

**THE POLITICAL PIANIST: PROTEST, COMMISSIONS, AND PROGRAMMING FOR  
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

by

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## **Abstract**

Politics touches many aspects of modern life, from the food we eat to the products we buy and the sports we watch—as well as the music we listen to, study, and perform. Classical musicians are generally more cautious about entering political debates than popular musicians and celebrities. This caution is attributable, in part, to the historical suppression and censorship of classical musicians and composers. But classical musicians today are affected by—and are often implicated in—the systemic forces of racism, sexism, inequality, and other sociopolitical problems. In this dissertation I argue that classical pianists can and should engage in political speech and action.

This study begins with a working definition of political music and surveys the history of political interference with classical music and musicians. I then outline three basic categories of political pianism: protest, commissioning, and programming. An exploration of protest highlights four notable pianists who engaged in political activism and speech. My discussion of commissions and programming critiques classical music's structural and institutional biases towards white and male composers and contends that collaborations with composers and repertoire choices can function as political statements. The document also introduces two new piano works written by Joel Thompson and Peter S. Shin, commissioned with funding from the University of British Columbia's Public Scholars Initiative. This dissertation is intended as a guide for pianists who wish to integrate their personal politics into their professional pursuits.

## **Lay Summary**

Politics today often seems ubiquitous and unavoidable; it touches many aspects of our modern lives. This influence extends to the music we listen to, study, and play. Classical musicians, however, are often reluctant to link their political beliefs with their profession. In this document, I argue that classical pianists have a claim to political action and speech as legitimate as any other public figure or citizen. This dissertation suggests a working definition of political classical music, introduces two new compositions, and suggests three models of political action.

## **Preface**

This thesis was written under the guidance of Dr. Corey Hamm and Dr. Michael Tenzer. It is an original, unpublished work which stands as the intellectual property of its author, Benjamin Hopkins. Musical examples from Joel Thompson's *My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes* are reprinted with permission from the composer.

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Video: Johannes Brahms: Cello Sonata No. 2 in F major, Op. 99 – Adagio affettuoso; with Annie Jacobs-Perkins, cello

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The commissions presented in this document and the accompanying lecture-recital were made possible by UBC's Public Scholars Initiative. I am eternally grateful to Joel Thompson and Peter Shin for entrusting me with the premieres of their compositions, and to Dr. Serbulent Turan and Dean Susan Porter for believing in the value of my project.

None of this would have been possible without my family. My parents are, quite simply, the most supportive and loving people I know, and it is thanks to their encouragement that I developed a love for language at an early age. Even though I've always been comfortable writing, finishing this dissertation often felt like an impossible task. But any time I had doubts, my partner Billie's unwavering confidence in me helped me keep moving forward, and our beloved dog Louie sat by my side nearly every day while I wrote this document. And ever since I moved to the Pacific Northwest, the hospitality, warmth, and welcome from my cousins in Seattle, especially Pat Marcus and Rich Berley, has made me feel truly at home.

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*To my grandmother, Irene Galinsky*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The idea for this dissertation first began to form at a concert I attended on October 28, 2018: the Czech Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall. Although the program had been decided long in advance, an unforeseeable atrocity recontextualized the concert's only work, Mahler's Second Symphony—the "Resurrection." On Saturday, October 27, 2018, a gunman murdered eleven Jewish senior citizens at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The "Resurrection" is powerful under normal circumstances, but in the aftermath of the attack it had an added weight that to this day I find impossible to fully describe. The text, chosen and partially written by Mahler, a Jewish composer whose career was impacted by anti-Semitism, is poignant and gutting even under normal circumstances.

Mahler's Second has a historic connection with violence and oppression. Leonard Bernstein conducted it on national television after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The Second was the last work performed by the Jüdische Kulturbund—the all-Jewish orchestra formed after the Nuremberg Laws removed Jews from the German orchestras—before the Nazis dissolved the organization in 1941 and deported its members to Nazi death camps. The orchestra had planned to play Nielsen's "Inextinguishable" Symphony as the opener to the 1942 season. Symbolism and musical subtext couldn't save the Jewish musicians in Germany or prevent anti-Semitic attacks in America.

There was no mention of the previous day's attack before the Czech Philharmonic performed at Carnegie Hall, but the 24-hour news networks had given the shooting nonstop coverage, and it must have been on nearly everyone's mind. New York City has the largest Jewish population in the world outside of Israel, and the main performance space in Carnegie Hall is named for the legendary Jewish violinist Isaac Stern. In good traffic, Pittsburgh is less

than a six-hour drive from Manhattan. By the fourth movement, many listeners were in tears, and the typical chorus of coughs was replaced with sniffles. The opening lines of the movement—“Humanity lies in greatest need; Humanity lies in great agony”<sup>1</sup>—felt as though they had been specifically written for that moment. But for me, the resurrection promised in the final stanza seemed like a farce—the shooting victims, one of whom had survived the Holocaust, would not “rise again.”<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the text, they had “suffered in vain.” At that moment, the music could provide nothing but a temporary catharsis.

That experience was a concentrated dose of something I had felt since the 2016 election, which happened just two months into the start of my doctoral studies at UBC. The election of Donald Trump, and the subsequent parade of horrors—among others, the Muslim ban, children in cages at the border, mass shootings at a concert in Las Vegas and a high school in Florida, the rollback of protections for LGBTQ Americans—made me feel completely powerless. Talking about all these problems on social media increasingly felt like screaming into the void. Many people horrified by current events bought into the illusion, sharply identified by Jia Tolentino,

that speech has an impact; that it’s something like action... The internet generally minimizes the need for physical action. You don’t have to do anything except sit behind a screen to live an acceptable, possibly valorized, twenty-first-century life... In the absence of time to physically and politically engage with our community the way that many of us want to, the internet provides a cheap substitute... Opinion stops being a first step towards something and starts being an end to itself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bettie Jo Basinger, “Mahler Listening Guide: Symphony No. 2 in c minor (“Resurrection”), Utah Symphony, August 22, 2018, <https://utahsymphony.org/explore/2014/11/mahler-2-listening-guide/>.

<sup>2</sup> Basinger, “Mahler Listening Guide.”

<sup>3</sup> Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 17.

Platitudes about the value of classical music, and art in general, feel hollow to me for the same reason. In January 2019, a well-meaning concert presenter introduced yet another all-Beethoven program by saying, “If we all listened to more Beethoven, the world would be a better place.” The sentiment may strike many as endearing and optimistic, but immediately loses its charm when anyone points out that, actually, Hitler and the Nazis listened to quite a lot of Beethoven, and they indisputably made the world much worse. Indeed, regarding Richard Wagner’s attitudes on the respective moral qualities of Jewish and German music, Taruskin argues that “teaching people that their love of Schubert makes them better people teaches them nothing but vainglory, and inspires attitudes that are the very opposite of humane... To cast aesthetic preferences as moral or ethical choices at the dawn of the twenty-first century is an obscenity.”<sup>4</sup>

Although the presenter was surely speaking from ignorance rather than malice, the racist and imperialist history of the sentiment runs deep. Some music historians have argued that Wagner’s 1850 essay *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (*Jewishness in Music*) created a new, much more virulent strain of anti-Semitism that led directly to the rise of Hitler and eventually the Holocaust. And yet it was 2017, not 1937, when Donald Trump proclaimed that the superiority of Western culture was evident because “we write symphonies.”<sup>5</sup> The irony of making this assertion in a speech in Warsaw intended to celebrate the Polish resistance to Nazi Germany was obviously lost on him.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Los Angeles: Berkeley University Press, 2009), 344.

<sup>5</sup> “Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland,” The White House, The United States Government, July 6, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland/>.

The idea that simply performing classical music and letting it speak for itself—that we can passively, easily, make the world a better place just by producing and consuming it—naturally implies that other music is morally inferior. This claim of immorality is often explicitly leveled at non-white musicians; a “monolithic view of hip-hop as an art form characterized by misogyny and violently hedonistic lyrics”<sup>6</sup> arose during the mid-1990s culture war led by conservatives including Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich. Conservative critics have clung to that view; in 2015, Fox News host Bill O’Reilly condemned the rapper Ludacris as “a man who degrades women.” (In January 2017 O’Reilly settled his sixth workplace sexual harassment lawsuit for \$32 million.)<sup>7</sup> But critics of hip hop and rap are rarely interested in criticizing the misogyny and racism in many operas, the overwhelming gender imbalance in the classical music canon, or the widespread mistreatment of women in the classical music industry.

After the Associated Press reported twenty thoroughly sourced allegations of sexual harassment against Placido Domingo in 2019,<sup>8</sup> Norman Lebrecht waved away the accusations in editorials on Slipped Disc, his classical music gossip blog. “Domingo has long been known as a woman chaser,”<sup>9</sup> Lebrecht wrote, as if this was somehow exculpatory. Even if the accusations were true, he scoffed, Domingo “generally backed off” and “is genuinely popular among

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, “Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music,” *The Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 30 No. 2 (Nov. 1999): 165. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645846>.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Steel and Michael S. Schmidt, “Bill O’Reilly Settled New Harassment Claim, Then Fox News Renewed His Contract,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/21/business/media/bill-oreilly-sexual-harassment.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Gecker, Jocelyn, “AP: Women accuse opera legend Domingo of sexual harassment,” August 13, 2019. <https://apnews.com/c2d51d690d004992b8cfba3bad827ae9>.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Lebrecht, “Why the Domingo Case is Failing,” SlippedDisc, August 19, 2019. <https://slippedisc.com/2019/08/why-the-domingo-case-is-failing/>.



colleagues and has done much philanthropic work.”<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Lebrecht wrote that Domingo’s “propositions were ... something of a backstage joke... Whatever else I saw of him, he was not inhuman, not an abuser, not the monster that America’s #MeToo media has made of him.”<sup>11</sup> Since then, the American Guild of Musical Artists found that Domingo did indeed engage in “inappropriate activity, ranging from flirtation to sexual advances.”<sup>12</sup> Lebrecht has not corrected the record or apologized.

And yet, Lebrecht had plenty to say in 2014 when the Seattle Symphony performed the whimsical 1990s hit “Baby Got Back” in a concert with rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot. “This performance is a[sic] about men’s commodification of women’s bodies. It is lewd, rude, sexist and demeaning,”<sup>13</sup> Lebrecht proclaimed in his first Mix-A-Lot diatribe. A day later, he added: “A song in celebration of women’s bottoms is (a) degrading to women, (b) demeaning to men, (c) bad for box-office.”<sup>14</sup> The first two claims are subjective, and the third is not only completely unsubstantiated but contradicted by his previous post.<sup>15</sup> The double standard is telling. Not once

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<sup>10</sup> Lebrecht, “Why the Domingo Case is Failing.”

<sup>11</sup> Lebrecht, Norman, “Was Plácido a Pest?” *The Critic*, Dec 2019, <https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/december-2019/was-placido-a-pest/>.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Kennicott, “Plácido Domingo’s reputation as a performer enabled the opera world to ignore his predatory behavior,” *Washington Post*, Feb 25, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/placido-domingo-apologizes-after-union-finds-he-engaged-in-inappropriate-activity/2020/02/25/19ac42ac-57e9-11ea-ab68-101ecfec2532\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/placido-domingo-apologizes-after-union-finds-he-engaged-in-inappropriate-activity/2020/02/25/19ac42ac-57e9-11ea-ab68-101ecfec2532_story.html).

<sup>13</sup> Norman Lebrecht, “This Will Be the Most-watched Symphony Video of 2014,” *Slippedisc*, June 9, 2014, <https://slippedisc.com/2014/06/this-will-be-the-most-watched-symphony-video-of-2014/>.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Lebrecht, “Why Seattle was So Wrong to Book the Rapper,” *Slippedisc*, June 10, 2014, <https://slippedisc.com/2014/06/slippedisc-editorial-why-seattle-was-so-wrong-to-book-the-rapper/>.

<sup>15</sup> Lebrecht’s claim that the performance was somehow bad for business is contradicted by his observation that “more than half a million people have viewed [the video of the performance] in two days. No other orchestra has anything half as viral.” To date, the video has over nine million views. It is also delightful.

in dismissing the Domingo allegations did Lebrecht allow for the possibility that creating an environment of sexual harassment in the workplace is degrading to women. He finished his denouncement of Mix-A-Lot by trumpeting the moral superiority that Taruskin condemns, writing that “those of us who uphold [symphonic music] ... are saving a chunk of western civilization and resisting dumb-down demands from politicians, marketing experts and society at large.”<sup>16</sup>

Norman Lebrecht and Donald Trump’s speechwriter undoubtedly hold different goals and political opinions, but both build their arguments from the same tropes. Both arguments raise the question: from whom is western civilization being saved—and for whom?

Broadly speaking, the answer seems to be: From “others” and for “us.” There is not an ounce of introspection or self-awareness when Lebrecht writes “Rap is a divisive Afro-American male genre. We stand for plurality, diversity, inclusion.”<sup>17</sup> He is so deeply entrenched in the mythology of moral superiority that he cannot see the hypocrisy of claiming that classical music writ large stands for diversity and inclusion while simultaneously advocating for the exclusion of a Black artist from the symphony hall. Lebrecht’s royal “we” is presumably the elite, educated, appropriate connoisseur who sees any change to the classical canon as an existential threat.

Change is already here, though. Most of this dissertation was written during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. This outbreak triggered the cancelation of concerts worldwide, layoffs and furloughs at major orchestras, and shattered the gig economy. Live performances ceased entirely in March. At the end of May, protests erupted in the United States and worldwide

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<sup>16</sup> Lebrecht, “Why Seattle was So Wrong to Book the Rapper.”

<sup>17</sup> Lebrecht, “Why Seattle was So Wrong to Book the Rapper.”

after the horrific police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Floyd's murder came on the heels of national outrage over the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, who was killed by three white men while out for a jog in Georgia. The world's focus was drawn to the systemic abuse and violence perpetrated against Black Americans; protests spread through every state in America and around the world for months. Jacob Blake was shot in the back seven times in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in August. In September my own hometown of Rochester, NY received national attention for covering up the death of Daniel Prude, a Black man who died of asphyxiation after being pinned to the ground by police officers while experiencing a mental health episode.

During the height of the Black Lives Matter protests on June 2, 2020, many arts organizations and artists joined #BlackOutTuesday on social media. For organizations and artists that participated or released statements of support for Black Americans, a short record of institutional diversity and a lack of previous support for anti-racism complicated their efforts. Without a track record of advocating for racial justice, public statements that failed to commit to concrete future actions rang hollow. Many replies to the Metropolitan Opera's social media post about the killing of George Floyd pointed to the hypocrisy of the institution's assertion that "there is no place for racism in the arts" when the Met has yet to perform an opera by a Black composer. The Met used dark makeup in its productions of *Otello* until 2015.

Although corporations have used social and political ideas to market their brands for years, many arts organizations and classical musicians have avoided potentially controversial issues. Often after enormous tragedies—mass shootings or terrorist attacks, of which there have been many in the last decade—musicians and organizations circulate a quote from Leonard Bernstein on social media: "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before." Ripped from its context, the quote suggests

that playing music is an apolitical act that, in and of itself, has the power to bring light into the world during dark times. Having successfully posted a statement that would offend no one, the poster could comfortably return to silent neutrality. On June 5, the Leonard Bernstein Office released the following statement on Facebook:

The Leonard Bernstein Office and family would like to address the use of Bernstein's oft-cited quote - about responding to violence with a re-intensified commitment to making music - in the context of the current national crisis over racism and police brutality. Bernstein originally spoke those words to introduce a memorial performance of Mahler's Symphony No. 2 in the days following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In today's moment, the citation feels inappropriate, since there is so much more we need to do right now to repair our broken world. And we're certain that Leonard Bernstein would agree and encourage fans to listen and find inspiration in the words of those speaking out now.<sup>18</sup>

The quote used in the internet meme always cuts out Bernstein's preceding sentences, delivered at a fundraiser of the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York on November 25, 1963: "We musicians, like everyone else, are numb with sorrow at this murder, and with rage at the senselessness of the crime. But this sorrow and rage will not inflame us to seek retribution; rather they will inflame our art. Our music will never again be quite the same."<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, our music will never again be quite the same. Classical music is not immune from political forces and pressures, and if the practitioners and creators of the art form do not speak about their values, classical music runs the risk of being co-opted and corrupted by bad faith actors. While athletes, chefs, business executives, country musicians, actors, pop stars, and

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<sup>18</sup> The Leonard Bernstein Office, Facebook, June 5, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/LeonardBernstein/posts/10163656771445285>.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Buchenholz, "An Artist's Response to Violence," Leonard Bernstein Office, accessed June 12, 2020, <https://leonardbernstein.com/about/humanitarian/an-artists-response-to-violence>

reality television stars leverage their platform for political influence, classical musicians who remain silently apolitical render themselves uniquely and pointlessly powerless.

As a classical pianist with strong political opinions and a deep interest in social justice, I have often struggled with the question of how to use my art to engage with society. In this document, I will propose three basic ways for pianists to use their work to proactively engage in political activity. These three broad categories are by no means exhaustive and are meant as a starting point for other musicians.

I focus this dissertation on pianists and their repertoire because as artists who work mostly alone or in small groups, it is easier for them to make political choices and take unilateral political actions. Pianists have more opportunities to highlight their individual opinions and perspectives than musicians who play in large ensembles. They are not beholden to organizational constraints and do not have to make decisions as part of a larger collective. Pianists are used to selecting repertoire and crafting concert programs on their own. When pianists do work with others, they can seek out collaborators who share the same goals or political affinities. The nature of a pianist's work allows them more room and freedom in their work than other musicians.

While I do not maintain, as some do, that *all* art is political, I believe that it is essential for pianists to consider the political implications of their work. We are all implicated in our society's systemic inequities and injustices. Indeed, classical music has often lagged behind social trends on gender and racial equality. The late Supreme Court justice and opera fan Ruth Bader Ginsburg recounted that "in my growing-up years, I never saw a woman in a symphony orchestra, and critics like Howard Taubman for the *New York Times* swore that they could tell

the difference between a woman at the piano and a man.”<sup>20</sup> After American orchestras began holding blind auditions, “the percent of female musicians in the five highest-ranked orchestras in the nation increased from 6 percent in 1970 to 21 percent in 1993.”<sup>21</sup> Women were not allowed to audition for the Vienna Philharmonic until 1997; the Berlin Philharmonic first admitted a woman in 1982.<sup>22</sup> Black musicians in the United States were also excluded from orchestral and operatic careers until the 1950s; Marian Anderson was the first Black singer to appear at the Metropolitan Opera, in 1955.<sup>23</sup> To this day, women and people of color are severely underrepresented on the podium and in concert programming; this is not a coincidence, but rather the completely predictable outcome of discriminatory practices.

The performance and study of classical music requires money—and always has. In the time of Mozart and Beethoven, the money often came from royal patronage. Today, that money can still come from patrons or sponsors, but more often is a result of an individual’s economic situation. Buying or renting an instrument and paying for lessons is only the start; reaching the top tiers of classical piano performance means spending thousands of dollars every year on festivals, masterclasses, competitions, travel, and perhaps even relocation to Manhattan or Philadelphia for study at elite pre-college programs. Tuition for a four-year Bachelor of Music

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth Bader Ginsburg, “A Motion for Peace: A Conversation with Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Joyce DiDonato, and Donna Leon,” November 10, 2019, The Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., 1:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f03tRyveiys>.

<sup>21</sup> Claudia Goldin and Cecelia Rouse, “Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of ‘Blind’ Auditions on Female Musicians,” *The American Economic Review* 90, no. 4 (2000): 715-741.

<sup>22</sup> Farah Nayeri, “When an Orchestra was No Place for a Woman,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/23/arts/music/women-vienna-philharmonic.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Alex Ross, “Black Scholars Confront White Supremacy in Classical Music,” *The New Yorker*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/21/black-scholars-confront-white-supremacy-in-classical-music>.

degree can cost as much as two hundred thousand dollars. While many organizations that offer scholarships and fund study for musicians without these resources, the significant financial barriers to entry means that the profession itself is stratified by economic class and privilege.

The 21st-century pianist must understand and confront these issues, which will not go away on their own. When the Pacific Northwest was recently smothered by smoke from wildfires (which worsen each year with climate change), I thought of the apocryphal story of Nero fiddling while Rome burned. While the particulars of his situation were, of course, wildly different from ours today, the idea of simply playing an instrument while the world crumbles around us seems similarly inappropriate and out of touch.

Unlike Nero, many musicians have a deep desire to affect change in their communities; our career choices don't preclude us from holding strong opinions on sociopolitical issues. Classical musicians are well-trained in making value judgments; we comfortably debate whether a piece of new music is good or bad, extol or excoriate a pianist's perceived dedication to the score, and even critique a performer's wardrobe and eyewear. We can certainly apply that same instinct to political questions, especially when those questions affect our audience and colleagues. The following chapters will explore the link between politics and classical music, and then propose three broad forms of political action. It is my hope that this document serves as a starting point for pianists who wish to use their art for advocacy and activism.

## Chapter 2: Politics and Classical Music

There are few terms that carry more cultural baggage than the word “political.” Consumers increasingly expect the products they buy, the food they eat, and even their workout classes to reflect their political values. Wearing a mask (or, rather, *not* wearing a mask) during the COVID-19 pandemic became a political statement in the United States, Canada, and even Europe. The term “politically correct” (or just “PC”) has become one of derision. Politics serves as entertainment in television shows like *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, *Veep*, and their forebear *The West Wing*—not to mention the politics-as-sport debates featured every night on cable news networks. Outlets including the CBC, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and CNN all give politics its own section on their websites, neatly walled off from the sections for national and international news.

Given the seemingly inescapable nature of politics today, and the multitudinous meanings and subtexts attached to the word, it is critical to clearly define what politics means in the context of classical music. This chapter surveys musicological definitions and categorizations of political music and explores the long history of intrusion and imposition of politics onto classical music.

### 2.1 Defining the Political in Classical Music

While the concept of political music has been thoroughly explored in the realm of popular music, there is significantly less scholarship on this subject in classical music. However, the general principles set forth by studies of popular political music (several of which will be discussed in the following sections) apply just as well to classical political music.

