

# Violinist Dmitry Smirnov in concert: A courageous stand against the anti-Russia campaign

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The young Russian violinist Dmitry Smirnov was awarded the Osnabrück Music Prize at the concert in this city in northwest Germany that was held under the motto “Don’t burn bridges.” Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the program for the concert was changed, and the 27-year-old soloist played a violin concerto by the Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov instead of the originally planned Haydn concerto. In addition to another work by Silvestrov, the orchestra also performed Symphony No. 8 by Dmitri Shostakovich.

“It’s a statement to do a concert like this, where everyone works together,” the event’s conductor, Daniel Inbal, explained. “And music, after all, embodies the ideal of humanity coming together and building bridges.” In the laudatory speech for the prize the artistic director of the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, Benedikt Stampa, said via video, that Smirnov represented a new generation of musicians whose music easily transcended borders.

Smirnov himself, who has declined to make any public declaration on the war, emphasized that he was on the side of all those who want to build bridges. He had friends and family in both Russia and Ukraine. In an interview, he called for universal recognition of the composer Silvestrov.

As a young Soviet composer, Silvestrov, a longstanding cultural heavyweight in Ukraine, belonged to the Kiev avant-garde, which refused to comply with the stifling dictates of the Stalinist artistic policy of “Socialist Realism” and instead embraced international compositional trends. He later turned away from atonality, and his diverse oeuvre, partly influenced by Romanticism, ranges from symphonies to

“naïve” piano bagatelles. Resembling the work of the former Soviet-Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, Silvestrov’s music today is tinged with religion.

The young violinist Smirnov was fascinated by the stylistic diversity of the Violin Concerto, which is clearly related to Silvestrov’s international conception of music. In 2018, when the Violin Concerto was premiered in Weimar, Silvestrov was asked by a journalist whether a Ukrainian musician could best understand his work. Silvestrov responded in the negative and declared that he regarded himself as a European composer and pointed to the close links between Ukrainian and Russian culture. There are many Ukrainian influences, for example, in the work of the world-famous Russian composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky.

These international cultural links are looked upon unfavorably by today’s warmongers who seek to build artificial walls ideologically harkening back to the era of Stalin and Hitler when artists, whose loyalty to the state was in doubt, were denounced as hostile, rootless “cosmopolitans.” In the same vein, the former head of the Green Party’s Heinrich Böll Foundation in Kiev, Sergei Sumlenny, denounced Smirnov for being a Russian living in Switzerland and winning a German prize. Drawing from the playbook of racist identity politics he described Smirnov’s interpretation of the Silvestrov violin concerto as “cultural appropriation.”

The Ukrainian ambassador to Germany Andriy Melnyk ranted on Twitter. “I will never visit Osnabrück again. Have a nice day, you hypocritical ‘bridge builders.’ Such musical ‘bridges’ lead straight to hell.” Melnyk had already demonstratively refused to attend a solidarity concert for Ukraine in March

organized by the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who had also invited Russian musicians.

A number of people on Twitter have expressed their solidarity with the Russian artist, declaring they were happy to do without Melnyk's visit. Several tweets alluded to Melnyk's glorification of the Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and recommended that Melnyk quit Germany, stating there was no place for right-wingers like him in the country. Recently, both Melnyk and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky demonstratively backed the Azov Battalion, which is rooted in fascist traditions.

Shostakovich's 8th Symphony played at the concert was a timely reminder not only of the invasion of the USSR by the German army in 1941, but also of the fact that Ukrainian and Russian soldiers defended the Soviet Union together against Hitler during WWII. The symphony, completed in 1943, is one of Shostakovich's "war symphonies," along with his famous 7th, "Leningrad," Symphony, and his 9th Symphony.

Today, Dmitri Shostakovich is one of the most popular modern composers internationally. Almost everyone is familiar with his Leningrad Symphony. He has assumed a classic status like that of Beethoven. Both men were shaped by great social upheavals—Beethoven by the French Revolution and Shostakovich by the October Revolution. Inspired by the progressive years of the early Soviet Union, Shostakovich wrote works exalting the humanist ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity.

The 8th Symphony was written in the summer of 1943, a few months after the victorious Battle of Stalingrad, during the largest tank battle of World War II on the Eastern Front near Kursk. Against the backdrop of Hitler's looming defeat, the symphony resembles a tentative reflection on what the future would hold. The victory over Hitler was not a complete victory because there was still Stalin. There are long stretches of subdued tension in the symphony, until a hammering repetitive beat begins in the third movement, along with grotesque elements and violent outbursts, until the symphony ends after several dialogues between individual instruments played with a strangely enraptured calm.

The lack of patriotism evident in the 8th Symphony outraged the Stalinist functionaries in Moscow. In the

course of the state campaign that began in 1948 against "formalist" art, i.e., "art not rooted in the people," the symphony was banned, as was the subsequent 9th Symphony. The symphonies were only played again after Stalin's death. Apparently, they had struck a chord in listeners too close to the times.

The moving Osnabrück Symphony Concert also struck a chord with an audience worried about the renewed danger of fascism and war. The decision in favor of a program featuring Ukrainian and Russian music, performed by the young Russian prize winner Smirnov and the internationally staffed Osnabrück Symphony Orchestra, contains in essence the correct orientation against this danger: the international cooperation of workers, friends of culture, and young people against the attempt to put art in the service of a US-NATO led war against Russia, for which the Ukraine war is only the trigger.



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