Dmitro Larin

The Kyiv Symphony Orchestra, in a photo taken before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

# Listening to Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine this winter, orchestras around the world opened their concerts by performing the Ukrainian National Anthem in support of the country. That show of solidarity, while heartening, reminds us that Ukraine's classical composers and musical contributions are far more significant than many people realize, writes **Elena Dubinets**, and it's time for that to change.

Elena Dubinets

On February 26 of this year, a concert by the London Philharmonic Orchestra at Royal Festival Hall began with a standing ovation. But it was not for the musicians or the composers; it was for a civic cause reflected in the music. Russia had launched a full-scale military invasion into Ukraine just two days earlier, and London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) became one of the first ensembles in the world to add the Ukrainian National Anthem to a concert as a small but meaningful gesture of solidarity with the people of a sovereign nation fighting for their country with courage and dignity. As musicians, we have the power and the responsibility to participate actively in the ongoing struggle for a better world, and the LPO, where I am the artistic director, found it necessary to make a musical statement about the Ukrainian war.

Ukrainian music is less known than it ought to be. That's due to its close association with Russian music, which has overshadowed it while at the same time significantly imbibing Ukrainian influences. In my 2021 book *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned,* I discuss the circumstances of many composers who, like Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff, and others, emigrated from Russian and Soviet territories during the past dozen decades. Despite a multitude of roots and influences—the border crossings, diasporic peregrinations, and homecomings inevitably affecting these composers' creative expressions—and despite a diverse range of different ethnicities from within the former Soviet Union, these composers continue to be identified by many listeners, critics, and scholars as "Russian."

Most of these ethnicities are distinct and iconic; in fact, in many cases their representatives strongly disassociate themselves from Russia. In a 2018 interview, Georgian composer Giya Kancheli (1935-2019) referred to the ethnopolitical conflict over Georgia's autonomous region of South Ossetia and noted bitterly that Russia "hasn't lost its imperial ambitions." Ukrainian composer Leonid Hrabovsky, who lived in Moscow for nine years before emigrating to the U.S., said to me in 2018: "I don't refer to myself as a member of the 'Russian world.' My attitude to its representatives entirely depends on whether or not they think that Ukrainians are a separate nation, like, let's say, Poles or Bulgarians. Fortunately, there are many like-minded people in Russia, and a normal dialogue is not excluded. Let's live with a hope." This hope is disappearing in front of our eyes as Russia invades Kyiv.

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My husband is from Ukraine, I am a Jew from Moscow, and our native countries are now at war. Neither of us is content with current Russian policies. Due to our entangled family history, very typical for many "Russian" families, we don't ever say that we are Russians—and, strictly speaking, we aren't, either by ethnicity or nationality, even though "Russian" is the label usually slapped on all former citizens of the USSR, regardless of their actual ethnicity or self-identification. The war that was recently instigated by my native country against my husband's country is a shared tragedy of many people. It is not only a war against Ukraine; it is also a war against Europe, and against our future.

What the Russian government is forgetting is real, documented history. In his pre-war February 21 speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin presented Ukraine as part of Russia's imperial world rather than as a fully independent state, depriving it of statehood and nationhood. The truth is that, as an ethnic and territorial entity, Ukraine is much older than Russia. Ukraine is a geographic and cultural ancestor of Russia, and the latter derived its name from the name of the first Slavic state, which existed between the ninth and thirteenth centuries: Kyivan Rus', named after Kyiv, the current capital of Ukraine. Moscow didn't even exist when Kyiv was already a major metropolis. Incidentally, Kyivan Rus' was the location of Alexander Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*, known by music lovers for its *Polovtsian Dances*.

Russian music—like the Russian empire—has never been *simply* Russian. Even as it was wearing the patriotic trappings of official Russian nationalism, Russian music was always multiethnic and multicultural. Many of the most "Russian" composers have embodied a heady blend of ethnicities and characteristics, and the Ukrainian element has always been an important layer of Russian music. For example, Tchaikovsky wrote his Symphony No. 2 while spending a summer in Ukraine; he used three

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On March 9, musicians from the Kyiv-Classic Symphony Orchestra, which is part of the Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music, performed a 25-minute, nationally televised concert in Kyiv's central Maidan Square. Led by Herman Makarenko, the musicians performed works including Ukraine's National Anthem, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," and "Lileya," a ballad by Konstantin Dankevich.

Ukrainian folk songs in it. The subtitle of the symphony—"Little Russian"—means "Ukrainian," as "Little Russia" or "Malorus" was a term used by Russians to designate Ukraine's territory as part of the Russian empire. Ukrainians—among them such cultural figures as Taras Shevchenko and Nikolai Gogol—have found the "Little Russian" label insulting and demeaning.

