is already happening in Poland, [a] European country, where Russian music is forbidden.”

Sokhiev concluded his moving statement by asserting that “We musicians are there to remind through [the] music of Shostakovich about [the] horrors of war. We musicians are the ambassadors of peace. Instead of using us and our music to unite nations and people we are being divided and ostracised.”

The boycotting or banning of Russian musicians is widespread. A concert venue in Ittingen, Switzerland, for example, recently announced it was canceling an appearance concert by young Russian cellist Anastasia Kobekina.

The Strad, in an article headlined “Russian cellist cancelled, despite condemning war,” noted that Kobekina

was to appear in concert March 20 with pianist Jean-Sélim Abdelmoula at the Kartause Ittingen (Ittingen Charterhouse), a former monastery.

The article, remarkably, explains that the decision was made “due to Kobekina’s nationality.” *The Strad* writes: “Posted on Kobekina’s Instagram account, a translation of the concert organiser’s decision stated, ‘The reason is the nationality of the artist, but not the young artist herself. Anastasia Kobekina vehemently condemns Russia’s war against Ukraine.’ This occurs as numerous competitions and festivals are taking active measures not to discriminate against Russian musicians.” In other words, the venue’s decision was an unalloyed surrender to ethnic prejudice and hatred.

According to Kobekina’s website, “Born in Russia [in 1994] into a family of musicians, she received her first cello lessons at the age of four. Following the completion of her studies in Moscow, she was invited to study at the Kronberg Academy in Germany with Frans Helmerson. She continued her studies at the University of Arts in Berlin (Prof. Jens Peter Maintz) and then in the Conservatoire of Paris with Jérôme Pernoo. Currently, she is doing her postgraduation in baroque Violoncello with Kristin von der Goltz at the Frankfurter Hochschule.”

As a soloist, Kobekina has performed with world-famous orchestras such as the Konzerthausorchester Berlin, Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, Wiener Symphoniker, the BBC Philharmonic, Kremerata Baltica, Mariinsky Theater Orchestra, the Moscow Virtuosi, the Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra Moscow, and under the guidance of conductors Krzysztof Penderecki, Valery Gergiev, Heinrich Schiff, Omer Meir Wellber, Vladimir Spivakov and Dmitri Kitayenko.

But she was born in Russia ...



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