

GLOBAL ASSIST

UKRAINE IS ONLY THE MOST RECENT TRAGIC CONFLICT TO CREATE REFUGEES BY THE MILLIONS. ORCHESTRAS AND OTHERS IN THE CLASSICAL MUSIC COMMUNITY ARE TAKING ACTION TO HELP DISPLACED ARTISTS AS THEY NAVIGATE LIFE AWAY FROM HOME.

BY JEREMY REYNOLDS



Courtesy Jessica Lustig

Ahmad Sarmast, founder of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, in Portugal with musicians from Zohra, the school's orchestra of girls and young women.



Yo-Yo Ma helps tune the violin of a student at the Escola Artistica de Musica Do Conservatorio Nacional in Lisbon, Portugal in March 2022. The violinist was one of the last Afghanistan National Institute of Music students to be evacuated from Kabul to Lisbon in 2021.



On the tarmac in Portugal awaiting a plane from Doha carrying young émigré musicians from the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, left to right: Jessica Lustig, ANIM founder Ahmad Sarmast, and Lesley Rosenthal. Lustig, a co-founder of the music publicity firm 21C Media, and Rosenthal, the Juilliard School's COO, worked with Sarmast to help Afghan musicians resettle in Portugal after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan last summer.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February, many Ukrainian musicians fled the country. Some took up their instruments to play the music of their homeland. Some took up arms. Marta Krechkovsky, a violinist in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, immigrated to Canada when she was 12 to compete in music competitions, but she still has family in Ukraine. One of her cousins, a piano teacher at the University of Kyiv, fled to the Western part of the country and is now teaching lessons on Zoom. Another cousin, a violinist with the Kyiv National Opera, signed up for territorial defense and is now serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Instead of a violin, he now carries a rifle. Instead of the sounds of pounding timpani, there are mortar blasts. Instead of woodwinds, there are



The Kyiv Symphony Orchestra in front of Ukraine's parliament building, Verkhovna Rada, in Kyiv, before the war. At press time, many orchestra musicians were granted leave from military service to perform on tour in Europe.



The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's Concert for Peace on April 2, 2022 featured PSO violinist Marta Krechkovsky (center), who was born in Ukraine and still has relatives there. Music Director Manfred Honeck (to Krechkovsky's left), led the concert, which raised funds to support humanitarian relief for the people of Ukraine and featured pianist Leif Ove Andsnes, two Pittsburgh choirs, and Pittsburgh Opera Resident Artists.



Pittsburgh Symphony violinist Marta Krechkovsky says while it's "amazing to see everyone rally around" in support of Ukraine during the war, she worries about one of her cousins, a violinist with the Kyiv National Opera now serving in Ukraine's armed forces. "I just wonder when they're going to be able to go back home," Krechkovsky says. "I hope it's soon."

sirens. "We're constantly worried he'll be sent into the East. He's not from a military background, after all," Krechkovsky says. "He does whatever he's asked. He's a soldier now."

Musicians, orchestras, and other members of the classical music community are playing important roles during this and other global crises, rolling up sleeves and doing what they can to raise awareness and money and to create community as conflicts rage and force millions to leave their homes to seek safety. Many concerts by American orchestras this February and March opened with musicians standing up to perform the Ukrainian National Anthem. Some orchestras adapted existing programs by adding repertoire by Ukrainian composers, and other orchestras held fundraisers to assist the victims of the war in Ukraine. As of April, an estimated 6 million people have been forced to leave that country.

The conflict in Ukraine may have

gotten the bulk of the media attention, but it is far from the only world situation to have created refugee and internally displaced communities. Heartrending images of Afghans' desperate attempts to leave in August 2021, after the Taliban's takeover of the government, were followed several months later by the

IN TIMES OF WAR AND CONFLICT, MUSIC CAN FUNCTION AS A SYMBOL FOR SOLIDARITY AND IDENTITY AND HOPE.

image of young Afghanistan National Institute of Music musicians arriving safely in Portugal, where they have been granted asylum. Other musicians have escaped the clashes in their countries and settled permanently in the United States, among them Syrian American

clarinetist and composer Kinan Azmeh, whose native country has been embroiled in a civil war for more than a decade. The human rights abuses of the Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang province in China resulted in dangerous and difficult realities, including for Uyghur musicians; some of those who fled their homeland

have become members of Lidiya Yankovskaya's U.S.-based Refugee Orchestra Project. The Seattle Symphony this spring hosted a fundraising concert at Benaroya Hall entitled "The Mayors' Concert for Ukraine and Refugees Worldwide," with proceeds going to Ukrainian refugees in Europe and refugee groups in Seattle and elsewhere in King County. In local

press reports, Valeriy Goloborodko, the Honorary Consul General of Ukraine in Seattle, said, "The Symphony's musicians volunteering for this concert is yet another example of how people are contributing so much to help the people of Ukraine." In the Houston Symphony's



Conductor Christopher Rountree and the Houston Symphony at the orchestra's June 2019 "Resilient Sounds" program featuring works created jointly by local composers and recent refugees to Houston. Taking a bow after that evening's performance of Victor Rangel's *To Dream of Jasmine*, were (left to right, in front of orchestra) filmmaker Erica Cheung, Dayana Halawo, a community leader and refugee from Syria, and Rangel. *To Dream of Jasmine* tells the story of Halawo's flight from the Syrian war with her family.



