

Peter Gelb of the Met Opera continues his campaign for the proxy war in Ukraine

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Several weeks ago, at the October 14 performance of Verdi's masterpiece *Macbeth*, Metropolitan Opera General Manager Peter Gelb came out on stage to call on the audience to rise for the Ukrainian national anthem. "Ever since Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine," declared Gelb, "the Met has stood in staunch defense of the nation's fight for its liberty and for justice. Today, with the nation under nonstop and relentless attack, Ukraine needs our support. It needs the world's support more than ever."

This extraordinary action by the chief of the largest performing arts organization in the United States has been accompanied, in recent weeks, by a similar official declaration of support for the Ukrainian regime, prominently displayed inside the programs of various operas presented by the Met.

Gelb has been in the forefront of the anti-Russian campaign ever since 2022. His statement calls Russia's reactionary invasion, which took place more than four and a half years ago, brutal and illegal, but one word appears to be carefully omitted—"unprovoked." The invasion was indeed provoked, and it led to the proxy war of the imperialist powers against Russia that continues to this day. This war was prepared over many years. It involved the expansion of the NATO imperialist military alliance to the borders of the former Soviet Union and the overthrow of the elected pro-Russian Ukrainian government by a fascist-backed coup in 2014.

The Met issued an official statement in support of Ukraine immediately after the war began. Moreover, Gelb quickly made it a condition of employment at the Met for Russian musicians to repudiate Vladimir Putin. Anna Netrebko, one of the world's leading sopranos and a longtime star at the Met, was fired even after she had criticized the invasion, because Gelb did not deem her statement strong enough. Although Netrebko later was awarded more than \$200,000 by an arbitrator for the Met's breach of its contract with her, Gelb stubbornly continues to denounce the soprano, saying recently that he considers her "dishonest." The attack on Netrebko is bound up with the ethnonationalist campaign by the Kiev regime to blacken all of Russian culture, even to the extent of dropping the works of Tchaikovsky from concert programs. Netrebko's career has continued to flourish in Europe, but she has not performed in Russia or, with the exception of one small performance in

Florida, in the US.

The Met has also jointly commissioned a new opera, *The Mothers of Kherson*, with the Polish National Opera. The new work has just premiered in Warsaw and is scheduled for performance in New York in April 2028. It is based on the story of the thousands of Ukrainian children abducted by Russian forces in the early stages of the war. Of course, art can and should depict war's crimes against children. Although no judgment can be passed on the artistic merit of this work before it is heard, it must be noted that the actions of only one side are being considered. While the Met does not typically disclose the cost of a new opera commission, composer's and librettist's fees plus broader development costs can easily amount to more than \$1 million. The financial commitment this commission entails fits in with the Met's propaganda campaign in support of the Zelensky regime in Kiev.

The Met's record on Ukraine is not the product of the obsession of one man. While Gelb's wife, Canadian-Ukrainian conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson, has been very prominent in this campaign, the fundamental causes are political and not personal in nature. Gelb has acted as he has because of a broad consensus within the American ruling class in support of the proxy war, especially within the New York City financial, political and cultural establishment. A significant layer of affluent petty bourgeois like Gelb obediently follow in the ideological wake of this establishment.

The nature of this consensus is clear. The aim of the war is to inflict a strategic defeat on Moscow, subordinating Russia to the status of a semi-colony, seizing its vast natural resources and consolidating US hegemony over the Eurasian landmass as preparation for war with China. While there may have been a few eyebrows raised behind the scenes about this or that detail, Gelb is clearly articulating the views of the oligarchs and the billionaires, and particularly the line of the Democratic Party, which has attacked the Trump administration from the right, for allegedly dragging its heels on this war.

In this regard, it should be noted that right after the White House clash between Zelensky and Donald Trump in March 2025, the Met issued a statement praising "the heroic leader President Zelensky" and played the Ukrainian anthem before another opera performance. Ukraine gave Gelb its Order of

Merit in 2023.

The proxy war is not about Ukrainian “liberty” and “freedom.” That is just the window dressing designed to obscure the predatory aims of the conflict. That is the only way that the playing of the Ukrainian national anthem before a largely upper middle class and elite audience can be understood. There has been no declaration of war against Russia by the US or by the European powers, but there is a war—a de facto war—one of the fronts in the emerging third world war.

