Salzburg Festival sacks its acclaimed director for refusing to blacklist Russian artists

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This year's Salzburg Festival runs until the end of August. The world's most important festival of classical music and the performing arts was founded over 100 years ago by theatre director Max Reinhardt and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal and this summer again offers a wide range of concerts, opera, theatre and film screenings, including a number of fascinating new productions.

Salzburg's squares and cafés are abuzz with discussions about music, drama and direction. Unlike last year, however, there is a tense and uneasy atmosphere.

For the man whose artistic imprint shapes the programme was fired just weeks before the festival began. Markus Hinterhäuser, the world-renowned pianist and impresario, had directed the Vienna Festival Weeks from 2014 to 2016 and the Salzburg Festival from October 2016 onward. Under his direction, the latter achieved over 98 percent capacity with more than 250,000 visitors last year. In April 2024, his contract was extended once again by the festival's board of trustees for a further five years, until September 2031.

But at the end of March, just weeks before rehearsals were due to begin, he was surprisingly placed on leave "with immediate effect," his contract shortened to end in September. The festival's board of trustees, which includes the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) state Governor Karoline Edlstadler and the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) mayor of the city of Salzburg and former Porsche Holding works Council Chairman Bernhard Auinger, spoke of "irreconcilable differences," communication problems and a violation of the "good conduct clause."

In truth, everything points to political interference aimed at bringing the Salzburg Festival into line with the growing military build-up against Russia.

The sequence of events makes this very clear. Since the start of the Ukraine war in 2022, Markus Hinterhäuser has faced criticism for being among the few festival directors who refused to disinvite Russian artists. The singer Anna Netrebko was allowed to perform, and above all, Hinterhäuser continued to work closely with the internationally celebrated Greek-Russian conductor Teodor Currentzis, who is again appearing with his ensemble this year. His tribute to the Hungarian-Jewish composer György Kurtág at Salzburg's Kollegienkirche, featuring music by Kurtág and Arvo Pärt, met with great admiration.

Currentzis has rejected demands that he speak out publicly against Russia and the Putin regime, insisting instead on artistic freedom and his right to remain "silent" on the current war. Markus Hinterhäuser defended him against the attacks right up until the end.

It was only at the end of last year, just weeks before the disputes within the board of trustees became public, that the row over Currentzis came to a head. When Austria's Culture Minister Andreas Babler (SPÖ) inducted him into the "Curia for Art" at the end of 2025 and awarded him the "Austrian Decoration for Science and Art," Ukraine's Ambassador to Austria Vasyl Khymynets and several media outlets intervened in an attempt to prevent this. Markus Hinterhäuser once again vehemently defended Currentzis.

Shortly afterwards, "differences" broke out within the board of trustees over the appointment of a new head of drama. Hinterhäuser, it was claimed, had failed to observe the criteria of the application process. In truth, the question of Ukraine also lies behind this dispute.

For the 2024-25 season, Marina Davydova served as the festival's head of drama—an exiled Russian theatre manager who positioned herself as an opponent of Putin immediately after the start of the Ukraine war and relocated to Berlin. Hinterhäuser terminated her contract after it emerged that she was simultaneously working as an artistic adviser for the "Voices Performing Arts Festival" in Berlin, a secondary activity she had not disclosed to him. The "Voices" festival had been founded after the start of the Ukraine war as a platform for exiled artists from Russia and Belarus, among other countries, as well as for Ukrainian cultural figures.

For the 2024 festival, Davydova also organised a reading titled "Hello, This Is Navalny Speaking—Letters of a Free Man," featuring prison writings by Alexei Navalny, the Russian regime opponent celebrated in the West who died in early 2024. In the following drama season, Hinterhäuser cancelled this reading.

The final trigger for Hinterhäuser's dismissal was an article published by leading German news weekly *Der Spiegel* on March 26, which served to obscure the political background behind personal insinuations and rumour. Sebastian Hammelehle, who headed the magazine's culture desk from 2018 to 2023, quoted anonymous staff members in the piece attacking Hinterhäuser as a misogynistic hothead and, tellingly, interviews Marina Davydova by name. Her claim that Hinterhäuser had said to her, "Why are you smirking at me so contemptuously?" was, for the editor, apparently worth a headline in itself.

As if on cue, his *Spiegel* report appeared online on March 26 at 12:50 p.m. At 1:30 p.m.—barely 40 minutes later—the board of trustees announced the immediate parting of ways with artistic director Markus Hinterhäuser!

A final indication of the political background is the invitation extended to pro-Western Belarusian opposition politician Maria Kalesnikava to speak at the official opening ceremony on July 26. A former activist for Belarusian banker Viktar Babaryka in the presidential election campaign against Lukashenko, and a political prisoner in Belarus since 2020, Kalesnikava is also a flautist who studied partly in Stuttgart; she was brought to Germany by the German government with Ukraine's assistance in 2025. In front of guests from leading Austrian and international political and business circles, she held forth in her speech on democracy and freedom, without a word for the freedom of art that Hinterhäuser had championed.

