

Media lends support to Toronto Symphony's barring of pianist

By Roger Jordan
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In the week since the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) banned Ukrainian-born pianist Valentina Lisitsa from performing, the corporate media and its music critics have sought to downplay the ban's significance.

Instead of denouncing it as a blatant act of political censorship aimed at preventing exposure of the criminal character of the western-backed regime in Kiev, the media has widely portrayed the decision to bar Lisitsa from giving two performances of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 as nothing more than a public relations blunder.

The controversy erupted on April 6, when Lisitsa posted a statement on her Facebook page advising that her two TSO concerts scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday of last week had been cancelled. TSO chief executive Jeff Melanson, who had initially tried to cover up the political motivation for the cancellation, later sought to justify it with the claim that Lisitsa had used "deeply offensive language" in a series of Twitter postings on the conflict in Ukraine. Earlier, while seeking to pressure her into withdrawing from her Toronto performances, the TSO had sent Lisitsa a letter accusing her of hate speech and threatening her with consequences under Canada's criminal code.

As quickly became clear, the real motivation behind the ban was the fact that Lisitsa had challenged Western propaganda claims that the Ukraine crisis has been produced by Russian aggression. Lisitsa explained in her Facebook statement that she had watched the growing ethnic civil war in her homeland with increasing desperation and wanted to draw attention to the other side of the story that has been suppressed in the western media. She referred to her concern over the repression and persecution of the Russian minority in the south and east of the country, driven by the well-documented presence of right-wing extremist and openly fascist elements in the Ukrainian government that came to power last year as a result of a Western-backed and orchestrated coup.

As an example of the misinformation she has been seeking to expose through social media postings, she mentioned how she had confronted a French magazine that had published a glowing cover story about a female member of the Ukrainian military who turned out to be a neo-Nazi.

These efforts to expose the true character of the Kiev regime

were intolerable to the Ukrainian right, which went on the offensive to discredit Lisitsa as a supporter of Russian President Putin. In what amounts to an outrageous assault on artistic freedom and the right to freedom of speech, the TSO gave its backing to this campaign with its decision to remove her from their programme.

The defence of Lisitsa against this reactionary campaign need not imply full agreement with her views. Her claim, for example, that political satire is the most effective way to reveal to people what is going on in Ukraine reveals at best a severely limited understanding of the geopolitical and historical issues at stake. Yet it has still enabled her to provide a more accurate picture of the character of the US-backed Kiev regime than that generally presented by the corporate media.

As far as the media is concerned, Lisitsa's views are beyond the pale. Even those who have expressed some trepidation about the consequences of the TSO's actions have said nothing to challenge the campaign of disinformation and lies mounted by the US, Canada and their allies to portray the Kiev regime as a bastion of democracy struggling against Russian aggression. After supporting the overthrow of an elected president to draw Ukraine into their sphere of influence, the imperialist powers responded to Moscow's pushback by initiating a vast build-up of NATO forces in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region that threatens to trigger a major conflict if not world war.

In a piece in the Toronto-based *Globe and Mail* which took a critical view of the TSO's actions, Marcus Gee wrote, "The bar on Ms. Lisitsa puts the TSO in an impossible position. If other groups come knocking, Mr. Melanson must now, for the sake of fairness, consider each objection to each musician."

Anne Midgette, the classical music critic with the *Washington Post*, was even more explicit in stating where her sympathies lay. "There's food here for legitimate debate," she wrote in the *Post*. "But legitimate debate is not necessarily what's fostered in the kangaroo court of Twitter and Facebook. The Toronto Symphony has been besieged by an outcry about free speech, and ultimately had to cancel the concerto altogether... Some of the orchestra's critics include people who have their own political axes to grind."

Midgette was a panelist on a discussion held by WQXR, New

York's classical music radio station, which sought to cast the entire episode as a matter of public relations management. For WQXR, the "crucial point" emerging from Lisitsa's banning was that "orchestras and arts organizations find themselves walking a fine line with protecting their brand when they engage an artist with controversial views."

Midgette told the broadcast, "The orchestra decorously cited distasteful Tweets and Lisitsa, who is a very savvy social media person, went on the warpath and said 'free speech'. Because the Toronto Symphony didn't come out and cite the tweets they were talking about, and because Lisitsa was able to marshal opinion on her side, this has developed into a kind of cause célèbre and people are jumping to conclusions based on inadequate information."

As well as illustrating the utter contempt for basic democratic rights in such privileged circles, the presentation of an embattled TSO being overwhelmed by Lisitsa and her ill-tempered followers is utterly false. The truth is that the TSO's cowardly capitulation was in line with the Canadian ruling elite's confrontational course towards Russia over Ukraine. The Conservative government of Stephen Harper has been one of Kiev's most outspoken supporters on the global stage, a stand that has been strongly endorsed by the opposition parties and the corporate elite. In alliance with the very same reactionary forces targeting Lisitsa, Canada's government has backed efforts by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC) to supply weaponry to the Ukrainian army and ultranationalist volunteer battalions.

On Tuesday, Harper went further, announcing plans to send 200 Canadian troops to western Ukraine to train the Ukrainian armed forces and National Guard units alongside US forces. The National Guard in particular is overwhelmingly composed of far-right and openly fascist militias.

Thus in bowing to the pressure from the right-wing ultranationalist Ukrainian-Canadian and Ukrainian groups, including the UCC and EuroMaidan Press website, the TSO was genuflecting to forces that enjoy considerable influence within Canada's ruling elite.

Articles published by EuroMaidan Press, it should be noted, were cited in press accounts as evidence of Lisitsa's apparently offensive language without any comment on the source of such allegations.

One such article, dated 12 December 2014, makes clear that the banning of Lisitsa was the result of a campaign orchestrated by these elements. The article, entitled "High culture merges with terrorism," commented on a previous protest at a Lisitsa concert in Pittsburgh the website had organised, "Complaints about the hiring of Ms. Lisitsa had previously been e-mailed to the Pittsburgh Symphony management, principal donors and local media." The article then concluded, "Ukrainian communities might be interested to greet Ms. Lisitsa at her upcoming concerts in Quebec, the Netherlands, Paris, Washington, Leipzig, London, Cincinnati, Stockholm and in

April, 2015 with the Toronto Symphony."

Melanson, by his own admission, acknowledges that the complaints over Lisitsa's appearance were first made in December, suggesting a direct connection with the EuroMaidan piece.

According to information released by Lisitsa, the TSO responded to pressure from a large donor to drop her concert. She provided the *Globe and Mail* with an image of an email from her agent dated 28 February in which the agent wrote that the anonymous donor was prepared to "pull his sponsorship" for the orchestra. The TSO has denied this.

Stewart Goodyear, who the TSO initially sought to call in as a replacement for Lisitsa, has also provided information about how the TSO attempted to keep him in the dark over the reason for the cancellation of Lisitsa's performances. Goodyear recalled speaking with TSO management twice, on the Thursday and Saturday prior to the breaking of the story, and no mention of the reason for Lisitsa's cancellation was made. Only after he had signed his contract was he informed of the circumstances. The Rachmaninoff concerto was ultimately struck from the programme.

In contrast to the dismissive attitude taken by most media commentators on the implications of banning an artist as a result of their political views, the comments sections of many articles on Lisitsa were full of angry denunciations of the move. "Can she play the piano?" asked one reader on WQXR. "If so, what difference do her personal opinions make? Are we going to censor everyone who offends us?" Another wrote, "The TSO, by persecuting an artist for deviating from the consensus of warmongering media propaganda, has renounced the right to be considered an artistic organization. It has defined itself as a political organ."

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