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Art Music and War: Ukrainian Case 2022

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Abstract

After the beginning of full-scale war Russia against Ukraine from 24 of February 2022, Ukrainian composers are reflecting the theme of a war in diverse ways. This article examines general underpinning concepts, guiding the composers of the present-day Ukraine, as well and their actual musical realizations, in order to 1) provide a basis for the understanding of the wartime functioning of the Ukrainian music culture; and 2) capture a specific brand of a creative response to a dramatic and oftentimes, tragic political situation. Specifically, attention in the article focuses on works *Eyes to Eyes* by Evgen Petrychenko and *Lullaby for Mariupol* by Illia Razumeiko, Roman Grygoriv and *Opera Aperta ensemble*, and investigate their structural, semantic and reception-related aspects.

Key words

art music, war, politics, Ukrainian compositions, *Eyes to Eyes*, Evgen Petrychenko, *Lullaby for Mariupol*, Illia Razumeiko, Roman Grygoriv

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine began in 2014, but a worldwide interest in and attention to Ukrainian culture in general, and art music in particular has increased with the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion on the territory of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Since then, all layers of the art scene in Ukraine, including its music life, have been drastically affected. After a period of shock and confusion, Ukrainian musicians have drastically redirected their activities, focusing on two main objectives: to support Ukrainian Army Forces in any way possible, and to reinforce cultural diplomacy, including the worldwide popularization of Ukrainian music, thus conveying the truth about the war through music. As composer Alla Zagaykevych commented,

“Ukrainian artists have a difficult mission to be with their brothers and sisters who have been fighting hard for our freedom against the Russian invader since 2014, while at the same time, appealing to the European art community by manifesting original artistic ideas. We need to find a new way to communicate with the world that knows practically nothing about Ukrainian art, especially, contemporary Ukrainian art scene.”¹

In general, scholarship shows that a correlation between music and politics is a controversial topic. Summarizing research on the subject, Garratt points to its three main aspects:

“The first vigorously segregates political music from music as an autonomous art, treating the former as a marginal, sub-artistic phenomenon. The second similarly regards political music as antithetical to art yet claims that autonomous art offers a deeper form of political engagement as well as better art. In contrast, the third position affirms the proposition that all music is political, rejecting the polarization of political and non-political art as misguided or tendentious.”²

In 2022, Ukrainian art music scene showed a sharp move from the first aspect defined by Garratt to the third one, from a strong position of “music is outside of politics” to an active engagement with the state's cultural politics. Indeed, this assertion is rather general and there are some exceptions, but it captures an overall trend. Let me provide some examples from the discussions taking place in the Ukrainian media to support this claim. First, in her 2019 article, *Music outside politics: how long will our musicians hide their views*, Yatel stresses that “*Music outside of politics is one of the most widespread ideas in the current Ukrainian infofield.*”³ Kuzyomska echoes this sentiment: “*Often, especially among*

1 ZAGAYKEVYCH, Alla. Die Möglichkeit einer Zukunft. *Musik & Ästhetik*, 2023, 27, 1, p. 74–75.

In this article, all translations from Ukrainian and German to English are done by the author.

2 GARRATT, James. *Music and Politics: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 33.

3 YATEL, Kateryna. Muzyka Poza Politykoiu: Yak Dovho Nashi Muzykanty Budut Prykhovuvaty Svoi Pohliady [Music Outside Politics: How Long Will Our Musicians Hide Their Views]. *Livroom* [online]. 2019, 27 March. [cit. 2023-26-03]. URL: https://livroom.com.ua/blogs/vote_or_die/.