“Political,” in relation to classical music, has nothing to do with partisanship; it does not imply liberal or conservative, left or right, no matter how often it is used that way in common



parlance. Rather, my idea of the political in music is adaptable to each individual's values or causes. The English word political is derived from the Greek word *politeia*, "which encompasses not only the organization and running of the state (*polis*) but public civic life in general."<sup>24</sup> Garratt explains that the line between state institutions and private life is drawn differently in different theories of political systems, and that a third category, civil society, is used to apply to public non-governmental institutions.<sup>25</sup> "The sphere of politics—and therefore also political music—naturally extends beyond government and party politics, encompassing social movements and public forms of artistic activism."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the political pianist should be understood as a musician who is engaging with the government or civil society (or even both) through their work.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.2 Characteristics of Political Music

Music commemorates tragedies, eulogizes politicians, celebrates wartime victories, and backtracks political campaigns. "Music accompanies political struggles in ... most of the world's societies."<sup>28</sup> But it is challenging to concretely identify what counts as political music. In *Playing*

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<sup>24</sup> James Garratt, *Music and Politics: A Critical Introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 6, doi:10.1017/9781139505963.

<sup>25</sup> Garratt, *Music and Politics*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Garratt, 6.

<sup>27</sup> The inversion of the political pianist is the pianist politician, a notably different role best exemplified by former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The pianist politician makes a career out of government and politics, and their musical pursuits are not central to their work. This distinction is much murkier when applied to the case of Ignace Jan Paderewski, who was first and foremost a pianist and composer but also briefly served as Prime Minister of Poland in 1919.

<sup>28</sup> Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), 5.

*for Change*, Rosenthal and Flacks identify several traits of political music. Political music “identifies collective and structural arrangements” and illuminates “the *social* roots in what might otherwise be felt as *individual* stories or problems.”<sup>29</sup> Political music shows its audience that “existing arrangements are not natural, normal, or eternal but the result of previous human decisions and arrangements, *and thus susceptible to change*,” and can even help mobilize opposition to those arrangements.<sup>30</sup>

Rosenthal and Flacks point to four main tasks or uses for political music: “education; conversion and recruitment; mobilization;” and “serving the committed”<sup>31</sup> members of a movement by affirming that movement’s values and providing “spirit maintenance”<sup>32</sup> (for example, the music that accompanied the Civil Rights movement). These functions are quite similar to the six goals of propaganda songs identified by Denisoff: soliciting outside support; reinforcing the “value structure of ... active supporters;” promoting “cohesion” and “high morale” within a movement; recruitment; invoking solutions; and pointing to “some problem or discontent in the society, usually in emotional terms.”<sup>33</sup>

Although Denisoff focuses specifically on “urban propaganda songs,” Rosenthal and Flacks also note that even ostensibly apolitical music can become political through interpretation or context. “The political nature of a musical experience may arise in more than one dimension:

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<sup>29</sup> Rosenthal and Flacks, *Playing for Change*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Rosenthal and Flacks, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenthal and Flacks, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenthal and Flacks, 127

<sup>33</sup> Denisoff, R. Serge, “Songs of Persuasion: A Sociological Analysis of Urban Propaganda Songs,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 79, no. 314 (Oct. – Dec. 1966): 582, doi:10.2307/538223.

It may be intended by the artist, perceived by the audience (whether intended by the audience or not), and/or engendered by ... events and environment.”<sup>34</sup> Expanding the idea of political music to so many subjective and fluid factors waters it down to the standard promulgated by Justice Potter Stewart in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*: “I know it when I see it”<sup>35</sup> (or, in our case, hear it).

### 2.3 Mattern’s Three Forms of Action

In *Acting in Concert*, Mark Mattern identifies three forms of “community-based political action through music” in the context of North and South American popular music. Mattern classifies these distinct forms as “confrontational, deliberative, and pragmatic.”<sup>36</sup> These categories were adapted from Harry Boyte, who used the term “insurgent” rather than “confrontational.”<sup>37</sup> Mattern situates community and popular music in the context of broad democratic political action, while political action in classical music is often fragmented and insular. Nonetheless, Mattern’s terminology provides a useful framework through which classical musicians can consider their own political strategies.

Mattern defines confrontational action as “an attempt to advance the cause of members of a favored group, who are typically portrayed in direct opposition to members of one or more other groups, by promoting sympathy and support” and drawing “sharp distinctions between the

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<sup>34</sup> Rosenthal and Flacks, 21.

<sup>35</sup> “*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964),” Justia Law, accessed July 29, 2020, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/378/184/>.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Mattern, *Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 25.

<sup>37</sup> Mattern, *Acting in Concert*, 150.

perceived forces of right and wrong.”<sup>38</sup> Mattern cites protest music as an example of confrontational action; Chapter 2 will show that classical pianists can also engage in confrontational action as musicians without playing a note.

Pragmatic action presumes a common political goal or interest, and “occurs when members of one or more communities use music to promote awareness of shared interests and to organize collaborative efforts to address them.”<sup>39</sup> One example of pragmatic action is when the popular musician Sting “uses his music to draw attention to global environmental problems and goad action among multiple communities and nations.”<sup>40</sup> Mattern’s definition of pragmatic action is so broad that almost all of the political actions described in the following chapters fall into this category in one way or another.

Deliberative action is the most difficult to apply to classical pianists. According to Mattern, deliberative action “occurs when members of a community use musical practices to debate their identity and commitments or when members of different communities negotiate mutual relations.”<sup>41</sup> The idea of deliberative action is related to the political theory of deliberative democracy, which “directly involves citizens in public discourse about political issues, a process that ideally enlarges their perspectives and produces consensual decisions.”<sup>42</sup> Because deliberative democracy and action operate on a large scale and involve consensus-

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<sup>38</sup> Mattern, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Mattern, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Mattern, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Mattern, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy S. Love, *Music and Democracy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 5, [muse.jhu.edu/book/5106](http://muse.jhu.edu/book/5106).

building, I instead prefer to apply the term “collaborative action” to the political pianist. Pianists can debate their identity and commitments within a smaller group or with only one collaborator, as with commissioning political music from individual composers, which I explore in Chapter 3.

## 2.4 Criticism

“More often than not political art fails as politics, and all too often it fails as art,” John Luther Adams wrote in 2015.<sup>43</sup> “When I’m true to the music, when I let the music be whatever it wants to be, then everything else—including any social or political meaning—will follow.” Adams was echoing Ned Rorem, who according to Taruskin once said that “the more an artwork succeeds as politics, the more it fails as art.”<sup>44</sup> Both of these claims fall under what Garratt describes as the long-dominant position in Western theory and musicology, that “political music [is] something distinct to (and distinctly inferior to) music as autonomous art.”<sup>45</sup> Lydia Goehr contends that works of music are most politically effective “by aspiring towards a purely aesthetic state.”<sup>46</sup> Critically, none of these critics claim that music *should not ever* be political—only that political music is simply not very good or isn’t the best approach. Such a subjective claim completely overlooks the political music that I will explore in the following chapters, and which, in my opinion, does succeed as both art and politics.

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<sup>43</sup> John Luther Adams. “Making Music in the Anthropocene,” *Slate Magazine*, 24 Feb 2015, <https://slate.com/culture/2015/02/john-luther-adams-grammy-winner-for-become-ocean-discusses-politics-and-his-composition-process.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Taruskin, *The Danger of Music*, 217.

<sup>45</sup> Garratt, *Music and Politics*, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: On Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy*, quoted in Garratt, *Music and Politics*, 35.

Just as music need not be apolitical, playing music does not require a monastic abdication of civic awareness and responsibility. In 2017, Emanuel Ax wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* condemning Donald Trump’s “cruel” budget proposal.<sup>47</sup> Because Ax was talking about the elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities,<sup>48</sup> he was speaking in his area of expertise about an issue that directly affected his life and career. But there is no clear line of demarcation between personal and professional life when funding for the arts is used as a political football, or when an elected government’s abject failures during a pandemic result in the devastation of the gig economy, massive layoffs, and a protracted nationwide cancelation of concerts. For a white, male elite classical music celebrity in America, choosing when to draw connections between personal, professional, and political is a privilege that women and people of color do not typically enjoy.

Classical musicians often seem more wary of entering the political arena than popular musicians—to say nothing of actors, athletes, and other celebrities—even though popular musicians and other public figures are also subject to the same criticisms. A 2006 documentary about the Dixie Chicks<sup>49</sup> took the rejoinder to “shut up and sing” as its title. Former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani criticized Beyoncé for using her 2016 Super Bowl performance “as

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<sup>47</sup> Emanuel Ax, “On ‘Cruel’ Budget Cuts,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/23/opinion/emanuel-ax-on-cruel-budget-cuts.html>.

<sup>48</sup> To be sure, Trump is not the first to attempt to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. For more on this, see Cynthia Koch, “The Contest for American Culture: A Leadership Case Study on The NEA and NEH Funding Crisis.”

<sup>49</sup> The band now goes by “The Chicks,” out of sensitivity towards the racist meaning of “Dixie.”

a platform” to support the Black Lives Matter movement and oppose police brutality<sup>50</sup> (a criticism that has not aged well, to say the least). When Taylor Swift took to Instagram to endorse a candidate for Senate in 2018, she was criticized as an elitist by the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and Donald Trump told reporters Swift “doesn’t know anything” about the candidates.<sup>51</sup>

In 2018, Laura Ingraham told LeBron James to “shut up and dribble” after he publicly discussed politics and “the challenges that come with being black and a public figure in America.”<sup>52</sup> Ingraham earns millions of dollars a year to talk about politics on Fox News and once published a book called *Shut Up and Sing: How Elites from Hollywood, Politics, and the Media are Subverting America*. While James suffered no apparent professional consequences, the same cannot be said for Colin Kaepernick, who was allegedly blacklisted by the NFL for protesting police violence against Black Americans by kneeling during the national anthem.

These criticisms are cut from the same cloth as arts writer David Lister’s complaint after Krystian Zimerman announced he would boycott American concert halls over the country’s foreign policy (see Chapter 2). “I’m not a fan of musicians boycotting countries,”<sup>53</sup> wrote Lister,

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<sup>50</sup> Maeve McDermott, “Stop telling female artists to ‘shut up and sing,’ from Beyoncé to Taylor Swift, *USA Today*, Oct. 22, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2018/10/22/beyonce-taylor-swift-stop-telling-women-shut-up-and-sing/1695852002/>.

<sup>51</sup> Erin Durkin, “‘She just ended her career’: Taylor Swift’s political post sparks praise and fury,” *Guardian*, Oct. 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/oct/08/taylor-swift-instagram-post-endorsement-democrats-tennessee>.

<sup>52</sup> Emily Sullivan, “Laura Ingraham Told LeBron James to Shut Up and Dribble; He Went to the Hoop,” *NPR*, Feb. 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/19/587097707/laura-ingraham-told-lebron-james-to-shutup-and-dribble-he-went-to-the-hoop>.

<sup>53</sup> David Lister, “The pianist doth protest too much,” *Independent*, May 2, 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/columnists/david-lister/david-lister-the-pianist-doth-protest-too-much-1677684.html>.

attacking Zimmerman for selling recordings in the US and claiming that Zimmerman should not be allowed to call Poland “his country” because he lives in Switzerland. Lister further asserted that the protest stemmed from Zimmerman’s hatred of America, an absurd mischaracterization of the point. Zimmerman had “compromised his protest” by Lister’s standards, “but even if he had not, it is a questionable protest.”<sup>54</sup> Criticism of this nature is merely aspirational censorship—and the long history of censorship of musicians and music makes it imperative that musicians reject these attacks.

The proposition that certain people should not be allowed to talk about politics in spite (or perhaps because) of their fame or profession is antithetical to the free exchange of ideas. Certainly, anyone who enters the public sphere of debate runs the risk of criticism. But attempting to limit who should be allowed to speak and in what manner is too often used to distract from the merits of the arguments.

## **2.5 Suppression and Censorship**

The relative stability of liberal democracies and the rise in the number of countries classified as “free” since the 1970s<sup>55</sup> may, in part, have obscured the reality that music has always been subjected to political power and suppression. “Utopians, puritans, and totalitarians have always sought to regulate music if not forbid it outright,”<sup>56</sup> writes Taruskin in a brief survey

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<sup>54</sup> Lister, “The pianist doth protest too much.”

<sup>55</sup> Amanda Taub, “How Stable Are Democracies?” *New York Times*, Nov 29, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/world/americas/western-liberal-democracy.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Taruskin, *The Danger of Music*, 168.



of musical censorship that notes Protestant burnings of songbooks in 16th-century England;<sup>57</sup> at that time, the Elizabethan government's censorship of certain disfavored printed music meant that popular ballads were also "implicitly shaped, if not closely monitored, by the English government."<sup>58</sup>

Opera was particularly vulnerable to interference from censors. James Conlon observes that "the kings and royal patrons of composers, the emerging governments of the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church, the aristocratic sponsors all could and did exert influence on the subject matter of any music with text."<sup>59</sup> In 18th century Vienna, operas were subject to review by the office of theatre censor, established in 1770.<sup>60</sup> Although Mozart's *Don Giovanni* would likely have been heavily censored if its libretto were in German, Italian operas were apparently subject to much lighter censorship.<sup>61</sup> Not much later, in 1805, the Austrian police attempted (but failed) to censor Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*.<sup>62</sup> Giuseppe Verdi's operas were subjected to censorship throughout his entire career.

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<sup>57</sup> Taruskin, 168.

<sup>58</sup> Jeremy L. Smith, "Governmental Interference as a Shaping Force in Elizabethan Printed Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 78.

<sup>59</sup> James Conlon, "Message, Meaning and Code in the Operas of Benjamin Britten," *The Hudson Review* 66, no. 3 (2013): 457, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43488573>.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Nedbal, "Sex, Politics, and Censorship in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*," *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 176.

<sup>61</sup> Nedbal, "Sex, Politics, and Censorship in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*," 176.

<sup>62</sup> Robin Wallace, "The Curious Incident of *Fidelio* and the Censors," *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 221.

Censorship of purely instrumental music prior to the 20th century was rare because of its general abstraction.<sup>63</sup> But in the twentieth century, the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union censored music on an unprecedented level as part of their attempt to “control all aspects of national life.”<sup>64</sup>

Nazi suppression of music during the 1930s targeted Jewish, Communist, and “other ‘non-national’ musicians.”<sup>65</sup> The Nazi ban on Jewish music included Mendelssohn,<sup>66</sup> Mahler, and Schoenberg; non-Jewish musicians deemed degenerate, including Stravinsky, Webern, and Berg were also banned.<sup>67</sup> An exception was made for music deemed unsuitable for Germans to be performed by Jewish musicians for Jewish audiences.<sup>68</sup> After the 1933 Law for the Re-establishment of the Civil Service led to the removal of Jews from orchestras, the musicians were allowed to form their own orchestra under the auspices of the Jüdische Kulturbund (Jewish Culture League).<sup>69</sup> The orchestra was supervised by Nazi officials, who banned the League from performing works of German composers and mandated that they only play repertoire deemed Jewish.<sup>70</sup> Mahler was allowed; Beethoven was not.

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<sup>63</sup> John Rosselli, “Censorship.” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40602>.

<sup>64</sup> Rosselli, “Censorship.”

<sup>65</sup> Rosselli, “Censorship.”

<sup>66</sup> Although Mendelssohn’s father converted his whole family to Christianity, the Nazi regime considered “Jewishness” a racial quality.

<sup>67</sup> Rosselli, “Censorship.”

<sup>68</sup> Rosselli, “Censorship.”

<sup>69</sup> “Music in the Third Reich,” ORT, accessed Aug. 12, 2020, <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/>.

<sup>70</sup> Lily E. Hirsch, “The Jüdische Kulturbünde in the Early Nazi Years,” The OREL Foundation, accessed Aug. 12, 2020, [http://orel-foundation.org/journal/journalArticle/the\\_j252dische\\_kulturbunde\\_in\\_the\\_early\\_nazi\\_years](http://orel-foundation.org/journal/journalArticle/the_j252dische_kulturbunde_in_the_early_nazi_years).

Under Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, the Moscow conservatory "consigned the composers of the past wholesale to the dustbin of history, excepting only Beethoven, the voice of the French revolution, and Mussorgsky, the proto-Bolshevist 'radical democrat.' Tchaikovsky ... was a special target of abuse."<sup>71</sup> The Union of Soviet Composers was established in 1932 as a "service organization" of sorts, and became a vehicle for the denunciation and "organized slander" of disfavored composers accused of holding leftist views and "'petit-bourgeois' sympathies," including Shostakovich.<sup>72</sup> According to Taruskin, "none of us alive today can imagine the sort of extreme mortal duress to which artists in the Soviet Union were then subjected, and Shostakovich more than any other."<sup>73</sup> Like the Nazis, the Soviets promoted traditional Russian music and censored or banned jazz and contemporary avant-garde music because of its bourgeois connotations.<sup>74</sup> Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Khachaturian were frequent targets of official criticism in the state newspaper *Pravda* and unofficial performance bans.<sup>75</sup>

In the United States, too, composers and musicians were targeted for their alleged political affiliations. During World War I, a century before athletes kneeling for the national anthem became a contemporary controversy, "the German Karl Muck, the music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was jailed for his disinclination to conduct 'The Star-Spangled

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<sup>71</sup> Richard Taruskin, "Interpreting Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony," in *Music and Ideology*, ed. Mark Carroll (New York: Routledge, 2016), 265, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315090979>.

<sup>72</sup> Taruskin, "Interpreting Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony," 268.

<sup>73</sup> Taruskin, "Interpreting Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony," 270.

<sup>74</sup> Rosselli, "Censorship."

<sup>75</sup> Rosselli, "Censorship."

Banner.”<sup>76</sup> Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and Hanns Eisler were among the musicians targeted by Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee during the Red Scare of the 1950s. A 1953 performance of Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait* that was scheduled “in conjunction with Dwight Eisenhower’s first inaugural” was canceled because he was alleged to be a communist.<sup>77</sup> Copland’s career subsequently suffered, initially because of the time and energy he had to devote to defending himself against the committee, and as many presenters subsequently canceled his concert and lecture appearances or withdrew invitations.<sup>78</sup> Leonard Bernstein was surveilled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for decades, beginning in the 1940s.<sup>79</sup> CBS blacklisted Bernstein from 1950 until 1956,<sup>80</sup> and the State Department refused to renew his passport in July 1953.<sup>81</sup> (Undeterred, Bernstein used Voltaire’s satirical critique of 18th-century French society as a satirical critique of McCarthyism and American society in his opera *Candide*.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Tim Page, “When Classical Music had a Place on America’s Political Stage,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/when-classical-music-had-a-place-on-americas-political-stage/2020/01/23/5049a388-25b0-11ea-ad73-2fd294520e97\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/when-classical-music-had-a-place-on-americas-political-stage/2020/01/23/5049a388-25b0-11ea-ad73-2fd294520e97_story.html).

<sup>77</sup> Bill Morelock, “Conscience vs. McCarthy: the political Aaron Copland,” *Minnesota Public Radio*, May 3, 2005, [http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2005/05/03\\_morelockb\\_unamerican/](http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2005/05/03_morelockb_unamerican/).

<sup>78</sup> Jennifer DeLapp-Birkett, “Government Censorship and Aaron Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait* during the Second Red Scare,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 527.

<sup>79</sup> Barry Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 27, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520943070>.

<sup>80</sup> Seldes, *Leonard Bernstein*, 55.

<sup>81</sup> Seldes, 69.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth B. Crist, “The Best of All Possible Worlds: The Eldorado Episode in Leonard Bernstein’s ‘Candide,’” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19, no. 3 (2007): 225, [www.jstor.org/stable/27607162](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27607162).

Musicians in liberal democracies may no longer fear government blacklisting or surveillance, but freedom of speech is still not protected everywhere. In 2013, Turkish pianist and composer Fazil Say was sentenced to a 10-month suspended jail term for his tweets about Islam, including a retweet of a verse from an 11th-century Persian poem and a joke about alcohol and a mosque's call to prayer.<sup>83</sup>

## 2.6 Misuse and Misappropriation

While absolute music by dead composers is particularly susceptible to malicious interpretation, even contemporary popular musicians must worry about their music being used for purposes they find objectionable. Artists including Neil Young, The Rolling Stones, and Elton John have attempted to get the Trump campaign to stop using their music at rallies, to varying degrees of success.<sup>84</sup>

There were no cease and desist orders to be filed against the Nazi regime, which perfected rather than invented the practice. Nazi propagandists perpetuated a decades-long tradition of using German music to support political ideologies across the spectrum. Beethoven was perhaps the most frequently misappropriated. Richard Wagner wrote an article in 1870, the

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<sup>83</sup> Esther Zuckerman, "Pianists Can Get Sentenced to Jail for Anti-Islam Retweets of Poems Now," *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2013/04/fazil-say-jail-sentence/316259/>.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Solender, "All The Artists Who Have Told Trump To Stop Using Their Songs At His Rallies," *Forbes*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/06/28/all-the-artists-who-have-told-trump-to-stop-using-their-songs-at-his-rallies/#808d75874b87>.

centennial of Beethoven's birth, that linked German victory in the Franco-Prussian War to the "blood and iron" vision of Beethoven the Germanic genius.<sup>85</sup>

The Wagnerian vision of Beethoven's music as a catalyst that would "lead to construction of a true and genuine German Empire"<sup>86</sup> was not the only vision of Beethoven as a political icon. Early socialist theorists used Beethoven as a "model for all citizens of oppressive systems;"<sup>87</sup> after World War I, German socialist and communist parties claimed Beethoven's life and music proved he was a "staunch democrat and active revolutionary" and anti-bourgeois reformer.<sup>88</sup> The idea that Beethoven's Third Symphony ("Eroica") was actually a revolutionary political work condemning Napoleon "rests on a handful of ambiguous or questionable episodes."<sup>89</sup> The Ninth Symphony was also claimed by leftists; "no composition was immune to politicization," including *Fidelio*—claimed as "a manifesto against the feudal aristocracy"—and the *Egmont* Overture, which was interpreted as "describing the liberation of a people."<sup>90</sup>

The Third Reich reinvented Beethoven as a National Socialist sympathizer.<sup>91</sup> Nazi propagandists painted Beethoven as a "world conqueror" in order to link him to Hitler and claimed Beethoven was a "Führer-type."<sup>92</sup> Beethoven's visits to resort towns in Bohemia were

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<sup>85</sup> David B. Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics, 1870-1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>86</sup> Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics*, 41

<sup>87</sup> Dennis, 42.

<sup>88</sup> Dennis, 89.

<sup>89</sup> Esteban Buch, *Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History*, trans. Richard Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 68.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis, 97.

<sup>91</sup> Dennis, 149.

