

A SECOND OPEN LETTER TO THOMAS QUASTHOFF

Dear Thomas Quasthoff,

We noticed that on January 11, *Die Welt* and most other German newspapers reported you will be performing ‘for the first time’ in Israel in February. We interpret this, sadly, as your reply to us and the many other people who have written asking you not to sing in Israel. And we have to say we’re slightly surprised.

Because to perform with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra is to declare an identification with the State of Israel. We’re not saying this because we’re a bunch of leftie English professors. We’re saying it because the Israel Philharmonic itself says so.

Here’s its website describing the period 1947-1956, the decade, it says, ‘in which some of the world’s most renowned artists came to identify through the orchestra with the State of Israel’. You’ll be in illustrious company – Koussevitzky, Fricsay, Giulini – but do you want your appearance to be spun this way? It will be, whether you like it or not.

Here’s your conductor, Zubin Mehta, described by the IPO as ‘arriving in a plane full of ammunition from Europe’ during the 1967 Six Day War, and soon afterwards conducting Verdi’s *Requiem* in Bethlehem -- militarily-suppressed and illegally-occupied Bethlehem, but the website somehow doesn’t mention this. Mehta calls the orchestra ‘Israel’s flagship’, and he’s happy to sail in it – but are you?

We’ve been trying to find evidence that the IPO has ever taken a public stand against the Occupation. In 2007, the women’s peace organisation Women in Black requested the orchestra to do so before it played in Los Angeles; they delivered a petition signed by a thousand people, including Silvia Tennebaum, step-daughter of the orchestra’s founding conductor, William Steinberg. They heard nothing back.

Proudly displayed on the IPO's website are pictures of a concert it gave in July 2010 near the fence enclosing Gaza's traumatised and hungry population. Was this concert meant to extend a hand of solidarity and friendship to the human beings shut up in the ghetto on the other side of the fence? It was not. It was to call for the release of Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held captive in Gaza. Palestinians on the other side of the fence raised placards to remind everyone there are at least 8000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons, often held without charge or trial, and often tortured (see the December 2010 report by the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel). But under Maestro Mehta, the band played on.

So you will be performing with an orchestra that identifies wholeheartedly and inextricably with the aims and policies of the State. From the January 11 reports in the German press, it seems you've decided you'll go ahead and do so. 'Quasthoff in Israel' – very good for Brand Israel. Not so good for the Palestinian struggle for rights and justice.

Yours sincerely,
Professor Haim Bresheeth
Mike Cushman
Professor Hilary Rose
Professor Steven Rose
Professor Jonathan Rosenhead

London, 13 January 2011