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SOAS “Art Musics of Israel” conference: muting discord

SOAS is due to be the venue for an International Conference on Israeli music which directly breaks the academic and cultural boycott of Israel. The SOAS Music Department, in conjunction with the Jewish Music Institute Forum for Israeli Music, is hosting this event due to take place during March 28-31. The Director of SOAS Paul Webley is to give the opening speech. Conference details are at <http://www.jmi.org.uk/conferences/JMI%20IsraelA5Leaflet.pdf>

Yet this Conference is sponsored by the Israeli Embassy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture. As such it can be seen as part of the ‘Brand Israel’ project aimed at pasting a glossy, cultured face over the ugly reality of this war criminal regime. Such activities are explicitly identified as appropriate targets of boycott under the PACBI guidelines, which carry the support of Palestinian civil society. See <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1108>.

The ‘Art Musics of Israel’ conference seeks to normalize the cultural image of the Israeli apartheid state. In the conference programme, Arab music is treated as one (secondary) influence on Israeli music; Arab musicians are portrayed as partners in music-making or in dialogue. This storyline of multi-cultural harmony mutes and seeks to disguise the political discord which results from Israel’s institutional racism against its Arab citizens – not to mention the Palestinians under illegal occupation in the Occupied Territories. The world in which the IDF slaughters 1400 defenceless Gazans, and keeps the survivors penned into a vast open-air prison is nowhere to be seen.

By promoting this conference SOAS is providing a liberal cover for Israeli apartheid to normalise its image. Last year the SOAS Student Union voted to adopt the policy of Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) against Israeli goods, produce and cultural exports. For cultural events, sponsorship by Zionist institutions is a clear rationale for boycott, according to the PACBI guidelines. For consistency, should not the Student Union censure SOAS for hosting this racist event, and demand that it be cancelled? If it goes ahead, the conference invites opposition from all supporters of the Israeli Boycott campaign.

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