

# Calgary's Honens International Piano Competition forced to revoke ban on Russian musicians after outcry

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The eruption of the US-NATO proxy war with Russia following the Putin regime's reactionary invasion of Ukraine has resulted in Russian musicians, such as the young Alexander Malofeev and Anastasia Kobekina, having their forthcoming concerts cancelled by organizers in Canada and Switzerland, respectively, simply because they were born in Russia.

Kobekina and Malofeev have joined the ranks of proscribed artists like soprano Anna Netrebko and conductor Valery Gergiev as part of the indiscriminate banning of Russian artists, which has been spearheaded by a hysterical demonization of everything Russian by sections of the affluent middle class.

The anti-Russian fervour has also been on display at the Honens International Piano Competition in Calgary, Alberta. An official statement March 8 from the Board of Directors initially revoked the invitations to six Russian pianists, Timofey Dolya (28), Anna Geniushene (31), Maxim Kinasov (29), Elizaveta Kliuchereva (23), Sergey Tanin (27) and Dmitry Yudin (21). None of them have any connection to Vladimir Putin, nor have they made any public statements concerning the war.

The Board wrote of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, “[S]uch blatant acts of aggression and greed have no place in our world.” This was the excuse used to exclude the Russian pianists.

The Honens Board's reference to the “blatant acts of aggression and greed” seems to only apply to Russia. No American pianist—and rightly so—has ever been penalized for the US-led wars of the past three decades, including the 1991 Gulf War, Somalia, Serbia, Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the NATO-led destruction of Libya in 2011, the Syria civil war or the devastation and starvation of Yemen.

The reality is that decisions like those taken by the

Honens competition are aimed at whipping up a war fever. A “total war” atmosphere is deliberately being created, even though the US, UK, Canada and their NATO allies are not yet officially at war with Russia. But given the fact that all of eastern Europe is balancing on the edge of the abyss as NATO continues to funnel weapons—including S-300 anti-aircraft systems and tanks, as well as volunteers—into Ukraine, it is not difficult to imagine different scenarios where the situation could rapidly escalate into a world war fought with nuclear weapons.

The reactionary pro-war campaign targeting everything Russian has little popular support. This was underscored by the outcry that erupted against the decision of the Honens to unilaterally ban the Russian pianists, forcing the competition to perform an about-face and reinstate them.

The renowned Russian-American performer and pedagogue Kirill Gerstein, who currently teaches at the Hanns Eisler Hochschule in Berlin, condemned the decision on Twitter. Gerstein cited the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, noting that it asserts that “no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs.” He noted that “revoking invitations to six presumably innocent young musicians on the basis of their passport? How does this help?”

Similar sentiments were expressed in the comments section of the Honens' Board of Directors post on their Facebook page. There were nearly 300 comments on the post, many of them hostile to the blatant discrimination against the Russian musicians. One comment by Chantal Balestri, the president of the New York Chapter of the World Piano Teachers Association, indicated that some

contestants had withdrawn from the competition in opposition to the Board's decision. "I am glad to hear that some actual contestants are already refusing to participate," she wrote. "Please listen to them. They are renouncing one of their dreams to fight for justice."

On March 17, the Honens Board of Directors announced that "we have actively engaged in difficult conversations and individual reflection leading to a reconsideration of our decision. Ultimately, we have decided to reinstate competitors of Russian nationality."

No doubt considerations about funding and the reputation of the competition played a part in the about-face. Nevertheless, this decision would not have come about without the public outcry.

The coverage in the corporate-controlled media sought to bury the popular opposition to the racist ban. The limited coverage in the Canadian press simply regurgitated the talking points without interviewing any pianists or mentioning the outrage on social media.

Only one Russian pianist, Anna Geniushene—who will also be competing in the upcoming Van Cliburn competition in June—has withdrawn from the competition entirely. Two Italian pianists, Giovanni Bertolazzi and Federico Gad Crema; the American pianist Benjamin Dominguez; Bruce Liu, the Canadian pianist who won the Chopin Competition last year but received virtually no press coverage in English Canada; and the South Korean pianist Joon Yoon, who studies with Gerstein, have all withdrawn. Liu has just signed a contract with Deutsche Gramophone and is managed by the same firm as the young Russian cellist Anastasia Kobekina.

The Honens International Piano Competition was founded in 1991 by Esther Honens, a wealthy Albertan donor who was dying of Parkinson's disease. Her bequest left the competition an initial \$5 million. Since the 1990s, the triennial competition has become a major beacon for many pianists not only for the top prize, but for the access to managers, tours and promotions that come with it.

While the Honens and other competitions go to great lengths to claim that banning Russian pianists is intended to prevent "harm" to the other competitors or to "send a message" of support for "democracy" against "aggression," these moves actually express the interests of the greatest aggressor, American imperialism, and its allies. The affluent social layer that donates and dominates the boards of the various music competitions has, whether they are aware of it or not, a direct material stake in the subjugation of Russia by the Western imperialist powers. The same processes operating in the

US and Europe have been at work in Canada: the wealth of Canadian billionaires rose by \$78 billion during the first year of the pandemic while inflation has eaten away at workers' wages.

The opposition to the Honens decision reflects a healthy response among wider layers of musicians and artists to the vicious anti-Russia campaign. A petition on Change.org entitled "Stop the war against Ukraine and stop the blanket boycott against Russian and Belarusian artists" has attracted the signatures of several top-tier musicians. These include the conductors Sir Simon Rattle and Franz Welser-Möst; the pianists Leif Ove Andsnes, Jean-Efflam Bavouzet and Yefim Bronfman; and the violinists Nicola Benedetti and Patricia Kopatchinskaja.

While the sentiments in support of their Russian colleagues are no doubt well-meant, the political level of the text is very low. There is no mention of how the predatory moves of Washington fuelled the current conflict. Nor is there any mention of NATO's steady march to the borders of Russia, which has turned Europe once again into a powder keg. The statement also expresses support for the US-sponsored sanctions against Russia. Far from ending the war, the sanctions have made daily life far more difficult for the average Russian citizen, and workers around the world, who are bearing the brunt of price increases for basic necessities exacerbated by the disruption of trade and supply chains.

The movement that has, so far, forced the Honens competition to reconsider its unprincipled move, expresses something about the nature of music. Whatever the current challenges, it is clear that musicians, just as workers in all branches of industry, are more interconnected than ever before. Music, perhaps the most abstract of all art forms yet created by humanity, is universal in a way that transcends borders. Every musician banned simply to defend the interests of the rich and powerful is an affront to music and such affronts must be condemned by class conscious workers.



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