<sup>92</sup> Dennis, 150.

used as a justification for the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia.<sup>93</sup> The Berlin radio played Beethoven's Seventh Symphony to observe Hitler's birthday in 1945, and the funeral march from the "Eroica" was broadcast to announce his suicide days later.<sup>94</sup>

Beethoven was not solely the province of the Nazis during the war. French orchestras performed the Ninth at least three times in December of 1940 alone.<sup>95</sup> Beethoven's music was frequently played in England and America during the war, "often by groups of émigré musicians determined not to allow Hitler to be the sole master of the German cultural patrimony."<sup>96</sup> Beethoven's Fifth symphony, the opening rhythm of which became an Allied Morse code for "victory,"<sup>97</sup> was also played by an orchestra of female prisoners in Auschwitz.<sup>98</sup>

Beethoven was not the only composer whom the Nazis attempted to claim; in *Mozart and the Nazis: How the Third Reich Abused a Cultural Icon*, Erik Levi extensively details the Nazis' appropriation of the man and his work. This includes claiming Mozart was truly German rather than Austrian,<sup>99</sup> erasing his commitment to Freemasonry (which Hitler considered part of a Jewish conspiracy),<sup>100</sup> and downplaying any relationship with Jews—including by casting as

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<sup>93</sup> Dennis, 165.

<sup>94</sup> Dennis, 219.

<sup>95</sup> Buch, *Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History*, 212.

<sup>96</sup> Buch, 215.

<sup>97</sup> Dennis, 215

<sup>98</sup> Dennis, 216.

<sup>99</sup> Erik Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis: How the Third Reich Abused a Cultural Icon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 22-23.

<sup>100</sup> Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis*, 33.

inferior the work of Lorenzo Da Ponte, the Jewish librettist of *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*.<sup>101</sup>

After World War II, “East German propagandists repeated legends about” Beethoven from earlier leftist movements;<sup>102</sup> West Germans attempted to “de-ideologize” Beethoven and his music.<sup>103</sup> The 1989 reunification of East and West Germany was celebrated with a series of Beethoven concerts; Daniel Barenboim led the Berlin Philharmonic in a concert of Beethoven’s First Piano Concerto and Seventh Symphony<sup>104</sup> and Yehudi Menuhin gave a concert featuring the *Egmont* Overture and the Fourth Symphony.<sup>105</sup> Both of these were overshadowed by Leonard Bernstein’s performance of the Ninth Symphony, in which he famously changed the words of the finale from “joy” to “freedom.”<sup>106</sup> To Taruskin, “Bernstein and Beethoven—and all of classical music, or so it seemed—had been reduced to the level of ambulance chasers, intruders on a historic scene... As if the high culture and all its icons had not been exploited by every dictatorship (and every commercial interest), used as a bludgeon to beat down spontaneous (popular, counter-) culture and sell every consumer product.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Levi, 53-54

<sup>102</sup> Dennis, 178.

<sup>103</sup> Dennis, 191.

<sup>104</sup> Dennis, 199.

<sup>105</sup> Dennis, 200.

<sup>106</sup> Dennis, 200-202.

<sup>107</sup> Taruskin, *The Danger of Music*, 71-72.



Jeffrey Kahane has argued that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is "the most politically fraught piece of music ever composed."<sup>108</sup> In a 2016 lecture, Kahane read a list of the many political uses of Beethoven compiled by Eduardo Galeano in *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, which included many of the World War II-era abuses detailed above. Kahane added that "in 1974, the [white supremacist] Republic of Rhodesia adopted the Ode to Joy as its national anthem."<sup>109</sup> Today, the European Union uses the Ode to Joy as its anthem in yet another claim to (or reclamation of) Beethoven's "true" message.

In Soviet Russia, propagandist interpretations of music served the purposes of Stalin's regime. Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 7 won the Stalin prize in 1942, and the government claimed the work as a reflection of the German attack on Russia, as it had done with Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony.<sup>110</sup> Following Shostakovich's death,

the [Russian] reinvention of Shostakovich as a dissident was a form of rehabilitation ... to fit in with the changed climate of the perestroika and post-Soviet eras. In the West ... the idea that the leading composer of the Stalin era was attacking the system from within flattered the liberal illusion that at heart everyone shares the values of liberal democracy.<sup>111</sup>

Ignorance can also cause misappropriation. In 2011, Rick Perry's campaign for the Republican presidential nomination "soundtracked a homophobic ad with music inspired by

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<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey Kahane, "Beethoven and Kurt Weill in 'The Garden of Exile'" (lecture, Ziering-Conlon Initiative for Recovered Voices International Symposium, Los Angeles, CA, Oct. 8, 2016). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ewWDPHb\\_-4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ewWDPHb_-4).

<sup>109</sup> Kahane, "Beethoven and Kurt Weill in 'The Garden of Exile.'"

<sup>110</sup> George G. Weickhardt, "Dictatorship and Music: How Russian Music Survived the Soviet Regime," *Russian History* 31, no. 1/2 (2004): 130, [www.jstor.org/stable/24657738](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24657738).

<sup>111</sup> Garratt, *Music and Politics*, 158.

Copland,” who was openly gay.<sup>112</sup> Mitt Romney, the eventual Republican candidate, used Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man” on the campaign trail, probably unaware that its “title and inspiration [came] from a speech by uber-lefty politician Henry A. Wallace, the Communist Party-endorsed candidate for the presidency in 1948.”<sup>113</sup>

## 2.7 Professional Consequences

“Classical musicians generally shy away from making political statements ... [T]hey tend to cling to the illusion of an art that floats above politics, formally pure and spiritually aloof,” wrote Alex Ross.<sup>114</sup> The myth Ross identifies makes it possible to “have it both ways;” the artist “dabbles in politics, yet insists that politics stops at the doors of the concert hall.”<sup>115</sup> That illusion may, in part, have emerged in reaction to the political backlash some musicians faced in the aftermath of World War II.

Many associated with the Nazis suffered professional consequences after World War II, even if the extent of their involvement or collaboration was unclear. Alfred Cortot’s involvement with the Vichy government during the war, as president of the Comité d’Organisation Professionnelle de la Musique, and his participation in concerts with the Berlin Philharmonic

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<sup>112</sup> David Wagner, “Republicans Keep Misusing Aaron Copland’s Music,” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 6, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/11/republicans-keep-misusing-aaron-coplants-music/321726/>.

<sup>113</sup> Wagner, “Republicans Keep Misusing Aaron Copland’s Music.”

<sup>114</sup> Alex Ross, “Women, Gays, and Classical Music,” *New Yorker*, Oct. 3, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/women-gays-and-classical-music>.

<sup>115</sup> Alex Ross, “As if Music Could Do No Harm,” *New Yorker*, Aug. 20, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/music-harm>.

Orchestra led to his arrest after the liberation of France in 1944.<sup>116</sup> Cortot contended that he had merely attempted to help his fellow musicians, and indeed he had helped free musicians imprisoned by Hitler's government and arranged the release of a Jewish soprano from the Drancy transit camp in 1944<sup>117</sup> (between June 1942 and July 1944, "approximately 61,000 Jews" were sent from Drancy to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and nearly 4,000 more sent to the Sobibor killing center.)<sup>118</sup> It seems unlikely that he was sympathetic to the Nazi agenda; in 1933, he had refused to appear "in Germany's concert halls because of the rise of anti-Semitism there. He also canceled a concert in Italy in 1939 for similar reasons."<sup>119</sup>

After the war, public attitude towards Cortot became increasingly hostile; he was banned from public performance for a year<sup>120</sup> and some organizations, including the orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire, refused to work with him even after the ban was lifted.<sup>121</sup> In one particularly tumultuous incident in January 1947, Cortot was to give three performances of the Schumann Piano Concerto with a Parisian orchestra. At the Saturday morning rehearsal, which was open to the public, the orchestra members refused to pick up their instruments in protest, and Cortot

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<sup>116</sup> "Alfred Cortot," Music and the Holocaust, ORT, accessed Aug. 8, 2020, <http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/alfred-cortot/>.

<sup>117</sup> "Alfred Cortot," Music and the Holocaust.

<sup>118</sup> "Drancy," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed Aug. 8, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/drancy>

<sup>119</sup> "Alfred Cortot, Pianist, is Dead: Soloist and Conductor, 84, Backed Vichy Regime," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jun 16, 1962, ProQuest.

<sup>120</sup> Terry Teachout, "Alfred Cortot: The Pianist Who Sold His Soul," *Commentary Magazine*, Apr 17, 2020, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/terry-teachout/alfred-cortot-pianist-nazi-collaborator/>.

<sup>121</sup> "Alfred Cortot," Music and the Holocaust.

played the piano part completely unaccompanied.<sup>122</sup> Afterwards, angry audience members demanded a repeat performance with the orchestra, stormed the stage and then shouted the orchestra offstage without allowing them to play Debussy's *La Mer*, the final piece on the program. There was also an "uproar" at the Saturday afternoon concert when the program was given out of order, and on Sunday afternoon "it was impossible to hear most of what he played" due to the irate audience.<sup>123</sup> Cancel culture in postwar Paris was out of control. Soon after, Cortot left France and settled in Switzerland, though after a cooling-off period of several years he was once again able to play in France without incident.<sup>124</sup> Upon his death in 1962, the *New York Times* ran his obituary with the headline "Alfred Cortot, Pianist, Is Dead: Soloist and Conductor, 84, Backed Vichy Regime."<sup>125</sup>

German pianist Walter Giesecking's association with the Third Reich also followed him after the war. Whether Giesecking supported the regime remains unclear. However, he certainly benefited professionally. "Reich officials were both interested and involved in Giesecking's" concert appearances; in fall 1944 Giesecking was "one of just seventeen pianists to be placed on the Reich's ... list of "God-gifted" artists, which ... assured his continued exemption from

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<sup>122</sup> Joe Joyce, "Controversial pianist forced to go solo: January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1947," *Irish Times*, Jan. 27, 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/controversial-pianist-forced-to-go-solo-january-27th-1947-1.1273620>.

<sup>123</sup> Joyce, "Controversial pianist forced to go solo."

<sup>124</sup> "Alfred Cortot," *Music and the Holocaust*.

<sup>125</sup> "Alfred Cortot, Pianist, is Dead," *New York Times*.

military service and allowed him to keep performing — albeit with no personal control over his engagements by this point.”<sup>126</sup>

After the war, Giesecking was “blacklisted and forbidden from performing in public” by the U.S. Military Government from 1945 until 1947.<sup>127</sup> Even after the ban was lifted, “his concerts often faced fierce opposition North and South America, as well as Australia.”<sup>128</sup> In December 1948, “three members of the musicians’ chapter of the American Veterans Committee picketed Carnegie Hall” protested Giesecking’s Carnegie Hall concert scheduled for the upcoming spring.<sup>129</sup> Ultimately, “the U.S. Justice Department ... prohibited [Walter] Giesecking’s highly-anticipated American post-war return tour at the last minute on account of fierce public protests.”<sup>130</sup> The public backlash persisted for years. On April 23, 1953, “two hundred and fifty members of the Jewish War Veterans, carrying signs condemning the pianist for alleged Nazi associations” picketed Giesecking’s Carnegie Hall recital.<sup>131</sup>

Upon his death in 1956, the *New York Times* devoted several paragraphs to the controversy, reporting that Giesecking’s concert appearances “aroused the fury of those interested in music who believed that his undoubtedly great talents as an artist should not cloak his racist

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<sup>126</sup> Frank R. Latino, “Walter Giesecking in Belgium, 1938-1944: The Controversial Appearances of a Prominent German Pianist,” *Revue Belge De Musicologie / Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Muziekwetenschap* 69 (2015): 279, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24752456>.

<sup>127</sup> Latino, “Walter Giesecking in Belgium,” 279.

<sup>128</sup> Latino, 281.

<sup>129</sup> “Carnegie Hall Picketed: AVC Group Protests Flagstad and Giesecking Recitals,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, December 8, 1948, <http://proquest.com/docview/108372589>.

<sup>130</sup> Latino, 270.

<sup>131</sup> Giesecking is Picketed: Protest Groups Gather Outside Hall – Wagner on Sound truck,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, April 23, 1953, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/112831058>.

and nationalist views.”<sup>132</sup> The *Times* offered no evidence that Giesecking had ever expressed racist and nationalist views; to many, his association with the Nazis was proof enough.

On the other end of the spectrum, the politics of the Cold War elevated the career of one American pianist. Van Cliburn, the only classical musician to ever be thrown a ticker-tape parade in Manhattan, is often held up as an ambassador for American ideals to the oppressed Russian people. The mythology surrounding his surprising win at the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Competition reinforces the idea that classical musicians can passively change the world for the better solely through their musical activities. Nigel Cliff’s recent biography of Cliburn credulously proclaims as much in its subtitle: “How One Man and his Piano Transformed the Cold War.” Stuart Isacoff’s “When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn’s Cold War Triumph, and Its Aftermath” peddles the same grandiose notion. Yet Cliburn won the Tchaikovsky gold medal in 1958; the Berlin Wall would not fall for another three decades. Isacoff and Cliff are not political scientists or Cold War historians; readers can reasonably assume that the complexities of the Cold War cannot be captured by a biography of one American pianist. But the idea that music in and of itself can transform the world is a powerful cliché, cut from the same cloth as the Bernstein meme.

## **2.8 The Political Imperative**

Suppression, censorship, and misappropriation brought politics to classical music long ago. That Rubicon has already been crossed, most frequently and egregiously by non-musicians.

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<sup>132</sup> "Walter Giesecking, Pianist, Dead at 60," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), October 26, 1956, <https://proquest.com/docview/113710845>.

To accept the premise that music must stay apolitical, but only for its practitioners, means that artists ultimately cede their own power. By and large, in liberal democracies there is nothing stopping classical musicians from being political except self-censorship. While pianists may rightly fear consequences for their political speech or even their musical identity, this chapter has shown, if anything, that remaining apolitical does not guarantee safety.

The political pianist must affirmatively and specifically advocate for their own views to prevent their work from being co-opted or misunderstood. This is not to say that pianists must constantly be political; there is a time and a place, and political speech and action should be carefully considered prior to any undertaking. The following chapters will explore three broad categories of political activity for the political pianist: protest, commissioning, and programming.

## Chapter 3: Protest

Protest is, at its core, a disruptive act. In the context of classical music, disruption is usually thought of as originating offstage—like the riotous audience faced by Alfred Cortot, or the picketers outside of Giesecking’s recitals. In 1981, when the Israel Philharmonic first attempted to play music by Wagner (long subject to an informal ban) as an unannounced encore, audience members shouted down the orchestra and fist fights broke out.<sup>133</sup> In October 2014, two months after a police officer killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Black Lives Matter protestors delayed a St. Louis Symphony performance of the Brahms Requiem.<sup>134</sup>

Classical concerts and piano recitals are usually orderly and predictable events by design: patrons receive a program listing everything they will hear in exact order, often with the duration of the pieces listed to the minute; the concert typically starts a few minutes late and ends within two hours, including an intermission. This format does not seem to leave room for spontaneous political protest. In this chapter I examine the actions of four prominent pianists who nevertheless engaged in political protest through speech, action, and social media. These four pianists—Gary Graffman, Krystian Zimerman, Valentina Lisitsa, and Igor Levit—used their prominence as musicians to draw attention to their causes in ways that most private citizens cannot. They recognized the power of their respective platforms and used them to take a stand, to varying degrees of success and even to some of their detriment.

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<sup>133</sup> “Playing of Wagner in Israel Provokes Disturbance,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/17/arts/playing-of-wagner-in-israel-provokes-disturbance.html>.

<sup>134</sup> Steve Giegerich, “Michael Brown protestors interrupt St. Louis Symphony Orchestra concert,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 6, 2014, [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/michael-brown-protesters-interrupt-st-louis-symphony-orchestra-concert/article\\_bfd2b377-8da4-56f8-aa8d-64bf714e0114.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/michael-brown-protesters-interrupt-st-louis-symphony-orchestra-concert/article_bfd2b377-8da4-56f8-aa8d-64bf714e0114.html).



### 3.1 Gary Graffman and the Columbia Artists' Boycott

In 1964 the United States of America was severely racially segregated. Although the Supreme Court had ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional in 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education*, the implementation of civic equality was slow. The Little Rock Nine were not escorted into school by federal troops until 1957. Violence was a regular tool of oppression and intimidation, and the Civil Rights Act would not be signed until July 1964. A decade after *Brown*, the South remained unapologetically unintegrated. In Alabama, where activists staged the Birmingham bus boycotts, segregation was enforced as a social construct rather than by a legal regime. "Many accounts of the Jim Crow South ... unthinkingly [depict] segregation in the region as a universal and uniform system. State law required racial segregation in most institutions directly funded by the state, though not in all of them. The laws were ... few indeed."<sup>135</sup> Segregation, by and large, was enforced at a local level and was propagated by businesses and non-governmental organizations. This included concert halls and presenters. African-Americans "were excluded entirely, or, in some places, were only allowed in a designated area of the auditorium. [A]ny artist who performed in the South performed for segregated audiences."<sup>136</sup>

On November 2, 1963, two African-American college students were arrested while attempting to attend a Royal Philharmonic of London concert in Jackson, Mississippi.<sup>137</sup> The

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<sup>135</sup> Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen G.N. Tuck, eds., *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52.

<sup>136</sup> Gary Graffman, *I Really Should Be Practicing* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 288.

<sup>137</sup> Theodore Strongin, "Boycott Efforts in Arts Continue," *New York Times* (1923-Current file), March 11, 1964, <http://proquest.com/docview/115557498>.

concert was organized and presented by the Community Concerts division of Columbia Artists,<sup>138</sup> a management agency that represented many high-profile classical musicians. Pianist Gary Graffman was on Columbia's roster at the time.

Graffman was scheduled to play a recital for a white-only audience in Jackson, Mississippi on February 27, 1964.<sup>139</sup> As he explained in his memoir, he had always performed in the South "whenever invited" and "toured South Africa in 1961"<sup>140</sup>—despite his self-proclaimed "strong feelings about social injustice."<sup>141</sup> But after the November arrests in Jackson, Austin Moore of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) wrote a letter to Graffman asking him to join an ongoing boycott of Mississippi.<sup>142</sup> NASA director James Webb and Dan Blocker of the popular television show *Bonanza* had both already canceled scheduled appearances,<sup>143</sup> and SNCC was attempting to recruit other public figures.

Graffman first considered playing the recital while publicly announcing that he would donate his fee to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). But after speaking several times with Moore as well as with the head of the NAACP's legal defense fund and the NAACP's Mississippi field secretary, Graffman decided that joining the

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<sup>138</sup> Henry Raymond, "Concert Artists to Skip Jackson," *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, April 10, 1964, <http://proquest.com/docview/115755894>.

<sup>139</sup> Howard Klein, "Integration Stand: Graffman's Refusal to Play in South Brought Him Unforeseen Reactions," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, March 29, 1964, <http://proquest.com/docview/115738080>.

<sup>140</sup> Graffman, *I Really Should Be Practicing*, 290.

<sup>141</sup> Graffman, 289-90.

<sup>142</sup> Graffman, 287.

<sup>143</sup> John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 276.

boycott was the right choice. According to Graffman, his managers at Columbia Artists were opposed to a public boycott and preferred to have him claim to be sick.<sup>144</sup> Graffman insisted that he would not play to a segregated audience, and eventually Columbia Artists' lawyers sent a letter to the Jackson branch of Community Concerts in which Graffman explained his reasons for withdrawing:

In the past I have played for segregated audiences, but I did not do so by preference ... I have not heretofore regarded myself as being in a position either to make a positive contribution to the civil rights movement by declining to appear, or to harm the civil rights movement by agreeing to appear. With all the recent developments in the achievement of meaningful civil liberties, and particularly in light of the civil rights legislation now in process of enactment by Congress, I feel more keenly than ever that it is my duty to be responsive to a situation like the one confronting me.<sup>145</sup>

Columbia Artists tried to avoid a publicity firestorm by quietly replacing Graffman, initially approaching pianist David Bar-Illan to step in. But Bar-Illan also declined to perform for a segregated audience after consulting with Graffman.<sup>146</sup> Ultimately, Columbia Artists replaced Graffman with German pianist Hans Richter Haaser, who told the *New York Times* as saying that "he did not wish to become involved in 'internal problems' of this country."<sup>147</sup> On February 26, the *Times* noted that Graffman's cancelation was "the first time that a distinguished concert artist has joined other entertainment personalities in boycotting Mississippi's capital," although many musicians had previously "kept appearances in the South to a minimum."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Graffman, 291-296.

<sup>145</sup> Graffman, 296.

<sup>146</sup> Graffman, 298.

<sup>147</sup> Henry Raymont, "Artists' Anger at Segregation of Southern Audiences Rising," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), March 5, 1964, <http://proquest-com/docview/115562760>.

<sup>148</sup> Henry Raymont, "Gary Graffman Drops Concert in Segregated Hall in Jackson," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), February 27, 1964. <http://proquest.com/docview/115700781>.

In the weeks after Graffman's cancelation, the *Times* chronicled a growing list of classical musicians who supported the boycott, but also recorded the opinions of performers who believed an organized protest was the wrong approach. Pianist Artur Schnabel proclaimed that musicians should stand against discrimination, while violinist Nathan Milstein told the *Times* that a boycott "would antagonize white liberals in the South and 'serves no useful purpose.'"<sup>149</sup> Yet even as Julius Katchen, Leon Fleisher, and Jaime Laredo all officially joined the boycott, Schnabel stopped short of directly endorsing it.

According to Graffman, his management at Columbia Artists was unhappy about the boycott, and he left their roster soon after. It must be noted that this claim about Columbia's position is from Graffman's perspective only, and in early April Columbia Artists independently announced it would stop presenting concerts in Jackson "until racial tensions" had eased.<sup>150</sup> The vagueness of this statement makes it impossible to discern if this policy applied to all segregated concert halls or whether it was exclusive to Jackson, or even how long it lasted.

The high profile of the musicians and the optics of the boycott kept national attention on the injustices of segregation; they effectively forced Columbia Artists to divest from racially segregated concert presentation, applying both economic and cultural pressure to the white patrons of Jackson's Community Concerts. But while the *New York Times* reported favorably on the effects of Graffman's initial cancelation, it also noted that Hurok Attractions, Inc. (a

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<sup>149</sup> Henry Raymont, "Rubinstein Says Artists Belong in Campaigns Against Prejudice; Praises Musicians Who Bar Appearances Before Segregated Groups," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), March 10, 1964, <https://proquest.com/docview/115697047>.

