

Israeli conductor Ilan Volkov speaks out powerfully against Gaza genocide at BBC Proms

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Israeli conductor Ilan Volkov ended his recent BBC Proms performance with a bold and powerful statement against the atrocities being committed by Israel, saying “we cannot let this go on any longer.” Volkov then announced that he will not work in his homeland for the foreseeable future.

The 49-year-old conductor, who was born and resides in Israel, had just led the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (BBCSSO) in a fine performance of Brahms’s Second Symphony and music by Stravinsky and Gabrieli. He concluded not with an encore, but with an emotional reading of a short, prepared statement.

“In my heart,” he said, “there is great pain now every day for months. I come from Israel and live there. I love it. It’s my home.

“But what’s happening now is atrocious and horrific.”

At this point he was interrupted by hecklers. He told them “You can go if you don’t want politics. Politics is part of life every day,” before resuming.

He described feeling “completely hopeless in front of innocent Palestinians being killed in thousands, displaced again and again, without hospitals, without schools, not knowing when the next meal is [coming].”

Volkov pointed to the “inhuman conditions” of Israeli hostages, saying categorically “political prisoners are languishing in Israeli jails, Israelis, Jews and Palestinians, Israelis, Jews AND Palestinians...”

Interrupted again, he told his hecklers, “You will let me finish, and then you can curse me all your life, no problem...”

He finished with an impassioned plea.

“Israelis, Jews and Palestinians, we are not able to stop this alone. I ask you, I beg you all to do whatever is in your power to stop this madness. Every little action counts while governments hesitate and wait. We cannot let this go on any longer. Every moment that passes puts the safety of millions at risk. Thank you.”

The BBC ended its broadcast when Volkov spoke and did not report his statement. There has been little media

coverage of it generally, outside of the *Times* and *Haaretz*, but the video has circulated widely on social media. It can be seen here on TikTok and here on X.

Volkov’s statement, which had all the more weight coming from an Israeli citizen, gave voice to the mass global revulsion at the genocidal war crimes being committed against the Palestinian people. It expressed growing domestic anxiety and opposition to the war.

Volkov is perhaps best known for his extensive work abroad, including with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and the Brussels Philharmonic. After serving as BBCSSO’s chief conductor 2003-2009, he was appointed its principal guest conductor. He has also conducted the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra and the Israel Philharmonic, as well as curating contemporary music events.

Volkov afterwards gave an interview to the *Times* in which he stated his principled motivation for speaking out, and the conditions that enabled him to do so. “This is an issue,” he said, “that should be voiced by an Israeli abroad... By exposing the truth publicly, that’s already a start.”

Volkov, a resident of Herzliya near Tel Aviv, has been a regular participant in silent peace vigils in Israel, where protesters hold photos of children killed in Gaza. This is the first time he has publicly connected that with his professional work. “As a conductor, you have to have a strong moral backbone... You’re in the public eye. Maybe nobody cares what you say, but it has some influence. It’s important to do whatever we can to stop the cycle of helplessness.”

As he explained to the BBC World Service, the sense of political crisis had been building rapidly. “Terrible things in Palestine have been happening for decades. But what’s happening in these days... is unimaginable.” He had felt “months ago” that he would finally speak out at the Proms “because it’s the biggest concert that I do every year.” He described it as “a cry for help... if this government is not

stopped, by whatever means is necessary, it's already bad, but can go even worse. We have to join forces and stop it."

Volkov voiced the growing recognition of the fascistic character of the Israeli government, and the domestic protests demanding a hostage deal and end to the war.

He told the *Times*, "The phrase 'not in my name' is not always helpful. But this war *is* happening in my name, and I'm going to fight against it. We have to make a stand. We have to think creatively about what we can do. I believe that now all non-violent ways of trying to influence the situation are crucial."

His recognition of the political conditions in Israel is particularly significant, both in terms of the far-right government and the as yet small opposition from Israeli Jews, posing broader questions of political programme and perspective.

"In Israel, there is no real democracy," he told the *Times*. "The media is not showing reality, the police are under a fascist minister and the justice system has supported the occupation for decades. We Israelis alone—Palestinians and the small minority of Jews standing against it all—won't be able to stop Netanyahu's government. We need the support of the whole world to make this massacre end."

Speaking of how he and his family had taken to shelters in the wake of the October 7 Hamas attack, he called those "a few scary days for all Israelis, because the sense of security had vanished."

The reality of the situation, however, is that "the Israeli army is incredibly strong... We have the US and most of the western world behind us. I don't believe we have an existential threat. From the beginning, this idea has been used as a tool to frighten the population."

He described Israel now as having "lost any sense of morality and completely lost control. Or maybe the vengeance is just an excuse. We don't yet have enough details to know." On the BBC World Service, he described it as "a war of vengeance, of destruction."

On his Facebook page, Volkov posts many pro-Palestinian statements. In one he wrote of the alleged opposition "to this or another thing" coming from Israeli Defence Force commander-in-chief Eyal Zamir. The end result, "as usual in this place," would be "Obey, carry out orders, endangering the lives of the kidnapped and soldiers and especially—murder innocent civilians in large numbers, every day."

"Let it be clear," he wrote, "the only military goal is the continuation of destruction." Pointing to the destruction of infrastructure, the killing of civilians and the strangling of aid access, he called for urgent action, including industrial action: There had to be, "A complete stop of all life here, a strike and a real opposition to the government's actions that

endanger the lives of all the people living here, Jews and Palestinians. There's no more time, resistance now!"

Calling for return of the Israeli hostages and "a lasting ceasefire," he told the *Times* "This bloodshed must stop... What are we waiting for? More blood? People in Gaza are still not getting enough food, medical aid, fuel, gas. They have been displaced again and again for almost two years. They have no way to live."

Volkov has been wrestling with the interaction of politics and culture. The *Times* noted "a perception of double standards," where Russian musicians have been required to issue anti-Putin statements or face blacklisting, as with the soprano Anna Netrebko.

Volkov said that demanding artists speak out would be as bad as expecting them just to "shut up and play... We cannot make it a test for every person in a concert hall, to see if they are anti-fascist enough for us. What we have to do is have solidarity with each other. Work together. Listen to each other."

Asked about the proposed boycott of the next Eurovision Song Contest by several countries, he told the World Service that if a cultural boycott led to government actions "which need to be taken now," then we cannot afford to wait six months until the song contest.

With the American government "not doing anything, and Israelis, Palestinians and Jews that live in Israel... not able to stop Netanyahu's actions and his government and the army," Volkov called on "the European countries and the rest of the world to wake up."

"I'm not a politician," he said, but "they know what will stop Israel." Appealing to those powers that have systematically whitewashed Israel's crimes over the last two years is a dead end, but Volkov's desperate appeal speaks to the beginning of a recognition of the need for a different political response. His calls for unity of Palestinian and Jewish Israelis is noteworthy, and his courageous public stand is welcome.



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