

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra doubles down against British-Australian pianist Jayson Gillham

Richard Phillips
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Negotiations between Jayson Gillham and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) collapsed last week after its lawyers issued an “open letter” rejecting the internationally acclaimed pianist’s requests for compensation. The letter was signed by Leon Zwier, a partner with the pro-Zionist Arnold Bloch Leibler (ABL) law firm.

Gillham is the victim of MSO management’s censorious cancellation of a scheduled August 15 concert. He was targeted because he dared to verbally introduce *Witness*, a short piano work which he played during his recital on August 11. Composed by Connor D’Netto, the five-minute piece was dedicated to the more than 100 Palestinian journalists killed by Israel in Gaza since the genocide began.

Gillham, who has consistently opposed the Gaza genocide, told his concert audience that Israel’s murder of journalists was illegal and carried out “to prevent the documentation and broadcasting of war crimes to the world.”

MSO claimed these comments were “an intrusion of personal political views,” made “without authority” and cancelled the next recital. Gillham’s comments of course, are not “personal political views” but a statement of fact verified by journalists and numerous human rights organisations, officially documented as war crimes.

Widespread denunciations on social media of the MSO’s blatant censorship initially forced orchestra management to issue an apology about the recital cancellation and later “reinvite” Gillham to perform on August 15.

MSO’s offer, however, contained unacceptable new provisions that were not in the original recital contract. MSO also published a statement on its website misrepresenting Gillham’s view and implying that he had

caused security concerns—from possible demonstrations by pro-Palestinian activists—if the concert went ahead.

Pushing back against these blatant attacks on freedom of expression, a mass meeting of MSO musicians on August 15 passed a no-confidence motion in MSO management. It called on managing director Sophie Galaise and the orchestra’s chief operating officer Guy Ross, to resign and for an independent inquiry into their actions to be held. Peter Garrett, lead singer of Midnight Oil and a former minister in the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments, has been appointed to head the inquiry.

Galaise, who cancelled Gillham’s recital without previously informing her board of directors, was forced to resign on Monday, but MSO management stepped up its actions against the pianist, denouncing him in its open letter and rejecting all his compensation requests.

In previous talks with the MSO, Gillham had asked for a public apology, reputational compensation for the cancelled recital, future performance opportunities and other demands, including affirmation of artists’ right to speak freely. He also requested for the commissioning of a piano concerto by a Palestinian composer and a donation to the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music in Palestine.

Gillham’s demands were “outrageous” and “will never be met,” the open letter declared, because he had “abused his position by using an MSO concert to air his political opinions... [and] did so improperly.”

The letter then ludicrously insisted that Gillham’s censorship “is not and has never been about free speech”—a claim refuted by the never-ending efforts of the Zionists and their political allies everywhere to silence actors, artists, musicians, journalists or others opposing Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

MSO's letter is no surprise. ABL and other pro-Zionist organisations, such as Lawyers for Israel, have been prominent in intimidatory campaigns against key public figures speaking out against Israel's murderous ethnic-cleansing operations against Palestinians.

Some of those targeted since last November include three Sydney Theatre Company actors who were hysterically denounced for wearing keffiyahs during a curtain call; Mike Parr, whose long-term contract with the Anna Schwartz Gallery was cancelled in December after he painted the words "Palestine," "Israel" and "apartheid" during one of his painting performances; and journalist Antionette Latouf sacked from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation because she shared a Human Rights Watch article on social media.

Leon Zwier, who wrote MSO's open letter, is currently one of the two ABL lawyers representing a Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA) complaint to the Human Rights Commission against Mary Kostakidis, a former SBS journalist and pro-Palestine activist. If found guilty she would face massive fines and reputational damage.

ZFA has accused Kostakidis of breaching Australia's Racial Discrimination Act for sharing a "from the river to sea" comment by Hassan Nasrallah, secretary-general of the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, on social media. The veteran journalist pointed out that the same slogan is in the charter of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party.

Gillham responded to the MSO's open letter with a three-page media statement laying out the chronology of the events and explaining their legal implications.

"The actions taken by the MSO," he said, "constitute direct discrimination because of political belief or activity, which are protected under [Victoria's] Equal Opportunity Act 2010 and violate protections under the Fair Work Act 2009. These actions infringe my right to freedom of expression and my workplace rights."

Gillham also pointed out that MSO have refused to allow him any input into the so-called independent review.

"I stand firmly by my actions and words. As an artist, I believe it is not only my right but my responsibility to use my platform to shed light on important issues," Gillham said.

"The factual statement I made about the plight of Palestinian journalists is backed by reputable sources and aligns with international law. The implication that my actions caused safety concerns is unfounded and deeply troubling. It appears to be an attempt to deflect from the

real issues at hand and to stigmatise legitimate political expression...

"This situation raises important questions about artistic freedom, the role of cultural institutions in public discourse, and the rights of artists to express views on matters of public interest."

While Gillham is supported by musicians, students, artists and other creative workers across Australia and internationally, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the union that covers the sector, has made one perfunctory statement about the MSO victimisation of this courageous young pianist.

Issued on August 14, it blandly declared: "Creative workers should not feel the need to restrict the expression of their opinions for fear of damaging their careers. MEAA takes allegations of censorship and harassment extremely seriously and will support its members in pursuing professional and personal safety and their freedom to express political opinions."

Four weeks on, the MEAA has not called any action or mobilised any of its members in Gillham's defence.

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Last week Jayson Gillham and Connor D'Netto announced the release of a recording of the Witness piano piece via Room40, with all proceeds donated to the Palestine Australia Relief and Action charity. The track is available for streaming and purchase here.

Gillham will also perform the short meditative piece at his recital this Sunday afternoon at the Goulburn Performing Arts Centre, and at the Riverlinks Eastbank in Shepparton on October 3. He will also play with Canberra Symphony Orchestra on September 18 and 19.



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