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Ukrainian Classical Music in the Public Sphere Amid the Russo-Ukrainian War: 2022–2023

Summary: This article discusses the state of Ukrainian classical music during the first years of the full-scale Russian invasion, the understanding of which requires familiarity with the historical context and the rhetoric of post-colonial studies. The cultural confrontation between Ukraine and Russia reached its peak during this period, leading to a significant decline in the promotion and performance of Russian classical music both within Ukraine and internationally. Since 2022, a shift in the Ukrainian musical landscape—marked by the revitalisation of repertoire politics and an active process of derussification has been observed. This positive development is demonstrated in Ukraine's opera houses and their ongoing repertoire renewal: this includes *Kateryna* by Oleksandr Rodin (Odesa), *Fearful Revenge* by Ievhen Stankovych (Lviv), and *Vyshyvanyi. The King of Ukraine* by Alla Zahaikevych (Kharkiv). The Ukrainian opera *Chornobyl'dorf* by Roman Hryhoriv and Illia Razumetskyi is regarded as one of the best modern repertoire operas. The staging of *Genesis. Opera of Memory* by the same authors in the Khanenko Museum (Kyiv, 2022) has become a new phenomenon in Ukrainian musical life. The Nova Opera group presented the *Art of War* opera by the young composer Serhii Vilka, based on a libretto by Myroslav Laiuk. Classical works by Ukrainian composers are also being reconceptualised: Lviv Opera presented an action version of *Cossacks Beyond the Danube* by Semen Hulak-Artemovskiy.

Global interest in the works of Ukrainian classical music has increased; therefore, the online repository of works by local composers (the number of records on the Ukrainian Live Classic app platform rose from 500 to 1700, representing the creativity of more than 70 authors) has been developed. The renowned promoter of Ukrainian classical music is the Days of Ukrainian Music in Warsaw festival, which has been held since 1999 (founded by Roman Rewakowicz). The world tours of the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra (initiated by the Metropolitan Opera and Polish National Opera) and the Kyiv Symphony Orchestra, whose programmes are based on Ukrainian music,

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occur within the framework of cultural diplomacy. In November 2022, during the United Kingdom–Ukraine Season of Culture, a festival of new and experimental music took place in Huddersfield with the participation of Ukrainian performers. The ‘Solidarity Project’ is an invitation from Ukrainian composers to collaborate with the Metropolitan Opera. However, there remains a lack of professional discussion regarding national classical music in the Ukrainian media landscape. Departments specialising in the post-colonial studies of Russian culture, in which Ukrainian culture has existed on the sidelines for a long time, are currently being established.

Keywords: musical classics, opera, derussification, decolonisation, cultural diplomacy

In the rhetoric of modern researchers, Ukrainian classical music is often used as a weapon of information in the Russian-Ukrainian war.¹ An international scientific conference with the participation of specialists from Ukraine, Poland, and the United States was held in the M. Lysenko Lviv National Music Academy on 9–10 December 2022 under this theme. The scientists defined the strategic tasks of Ukrainian musical art amid the Russian-Ukrainian war (Liubov Kyianovska) and noted the influence of martial law on changes in the musical infrastructure (Zoriana Lastovetska-Solanska). Famous Ukrainian composers have repeatedly been discussing the role of music during wartime.²

History as a discipline has gained particular significance and popularity in Ukraine after 24 February 2022. This is reflected above all in the monographs of Ukrainian historians such as Serhii Plokyh³ and Yaroslav Hrytsak.⁴ Meanwhile, American historian Timothy Snyder, in his lecture series *The Making of Modern Ukraine* delivered at Yale University, also noted that Ukrainian classical music, inspired by Mykola Leontovych’s *Shchedryk*, was performed on 5 December 2022, at Carnegie Hall. Snyder drew attention to the confrontation between the Ukrainian and Russian cultures, which has an ideological connotation, although both these cultures are bound organically.⁵ The deep tension, which has existed between them for several centuries, reached its peak during the Russian-Ukrainian War: we are witnesses to the process of separation, as attempts to perform and promote Russian classical music both within and outside Ukraine continue. An outstanding example is the efforts of the Grand Kyiv Ballet, in particular, of Kateryna Kukhar, aimed at substituting *The Swan Lake* by Pyotr Chaikovsky for *The Forest Song* by Mykhailo Skorulskyi on the stages of Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. Therefore, according to Tetiana Pylypchuk, Director