In the 1910s and 1920s, such major Ukrainian composers as Boris Lyatoshinsky, Mykola Leontovich, Lev Revutsky, and Mihail Verikovsky were creating symphonic music with a distinctive national approach. By the 1960s and 1970s, a number of important avant-garde Ukrainian composers—among them Valentyn Silvestrov, Vitalii Hodzatsky, Leonid Hrabovsky, Valentyn Bibik, Lesya Dychko, Myroslav Skoryk, Volodymyr Zahortsev, Yevhen Stankovych, Ivan Karabyts, and Volodymyr Huba—managed to establish their individual voices within the Soviet musical culture. In the early 1960s, Leonid Hrabovsky's *Symphonic Frescos* and Valentyn Silvestrov's Symphony No. 1 opened a new, Ukrainian world in the Soviet symphonic canon, characterized by a connection with Ukrainian folk, choral, and sacred music and vivid lyrical expression.

**Towards the end of the twentieth century, Ukrainian music distinguished itself as a "national school," and there are exciting new composers on the Ukrainian musical horizon.**

Towards the end of the twentieth century, as Ukraine was gaining independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian music distinguished itself as a "national school," and exciting new voices on the Ukrainian music horizon include Hanna Havrylets, Ihor Shcherbakov, Sviatoslav Luniov, Hennady Liashenko, Victoria Poliova, Oleksandr Shchetynskyi, Bohdan Kryvopust, Bohdana Froliak, Oleksii Retynskyi, and others.

Ukrainian music has become a major part of not just Russian but also international musical legacy, and especially of American music. Leonard Bernstein was the son of Ukrainian-Jewish parents. American composers Leo Ornstein and Dimitri Tiomkin were born in Ukraine. Another émigré, Joseph Schillinger, was born in Kharkiv and became a famous private music composition teacher, mentoring George Gershwin, who studied with him up to the premiere of *Porgy and Bess*. The unforgettable melody "Summertime" in *Porgy and Bess* was borrowed, in part, from the Ukrainian folk song "Ot hodit' son kolo vikon" ("A Dream Passes by the

Windows"). One of the most beloved Christmas carols, "Carol of the Bells," originates from the Ukrainian New Year's song "Shchedryk" ("The Little Swallow"), first arranged by Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych in 1916 and published with new lyrics by Peter J. Wilhousky in 1936.

The importance of the Ukrainian school of instrumental performance is broadly known. Pianist Vladimir Horowitz was born in Kyiv. Odessa, one of the largest Ukrainian cities, gave the world talented pianists and violinists: David Oistrakh, Nathan Milstein, and Emil Gilels were born there, and Sviatoslav Richter was born in the Ukrainian city of Zhytomyr but lived and studied in Odessa for a long period. In 2021, the Ukrainian conductor Oksana Lyniv became the first woman conductor in the history of the Bayreuth Opera Festival, leading *The Flying Dutchman* at the festival's opening; she is also the first woman chief conductor of an Italian opera orchestra as general music director of the Teatro Comunale di Bologna. Ukraine has earned its place in the pantheon of classical music.

The unity of the Western countries in supporting Ukraine is encouraging. And the orchestral community has become an important contributor in this process. In the first weekend of the war, aside from the Ukrainian National Anthem, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chief Conductor Vladimir Jurowski—whose family has Russian, Jewish, and Ukrainian roots—performed Symphony No. 1 by 19th-century Ukrainian composer Mykhailo Verbytsky. In mid-March, the London Philharmonic will perform Valentyn Silvestrov's Symphony No. 4. Other orchestras will follow and, sooner rather than later, Ukrainian music will become an essential part of the symphonic repertoire. S

ELENA DUBINETS is the artistic director of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. She previously held top artistic planning positions at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the Seattle Symphony. She received her MA and PhD degrees from the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Russia and has lived in the U.S. since 1996, moving to London in 2021.

## RESOURCES

The Ukrainianlive.org website has extensive information about historic and contemporary Ukrainian composers, available scores, and an app featuring music by Ukrainian composers of classical music. The "Stand with Ukraine" section of the Lviv National Opera's website at opera.lviv.ua/en/standwithukraine/ includes information and links to several orchestral scores by Ukrainian composers. The American Musicological Society has posted "Music from Ukraine: A Collaborative Portrait Gallery in March 2022," with wide-ranging essays, videos, and information about Ukraine's classical music scene at https://musicologynow.org/music-from-ukraine/.