

# **Group connected to Polish 'LGBT-Free Zone' newspaper to host Carnegie Hall event**

Gazeta Polska Community of America, which is affiliated with an infamous far-right Polish publication, plans to host a concert at Carnegie Hall in October.

Buried deep in Carnegie Hall's schedule of upcoming events is an Oct. 24 concert titled "From Chopin to Gershwin," and in small text are the words: "Presented by Gazeta Polska Community of America."

When gay concert pianist Paul Bisaccia received a call from Poland asking him to partake in this "star-studded event," he was elated. The 64-year-old musician has performed on four continents but he has never played Carnegie Hall.

However, after searching Google and uncovering the newspaper's historic bigotry, Bisaccia found himself wondering whether he should accept.

"It is not a small thing to turn down a concert at Carnegie Hall, no one does that," he told NBC News. Gazeta Polska, a far-right weekly newspaper in Poland, is infamous for publishing anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic and anti-LGBTQ content. Just weeks ago, the publication ignited global controversy by distributing "LGBT-Free Zone" stickers in an August issue. A controversial 2017 cover read "refugees have brought deadly diseases," which many in Poland saw as echoes of Nazi-era propaganda against Jews.

Carnegie Hall spokesperson Synneve Carlino said the concert "is an event presented by an outside producer renting Carnegie Hall" and added that the venue "strongly rejects this sticker campaign and does not condone discrimination or intolerance against any group."

Carlino shared a statement from Gazeta Polska Community of America, which said, "The foundation is independent and separate from the Gazeta Polska print media and its editorial board."

However, the group's Facebook page has a longer version of this statement that notes its chapters are independent but also "supported by" the Gazeta Polska editorial board in Poland.

Maciej Rusinski, a spokesperson for Gazeta Polska Community of America, said the foundation "does not support, take part or promote" the sticker "stunt," and added that the anti-gay stickers "may be interpreted as discriminatory."

“The foundation stands against political censorship of any kind, discrimination on the basis of beliefs, nationality or sexual orientation, as well as against totalitarian systems and ideologies, and those principles are written into the charter,” Rusinski continued.

Rafal Pankowski, a sociology professor in Warsaw, Poland, and member of the anti-racism “Never Again” association in that country said the Gazeta Polska newspaper has been on his organization’s radar for some time.

“I think it became more radical under the current editor,” Pankowski said of Tomasz Sakiewicz.

As for both the Gazeta Polska Community of America and the chapters that exist around the world, Pankowski claimed they are all “a political movement built around the newspaper, and so they exist in Poland, and they exist outside of Poland.”

“It shares the political perspectives of the newspaper and Mr. Sakiewicz is very active in organizing it and leading it,” Pankowski said.

Rusinski, the Gazeta Polska Community of America spokesperson, confirmed that the U.S.-based foundation and its chapters have in fact hosted Sakiewicz at events.

Pankowski said the paper is well known in Poland for using the “apocalyptic language” of the far-right. Aside from the sticker controversy, a summer 2019 issue featured an image of rainbow paint-stained hands desecrating a statue of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus under the headlines “They want to destroy civilization” and “They want to stamp on everything that we have been.”

Another controversy in recent years, Pankowski said, came after the magazine published an article suggesting that after the Nazi invasion of Poland, the country’s Jews did not “have it that bad because the Jews in the ghetto had self government.” In fact, Poland had 3.3 million Jews before the Nazi invasion, and just 380,000 Polish Jews survived the extermination of the Nazi Holocaust, according to Yad Vashem.

Paul Bisaccia, the pianist, said he plans to decline the invitation to play at Carnegie Hall.

“To walk out on that stage is a great honor, to be asked to do it is a great honor, and to find out that the sponsor is someone who would besmirch this honor is very depressing and saddening to me,” Bisaccia said. “I’m 64 years old, I have had a happy life, and who knows — maybe Carnegie Hall will come under more pleasant and exciting circumstances.”

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