Jimmy López Bellido, then the Houston Symphony's composer in residence, led the orchestra's "Resilient Sounds" project pairing local composers with people recently resettled in Houston, including refugees from the Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Syria, and more.

MUSICIANS, ORCHESTRAS, AND OTHERS IN CLASSICAL MUSIC ARE DOING WHAT THEY CAN TO RAISE AWARENESS AND MONEY AND TO CREATE COMMUNITY FOR PEOPLE FORCED TO LEAVE THEIR COUNTRIES TO SEEK SAFETY.

"Resilient Sounds" series, composers are paired with members of the city's diverse refugee communities to create new works.

In times of war and conflict, music can function as a symbol for solidarity and identity and hope. It can be a rallying cry against invasion and injustice. It can help humanize displaced communities and show that the ties that bind humanity are stronger than their differences. It can represent a piece of home that travels wherever displaced people find welcome and safety. And it can be a source of comfort and hope to those on the front lines. "On his day off from the Armed Services all he wanted

to do was pick up his violin and practice," Krechkovsky says of her cousin.

Battling Silence

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's recent rise to power cast a deathly hush over the land, as the fundamentalist group has banned playing or even listening to music. The consequences for doing so can be fatal. Taliban soldiers have murdered musicians at weddings and celebrations. Afghans have been killed for listening to music on a radio or phone, pulled from cars and beaten mercilessly. Since August, musicians have sold and burned instruments out of fear of retribution. This is the second time the Taliban has



Justin Mohling

"After the uprising and the crisis that followed, I switched from thinking of music as a luxury. Art making became more urgent," says clarinetist and composer Kinan Azmeh, originally from Damascus, Syria.

instilled such a ban. The first was in the 1990s, causing numerous professionals and educators to flee to Pakistan, Iran, India, Germany, and elsewhere.

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM), founded 2010 in Kabul by Dr. Ahmad Sarmast in part to bring back some of that lost talent and knowledge, shut its doors when the Taliban took over the city last summer. "This was a unique school, one of the only co-ed schools in the country that provided complete secondary education," says Jessica Lustig, a board member of Friends of ANIM, a charitable group that supports the school, which provides instruction in both Western and Afghan music. "For girls over the age of 12 it was already one of the few places they could go and learn math and history and science in the country. That's one of the reasons the school was so irritating to the Taliban." Lustig, a founding partner of 21C Media Group, a music publicity firm based in New York, worked tirelessly to secure transport and asylum for the school's 273 students and faculty in Lisbon, Portugal, "the only country in the world that offered any kind of opportunity for the group asylum," she says.

After a harrowing few months, school started once more for the institute in February in Lisbon, Portugal, ensuring the preservation of Afghan music traditions. The Afghan students have begun attending regular high school



Syrian American clarinetist Kinan Azmeh (center) performed with musicians from the Orchestra of St. Luke's in "Far from Home," an April 2022 program featuring three of Azmeh's compositions that reflect on the personal significance of "home." Performing with Azmeh were OSL violinists Jesse Mills and Alexander Fortes, violist Katarzyna Bryla-Weiss, cellist Sujin Lee, and bassist John Feeney (not pictured).

as well as the national conservatory for gifted musicians of Lisbon and taking intensive Portuguese classes. Yo-Yo Ma visited in March to perform with a double quartet: four Portuguese students and four Afghan students. “The fervent hope is that one day the school will reopen in Kabul and bring this Afghan music back home where it belongs,” Lustig says, explaining that under the Taliban’s rule an entire musical tradition is being wiped out. “Right now the entire country is silent, with musicians being tortured and heckled. I think people would be outraged if they knew, but people don’t realize it’s still happening.”

Pieces of Home

Syrian American clarinetist Kinan Azmeh has been pondering the concept of “home” in his music for more than a decade. He arrived in the U.S. a week before 9/11 and became a citizen in July 2021. In 2010, Azmeh, living in New York, watched the Syrian uprising on TV as well as the violence of the government’s response. Azmeh says that feelings of hopelessness and loss drowned out his creativity for a year before he realized that performing was itself an act of freedom. “After the uprising and the crisis that followed, I switched from thinking of music as a luxury. Art making became more urgent,” he says. His first composition after the crisis, “A Sad Morning, Every Morning,” became the cornerstone of a multimedia project, “Home Within,” which Azmeh has since performed around the world in concert halls and refugee centers alike, raising money for humanitarian aid for Syrians and others. In March, musicians of the Silk Road Ensemble joined Azmeh, a long-standing member, for performances in multiple U.S. cities.

“As artists we can open windows and raise awareness, but the fact that you can move people with these creations—humanity needs that,” he says. “I think back to the Rwandan genocide in the early 1990s. I’m embarrassed to admit, I watch the news, but did I do anything? No. It felt way beyond anything I could do. But I would like people to not feel the same, whether it’s Syria or Ukraine.”

