

Calgary Opera fires principal singer for displaying Palestinian flag at opening night of *Tosca*

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In an outrageous act of political censorship, the Calgary Opera fired bass singer Gabriel Sanchez-Ortega and replaced him in the role of Cesare Angelotti in its just concluded production of Puccini's *Tosca*, for briefly holding up a Palestinian flag at the curtain call on opening night, October 16.

Sanchez-Ortega, an emerging artist in his first year of the McPhee Artist Development Program, was replaced in the role of Angelotti, the escaped political prisoner in Giacomo Puccini's popular opera. Although Angelotti appears primarily in the first act, his frantic arrival at the Church of Sant'Andrea della Valle serves as the crucial catalyst for the entire plot, sparking the ruthless manhunt led by the villainous Baron Scarpia.

The Calgary Opera's run of *Tosca* had only three scheduled performances. The organization said Mr. Sanchez-Ortega was replaced for the second performance on Sunday, October 18 and the final one on Saturday, October 24. During Saturday's closing performance, protesters carrying Palestinian flags entered the auditorium during the opera, chanting "Free Palestine." Sanchez-Ortega leant his support to the protest action, displaying a poster on his Instagram profile declaring, "Bring your flags. Bring your voices. Art is meant to confront power, not submit to it."

Sanchez-Ortega's summary dismissal has been met with loud public condemnation, in sharp contrast to the stony silence of the political establishment, which, in one form or another, continues to support Israel's imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza.

The display of the Palestinian flag is significant in and of itself, but in this production it carries added political and symbolic weight. Commentators have pointed out the bitter irony of firing a performer for political expression at a production of *Tosca*—a political drama in which Cesare Angelotti, an escaped political prisoner, is fighting the oppression of an authoritarian government. One patron who witnessed the protest Saturday night told CTV News, "It was the right one [*Tosca*] to pick. I don't think it was lost on anybody."

Gabriel Sanchez-Ortega's protest aligned directly with the

political theme of the opera itself. In the opera, Cesare Angelotti is a political dissident and former Consul of the short-lived (1798-99) Roman Republic who risks his life and freedom to take a visible, uncompromising stand against the oppressive regime imposed by the Kingdom of Naples after its capture of Rome.

Tosca is one of Puccini's most celebrated operas and remains one of the most performed operas worldwide. (Readers interested in learning more about it can view this clip from the second act and this from the finale from the 2001 opera film "Puccini-Tosca." *Tosca* premiered in 1900 and is based on events set exactly a century earlier. *Tosca* is the lover of the political prisoner Cavaradossi, imprisoned by the anti-Napoleonic ruler of Rome, Baron Scarpia. In the true tradition of tragic opera, *Tosca* kills the evil Scarpia and then leaps to her death.

This opera is inherently a drama about political repression, state surveillance and individual resistance. It explores what happens when individual moral conviction collides with institutional power, represented by Scarpia and the state apparatus.

That the Calgary Opera should stage this work while simultaneously punishing one of its own performers for the very act of conscience the opera celebrates is a measure of the hypocrisy and cowardice of the institution's management.

Canada's ruling class and its governments have worked systematically since October 2023 to criminalize all expressions of opposition to the Zionist regime's genocide of the Gaza Palestinians, in the political sphere as well as in cultural life. Under former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his successor, Mark Carney, the federal Liberal government has smeared and demonized popular protests denouncing the genocide and continued supplying the far-right Israeli regime with military equipment and political support. Provincial governments have followed suit, encouraging massive police crackdowns on protests and university campus occupations.

Cultural institutions have clamped down on protests, cancelling, disciplining or sacking performers for simply voicing their opposition to the Zionist regime's extermination

of the Palestinians. One of the most recent examples was the Canadian Human Rights Museum (CHRM), which was viciously denounced by the political establishment, including federal Heritage Minister Mark Miller, for an exhibition entitled “Palestine Uprooted” that opened in June. The modest 12-metre-long exhibit included artifacts documenting the expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinians in 1948-9 during and following the imperialist-backed establishment of Israel. In an unprecedented example of government interference into museum policy, Miller, who oversees Canada’s national museums, which are purportedly independent of the government and operate as Crown corporations, asserted that the exhibition should be “rectified” because it failed to condemn Hamas as a “terrorist organization.” The Asper family, whose multi-million-dollar wealth helped establish the museum, withdrew its financial support for the CHRM in July.

