

# 182 Royal Ballet and Opera staff denounce “genocide in Gaza,” forcing cancellation of Tel Aviv *Tosca* production

David Walsh  
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A production of Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca* by the Royal Ballet and Opera (RBO), provocatively scheduled by management for Tel Aviv in 2026, has been cancelled after widespread opposition from artists and staff. The RBO is one of Britain’s most prestigious arts institutions.

Some 182 members of the ballet and opera company, including dancers, singers, musicians and staff across artistic, creative, technical and administrative departments, sent an open letter August 1 to management expressing “deep concern and moral conviction” in response to the “actions and decisions taken” by the RBO “in the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza.”

On Wednesday, Alex Beard, the company’s chief executive, told CNN that the Tel Aviv *Tosca* production had been canceled, but claimed the decision had been taken “before the recent staff letter was received” and out of “concerns about the safety of company members in the region, in light of the ongoing conflict.” There is no reason to give Beard’s claim the slightest credence. RBO management was obviously taken aback by the surge of anger its tacit endorsement of Israeli actions provoked. (*OperaWire* disposes of the fiction, writing firmly, “Following the [staff open] letter the Royal Ballet and Opera canceled its collaboration with the Israeli Opera for a production of *Tosca*.”)

The outrage and resistance were no doubt intensified by an incident that occurred during a curtain call at a July 19 performance of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. One of the performers, dancer Danni Perry, unfurled a Palestinian flag in protest against the Israeli government’s policy of starvation and mass killing in Gaza. Director of Opera Oliver Mears entered the stage and attempted to seize the flag from Perry, although he failed. According to Perry, Mears said to him, “You will never work at the opera

house again,” to which Perry asserts he replied, “I don’t give a flying f\*\*k.” A witch hunt was thereupon launched against Perry in the right-wing British media.

The open letter of the 182 RBO artists and staff refers to the Perry-Mears episode. It praises Perry’s “act of courage and moral clarity on our very stage.” The act “reminded us that art cannot and does not exist in a vacuum. Their [Perry’s] gesture was not one of self-interest but of solidarity, a call to conscience. We stand firmly with them.” The letter sharply criticizes Mears, who attempted “to forcibly snatch the flag from the performer, displaying visible anger and aggression in front of the entire audience. This act, far from being a neutral administrative intervention, was itself a loud political statement.”

Mears’ act, the signatories argue, “sent a clear message that any visible solidarity with Palestine would be met with hostility, while the organisation remains silent on the ongoing genocide. ... Oliver Mears does not represent us.”

The open letter declares, “To call what is unfolding [in Gaza] anything less than genocide is to ignore the overwhelming weight of evidence and the cries of those living—and dying—under siege.”

It also asserts that

our organisation has chosen to actively support the Israeli state and its economy by hiring our production of *Turandot* to The Israeli Opera [in June-July, 2025]. This decision cannot be viewed as neutral. It is a deliberate alignment, materially and symbolically, with a government currently engaged in crimes against humanity.

It notes that the Israeli Opera “publicly offers free tickets to soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces ‘in recognition of their work,’ as stated on their website.” The RBO is hence “clearly making a strong political statement by allowing its production and intellectual property to be presented in a space that openly rewards and legitimises the very forces responsible for the daily killings of civilians in Gaza.”

The letter further argues that

As artists and cultural workers, we know too well the role the arts have historically played during times of crisis. Opera and ballet are not apolitical artforms. They are filled with stories of human resilience, resistance to oppression, and the triumph of justice over tyranny. To now retreat behind a false veil of neutrality is both hypocritical and cowardly.

The signatories point to the RBO’s “swift and decisive” response to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. “Why is Palestinian suffering met with silence, while Ukrainian suffering was met with action? The double standard is deafening.”

In a ludicrous and compromising reply to this point,

Beard, the chief executive, said in a statement reported in UK media that the RBO’s support for Ukraine was “aligned with the global consensus at the time,” but that “as the world’s geopolitics have become more complex, our stance has changed to ensure that our actions reflect our purpose and values.” (CNN)

Taken at face value, this peculiar formulation suggests that the RBO’s “purpose and values” have always included an accommodation with mass death and suffering, and that the company has now decided to acknowledge this openly.

The 182 go on in their protest letter:

As an organisation of global standing, with the power to shape discourse and influence cultural values, we have a responsibility to act ethically.

We cannot simultaneously present ourselves as champions of human dignity and artistic excellence while materially supporting a regime that commits genocide. To do so is to betray our audience, the values this organisation claims to uphold, and the very spirit of the artforms we serve.

Finally, in a series of bullet points, the public letter affirms “solidarity with the performer who bravely displayed the Palestinian flag on our stage.” It calls for Mears “to be held accountable for his public display of aggression towards a performer exercising their right to express a deeply moral and political truth.” The letter rejects “any current or future performances in Israel,” and commits “to withholding our productions from institutions that legitimise and economically support a state engaged in the mass killing of civilians.”

The appeal concludes by calling

on the Royal Ballet and Opera to publicly acknowledge the genocide in Gaza, to end its silence, and to align its actions with the same moral and humanitarian principles it upheld in the case of Ukraine. History will remember the choices we make in times of atrocity. We urge our organisation not to be complicit through inaction or false neutrality.

The tense situation at the RBO is representative of conditions in cultural institutions and industries in Britain and throughout the world: a state of war, open or covert, exists between management, tied to its respective government and the latter’s support for the massacre of the Palestinians, and an increasing radicalized and restive workforce.



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