

Renowned pianist Krystian Zimerman protests US militarism during concert

By Hiram Lee
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Renowned classical pianist Krystian Zimerman interrupted his concert last month at Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles to level a protest at US militarism, including the recent activity of the United States in Poland. Zimerman stopped the April 26 concert just before its concluding piece was performed, declaring his intention never to play in the United States again.

Zimerman, who has been an outspoken critic of the war in Iraq, expressed in comments made from the stage his disgust with US military intervention in the Middle East and Europe, and the notorious US prison camp in Guantánamo Bay. The artist, who was born in Poland, also spoke of his outrage over US military activities in that country, angrily demanding the US government “Get [its] hands off my country.”

Zimerman was referencing the deal secured by the Bush administration with the right-wing government of Poland to install an anti-missile system in that country following the conflict that erupted between Russia and Georgia in 2008. While arranged under the pretext of defending European countries against missile attacks from hostile forces in the Middle East, particularly in Iran, during the “war on terror,” the insertion of the US missile defense system and military personnel into Poland is in reality a provocative act meant to reassert and reclaim US hegemony in the former “buffer states” of Eastern Europe.

The pursuits of US imperialism in Poland are also not limited to the missile defense program. The country is home to one of several CIA “black sites,” part of a network of secret prisons employed by the Bush administration to torture and hold indefinitely prisoners captured in the so-called “war on terror.”

With such criminality employed by the United States in Poland, with the complicity of the Polish government, Zimerman felt himself compelled to speak

out. His protest was sincere and also courageous considering the harassment that has befallen those in similar positions who have raised their voices against the crimes of US imperialism.

Some reports estimate that between 30 and 40 people walked out of the concert hall following Zimerman’s protest, to which the pianist is reported to have said in response, “Yes, some people when they hear the word military start marching.” Some of those who remained in the auditorium booed the pianist, but many others cheered in support of his remarks.

Following his comments, the pianist launched into what has been widely described as a “ferocious” performance of Karol Szymanowski’s “Variations on a Polish Folk Theme.” He received a standing ovation upon its completion.

While Zimerman spoke out against the crimes of the US government and military, it would be a mistake to characterize his comments as “anti-American.” Zimerman, recognizing that the policies enacted by the Bush administration and being continued by the Obama administration are not representative of the sentiments of the majority of the US population, did not condemn all of those in the US. The *Los Angeles Times* reports that Zimerman “said that America has far finer exports than its military and he thanked those who supported democracy.”

While Zimerman may not have carefully planned his remarks during the April concert, and may or may not have planned to make them at all, it was at the same time not an impulsive or ill-considered outburst. The pianist has struggled with and grown increasingly disgusted by the brutal acts of US imperialism over the past decade. In 2006, he declared he would not perform in America as long as George W. Bush remained in office.

But even with Bush gone, it appears Zimmerman has found the newly elected Obama administration's actions just as deplorable. His remarks during the Disney Hall concert were triggered, in part, by Obama's April 5 announcement in Prague that he would go through with the plans established by Bush to place the missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. In those remarks, Obama echoed the pretext used by the Bush administration, saying, "As long as the threat from Iran persists, we will go forward with a missile defense system that is cost-effective and proven."

In addition to the anger Zimmerman felt over such recent acts, the artist has also been infuriated by his own experiences with the thuggishness of US government authorities during past visits to the US. Not long after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Zimmerman traveled to New York to give a performance at Carnegie Hall. His piano, a one-of-a-kind Steinway modified to his specifications, was seized by officials at JFK Airport. Making the ridiculous claim that the glue holding the piano together gave off a suspicious odor, possibly suggesting explosive materials, the Transportation Security Administration ordered the instrument destroyed. In response to this reprehensible act, on later tours of the US, Zimmerman chose to disassemble his piano and ship it around the country in pieces, reassembling the instrument before each concert.

These impossible conditions, combined with his growing outrage over US foreign policy, have now driven Krystian Zimmerman to discontinue performing in the United States.

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