

OPEN LETTER TO GERMAN BASS-BARITONE THOMAS QUASTHOFF

Dear Thomas Quasthoff:

We understand you're scheduled to give five concerts in Israel in February 2011, where you will sing Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children). We're struggling to understand why this might seem to you an appropriate thing to do.

Possibly you are already thinking by what right a group of British academics questions a professional commitment you have made – but we hope you will hear us out.

We are looking at a report about two-year-old Nasma Abu Lasheen, who died in October 2010. Nasma had the misfortune to be born Palestinian in the Gaza Strip, under blockade by the Israeli government. In her very short life she lived through the terror of Operation Cast Lead, the three-week assault on the trapped population of Gaza that Israel unleashed in December 2008-January 2009.

But this is not what killed Nasma. Nor did she die because in the devastated Strip, nine-tenths of the water people drink is contaminated and the sea is full of untreated sewage (the Israelis bombed water and sewage systems and haven't allowed in reconstruction materials).

Nasma developed leukaemia. Gaza's hospitals are prevented from importing radiation machines and other equipment necessary to treat cancer patients. Nasma's parents applied for urgent permission to take her to a hospital in Israel. In spite of the efforts of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, the permit took eight days to arrive -- too late for Nasma.

When, in the hushed concert halls of Haifa and Tel Aviv, you sing *Wenn dein Mutterlein...* [When your mother comes into the room, my eyes light on the place where your dear little face would have been, my little girl], will the parents of Nasma Abu Lasheen be there to hear you? They will not. Palestinians from Gaza and the Occupied West Bank are not allowed to enter Israel. So they won't be consoled, however briefly, by the intensity of Mahler's music and the warm humanity and beauty of your voice.

We read that you are, quite rightly, fed up when people focus on the physical consequences for you of thalidomide – you lead, you say, 'a normal life'. But we would like to ask whether you know that the possibility of permanent disablement is often deliberately inflicted on Palestinian children. For instance, the organisation Defence of Children International says that in the eight months to 28 November 2010, 16 children were deliberately shot in the leg or arm by Israeli forces in Gaza. Their crime? They were scavenging for gravel among bombed buildings near Israel's border fence.

We are not denying that Israeli children have been killed and maimed, mainly by suicide bombings by Palestinian militants. We do not condone these actions. But

Please reply to: BRICUP, BM BRICUP, London WC1N3XX

email: bricup@bricup.org.uk
www.bricup.org.uk

we call to your attention Nurit Peled-Elhanan, whose 13-year-old daughter Smadar died in a suicide bombing in 1997. Peled-Elhanan has turned her grief into determined activism against the Israeli occupation, describing both her daughter and the bomber as ‘victims of the occupation’.

Our argument is that by performing in Israel, you help draw a veil over the ‘killing, liquidation, destruction, devastation and abuse of millions of civilians’ that Peled-Elhanan so eloquently describes in her 4 December article for Israeli Occupation Archive. You help the Israeli government camouflage something very racist, very systematic and very ugly. And you reassure Israelis that, whatever cruelty and illegality their government, their army and the settlers commit against the Palestinians, they still have a place in the ‘civilised’ world. Do you really want to do this?

You teach at an academy in Berlin named after a composer, Hanns Eisler, who did not flinch from engagement in anti-fascist struggles in the 1930s. Eisler and Brecht’s songs could not, of course, prevent the Nazi holocaust of disabled people, communists, Jews, gypsies, Slavs, Poles, across Europe. And now we may be less moved by the martial rhythm and simple hopes of ‘Solidarity Song’. But solidarity still matters, doesn’t it?

Palestinian civil organisations are asking international artists not to co-operate with Israeli institutions. We know that in asking you to respect this Palestinian call, we’re asking you to do something very hard. But this year alone, British film-maker Mike Leigh and musicians Elvis Costello, Gil Scott-Heron and Tindersticks are among a number of artists who have withdrawn from commitments in Israel on political and humanitarian grounds.

If you decide to join them, you will draw back from appearing to condone Israel’s suffocation of Palestinian lives, rights, and freedom. ‘Those in power/Sat safer without me: that was my hope’, Brecht wrote. We live in hope that you might share his ambition. Please don’t sing with the Israel Philharmonic.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Haim Bresheeth

Mike Cushman

Professor Hilary Rose

Professor Steven Rose

Professor Jonathan Rosenhead

London, 8 December 2010