

# Melbourne Symphony Orchestra cancels performance over dedication to murdered Palestinian journalists

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In an act of censorship that has provoked considerable anger, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) cancelled a performance by pianist Jayson Gillham, scheduled for this evening, because at a concert on Sunday he referenced Israel's mass murder of Palestinian journalists in Gaza.

Gillham's simple comments, acknowledging the humanity of those killed and noting the illegality of a government deliberately murdering reporters, have triggered a complete meltdown of the MSO management.

In a nauseating email on Monday announcing the cancellation to attendees, MSO denounced Gillham's "unauthorised" remarks and apologised for them, while prattling about "safety" and "diversity." It made yet another groveling public apology yesterday.

Then, amid widespread anger, MSO declared this morning that the cancellation had been an "error," as though it were a clerical mistake. Notwithstanding the "error," the cancellation of the concert remained due to unspecified "security concerns." There was a vague possibility that it would be held "at a later date," with the MSO stating that it was in discussion with Gillham's representatives.

The entire episode, from the MSO's fawning apologies to genocide supporters to its public attacks on a young musician and now its attempts to wriggle out of the mess it has created, says much about the state of official artistic institutions.

To even speak of artistic freedom in relation to such entities is to be years or decades behind the times. The MSO and similar institutions represent a conglomeration of business interests, ultra-wealthy donors and representatives of the political establishment, packaged together by corporate public relations. For these forces, artists are a commodity to be exploited when useful and to be brutally discarded if they step out of line.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the incident is that nothing Gillham said or did could be considered offensive or even controversial by anyone with a modicum of democratic

and humane sensibilities.

With the permission of the MSO, Gillham played "Witness," a composition by Connor D'Netto "dedicated to the journalists of Gaza." Before he began, Gillham reportedly stated, "Over the last 10 months, Israel has killed more than 100 Palestinian journalists." This had included "targeted assassinations of prominent journalists," who were clearly marked as reporters.

"The killing of journalists is a war crime in international law, and it is done in an effort to prevent the documentation and broadcasting of war crimes to the world," Gillham is said to have stated.

The argument of anyone "offended" by those comments, and of the spineless MSO management that has adapted to them, is not with the talented pianist but with international law.

As long ago as February 1, a group of United Nations experts issued an official statement, noting the killing of 122 journalists and media workers in Gaza since October 7. Expressing alarm over the "extraordinarily high numbers of journalists and media workers who have been killed, attacked, injured and detained," the UN officials stated that Israel was "blatantly disregarding international law."

Maybe the MSO management should set the UN experts straight. The wise spokespeople of the orchestra could explain to the UN officials that while the deaths of 122 journalists are unfortunate, the situation in the Middle East is complex, and blunt condemnations of mass murder should be avoided lest they "upset" those who support said mass murder.

That was essentially the line the MSO took in its Monday email, throwing Gillham under the bus and cancelling his Thursday concert.

Adopting an adversarial and hostile tone towards a famed musician who had performed for it 24 hours earlier, the MSO declared: "Mr Gillham made his personal remarks without seeking the MSO's approval or sanction. They were

an intrusion of personal political views on what should have been a morning focused on a program of works for solo piano.”

Further, “The MSO understands that his remarks have caused offence and distress and offers a sincere apology.” Gillham’s comments had created a “difficult situation.” But, never fear, “In standing for humanity and peace we seek for every one of our performances to be a welcome and safe place for all.” Nevermind the dead journalists, just make sure not to mention them.

Even in its backdown today, the MSO declared that it “maintains that a concert platform is not an appropriate stage for political comment.” It “acknowledge[d] Jayson’s concerns for those in the Middle East and elsewhere,” but “recognise[d] the strength of feelings of all parties on this matter,” as though there is an equivalence between supporting the murder of journalists and opposing such war crimes.

Gillham is not a minor figure. The MSO itself, in promoting his concerts, described the 38-year-old British-Australian as “one of the finest pianists of his generation.” Having begun playing at the age of four, Gillham is a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London, who has performed to acclaim all over the world.

Connor D’Netto, whose “Witness” Gillham played on Sunday, is just 30-years-old and has been described as “the model contemporary Australian composer” by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Classic FM.

Musical excellence, lifetimes dedicated to honing artistic ability and to culturally uplifting the public—what does that count for against the prerogatives of donors or prospective donors with reactionary opinions and lots of money? It would appear very little for the MSO management.

The speed with which Gillham’s comments produced a “difficult situation” for the MSO strongly suggest that those who were upset by his defence of murdered Palestinian journalists had deep pockets and significant connections.

Even in its retreat, the MSO has maintained its position that artists have no right to express their “personal opinions” on stage. That is a conception of music and of art as a lifeless commodity, artificially detached from the most pressing issues of the world, and with those who create it circumscribed and muzzled.

If such a conception were applied retrospectively, many of history’s most famous artists, who took a stand on the major social and political questions of their day, would be subject to censure. Art, moreover, even of the more abstract forms, can only reflect the world, with its passions, controversies and conflicts.

Politically, the furore over Gillham’s comments is in line with the attempts of governments internationally to

delegitimise opposition to the massive war crimes that they are helping to perpetrate in Gaza. In Australia, the charge has been led by the Labor government, which actively supports the Israeli genocide, while slandering opponents of it as antisemites.

The MSO’s “difficult situation” recalls a similar issue that erupted at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) in November. During a curtain call for their performance of Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, three young actors, Mabel Li, Megan Wilding and Harry Greenwood, wore keffiyehs.

According to those in attendance, the keffiyehs were scarcely noticed. But when a photo of the actors wearing the scarves was posted online, all hell broke loose. The Murdoch media, together with Zionist supporters of the Israeli war crimes, presented the wearing of the keffiyehs as something approaching an act of violence or a declaration of support for terrorism.

The actors were relentlessly defamed, while leading Zionists were given great attention, as they ludicrously and hysterically spoke of their fear and upset. Some literally compared the actors wearing the keffiyehs to the horrors of 1930s Germany. The STC bent over backwards to appease its offended donors, and has been in a state of unresolved agitation, including management and board reshuffles, ever since.

As with the STC witch-hunt, the attack on Gillham provoked massive anger, with social media posts condemning the MSO reaching hundreds of thousands or even millions of people. That again underscores the gulf that has opened up, on the genocide and every other issue, between the vast mass of the population and the establishment.

In its own way, the contrasting responses again demonstrate that, as at the pivotal turning points of the 20th century, the fight for artistic freedom and the defence of artists is inseparable from the broader fight against militarism, war, authoritarianism, and their source, the capitalist system.



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