Ukrainian musicians, you can hear this memorable phrase, ‘music is outside of the politics’. It is difficult to say whether this is even possible. [...] However, for the most part, musicians who adhere to such a ‘politics’, refuse to not only bring up the political situation within the country, but also anything ‘national’.”⁴ After the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Bereza has expressed a more direct opinion: “Music outside of politics became a ‘Potemkin village’ for many artists. Onstage, in the spotlight, they are ‘for peace and against war’. Out of the spotlight, they quietly support actions of the Russian government or just as quietly hope to sit it out. But we know that keeping quiet supports the aggressor, so the problem only intensifies.”⁵

This controversial situation is reflected in a handful of studies, focused on Ukrainian popular music and politics.⁶ Ukrainian art music research, however, has typically investigated music of the previous centuries vis-à-vis their contemporary political context,⁷ and has not yet addressed the role of art music at the time of the current Russian war against Ukraine. So far, this void has been filled by Western publications on this subject.⁸

But, in any case, Ukrainian art music, reflecting the war, has been written and performed, with the composers interpreting the theme of war in different ways and with a broad range of musical tools. This article examines general underpinning concepts, guiding the composers of the present-day Ukraine, as well as their actual musical realizations, in order to 1) provide a basis for the understanding of the wartime functioning of the Ukrainian music culture; and 2) capture a specific brand of a creative response to a dramatic and oftentimes, tragic political situation. Specifically, I focus on works *Eyes to Eyes* by Evgen Petrychenko and *Lullaby for Mariupol* by Illia Razumeiko, Roman Grygoriv and Opera Aperta ensemble, and investigate their structural, semantic and reception-related aspects. I maintain that, while the communicative strategies of both

4 KUZYOMSKA, Olga. Muzyka, Yaka (Ne) Poza Politykoiu [Music That is (Not) Out of Politics]. *Letters to friends* [online]. 2022, 23 January. [cit. 2023-03-26]. URL: <https://lysty.net.ua/muspolit/>.

5 BEREZA, Yurii. Music is Outside of Politics? Tell That to the Dead in Bucha. *Public. Culture* [online]. 2022, 5 April. [cit. 2023-03-26]. URL: <https://suspilne.media/225135-music-politics-tell-dead-bucha/>.

6 KLID, Bohdan. Rock, Pop and Politics in Ukraine’s 2004 Presidential Campaign and Orange Revolution. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 2007, vol. 23, No. 1, p. 118–137.

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7 KORNIJ, Lidia—SIUTA, Bogdan. *Istoriia Ukraïnskoi Muzychnoi Kultury [History of Ukrainian Music Culture]*. Kyiv: Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine, 2011.

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8 CLARK, Janine Natalya. Music, Resilience and ‘Soundscaping’: Some Reflections on the War in Ukraine. *Cultural Sociology*, 2023, 00(0), p. 1–21.

HOWLETT, Marnie. Nation-Building From (below) the Grassroots: Everyday Nationalism in Ukraine’s Bomb Shelters. *Nations and Nationalism*, 2023, vol. 29, iss. 1, p. 63–69.

compositions are directed to the audience outside of Ukraine, they embody different creative approaches to the theme of war and national identity.

General Mapping

It would be false to claim that every work, created by Ukrainian composers during 2022, is connected with the theme of war or reflects upon it. Street's discusses a correlation between music and politics, suggesting that,

"[...] if musical pleasure and choice are purely private matters of personal consequence, they are not political. It is only when musical pleasure (or musical displeasure) spills over into the public realm and into the exercise of power within it that it becomes political. It is where music inspires forms of collective thought and action that it becomes part of politics. It is where music forms a site of public deliberation, rather than private reflection, that we talk of music as political."⁹

Undoubtedly, creative impetuses and processes guiding individual Ukrainian composers are often unpredictable; furthermore, many of them are currently living abroad, working for or with different institutions, festivals, orchestras and performers. Therefore, for the purpose of this essay, I consider as political those compositions that unequivocally reflect the thematic of the war through either composers' notes and commentaries, or a musical soundscape. Such compositions may be defined as "representational" (accordingly to Brown)¹⁰, transferring many sensations and emotions of witnesses of the war into musical sounds.

