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European Opera Houses Weigh In on Russian Theater Scandal

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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The letter was signed by Dietmar Schwarz, head of Berlin's Deutsche Oper, and Bernd Loebe, head of the Frankfurt Opera House, who also serves as chairman of Germany's opera association.

The heads of leading German opera houses have spoken out in protest against the Russian culture minister's decision to fire a theater director over his refusal to cancel a production of Richard Wagner's opera "Tannhäuser" that local Orthodox clergy said offended them.

"We have learned with indignation that Boris Mezdrich was fired from the post of Novosibirsk opera theater director over a production of 'Tannhäuser' that ostensibly offends religious feelings," said the letter addressed to Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky.

The letter was signed by Dietmar Schwarz, head of Berlin's Deutsche Oper, and Bernd Loebe, head of the Frankfurt Opera House, who also serves as chairman of Germany's opera association that comprises 13 leading opera houses in Germany, Austria and Switzerland as well as associate members the Paris Opera, London's Covent Garden and Milan's La Scala.

"From the point of view of Germany's opera association, such a move is an unacceptable intrusion of politics into the field of freedom of expression in art," the letter's authors said, adding that the opera association demands the reversal of the decision to sack Mezdrich.

The Russian Culture Ministry fired Mezdrich at the end of March, citing his failure "to take into account values that exist in society" and for his "disrespect for public opinion," according to a statement on the ministry's website.

The production included a portrayal of the early, unknown years of Jesus Christ, and in particular, featured a poster depicting a crucifix between a naked woman's legs.

Orthodox activists in Novosibirsk, led by local Church leader Metropolitan Tikhon, rallied in protest against the performance, which prosecutors accused of offending religious sentiment — a crime in Russia. The case was thrown out by a court, and members of the local intelligentsia staged their own protest against the interference of the Orthodox Church in art.

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