

# Opera houses sat by as I was groped on stage, soprano claims

## France

Adam Sage Paris

French opera houses have been accused of failing to protect female singers after a leading soprano claimed to have been repeatedly sexually assaulted on stage during a production.

Chloé Briot, 32, told *La Lettre du Musicien*, the classical music journal, that she had filed a criminal lawsuit after claiming to have been groped by Boris Grappe, a French baritone. Grappe played the role of her husband while performing in *L'inondation*, a French opera based on a 1929 novel by Yevgeny Zamyatin, the Russian author.

Briot said the assaults occurred during sex scenes, which she claims were used as a pretext to grab her breasts. She said her pleas for protection from stage producers and opera house directors fell on deaf ears.

Grappe denies the allegations, saying

touch me anymore. In the second scene, he violently opened my legs and put his head on my genitalia.

"During another performance he murmured to me: 'I want to hurt you.'"

She said she kept quiet at first for fear of "causing turmoil", adding: "The stakes were high: I had the leading role. It was important that everything went well."

But Briot said when the assaults resumed in Rennes, she alerted the director and asked him to pass on her concerns to his counterpart in Nantes. "No action was taken. I was extremely anguished. I was alone with my aggressor... every evening on stage and despite my pleas, nobody answered."

"Today, I am broken. I don't know how I will get back on the stage... and I feel vulnerable when I sing."

She said she had filed a lawsuit in March, at the end of the tour. Media outlets said a criminal inquiry had begun as a result.

In a statement, Grappe said: "The opera... was rehearsed and performed in the presence of an artistic team, a technical team, colleague singers, an orchestra and... the public. It is in this context my colleague Chloé Briot claims to have been sexually assaulted on stage for weeks, even months, without any of the above mentioned people noticing."

"I always followed only the stage instructions of an artistic team that was extremely attentive to the precision of the intentions and of the performance of the artists and was always present during productions."

Maitre Christophe Cottet-Bretonnier, Briot's lawyer, said Grappe's acts had gone "well beyond the scenario and the simulated sex" that had been intended.

Rennes and Nantes opera houses denied ignoring Briot and said they put in place a protocol so she did not cross paths with the male singer backstage.

Olivier Mantei, director of the Opéra-Comique house in Paris, said that when *L'inondation* is staged again in 2023 and 2024 the alleged aggressor would not be part of the cast, although he would be given roles in other operas.



Chloé Briot, 32, is suing a co-star for sexual assault

he respected scrupulously the director's instructions during the scenes and is preparing to file his own case against Briot for defamation.

French opera is braced for more damaging publicity next month when *La Lettre du Musicien* publishes an investigation into sexism and harassment that is said to be rife behind the scenes.

Briot had the leading role in *L'inondation* during what was described as a triumphant tour that took it from the prestigious Opéra-Comique in Paris to Rennes and Nantes coast between October 2019 and this February.

She said: "The assaults... happened only during the two sex scenes planned by the stage producers... in the middle of the performance, he fondled my right breast as though it was Plasticine. I tried to curl up so that he couldn't



Putting his feet up A brown bear relaxes at Katmai national park, Alaska, after spending several hours hunting for salmon

## Envoy's links to Hitler angers Poles

### Poland

Oliver Moody Berlin

Poland has left the new German ambassador to Warsaw in limbo as he is pilloried in the country's nationalist press for his father's past as an adjutant to Hitler.

Relations between the countries suffered under a barrage of anti-German rhetoric during the recent Polish presidential election campaign. This included repeated demands for Second World War reparations.

At the start of summer, Germany nominated Arndt Freiherr Freytag von Loringhoven, a former Nato intelligence chief, well-regarded ambassador to Prague and capable jazz guitarist, to take over the post in Warsaw.

Ordinarily, approval by the host government would be a formality, yet Poland has stalled on the process for more than three months.

The election last month, the pandemic and the resignation last week of Jacek Czaputowicz, the Polish foreign minister, have all caused upheaval, but

commentators in Germany suspect a calculated snub.

Peter Loew, director of the German Poland Institute, said it was rumoured that the appointment had been personally vetoed by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of the ruling right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party.

