

Music and Politics: The Toronto Symphony Orchestra Silences Ukrainian Musician Valentina Lisitsa

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It is no secret that nowadays many alternative media activists face appalling state-sponsored censorship in many nominally free and democratic Western countries. Now it seems that such censorship has penetrated much deeper than we have come to expect. Art itself, the truest form of free expression, is being silenced.

Valentina Lisitsa is a brilliant musician, a famous virtuoso pianist, also known for publicly expressing her opinion on the Ukrainian conflict through her [Twitter account](#). She is a good friend of the *Slavyangrad Team* and has kindly translated a number of articles for our publication. Her views are always insightful and she has never made them a secret. We are lucky to have Valentina's first-hand account about dealings with the [Toronto Symphony Orchestra \("TSO"\)](#), which has decided to cancel her concert because of her political opinions. The TSO's decision to silence Valentina's music because she has exercised her inviolable right to express her beliefs is a message to all artists that the next time it could be them.

Valentina is Ukrainian. She was born on March 25, 1970, in Kiev. Her family comes from Odessa—her mother is a Russian citizen, and her father was Ukrainian. Valentina graduated from the Lysenko music school and the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine (the Kiev Conservatory). She married Alexey Kuznetsov from Taganrog. In 1991, they represented Ukraine in the Murray Dranoff Two Piano Competition in Miami, Florida, and won the first prize. In 1992 they moved to the USA to study and subsequently decided to remain there. In 2001 they became American citizens. Since last year, Valentina has been living in Paris.

Valentina is one of the most frequently viewed pianists on YouTube, with over 177,000 subscribers, and she performs all over the world. Now Valentina's concert in Toronto, which was scheduled for April 8 and 9 at the Roy Thomson Hall, has been cancelled for an outrageous reason—her political views. In an email sent to Valentina's agent, the TSO stated: *"the Toronto Symphony Orchestra received some messages from ticket buyers and others expressing **concern over pianist Valentina Lisitsa's public political statements.**"*

In its correspondence, the TSO also accused Valentina of nothing less than **public incitement of hatred** contrary to section 319(2) of the Criminal Code of Canada and went as far as to insinuate that Valentina, a citizen of the United States, could be barred from entering Canada by the immigration authorities. The TSO attempted to base its charges on

Lisitsa's public social media posts, attaching a copy of some of her tweets, along with a brief and exceedingly shallow legal opinion by the TSO's counsel at Borden Ladner Gervais LLP.

Despite being provided with a substantive legal response on the merits of these allegations, the TSO has since mustered neither a single sentence in support of its accusations, nor a single word of apology. It was only after the legal opinion supplied by Valentina underscored that the TSO could not unilaterally dissolve the contract that the TSO's counsel clarified that all her fees would be paid. To all appearances, the TSO seemed to believe that it could not only silence Valentina's music, but also renege on its contractual obligations and thus walk away from their commitments.

With the TSO finally making a decision to cancel Valentina's concert at the Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto, Valentina has appealed to her fans and friends on [her public Facebook page](#), today, on April 6. With full support for Valentina's courage and strength, we have excerpted the full text of her appeal below. Valentina Lisitsa has never been one to hide her political views. It is time for the TSO to acknowledge that they can no longer hide their own biases and to stop kowtowing to ferociously reactionary political lobbies.

- by [Olga Luzanova](#) & [Gleb Bazov](#)



"Dear fans, DEAR FRIENDS!

I have a confession to make and a huge favor to ask all of you. I really REALLY need your help now.

But first, my confession.

Over the last year I have been leading a double life. There was me—a "celebrity" pianist hopping from concert to concert, all over the world; learning new pieces, meeting fans, recording, chirping about my happiness in upbeat interviews.

But there was another me: not a musician but a regular human being—a daughter, a mother, a wife. And this human being was watching helplessly how the country of my birth, of my childhood, of my first falling in love—this country was sliding ever faster into the

abyss. Children die under bombs, old ladies die of starvation, people burned alive...

