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International Tchaikovsky Competition expelled by World Federation of International Music Competitions

In the latest expression of the anti-Russian campaign following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine two months ago, the world-famous International Tchaikovsky Competition has been expelled by the World Federation of International Music Competitions (WFIMC). The Tchaikovsky Competition, inaugurated in 1958 by a contest in which American pianist Van Cliburn won the top prize, is among the most prominent affiliates of the 120-member WFIMC.



Gala concert of laureates at Tchaikovsky Competition, 2019 (Photo credit–tchaikovskycompetition.com)

The Tchaikovsky Competition is named after Russia's most famous 19th century composer, whose name is synonymous with Romanticism and with Russian music generally. Held every four years in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Leningrad before the dissolution of the Soviet Union), its inaugural event 64 years ago made international headlines with the triumph of the young American. Cliburn, who died in 2013 after a significant career, won the hearts of the Russian audience as well as the judges in 1958, and his victory, only a few years after the Korean War and the heyday of McCarthyism in the US, became associated with a broader yearning for peace. This was the same period which saw famed conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra embark on a tour of the Soviet Union. Music, and classical music in particular, was regarded as having the potential to advance the cause of international understanding.

While the Tchaikovsky events include competitions for violin, cello and vocal artists, and also included brass instruments at its most recent competition in 2019, the overwhelming emphasis is on the piano. Among its first prize winners over the years have been such prominent musicians as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Grigory Sokolov, Andrei Gavrilov, Mikhail Pletnev, Boris Berezovsky, Denis Matsuev, Daniil Trifonov and Barry Douglas (in 1986, the first non-Russian pianist to win first prize since Cliburn). Violinist prizewinners have included Gidon Kremer, Vladimir Spivakov and Viktoria Mullova.

In a statement issued in the names of its president and secretary general, the WFIMC felt compelled to acknowledge the importance of the Tchaikovsky Competition, even as it sought, somewhat defensively, to justify its action.

“Many laureates of the Tchaikovsky Competition are among the leading artists of today,” the WFIMC conceded. “However, in the face of Russia's brutal war and humanitarian atrocities in Ukraine, the WFIMC as an apolitical organization cannot support or have as a member, a competition financed and used as a promotional tool by the Russian regime.”

While this supposedly “apolitical” organization lines up with the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, it says nothing about how Putin's reactionary attack was instigated over a

period of decades by relentless provocations on the part of US imperialism, including the steady expansion of NATO after its supposed reason for existence had ended with the end of the Cold War. Nor is there any mention of the installation of a pro-NATO regime after a right-wing US-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014. Nor does the WFIMC's hypocritical statement attempt to justify its exclusion of a Russia-based competition while ignoring its many affiliates in the US, where governments led by both major parties of American imperialism have launched unprovoked wars and aggression against Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, Libya and elsewhere in recent years.



Announcement of results of the 3rd round of auditions in the piano category, 2019 (Photo credit–tchaikovskycompetition.com)

Of course, neither Russian nor American artists should be banned on the basis of the actions of their governments, or even—except in the most extreme circumstances as in the case of the Holocaust—on the basis of their own political views. Today, however the banning of artists is part of the effort to stoke nationalism and increases the danger of a third world war. On the other side, Vladimir Putin has pointed to the attacks on Russian artists to whip up reactionary Russian nationalism as well.

The action against the Tchaikovsky competition is part of an ongoing effort to demonize Russia as part of the war fever orchestrated in London, Berlin, Paris and above all Washington. It follows the efforts to disrupt or destroy the international careers of Russian

conductor Valery Gergiev and soprano Anna Netrebko, as well as less prominent but no less serious attacks on younger artists, such as the cancellation of a number of recitals by Russian pianist Alexander Malofeev, and the decision by the Sibelius Violin Competition to exclude Russian competitors from this year's event.

A growing number of musicians and other artists have voiced their opposition to the attempts to ban Russian artists. Most recently, the Honens International Piano Competition in Calgary, Canada, was forced to rescind its attempt to ban six young Russian pianists, after the decision was condemned on social media and by noted pianist Kirill Gerstein, among others.

The WFIMC statement, apparently attempting to head off this criticism, makes the contradictory claim that it “affirms its previous statement against blanket sanctions on all Russians and against the discrimination and exclusion of individual artists, based on their nationality.” But of course, the action taken against the Tchaikovsky Competition excludes artists based on their nationality. The statement concludes, “In times of war especially, we believe it to be essential to maintain a dialogue with those who trust us and who share our values, the same way as we trust them.” The hypocritical praise of “dialogue” is limited to “those ... who share our values”—in other words, a boycott of those who may not, and of all those who have been preparing for the next Tchaikovsky competition.

This week's announcement highlights the fact that what has developed into a US-NATO proxy war against Russia marks the end of an era. The impact of the war on international cultural events recalls the period that preceded the first Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958. The war fever being whipped up today has not been seen for at least 70 years. Even during the Cuban missile crisis and the days of Ronald Reagan's fulminations against the “Evil Empire,” international cultural exchanges were rarely if ever affected. The unique focus, by the WFIMC and similar institutions, on Putin and the proximate invasion, divorced entirely from its history, is a statement of solidarity with US-NATO aggression.

The privileged social layer that dominates the boards of the various elite musical organizations and musical competitions in Europe and North America is on board with the war drive. The young musicians and other artists, on the other hand, have no reason to support war.

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