

Renowned Musicians Pay Tribute to Late Anti-War Pianist Pavel Kushnir

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PARIS — Renowned pianists Grigory Sokolov and Sergei Babayan performed a benefit concert in the French capital Monday evening in honor of Pavel Kushnir, a pianist and anti-war activist who tragically passed away in a Russian pre-trial detention center at age 39 in July.

The benefit concert, for which dozens of musicians around the world expressed their support in an open letter, marked the first time since the invasion of Ukraine that the global music community has so strongly supported an anti-war Russian performer.

The program opened with Frédéric Chopin's Mazurkas, traditional Polish dances that were the composer's way of resisting the Russian occupation of 19th-century Poland.

In the final months of his career before his arrest, Kushnir highlighted Chopin's Mazurkas in a series of weekly educational radio broadcasts in Birobidzhan, the capital of the remote Jewish autonomous district in Russia's Far East where he lived.

Sokolov and Babayan also performed selections by Schumann, Schubert, Liszt and Rachmaninoff.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Kushnir became a vocal opponent of the war, putting up anti-war leaflets and posters. He posted several videos on his YouTube channel where he argued about the nature of fascism, called for revolution and expressed support for the LGBTQ+ community. His channel had only five subscribers.

Kushnir was charged with "terrorist activity" in connection with these videos and placed in a pre-trial detention center. He passed away on the sixth day of the dry hunger strike. He was 39 years old.

Eyewitnesses who attended his funeral claimed to have seen traces of blood on Kushnir's face. However, no investigation into his death in pre-trial detention has been carried out. His ashes were buried in his birthplace Tambov, where his mother still lives.

The scale of Kushnir's talent only became known after his death. In addition to being a brilliant, sensitive pianist with a rich repertoire, it turned out that he was also a writer. He left behind two great avant-garde novels — "Noel" and "Russian Cutting" — as well as a manuscript of the diary he kept in Birobidzhan during Russia's fall 2022 "partial" mobilization.

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In addition to the benefit concert, about 60 internationally renowned conductors, composers and pianists signed an open letter in support of artists facing political repression or forced into exile.

The letter's signatories include Daniel Barenboim, Gidon Kremer, Martha Argerich, Evgeny Kissin, Simon Rattle, Fabio Luisi, Alexei Aigi, Sir Antonio Pappano and more.

"We wish to express our support for all artists around the world who are oppressed and sometimes forced into exile," the letter states. "Pavel Kushnir chose internal exile and dared to speak out against war. He paid for it with his life. We will be with you mentally this evening and join in solidarity with all artists suffering from repression today."

Pianist Olga Shkrygunova, a close friend of Kushnir, said that the letter's signatories also include musicians who still live and perform in Russia.

"This is an incredibly brave act on their part," Shkrygunova said. "Pavel has become a symbol of light, honest and uncompromising. He resonates in everyone in his own way."

Evgeny Kissin, pianist, said: "Music can be both for good and evil. Pavel Kushnir always used it for good. Let us honor his memory and follow his example."

Proceeds from the Paris concert will be donated to the Atelier des artists en exile, a French NGO that supports musicians, artists and filmmakers from around the world who live in exile. This NGO currently assists more than 350 people, about 200 of whom are from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

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