

Russian soprano Anna Netrebko sues Metropolitan Opera for discrimination and defamation

Fred Mazelis
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Russian soprano Anna Netrebko has sued the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, along with its general manager Peter Gelb, on grounds of discrimination, defamation and breach of contract for future performances. The opera star is seeking at least \$360,000 in damages.

Netrebko, one of the most well-known figures in the world of opera, was especially cherished by audiences at the Met, where she made her debut in Prokofiev's *War and Peace* more than 20 years ago. She was nevertheless fired by the Met's Gelb on March 3, 2022, little more than a week after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

Gelb, who is married to the Canadian-Ukrainian conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson, demanded not only that Netrebko denounce the invasion, but that she also repudiate Russian President Vladimir Putin by name. In fact, the soprano almost immediately issued statements opposing the war, but she refused to add a denunciation of Putin. This was not enough for Gelb, who cancelled her upcoming performances in Verdi's *Don Carlo* for the 2022-23 season and declared that Netrebko would not be returning to the Met.

Netrebko filed a grievance through the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA). Last February the arbitrator issued his decision, and it was a vindication of the soprano. Howard Edelman wrote that "there is no doubt [Netrebko] was a Putin supporter, *as she had a right to be* [emphasis added]." In fact, Netrebko had endorsed Putin when he ran for President in 2012 and had appeared with him on several occasions. However, the arbitrator added, this conduct "was certainly not moral turpitude or worthy, in and of itself, of actionable misconduct." He awarded the soprano more than

\$209,000 in compensation for the lost performances in Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* and Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*, in addition to *Don Carlo*.

Netrebko, following the favorable arbitration decision, is pursuing her claims that the Met has unfairly attacked her and jeopardized her career. Her suit was filed in Federal District Court last Friday. She is asking that, in addition to the amount decided by the arbitrator, she also be compensated for performances for the upcoming two seasons. There had been verbal agreements for roles in Puccini's *Tosca* and Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* in the 2023-24 season, and Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and Verdi's *Macbeth* for 2024-25. The arbitrator had declined, in his ruling earlier this year, to include compensation for those performances.

Netrebko's suit charges, according to the OperaWire website, that she was discriminated against because of national origin, and also that the Met and Gelb "harmed Netrebko's relationship among audiences, including by encouraging protests against her performances" and "reputation caused by Gelb and the Met has caused other opera houses and cultural institutions in the United States to refrain from hiring Netrebko."

Furthermore, the suit alleges, "due to the Met's requirement that Netrebko issue public statements opposing the actions of Russian government, Russian politicians have denounced Netrebko, Russian theater companies have canceled contracts with her, Russian audiences have criticized her on her social media channels and in the Russian press, and Netrebko and her family and friends in Russia have suffered the risk of harm, retaliation, and retribution by the Russian government." This was in response to her declaration

that, “I expressly condemn the war on Ukraine and my thoughts are with the victims of this war and their families. My position is clear. I am not a member of any political party nor am I allied with any leader of Russia.”

The reactionary character of the invasion ordered by Putin was clearly provoked by imperialist policies carried out over many years. Similarly, the problems besetting Netrebko’s career in Russia were clearly provoked by the hypocritical and arrogant insistence by Gelb and others that she do what was never demanded of any US opera singer, as a condition of employment, during the invasion of Iraq or similar imperialist crimes. Fortunately for Netrebko, her career has continued in Europe, at least for now, including critically and publicly acclaimed performances at several of the world’s most famous venues, including the Vienna State Opera and La Scala Opera House in Milan. She is also scheduled to appear in Paris and Berlin. This past week, however, local authorities in Prague announced that they would be trying to cancel an upcoming concert in October, an event that is already almost sold out.

That Netrebko, one of the most famous and wealthy opera stars, is forced to fight to salvage her career is a reflection of the new Cold War that is being fueled by the US and NATO against Russia and China. Gelb, the most prominent voice in opera management in the US, has made his political motives very clear. In an interview with VAN magazine last year, he sounded more like the US Secretary of State than the general manager of the Met. Indeed, he was more unguarded than the more “diplomatic” Washington officials. As the WSWs reported at the time, Gelb said, when asked whether the US was at war with Russia, “The Met is, and indirectly, the US is, obviously. We may not say we’re at war with them, but we are at war with them.”

Gelb’s actions, and especially his provocative language, are no doubt also connected to his wife’s very public activity in support of the Ukrainian regime. Keri-Lynn Wilson founded the “Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra” after the war began. Created “in collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera and the Polish National Opera,” the Orchestra is, according to Wilson’s website, “under the patronage of Ukraine’s First Lady, Olena Zelenska.” This foray by the Met into international politics is virtually unprecedented. It

explains Gelb’s announcement that “we are at war with them.” The opera manager has indicated what President Joe Biden would prefer to keep quiet for now—that plans for the escalation of the current conflict is very far advanced.

The McCarthy-like witch-hunting and attacks on the careers of artists who in some way are judged disloyal will not be limited to people like Netrebko or Russian conductor Valery Gergiev. These are attacks on the democratic rights of the working class and must be fought on that basis.



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