1 About musical life in Ukraine after 2014 see: Samczenko W. 2022; Olijnik S. 2022.

2 Safian D. 2023.

3 Plokyh S. 2015; Plokyh S. 2021.

4 Hrytsak Y. 2024.

5 Snyder T. 2023.

of Kharkiv Literature Museum, in an interview with Radio Liberty, the so-called ‘war of cultures’ is one of the peculiarities of the large-scale Russian-Ukrainian war.⁶

The resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine prohibiting Russian music in the media space and public venues has elicited a strong response. In the opinion of the famous historian S. Plokhyy, it is expected that, in the future, “the dominant Russian culture will be transformed into the minority” in Ukraine.⁷ The slogan ‘Return of History’, which became fundamental in his book, *Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*,⁸ is important for understanding Ukraine’s musical heritage.

The large-scale Russian-Ukrainian war triggered tectonic shifts in the consciousness of the Ukrainian people, who felt a need to pull Ukrainian culture out from under the shadow of Russia, and this inevitably influenced the musical community. The year 2022 passed in an atmosphere of intense discussion regarding the renewal of repertoire policy, decolonisation, and derussification of both the Ukrainian and European musical spaces. However, in an interview with music expert Adelina Yefimenko, renowned opera singer Olha Kulchynska noted:

As regards cancelling everything Russian in Ukraine, I totally agree. We always underestimated what we had, did not study and showed little interest in it as compared to the Russian music [...]. But all of us, the Ukrainians, shall understand that such a boycott and cancellation of the Russian culture, which we demand from the Western world, will never take place [...] That is why we shall shift the focus to the propagation of something of our own, but not to the cancellation of someone else’s things.⁹

Let’s recall the metaphorical expression popular in Ukraine, attributed to the former President Leonid Kuchma: even now, some figures in Ukrainian culture are looking at it through Moscow’s glasses. The war has led to another process — now we are trying to examine our musical heritage through the prism of national culture, which contributes to the establishment and development of Ukrainian identity. It is symbolically depicted on the posters of students at the Institute of Graphical Design of Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts (exhibition ‘Ukrainians by Origin, Spirit and Actions’, 1 August – 30 September 2022).

One of them shows the composer, pianist, and conductor, Ihor Stravinskyi, one of the most famous representatives of new music, who was born in the Russian Empire,

6 Bondar Y. 2023.

7 Drozdovs’kyi D. 2018.

8 Plokhyy S. 2023.

9 “Щодо кенселінгу всього російського в Україні я повністю згідна. Ми завжди недооцінювали своє, мало його вивчали, мало цікавились, порівняно з російською музикою [...]. Але ми всі, українці, маємо розуміти, що такого бойкоту і кенселінгу російської культури, як ми вимагаємо від західного світу, ніколи не буде [...]. Тому ми мусимо змістити акцент на пропагування свого, а не на кенселінг чужого”. Yefimenko A. 2023.