<sup>150</sup> Raymont, "Concert Artists to Skip Jackson."

management company that represented Artur Rubinstein, Isaac Stern, Van Cliburn, and others) “had avoided booking its artists in segregated concert halls for the last 10 years.”<sup>151</sup>

By Graffman’s own admission, he had some ambivalence about the moral absolutes. “If the issue of human rights determines whether or not one will play in a particular country, then there would be very few places to play,”<sup>152</sup> he wrote in his memoir. This statement, bordering on ethical nihilism, fails to distinguish between living in an unjust system versus profiting from willful participation in a segregated environment. This may be Graffman’s way of reconciling his values with past actions he regrets. Despite his strong feelings about “social injustice,” Graffman claims it had simply “never occurred to [him]”<sup>153</sup> that he might have the power to do something about it.<sup>154</sup>

It is difficult to imagine that Graffman had been unaware of the violence and brutality in the South prior to February 1964. In September 1963, only months before Graffman’s cancelation, the infamous Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing killed four young African-American girls. Explaining the origins of Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam,” Lynsky describes the environment in the South:

[The bombing] was the latest, greatest outrage in a violent year [1963]. In May, pictures of attack dogs and fire hoses on the streets of Birmingham had shocked the world. The following month, Medgar Evers had been murdered in Mississippi. Shortly

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<sup>151</sup> “3 Musicians Back Civil Rights Plan,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, March 13, 1964, <http://proquest.com/docview/115522930>.

<sup>152</sup> Graffman, 290.

<sup>153</sup> Graffman, 289-290.

<sup>154</sup> Even allowing for the possibility that Graffman simply wasn’t following news coverage of civil rights protests in the South, it seems plausible and even likely that he would have read the *New York Times* obituary of Alfred Cortot in 1962 (referenced in the previous chapter), which mentioned Cortot’s boycott of German and Italian concert halls over anti-Semitism.

after that, President Kennedy had been forced to intervene to stop Alabama's governor George Wallace from blocking the integration of the state university.<sup>155</sup>

Graffman acknowledged this brutality at beginning of his chapter about the boycott, condemning the “imbecility, cruelty and irrationality” of racism.<sup>156</sup> But despite his awareness of the “bombings, shootings, murders, intimidations and humiliations”<sup>157</sup> that characterized the Jim Crow South, the moral implications of playing for a segregated audience seemingly did not trouble him before 1964. In Graffman's telling, as soon as he was prompted, he enthusiastically supported a fight that he believed in but did not seek out. Yet he also acknowledged that were it not for the letter from Austin Moore, he would have remained comfortably unaffected by the injustices in the South, or at least content to carry on performing in segregated concert halls and hope the problem eventually went away.

Evaluating ethical choices made in the past is often criticized as presentism—the practice of judging the past by the moral standards of current times. In June 2020, as Princeton University removed Woodrow Wilson's name from its public policy school and protestors around the country removed Confederate monuments, some argued that it is unfair to project widely accepted contemporary values onto important historical figures. Donald Trump claimed that this was a “left-wing cultural revolution”<sup>158</sup> that threatened the very moral fabric and existence of the

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<sup>155</sup> Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day* (New York: Ecco, 2011), 71.

<sup>156</sup> Graffman, 288.

<sup>157</sup> Graffman, 289.

<sup>158</sup> Chris Cillizza, “The 28 most outrageous lines from Donald Trump's Mount Rushmore speech,” CNN, July 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/04/politics/donald-trump-mount-rushmore-south-dakota-speech-lines/index.html>.

country; *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens decried the “liberal elites ... who are in a perpetual fervor to rewrite the past.”<sup>159</sup>

A similar defense of Graffman would argue that it is unfair to single out Graffman for criticism because many Americans ignored the evils of segregation altogether, many took no action, and many actively opposed civil rights. But it is not rewriting history to call attention to Graffman’s years of participation in segregationist policies; by his own account, he was aware of right and wrong at the time. While commending him for eventually acting righteously, it is also important to acknowledge his prior complicity. Ibram X. Kendi provides a simple and illuminating standard:

The question for each of us is: What side of history will we stand on? A racist is someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. An antiracist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist idea. ‘Racist’ and ‘antiracist’ are like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos. No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. We can unknowingly strive to be a racist. We can knowingly strive to be an antiracist.<sup>160</sup>

By this metric, every time Graffman performed to a segregated audience—whether in the Jim Crow South or in apartheid South Africa—he was supporting a racist policy. Although he may have abhorred the system, and although he may never have expressed a racist idea, his silence and participation perpetuated racism. This is not moral condemnation; it is fact. Every white musician who earned money by playing was not only allowing racist systems to exist

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<sup>159</sup> Bret Stephens, “Reading Orwell for the Fourth of July,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/opinion/orwell-fourth-of-july.html>.

<sup>160</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be Antiracist* (New York: Random House, 2019), chap.1, Apple Books.

unchallenged but was actively profiting from racism. Once Graffman canceled his appearance, he was being antiracist.

White performers may have justified their participation insofar as they were not actively racist; but when action and inaction uphold the same policies, this is a distinction that holds no difference. White performers may have taken comfort from the comments of some Black performers who opposed boycotts. “Fats Domino ... said he would play segregated venues if the money was right. Nat ‘King’ Cole [called boycotts] ‘an idiotic idea’ which some people exploited as a ploy for publicity.”<sup>161</sup> But it was not the responsibility of Black artists to destroy the system of their own oppression. In 1959, Miles Davis was beaten by police while taking a smoke break in between sets at Birdland in New York City—for refusing to move from the sidewalk in front of the club.<sup>162</sup> Black musicians did not possess the power or safety inherently granted to white musicians.

John Lewis was the chairman of SNCC at the time of the boycotts and attempted to persuade other organizations, including the American Ballet Theater and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, to cancel appearances in segregated venues, without success.<sup>163</sup> In his memoir, Lewis wrote that although the support from Graffman was encouraging, “it was largely symbolic, increasing the sympathy for our cause from beyond the borders of the state, but with little effect on the grim realities that continued to exist within those borders.”<sup>164</sup> Lewis made only

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<sup>161</sup> Lynsky, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, 77.

<sup>162</sup> “Miles Davis Seized,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, August 26, 1959, <http://proquest.com/docview/114690511>.

<sup>163</sup> Strongin, “Boycott Efforts in Arts Continue.”

<sup>164</sup> Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 276.



one passing mention of Graffman’s participation in the 1964 boycotts, whereas Graffman devotes an entire chapter of his memoir to the events. This suggests that while the event was a crucible for Graffman, its significance to the larger civil rights movement was minimal.

Before he acted in opposition to racism, Graffman may have drawn a distinction between the members of his audience and the worst segregationists; perhaps he viewed racists as irrational and flawed people who would eventually come around; maybe it was easy to forget about the audience when the house lights went down. Or maybe until somebody told him he had the power to make a difference, he believed that his job was—as one audience member shouted at Krystian Zimerman several decades later—only to shut up and play the piano.

### **3.2 Krystian Zimerman**

Krystian Zimerman, born in Poland in 1956, rose to prominence after winning the International Chopin Competition in 1975.<sup>165</sup> Even with his reputation as Leonard Bernstein’s favorite pianist,<sup>166</sup> the dedicatee of Witold Lutoslawski’s Piano Concerto, and one of the greatest living recording artists, he has always limited his public appearances to no more than sixty performances annually.<sup>167</sup>

Zimerman began bringing his own pianos on tour in the mid-1990s, which presented both logistical challenges and artistic benefits. However, one unforeseen complication was the

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<sup>165</sup> Bryce Morrison, “Zimerman, Krystian,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.41695>.

<sup>166</sup> Mark Swed, “Review: Krystian Zimerman’s controversial appearance at Disney Hall,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 2009, <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/04/krystian-zimermans-last-us-appearance-at-disney-hall.html>.

<sup>167</sup> Morrison, “Zimerman, Krystian.”

implementation of heightened security protocols after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Zimmerman had several negative encounters while touring the United States. Upon arrival at New York's John F. Kennedy airport in early 2002,<sup>168</sup> Homeland Security officials confiscated and subsequently destroyed Zimmerman's piano "because [they] were suspicious that its glue could be an explosive in disguise."<sup>169</sup>

In 2006, Zimmerman again had trouble getting his piano through customs in New York, and although the piano was not completely destroyed this time,<sup>170</sup> it was impounded for five days.<sup>171</sup> In an October 2006 interview, Zimmerman said that "they ripped out the keyboard. I lost another keyboard going to Japan in April, here in the JFK Airport in New York."<sup>172</sup> On that same tour, Zimmerman made a last-minute repertoire change for a concerto performance in Irvine, California because the Transportation Security Administration had again held up his piano and Zimmerman "didn't have time to adjust it" for the scheduled Chopin.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Most reports of this event are based on Zimmerman's own recounting, and not well-documented in contemporaneous news reports. While it is impossible to specifically identify the date of this incident from these sources, Zimmerman's only appearance in New York City in the months after the September 11 attacks was at Carnegie Hall on April 28, 2002. Moreover, there seems to be a general confusion over which incidents happened when; Stephen Siri's *A Dictionary for the Modern Pianist* mistakenly conflates the 2002 destruction of the entire piano with the 2006 incident.

<sup>169</sup> Swed, "Review: Krystian Zimmerman's controversial appearance at Disney Hall."

<sup>170</sup> In a 2008 interview with the BBC, Zimmerman said that "two of [his] pianos got destroyed in America" without specifying exactly what happened to the instruments.

<sup>171</sup> Andrew Gumbel, "Polish pianist stops show with anti-US tirade," *The Guardian*, April 29, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/apr/28/krystian-zimmerman-missile-defence-poland>.

<sup>172</sup> Jim Lowe, "Krystian Zimmerman speaks," *Barre Montpelier Times-Argus*, October 20, 2006, [https://www.timesargus.com/news/krystian-zimmerman-speaks/article\\_8eecedb7-fef9-5f3b-9d81-71af03d2528d.html](https://www.timesargus.com/news/krystian-zimmerman-speaks/article_8eecedb7-fef9-5f3b-9d81-71af03d2528d.html).

<sup>173</sup> "Polish pianist won't return to U.S.," *CBC*, April 28, 2009, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/polish-pianist-won-t-return-to-u-s-1.792646>.

When Zimmerman returned to the United States for his 2009 tour, President Barack Obama had recently taken office, and had pledged to close Guantanamo Bay and withdraw troops from Iraq. Zimmerman already had a reputation for speaking out against American foreign policy and may have been optimistic about the possibility of change under the new administration. Indeed, in a concert in Berkeley, California on April 24, Zimmerman spoke to the audience before playing Bach's Partita No. 2 in C minor.

Zimmerman told his audience it was important to consider the political purpose of a piece of music. Bach, he told his audience, 'had made a decision to put his piece in a minor key rather than a major one.' Perhaps, he said, according to audience members who were there, he did that because there was a leader Bach didn't like. Zimmerman made an approving reference to Obama and then played the piece, but ended it in a joyful C major instead of a melancholy C minor.<sup>174</sup>

By the time of his Los Angeles recital on April 26, Zimmerman's mood had changed. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that American foreign policy had recently been a sore spot in Poland after reports "that the CIA held suspected Al Qaeda militants in secret prisons in Poland."<sup>175</sup>

A late program change replaced Brahms' Klavierstücke, Op. 119 with Grazyna Bacewicz's Piano Sonata No. 2. Paired with Karol Szymanowski's Variations on a Polish Folk Theme, Op. 10, the second half became a celebration of Polish nationalism. Upon returning to the stage for the variations, Zimmerman paused to speak to the audience. He announced that:

two years ago he decided he could not play in the country that operated the prison in Guantanamo Bay, violated international conventions and whose military complex 'aims to control the world.'...[D]ozens of audience members walked out during his speech and continued to exit during his performance of the Szymanowski Variations. Several people shouted at him to "shut up and play the piano" and "go back to your country." Those

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<sup>174</sup> Jessica Garrison and Diane Haithman, "Pianist's overtly political chord," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 2009, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-apr-28-et-zimmerman-pol28-story.html>.

<sup>175</sup> Garrison and Haithman, "Pianist's overtly political chord."

voices were drowned out by the overwhelming applause of the large majority of the audience.<sup>176</sup>

The most frequently referenced quote from Zimmerman's speech was "Get your hands off my country," which was widely interpreted to be a reference to the missile shield. "Some people, when they hear the word military, start marching,"<sup>177</sup> he said. Although the incident was widely reported as a spontaneous outburst, Zimmerman had been thinking about this for a long time. In 2008, he told BBC Radio3 that next year he would play his last concert in America and then take a long break:

[For] the last eight years, I was observing this country ... Quite a lot of the world got destroyed in the last eight years. I cannot agree with many things which happened in the political life of this country, and I thought of giving it a few years just to wait and see what will happen in the future.

When I turned fifty, and I was complaining about this and that my daughter said, 'So what did you do to change the world?' And I realized I hadn't done enough. So, I went onstage, and I was talking to the audience and I was trying to make them aware of what was happening. I did a speech after every concert in my last two American tours, and as a result I have quite a lot of trouble now in organizing these tours. I have dropped out of two tours now; I had to cancel them altogether. I'll just wait until the situation changes and then will come back ...

I don't know if it's my function, but I have certainly a possibility to address two, three thousand people not only with my music but also with my thoughts. I was trying to use this opportunity.<sup>178</sup>

Zimmerman has not returned to the U.S. since his concert in Los Angeles. He did not return during the eight years of Obama's presidency, and it is impossible that the election of Trump and that administration's policies made him more amenable to returning to the U.S. He has continued

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<sup>176</sup> Benjamin Hopkins, "Shut up and Play the Piano," unpublished manuscript, Los Angeles, CA, 2009.

<sup>177</sup> Garrison and Haithman, "Pianist's overtly political chord."

<sup>178</sup> Krystian Zimmerman, interview with Tom Service, *Music Matters*, BBC Radio 3, May 10, 2008, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/musicmatters/pip/lwjxu/>.

to speak from the stage, including a recent concert in Switzerland in which he criticized Switzerland's "record of supplying arms to countries that are engaged in civil war."<sup>179</sup>

### 3.3 Valentina Lisitsa

Ukrainian-born pianist Valentina Lisitsa was one of the first classical musicians to build a lucrative career on a social media platform. In 1991, she and her husband tied for the gold medal at the Dranoff International 2 Piano Competition. However, despite signing with management, Lisitsa was unable to gain a foothold as a performer.

In 2007, she began uploading videos to YouTube, starting with a previous commercial release of the 24 Chopin Etudes.<sup>180</sup> Her YouTube channel reached 53,000 subscribers and 43 million views five years later.<sup>181</sup> After spending her life's savings to hire the London Symphony Orchestra for a recording of the Rachmaninov piano concertos, she was signed by Decca Classics and engaged for a recital at the Royal Albert Hall in 2012, which, true to form, was streamed live on YouTube.

The *New York Times*' 2013 profile of Lisitsa devoted most of the column to her successful social media strategies. But the *Times* also noted in passing that "unlike the polite

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<sup>179</sup> Norman Lebrecht, "Piano Roll: Krystian Zimerman in an Anti-Swiss Outburst," SlippeDisc, September 13, 2018, <https://slippedisc.com/2018/09/piano-roll-krystian-zimerman-in-anti-swiss-outburst>.

<sup>180</sup> Vivian Schweitzer, "Concerto for Piano and YouTube," *New York Times*, October 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/arts/music/valentina-lisitsa-jump-starts-her-career-online.html>.

<sup>181</sup> Charlotte Smith, "Pianist Valentina Lisitsa signs to Decca Classics," *Gramophone*, May 25, 2012, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/classical-music-news/article/pianist-valentina-lisitsa-signs-to-decca-classics>.

feeds of other classical artists,” Lisitsa often used her online presence to be “argumentative and outspoken, tweeting about politics and berating concert promoters who have irked her.”<sup>182</sup>

It was this proclivity for confrontation on social media that may have turned Lisitsa’s greatest asset—her online fame—into the instrument of her downfall. The internet had made her famous and successful to a degree most pianists would envy, and yet this success led to an Icarian miscalculation. In 2015, Lisitsa was slated to perform with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) when the orchestra canceled her appearance over several offensive tweets.

In a statement, the TSO explained that it had removed Lisitsa “due to ongoing accusations of deeply offensive language” and a history of “provocative comments overshadow[ing] past performances.”<sup>183</sup> A close examination of all tweets on the account @ValLisitsa from April 2014 to April 2015 shows that the TSO was being diplomatic. The account’s tweets were almost entirely political; fewer than twenty tweets related at all to her musical activities, out of hundreds. Lisitsa essentially acknowledged this when she tweeted a concert announcement that she called a “rare musical tweet.”<sup>184</sup>

Aside from the rare tweet about a concert or recording, Lisitsa’s Twitter account was devoted to colorful and often profane commentary about the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, which had escalated with the February 2014 ouster of Ukraine’s Russian-backed president Viktor

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<sup>182</sup> Vivian Schweitzer, “Concerto for Piano and YouTube,” *The New York Times*.

<sup>183</sup> Anastasia Tsiouclas, “Twitter Outrage Takes Toronto, Canceling Two Pianists,” *NPR*, April 8, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2015/04/09/398571112/twitter-outrage-takes-toronto-canceling-two-pianists>.

<sup>184</sup> Valentina Lisitsa, “Rare ‘Musical’ Tweet,” Twitter, June 12, 2014, 2:50 PM, <https://twitter.com/vallisitsa/status/477206208160739328>.

Yanukovych.<sup>185</sup> Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in March 2014, and pro-Russian rebels began seizing territory in eastern Ukraine in April. On July 17, Malaysian Airlines flight 17 was shot down by Ukrainian rebels and all 298 people on board were killed.<sup>186</sup>

Lisitsa's tweets were vocally anti-Ukrainian, and she frequently shared extremely graphic images of purportedly dead and maimed Ukrainian civilians allegedly killed by pro-Ukrainian forces. After the Malaysian Airlines flight was shot down, she suggested in several tweets that the Ukrainian government was actually responsible for the missile attack<sup>187</sup> and made an unsubstantiated claim about Ukraine supplying ISIL with nuclear weapons. Lisitsa tweeted a parody of "Old McDonald" that implied that the late Senator John McCain was in league with Nazis.<sup>188</sup> Even when she defended famed Russian soprano Anna Netrebko against protests over her support for Russia, Lisitsa included graphic photographs of dead and mutilated bodies in her tweets and referred to Ukrainians as Nazis (see Appendix A).

The tweets that the TSO produced as justification for their decision<sup>189</sup> included a now-deleted tweet<sup>190</sup> from August 2014 that mockingly compared teachers dressed in traditional

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<sup>185</sup> Max Fisher, "Everything you need to know about the Ukraine crisis," *Vox*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.vox.com/2014/9/3/18088560/ukraine-everything-you-need-to-know>.

<sup>186</sup> Fisher, "Everything you need to know about the Ukraine crisis."

<sup>187</sup> Valentina Lisitsa (@ValLisitsa), "US whistle-blower leaks hi-res satellite images of Malaysian Airlines #MH17. And of Ukrainian Airforce MIG-29," Twitter, November 14, 2014, <https://twitter.com/ValLisitsa/status/533292021046607872>.

<sup>188</sup> @ValLisitsa. "OLD @SenJohnMcCain HAD A FARM, E-I-E-I-O AND ON HIS FARM HE HAD SOME NAZIS..." Twitter, February 6, 2015, <https://twitter.com/ValLisitsa/status/563789336865689600>.

<sup>189</sup> The TSO compiled seven pages of offensive tweets, but the document is no longer publicly available.

<sup>190</sup> If, as Lisitsa later claimed, the tweet was not racist or offensive, why did she delete it?

Ukrainian garb to African tribesmen.<sup>191</sup> Lisitsa told the *Toronto Star*, in a stunningly ignorant and racist quote, that her

depiction of an abstract ‘African tribe’ doesn’t allude to anything racist. It shows what it shows—primitive society that is not ‘civilized.’ What I was most stunned with is that Ukrainians say I mock African Americans by using this photo. Now, I don’t ever imagine African Americans as wearing tribal dress. This is a stereotype that only the racists themselves would ever apply to African Americans, isn’t it?<sup>192</sup>

The TSO announced that it would still pay Lisitsa’s fee but removed her from the scheduled concert programs. Canadian pianist Stewart Goodyear was engaged to replace Lisitsa but withdrew only two days after the announcement due to online harassment from Lisitsa’s fans. Lisitsa went on a scorched-earth public relations campaign. Rather than issue an apology, she doubled down and continued to defend herself over social media, posting an edited headshot with a large duct tape “X” photoshopped over her mouth that claimed she was being censored. She tweeted that “TSO lawyers went through ALL my tweets and couldn’t find ONE that breaks laws,”<sup>193</sup> a rhetorical distraction designed to entirely sidestep the main problem with the offensive content.

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<sup>191</sup> Robert Mackey, “Toronto Orchestra Drops Pianist Over Tweets About Ukraine,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/americas/toronto-orchestra-drops-pianist-over-tweets-about-ukraine.html>.

<sup>192</sup> Leslie Ferenc, “For Valentina Lisitsa, not a note of regret after TSO snub,” April 10, 2015, <https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2015/04/10/for-valentina-lisitsa-not-one-note-of-regret.html>.

<sup>193</sup> Valentina Lisitsa (@ValLisitsa), Twitter, 8 April 2015, <https://twitter.com/ValLisitsa/status/585801039556771840>.





Figure 3.1 Valentina Lisitsa Facebook photo, April 6, 2015

In an interview with National Public Radio, Lisitsa even compared her situation to “cases where people, for example in Indiana, are in private companies, and can turn away gay couples,”<sup>194</sup> without acknowledging the critical differences between choosing to send a tweet and facing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Her approach not only doubled down on offensiveness and ignorance but was also undoubtedly self-sabotaging. Although it may have generated short-term attention—which is the key to social media success—her handling of the incident was detrimental to her career in the long run. A magnanimous apology may have been enough to save face for the TSO and could have allowed her to salvage those performances, and perhaps longer-term career prospects. By making the incident into a no-holds-barred public relations war, not only did Lisitsa guarantee

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<sup>194</sup> Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Twitter Outrage Takes Toronto, Canceling Two Pianists,” *NPR*, April 8, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2015/04/09/398571112/twitter-outrage-takes-toronto-canceling-two-pianists>.

she would never again be hired by the TSO, she almost certainly made other organizations extremely reticent to engage her in the future.