There are plenty of precedents for attacks on free speech and other democratic rights in the history of American capitalism in time of war or preparation for war, and musicians and other artists have not been spared. After the US entered the First World War in 1917, German music was quickly removed from concert programs. German-born conductor Karl Muck, who was well-established as the chief conductor of one of the most famous orchestras of the country, in Boston, was imprisoned on trumped-up charges for nearly 18 months before being deported.

During the Korean War, and the Cold War that preceded and followed it, numerous artists, most famously the operatic bass-baritone Paul Robeson, suffered irreparable damage to their careers. The ultimatums given by Gelb to Netrebko recall the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1940s and 50s, as well as the demagogic anticommunism of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy. Actors, writers and other artists were told they could salvage their careers only if they recited obligatory denunciations prepared for them in advance.

Gelb’s brazen and hypocritical warmongering has triggered very little criticism. There were reports that some musicians objected to turning the opera stage over to war propaganda. This was swept under the rug by instructing those protesting to simply withdraw from that section of the performance.

Justin Davidson of *New York* magazine was one of the very few critics who took issue with Gelb. He ironically proposed an opera libretto based dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was brutally killed and his body dismembered in 2018 by agents of the Saudi regime headed by de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman. Davidson suggested “a future commission” for the Met, “about a brave storyteller, gifted with eloquence and clarity, whose truths anger a vengeful king. He flees into exile, only to be entrapped and murdered just when he thought he was safe. On the Met’s stage, the writer—called, say, Jamal Khashoggi—would be sung by a heroic tenor, his tormentor by a demonic baritone.”

Not only did Gelb not speak up at the time of the murder of Khashoggi, he made a deal with the murderer. As Davidson reminded his readers, “the nimbly opportunistic Peter Gelb recently struck a \$100 million deal with Saudi Arabia to supply Riyadh’s new opera house with three weeks’ worth of performances each year...” The distinction made by Gelb between the brutality of Putin and that of the Saudi ruler

corresponds exactly with the foreign policy of the US government.

The most glaring example of Gelb’s hypocrisy is the Met’s ongoing total silence on the Israeli genocide in Gaza. In the immediate aftermath of the events of October 7, 2023, Gelb also spoke on the stage of the Met, directing the orchestra to play Verdi’s famous “Va, Pensiero,” the chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, from *Nabucco*. In the three years since, as 75,000 Gazans, the great majority women and children, have been slaughtered and tens of thousands of others wounded or mutilated, there have been no words from Gelb, no official pronouncements, on the stage or elsewhere.

The attempt to draw an equal sign between Verdi’s music and the role of either Zionism or the cause of Ukraine in the proxy war must be answered. Verdi’s choruses were bound up with the *Risorgimento*, a democratic struggle to unite Italy against Austrian Habsburg domination. Using Verdi to back the imperialist proxy war, or the Zionist regime, is the exact opposite of its historic meaning and significance.

Nor do Gelb’s high-flown words about liberty and suffering apply to the Iranian people subjected to months of attacks in an undeclared war, or to the Cuban people, or the hundreds of fishermen killed by US drone strikes in international waters, or the American citizens as well as legal and undocumented immigrants who have been indefinitely imprisoned or deported or even killed, as part of the endless outrages of the fascist US president. None of that gets a mention from Gelb. Ironically, while Gelb has not mentioned the war on Iran, it is this very war and its consequences that led the Saudi regime, citing economic damage, to withdraw its \$100 million offer to the Met.

While Gelb extols the virtues of the unelected government of Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukrainian Trotskyist Bogdan Syrotiuk has been jailed for more than two years and has recently been sentenced to 15 years in prison for the sole “crime” of writing articles for the *World Socialist Web Site* opposing both Putin and Zelensky and fighting for the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian workers to put an end to the fratricidal conflict.

Gelb’s actions have the odor of desperation. In the US, among broad layers of the middle class as well as the working class, there is opposition to the genocide in Gaza and to the war on Iran, and opposition to escalation of the proxy war in Ukraine. In Ukraine there is also enormous opposition, including to the forcible conscription of cannon fodder for the war. But this opposition must above all be based on the international working class, in struggle against the criminal and decaying capitalist system.



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