Below, I discuss several representative works created since the beginning of the Russian invasion, arranging them into three categories. The first category includes the compositions, in which the authors express their wartime experience with comments on the works or with their titles: *The Fishes' Reply to St. Anthony* by Alexey Shmurak (b. 1986), *Footprints on the Sun* by Maxim Kolomiets (b. 1981), *Still* by Ihor Zavorodnii (b. 1987), *Largamento* by Olexander Rodin (b. 1975), and *Le Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* by Alla Zaykevych (b. 1966).

In the works of the second category, composers' reflection on the war experience results in a troubling soundscape, such as the sounds the air raid sirens and explosions in *Lacrimosa* by Oleksandr Shchetynskyi (b. 1960), *Lacrimosa. Bucha* by Victoria Poleva (b. 1962), *Eyes to Eyes* by Evgen Petrychenko (b. 1976), *Maria's city* by Zoltan Almashi (b. 1975), *Post* by Svyatoslav Lunyov (b. 1964), and *Kommos 2022* by Oleg Bezborodko (b. 1973).

Compositions of the third category are based on or include the documented facts of Russia's crimes, and thus, may be considered as direct political manifestations. The works in this category are installation *Gentle World* by Zavorodnii and multimedia per-

9 STREET, John. *Music and Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012, p. 8.

10 BROWN, Courtney. *Politics in music: music and political transformation from Beethoven to hip-hop*. Atlanta: Farsight Press, 2008, p. 4.

formance *Lullaby for Mariupol* by composers Illia Razumeiko (b. 1989), Roman Grygoriv (b. 1984) and Opera Aperta ensemble.

In order to convey a specific political stance for any work in the categories outlined above, choosing a target audience is imperative. I observe that Ukrainian composers are considering several factors in order to carefully identify their potential listeners, specifically,

- 1) A geographical factor: Whether a composition is directed toward an exclusively Ukrainian audience, or a foreign audience, or has no such limitations;
- 2) A listeners' artistic preferences factor: In basic terms, whether communicative properties of a composition are directed toward an art music audience, or a broader public;
- 3) A concept and means factor: A composer's expressive apparatus to convey a message of a work.

Many compositions belonging to the first and second categories have no geographical limits and are oriented towards traditional art music audience, as reflected by the location of their premiers, as well as their performing bodies: in many cases, Philharmonic concerts in Ukraine (works by Shchetynskyi, Petrychenko, Poleva) or special projects of European music ensembles (such as the Latenz Ensemble's premiere performance of compositions by Shmurak and Kolomiets).

The performances of *Lullaby for Mariupol*, representing the third category, have taken place in different European countries, targeting a larger audience. The work premiered in Vienna and Rotterdam in May 2022, followed by performances in Linz in September and in Milano in October. The installation *Gentle World* by Zavorodnii was published in his YouTube channel, undoubtedly directed toward a global audience.

I observe stark differences between the communicative goals of the works belonging to the first, second and third categories, respectively, conditioned by their conceptual frameworks. On one hand, a composer's war-time reflections may be interpreted in different ways by listeners within and outside of the country at war. On other hand, a political manifestation, expressed in music, would be probably aimed mainly at the foreign audiences. In other words, political statements, such as "we exist, we are here" and "this is the history of our fight" are very important to the Ukrainian audience, and via music, these messages have been disseminated to the outside world. It is important to stress that, while the compositions of the second category incorporate what I call "reflexional" images of the war (e.g., sounds of the air raid sirens and explosions, created by orchestral means), the works of the third category include disturbing authentic images and/or sounds of the ongoing war. While these latter compositions have a big impact on a listener, not many Ukrainians, who have experienced the horrors of the war firsthand, want to relive them. Perhaps, this is the reason why, for example, *Lullaby for Mariupol* has been performed abroad only.

In general, the newly created works demonstrate a very specific and rather unexpected approach of Ukrainian composers to the theme of war. They neither promote militarism and violence nor call for the destruction of the enemy. Mostly, in different ways, these works offer personal reflections on the tragic events, lyrical memories, and empathy for compatriots. I would like to provide supporting evidence for such a claim

through an examination of the two compositions, representing the second and third categories, respectively, of my proposed above classification of music of the Ukrainian war.

