

25 January 2012

AN OPEN LETTER TO CHRISTOPH VON DOHNÁNYI

Dear Christoph von Dohnányi,

We were impressed to [read](#) that last October you cancelled several appearances as conductor with the Hungarian State Opera, in protest at appointments made by the mayor to the New Theatre in Budapest. You were quoted as saying that you did not want to appear in a city 'whose mayor entrusted the direction of a theatre to two known anti-Semites of the extreme right'.

We share your alarm at the growing power of racist and authoritarian parties in the Hungarian state, and we salute you for the stand you have taken. But we're also interested to see that you actively support the withdrawal of cultural engagement as a means of expressing political and moral outrage. Please allow us to suggest that moral and political considerations might therefore argue against your appearances this coming April as guest conductor with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

Leave aside for the time being the painful fact that between 1947 and 1949 more than half the Palestinian population was driven out of what became Israel, and has never been allowed to return (many historians, including [Benny Morris](#) and [Ilan Pappé](#), have documented this; and then there is this old man, [Amnon Neumann](#), describing on film exactly how his Palmach unit got Palestinians to leave).

Leave aside for the moment the illegal military occupation of remaining Palestinian land since 1967, even though every day, dunum by dunum, it removes Palestinians from their land and abuses their rights (for example, the Guardian newspaper has just [reported](#) the systematic mistreatment of Palestinian children in Israeli prisons).

Please look at one event that has occurred since the start of this year.

On 11 January 2012 the Israeli Supreme Court [decided](#) that marriage to an Israeli citizen does not give Palestinians from the Occupied Territories or elsewhere the right to reside with their spouses inside Israel. These people, and their children, are now liable to be expelled. Articulating the

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court's majority opinion, Justice Asher Grunis said, 'Human rights are not a prescription for national suicide'. Presumably István Csurka, whose role in the New Theatre in Budapest you understandably object to, might voice similar ethno-nationalist sentiments in relation to the presence of Jews and Roma in Hungary (and according to the [Anti-Defamation League](#), he has done so, many times).

Our argument is that racism is indivisible. If one is outraged by the presence in power of racists in one place, one has to be outraged by their exercise of power elsewhere too. Israeli poet Yitzhak Laor [says](#) the Israeli Supreme Court decision is motivated by the desire to 'maintain a Jewish majority...The looming expulsion of thousands will be carried out with the silent agreement of enlightened members of society [for whom] maintaining a Jewish majority is an ideological common denominator'.

Some of those 'enlightened' members of society will be sitting in your concerts, Christoph von Dohnányi, enjoying your interpretation of Schumann and Mendelssohn. Meanwhile, says Laor, 'the expulsion of women and children from their homes will be carried out by a state that has never held Arabs to be equal before the law'.

We could suggest further reading – [this account](#) of the harassment and dispossession of the Bedouin in the Negev – Israeli citizens, but not Jews. [This interview](#) with Haneen Zoabi, a Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset, who says: 'Jewishness here means Zionism, not Judaism. It is misleading to talk about a Jewish and democratic state; it is a Zionist state...To choose Zionism at the expense of democracy is now legitimate; you are defending the Jewish state'.

We applaud the good example you have set by withdrawing from your concerts at the Hungarian State Opera. We respectfully suggest that consistency should lead you to do the same with regard to the IPO. Please don't let those 'enlightened' members of Israeli society continue to believe that their racism is tolerable and excusable because it's directed at Palestinians. Please don't go.

Yours sincerely,
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Mike Cushman
Professor Adah Kay
Professor David Pegg
Professor Jonathan Rosenhead

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