The worst thing that can happen to any country is fratricidal war, people seeing each other, their neighbours as enemies to be eliminated. This is what has befallen my beautiful Ukraine. My heart was bleeding. You all saw on TV screens all over the world a magnificent revolution, the people of Ukraine raising in fury against their corrupt rulers, for a better life. I was so proud of my people! But the ruling class doesn't let go easily. They managed to cunningly channel away the anger, to direct it to other, often imaginary, enemies—and worse, to turn people upon themselves. A year later, we have the same rich people remaining in power, misery and poverty everywhere, dozens of thousands killed, over a million of refugees.

So, I took to Twitter (how many of you know I have a Twitter account?) under a name “NedoUkraïinka”—a word roughly meaning “Sub-Ukrainian”, a stab at Ukrainian Prime Minister who called Russian-speaking southern and eastern Ukrainians “SUBHUMANS”! Yes, I kid you not. In an official written document. I am a subhuman, my husband, my mum.... I mastered Ukrainian language perfectly, far better than a so-called “president” of Ukraine. But I don't speak it to my family, I didn't sing lullabies to my son in Ukrainian, when I sleep I never see the dreams in Ukrainian, when I will be dying my last words will NOT be in Ukrainian...

Sorry, I got carried away telling you those things... To get back to my story—I took to Twitter in order to get the other side of the story heard, the one you never see in the mainstream media—the plight of my people, the good and bad things that were happening in Ukraine. I translated news stories from Ukrainian language websites, I translated eyewitness accounts of atrocities.... I became really good in unmasking fakes published by Western media in order to make one side of the civil war look whiter and softer than the Easter bunny, and the other—like sub-humans, not worthy of mercy, the “collateral damage”.

To give you just one example: one of my feats was to confront French fashion magazine “Elle” who published a glowing cover story about women in Ukrainian army. After the research I have shown to the magazine in my Twitter posts that the “cover girl” they have chosen to show was in fact a horrible person, open Neo-Nazi, racist, anti-Semite who boasted of murdering civilians for fun! The magazine issued a written public apology.

*I was very proud! But with time my activities attracted a lot of vicious haters. I was a particularly important “target” because of being Ukrainian, thus—a traitor. I thought I knew hate—my playing on YouTube certainly “attracted” a fair share of hate mail. But I was mistaken. Death threats, wishes for my family to die, calling me “paid Kremlin wh*re”... the list goes on and on.*

My haters didn't stop there. Trying, in their own words, to teach me a lesson, they have now attempted to silence me as a musician.

I am scheduled to play Rachmaninoff Concerto #2 with Toronto Symphony Orchestra this week. Back in December someone in the orchestra top management, likely after pressure from a small but aggressive lobby claiming to represent the Ukrainian community, has made a decision that I should not be allowed to play. I don't even know who my accusers are, I am kept in the dark about it. I was accused of “inciting hatred” on Twitter. As the “proof”, ironically enough, they presented to the orchestra my tweets containing, of all things, Charlie Hebdo caricatures depicting lying media!!! We all know what those who can't tolerate free speech did to Charlie Hebdo journalists.

Now, the orchestra based in one of the freest democratic countries is bending over to the same kind of people, helping them to assassinate me—not as a living person yet , but as a **MUSICIAN** for sure.

Yes, Toronto Symphony is going TO PAY ME NOT TO PLAY because I exercised the right to free speech. Yes, they will pay my fee but they are going to announce that I will be unable to play and they already found a substitute. **And they even threatened me against saying anything about the cause of the cancellation.** Seriously. And I thought things like this only happen in Turkey to Fazil Say?

Now, the plea.

Before you decide to help me—If you wish, please take time and read my tweets. You might find some of them offensive—perhaps. Satire and hyperbole are the best literature tools to combat lies. Bear that in mind when reading.

Here is what I ask you to do for me and in defense of freedom, even if you disagree with me on politics.

I ask you to raise your voice and tell Toronto Symphony that music can't be silenced. Ask them to let me play. If you want to write something—great! Or just share a photo I made (sorry, I made it on my phone, nothing fancy). Ask your friends to join in.

If they do it once, they will do it again and again, until the musicians, artists are intimidated into voluntary censorship. Our future will be bleak if we allow this to happen.

Please stand with me.

Here are the links :

<https://www.facebook.com/torontosymphonyorchestra> Twitter [@TorontoSymphony](https://twitter.com/TorontoSymphony)”

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