Life Under Air Raid Sirens: *Eyes to Eyes* by Evgen Petrychenko

Eyes to Eyes by Evgen Petrychenko was written for Liatoshynskiy cappella, a prominent Ukrainian music ensemble comprising the orchestra and the choir, directed by Bogdan Plish. Liatoshynskiy cappella has a broad, inclusive repertoire, from baroque to contemporary music. In June 2022, the ensemble toured Europe with performances of Ukrainian music, from folk songs to newly created works, including Petrychenko's *Eyes to Eyes*. As the composer shared during our conversation,

*"In May and June 2022, Liatoshynskiy cappella toured Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. The purpose of the tour was to introduce the audience to the music of Ukrainian composers. [...] In order for the European audience to understand Ukrainians (their pain, their drive to prevail, their current living conditions, etc.), a decision was made to write a new work that would capture these ideas in the most accessible way. That's how Eyes to Eyes came to being."*¹¹

This work's concept, its thematic material, structure, and the composer's timbral choices all were conditioned by specific creative objectives:

- The composition had to reflect the current political situation in the country; therefore, it must be dedicated to the theme of the war;
- The work had to fit into the ensemble's repertoire of both contemporary and early Ukrainian music;
- The compositional technique and musical language of the work had to be familiar and accessible for the broader audience.

I argue, Petrychenko succeeded in fulfilling the goals he posed for himself. The photographs of Azovstal defenders served as a powerful impetus for the creative process. As Petrychenko commented, *"Exhausted, but bright and sincere eyes of the Azovstal defenders captivated my imagination."* This both explains the composition's title, *Eyes to Eyes*, and its concept—the stark juxtaposition of the peacefulness, expressed through the work's main theme, and the soundscape of the war, a recreated air raid siren sound that has become the fact of the Ukrainians' everyday life.

The work is written for the symphony orchestra with solo violin, viola, cello and harpsichord, providing Liatoshynskiy cappella with an opportunity to combine it with other works in their programming. For example, in one concert, *Eyes to Eyes* was performed together with the works by both contemporary and classical Ukrainian authors; in another, combined with Western European baroque music. Moreover, the considerations of the

11 From a private conversation with the author, 2023-06-04.

ensemble's programming strategies shaped Petrychenko's approach to the issue of the work's accessibility.

Eyes to Eyes is a composition in three traditional parts – exposition, development and recapitulation. The main theme, assigned to the solo violin, exhibits common to romantic style features: A major tonality, clearly defined phrasing, T–D functional structure of the first phrase, gradually expanding pitch range, and motivic repetition (Example 1).

The work as a whole is built on the interaction of these three elements: the exposition features a contrapuntal overlap of the first theme in the solo parts with the siren sounds imitation; the development transforms the theme using the means of textural and rhythmic variation; and in the recapitulation, the harpsichord's quasi-improvisation and the siren sounds return. In the climax zone, before the recapitulation, the main theme sounds in the trumpet part, accompanied by the orchestral tutti.

The result is a rather traditional composition, which may enjoy a popularity among the classic music audience or, perhaps, within a larger circle of listeners. In the composer's words, "*This is a musical narrative of the war sirens, against and in spite of which, life is moving forward. Maybe because it evokes a broad, powerful range of emotions, the piece has been positively received in both Ukraine and Europe.*"

Eyes to Eyes is a rather atypical work for the 2022 Ukrainian art music scene. A straightforwardness of the war theme interpretation, expressed in the direct juxtaposition of the "theme of life" and the soundscape of war, coupled with an overall romantic music language, make this composition function more like a political poster rather than an original musical artwork. Still, such pieces, aimed at a larger, diversified audience, have their own place within Ukrainian musical landscape as an embodiment of cultural diplomacy.