The fallout from the incident appears to have crippled Lisitsa's career. In 2012, Lisitsa signed with the Decca Classics recording label. Archives of Decca's website show that before the Twitter fallout she had an active career as a concerto soloist, making twelve orchestral appearances in Europe, Japan, and the United States in 2014 and ten in 2015. After the TSO cancellation, her schedule dried up. In 2016 and 2017, her only concerto performances were two different week-long tours with Russian orchestras and one appearance in Syracuse, New York. In 2018, she gave four concerto performances; two were with Russian orchestras, one in Fort Wayne, Indiana and one in Luxembourg. Her 2020 schedule indicates only one collaboration with an orchestra, the New Zealand Symphony. At the height of her touring schedule in 2014 and 2015, she played with high-level orchestras including the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the Leipzig Gewandhaus. She has not been invited back to play with those organizations, or any of similar prominence.

Her recording output has slowed, and her royalty income likely decreased after the airlines Lufthansa and KLM removed her recordings from their inflight catalogues.<sup>195</sup> Since 2015, she has released only two albums; from 2012 to 2015, she put out fourteen recordings on the Decca label. Although it is impossible to definitively say that this precipitous drop was a result of her public relations disaster, Lisitsa herself attributed her career stagnation to bad press. In 2016, she filed a defamation suit against John Bell Young, a pianist who wrote many

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<sup>195</sup> Norman Lebrecht, "Now Lufthansa Deletes Valentina Lisitsa," September 1, 2015, <https://slippedisc.com/2015/09/now-lufthansa-deletes-valentina-lisitsa/>.

Facebook posts railing against her offensive tweets and her playing. Lisitsa's court filing alleged that her concertizing income dropped from approximately \$188,000 in 2014 to \$25,000 in 2016, and claimed that she had lost over \$200,000 in concert fees and royalties.<sup>196</sup> It seems unlikely that a relatively unknown critic's social media posts caused all—or any—of these losses. Regardless, her career has not recovered from the marked decline it took after April 2015.

### 3.4 Igor Levit

Unlike the pianists discussed in previous sections of this chapter, Igor Levit has not triggered boycotts or cancellations with singular incidents of political activity. Instead, Levit has intertwined his musical and political life so much so that he has been dubbed “the pianist of the Resistance” by the *New York Times*.<sup>197</sup> His Twitter feed blends political retweets and commentary with performance videos and, since spring 2020, pandemic recitals from his home. For Graffman and Zimmerman, boycotts and speaking from the stage were notable disruptions, while Lisitsa's Twitter sideshow overshadowed her playing. For Levit, however, politics has become a defining and oft-praised feature of his career.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump seemed to be the turning point for Levit. Before beginning a recital in Brussels on November 9, 2016, the day after the election results, Levit spoke to the audience and subsequently published his entire speech via tweet (see Appendix B).

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<sup>196</sup> Lisitsa v. Young, 1:16-cv-05903 (S.D. New York, 2016).

<sup>197</sup> Michael Cooper, “The Pianist of the Resistance Captures a Surprise Award,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/03/arts/music/igor-levit-gilmore-award.html>.

The *New York Times*' Zachary Woolfe noted that this tweet was “pinned” to the top of his Twitter profile as late as February 2017.<sup>198</sup>

It is notable that Levit identified the election of Donald Trump as the impetus for his decision to speak out and raise his voice. In 2018, he performed a program at Tanglewood that consisted of Beethoven's “Eroica” Variations, Frederic Rzewski's “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!” and Arnold Schoenberg's “Ode to Napoleon”<sup>199</sup>—pieces which all engage with themes of freedom or tyrannical leaders. As of April 2020, to avoid any confusion about his priorities, Igor Levit's website describes him as: “Citizen. European. Pianist.” A February 2020 magazine profile reverentially described Levit's non-musical activities:

Levit has 46,000 followers on Twitter, a calendar full of prime-time TV appearances, and a new, stylish homepage developed by one of Germany's top web designers. He's already tweeted about the scandal of the day while most performers are still busy with their morning scales ... Levit is one of the few classical musicians with a hyperactive and prominent Twitter account. That has empowered him further, because others want to buy his soaring attention stock. Levit and many journalists, in particular, are good friends, praising one another online in turn.<sup>200</sup>

Levit's successful self-branding as an unapologetically outspoken pianist-*cum*-politico is a stark contrast to Lisitsa's professional implosion. Differences between their Twitter behavior likely explain the disparate outcomes. Levit espouses a point of view that is decidedly more popular in the West than pro-Putin and pro-Russia positions. Many of Levit's tweets repudiate

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<sup>198</sup> Zachary Woolfe, “Review: Igor Levit, a Pianist for Polarizing Times,” *The New York Times*, Feb 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/12/arts/music/igor-levit-review.html>

<sup>199</sup> David Noel Edwards, “Preview: Tanglewood performance by Igor Levit, JACK Quartet to highlight notorious demagogues,” *Berkshire Edge*, August 13, 2018, <https://theberkshireedge.com/preview-tanglewood-performance-by-igor-levit-jack-quartet-to-highlight-notorious-demagogues/>.

<sup>200</sup> Hartmut Welscher, “Winner Takes All: Igor Levit in the Attention Economy,” *VAN Magazine*, February 2, 2020, <https://van-us.atavist.com/winner-takes-all>.

Donald Trump, Nazis, and racism—largely mainstream positions. In recent years, Levit’s American performances have taken him to college campuses and large coastal cities, where audience members are more likely to share his liberal leanings. “There is no dense city in America that routinely votes Republican,”<sup>201</sup> thus insulating Levit from a high level of opposition or backlash. More importantly, Levit does not traffic in racism and propaganda or share offensive or violent images.

Levit has also used his platform for advocacy beyond the concert hall and Twitter. He was one of many musicians—including pianist-conductor Daniel Barenboim and Metropolitan Opera conductor Fabio Luisi—who returned their Echo awards (a German corollary to the Grammys) in protest in 2018.<sup>202</sup> That year’s hip-hop category winner was a rap duo whose lyrics have been characterized as anti-Semitic, homophobic, and misogynistic.<sup>203</sup> So many musicians returned their awards that the German Music Industry Association completely eliminated the awards entirely shortly after.<sup>204</sup>

In December 2019, after receiving an email threatening to assassinate him during a performance, Levit wrote an article for the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper detailing the anti-Semitism he has faced as a Jewish musician in Europe. In January 2020, Levit was recognized by the International Auschwitz Committee with the Statue-B award, which is conferred for

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<sup>201</sup> Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), chap. 2, Apple Books.

<sup>202</sup> Justine Nguyen, “Germany’s Echo Awards Have Been Scrapped,” *Limelight*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/news/germanys-echo-awards-have-been-scrapped/>.

<sup>203</sup> Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Charges of Anti-Semitism Roil German Music Awards,” *NPR*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2018/04/19/604046154/german-rappers-accused-of-anti-semitism-win-major-music-prize>.

<sup>204</sup> Nguyen, “Germany’s Echo Awards Have Been Scrapped.”

“commitment [to] opposing anti-Semitism and right-wing hatred, and promoting tolerance and dignified life together in democracy.”<sup>205</sup> He also won the 2020 International Beethoven Prize, which is “awarded to artists who place themselves in the service of human rights, peace, freedom, combating poverty and inclusion.”<sup>206</sup> Previous winners of the award include pianists Gabriela Montero and Fazil Say.

### 3.5 Strategies

What can the political pianist learn from the pianists discussed in this chapter? How can aspects of their vastly different strategies be applied to present-day situations?

Zimerman and Graffman both attempted to leverage the loss of future concerts to advocate for change. The boycotts that loom largest in the American imagination—like the Montgomery bus boycott—put consumer pressure on businesses. Zimerman and Graffman flipped this dynamic by placing the artist (the supplier) at the center of the boycott. A consumer-led boycott attempts to force change by inflicting financial pain upon a business. The artist’s boycott demonstrates that a chosen cause is so important that musicians are willing to inflict financial pain upon themselves. As a matter of principle, it is a powerful statement; however, most pianists are replaceable and do not have Krystian Zimerman’s international renown to gain attention. For these pianists, the Columbia Artists boycott is instructive: it ultimately succeeded

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<sup>205</sup> “International Auschwitz Committee honours the pianist Igor Levit,” International Auschwitz Committee, January 8, 2020, <https://www.auschwitz.info/en/welcome/announcements/artikel/lesen/international-auschwitz-committee-honours-the-pianist-igor-levit-1839.html>.

<sup>206</sup> Torsten Landsberg, “Igor Levit wins the Beethoven Prize for Taking a Stand at the Keyboard,” *DW*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/igor-levit-wins-the-beethoven-prize-for-taking-a-stand-at-the-keyboard/a-51557554>.

in pressuring management to divest from segregated concerts because it had power in numbers. While one cancellation would have been an inconvenience, the Columbia Artists effectively canceled all classical concerts for the second half of Jackson's 1963-64 season.

A coordinated artists' boycott can inflict severe economic consequences on a community. The cancellation of Nilsen's Jackson recital probably forced the organizers to refund tickets, and a continued boycott would have resulted in more lost revenue. Although there is no data available to prove this, a similar albeit larger boycott in 2017 suggests that such an effort can have a substantial impact. The Associated Press estimated that the boycott of the state of North Carolina by musicians, corporations, and the National College Athletic Association over its anti-trans "bathroom bill" had the potential to cost the state a minimum of "more than \$3.76 billion in lost business over a dozen years." This figure included "a canceled Ringo Starr concert that deprived a town's amphitheater of about \$33,000 in revenue."<sup>207</sup> The San Francisco Symphony withdrew from two scheduled concerts at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, costing the region an estimated \$325,000 in lost economic activity.<sup>208</sup> For individual musicians, joining a broader movement can have a powerful economic impact and signal solidarity.

Although it may not have the economic power of a boycott, strategic social media use can also make specific and detailed arguments. Social media can help lesser-known musicians reach a broader audience. The problem, as Lisitsa and many other trigger-happy tweeters have discovered, is that social media platforms can incentivize impulse-posting, and the most divisive content often gets the most attention. The difference between Levit's success and Lisitsa's

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<sup>207</sup> Emery P. Dalesio and Jonathan Drew, "AP Exclusive: 'Bathroom bill' to cost North Carolina \$3.76B," *Associated Press*, March 30, 2017, <https://apnews.com/e6c7a15d2e16452c8dcbc2756fd67b44>.

<sup>208</sup> Dalesio and Drew, "AP Exclusive: 'Bathroom bill' to cost North Carolina \$3.76B."

downfall is obvious but informative. Expressing political opinions is never risk-free, but sharing offensive content and making racist statements is almost guaranteed to have repercussions.

Even after a decade of social media use and highly publicized firings over social media misbehavior,<sup>209</sup> some in the classical music world are still making bigoted comments on social media that cost them their jobs. On May 31, 2020, the Austin Symphony Orchestra and Austin Opera fired trombonist Brenda Sansig Salas just one day after she made racist comments on Facebook.<sup>210</sup> On July 20, 2020, the Richard Tucker Music Foundation removed David Tucker—the son of its namesake—from its board after he made offensive comments on Facebook about protestors in Portland, Oregon.<sup>211</sup> Tucker made the comments on a post by Julia Bullock, a Black soprano; he called the protestors “thugs,” a term often used as a racist dog whistle. Famous singers and past winners of the Richard Tucker Award—including Joyce DiDonato and Stephanie Blythe—condemned David Tucker’s comments on their own social media accounts.

The best advice for the political pianist comes from one of Barack Obama’s mantras: “Don’t do stupid stuff.”<sup>212</sup> The savvy political pianist should thoughtfully consider their words and make sure that they are informed before they speak. John Legend, who has been “outspoken

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<sup>209</sup> Katie Halper, “A Brief History of People Getting Fired for Social Media Stupidity,” *Rolling Stone*, July 13, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-lists/a-brief-history-of-people-getting-fired-for-social-media-stupidity-73456/>.

<sup>210</sup> Michael Barnes, “Austin Opera and Austin Symphony fire trombonist for posts about protesters, Trump,” *Austin American-Statesman*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.austin360.com/news/20200602/austin-opera-and-austin-symphony-fire-trombonist-for--posts-about-protesters-trump>.

<sup>211</sup> Sarah Bahr, “Opera Foundation Removes Trustee Over Offensive Comments,” *New York Times*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/20/arts/music/tucker-foundation-opera-black.html>.

<sup>212</sup> James Fallows, “Obama: Chessmaster, not Pawn,” *The Atlantic*, December 13, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/obama-chessmaster-or-pawn/420195/>.



about racial injustice”<sup>213</sup> and criminal-justice reform, advised musicians who want to speak out about politics to “try to do your homework. Read about it. Talk to activists and organizers and people impacted. Be open to evolution and changing your mind. Be intentional and strategic. And think about the impact of your words on the real lives of people.”<sup>214</sup>

Pianists must be crystal-clear about their message so that their audience understands what they are advocating for, and what action or remedy they propose. Gary Graffman clearly condemned racist segregation in Southern concert halls; his target audience knew he would return if they took one simple step and desegregated their concert halls. On the other hand, Krystian Zimerman spoke vaguely about his opposition to American foreign policy, and American piano fans and concert presenters—whether they agreed with his points or not—had no power to stop construction of a missile shield in Poland or close Guantanamo Bay. (Canadian audiences, who have even less impact on American foreign policy, have also suffered from the Zimerman boycott.)

A political pianist need not be limited to fighting for only one cause and does not have to protest or speak at every concert or event. There is power in picking one’s battles. Individuals must make these decisions based on their own individual preferences and circumstances. Pianists may also decide to completely forego the tactics described in this chapter and instead adopt strategies outlined in the next two chapters.

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<sup>213</sup> Adrienne Green, “Jesse Williams and John Legend Talk Race in America,” *The Atlantic*, February 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/john-legend-jesse-williams/552578/>.

<sup>214</sup> John Legend (@johnlegend), “If you are going to speak out, try to do your homework...,” Twitter, Jul 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/johnlegend/status/1282762479676710912>.

## Chapter 4: Commissioning

To paraphrase Philip Ewell, classical music is white. In his paper “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” Ewell applies sociologist Joe Feagin’s concept of a white racial framework that exists “to rationalize and insure white privilege and dominance over Americans of color” to music theory.<sup>215</sup> Ewell argues that the “composers we choose to analyze and teach” reinforce the white racial frame.<sup>216</sup> This also applies to performers, who perpetuate the white racial frame through the composers they choose to commission, program, and study; non-white composers are routinely excluded and marginalized.<sup>217</sup> Intentionally or not, this reinforces the image of classical music as an example what sociologist Elijah Anderson refers to as “The White Space”: a place characterized by its “overwhelming presence of white people and ... absence of black people.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Philip A. Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (June 2020), <http://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4>.

<sup>216</sup> Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame.”

<sup>217</sup> Ewell’s paper is incredibly insightful, demonstrating a command of critical race theory as well as music theory. His critique of music theory’s white racial frame is important to consider, because the theory of Western classical music is so tied up with the repertoire that is played and elevated. However, Ewell specifically warns against the words “diversity” and “inclusivity” — terms which I have attempted to avoid in this chapter. Essentially, Ewell argues that “the language of diversity” also functions to avoid confronting the structural issues of whiteness and race.

Ewell draws a distinction between music theory and music practice, however. Explaining how Heinrich Schenker’s racism is more problematic than Richard Wagner’s, Ewell writes that “we do not hold up Wagner as someone through whose *theories* we might understand tonal music. In other words, if one studies music theory in the U.S., Wagner’s racism is optional while Schenker’s is not.” Theoretically, then, piano repertoire with significant racist baggage, such as Debussy pieces that reference minstrel shows or caricature Asian music, could be eschewed by performers and teachers without necessarily avoiding all of Debussy’s works. Ewell calls for “deframing and reframing the white racial frame;” he does not even advocate for cancelling Schenkerian studies, but rather an honest presentation of “racialized thought in music theory.”

<sup>218</sup> Elijah Anderson, “The White Space,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (January 2015): 13, doi:10.1177/2332649214561306.

Gender disparities are also evident in commissioning and programming. The concert hall “remains a hostile place for women composers,”<sup>219</sup> a problem that Prevost and Francis argue is compounded by the lack of historical lineage or tradition for female composers<sup>220</sup> (of course, this is also true for non-white composers). The evidence for this contention plays out in concert halls every season. Over the entire 2018-19 season, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra both failed to program any works by female composers.<sup>221</sup> (The Philadelphia Orchestra added two works by women to their season after NPR reported on the imbalance.)<sup>222</sup> The Cleveland Orchestra’s season was slightly better, featuring music of 40 male composers and one female composer, Jennifer Higdon. The New York Philharmonic’s 2018-19 season included two women among the ranks of 49 total composers.<sup>223</sup>

These imbalances are also evident in the world of classical piano. The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition is a prime example of this reticence. The Cliburn, which ranks among the most prominent international competitions, has commissioned a new work by an

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<sup>219</sup> Roxane Prevost and Kimberly Francis, “Teaching Silence in the Twenty-First Century: Where are the Missing Women Composers?” *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 640, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199733163.013.26>.

<sup>220</sup> Prevost and Frances point out that it was not always this way; in the United States in the early twentieth century, there was interest in female composers. However, by the 1930s male composers and critics (including Charles Ives) had begun to criticize “women for the feminization of American music and the inferior quality of their musical abilities and taste” and even claimed there was a scientific reason for why there were no great female composers.

<sup>221</sup> Tom Huizenga, “The Sound of Silence: Female Composers at The Symphony,” *NPR*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2018/06/19/617136805/the-sound-of-silence-female-composers-at-the-symphony>.

<sup>222</sup> Tom Huizenga, “After Criticism, Philadelphia Orchestra Adds Female Composers to Its New Season,” *NPR*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2018/08/02/634864751/after-criticism-philadelphia-orchestra-adds-female-composers-to-its-new-season>.

<sup>223</sup> Huizenga, “The Sound of Silence.”

American composer for each competition since its inception in 1962. Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and John Corigliano are among the composers who have been commissioned to write works for the competition. But the Cliburn has never commissioned a work by a composer of color, and it was not until 2001 that the Cliburn gave its first commission to a female composer, Judith Lang Zaimont. In 2005, two out of the five new works at the Cliburn were written by women: Jennifer Higdon and Ruth Schonthal.

Notably, the only reason these pieces appeared at the Cliburn at all was because of the American Composers Invitational that was started in 2001. In the first year, forty-two American composers were invited to submit piano works;<sup>224</sup> the thirty-one pieces that were submitted were then distributed to the competitors without identifying the composers.<sup>225</sup> It was only through this blind selection process that female composers received commissions from the Cliburn. No works by women were chosen in 2009; the Cliburn abandoned the Invitational after 2009 and returned to commissioning only one composer in 2013 and 2017. Both were white men. The commissioned work for the upcoming 2021 competition will come from pianist Stephen Hough, also a white male.

#### **4.1 Commissioning Change**

Commissioning new music has the transformative potential make the pianistic repertoire more representative and equitable. Although it is impossible to remedy the historical absence of women and people of color from careers in composition, commissioning offers a way to

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<sup>224</sup> The Cliburn has not published information about who was invited.

<sup>225</sup> “1<sup>st</sup> American Composers Invitational at Cliburn Competition,” NewMusicUSA, June 1, 2001, <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/1st-american-composers-invitational-at-cliburn-competition/>

proactively shape the future. Organizations like the Los Angeles Philharmonic have led the way by taking significant steps towards more equitable commissioning. Half of the LA Philharmonic's 22 commissions in the 2019-20 season were written by women.<sup>226</sup> Their "Power to the People Festival" explored the use of music in social justice movements; the LA Philharmonic's former executive director, Simon Woods, told the *Los Angeles Times* that "the whole issue of gender parity, and also thinking hard about how we reflect racial equity through our commissions, is very important."<sup>227</sup>

Racial equity and gender parity can also facilitate the creation of politically themed music that illuminates perspectives and narratives outside of the white, male default. Anthony Davis' opera "The Central Park Five," which was premiered by Long Beach Opera in Southern California, won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Music.<sup>228</sup> The opera tells the story of five Black and Latino teenagers who were falsely convicted of rape and assault in 1989.<sup>229</sup> Though the convictions were overturned in 2002, the incident received national attention in Ava DuVernay's 2019 Netflix series *When They See Us*, and because Donald Trump had, at the time of the arrests, taken out "full-page newspaper advertisements calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty."<sup>230</sup> (There is a Trump role in the opera.) In 2019, the Pulitzer Prize for Music was

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<sup>226</sup> Deborah Vankin, "LA Phil's 2019-20 season: social justice, gender parity and a little Sondheim," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-la-phil-2019-20-season-20190219-story.html>.

<sup>227</sup> Vankin, "LA Phil's 2019-20 season."

<sup>228</sup> Anastasia Tsioulcas, "Anthony Davis Wins Pulitzer Prize for His Opera 'The Central Park Five,'" *NPR*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/04/850166148/anthony-davis-wins-pulitzer-prize-for-his-opera-the-central-park-five>.

<sup>229</sup> Tsioulcas, "Anthony Davis Wins Pulitzer Prize for His Opera 'The Central Park Five.'"

<sup>230</sup> Tsioulcas, "Anthony Davis Wins Pulitzer Prize for His Opera 'The Central Park Five.'"

awarded to Ellen Reid for her opera *p r i s m*, commissioned by the Beth Morrison Project. *p r i s m* confronts “the effects of sexual and emotional abuse,”<sup>231</sup> a particularly salient topic in opera and classical music given recent high-profile cases of assault and abuse in music conservatories, orchestras, and opera companies at the most elite levels.

## 4.2 Ideological and Representative Commissions

I propose two models of political commissions. The first is the ideological model: a pianist commissions works about a specific issue, by composers who support the same cause or agenda as the pianist. The second is the representative model: a pianist commissions a demographically representative group of composers to write pieces that may or may not have a specific political message, according to the composer’s preference. Identifying these two models is a useful starting point for aspiring commissioners and offers two clear paths for being a musical ally and advocate.

Sarah Cahill’s A Sweeter Music project is an example of ideological commissioning. A Sweeter Music was a response to the Iraq War and takes its title from a line in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1964 Nobel lecture: “We must see that peace represents a sweeter music, a cosmic melody, that is far superior to the discords of war.”<sup>232</sup> Cahill commissioned a total of eighteen anti-war or pro-peace compositions from composers with a record of “commitment to anti-war

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<sup>231</sup> Tom Huizenga, “Readjusting Your Reality: Ellen Reid Wins Music Pulitzer for ‘p r i s m,’” *NPR*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2019/04/15/713625417/readjusting-your-reality-ellen-reid-wins-music-pulitzer-for-p-r-i-s-m>.

