

Lifestyle | Features

Taiwan cancels concert by Russian soprano Anna Netrebko

Taiwan's National Symphony Orchestra on Tuesday cancelled a concert featuring Russian superstar soprano Anna Netrebko, whose past support for President Vladimir Putin has seen her performances axed from global stages. The orchestra did not give a specific reason for the cancellation, but said it had held discussions with the singer's representatives due to "concerns in the society".

Netrebko withdrew from New York's Metropolitan Opera in March last year after the premier opera house announced it would not work with artists who supported Putin after he launched the war on Ukraine a month earlier. She subsequently condemned the war, but her upcoming concert in Taipei still drew criticism in Taiwan, where residents have voiced support for Ukraine.



Russian soprano Anna Netrebko

Taiwan lives under constant threat of an invasion by China, which claims the self-ruled island as part of its territory to be seized one day, by force if necessary. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has stoked fears that Beijing might move similarly towards the island. Taiwan's culture ministry indicated support for the orchestra's cancellation, telling semi-official Central News Agency "there is no room for vagueness about Taiwan's attitude on the war". — AFP

Two-time Palme winner Ruben Ostlund to head Cannes jury

Swedish director Ruben Ostlund, a two-time winner of the Palme d'Or, will be jury president at this year's Cannes Film Festival in May, organizers announced Tuesday. Ostlund, 48, won the festival's top prize last year for "Triangle of Sadness", which left audiences squirming over its biting exploration of class divisions on a cruise ship, and extended display of extreme sea sickness. The film, which stars Woody Harrelson as a drunken Marxist captain, has also earned him three nominations at next month's Oscars - for best picture, best director and best original screenplay.

Ostlund also won the Palme five years earlier for "The Square", with a similarly cringe-inducing look at the art world. In a statement, Ostlund said he was "happy, proud and humbled to be entrusted with the honor" of leading the jury, which comes exactly 50 years after fellow Swede Ingrid Bergman had the role. It is the third time a two-time Palme winner has led the jury in Cannes, fol-

lowing Francis Ford Coppola and Emir Kusturica, and the first time it has gone to someone the year after they won.

The selection of films is due to be announced next month, along with the other members of the jury. Ostlund has become known for his scathing insights into the embarrassing foibles of Western middle classes. He first gained international attention with 2014's "Force Majeure" about a father on a ski trip who rescues his mobile phone before his children during an avalanche.

It won the runner-up Jury Prize in the secondary Un Certain Regard section at Cannes. Three years later, he went straight to the top, winning the Palme d'Or for "The Square", still set in Sweden but featuring US actor Elisabeth Moss and Britain's Dominic West. After his victory last year, Ostlund said his goal with audiences was "to entertain them, to (make them) ask themselves questions, to go out after the screening and have something to talk about." — AFP



In this file photo Swedish film director Ruben Ostlund reacts on stage after he won the Palme d'Or for the film 'Triangle of Sadness'. — AFP



US actress Margo Martindale arrives for Universal Pictures premiere of "Cocaine Bear".



US actor Jesse Tyler Ferguson arrives for Universal Pictures premiere of "Cocaine Bear".

Eats, snorts and bereaves: Killer 'Cocaine Bear' grips Hollywood

If you go down to the movie theater Friday, you're sure of a big, angry, drug-fueled surprise. "Cocaine Bear," the new comedy-horror from Universal Pictures, hopes to shake up Hollywood with its very loosely based-on-a-true-story tale of a giant, wild bear who overdosed on narcotics. "We like to take insane ideas really seriously," joked co-producer Aditya Sood, at the film's Los Angeles premiere this week. "So 'Cocaine Bear'-it's hard to beat that one."

The movie is inspired by a real-life incident in 1985, when packages of cocaine were airdropped by smugglers in a southern US forest and later consumed by a 175-pound black bear. The real bear, quickly dubbed "Pablo Escobear" by the press, sadly died from an overdose-but the movie imagines what might have happened if it had instead developed a taste for cocaine and gone on a wild killing spree to procure more.

Writer Jimmy Warden took his idea to Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, the acclaimed producing duo behind hits like "The Lego Movie" and "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse," who in turn took it to Universal. One of Hollywood's biggest and oldest studios, Universal is known for its broad, diverse slate, ranging from last Christmas's R-rated hit "Violent Night" to the upcoming, prestigious Christopher Nolan drama "Oppenheimer."



Actress/director/producer Elizabeth Banks (right) and actress Keri Russell (left) arrive for Universal Pictures premiere of "Cocaine Bear" at Regal LA Live theatre in Los Angeles. — AFP photos

Analysts say the studio is banking on its provocative, unorthodox premise to stand out from the typical fare on offer at theaters, where superhero films reign supreme and comedies have tended to flop in recent years. "They're not going for the mainstream audiences-they are going for people who like edgy, out-there movies, who want to have some fun at the movie theatre," said Comscore analyst Paul Dergarabedian.

"Just on the face of it, when you look at the name of the movie... the tagline 'Get In Line'... it has a very independent, edgy spirit to it." The movie's trailer has been watched 16 million times on YouTube, and the bear protagonist has its own Twitter account with viral posts such as: "I'm the bear who ate cocaine. This is my story."

'Complete escape'

Unsurprisingly, the film has provoked some controversy. Marty Makary, a prominent US public health expert and author, said he was "disap-

pointed" to see Hollywood "once again sensationalize cocaine" by "portraying cocaine use as fun and funny." "We should all be offended by entertainment that makes light of drugs that are ripping apart our country," he said on Twitter. Elizabeth Banks, the "Hunger Games" actress who has previously gone behind the camera for "Pitch Perfect 2" and the 2019 "Charlie's Angels" reboot, directs the film.

