

## Inside Out **Should musicians make a stand?**



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Musicians often perform composers with unpalatable views, or put up with bigoted colleagues, but it doesn't mean they agree with them. In the wake of the Gergiev protest, Christopher Gillett recalls his protest against the enemy of arts funding: Margaret Thatcher.

Only someone banged up without many rights in a Siberian prison can have missed the news about protests at recent concerts conducted by the LSO's chief conductor Valery Gergiev. Arguments rage about whether a classical concert is a suitable place to make a political protest. Personally I find it interesting that the debate focuses on the behaviour of the audience. No one seems to wonder what the orchestral players on stage with the controversial conductor think about gay rights in Russia and whether musicians should make a political stand.

I'm not party to the day-to-day conversations taking place at the LSO but I think it would be utterly wrong to assume that by turning up and playing, anyone in the band is nailing their colours to Gergiev's mast when it comes to his political views (whatever those really are). Musicians have a long tradition of soldiering on and doing their jobs, working with people they may secretly and not-so-secretly dislike, or playing works by composers in possession of some despicable beliefs. In Britain at least, political unease in the ranks rarely manifests itself - though it used to in the 1970s when compulsory membership of the Musicians' Union was, for some, a thorny issue.

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It can be extremely tricky for performers. We have to work with a lot of people with whom we hold deeply felt disagreements. Where do you draw the line? I once sang with an American baritone who was keen to tell me how many firearms he kept on his boat and how he'd use them to 'protect his property'. It was a conversation I didn't want to have at any time, let alone just before singing the gorgeous sextet in *Le*

*Nozze di Figaro*. I have worked with misogynists and homophobes. Racists too, I have no doubt. Unfortunately, sublime music doesn't always make for sublime personalities and I would be appalled if by singing with them anyone thought I was supporting their views.

The nearest I ever got to a political protest at work was in the late 1980s. Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time, came to see *Otello* at Covent Garden. The cast was asked to stay on stage after the curtain calls to meet her. She was an avowed enemy of public arts funding and I found the idea of fawning on her absolutely abhorrent, so I buggered off before she could come round. I don't suppose the absence of the minor-role Roderigo made the slightest bit of difference to her evening but, for once at least, I knew where to draw the line.

Christopher Gillett's account of an operatic tenor's life on the road, *Scraping the Bottom*, has just been published.

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