

Flanders Festival disinvites conductor Lahav Shani: the hypocritical outcry over “antisemitism”

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The cancellation of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra’s appearance at the Flanders Festival in Ghent, Belgium, under its designated chief conductor Lahav Shani has triggered a storm of protest in Germany that could not be more hypocritical and disingenuous.

Germany’s Minister of State for Culture Wolfram Weimer spoke of “a disgrace for Europe,” “blatant anti-Semitism,” and “an attack on the foundations of our culture.” Bavaria’s Minister of Culture Markus Blume also called the Ghent decision “gross anti-Semitism.” Editor of the German daily *F.A.Z.* Jürgen Kaube interpreted the cancellation as proof that “Israel-related anti-Semitism” is not an invention “to stigmatise criticism of the Netanyahu government,” but that it actually exists.

The Ghent festival management justified the cancellation of the concert planned for September 18 on the grounds that Shani is also chief conductor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO). “Lahav Shani has spoken out in favour of peace and reconciliation several times in the past,” they explained their decision, “but in light of his role as chief conductor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, we are unable to provide sufficient clarity about his attitude toward the genocidal regime in Tel Aviv.” Therefore, in consultation with the Ghent City Council, an alliance of liberals, socialists, and greens, the festival “chose to refrain from collaboration with partners who have not distanced themselves unequivocally from that regime.”

One can view the festival management’s decision critically. Especially since Shani, as the festival organisers themselves explain, “has spoken out in favour of peace and reconciliation several times in the

past.” In August, the 36-year-old conductor expressed his hope in a guest article for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* “that very courageous people will soon come forward on both sides, people who think about the future and dare to take the difficult steps toward peace.” “All I know is that every life lost is one too many,” he added.

Shani has also conducted the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded by his mentor Daniel Barenboim, in which Jewish, Palestinian, and Arab musicians play together. His wife, Miri Saadon, is a clarinetist in the orchestra.

However, the claim that the festival management’s decision was antisemitic is a malicious slander. The festival management has explicitly stated that the decision had nothing to do with Shani’s personal views or even his Jewish identity, but exclusively with his role as chief conductor of the IPO. The orchestra, as an institution, has not clearly distanced itself from the government, “and in our view, genocide leaves no room for ambiguity,” said Jan Van den Bossche, the festival’s artistic director.

The IPO, to which Shani was appointed musical director in 2018 at the age of 29 as the successor to Zubin Mehta, has been considered a flagship of the Israeli state for decades. It is more than legitimate that a music festival dedicated to the belief that music should be a source of connection, reconciliation, and mutual respect does not want to be associated with this state.

The Israeli government and the Israeli army are committing crimes against humanity in Gaza that defy description. Even when it seems impossible to escalate further, they continue to intensify the terror.

With its attack on Gaza City, the Israeli army wants to cram 1.5 million people into an area that is only

slightly more than twice the size of the Warsaw Ghetto, where about half a million people lived at its peak. And while 7 to 8 people lived crammed together in one room in multi-story buildings in the ghetto, in the Gaza Strip everyone is to be housed on the ground in tents without sanitary facilities. To add insult to mass murder, the Israeli government refers to this concentration camp as a “humanitarian zone.”

The same politicians and journalists who are now crying “anti-Semitism” have been persecuting, censoring, and suppressing artists, scientists, students and workers who protest against this murderous injustice for years. Many have lost their livelihoods as a result.

From the Ruhrtriennale to the Documenta in Kassel and the Berlin International Film Festival, there is no major art event that has not come under fire from pro-Israel censors. The battle cry of “antisemitism” has become a weapon for all those who justify the most brutal genocide in recent history. The double standards and lack of basic human compassion they display in doing so are breathtaking.

It was only three years ago that Shani’s predecessor at the helm of the Munich Philharmonic, Russian conductor Valery Gergiev, was fired without notice because he refused to distance himself from the Russian government in writing.

“Governments, media, universities, cultural and sports officials are demanding that Russian artists, scientists and athletes publicly oppose their own government or be summarily dismissed,” we wrote at the time. “It does not bother those responsible that by dictating opinion they are introducing the very methods they accuse Russian president Vladimir Putin of using.”

The propaganda from the political establishment and the media is powerful, but it is not all-powerful. The crimes committed by the Israeli government in full view of the world public have reached such proportions that they are turning billions of people around the world against it. Even the hypocritical clamour about antisemitism cannot prevent this.



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