She told AFP she had been inspired to make the film after reading the script at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, a time she described as "the most chaotic human history moment in hundreds of years." "I felt like there was no greater metaphor for the chaos that we were all feeling in 2020 than a bear high on cocaine." "It was so crazy and so fun and so wild that I just thought, why shouldn't we do this movie right now?" added star Keri Russell. "It's like, complete escape." — AFP

'Best chef in the world' Guy Savoy stripped of Michelin star

The Michelin Guide announced Monday the shock decision to knock a star off the Paris restaurant of Guy Savoy, frequently named the best chef in the world. The 69-year-old has held Michelin's top three-star status since 2002 for his Monnaie de Paris restaurant overlooking the Seine, which has a sister version in Caesars Palace, Las Vegas.

In November he was named best chef in the world for the sixth year running by La Liste, which aggregates thousands of reviews from around the world. Savoy's fame goes beyond the kitchen as an ambassador for the French "art de vivre"-he has pointedly rejected the fad for non-alcoholic drinks, for instance-and he lent his voice to the French version of Pixar film "Ratatouille".

But that has not stopped Michelin downgrading his establishment to two stars in its latest edition, published next Monday. It did the same for the upmarket seafood eatery of Christopher Coutanceau in La Rochelle.



In this file photo French chef Guy Savoy poses during a photo session in his restaurant in Paris. — AFP

"These are exceptional restaurants, so you can imagine that these decisions are carefully considered, supported by numerous visits from our inspectors throughout the year," Gwendal Poullennec, head of the guide, told AFP. The reasons are not made public, and communicated only to the chefs involved.

"For such important decisions, we include not just French inspectors but also some from other countries," said Poullennec. The move to downgrade restaurants is always hugely controversial, especially since the suicide 20 years ago of Bernard Loiseau-a close friend of Savoy-after his restaurant lost a star.

One chef, Marc Veyrat, unsuccessfully took the guide to court in 2019 after being stripped of a star, and said he never again wanted to see a Michelin inspector in his restaurants. Around 20 French restaurants have also been downgraded from two to one star in the latest edition of the guide. It had not downgraded anyone since 2019, conscious of the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those difficulties have continued with restaurants facing staffing shortages and, in the last year, soaring prices. But the guide says downgrades are now necessary if it is to stay relevant. "Yes, there are challenges, but they are challenges for everyone," said Poullennec. Created in 1900 by tyre manufacturers Andre and Edouard Michelin as a guide for motorists, it now has editions across Europe, Asia, North and South America. — AFP

ELEGANCE AND SENSUALITY
GRACE MILAN FASHION WEEK

Women's Fashion Week ended in Milan on Monday. Here are some of the trends that emerged for autumn-winter 2023-2024 — a return to elegance underscored by cut and quality, chic sensuality, and restrained classicism with a smattering of eccentric spice.

Elegant suits

Italian fashion houses have ditched sporty designs and streetwear for elegant, classically cut suits in refined fabrics. Trousers are long and shoe-covering. Oversized power-shoulder jackets have made way for classic cuts-waisted, belted or gathered at the back. Dolce & Gabbana showed suits with jackets that are cropped, matador style, or long but structured with wasp waists. Fendi opted for slimline jackets with a single row of buttons, discrete lapel collars and a

deconstructed men's waistcoat. Ferragamo was all cinched-waisted silhouettes, reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood divas. Max Mara's coats are gathered at the back. Tod's jackets waisted or belted, while Moschino went for suits with houndstooth and gold buttons a la Chanel.

Yeti coats

All-enveloping Yeti-style coats in furry or feathery textiles also took to the podium-a necessary addition to the skimpy underwear for those keen not to catch their deaths of cold. Gucci offered up Cruella Deville and blue fake fur. Roberto Cavalli's fake furs are an object lesson in art imitating nature. There were red feathers at Dolce & Gabbana, multicoloured plumes at Moschino. Max Mara's signature teddy bear coats are ultra snugly. MSGM varied the theme

in mauve, lemon and white boucle, with fringes or long fur. Ferragamo's iterations come in pearly grey or flaming red.

Red and black

While black was everywhere, there was still a thread of red to jive it up, in all shades from scarlet to bordeaux. Ferrari, which has launched a ready-to-wear collection, stuck to its iconic red but kept it discreet, in the lining of sombre-hued coats or in black-bordered swatches on dressing gown coats.

Dolce & Gabbana went for head-to-toe scarlet-sheer red tights, red patent sandals, red dresses, red bags, red gloves, red lipstick. Ferragamo added vermilion to minidresses and used it in splashes on black, on bakelite button to light up a black dress and in stitching on a black suit. MSGM selected raspberry red for a dress embracing the rounded

contours of a pregnant model. Prada's leather suit skirts are scarlet, while Fendi demonstrated yet again how well red marries with electric pink.

Uniforms and utility garments

Prada led the way with this trend, transforming the white of nurses' uniforms into long shirts with short trapes and the severe, old-fashioned capes of World War Two operators. The collection's officers' trousers, worn with cravats, are tight-fitted and its slimline slacks high-waisted to give them a feminine touch. There were aviators' jackets at Tod's and leather officers' belts with little pockets. Fendi's take on utility garments involved adding aprons to trousers or deconstructing blue workman's overalls. — AFP



A model presents a creation for Ferragamo



US model Kendall Jenner presents a creation for Prada



Models present creations for Fendi. — AFP photos