While it wasn’t directly targeted to refugee communities, “Home Within” touches on a question intrinsic to

displaced populations: Where is home? Azmeh’s answer is personal: “Home is the place you wish well for, where you contribute without having to justify it.” When he takes “Home Within” to a refugee community, he says he tries to contribute and make it meaningful to the groups he interacts with, even if it’s only for a day. This is particularly true when working with displaced children, he says,

describing how he helped Syrian girls to write a song using the names of boys they liked. “It was an amazing situation,” he says. “That’s where these kids should be in life, and I try to help them realize that they can have a voice. But that same night you go back to your hotel, while the kids go back to sleep in a tent sometimes. This part kills me.”

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Lidiya Yankovskaya conducts the Refugee Orchestra at National Sawdust in Brooklyn, New York. Yankovskaya was once a refugee, and the orchestra's members include musicians who have come to the U.S. as refugees from all over the world.



"These performances humanize the refugee community," says conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya, who founded the Refugee Orchestra Project in 2015. "Seeing people performing together on stage, hearing composers and performers share their stories with the audience, is a powerful thing."

Resettlement Blues

Catastrophe and war can displace refugees to any part of the world, but U.S. State Department data shows that many of these individuals' and families' roads led to the Lone Star State. Between 2010 and 2019, nearly 57,000 refugees went to Texas, more than any other state in the U.S. In recent years, the Houston Symphony Orchestra has worked to engage directly and personally with that population through its work with Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, a local organization that helps resettle refugees.

During the 2018-2019 season, the orchestra launched "Resilient Sounds," pairing six local composers from the Rice Shepherd

School and the University of Houston Moores School of Music with six recently resettled refugees identified by Interfaith. The composers worked with artistic partners—some of the works involved poetry or dance or visual art—to tell the tale of these refugees' journeys and experiences. "People keep getting displaced on a staggering scale," says HSO Executive Director and CEO John Mangum. "The long-term goal with this project is to help tell stories and process stories in the pursuit of creating mutual understanding."

Jimmy López Bellido, the orchestra's composer-in-residence at the time, shepherded the project, which included refugees from the Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Syria, and elsewhere. "Resilient Sounds" came to fruition in the summer of 2019, when the six works debuted to a sold-out community venue with listeners from the neighborhood as well from as the refugees' networks and symphony patrons. "The energy that night was just tremendous," Mangum says, adding that the event was considered a huge success. The original plan had been to continue developing the six works—but COVID-19 threw an all-too-familiar wrench. "Some of the composers have moved on, but we'd like to continue the work that we started," Mangum adds. "This project shows that we have much more in common with these six refugees than what makes us different. Music helps us reflect on these commonalities and our shared human experience."

A Refugee Orchestra

"Refugees often don't talk about refugee status, they don't want it to define them," says Lidiya Yankovskaya, founder and conductor of the Refugee Orchestra Project, an ensemble of top-level musicians from around the globe. "They want to define their own lives for who they are." Yankovskaya, a Russian-American conductor who specializes in new music and operatic rarities and participated

in the League of American Orchestras Bruno Walter National Conductor Preview, is a refugee herself. Her family fled to the U.S. in the '90s to escape anti-Semitism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She founded the Refugee Orchestra Project in 2015 to raise money for Syrian aid but quickly discovered an additional important function for an orchestra of displaced musicians. "These performances humanize the refugee community," she says. "Seeing people performing together on stage, hearing composers and performers share their stories with the audience, is a powerful thing."

The orchestra soon began receiving invitations for additional performances in the U.S. and abroad. It's grown significantly since it was founded, developing a network of professional musicians and performing a mix of Western classical music as well as the traditional music of some of the orchestra's members, partnering at times with existing orchestras. "The main focus is on spreading awareness of the issues," Yankovskaya says. "There are so many really high-level musicians coming into the country with few connections. Maybe they have studied in ways that are slightly less traditional." The Refugee Orchestra Project has members from the Uyghur Muslim community as well as from Myanmar, Armenia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, South and Central America, and more. They're currently working with the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, partnering with the Veterans Association on a Memorial Day performance intended to help Ukrainian refugees and showcase music from the organization's member communities. "This opens cultural understanding," Yankovskaya explains. "Even musicians don't realize there are such incredible musical styles. I think U.S. orchestras can learn from this. In order to create a unified sound we think that people have to come from a unified cookie-cutter background and approach. But that's not the case."

On the world stage, orchestras and opera companies large and small continue to perform the Ukrainian Anthem and music by Ukrainian composers. The Metropolitan Opera in New York and the Polish National Opera in Warsaw have partnered with musicians from

Ukraine to create the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra, scheduled to tour Europe and the U.S. in August. Krechkovsky, the Pittsburgh Symphony violinist, says that while it's "amazing to see everyone rally around this," the announcement of the tour was bittersweet. Her cousin could perhaps have qualified for an exemption from the armed forces for such a tour. Now, he's defending his homeland, practicing when he can, and hoping for

a better tomorrow. "I just wonder when they're going to be able to go back home," Krechkovsky says. "I hope it's soon." **S**

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