

National Opera of Belgium announces season “in which Russian titles feature more prominently than ever”

David Walsh
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In an obvious effort to counter the intense Russophobia that has taken hold of the European and North American music and artistic world generally, the National Opera of Belgium, to its credit, has announced “a totally unplanned-for season in which Russian titles feature more prominently than ever.”

Those works include the operas *The Queen of Spades* (1890) and *Eugene Onegin* (1879) by Tchaikovsky and *The Nose* (1930) by Shostakovich, along with pieces by Russian composers Prokofiev, Glinka, Glière, Rachmaninoff and Rimsky-Korsakov featured in various concerts and recitals.

As we have noted on the WSWS, outstanding Russian conductors, singers and musicians such as Valery Gergiev, Tugan Sokhiev, Anna Netrebko and Alexander Malofeev have become victims of the lynch mob atmosphere incited by the Biden administration and Western European governments. The anti-Russian propaganda is aimed both at stupefying the various populations and stampeding them into war and at concealing the cynical manner in which the conflict has been deliberately provoked and ignited by the US and its NATO allies.

In a press release, Peter de Caluwe, the general and artistic director of La Monnaie (the company takes its name from the Brussels opera house in which it performs, once the site of a government mint), explained the company’s reasoning.

“We are aware,” observed de Caluwe, “that this programming might well raise questions and perhaps even trigger discussion or dismay. We have nevertheless decided to run with what was planned, or rather, what has become a cluster of Russian titles to be performed in one and the same season as a result of the COVID pandemic preventing us from performing them according to the original schedule.” The director continued, pointedly, “So

while the cluster was not intentional, it provides us with an unexpected opportunity to endorse our intrinsic mission: to unite, bring together and build bridges between people.”

De Caluwe went on to explain that he considered the opera company “to be an anti-war and pro-peace institution, as borne out by our position in the heart of the capital of Europe, by our purpose, our programming, our leadership style and our way of working. Our model is one of harmony, not conflict.”

After explaining that La Monnaie “condemns the devastating aggression against Ukraine by the Russian regime and expresses its solidarity with the populations who are suffering the terrible consequences of this unnecessary war,” the company’s director expressed “support for those artists who are committed to peace and who oppose, each in their own way and with great courage, this unacceptable aggression.”

In an important passage, de Caluwe explained that he and his opera “believe that Russian culture continues to be part of our common heritage. European arts, literature, film and music will always be linked to Russian culture, which has given life to some of the continent’s most inspiring works that we share.” We cannot erase history, he pointed out. “On the contrary,” the statement argued, “the great immortal works of art confront us with ourselves and with the times in which we live. Our mistakes too, and how to avoid them. From this point of view, it is clear to us that the Russian repertoire cannot be banned, but must continue to be staged and presented.”

De Caluwe further argued that both Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich had been “victims of previous Russian regimes” and had “suffered enough under the political conditions of their time.”

He went on to indicate that opera, in his view,

represented “the best example of collaborative work: so many male and female artists, technicians, artisans, etc., from every corner of the world working side by side on a production. No fewer than thirty-eight nationalities have permanent jobs at La Monnaie.” During the company’s next season, de Caluwe pointed out, “Russian and Ukrainian artists will be working alongside many other nationalities. It is the responsibility of our institutions to continue to engage collaborators and artists regardless of nationality so as to show the world just what can be achieved by bringing together people, communities, generations and cultures. Art is and remains the domain of freedom, exchange, understanding and humanism. We are here to make art, not war.”

One of the recitals at La Monnaie next season will feature soprano Olga Peretyatko “daughter of a Ukrainian father and Russian mother,” who, according to the company’s website, “wanted to pay homage to the music of her country of birth, with the most beautiful melodies and the most intimate songs of Sergei Rachmaninoff, Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.”

In this heavily Russian-influenced season, a January 8, 2023 concert will include Mikhail Glinka’s overture from his opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), allowing the company’s orchestra to travel “all the way back to the first Russian steps into the world of classical music. Afterwards, [Armenian-American] Sergei Babayan will be starring in the Third Piano Concerto by Prokofiev, a competition classic.”

Referring to Alain Altinoglu, a French conductor of Armenian descent, who has been at the Belgian opera company since 2016, the website notes that “anyone who is familiar with our Music director will know all too well that Russian musical storytelling is where he feels at home.”

Under previously existing conditions, de Caluwe’s statement and the company’s artistic choices would hardly have stood out. Today, they seem positively courageous.



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