<sup>232</sup> “A Sweeter Music,” *WNYC*, March 2, 2009, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/70934-a-sweeter-music/>.

activism or their strong political conscience.”<sup>233</sup> The project was funded by various individual donors and non-profit organizations.<sup>234</sup> The composers who contributed to the project include Frederic Rzewski, Terry Riley, Yoko Ono, Jerome Kitzke, and The Residents. The works were premiered in a recital at Merkin Hall in New York City in 2009 and were accompanied by a video presentation by John Sanborn.<sup>235</sup> A commercial recording was released in 2013 but does not include all eighteen commissions.

Cahill clearly identified the ideological basis for her commissions, and then enlisted the skills of composers inclined to agree with her cause. One limitation of this approach is that it self-selects for composers who are already outspoken about their political beliefs or have previously composed pieces about a specific issue but does not necessarily make the piano literature more representative.

Representative commissioning is exemplified by Active Listening, a project started by pianist Lior Willinger. In its first edition, Active Listening funded commissions by ten composers through a grant from the Presser Foundation. Each composer was asked to “address a social justice issue they feel passionate about” through short compositions.<sup>236</sup> Willinger recorded and released each piece along with statements from the composers and specific action points for listeners. The resulting pieces, by a diverse cohort of composers, touched on issues including climate change and deforestation, the school-to-prison pipeline, the Trump administration’s

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<sup>233</sup> Sarah Cahill, *A Sweeter Music*, Other Minds Records, 2013, compact disc, liner notes.

<sup>234</sup> Sarah Cahill, *A Sweeter Music*, liner notes.

<sup>235</sup> “A Sweeter Music,” *WNYC*.

<sup>236</sup> Lior Willinger, “Active Listening,” accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.liorpiano.com/active-listening>.

family separation policy, and homelessness. Critically, the project did not exclude white or male composers, but still managed to shift the balance away from the white racial frame and does not prioritize maleness or whiteness.

As a white, male pianist this approach appeals to me for several reasons. First, it centers the perspectives of composers who can speak to certain political issues through their lived experiences in a way that I cannot. Joel Thompson's *My Dungeon Shook*, which is discussed in the following section, viscerally gives voice to emotions about the murder of Black men in America that could not be expressed by a white composer. Second, this approach shows that classical musicians are both capable of and invested in presenting worldviews that go beyond our historically white, male, Western tradition. Third, our audiences care about these issues, too, and art helps us collectively process and think about contemporary social problems and challenges. Finally, art is a historical document; future musicians and historians will gain crucial understanding of our current moment from the music composed today.

#### **4.3 Commissioned Works by Joel Thompson and Peter Shin**

Active Listening was the inspiration for my project for the University of British Columbia's Public Scholars Initiative. According to UBC's Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies webpage, the Public Scholars Initiative was started to support UBC doctoral students who use their dissertation work or other scholarly endeavors to advance the public good. Doctoral students from every division of the university participate in the program, which funds projects that contribute not only to academic knowledge and the university but also to the public good and community partners.



The Public Scholars Initiative funded my proposal to commission piano pieces by Joel Thompson and Peter S. Shin. As with Active Listening, I asked each composer to write a piece that engages with a social or political issue of their choice. The resulting works are Thompson's *My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes for Piano* and Shin's *ravel's miroirs no. 3 but you're dissociating at your recital*.

#### 4.3.1 Joel Thompson

Joel Thompson, born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1988, is a doctoral student in composition at the Yale School of Music. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in music and a Master of Music degree in Choral Conducting, both from Emory University. His background in choral music clearly shaped his affinity for text-setting and vocal writing; he has written several choral works that set poems by Langston Hughes. My introduction to Thompson's music was at the Aspen Music Festival in 2017, where I played two of his art songs in a new music concert organized by that year's composition fellows.<sup>237</sup> Thompson's music often engages with themes of love, loss, and memory.

After the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, Thompson's choral work *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* received national attention. Written in 2014 as a "way to process [his] feelings"<sup>238</sup> after the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, the work is still tragically relevant today. Each of the seven movements set to music the dying words of seven unarmed

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<sup>237</sup> Each Aspen composition fellow that year composed a fanfare to be played before the second half of an orchestra concert; Thompson's was titled "Despite the constant negative press covfanfare."

<sup>238</sup> AJ Willingham, "This haunting song features the last words of unarmed black men," *CNN*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/george-floyd-seven-last-words-unarmed-joel-thompson-trnd/index.html>.

Black men; the last movement, Eric Garner, was particularly salient because he and Floyd spoke the same last words: “I can’t breathe.” In each movement the all-male chorus, accompanied by chamber ensemble or orchestra, intones the last words of Brown, Garner, Kenneth Chamberlain Sr., Trayvon Martin, Amadou Diallo, Oscar Grant, and John Crawford.

Several organizations have commissioned politically conscious works by Thompson. Through a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra has commissioned Thompson to write a piece about the 1956 Tallahassee bus boycott.<sup>239</sup> Challenge the Stats, a non-profit organization whose website describes their mission to “empower artists of color by creating communities devoted to diversity, inclusion, and equity in the classical performing arts,” commissioned Thompson’s “Songs from Prison” with a grant from the American Harp Society. The three songs for harp and tenor address mass incarceration by setting of words from three incarcerated Americans.

#### **4.3.2 *My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes***

*My Dungeon Shook* is Thompson’s musical protest of and personal reaction to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd. The set takes its title from an essay by James Baldwin titled “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” in *The Fire Next Time*. The title of the essay references the spiritual “Free at Last,” famously quoted by Dr. Martin Luther King in his “I Have a Dream” speech. Baldwin’s essay is both a deeply personal message to his nephew and a commentary on racism in America.

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<sup>239</sup> Giulia Heyward, “He Turned ‘I Can’t Breathe’ Into Protest Music,” June 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/arts/music/classical-music-black-lives-matter.html>.

In a paragraph that could have easily been written this year, Baldwin wrote, “neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive [my country and my countrymen], that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.”<sup>240</sup>

Like the Baldwin essay, the preludes are “a reflection on issues of identity and culture, and the cognitive dissonance that arises between the ideals of this country and the reality of country and are a reflection on [Thompson’s] experience in this devastating summer of 2020.”<sup>241</sup>

The titles of the three preludes are *Totentanz*, *Lacrimosa*, and *L’homme agenouillé*.

*Totentanz*, the dance of death, recalls Liszt’s paraphrase on the *Dies irae* and Saint-Saëns’ *Danse macabre*. The prelude opens with a syncopated rhythmic figure in the left hand that permeates the piece and infuses the dance with a bossa nova-like feeling.



Figure 4.1 Thompson, *Totentanz*, mm. 1-6

<sup>240</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), 5.

<sup>241</sup> Joel Thompson, “New Music New Haven #1,” October 30, 2020, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZAT7n9vyfA&t>.

The fifth measure establishes a tension between E-natural and F that permeates the entire set. In measure 58 Thompson introduces a four-note motive that repeats in the following preludes: a long G-flat resolves to F (representing the initials of George Floyd), followed by C and E. The prelude ends with a violent cluster at the low extreme of the piano, played with both forearms.

**Tempo I** ♩ = 108

The musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and shows a melodic line starting with a long G-flat (G4) that resolves to F4, followed by C4 and E4. The lower staff is in bass clef and shows a complex rhythmic pattern with a four-note motive (G-flat, F, C, E) that repeats. The piece ends with a violent cluster at the low extreme of the piano.

Figure 4.2 Thompson, *Totentanz*, m. 58-60

The title of the second prelude, *Lacrimosa*, references a movement of the requiem mass, set by composers including Mozart, Verdi, and Fauré. In contrast to the anger and frustration felt in the first prelude, the second portrays grief and loss. It is built on a two-measure ostinato; after the ostinato is established, Thompson overlays the G-flat-F-C-E from the previous movement above a musical spelling of ‘Ahmaud’ in the middle voice with a combination of German letters and fixed-Do. The first twenty-eight bars of prelude are hushed, starting at *pianississimo* and getting only as loud as *piano* in measure 17 before returning to *pianississimo*.

# Lacrimosa

Numb, yet feeling ♩ = 74

ppp

5

A H M(i) U(i) D

Figure 4.3 Thompson, *Lacrimosa*, mm. 1-8 (lettering added)

In measure 29, after four and a half beats of silence, an anguished arpeggio that also contains the musical spelling of Ahmaud loudly reintroduces the G-flat-F-C-E motive, before once more subsiding into quietude. Two measures of silence transition *attaca* into the third prelude.

27

ff

13

Red.

Figure 4.4 Thompson, *Lacrimosa*, mm. 27-31

*L'homme agenouillé* (“The Kneeling Man”) is an incisive alteration of *L'homme armé* (“The Armed Man”),<sup>242</sup> a French folksong frequently used as a cantus firmus in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. The title is a searing reference to the police officer who killed George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for eight minutes. Thompson uses “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the basis of the prelude, setting the melody atop jazzy harmonies and weaving it through various registers and voices. In the middle, an augmentation of the set’s recurring G-flat to F motive appears in the right hand above the national anthem in the left hand. *L'homme armé* is quoted in the left hand from beat five of measure 30 until the end of measure 32 as the right hands nears the end of the anthem. He stops the anthem’s melody just short of the last word: brave.

Figure 4.5 Thompson, *L'homme agenouillé*, mm. 29-37

The performer can opt to play 16 measures of repeated E’s over interjections of the first prelude’s rhythmic left hand, or skip to the final E, which is held until the sound has completely died away.

<sup>242</sup> Thompson also subversively quotes *L'homme armé* several times in “Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.”

### 4.3.3 Peter Shin

Peter Shin is pursuing a Ph.D. in composition at the University of California, Berkeley and holds degrees from Yale University, the University of Southern California, and the University of Michigan. His website describes his music as a navigation of “national belonging, the co-opting and intermingling of disparate musical vernaculars, and the liminality between two halves of his second-generation Korean-U.S. American identity.” In addition to his piece for the Public Scholars Initiative, he has recently been commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth. His multimedia work “PSA #650+,” which was written to draw attention to the global rise in hate crimes against Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic, was premiered by the Chicago Civic Orchestra in March 2020.

### 4.3.4 *ravel’s miroirs no. 3 but you’re dissociating at your recital*

Peter Shin’s composition was built on a question that he posed to me: what piano pieces did I listen to for comfort or relaxation? From the list I provided, he chose to work with Maurice Ravel’s *Une barque sur l’océan* from *Miroirs*. I recorded parts of *Une barque sur l’océan*, including one excerpt in which I simulated a catastrophic mid-recital meltdown. Shin created an electroacoustic collage that combines my recordings with short clips from recordings of the same piece by famous pianists that he has manipulated by bending pitches, distorting sound, and overlaying multiple recordings on top of each other. At times the piano recordings are distorted to sound like harp or prepared piano. In performance, the pianist imitates or repeats the recorded excerpts and at other times improvises against them. The piano keyboard is turned away from the audience to obscure which sounds are live and which are recorded.

The manipulated recordings make up the first three minutes of the piece, with the pianist playing the same excerpt with a slight delay, before transitioning into rolls of thunder and a downpour of rain. The rain melts into a recording of tumultuous applause, which abruptly cuts off. As the pianist improvises, three recordings of the same excerpt of *Une barque sur l’océan* are played back to back, followed by my recording of the simulated recital disaster. An audible sigh on the electronic track is followed by sounds of ocean waves and seagulls. The noises of speed boats or jet skis are blended into a return of the pitch-distorted Ravel recordings, and snippets of *Oiseaux tristes*, which merge into a recognizable cell phone alarm tone—it has been only a nightmare after all. In his program note, Shin describes the work’s central premise:

Following a budding pianist who suffers from imposter syndrome, the piece is situated in their mental state during a performance of Maurice Ravel’s *Une barque sur l’océan* from *Miroirs*. Exhibiting dissociative symptoms from derealization to amnesia, the pianist pollutes what is regarded as a masterpiece of the Western canon and pits themselves against the recordings of master pianists Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Frederic Chiu, and Abbey Simon, highlighting issues of mental health, failure, purpose, and belong, challenged further by the uncertainties of this year.<sup>243</sup>

#### 4.4 Managing Resources

Setting manageable and realistically attainable goals is important for a successful project. The political pianist should begin by approaching composers with whom a relationship already exists. Start small; it is easier to fund works by two composers than twelve. With a track record of successful commissioning projects, it is easier to expand. I intentionally wrote my proposal for the Public Scholars Initiative to include only two works, requiring a smaller budget than was potentially available so that it would be more likely to win approval.

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<sup>243</sup> Peter Shin, “ravel’s miroirs no. 3 but you’re dissociating at your recital,” unpublished musical score, 2020.



When applying for grants with a specific composer or composers and a concrete project proposal, it is important to make reasonable budget requests. New Music USA, for example, is committed to funding as many smaller grants as possible; between forty and forty-five percent of their awards go to projects with a budget under \$3,000. Expanding beyond solo repertoire to chamber works also increases the number of available funding sources. Chamber Music America provides grants for the composition of works for ensembles of at least two and at most ten musicians and has committed to awarding a majority of their grants “to applicants who apply with ALAANA,<sup>244</sup> women, and gender non-conforming composers.”<sup>245</sup>

For pianists without access to outside funding and on a limited budget, commissioning is still within reach. During the initial coronavirus shutdown in the United States, composer Kimberly Osberg used social media to offer “super cheap” commissions.<sup>246</sup> On Twitter, Osberg offered commissions under one minute for five dollars; twelve dollars for one- to two-minute pieces; and twenty dollars for works of two to three minutes, with the condition that the commissioner post a performance video within three days of receiving the score.<sup>247</sup> The result

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<sup>244</sup> African/Black, Latinx, Asian/South Asian, Arab/Middle Eastern, and Native American.

<sup>245</sup> Chamber Music America, “Classical Commissioning Program,” accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.chamber-music.org/programs/classical/grants/-commissioning-program>.

<sup>246</sup> Tim Diovanni, “Commissions from Quarantine: How Composer Kimberly Osberg is Treating her Cabin Fever,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.dallasnews.com/arts-entertainment/performing-arts/2020/04/20/commissions-from-quarantine-how-composer-kimberly-osberg-is-treating-her-cabin-fever/>.

<sup>247</sup> Kimberly Osberg (@kimpositions), “MUSICIANS: I’m going stir crazy, so I’m selling CHEAP commissions for any instrument now through Monday,” Twitter, March 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/kimpositions/status/1240691898072756224>

was “about 40 short commissions, for solos and duos, from musicians across the United States and Canada, as well as from Germany and Mexico.”<sup>248</sup>

#### **4.5 Commissioning for the Future**

Because of COVID-19, “the lack of any immediate opportunity for performance has made it unlikely that composers will sit down to write the hour-long symphony they’ve been meaning to tackle,”<sup>249</sup> Alex Ross pointed out at the end of June. Musicians have had to adapt to online formats and will have to adapt once again when it finally becomes possible to stage concerts indoors for a live audience. While it is impossible to predict what this will look like, it almost certainly will require some paring-down of audience capacity, ensemble size, and concert length. This creates room to reimagine piano recital programming in ways I will detail in the following chapter, and to direct resources and attention to living composers. Commissioning new music supports composers whose livelihoods have been jeopardized by the pandemic. It can also serve several other purposes: it is a tool for dismantling the predominantly white, male frame of classical music; it advances the work of people who have been historically marginalized in classical music performance; and it can facilitate the expression of viewpoints that simply are not present in the extant literature. Moreover, commissioning new music is a way to commit to an image of classical music as a vibrant, living art form rather than a conservative institution built on replication and not evolution.

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<sup>248</sup> Diovanni, “Commissions from Quarantine.”

<sup>249</sup> Alex Ross, “Musicians and Composers Respond to a Chaotic Moment,” *New Yorker*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/06/musicians-and-composers-respond-to-a-chaotic-moment>.

## Chapter 5: Programming

A pianist's repertoire, particularly in solo recitals and recordings, defines their musical identity. Murray Perahia's recital programming adheres to the prototypical 20th-century format—a chronological offering of Bach, one or two major classical works, and several romantic pieces. Angela Hewitt is known for her interpretations of Bach; Paul Lewis casts himself in the mold of his mentor Alfred Brendel. Yuja Wang is famous for her knuckle-busting performances of virtuoso transcriptions.

Repertoire choices can also represent a pianist's political opinions. In Zimerman's 2009 Los Angeles recital, the all-Polish repertoire of the second half powerfully contextualized his speech. The Kronos Quartet used their "Music for Change: The Banned Countries" program to protest Donald Trump's 2017 travel ban.<sup>250</sup> Igor Levit's 2018 recital at Tanglewood paired Beethoven's Eroica Variations with Schoenberg's "Ode to Napoleon," Op. 41 and Rzewski's "The People United Will Never Be Defeated! variations."<sup>251</sup> Schoenberg's "Ode to Napoleon" was "composed during the Second World War as a protest against tyranny."<sup>252</sup> Rzewski's variations are based on a Chilean protest song, and include an Italian revolutionary song and

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<sup>250</sup> Mark Swed, "Review: In defiance of Trump, Kronos Quartet plays music from banned countries," December 5, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-kronos-banned-countries-review-20181205-story.html>.

<sup>251</sup> Edwards, "Tanglewood performance by Igor Levit, JACK Quartet to highlight notorious demagogues."

<sup>252</sup> Leonard Stein, "Ode to Napoleon," Los Angeles Philharmonic, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/2517/ode-to-napoleon>.

“Hanns Eisler’s anti-fascist ‘Solidaritätslied,’ a reminder that parallels to present threats existed in the past and that it is important to learn from them.”<sup>253</sup>

These examples aside, today’s piano recitals—especially on the most elite stages—generally draw from the same core repertoire. Concerts are planned months if not years in advance, and when the regular season is over, summer festivals start. This seamless cycle of recitals and concerts leaves little opportunity for reflection and experimentation. But with the complete halt of concertizing brought about by the pandemic, and the social upheaval that has spurred organizations and artists to confront systemic racism in our midst, a re-examination of the recital and the piano repertoire is necessary for classical pianism to claim relevance in the post-pandemic landscape.

## 5.1 The Piano Recital: History and Trends

What we now recognize as the modern piano recital is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of classical music. “Present-day notions of the concert presume the existence of a concert repertory. But much of the music played in public on the piano, for much of its history, was not specifically for concerts, or even specifically for the piano.”<sup>254</sup> As late as the mid-nineteenth century, concerts with piano involved were often a potpourri of soloists and ensembles, original compositions and improvisations. “Even Chopin, in his first public appearance in Vienna in 1829, had to share the billing with an orchestra, a singer, and a

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<sup>253</sup> Stephen Drury, *Rzewski: The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* New Albion Records, 1994, liner notes.

<sup>254</sup> James Parakilas, Stephen Zank et al, “The Concert and the Virtuoso,” in *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 185.

ballet.”<sup>255</sup> These mixed concerts often contained combinations that seem unthinkable to today’s pianists. In 1835, Liszt performed “a rather bizarre version of Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata: the first movement was presented in an orchestral version” and Liszt played the final two movements solo.<sup>256</sup> Mixed format concerts were gradually displaced by the solo recital during the latter half of the 19th century. The solo recital format was pioneered by Liszt, who began “reducing the number and prominence of assisting musicians in his concerts” in 1837.<sup>257</sup>

Alfred Brendel lumped modern-day piano recitals into two broad categories: the old-fashioned “menu” recital and the recital that “proceeds in a roughly historical order.”<sup>258</sup> The chronological order program (Zank calls it the “conservatory” model) emerged in the 1870s out of an attempt to achieve “balance” and “coherence,” and was popularized by Hans von Bülow.<sup>259</sup> The menu format combines shorter works (appetizers, salads, and puddings) with one or more main courses. A third category of recital consists of works by only one composer; while this is to be expected in years like 2010, when Chopin and Schumann recitals overtook the stage, pianists like Andras Schiff often take the concept to marathon extremes. During the 2012-13 season, Schiff performed the complete Well-Tempered Clavier, all of the French and English Suites, the Partitas, the Goldberg Variations, and the keyboard concertos. In 2009, he completed his Beethoven sonatas cycle in Los Angeles with the last six sonatas spread across two programs just

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<sup>255</sup> Gould, John. “What Did They Play?: The Changing Repertoire of the Piano Recital from the Beginnings to 1980.” *The Musical Times* 146, no. 1893 (2005): 62, doi:10.2307/30044125.

<sup>256</sup> Parakilas, Zank, et al, 191.

<sup>257</sup> Parakilas, Zank, et al, 194.

<sup>258</sup> Alfred Brendel, “The Pianist and the Program,” *New York Review of Books*, November 22, 1990, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/11/22/the-pianist-and-the-program/>.

<sup>259</sup> Gould, “What Did They Play?” 69.

days apart (each played without intermission). Numerous pianists over the years have played the complete Beethoven sonatas in recital, including recent cycles by Jonathan Biss and Daniel Barenboim.

The League of American Orchestras has tracked orchestral repertoire every season since 1970. In 2012-13, the most recent season for which data is available on its website, the vast majority of performances excluded women and non-white composers. Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms were far and away the most frequently played composers. Although there is no analogous current database of piano recital repertoire, the situation is likely the same. John Gould examined repertoire from 280 piano recitals from before 1860 until 1980 and shows that just eleven composers “accounted for well over 60 percent” of concert appearances.<sup>260</sup>

A more current sample can be found Carnegie Hall’s 2020-21 piano recital lineup, which features recitals by Denis Matsuev, Andras Schiff, Emanuel Ax, Murray Perahia, Evgeny Kissin, and Maurizio Pollini, among others—all playing repertoire by the dozen or so composers most central to the repertoire. The only work by a woman composer to be found is Gabriela Montero’s *Scenes from Childhood*—included as a part of Montero’s own recital program. This uniformity is replicated every season in concert halls around the world. As Piotr Anderszewski told “Humans of New York” in 2016:

There is a lot of pressure when you perform at Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall. People pay for those tickets and you must respect your audience. If you’re piloting a Boeing 777 with four hundred people on board, you aren’t going to try new maneuvers. You aren’t going to have fun or experiment. You don’t have time to stay in your dreams or ideas.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Gould, 66.

<sup>261</sup> Humans of New York, Facebook photo, March 1, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735/1197747470299351>.

Whether the pressure Anderszewski describes comes from audiences and critics, or is simply internal, the result is a mostly homogenous concert circuit. The repertoire emphasized by educational institutions and international piano competitions reinforces this uniformity.

