

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra musicians demand management resign over its persecution of Jayson Gillham

Richard Phillips
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Members of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) have unanimously demanded senior management resign over its decision to cancel concerts by Jayson Gillham following his introduction to *Witness*, a five-minute piece included in his August 11 piano recital. The meditative composition by Connor D’Netto was dedicated to the more than 100 Palestinian journalists killed by Israel in Gaza since October 7.

The acclaimed British-Australian pianist told his audience that Israel’s murder of Palestinian journalists was illegal and had been carried out “to prevent the documentation and broadcasting of war crimes to the world.”

The MSO management immediately cancelled Gillham’s next concert, claiming that his comments were “an intrusion of personal political views,” made “without authority,” and “beyond the remit of his contract.”

Confronted with the eruption of mass opposition on social media to MSO’s blatant censorship, senior management later declared Gillham’s cancellation had been an “error.” It cynically claimed that it had unspecified “security concerns” about Gillham’s next concert previously scheduled on August 15.

An angry meeting of MSO musicians on the night of the cancelled performance, however, brushed aside these cynical manoeuvres and unanimously endorsed a letter demanding the resignation of MSO’s managing director and its chief operating officer. The MSO, the first professional orchestra established in Australia, has 88 full-time musicians.

Gillham’s treatment, it declared, was part of a “continued pattern of behaviour” by MSO

management. “Despite ongoing attempts to engage with senior leadership and provide feedback through formal channels; including committee consultations, employee culture surveys and internal grievance procedures, the response from management has been insufficient, and in many cases dismissive.” The letter demanded an investigation into the decision-making process behind Gillham’s cancelled performance.

While it made no specific reference to the Gaza genocide, the letter is a damning indictment of MSO management. It also makes clear that Australian classical musicians, like hundreds of thousands of artists internationally, refuse to be intimidated by pro-Israeli propagandists and their multi-millionaire backers who patronise the arts and attempt to dictate what can or cannot be seen or heard.

This determination of MSO musicians to defend free speech and artistic expression was further underlined in an open letter and petition issued last Friday by the Australian Music Students’ Association (AMSA), signed by scores of students since.

Voicing its solidarity with Gillham for using “his art and platform to stand for good,” the AMSA called on all musicians—students, professionals, and amateurs—nationally to sign its statement and demand the MSO reverse its cancellation of Gillham’s performances.

“Support for Gaza and opposition to a genocide are not personal political views; opposing a genocide is not a political matter. They are the crux to the work [*Witness*], and it would be an inaccurate performance not to mention them; any attempt to politically sanitise the work would render it useless.

“Just two days before, on 10 August, the Israeli military massacred 100 Palestinians during morning prayers at Al-Tabi’in school in Gaza—this massacre is only known because of the journalists reporting to it,” the statement said.

The AMSA pointed out that Gillham had introduced and performed a piece composed by György Ligeti at the August 11 performance. Ligeti, a Hungarian Jew, was sent to a forced labour brigade, his brother incarcerated in the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, and his parents sent to Auschwitz. MSO management did not object to Gillham’s introduction to that piece.

Later that day, Cat Empire, a long-established and popular international touring jazz/funk group, announced that it was cancelling three scheduled MSO performances this week in Melbourne to protest the victimisation of Gillham and express solidarity with MSO musicians.

“We value the principles of freedom of speech, artistic expression, and inclusivity. Therefore, in good conscience, we’ve made the decision to postpone next week’s shows at Hamer Hall,” a statement from the group said. “We strongly support Jayson and the talented musicians in the orchestra, many of whom are our friends and contemporaries,” it said.

Appeals to senior management of the MSO, whose principal multi-millionaire backers are intimately connected to the Australian political establishment that is complicit in the genocide and to pro-Israel lobby groups, however, will fall on deaf ears.

MSO, like other major artistic institutions, is heavily dependent on private donations to fund its operations. It would be naive to think that the generally reactionary views of the ultra-wealthy and corporate interests involved do not exert a powerful sway over the MSO management, however directly or otherwise.

MSO’s donors include wealthy individuals who have explicitly supported the Israeli assault on Gaza.

MSO senior management, which now claims to be in negotiations with its musicians and Jayson Gillham over future concerts, has not issued any formal response to last week’s open letters. Nor has it made any public comment on Cat Empire’s decision to cancel this week’s concerts.

The determination of MSO musicians and other

courageous artists and musicians, such as Jayson Gillham, to oppose the Gaza genocide and defend freedom of expression can only be taken forward as part of a unified fight to mobilise workers and youth internationally against imperialist war and the capitalist profit system.

In Australia, this requires a political struggle against the ruling elite and its Labor Party servants which unwaveringly back Israel’s murderous onslaught in Gaza, the US-led NATO war against Russia, and the preparation for war against China. Their ongoing efforts to discredit, delegitimise and suppress all opposition to the war crimes being perpetrated in Gaza are inseparably connected to this military and geo-strategic agenda.



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