died in the USA, but was portrayed as an artist belonging to Ukrainian culture (Fig. 1). A comparative analysis of the pre-war repertoire of the Ukrainian opera houses with the repertoire during the large-scale war shows certain positive changes: they include *Kateryna* by Oleksandr Rodin (Odesa), *The Terrible Revenge* by Yevhen Stankovych (Lviv), and *Vyshyvanyi. The King of Ukraine* by Alla Zahaikevych (Kharkiv),¹⁰ *Genesis* (Modern Opera Laboratory, Kyiv). The Ukrainian opera *Chornobyl'dorf* by Roman Hryhoriv and Illia Razumeiko, which presents the vision of what life after the Apocalypse might be like in the event of the loss of historical memory, was ranked in the top six of the world's best operas. It was written in 2020, and in 2022–2023, according to its authors and performers, it became a story about the war. This opera was broadcast on the BBC British radio and performed at the Ukrainian festival in Liverpool in April 2023. The staging of the *Opera of Memory* in Khanenko Museum (Kyiv) has become a new phenomenon in Ukrainian musical life. This is a five-hour story about the creation of the world – *Genesis: Opera of Memory in 13 mise-en-scène*. The opera was written specifically for the museum as a place of memory. Its libretto is based on the Book of Genesis and the everlasting myth about Orpheus. Thirteen rooms of the empty museum serve as a space for thirteen *mise-en-scène*. In this space, the Opera Aperta artists tell the history of the Russian-Ukrainian war (on the night of the seventh day of the creation of the world, Ophelia recalled the dreams: the destroyed theatre, an old piano, and an empty museum). In Lviv, the Nova Opera formation presented the opera *The Art of War* by the composer Serhii Vilka (libretto written by the poet Myroslav Laiuk). The opera was based on the motifs of the classical military treatise by Sun Tzu about the difficult way to victory. The strong impression in this opera is produced by the vocal improvisation and the extension of the singing techniques, from academic, folk, and jazz vocal to overtone singing.

In May 2023, Lviv Opera presented the action-version of the *Cossacks Beyond the Danube* by Semen Hulak-Artemovskiy. On the stage, the audience saw bundles of silver threads, which, envisioned by the art director Tadei Ryndzak, symbolically connect the authors of the new opera with those who are no longer with us. It is a kind of dialogue of modern composers, particularly the author of the new version, Dmytro Saratskyi, with S. Hulak-Artemovskiy. It is worth noting that not only did musical experts participate in the discussion concerning the performance of this opera on the Lviv stage. The historian Olesia Isaiuk from the Liberation Movement Centre of the National Museum-Memorial 'Loncky Street Prison' finds this opera to be an unsuccessful transformation of the classical version by considering it through the prism of colonial optics. The author is surprised by an attempt to "make an epic story dedicated to the national theme out of the plot forcedly quasi-loyal to the empire."¹¹

¹⁰ See: Vyetrov O.V. 2023.

¹¹ "Зробити з вимушено квазілояльного імперії сюжету епічний твір на національну тему". Isayuk O. 2023.