Sanchez-Ortega’s firing is part of a broader campaign of censorship carried out by wealthy patrons and institutions in the music industry internationally. It comes in the wake of the removal of rapper Macklemore from the lineup of Ed Sheeran’s North American stadium tour, following pressure from billionaire venue owners after Macklemore repeatedly issued onstage “Free Palestine” chants and made political statements during major concerts. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, this act of “contemporary McCarthyism” was orchestrated by a group of Zionists and billionaire oligarchs—including New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft—who delivered an ultimatum to Sheeran: get rid of Macklemore or lose access to their stadiums.

The Calgary Opera sought to justify its firing of Sanchez-Ortega with the following miserable statement: “Individual political protest contravenes not only company policy, but also our responsibility to create a more connected, caring, and civil society through shared artistic experiences.” The company further apologized for the “discomfort and distress” some may have felt.

These self-appointed guardians of public order and “caring” apparently feel no “discomfort and distress” over the systematic extermination of tens of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children by a fascistic regime backed to the hilt with weapons, technology and political cover by the imperialist powers, including Canada. As one online comment put it, “Guarantee you wouldn’t have axed the actor if they held up an Israeli flag even though it represents genocide.”

Ironically, the Calgary Opera’s publicity tagline for *Tosca* declared, “Fear Nothing. Lose Everything.”

The claim that art must remain “apolitical” is a reactionary fraud. The administrators of opera companies and other cultural institutions, and the financial oligarchs and wealthy patrons whose funds increasingly determine what productions can be realized, demand that all art conform to the politics of the ruling class, which is dominated ever more by war, state repression, dictatorial forms of rule and the material and

cultural impoverishment of the working class. They cover this up with bogus pleas for “apolitical” art under conditions in which remaining silent or posing as “neutral” in the face of the crimes of imperialism amounts to endorsing them.

Calgary Opera management came under pressure to carry out the firing, with Sanchez-Ortega himself stating: “I was informed that financial threats had been made against Calgary Opera. I hold no resentment. After the theatre, (political or otherwise) we all have to go home, and look at ourselves in the mirror. It was my honor to play the role of Angelotti, an escaped political prisoner.”

The singer’s dignity in the face of his dismissal recalls Macklemore’s own response to his blacklisting, in which the rapper insisted he was not the victim: “The victims are the Palestinian people.” Sanchez-Ortega’s refusal to express resentment, and his insistence on the honor of having played a political prisoner, is itself a quiet rebuke to the institution that fired him.

Sanchez-Ortega’s stance enjoys broad support among artists and cultural workers. A total of 182 staff members of Britain’s Royal Ballet and Opera wrote in an open letter last year, after a dancer unfurled a Palestinian flag at a curtain call of *Il Trovatore* and was threatened by management: “Opera and ballet are not apolitical art forms. 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.” That episode, in which the RBO was forced to cancel a planned Tel Aviv production of *Tosca* amid a revolt by its own artists, is representative of the state of war—open or covert—that now exists between cultural management, tied to governments’ support for the massacre of Palestinians, and an increasingly radicalized and restive artistic workforce.

Artists who refuse to be silenced—Macklemore, the musicians who quit Sheeran’s tour in solidarity, the 182 RBO staff, and now Gabriel Sanchez-Ortega—are giving voice to the mass opposition that has formed to the imperialist-sponsored genocide in Gaza throughout the working class and youth around the world. The task of the working class, and of all those who defend artistic freedom, is to defend these artists and demand an end to all censorship of pro-Palestinian and anti-war expression. This can only be fought for by building a mass movement against genocide and imperialist war led by the international working class.



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