## **5.2 Repertoire Requirements: Constraints in the Elite Piano World**

In addition to concert programming, repertoire requirements at elite competitions and conservatories signify what music is worthy of attention and performance. Piano competitions named for specific composers naturally place a large emphasis on those composers' works; the international Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Liszt, and Beethoven piano competitions require their namesakes' works to various degrees. While the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw exclusively demands Chopin works, the International Tchaikovsky Competition only requires a work by Tchaikovsky in the concerto finals and the qualifying video. However, in round one the Tchaikovsky also prescribes a prelude and fugue by Bach; a classical sonata by either Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven or Clementi; and one etude each by Chopin, Liszt, and Rachmaninoff. The second round requires one work by any of a dozen male Russian composers. Notably, contestants are not required to play any works from the 21st or 20th centuries, the era most likely to include a diverse array of composers.

The Tchaikovsky Competition is by no means an outlier. The repertoire posted on the Cleveland International Piano Competition's website requires a Chopin etude and a sonata by Mozart, Haydn, or Beethoven in its first two rounds; the semi-final round must contain a work by Chopin, Brahms, Schubert, or Robert Schumann. While the Van Cliburn competition no longer sets any repertoire requirements at all, their required commissions have been overwhelmingly white and male, as discussed in the previous chapter. The 2018 Honens Competition required a

few non-standard works across two chamber music recitals, including the Corigliano Sonata for violin and piano, songs by Rimsky-Korsakov and Medtner and works for piano and winds by Jean Françaix, Jean Cartan, and Albert Roussel. Despite emphasizing that “a Complete Artist explores both the pivotal works of the piano literature and the music of our time,”<sup>262</sup> only one woman was represented in the repertoire choices of the semi-finalists.

Even at competitions that do not set repertoire requirements, the necessity of picking pieces strategically to work for multiple competitions means that most competitors will not venture outside of the standard literature. Thus, international piano competitions are awash with familiar monuments—Stravinsky’s “Petrouchka,” Ravel’s *Gaspard de la Nuit*, Liszt’s Sonata in B minor—and even contemporary repertoire selections tend to be familiar standards.

### **5.2.1 Competition Programming at The Cliburn**

The Van Cliburn competition is a microcosm of this programming trend. The Cliburn has published every year of its program books online, and it touts itself as one of the most prestigious international competitions (the Cliburn recently doubled its prize money for 2021 to \$100,000 for the gold medal). In 2017, the most recent Cliburn competition, only one of the thirty competitors programmed a work by a woman (one prelude from Lera Auerbach’s 24 Preludes, Op. 41) in any of their three proposed solo recitals. By comparison, seven competitors offered

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<sup>262</sup> “Rules and Application Manual for Pianists – 2018 Honens Prize for Piano,” Honens, [http://honens.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/010218\\_HONENS\\_2018\\_PIANIST\\_MANUAL\\_v7.pdf](http://honens.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/010218_HONENS_2018_PIANIST_MANUAL_v7.pdf)



Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, five programmed Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, and each of Prokofiev's last three sonatas was programmed by at least three competitors.<sup>263</sup>

Intriguingly, competitors in the first four editions of the Cliburn listed significantly more contemporary music in addition to the commissioned work. While many of those were by composers who are well known today—such as Leon Kirchner, Norman Dello Joio, Benjamin Lees, and Roy Harris—many of the contestants offered works by composers who have disappeared into obscurity.

The program book from the fourth edition in 1973<sup>264</sup> shows that contestants offered contemporary works from, among others, three Korean composers; two Japanese composers; two composers from Taiwan and Hong Kong; and one composer each from Bulgaria, Cuba, Uruguay, and Greece. Although the program book does not contain the rules of the competition, that each contestant programmed one work by a composer of their own nationality suggests that this was a requirement rather than a coincidence. The 1969 competition<sup>265</sup> had fewer international contestants, and each of them also offered a work by a composer from their own country in their second-round programs. The American competitors all offered one contemporary work by an American composer in addition to the commissioned work by Norman Dello Joio in the first round.

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<sup>263</sup> Since 1993, the first year that competitors were given completely free choice of programming aside from the commissioned work, Rachmaninov's Piano Sonata No. 2 has been programmed 39 times, Liszt's Sonata in B minor 33 times, and *Gaspard de la Nuit* 31 times. No other works by women were programmed aside from the obligatory commissioned pieces and the Auerbach prelude.

<sup>264</sup> The Cliburn, "Fourth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Program Book (1973)," Issuu, accessed July 9, 2020, [https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/4th\\_\\_1973\\_\\_program\\_book](https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/4th__1973__program_book).

<sup>265</sup> The Cliburn, "Third Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Program Book (1969)," Issuu, accessed July 9, 2020, [https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/3rd\\_\\_1969\\_\\_program\\_book/34](https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/3rd__1969__program_book/34).

A requirement for contestants to play music from their respective countries of origin would rightly be criticized as tokenism today.<sup>266</sup> The requirement is also a limitation insofar as it implies, for example, that only competitors from Japan have a special claim to playing Japanese music. This reinforces the pernicious idea that musicians have an affinity for playing music from “their” culture that they cannot showcase with other repertoire and lack the ability to interpret music from composers of other nationalities. It also echoes 1997 Cliburn gold medalist Jon Nakamatsu’s experience at a competition in 1990, when “a well-renowned jury member told [him] that Japanese people do not know how to play Chopin and that [he] should find composers that speak more clearly to [his] culture.”<sup>267</sup>

By the time of the fifth edition in 1977, the national composer requirement had been eliminated and there was a smaller proportion of contemporary music. Notably, one competitor offered Grazyna Bacewicz’s Piano Sonata No. 2, the first time a female composer was listed.<sup>268</sup> The sixth edition program book<sup>269</sup> was the first to list the repertoire rules, which by that time were similar to many other modern competitions: a major work by Bach; a classical sonata by Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven; a major work by Chopin; two etudes (one by Chopin) or the

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<sup>266</sup> The Cliburn also printed things that would be considered wildly inappropriate by today’s standards. Until the 2005 edition, the program book included each contestant’s home address. Several editions in the ‘70s and ‘80s also noted the contestant’s marital status in their biography. The options were married or single, defaulting to heteronormative standards at a time when same-sex relationships were still criminalized in Texas and same-sex marriage would not be legal for several decades.

<sup>267</sup> Jon Nakamatsu, “Jon Nakamatsu’s ‘Loser’s Club’” (speech, Fifth International Van Cliburn Competition for Outstanding Amateurs, Fort Worth, TX, 2007). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5smz7gycqQ>.

<sup>268</sup> The Cliburn, “Fifth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Program Book (1977), Issuu, accessed July 9, 2020, [https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/5th\\_\\_1977\\_\\_competition\\_\\_cropped\\_](https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/5th__1977__competition__cropped_).

<sup>269</sup> The Cliburn, “Sixth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Program Book (1981), Issuu, accessed July 9, 2020, [https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/6th\\_\\_1981\\_\\_program\\_book](https://issuu.com/cliburn/docs/6th__1981__program_book).

Prokofiev or Schumann Toccata; and a work representing the 20th century selected from a list of twenty-one composers, all men.

It is understandable that competitors may be wary of programming a piece that is likely new to most of the jury. Pianists may not feel they have the time to learn a large-scale non-standard work that would have limited competitive use. And international competitions, particularly those livestreamed across the internet, do not welcome innovation or a first stab at a fresh piece.

### **5.2.2 Conservatory Curriculums**

At conservatories, repertoire pressures are compounded by audition requirements. A teacher preparing students to compete in the Cliburn or Tchaikovsky must first ensure that their repertoire meets those requirements. But even students who do not compete internationally but wish to acquire graduate degrees must still pick their repertoire with specific requirements in mind. The repertoire required for undergraduate and graduate degrees in piano reinforces the emphasis on the standard literature.

For a Bachelor or Master of Music audition, the Juilliard School requires a prelude and fugue by Bach; a classical sonata by Beethoven or from a list of acceptable Haydn, Mozart, or Schubert sonatas; a substantial composition by Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Liszt, or Mendelssohn; one etude by Chopin; and one contrasting work by any composer. For Doctor of Musical Arts auditions Juilliard requires one sonata from a list of Beethoven or Schubert, one substantial work by the same romantic era composers, and one work written in the late 19th or early 20th century. The repertoire at elite music schools across North America adhere to this basic format. The Curtis Institute, Peabody Institute, Yale School of Music, New England

Conservatory, and others all prioritize J.S. Bach and the most central classical and romantic composers in their requirements. Varying degrees of freedom are allowed in the 20th- and 21st-century repertoire selections.

This is not to say that institutions and competitions should abandon their requirements entirely. There are important and legitimate reasons to assess a pianist's ability in a variety of styles and the touchstones of the literature. But it is also impossible to feign confusion about why classical piano remains so unrepresentative. In July 2020, the *New York Times* asked Black artists what changes they would like to see in classical music; conductor Roderick Cox answered:

I would like changes to be made in how we train musicians in conservatories and universities. A lot of our thinking, and our perceptions of what's good music, becomes indoctrinated at that stage. I say this because even though I'm a person of color, I was guilty of not being accepting of new voices and styles outside of Beethoven, Schumann, all the usual music of the past ... If students learn about composers like William Grant Still or Florence Price — and their approaches to making music — then they will become more versatile. And we will see that change taking place in our programming; schools won't just be producing conductors who want to do Wagner, Strauss and Mahler. I love these composers. But there are more voices to hear.<sup>270</sup>

When institutions and competitions set the terms of what repertoire is essential for making a career as a musician, pianists—who, unlike orchestra musicians, have much more control over their repertoire selections—understandably devote more time to learning and performing works that they believe will have the most utility for their career.

While it seems unlikely that competitions and conservatories will rapidly overhaul their repertoire requirements, the events of 2020 have already spurred some changes. Some music

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<sup>270</sup> Zachary Woolfe and Joshua Barone, “Black Artists on How to Change Classical Music,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/arts/music/black-classical-music-opera.html>.

schools have committed to including more music by women and composers of color in their concerts and curriculum; the Manhattan School of Music was the first to promise that every concert of its 2020-21 season would “feature work by African American creators or those from the African diaspora.”<sup>271</sup> Other music schools, including Yale and the University of Southern California, have made similar but more vague commitments to inclusivity in their concert programming. This is progress, although it is too early to tell if these changes will be lasting or simply fade from the forefront as the current crises fade from the headlines. It will likely fall to individual musicians and music students to hold their institutions responsible for establishing and continuing these changes.

### 5.3 Representative Programming

The two strategies outlined in the previous chapter on commissioning can also be applied to programming choices. Representative programming expands the repertoire beyond the white male fixtures that dominate concert halls today. This can have a powerful impact on listeners, and especially on young musicians. Joel Thompson told the *New York Times* that as an undergraduate student, “I didn’t think it was really possible for me to do classical music. But I remember, I went to my first Atlanta Symphony Orchestra concert. They played Alvin Singleton’s ‘PraiseMaker,’ and it was the first time I heard classical music from a Black composer. That’s when I sort of figured it was possible.”<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Manhattan School of Music, “#BlackLivesMatter,” May 31, 2020, <https://www.msmnyc.edu/news/blacklivesmatter/>.

<sup>272</sup> Heyward, “He Turned ‘I Can’t Breathe’ Into Protest Music.”

Recent conversations about racism and racial justice have accelerated efforts to program more works by composers of color. The internet makes it easier than ever for pianists to find these works. The Institute for Composer Diversity, operated by the State University of New York at Fredonia's School of Music, runs a database of works "by composers from historically underrepresented genders, racial, ethnic, and cultural heritages, and sexual orientations as well as disabled composers."<sup>273</sup> The database is searchable by demographic criteria, genre, and instrumentation. Music by Black Composers also maintains directories of living and historic composers, although the website's focus is primarily on violin repertoire.

Representative programming must also address the historic marginalization of women composers. Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn are far enough in the past that the exclusion of women from composition careers may seem like an anachronism. But classical music still reinforces the idea that composing is a male pursuit, even in academia. "Since few music anthologies include works by women composers, their music is often excluded from classroom analysis and the perception is that women write works that are not as interesting or valuable in comparison to those of their male counterparts."<sup>274</sup> Practitioners can address this imbalance through concert programming. Sarah Cahill has created and presented a "ritual installation and communal feminist immersive listening experience" called "The Future is Female," a marathon performance of four to seven hours of music all written by women.<sup>275</sup> In

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<sup>273</sup> Institute for Composer Diversity, "About," accessed Aug. 22, 2020, <https://www.composerdiversity.com/about>.

<sup>274</sup> Prevost and Francis, "Teaching Silence in the Twenty-First Century," 646.

<sup>275</sup> Sarah Cahill, "Concert Programs," accessed Aug. 18, 2020, <http://sarahcahill.com/concert-programs/>.

2019, Lara Downes toured with a recital called “Holes in the Sky,” featuring only music by women composers.

Concerts of works by only composers of a specific underrepresented group are not the only remedy for the imbalances in performance practice. Such programs may run the risk of reinforcing the idea that works by certain types of composers are novelties. There is something paradoxical about attempting to integrate the work of historically excluded composers by playing these works in a separate concert. Moreover, one-off concerts do not necessarily reach the broadest possible audience. Normalizing the inclusion of women and people of color in the concert hall must be a long-term project.

James Conlon’s “Recovered Voices” project is a successful model of representative programming. Conlon has used his prominence as a conductor to advocate for the performance of lost and overlooked works by Jewish composers and others who were suppressed, banned, and killed by the Nazis. Conlon describes his three-pronged approach to this music as a consideration of moral, historical, and artistic factors:

Undoing injustice, when one can, is a moral mandate for all citizens of a civilized world. We cannot restore to these composers their lost lives. We can, however, return the gift that would mean more to them than any other: to play their music. Our perspectives on the history of twentieth century classical music are incomplete because an enormous quantity of works has remained unplayed, and the lives of its composers largely ignored ... Neither moral nor historical considerations would be reason enough for revival were it not for the artistic quality of what was lost. This cannot be judged by a single hearing of tokenistic or uncommitted performances. Judgments ... can only be made after those performing and listening over the course of years have given the spirit of that era sufficient time to be fully digested.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> James Conlon, “What Happens When Art Collides with its Society,” Lecture, Visions and Voices: The USC Arts and Humanities Initiative, Los Angeles, October 13, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NE8s7TaKVKs>.

Although the intentional destruction of art and music by the Nazi regime occurred on an unprecedented and incomparable scale, Conlon's strategy is equally applicable to the compositions of composers who were marginalized or excluded because of sexism and racism. Just as Conlon champions the works of Alexander Zemlinsky, Viktor Ullmann, Pavel Haas, and others, the political pianist can champion the work of any number of unjustly under-played composers.

#### **5.4 Ideological Programming**

Ideological programming centers music with specific political messages or themes. The performer must clearly identify these messages, with contextual notes printed or spoken from the stage if necessary. Pianists must select repertoire carefully to ensure they do not misrepresent the composer's intention or meaning. Political messages have often been erroneously attributed to some of the most iconic works in the piano literature.

Much ink has been spilled attempting to paint Chopin's music as coded nationalism, but such claims tend to be conjecture based on artistic embellishment rather than actual evidence. In a reply to a question from Liszt after Chopin's death, Chopin's student and friend Jane Stirling wrote that he "was never involved in any of his country's political events."<sup>277</sup> Despite this, "Schumann was one of the first overtly to comment on the political overtones of Chopin's mazurkas,"<sup>278</sup> calling Chopin's music "cannons buried in flowers" and naming the composer "a

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<sup>277</sup> Alan Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times* (New York: Picador, 2018), 675.

<sup>278</sup> Jeffrey Kalberg, "Hearing Poland: Chopin and Nationalism" in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, ed. R. Larry Todd (New York: Routledge, 2004), 249.



dangerous enemy” of “the mighty autocratic monarch of the north.”<sup>279</sup> The “Revolutionary” Etude, Op. 10, No. 12, has long been associated with the Warsaw Uprising even though “no such association existed in the minds of its first hearers” and the nickname “was not attached to the Study until after Chopin’s death.”<sup>280</sup>

The myth of Chopin’s works as subtle nods towards Polish independence includes suggestions that the second Ballade represented a “Polish pilgrim, separated from his or her homeland after the ‘November Uprising’” or that (as Schumann claimed) it was a representation of a poem by Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz.<sup>281</sup> Walker is confident that any attempt to link Chopin’s ballades to Mickiewicz’s poems “dooms these unique musical structures [to be] stretched out of shape to fit whatever story line the poet happens to be weaving.”<sup>282</sup> Indeed, although Chopin and Mickiewicz ran in the same Parisian social circles and Chopin was familiar with his poems, there was apparently no great affection between the two; Mickiewicz “long maintained that [author George Sand’s] liaison with Chopin was slowly killing her.”<sup>283</sup>

“Whether Chopin actually did intend the Ballade to be heard politically is another question,” Kalberg writes. “The actual ‘truth’ is not as important as the resultant diffusion of a politically inspired story.”<sup>284</sup> As far as understanding the context and reception of Chopin’s

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<sup>279</sup> Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, trans. Fanny Raymond Ritter (London: William Reeves, 1977), 207, [https://books.google.ca/books/about/Music\\_and\\_musicians\\_essays\\_and\\_criticism.html](https://books.google.ca/books/about/Music_and_musicians_essays_and_criticism.html).

<sup>280</sup> Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times*, 326-27.

<sup>281</sup> Kalberg, “Hearing Poland,” 252.

<sup>282</sup> Walker, 13.

<sup>283</sup> Walker, 512.

<sup>284</sup> Kalberg, 253.

music in 19th century society, this may be correct. For the political pianist, however, verifiable truth must be the foundation of political programming

Likewise, it would be a mistake to program one of Prokofiev's "War Sonatas" as part of an anti-war concert; that title is not used by Russian musicologists and, while the pieces are potentially reflective of "an anxiety concordant with the political tensions of the time,"<sup>285</sup> they offer no explicit viewpoint. Although many have speculated about the meaning behind the sonatas, there is no evidence to support, for example, Boris Berman's theory that the end of World War II inspired the eighth sonata's "victorious coda of the finale and the general reflective mood of the first movement."<sup>286</sup>

However, even after setting aside this misinterpreted music, there is still a significant amount of repertoire that explicitly references specific political issues. Many of these works touch on similar themes. The following sections briefly discuss representative examples of ideological repertoire in three broad thematic areas: music protesting states and state violence, anti-war music, and music associated with social movements.

#### **5.4.1 Responses to States and State Violence**

Leoš Janáček's *I. X. 1905* (originally titled *From the Street, 1st October 1905*) is one of the earliest explicitly political programmatic piano works. Each movement depicts the events of October 1st and 2nd, 1905 in the Moravian town of Brno. Czech residents were demanding the establishment of a Czech university, which was opposed by German political parties and the

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<sup>285</sup> Boris Berman, *Prokofiev's Piano Sonatas: A Guide for the Listener and the Performer* (Yale University Press, 2008), 169, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npc15.12](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npc15.12).

<sup>286</sup> Berman, *Prokofiev's Piano Sonatas*, 169.

town's German majority.<sup>287</sup> When German residents organized a protest on October 1, Czechs held a counter-protest, which Janáček himself attended. On October 2, the German military “intervened against a Czech demonstration which was already disbanding,” and a twenty-year-old Czech worker was stabbed and died two days later. *I. X. 1905* “expressed [Janáček’s] disapproval of the unjust and violent death of the young laborer.”<sup>288</sup> In 1924, Janáček wrote a description, at the publisher’s request, for the first edition. “The white marble of the steps of the Besednium in Brno. The ordinary laborer Frantisek Pavlik falls, stained with blood. He came merely to champion higher learning and has been slain by cruel murderers.”<sup>289</sup> The first movement, “The Presentiment,” portrays the chaos and intensity of the protest. The second movement, “The Death,” is a funeral march—but the typical funeral march dotted rhythm is displaced from the downbeat in each measure by a sixteenth rest, giving the movement a strangely ungrounded atmosphere.

Turkish pianist-composer Fazil Say’s sonata for piano *Gezi Park 2* is thematically similar to *I. X. 1905*. Although it differs from *I. X. 1905* in structure—its four movements follow the more traditional sonata form—it also commemorates the death of a protestor at the hands of government forces. The sonata is the middle piece in a trilogy of works concerning protests against the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan at Gezi Park in Istanbul on May 31, June 1, and June 2, 2013. *Gezi Park 1* is a concerto for two pianos and orchestra, and *Gezi Park 3* is a “wordless song” for mezzosoprano, piano and chamber orchestra. *Gezi Park 2* is thus the most feasible for

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<sup>287</sup> Jiří Zahrádka, trans. Sarah Peters-Gráfová, “1. X. 1905: The Myth and the Reality Surrounding the Work that Janacek Destroyed,” in *Janáček: I. X. 1905* (Prague: Bärenreiter Praha, 2005), vii.

<sup>288</sup> Zahrádka, viii.

<sup>289</sup> Zahrádka, x-xi.

performance by solo pianist. Like Janáček's sonata, each movement of Gezi Park 2 has a title that describes events at the protest. The first movement references slogans from the protest, and the score requires the performer to execute glissandos on the piano strings and also mute strings with one hand to create the effect of the saz, a Turkish guitar-like instrument.<sup>290</sup> The four movements are titled *Nights of resistance on the streets of Istanbul*; *The silence of the gas cloud*; *On the killing of the innocent child Berkin Elvan*; and *Hope is always in our hearts*. Say provides the following inscription above the third movement:

14-year-old Berkin Elvan, an innocent child, was shot by police on his way to the shop to buy bread. Berkin remained in a coma for 269 days and died on 14 March 2014. He weighed only 16 kilos when he died; his funeral in Istanbul was attended by 500,000 people.<sup>291</sup>

While Gezi Park 2 and *I. X. 1905* each respond to one specific event and memorialize one specific individual, pianist-composer Gabriela Montero's one-movement piano concerto *Ex Patria* is a protest against large scale state-sponsored violence. Montero wrote the piece "in 2011 to honor the 19,336 victims of homicide that year in Venezuela."<sup>292</sup> She conceived of the work as an act of dissent and protest against Hugo Chávez's regime. Montero was the recipient of the 2018 Beethovenpreis for her work as an advocate for the Venezuelan people.

Jerome Kitzke's 2018 *A Lament and Cry for These United States* is scored for piano and oboe/English horn, and requires both performers to also speak, shout, and percuss with tom toms. Kitzke conceptualized the work after the 2016 election of Donald Trump, and it was written as a

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<sup>290</sup> This technique is also used in Say's better-known work "Black Earth."

<sup>291</sup> Fazil Say, *Gezi Park 2: Sonata for piano, Op. 52* (New York: Schott, 2016), 24.