Looking for Empathy: *Lullaby for Mariupol* by Illia Razumeiko, Roman Grygoriv, and Ensemble *Opera Aperta*

A creative collaboration of the Grygoriv & Razumeiko duo is provocative and uncommon for the Ukrainian music art scene in general. These composers have been working together for a long time and a major outcome of their partnership are several operas and musical theater compositions. Among them are opera-requiem *Iyov* (2015), opera-circus *Babylon* (2016), opera-ballet *The Ark* (2017), trap-opera *Wozzeck* (2017), archaeological opera *Chornobyl'dorf* (2020), and *GENESIS. Opera of Memory in 13 Mise-en-scene* (2022).

Grygoriv & Razumeiko are keenly aware of their listeners' capabilities and expectations. I observe that their audience consists of young and middle-aged intellectuals, interested in contemporary philosophy, literature, theater, jazz, and rock music. Although this audience does not necessarily have much experience with contemporary music, it welcomes such an experience, both emotionally and intellectually. Having their potential listeners in mind, Grygoriv & Razumeiko developed a compositional style that can be best described as popular art music. In every composition by Grygoriv & Razumeiko, one can find different combinations of the following compositional and stylistic elements:

- Using the traditional concept of an opera but with a postmodern concept of the plot. The composer commonly utilizes Biblical subjects, well-known literary plots (*Hamlet*, *Wozzeck*), modernist writings of Borges, Huizinga, Hesse, and other authors;
- Using multimedia and scenography, shocking for the Ukrainian audience (for example, the musical instruments are broken on stage; a video and live performance layers are connected; singers perform nude);

- Combination of contemporary art music and popular music idioms;
- Using quotations from well-known compositions (for example, in *Opera Lingua*, the composers used quotations from Handel's *Concerto Grosso* in d minor, Bach's *Musikalische Opfer*, and Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*);
- Using folk material;
- Applying aleatoric and extended performance techniques;
- Using different noises and their combinations with pitches, as well as extremely loud and quiet dynamics.

Grygoriv & Razumeiko's work *Lullaby for Mariupol* exhibits similar features as those found in their operas, only in the context of a political statement, their effect has been dramatically amplified. As mentioned above, this composition was created in Spring of 2022 for a non-Ukrainian audience, in order to memorialize the tragedy of Mariupol, which had taken place at the time of the work's creation and premiere. As Roman Grygoriv said, "The *Lullaby for Mariupol's* function is not only about art. *Mariupol* has a cultural and diplomatic mission at least, and at most, it proves that we exist."¹³

In *Lullaby for Mariupol*, Grygoriv & Razumeiko use the following elements from their toolbox, delineated above:

- There is a dramatic footage by Dmytro Tyntiuk of the city under attack, and, at the climactic point of the work, a video, taken by a drone, of completely destroyed Mariupol;
- Improvisation is the main compositional mean. The performance combines micro-tonal instrumental improvisation on flute, duduk and Ukrainian folk instruments, such as bandura and tsymbaly, with vocal improvisations in the folk style;
- Extended performance techniques are utilized throughout, including playing the bandura like the tsymbaly, i.e., changing the position of the bandura to horizontal, and using sticks;
- Composers use extreme ranges of sounds and noises to achieve dramatic effect;
- Authentic folk material is used in the form of Ukrainian lullabies.

The latter is especially significant, as it reflects a general trend in the current Ukrainian cultural practices. Lullabies are heard during different kinds of music events, in newly created music, and at political actions. Besides *Lullaby for Mariupol*, there is an installation titled *Lullabies for the Land* by Yuval Avital that combines lullabies from different Ukrainian regions, sung in the vernacular manner. Another example is *Lullaby* by Darya Koltsova, a musical ritual *in memoriam* of all Ukrainian children killed in the war. Furthermore, *Maria's city* by Almashi and *Still* by Zavorodnii intimate lullabies idiomatically. Such a prominence of lullaby in the contemporary Ukrainian music scene is not surprising: semantically, a lullaby rejects the war since the two concepts are incompatible with one another. Moreover, idiomatically, lullabies are truly borderless, global phenomena. In *Lullaby for Mariupol*, this strategic compositional device reinforces the effectiveness of Grygoriv & Razumeiko's stylistic and structural choices.

