

RITORNA VINCITOR! ANNA NETREBKO'S ARBITRATION VICTORY SHOWS THAT NEW YORK'S METROPOLITAN OPERA IS GETTING WOKER AND GOING BROKER

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In Europe, revitalized theaters are announcing new

seasons that New Yorkers can now only dream about. As New York looks ever more provincial, Paris, Berlin, and Milan are only some of those offering Anna Netrebko in star roles.

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Fresh from its announcement that it will cannibalize as much as \$30 million of its endowment, reduce next season's number of performances by ten percent, and stage more contemporary and "socially relevant" works in the hope of attracting larger and more diverse audiences, the Metropolitan Opera recently suffered yet another humiliating blow in its ill-advised foray into cultural politics and foolish overindulgence in woke sensibilities. In February, according to reports that came to light last week, an independent arbitrator in New York ruled that the financially troubled opera company must pay \$200,000 to the Russian superstar soprano Anna Netrebko for canceled services.

Last season, the Met fired Netrebko for failing to denounce Russian president Vladimir Putin sufficiently, though she did denounce the war in Ukraine and canceled her engagements in Russia. Netrebko said she had met Putin on only a handful of ceremonial occasions and was not "allied with any leader of Russia." Nevertheless, the Met's general manager Peter Gelb still announced her dismissal and stated that he saw no way she could ever return to the house. In a more recent interview, Gelb suggested that "the Met" as an institution and a "majority of its audience" would still object to her return, though no disclosed evidence supports the latter assertion and 64 percent of Americans reject "cancel culture." Despite acknowledging Netrebko's contractual claims, Gelb further stated, to what has turned out to be his company's considerable expense, "we didn't think it was morally right to pay Netrebko anything considering her close association with Putin."

The Met's position has been that Netrebko's failure to comply with the company's apparent speech dictate was a violation of her contract's good conduct clause. The Met had also announced that other Russian artists—but no artists of any other nationality—would have to pronounce against Putin as an apparent condition of continuing employment. Celebrated conductor Valery Gergiev, it seems, will not reappear, though several Russian singers continue to perform, possibly without having issued the relevant statements. They include baritone Evgeny Nikitin, who just completed a successful and critically acclaimed run of performances in a new production of Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin*, and mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Gubanova, who recently appeared in a worthy revival of Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*.

In addition to her arbitration claim, Netrebko has filed a civil rights complaint against the Met. Discriminatory actions or policies based on national origin and many other protected characteristics are illegal under New York State and New York City human rights laws, which apply to all persons present within those jurisdictions regardless of their residency or citizenship. Under draconian laws passed in Russia last year, furthermore, publicly criticizing its government can result in arrest and up to fifteen years of imprisonment. Family members of Russian political dissenters are also known to have been unofficially harassed, and a number of high-profile government critics have died or been seriously harmed in suspicious circumstances, both in and outside of Russia.

As Gelb admitted, the Met failed to pay Netrebko the disputed sum for performances under her contract at the time of her dismissal, which contained a “pay or play” clause that required full compensation even if the Met dispensed with her services. The \$200,000 awarded to her by the arbitrator will cover fees of approximately \$15,000 per performance for thirteen performances for which Netrebko was contractually scheduled, but in which she did not or will not appear. The affected performances include last fall's run of Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlo* and Netrebko's slated but previously unannounced appearances in the 2023-2024 season's new production of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* and revival of Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*. Netrebko was replaced in *Don Carlo* by the superb Italian soprano Eleonora Buratto, but the remaining cast was uneven and the production, by Sir David McVicar, was too drab and dull to excite audiences. According to media reports, its revival *sans* Netrebko reportedly filled only 40 percent of the house in

some performances. The leading soprano parts in *La Forza del Destino* and *Andrea Chénier* are among Netrebko's best and most critically acclaimed roles, and those productions stand among the very few highlights of what will arguably be the worst season in the company's history.

The arbitration was not an unqualified success for Netrebko, who continues to perform a full schedule outside the United States, apart from a handful of cancellations on political grounds. The arbitrator rejected her claim of a further \$400,000 for planned Met performances for which contracts had not yet been executed. He also imposed a \$30,000 penalty on her for what he called "highly inappropriate" remarks she made after the war started, including publicly denouncing her Western critics as "shits" and "as evil as blind aggressors." The arbitrator further found that Netrebko, despite her denials, had supported Putin, but maintained that she had a "right" to do so and stated that supporting controversial political leaders is "certainly not moral turpitude or worthy, in and of itself, of actionable misconduct" in relation to an employment contract.

Additionally, the Met has announced that Netrebko's husband, Azerbaijani tenor Yusif Eyvazov, has been removed from six forthcoming performances of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*, ostensibly because he criticized black soprano Angel Blue's objections last summer to the use of dark makeup in a production of Verdi's *Aida* at Italy's Verona Festival. The Met proscribed the practice of using dark makeup for white performers in 2015, when it staged a new production of Verdi's *Otello*, whose title role is Shakespeare's "Moor of Venice." It had, however, advertised that production with prominent pre-premiere photos featuring its leading tenor in dark makeup, and many European theaters still use it unapologetically. Eyvazov's contretemps with Blue, who is not cast in *Tosca*, has no known effect on his ability to sing, but Gelb admitted that his association with Netrebko was, at the risk of using the *New York Times's* words, "problematic" and could potentially "disrespect" the production's lead soprano, who is Ukrainian.

Despite these reversals, Netrebko will still net \$170,000 for not performing at a company that can ill afford any form of financial loss after losing an estimated \$150 million during the Covid-19 pandemic and seeing its revenue continue to contract even as the pandemic

recedes. The Met has also announced that Eyvazov will be paid for his six canceled performances. Both singers have historically been box office draws, with Netrebko probably the last artist who could reliably sell out the house. The Met's management appears oblivious to the consequences of its politicized employment policies, however. Beginning in the #MeToo era, it cut top talent over questionable allegations of sexual harassment, including former music director James Levine, superstar performer Plácido Domingo, tenor Vittorio Grigolo, and director John Cox. Levine, who was fired in 2018, sued the company and won a \$3.5 million settlement.

Meanwhile, discerning New York operagoers are going elsewhere in large numbers and taking their money with them. Palm Beach's Society of the Four Arts recently welcomed Domingo with a cheering sold-out crowd energized by the notion that what they were doing would be impossible in what is for many of them an unmissed home town. Florida opera and symphony companies are reporting record audiences, revenues, and outreach. In Europe, revitalized theaters are announcing new seasons that New Yorkers can now only dream about. As New York looks ever more provincial, Paris, Berlin, and Milan are only some of those offering Anna Netrebko in star roles.