

Ukrainian nationalists demand Russian and Belarusian pianists be barred from Australian music competition

Richard Phillips
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Ukrainian chauvinists in Australia, in parallel with the federal Labor government's ever-escalating military support for the US-led NATO proxy war in Ukraine, are agitating for Russian and Belarusian classical musicians to be excluded from an International Piano Competition in Sydney next month.

The reactionary demands, which were publicised in a sympathetic article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other syndicated Nine newspapers on June 11, are part of the anti-Russian hysteria being whipped up internationally by supporters of the NATO war and the corporate media. This frothing nationalism is being stepped-up as Ukraine begins its murderous summer offensive.

The three-week piano competition, which will be held at the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, is one of the World Federation of International Music competitions.

A premier event on the Australian classical music calendar, this year's program has 32 young virtuosos competing, including the acclaimed Sergey Belyavsky and three other Russians, two Belarusians and two Ukrainians. The prize winner will perform recitals in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, Townsville and Perth.

Belyavsky, who has been playing since he was five, commenced his musical studies, aged nine, at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory. He was one of several pianists who spoke out against the war and has performed together with Ukrainian pianist Alexej Gorlatsch at a benefit concert in Frankfurt in March 2021.

Demands for the banning of performers because of where they happen to have been born is not just an assault on their basic rights but a reactionary attack on all musicians and artistic endeavours. It exposes, moreover, bogus claims that the US-led NATO war is a "democratic" endeavour. Such calls must be opposed by Australian musicians and artists of every genre, as well as workers, students and youth.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* article claims that the call for the bans came from the "Ukrainian community." In fact, they were made by the Ukrainian Council of NSW and supported by the Ukrainian ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko. They have no mass support among musicians or the rest of the population.

Ukrainian Council of NSW vice president Andrew Mencinsky told the newspaper that the competition "provided a platform for Russia to use the success of its musicians" and "deflect from its barbarous actions in Ukraine." The musicians should only be allowed to attend if they had "publicly condemned the invasion," Mencinsky said.

Contrary to Mencinsky's claims, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was systematically provoked and escalated by the US and its allies, especially through the 2014 coup in Kiev, which led to the installation of a government aligned with European and US imperialism and directed against Russia.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the Russian invasion, as the desperate and reactionary response to these imperialist provocations of the Putin regime, which represents the interests of the oligarchy that emerged out of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The claims of Washington and their allies to be defending Ukraine are a sham. Instead, they are fighting to the last Ukrainian, in a long-planned war aimed at inflicting a defeat on Russia to shore-up American imperialist hegemony.

Aside from this essential conflict, claims that an entire population is responsible for the actions of a government are always reactionary. Historically, they have been associated with outright racism and even genocide.

Russia, as every country, is divided along class lines. Russian workers and young people, together with artists and cultural figures, are no more responsible for the actions of the Putin regime, than are ordinary working people in the US culpable for the decades of American imperialist wars and interventions.

Vasyl Myroshnychenko, the Ukrainian ambassador, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that he sympathised with calls to ban Russians and Belarusians from the piano competition, accusing Russia of “weaponising culture.”

This allegation, however, perfectly describes the vicious anti-Russian “cultural cleansing” already implemented by the extreme-right Zelensky regime in Ukraine and advocated by Myroshnychenko in Australia.

In the past 12 months, the Zelensky government has ordered Ukrainian musicians and authors not to appear at any events or competitions that include their Russian counterparts. It has banned the import of Russian books, performances of Russian music and musicians or Russian plays, exhibitions and the screening of Russian films.

Last December, Ukrainian Culture Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko demanded an international boycott of all Russian culture, including a ban on performances of works by Tchaikovsky, Dmitri Shostakovich and other Russian composers until the end of the war.

Two months ago, Kyiv issued a decree blocking national sports teams from competing in Olympic, non-Olympic and Paralympic events that include competitors from Russia and Belarus. Any Ukrainian sporting federations competing at such international events will be stripped of their national status and all government funding.

These measures, which echo the anti-Soviet hysteria of Hitler’s Nazi regime, have been accompanied by the victimisation of Russian musicians and performers in the US, Canada, Germany and other countries. Contracts have been torn up and planned programs and performances cancelled.

The most notable casualties thus far are Russian conductor Valery Gergiev, soprano Anna Netrebko, violinist Lorenz Nasturica-Herschcowici and Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov.

For his part, Myroshnychenko, who was appointed Ukrainian’s ambassador to Australia and New Zealand in March 2022, has maintained a steady stream of anti-Russian propaganda, coupled with appeals to the Albanese government for more weapons and money. He regularly intervenes on social media to denounce organisations or individuals that fail to follow official NATO war propaganda.

Myroshnychenko, who was directly involved in the US-orchestrated Maidan Coup in 2014, was politically educated in the US, Canada, UK and Sweden. In 1999 and 2000, he worked in the Public Affairs Section in the US embassy in Ukraine and, in 2001, as an intern in the Canadian parliament under the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Program.

During the Maidan Coup, Myroshnychenko cofounded the so-called Ukraine Crisis Media Center, “aimed at amplifying

Ukraine’s voice internationally”—i.e., to churn out propaganda and apologetics for the US-orchestrated coup.

Last year, Myroshnychenko called for visa bans on Russian tourists wanting to visit Australia. In September he took to social media to denounce a three-storey mural in central Melbourne by pacifist painter Peter Smeaton.

Titled “Peace before Pieces,” the mural portrays a Russian and a Ukrainian soldier embracing each other. Myroshnychenko declared the image to be “utterly offensive to all Ukrainians,” a call that was taken up by the corporate media. The ensuing hysteria pressured Seaton to paint over his mural.

In January, Myroshnychenko demanded Russian and Belarussian tennis players be excluded from the Australian Open. While tennis officials failed to bar these players, they subsequently ruled that Russian and Belarus flags could not be taken to the Australian Open.

Last month, the Melbourne City Council unanimously voted to cut ties with its sister city of St Petersburg in Russia, ending a 34-year relationship. It followed a small protest outside the town hall by the extreme-right Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations.

The sister-city agreement allowed paintings from St Petersburg’s Hermitage to be exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne in 2015, as well as a Dostoyevsky Museum exhibition in 2019 and other cultural exchanges.

Chauvinist demands for bans on Russian and Belarussian musicians are of a piece with the political and military agenda of the Albanese Labor government and the rest of Australia’s political elite fully support the US war against Russia and military build-up against China. It is no accident that, to date, no politician has even commented on the call for a ban, let alone opposed it.



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