13 SAFIAN, Dzenyslava. "Lullaby for Mariupol" through the creators' and participants' eyes. *The Claquers* [online]. [cit. 2023-04-01]. URL: <https://theclaquers.com/en/posts/9336>.

Razumeiko describes the role of their creative collaboration with Grygoriv in this way:

“In the beginning, we created a minimalist instrumental piece, and then we expanded it to a multimedia performance. In this work, our role as composers is limited to the general considerations of form and other structural means, because it is not a classical Western European composition with a precise score, but rather a meditative funeral ritual that combines traditional vocals, microtonal improvisations of the quartet, and the video art.”¹⁴

Overall, a combination of a microtonal improvisation heard on the loudspeakers, folk singing, and a video layer creates a powerful and effective event, encapsulating human life under bombing and shelling. And, since the most important element of a well-planned political manifestation is its result, in this case, it is the listeners’ reception of the work. The following are excerpts from reflections of the performers, in which they describe the reaction of the audience during the performance.

Roman Grygoriv, composer:

“We didn’t give any chance to the public to remain indifferent. At the culmination, we showed a video where a drone flies over the destroyed Mariupol, displaying suffering and death. There was only one voice, and we all gradually joined in as a kind of a metronome, like a clock. It was the voice of Mariupol, surrounded by explosions. It was illustrative, but very strong. After the performance, we were approached by musicians and festival directors with tears in their eyes.”¹⁵

Anna Rudenko, vocals:

“We were heard, and we managed to reach out, I’m sure. In the eyes of the audience, I saw understanding and compassion, pain and delight, and the eyes do not lie.”¹⁶

Marichka Shtyrbulova, vocals:

“In my experience, the performance in Rotterdam was the most impactful. The whole work ends with the lullaby that we sing, and there is one chord that is held for half a phrase. When we finished [the performance], for a very long time, like five or seven minutes, there was just silence in the hall. Loud, mindful silence. There was no applause; no one moved. It was both a very powerful, but also a sad, difficult, and touching [experience]. This is the only possible reaction to this performance, I think.”¹⁷

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

Conclusion

In 2022, Velasco-Pufleau published an article titled *Is music a weapon of propaganda like the others? Reflections on the writing of a text of critical opinion in the context of war* where he criticized President Volodymyr Zelensky's public appeal at the 64th Annual Grammy Awards ceremony, and compared the concerts in support of Ukraine, held in Vilnius (Lithuania) and Berlin (Germany) to the Russian concert in Palmira (Syria) in May 2016. One of Velasco-Pufleau's conclusions is:

*"These concerts give ready-made answers and prevent us from asking questions in different ways. They show how European musicians and media are taking part, wittingly or not, in the war of information between Ukraine and Russia. The musicians' intentions are good: they want to support the beleaguered Ukraine as well as they can, as their governments' military, economic and diplomatic responses fluctuate or seem less than satisfactory. However, musicians have to be fair and accept that their performances cannot 'tell the truth' about the war in Ukraine. Rather, their music is being used as war propaganda, exacerbating binary media representations: good-evil, perpetrator-victim, civilization-barbarism."*¹⁸

Based on my investigation of the Ukrainian composers' works, focused on the theme of war, I argue that such binary propaganda oppositions, proposed by Velasco-Pufleau, are irrelevant. Most of the musical works created in 2022 inspire reflection, a wide range of emotions, and emphasize a personal, subjective point of view. Ukrainian composers, performers, and their audience all are people, whose life, as they knew it, has been completely destroyed and their world shattered into pieces. And it is the truth about the war that Ukrainian art music is trying to convey. I maintain, it is only in such a way that Ukrainian music may be interpreted as a political statement, extending beyond any one person's experience and emotions, and appealing to the global empathy and understanding. Perhaps, most compositions mentioned in this essay are not candidates for the rank of a masterpiece; probably, they will have a short performative life, but all of them are formulating the history of Ukrainian culture at this very moment, the time of the war.

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