<sup>292</sup> Stephen Raskauskas, "How Gabriela Montero Uses the Piano for Political Protest," *WFMT*, Aug. 24, 2015, <https://www.wfmt.com/2015/08/24/how-gabriela-montero-uses-the-piano-for-political-protest/>.

way for Kitzke to “express [his] concerns about what feels to be another dark time in American history.”<sup>293</sup> Its five movements are The Martial Instinct; A Lament; Soiling The Ground of Justice; And Cry; and I will Come Out and Tell You What Time of Night It Is. The final movement takes its title from Sojourner Truth’s speech at the Fourth National Women’s Rights Convention in 1853.

Tomeka Reid’s “Lamenting G.F., A.A., B.T., T.M.” premiered in an online Bang on a Can concert in July 2020. The piece translates into pitches the initials of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, four Black Americans killed in 2020, as well as the letters B, L, and M for Black Lives Matter.<sup>294</sup> Floyd, Taylor, and McDade were killed by on-duty police; while out for a jog, Arbery was shot by a retired police detective and his son.

#### **5.4.2 Anti-war Music**

Anti-war music is a distinctly 20th-century phenomenon. Although there are famous examples of classical music that obliquely reference the impacts of war, they tend to be personal rather than political statements. Perhaps the most famous is Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 81a, commonly known to as “Les Adieux.” The first movement, “Das lebewohl” (The Farewell), was written as Beethoven’s friend and patron Archduke Rudolf fled Vienna in the days before Napoleon’s army attacked and occupied the city.<sup>295</sup> But the sonata makes no

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<sup>293</sup> Jerome Kitzke, *A Lament and Cry for These United States* (New York: PeerMusic, 2018).

<sup>294</sup> Ross, “Musicians and Composers Respond to a Chaotic Moment.”

<sup>295</sup> Stewart Gordon, *Beethoven’s 32 Piano Sonatas: A Handbook for Performers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 219.

mention of the bombardment of Vienna, and its other two movements (“The Absence” and “The Return”) are also related only to Archduke Rudolf.

Composers wrote very little anti-war music prior to World War II; before the twentieth-century, war was portrayed as a “noble, heroic pursuit.”<sup>296</sup> Music that advocated for peace or memorialized the war dead came about only in the aftermath of World War I.<sup>297</sup> The most famous instance of this in the piano repertoire is Maurice Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin*; each of its six movements is dedicated to a soldier killed during World War I, including the Toccata, which was dedicated to Captain Joseph de Marliave—the husband of pianist Marguerite Long, who premiered the work.<sup>298</sup> Arnold contends that just as World War I marked a shift from the artistic vision of war as a “noble, heroic pursuit,” World War II was the last time that American composers applied their talents to supporting the war effort. Copland and Barber were among the composers who had written works to support the war effort, often through commissions from government agencies.<sup>299</sup> However, as the Vietnam War dragged on and public opinion of it soured, American composers increasingly produced anti-war music. “American composers wrote over sixty war-related art compositions in the nine years from 1966 to 1974,”<sup>300</sup> eclipsing the

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<sup>296</sup> Ben Arnold, “War Music and the American Composer during the Vietnam Era,” *Musical Quarterly*, 75, No. 3 (1991): 316, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/742053>.

<sup>297</sup> Arnold, 316.

<sup>298</sup> Jillian Rogers, “Mourning at the Piano: Marguerite Long, Maurice Ravel, and the Performance of Grief in Interwar France,” *Transposition*: 4, <https://journals.openedition.org/transposition/pdf/739>.

<sup>299</sup> Arnold, 316-17.

<sup>300</sup> Arnold, 318.

number of war-related works written in America over the previous twenty years by Arnold's count.<sup>301</sup>

Arnold's list of Vietnam-era war music contains only a few works suitable for solo or collaborative pianists. Several art song cycles were written in the late sixties, including Ned Rorem's *War Scenes* of 1969 for baritone and piano and Elie Siegmeister's *The Face of War*, a set of five songs written with Langston Hughes. Donald Lybbert's 1967 *Lines for the Fallen*, for soprano and two pianos tuned a quartertone apart (probably inspired by Charles Ives' *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces for Two Pianos*), requires special preparation. Critically, however, all these works invoke emotions and images of the Vietnam War without explicitly protesting the war itself. In spirit, they may have more in common with the music written after World War I than with the protest songs by the day's popular singers and musicians.

Protest music written during the Iraq War is often more specific. As noted in the previous chapter, the Iraq War was the catalyst for Sarah Cahill's commissioning project "A Sweeter Music." Frederic Rzewski, who contributed *Peace Dances* to the project, wrote *Stop the War! (Mile 61)* at the onset of the Iraq War, in March 2003. *Stop the War!* is written for speaking pianist and requires the pianist to drum on the keyboard lid and under the keyboard. The only words the pianist speaks ("in the language of the country of performance," per Rzewski's note)

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<sup>301</sup> One major caveat is that Arnold's study, while useful for understanding Vietnam-era musical sentiment in comparison to the prior wars, provides no explanation of what was counted as war-related music from World War II and most likely fails to account for Jewish and Holocaust-related music. See Nick Strimple, "Music as Resistance," in *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis* (Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

for the duration of the piece are “stop the war,” until the very last measure, when the pianist finishes ominously with “or it will stop us.”<sup>302</sup>

### 5.4.3 Social Movements

Frederic Rzewski has the most well-known oeuvre of political and politically-inspired music of any living classical composer, although he has said he does not think of himself as “an especially political composer.”<sup>303</sup> In addition to composing anti-war music, he also has taken inspiration from social movements, labor and union songs, and populist slogans. Rzewski’s monumental *36 Variations on ‘The People United Will Never Be Defeated!’* is a pianistic Everest and has become a mainstay in piano recitals. The variations derive their theme from Sergio Ortega’s song “¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!”, which “became the anthem of [Chilean President Salvador] Allende’s Unidad Popular.”<sup>304</sup>

Rzewski’s Four North American Ballads each quote and then elaborate upon an American protest song; the four are “Dreadful Memories,” “Which Side Are You On?” “Down by The Riverside,” and “The Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.” “The texts of the quoted folk songs reflect socio-economic conditions in the lives of the American working class” as well as

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<sup>302</sup> Frederic Rzewski, *The Road, Part 8: The Big Day Arrives* (Brussels: Sound Pool Music, 2003).

<sup>303</sup> Frederic Rzewski, *Non Sequiturs: Writings & Lectures on Improvisation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Köln: MusikTexte, 2007), 184.

<sup>304</sup> John Henken, “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!” Los Angeles Philharmonic, accessed August 9, 2020, <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/5368/the-people-united-will-never-be-defeated>.



Rzewski's socialist politics.<sup>305</sup> The first two ballads come from the coal mining community in Harlan County, Kentucky. "Down By The Riverside," on the other hand, is a traditional spiritual that was later used during protests against the Vietnam War.<sup>306</sup> "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues" returns to the labor movement, and is famous for its use of alternating black and white key clusters of increasing size that must ultimately be played with the forearms.

Rzewski's 2016 set *Songs of Insurrection* also works with melodies from global and historical protest movements of the United States, Europe, and Asia. In performance, the entire piece takes over an hour. Rzewski asks the performer to knock on the piano, as in *Stop the War!* and offers several points of optional improvisation—as long as everything, including the decision *not* to improvise, is unplanned.

Closely linked with Rzewski is his friend Cornelius Cardew, an English composer who early in his career worked with Stockhausen. Later, Cardew rejected serialism and the European avant-garde in favor of improvisation.<sup>307</sup> Cardew's politics became a critical part of his music, some of which he called "socialist piano music;"<sup>308</sup> in 1972, he disavowed his earlier works and the "bourgeois idealistic conception" of art.

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<sup>305</sup> Michael Zuraw, "From Ideology into Sound: Frederic Rzewski's 'North American Ballads' and Other Piano Music from the 1970s" DMA diss. (Rice University, 2003), 64-5, <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/18587>.

<sup>306</sup> As a solo piece, "Down By The Riverside" can also be categorized as an anti-war work, but when taken as part of the whole set, it is more easily understood as music inspired by social movements.

<sup>307</sup> T.D. Taylor, "Moving in Decency: The Music and Radical Politics of Cornelius Cardew," *Music and Letters* 79, no. 4 (Nov. 1, 1998): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/79.4.555>.

<sup>308</sup> Cornelius Cardew, "Thälmann Variations," Matchless Records, 1986, compact disc, liner notes.

Like Rzewski, Cardew incorporated songs from social movements into his piano music, and their stylistic approaches to the piano are similar. Among Cardew's "socialist" piano works are *Piano Album 1973*, *Thälmann Variations* (1974), and *We Sing for the Future! Piano Album 1973* is in ten movements, which are based on music from China, Ireland, "and other movements drawing on or praising Mao Tse-Tung."<sup>309</sup> Cardew wrote that he chose music from China because he viewed it as "the most advanced socialist country in the world," and selected music from Ireland out of respect for its people's "heroic efforts to achieve liberation from the British colonial yoke."<sup>310</sup>

Cardew composed *Thälmann Variations* thirty years after the execution at Buchenwald concentration camp of Ernst Thälmann, who was secretary of the German Communist Party from 1927 to 1933. The variations, grouped into three large sections, are based on the melody of the Thälmann Song, "which is still popular today in the German Workers' movement."<sup>311</sup> The variations are organized into three parts. Cardew also weaves in a melody by Hanns Eisler, which he described as "a warning to the German working-class,"<sup>312</sup> as well as a song by Charles Koechlin called "Let's Free Thälmann."

*We Sing for the Future!* opens with a simple statement of the titular song that soon erupts into a flurry of motion. Cardew wrote that "the song is for youth, who face bleak prospects in a world dominated by imperialism, and whose aspirations can only be realized through the victory

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<sup>309</sup> Taylor, "Moving in Decency."

<sup>310</sup> Cornelius Cardew, quoted in Taylor, "The Music and Radical Politics of Cornelius Cardew."

<sup>311</sup> John Tillbury, "Cornelius Cardew – We Sing For The Future!" New Albion Records, Inc., accessed August 18, 2020, <http://www.newalbion.com/blog/-cornelius-cardew-we-sing-for-the-future-na116cd>.

<sup>312</sup> Cardew, "Thälmann Variations," compact disc liner notes.

of revolution and socialism. In the framework of a solo piano piece lasting about 12 minutes, something of this great struggle is conveyed.”<sup>313</sup> Cardew’s “interest in English musical traditions is demonstrated in the opening of *We Sing For The Future*, reminiscent of the beginning of a set of variations by William Byrd or John Bull from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book.”<sup>314</sup> To Rzewski, the *Thälmann Variations* and *We Sing for the Future* attempt to fuse “the great models of the past, notably Beethoven ... combined with different folk-based traditions and ... early English keyboard music.”<sup>315</sup>

## 5.5 Lessons for Pianists

As musicians who frequently operate independently, pianists enjoy a unique flexibility to implement repertoire changes rapidly and without negotiating within a larger group or organization. The piano recital format itself has constantly changed over the last several centuries, and its evolution is ongoing. For the series “In a Landscape,” inspired by the New Deal-era Federal Music Project, Hunter Noack transports a Steinway into scenic locations in Oregon and plays free concerts while the audience, which listens over wireless headphones, is free to explore the environment.<sup>316</sup> In 2016, Igor Levit performed Bach’s Goldberg Variations on

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<sup>313</sup> Tillbury, “Cornelius Cardew – We Sing For The Future!”

<sup>314</sup> Tillbury, “Cornelius Cardew – We Sing For The Future!”

<sup>315</sup> Daniel Valera, “Frederic Rzewski Interview,” *Perfect Sound Forever*, March 2003, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/rzewski.html>.

<sup>316</sup> Brett Campbell, “Pianist Hunter Noack takes classical music outdoors with ‘In a Landscape’ series,” *Oregonian/OregonLive*, Jun. 27, 2019, <https://www.oregonlive.com/life-and-culture/g66l-2019/06/917c1e44326306/pianist-hunter-noack-takes-classical-music-outdoors-with-in-a-landscape-series.html>.

a rotating stage at the Park Avenue Armory in a collaboration with artist Marina Abramović.<sup>317</sup> Evgeny Kissin has begun incorporating recitations of Yiddish poetry into recitals of music by twentieth-century Jewish composers.<sup>318</sup> Interdisciplinary collaborations with dancers, visual artists, and video projections are also part of this evolution. But by and large, such experiments are exceptions rather than norms. Piano recitals most often epitomize museum culture and do little to dismantle the prevailing white, male, Euro-centric frame.

Implicit in this chapter is a criticism of myself. I have not added enough works by non-white and women composers to my repertoire, and I have publicly performed only a handful of works by composers of color and none by women. Over the course of four post-secondary degree programs, I have given six required recitals containing four different sonatas by Beethoven, multiple major works of Chopin, Brahms, and Prokofiev; and contemporary repertoire by Carl Vine, William Bolcom, and Aaron Copland. My choices were a result of the requirements for auditions I wanted to take and competitions I planned to enter, but there was never anything preventing me from expanding my repertoire to include work by non-white and women composers or performing repertoire that expressed my political positions. I was so focused on proving I could play the touchstones of the repertoire that I did not question institutional blind spots. I could have done more; most of us still can. I plan to include works by women and people of color on every future recital I play and teach this repertoire to my students. I will program pieces that convey explicit political messages. This is a commitment I encourage others to make as well.

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<sup>317</sup> Alex Ross, "Piano Theatre," *New Yorker*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/piano-theatre>.

<sup>318</sup> Ross, "Piano Theatre."

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

When I first started writing this dissertation, I sometimes feared I was overreaching. The position that pianists not only *could* be political but *should* be felt uncomfortable—not because I thought it was unsupported, but because classical music is a fundamentally conservative field and a conservative study that can often feel inherently opposed to change. Performances, recordings, and entire curriculums are devoted to the conservation of centuries-old music. I know many pianists who share my political beliefs, who I respect immensely as musicians, but who I suspected would ultimately be skeptical of my ideas about boldly incorporating the political into their musical activities.

But then 2020 arrived, and now the changes I am proposing feel inevitable rather than impossible, essential rather than radical. As an American citizen, the election of 2016 demoralized me. The events since then, and especially of the last year, have radicalized me. *Of course* we need to commission new works by non-white and women composers; *of course* we need to take every opportunity we can to program these works in concert. And *of course* classical musicians have a right, even a responsibility, to voice their political opinions on any platform available. These proposals now seem, if anything, moderate. In the years to come, they must be taken further.

In Chapter Two, I argued that the conclusions made in studies of popular political music easily apply to classical political music and showed that the historical imposition of politics upon music and musicians proved that music has always been connected to politics. The difference today is that musicians can exercise their own political power rather than have it exercised against them. Chapter Three took the case studies of four prominent concert pianists who made political statements through boycotts and social media activity. For pianists without upcoming

recital engagements or a substantial social media following, protest will likely be the least effective strategy. Chapter Four interrogated the troubling lack of diversity in new music commissioned by large organizations and proposed that individual pianists can commission smaller scale projects in a representative manner or to promote specific ideological views. Chapter Five examined the same lack of diversity in recital and competition programming, suggested repertoire with specific ideological themes, and recommended that pianists commit to more representative programming. These strategies can be employed individually or in combination as foundational tools for political pianism in the twenty-first century.

Of course, this is only the beginning. There are numerous ways for a dedicated pianist to use their work for political means and social good. While this document dealt with political performance and repertoire, there are also opportunities for musicians to mount fundraising concerts for charities and non-profits and to work directly with organizations that bring music and music education to community partners. The Health Arts Society, which operates in British Columbia, works with musicians to bring concerts to long term health-care centers, serving a population that does not otherwise have access to live music. In Los Angeles, a city which has one of the largest homeless populations in North America, violinist Vijay Gupta founded Street Symphony, a non-profit organization that works with communities affected by homelessness and incarceration.

Some sort of sociopolitical engagement is necessary for classical music to remain relevant in the decades to come. Demographic change in North America (by some accounts,

“Canada is experiencing the fastest rate of ethnic change of any country in the Western world”<sup>319</sup> and the United States could be “majority-minority” by 2045<sup>320</sup>) means that overemphasizing white, European classical traditions will likely make classical music feel even less relatable to ever more diverse audiences. Just as consumers want the products they buy to reflect their political values, they may come to expect the same from the music and musicians they listen to.

Ultimately, decisions about how and when to engage in politics, and about which issues, will have to be made at a grassroots level by ensembles and individual musicians. Every musician will make different choices and commitments. For every pianist who wants to incorporate political activism into their musical life, there may be five more who opt out—as is their right. But for pianists who, like me, have felt powerless in this current moment in history, it is my hope that this document has shown them that it is possible to make a difference with the careers and skills they have worked so hard to build.

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<sup>319</sup> Douglas Todd, “Almost 7 in 10 Metro residents will be non-white in two decades,” *Vancouver Sun*, May 30, 2017, <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/douglas-todd-almost-7-in-10-metro-residents-will-be-non-white-in-two-decades>.

<sup>320</sup> William H. Frey, “The US will become ‘minority white’ in 2045, Census projects,” Brookings, March 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/>.

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## Appendix A. Tweets from Valentina Lisitsa

 **NedoUkraïnka**  
@ValLisitsa Following

New school year begins in Odessa with teachers forced to wear Ukrainian tribal dress, a truly European custom :)

RETWEETS 25 FAVORITES 7

7:44 AM - 28 Aug 2014


 **Ruslana Boshirova** Альянс пианистов  
@ValLisitsa

In a new, European, Ukraine the camps will give their subhumans condemned to gas chambers an opportunity to offset their carbon footprint.

9:05 AM · Jun 15, 2014 · Twitter for Android

13 Retweets 3 Likes

 **Ruslana Boshirova** Альянс пианистов  
@ValLisitsa

[#BoycottAnnaNetrebko](#) because it must feel good to be a part of Nazi mob and lynch a brave woman.

*Tweet, December 4, 2015 (Graphic image omitted)*



Ruslana Boshirova Альянс пианистов  
@ValLisitsa

In a new, European, Ukraine the camps will give their subhumans condemned to gas chambers an opportunity to offset their carbon footprint.

9:05 AM · Jun 15, 2014 · Twitter for Android

13 Retweets 3 Likes



Ruslana Boshirova Альянс пианистов @ValLisitsa · 2/6/15

Everybody knows @SenJohnMcCain 😬 date with ISIS  
Less known fact: his best friend in Kiev is US PERSONA NON GRATA

Two leaders of Ukraine's nationalist Svoboda Party have been banned from entering the United States for their anti-Semitism, a Ukrainian daily reports.

Svoboda leaders Oleh Tyahnybok and Igor Smeshchenko were declared persona non grata in the United States earlier this year, following talks with Jewish leaders including the Simon Wiesenthal Center, according to a report published Wednesday in the Kiev-based Zerkna daily.



8

58

16



Ruslana Boshirova Альянс пианистов @ValLisitsa · 2/6/15

OLD @SenJohnMcCain HAD A FARM,  
E-I-E-I-O  
AND ON HIS FARM HE HAD SOME NAZIS  
La-La-la...  
@FacedBook2 @JeSuisRossii



Александр Александрович Гончаренко (род. 1980) - Одесса. Политик и... Убийца, пособник ПРАВОГО СЕКТОРА.





**Ruslana Boshirova** Альянс пианистов  
@ValLisitsa

Malaysian Airlines vice-president Huib Gorter: the  
airliner descended from 10.66km to 10.05 AT THE  
DEMAND OF UKRAINIAN TRAFFIC CONTROL

3:09 PM · Jul 18, 2014 · Twitter for Android



**Ruslana Boshirova** Альянс пианистов  
@ValLisitsa

US whistle-blower leaks hi-res satellite images of  
Malaysian Airlines #MH17.  
And of Ukrainian Airforce MIG-29.



8:15 AM · Nov 14, 2014 · Twitter for Android

98 Retweets 24 Likes

## Appendix B. Igor Levit's Statement On November 9, 2016

Dear Ladies and Gentleman,

Please allow me to say a few words to all of you before we begin the music.

In 1995 my parents, my sister and I moved from Russia to Germany. My parents desire was to give my sister and me the opportunity to achieve whatever we wanted in the best way. To provide us the opportunity for the best education and to give us a life in an environment, where we can not only become smart people but citizens, who understand their responsibility for their country, their friends, their people, their own environment.

Since then, whenever I was asked if I would consider myself being a Russian or German, my answer has been clear: I am a European! Not a proud one, but a grateful, happy, respectful, political, curious and responsible European, who happens to have become a musician.

Today, standing here on this wonderful stage in the European capital, Brussels, means a lot to me. A lot.

But today is a dark day, yesterday was a dark night. Yesterday the greatest economic power in the world has freely elected a bigot, an opportunist, an angry and dangerous man as their new president, as their commander in chief. For over a year, the U.S. election has shaken us up, shaken up our understanding of decency and respect for our fellow human beings. Yesterday's election brought this man into the most important office in the world. Fear, alienation, aggression, darkness, negativism made over fifty million people vote for this man. However, this is not the first time we have experienced such a tragedy in our societies. We saw how millions of people in the United Kingdom have decided to leave European Union, based on false facts and fear. We see how a French presidential candidate is dragging France into an ugly state of fear. In my home country Germany, I see how Neofascists are creating a political environment of fear and mistrust, and undermining the bonds that hold us together. We see this kind of political development in many different countries.

And what do we do? What does my generation do? Thus far, we have let their words destroy our own societies. Politicians speak of the European Union, our European Union, as if it was some kind of garbage, which stinks and which we could just throw away. The EU is a project of peace and unity! Does the EU make mistakes? Of course it does. Does the EU sometimes leave me disappointed and angry? Oh, you bet! But it is MY European Union. I am part of it, and so are we all. The European Union has kept our part of the world, which was so long a place of war and national hatreds, a peaceful place and has joined us together in shared purposes. And we let these people spit on it? How dare they!

Since last night it is clear for me:

The time of staying-in-my-comfort-zone is over. As long as I have voice, as long as I am able to raise my voice, I will not let these aggressive People destroy my society, my world. Our society, our world. We shouldn't let that happen! We must speak out and do what we can to keep our societies humane and just.

And I know, life isn't a concert hall. But music is life, we are here together, you listen to me, I listen to you. Listening to each other - this is civilisation! The great music we are sharing creates a great bond between us, and reminds us of the best that human life can create and share together. We shouldn't wait much longer. We are citizens of our countries, participants in the European Union, connected by bonds of friendship with the United States. We can raise our voice. and we SHOULD raise our voice.

Let us stay strong, stay together, fight for humanity, for trust, for respecting our fellow men and women, helping them, and believing in them people. And let us not just do it while sitting in this magnificent concert hall, but every day, at every hour we possibly can.

And now, over to Beethoven.  
Thank you very much.