

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? It was all about free speech

Way back in 1990, when my controversial book 'By Way of Deception' came out, the Israeli government was so upset it cajoled a Brooklyn judge to hold a middle-of-the-night hearing in his own apartment and got a written order to the media that they could not publish anything from the book.

Reacting to the order, the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and many other major newspapers, promptly ran prominent stories and quotes from the book on their front pages, daring officials to dictate to the media what it can and can't print. The result of all this was that the book - which I co-wrote with former Mossad agent Victor Ostrovsky - quickly shot up the best-sellers list, becoming the only Canadian non-fiction book (as far as I've been able to discover) to be Number 1 on the New York Times list and still the best-selling Canadian non-fiction book ever.

This isn't to boast about the success of my book. It is to illustrate the perils of those who resort to putting a muzzle on free speech. Which brings us, of course, to the cowardly and stupid decision last week by Toronto Symphony Orchestra CEO Jeff Melanson to cancel a concert by Ukrainian pianist Valentina Lisitsa over complaints about a series of pro-Russian tweets she sent out about the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian dispute.

Now I have to tell you that until this TSO petulance hit the news, I had no idea who Lisitsa was and, given the fact my musical taste leans towards bluegrass, gospel and old-time rock 'n' roll, I'm not a likely candidate to listen to her play a Rachmaninoff concerto. But that, obviously, is not the point.

There are many Torontonians who were looking forward to her concert, but now, thanks to the TSO's reaction to some unnamed critics, they were deprived of that pleasure.

Clearly this is not the worst thing that will ever happen to their lives. Or perhaps to Lisitsa's life, either.

But the decision to muzzle a pianist because some members of Toronto's Ukrainian community don't like her views - I don't like them either; the Russians, not the Ukrainians, are the bad guys here - has managed to a)- make her a household name; b)- sully the TSO's reputation; and c)- set a dangerous precedent for all future performers who may happen to harbour controversial views.

Those patrons who had purchased tickets to the concert were, after all, going there to listen to her music. She had no intention of delivering a political speech. She had intended to play the piano.

So one might ask that, however offensive some may have found her tweets on the subject, what on earth does her political viewpoint have to do with her ability to perform at the highest level on the musical stage? The answer, of course, is there is no connection between the two.

The TSO decision has been met by universal condemnation in the media, particularly from the arts crowd, which would normally be far more supportive of TSO efforts than your average Torontonian. This alone should give the TSO pause to reconsider and to wonder whether Melanson is really the guy they want making these decisions.

He may be a musical genius, but when it comes to promoting the image of his institution, he's a complete dud - at least he was on this occasion.

In explaining the reason for cancelling the concert, Melanson said they had compiled seven pages of 'deeply offensive' Twitter posts and that he had received 'hundreds' of complaints about her.

'This is not about free speech, this is not about a political perspective or persuasion, this is about very offensive, intolerant comments about people,' said Melanson.

'As one of Canada's most important cultural institutions, our priority must remain on being a stage for the world's great works of music, and not for opinions that some believe to be deeply offensive.'

What utter tripe. First, as offensive as her views may be to many people - although likely not to everybody - she wasn't about to bring them on stage anyway. She was going to play the piano.

And sorry, Jeff, but it is very much about free speech. Deny it all you want, but the proof, as they say, is in the pudding'.

What he should have done is what the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra (COP) official told Canadian Press their plan for her scheduled July performance, i.e., 'Whether or not one agrees with Ms. Lisitsa's political views, at this time at the COP, our agreement with her is as a guest artist.'

Amen to that. And, thanks to the TSO, it's a guaranteed full house.

