

Arbitrator orders Metropolitan Opera to pay soprano Anna Netrebko \$200,000 after breaking contract

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An arbitrator has ruled in favor of world-famous soprano Anna Netrebko in her grievance against the Metropolitan Opera. The New York opera company, under general manager Peter Gelb, banned Netrebko in March 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Gelb essentially gave the Russian soprano an ultimatum, demanding she denounce Russian president Vladimir Putin or face the cancellation of her performances in Puccini's *Turandot* last year and Verdi's *Don Carlo* in the current season.

Arbitrator Howard Edelman wrote, in a decision that was issued last month but was only belatedly reported last Saturday in the *New York Times*, that “there is no doubt [Netrebko] was a Putin supporter, as she had a right to be.” He said that this position “was certainly not moral turpitude or worthy, in and of itself, of actionable misconduct.” Edelman ruled in Netrebko's favor because of “pay or play” provisions in contracts with singers, which obligate the company to pay even if it later decides on cast changes. The opera company was held liable for Netrebko's fees for 13 performances, including in *Don Carlo* this season and in Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* and Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* in the 2023-2024 season.

Netrebko was not successful in her demand for another \$400,000 for subsequent performances of operas in later seasons, because these had not yet been formally agreed to. Nevertheless, the arbitrator's decision was a rebuke to the Met and to Gelb personally, a decision that at least partly upheld the democratic rights of artists.

Gelb, who is married to Ukrainian-Canadian conductor Kerry-Anne Wilson, sought to make an example of Netrebko, along with the equally well-

known Russian conductor, Valery Gergiev. In the weeks following the beginning of the war, which had itself been provoked by Washington and NATO, the Met management belligerently echoed the war propaganda coming out of the White House and State Department. Ignoring the record of US aggression spanning the first two decades of this century and all of the 20th century as well—from Iraq to Syria and Libya, the former Yugoslavia, Panama, Grenada, Haiti and most of the Latin American “backyard” of US imperialism—Gelb issued arrogant demands and began canceling performances and banning artists in the best tradition of witch-hunting Senator Joseph McCarthy of the 1950s.

In the past year, while the war in Ukraine has ground on and the US and the rest of NATO have stepped up their proxy intervention, there has also been a growth of popular opposition. Gelb was relatively restrained in his reaction to the arbitrator's ruling. “Although our contracts are ‘pay or play,’ we didn't think it was morally right to pay Netrebko anything considering her close association with Putin,” he told the *Times*. “It's an artistic loss for the Met not having her singing here. But there's no way that either the Met or the majority of its audience would tolerate her presence.”

Gelb's “moral” principles obviously do not apply where the numerous and continuous war crimes of his own government are concerned. While he arrogantly presumes to speak for the opera audience in New York, Netrebko's career has thrived in Europe, where there is a history, going back to the period of the Cold War, of somewhat greater resistance to political witch-hunts. The soprano, obviously with her career in mind, has issued statements in opposition to the war, but she has

refused to denounce Putin by name or sign on with the US/NATO campaign. She has withdrawn from performances in Russia, where she has been branded a traitor.

The La Scala Opera in Milan, one of the world's most famous opera houses, has just announced that Netrebko will appear in *Don Carlo* next December, in a cast that includes Ildar Abdrazakov and Elina Garanca. She will also be appearing with Jonas Kaufmann, one of the world's most renowned tenors. In 2024 Netrebko will appear in Salzburg, in a role that is new for her, in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*.

Only a few nights ago, on March 19, Netrebko received a standing ovation at a sold-out recital at La Scala. Singing arias and songs by Russian masters Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff and Rimsky-Korsakov, she was accompanied by Elena Bashkistrova, the Russian-born pianist who is also the wife of pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim. Barenboim, the founder along with Edward Said of the famous West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, bringing together young Palestinian and Israeli musicians, has fought for decades against attempts by right-wing Zionists and others to dictate what and where musicians can perform.

Another indication of the hypocrisy behind the Met's campaign against Netrebko is the fact that Russian bass-baritone Evgeny Nikitin continues to perform with the company in the current production of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, despite the fact that he has recently appeared in Moscow. The Met also announced this week that Netrebko's husband, the tenor Yusif Eyvazov, was being fired from Puccini's *Tosca*, in which he was scheduled to appear in the leading role of Cavaradossi in six performances beginning March 30. Significantly, however, in an obvious nod to the arbitration award for Netrebko, the Met will be paying Eyvazov for the canceled performances.



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