

Artists' Spat Over Putin Joins a National Tradition

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Putin, right, shaking hands with viola player Yuri Bashmet in the Kremlin last month on Bashmet's 60th birthday. **Alexei Nikolsky**

When famed viola player Yuri Bashmet declared that he "adored" President Vladimir Putin, he stirred little controversy in a country where classical musicians have often curried favor with the political elite.

But political drama spilled into the orchestra pit last month when Bashmet refused to condemn a new law prohibiting Americans from adopting Russian children, and in response the beloved singer Sergei Nikitin canceled his appearance at a concert celebrating the violist's 60th birthday.

The spat is the latest of many examples of Russian artists jumping — or being dragged — into the political fray. From composer Dmitry Shostakovich, who lived in fear of arrest under Stalin, to cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who returned to a liberalizing Soviet Union in 1991

and took up arms to defy Communist hard-liners, Russian performers have had a habit of becoming politicized figures.

At the core of the argument today is the question what an artist's role in Putin's Russia should be: attracting generous state funding for bigger and better artistic projects or challenging the political system in a way most ordinary citizens cannot afford to do.

Some cultural figures, including poet Dmitry Bykov and rocker Yury Shevchuk, brought their star power to the anti-Putin rallies that shook Moscow last winter. Others were recruited to back up Putin as he ran for a third term as president. As the expression goes, a poet in Russia is always more than a poet.

Actor and theater director Yevgeny Mironov appeared in a pro-Putin campaign ad in which he gave heartfelt thanks to Putin for keeping Russia — and his Moscow theater — afloat. Some of his fellow actors loudly refused.

Actress Chulpan Khamatova, who depends on government support for charity work for children, filmed a similar pro-Putin ad, but the delivery was tortured, as if she were speaking under duress. And she was one of the many cultural figures who signed a petition condemning the adoption bill.

The ban, which went into effect Jan. 1, proved controversial even among many Putin loyalists in the intelligentsia, who see the Kremlin as playing politics at the expense of Russia's orphans. Tens of thousands of people took part in a Jan. 13 protest march through Moscow, one of the largest anti-Putin demonstrations the city had seen in many months.

The adoption ban was in response to the Magnitsky Act, a U.S. law that imposes sanctions on Russians accused of involvement in the prison death of whistle-blowing lawyer Sergei Magnitsky and other rights abuses.

Yury Norshtein, Russia's most beloved animator, took Putin to task over Magnitsky during an awards ceremony on Jan. 19. Norshtein noted that Putin had attributed Magnitsky's death to heart failure but said that in fact the lawyer had died because of "a failure of Putin's heart."

The audience erupted with cheers and applause.

Discontent over the adoption ban entered the classical music world at a news conference Bashmet gave ahead of his birthday jubilee concert on Jan. 24. The floppy-haired violist, who is the conductor of two Moscow orchestras and a famed soloist in his own right, gave an equivocal answer when asked about his stance on the adoption ban, refusing to condemn the law in its entirety.

In an interview last month, Bashmet said he didn't think the fate of children should be decided by anti-American legislation, but he asserted that the adoption ban would end up helping Russia's orphans by raising awareness in the country about the tens of thousands of children in need of families.

"There are things that need to be decided within the country, and it's good that this question has been raised in such a controversial way. Now the president has decreed that it will be at the center of attention," Bashmet said. "Our government is now responding to this, to the

betterment of these children."

That stance didn't sit well with Nikitin, a bard in the Russian folk tradition. He said that it doesn't bother him if "Bashmet adores the president," but his ambiguous justification of the adoption ban took things too far.

"This doesn't have anything to do with politics," Nikitin said. "It's about being humane, being humanitarian, about morality."

Bashmet may be an extreme example of an artist showing affection for Putin, but classical musicians have rarely been immune to politics.

Valery Gergiyev, director of the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, has been outspokenly supportive of the Putin regime. After Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, he conducted a concert in front of a destroyed government building in the South Ossetian capital.

The cellist Rostropovich, whose support for Soviet dissidents led to his exile in the United States in the 1970s, returned as the Communist regime was crumbling. Wielding a Kalashnikov, he stood with protesters who had rallied around Boris Yeltsin in defiance of Communist hard-liners trying to take power in the August 1991 coup.

Other musicians have been much less willing participants when it comes to politics, doing their best to avoid the political fray. This was particularly true when the risks were greater, as they were in Soviet times, when even a discordant note or a suggestive motif could bring accusations of deviating from the political line.

Shostakovich received a scathing critique of his experimentalism in 1936. The critique was infamously titled "Muddle Instead of Music" and published in the Soviet Union's most important newspaper. With the Stalinist purges moving at full throttle, Shostakovich backed away from some of his more avant-garde music, taking more care to adhere to the political line.

But Shostakovich, like his contemporary Sergei Prokofiev, was also protected by his status. Great musicians of the Soviet period became a source of patriotism and a means of challenging the West's dominance. Despite the heavy weight of Stalinist repression, Shostakovich and Prokofiev created some of the most cherished, experimental and, at times, critical music of the 20th century.

After Stalin's death, many of Shostakovich's and Prokofiev's compositions that had been interpreted as anti-fascist during the dictator's life were recast as artistic protests against Stalinist terror.

Nikitin believes in the examples set by Prokofiev and Shostakovich, great artists who were among the few people who could attempt to oppose, even if only through their music, the existing regime.

"The government and state officials, including the president, should be grateful to these artists that they give them the opportunity to experience this kind of art, and in this way to make life in our country richer," he said.

In Soviet times, cinema also was under strict government censorship. When Stalin was in power, he personally decided which films could be shown and which were to be stashed "on the shelf." Despite this, the Soviet era is remembered as the height of Russian filmmaking, from the early experimentalism of Sergei Eisenstein to the charming, Oscar-winning "Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears."

After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, things changed drastically for the film industry. A style called "chernukha," or blackness, became the vogue among many Russian filmmakers, who made dark and violent movies showing contemporary life as a bleak moral vacuum.

Others, like director Nikita Mikhailkov, took a different tack by producing upbeat, patriotic films, attracting generous funding in the process.

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