"It probably has something to do with a power struggle in the Polish government camp," Professor Loew told *The Times*. "Resentments against the Germans are always a tried and tested tool in Poland for stirring up emotions."

Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven, the ambassador's father, commanded a tank division at the battle of Stalingrad and went on to prepare Hitler's daily briefings. He was absolved of war crimes by the British and later became a deputy inspector-general of the West German armed forces.

He drew on his experience in Hitler's bunker when he worked as an adviser on the film *Downfall*, shortly before his death in 2007.

Tomasz Sommer, editor-in-chief of *Najwyższy Czas* (High Time), a conserva-

tive magazine, explained the Polish stance. "I don't like [the Germans] sending someone with this background, not only because of his father, but principally because he was heavily involved in the intelligence services," he said.

Aleks Szczerbiak, professor of politics at the University of Sussex, said he was perplexed that Germany had not noticed the potential for conflict over its choice of ambassador.

The Polish government was "trying to make one of its calling cards a strong assertion of Poland's particular view of history", Mr Szczerbiak said. "It's almost a matter of pride."

The dispute adds to the long list of grievances between the two nations, from Germany's involvement in the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia, which Poland has condemned as a geopolitical tool of the Kremlin, to the legacy of the Second World War.

Yet there are also strong trade ties: Germany is by far Poland's biggest export market, buying a greater proportion of its goods than the next four countries put together.

## Dry summer disastrous for hedgehogs

### Germany

Oliver Moody

There are growing concerns about a precipitous decline in hedgehog numbers in Europe after conservationists concluded that Germany's population of the animals was enduring its worst summer in living memory.

After decades of habitat destruction, the dry summer has taken a toll on their food sources. Although the population is difficult to estimate, the number found dead on the roads has been falling with every passing year, suggesting that they are in long-term decline.

The European hedgehog has been on Bavaria's "red list" of endangered mammals for three years but experts believe this year's drought has made matters substantially worse. The Bavarian city of Würzburg has appealed to all resi-

dents with a garden to put out water and tinned cat food because the arid, hot summer had devastated the insects the hedgehogs would normally rely on.

"Things have never been as dramatic as they are this year," it said. "The insectivore is missing the staple of its diet. [We have] had to deal with many hedgehogs that had died from thirst or starvation."

Numbers seem to be waning in Berlin too. Anne Berger, of the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wild Animal Research, carries out regular surveys of the city's parks and cemeteries. In 2016 she found 55 hedgehogs in Treptower park but

Habitat destruction and a drought have taken a deadly toll

in the latest study she saw only two, she told *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

There are similar worries across western Europe. The French League for the Protection of Birds recently asked the public to participate in a national hedgehog census after its rescue centre in Audenge, near Bordeaux, had to treat 650 ill or injured hedgehogs in a matter of months.

The Netherlands is also holding a hedgehog count next month. Koos Dijksterhuis, a nature writer, urged his compatriots to leave out bowls of water because of the "extreme drought ravaging our country".



## Forbidden fruit: Estate agent helped himself to pear crop

### Canada

Charlie Mitchell Ottawa

An estate agent has further smeared his profession's reputation by picking all the fruit from the garden of a property he was showing to prospective buyers.

Jill Chan, who owned the house in Vancouver, said that she was left "distraught" by the theft, caught on the home's security system.

She alleges that it shows Peter Yang retrieving plastic bags from his car while she was out and filling them with pears and berries from the garden.

"I don't think it's acceptable practice to bag up someone's entire garden at a home showing like a free market," she wrote on social media in a post since

deleted. "Who does this? Truly appalling." Mr Yang also allegedly invited clients to help themselves to the fruit.

Ms Chan said that the garden held sentimental value because it was her late grandmother's pride and joy. She said that she filed a complaint with the Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver, which can issue fines of up to £17,100 for code of conduct breaches.

Luxmore Realty, where Mr Yang works, issued a public apology. Charles Zhou, the managing broker, said: "I deeply apologise to the homeowner and her family members who were offended by such behaviour."

The statement added that Mr Yang regretted his mistakes and would compensate the family.