Art as historical memory and social critique

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Hinterhäuser's dismissal has sparked fierce protests among artists and audiences alike. These days, many a music lover recalls Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's expulsion from his hometown of Salzburg 245 years ago. First his employer, Archbishop Colloredo, humiliated him as a "rascal" and "lout." Then the archbishop's chamberlain, Count Arco, "threw him out the door with a kick in the backside"—Mozart's own words, in a letter to his father dated June 9, 1781.

This latest Salzburg kick in the backside has provoked popular outrage. Hinterhäuser is greeted with cries of "Bravo" and cheered at his performances as a pianist which he has not cancelled. At the song recital of Schubert's "Winterreise" in late July, at which he accompanied baritone Matthias Goerne, he was received with tremendous applause and, at the end, sent off with a lengthy standing ovation.

In April, months before the festival began, around 60 prominent artists signed an open letter of protest, including Peter Handke, Elfriede Jelinek, Robert Carsen, Michael Haneke, Igor Levit, Tobias Moretti and Asmik Grigorian, warning against damage to the "spirit of Salzburg" and emphasising the festival's international significance.

Hinterhäuser embodies a generation of European culture shaped by the experiences of the 20th century: by the confrontation with fascism, war and nationalism, by the cultural awakenings of the postwar era, and by the conviction that great art gains its social significance precisely through its international openness and critical distance from the interests of those wielding political power.

Early in his career, Hinterhäuser worked in Salzburg with the former Belgian artistic director Gérard Mortier, who died in 2014 and whose concept for reforming the festival, dating from 1991, aimed to open it up to contemporary art and social debate. At the same time, he worked with artists whose output has for decades belonged to the canon of a critical European culture: Christoph Marthaler, Elfriede Jelinek, Peter Handke and Michael Haneke.

His collaboration with Marthaler at the Vienna Festival Weeks—above all, on the theatrical-musical production "Schutz vor der Zukunft" ("Protection from the Future"), which deals with the Nazi "euthanasia" crimes and, more broadly, with past and future social exclusion and selection—exemplifies how Hinterhäuser understood art as a place of historical memory and social critique.

This year's festival presents new works by Peter Handke ("Schnee von gestern, Schnee von morgen"/"Snow of Yesterday, Snow of Tomorrow") and Elfriede Jelinek ("Unter Tieren"/"Among Animals"). Other new productions this year likewise reflect contemporary society, such as Gabriela Carrizo's new staging of Georges Bizet's opera "Carmen," which portrays Carmen (Asmik Grigorian) and her eventual killer Don José (Jonathan Tetelman) against the backdrop of a brutalised society in a police state.

Even the festival's traditional opening piece, the play "Everyman—The Death of the Rich Man" by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who founded the festival in 1920 with Max Reinhardt, captures the present moment precisely. In Robert Carsen's staging, "Everyman" is a present-day, ostentatious super-rich man. He arrives in a gold Mercedes convertible, his entourage lugs golf bags, and there is partying, luxury, dancing, champagne and a positively demonstrative world of excess.

Confronted with death, he first loses his suit, luxury, car, money, servants, friends, lover—everything, in short, that makes him socially "somebody." And by the end, in this year's production, he loses even his last physical covering. Philipp Hochmair, who plays Everyman, appears naked on stage, rather than in his underwear as last year. Not only the super-rich man's possessions but also his social role fall away, as this allegorical image demonstrates.

"Where should the festival move in future?"

On August 1, Markus Hinterhäuser himself spoke at a solidarity event held by the "Passau Circle" and declared: "The important thing is that in this memorandum we are not staging a celebration of ourselves, but wanted to express what festivals can be, should be, perhaps must be: namely, a stance towards the world. Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Where should the festival move in future, even in perspective, so that it exists not just for 100 years, but for 150, 200 years? Certainly, some of the figures who believe they must exert great influence over the festival will no longer be around."

"But the festival will continue to exist," he continued. "It was, at its core, a political project—a peace project founded after the First World War amid social and economic catastrophe. There were people who had the courage to bring something into being that still endures today. And I say this quite deliberately: It is truly not acceptable to abuse the most precious thing Salzburg has to offer the world, as an instrument of political small-mindedness. That is a very dangerous development. This must not happen, and we must all be vigilant to ensure it does not happen again."

Even though his reference to political "small-mindedness" understates today's military sabre-rattling, this warning and its reference back to the period after the First World War must be taken seriously. The events in Salzburg cannot be separated from the current, sharply escalating political situation, which threatens to plunge the world into another world war.

The hysterical war propaganda against Russia is accompanied by ever more intense attacks on the freedom of art and culture. Public cultural institutions are being required to subordinate themselves to the interests and war aims of the ruling elites, whether that of the dictatorial Ukrainian regime in the war against Russia or the far-right Israeli government and its genocide in the Middle East.

The sudden dismissal of a popular artistic director, known throughout the cultural world as progressive and critical, recalls not only Mozart being kicked out of Salzburg at the hands of the local nobility. It also evokes dark memories of 1938. In that year, following the *Anschluss*—Austria's forcible incorporation into Nazi Germany—Bernhard Paumgartner was dismissed as the festival's musical director and head of the Mozarteum, the Salzburg music academy and foundation established in 1841, and the Salzburg Festival was forced to conform (*gleichgeschaltet*) with Nazi ideology.

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