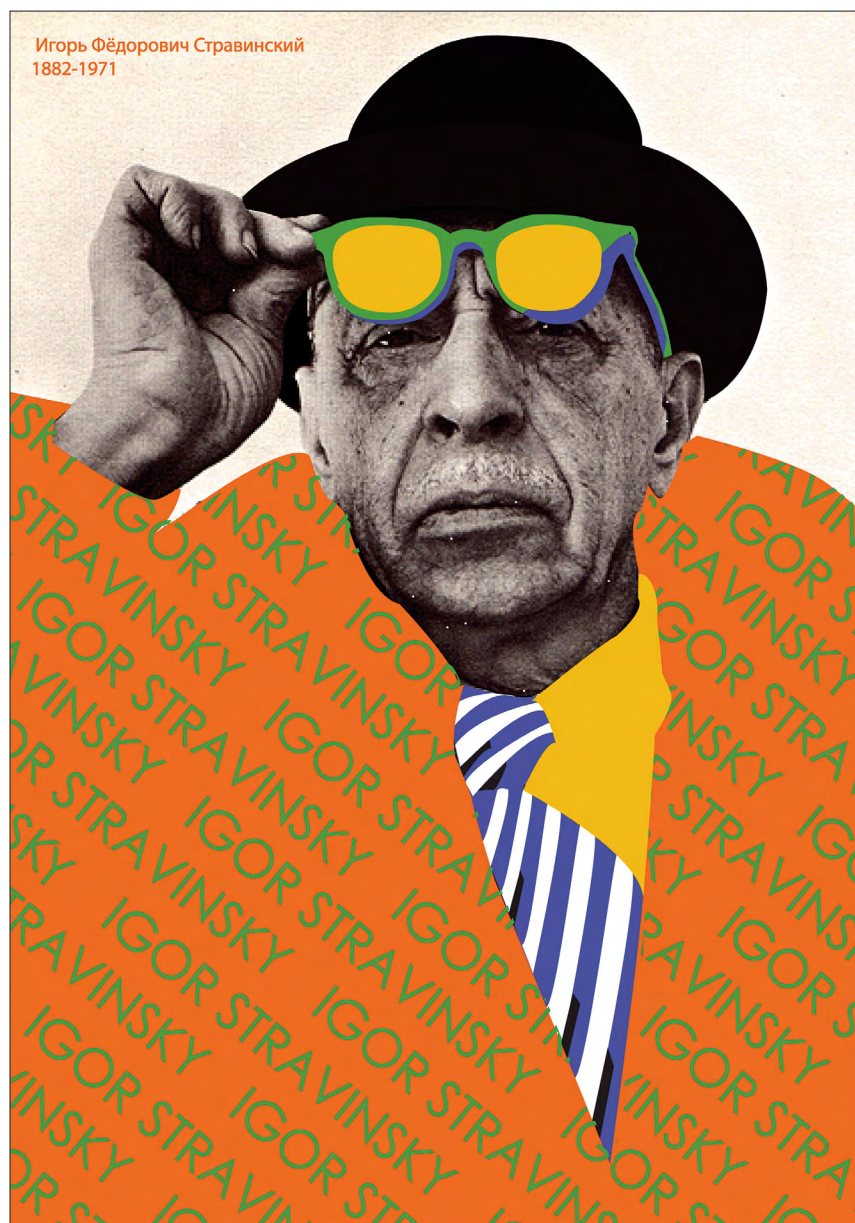


Fig. 1. Igor Stravinsky (Poster by O. Poliakova, 2022)

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Recital fortepianowy Studio Koncertowe Polskiego Radia im. W. Lutosławskiego, ul. Modzelewskiego 59 Wykonawca: Dmytro Choni – fortepian W programie: Walentyn Sylwestrow 3 Bagatele op. 1 4 Utwory op. 2 3 Walce z Postludium op. 3 3 Bagatele op. 4 Postludium op. 5 5 Utworów op. 306 4 Utwory op. 302	Koncert kameralny Studio Koncertowe Polskiego Radia im. W. Lutosławskiego, ul. Modzelewskiego 59 Wykonawcy: Chain Ensemble Andrzej Bauer – dyrygent W programie: utwory Leonida Hrabowskiego, Oleha Bezborodki, Jurija Laniuka i Oleksandra Szczetyńskiego WSTĘP WOLNY na koncert 6 września na podstawie wejściówek do pobrania ze strony 	Koncert oratoryjny Sala Koncertowa Filharmonii Narodowej ul. Sienkiewicza 10 Wykonawcy: Bartosz Koziak – wiolonczela Tamara Kalinkina – sopran Natalka Polovynka – mezzosopran Hubert Zapiór – baryton Chór i Orkiestra Filharmonii Narodowej w Warszawie Roman Rewakowicz – dyrygent W programie: utwory Oleksandra Szymki, Zoltana Almaszi i Bohdana Frolak

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Fig. 2. Poster of the 8th Days of Ukrainian Music in Warsaw, 4–9 September 2022
 (Source: www.pmw.org.pl)

Since 2022–2023, the world has become much more interested in Ukrainian classical music. As a result, an online database of works by domestic composers, initiated by the Lyatoshynskyi Club, was created. Thereafter, the number of records on the app, Ukrainian Live Classic, increased from 500 to 1700, representing the creative works of more than 70 composers, which was of particular interest to musicians from the USA, Germany, and Austria. The world tours of the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra, initiated by the Metropolitan Opera and the National Opera of Poland, and Kyiv Symphony Orchestra, whose programmes were based on Ukrainian music, took place within the framework of international diplomacy. We should also note the trend for the performance of works by modern Ukrainian composers (Valentyn Sylvestrov, Viktoriia Poliova, Hanna Havrylets, and Bohdana Froliak). The ‘Days of Ukrainian Music in Warsaw’ festival, which has been held since 1999 (founded by conductor Roman Rewakowicz), is significant in terms of promoting Ukrainian classical music. According to specialists, a comparative analysis of concerts within the framework of this event with the Ukrainian Freedom concerts in Poland primarily points to a contextual reaction of the musical community to Russian aggression, but not to profound changes in the comprehension of Ukrainian musical culture abroad. For example, while the Warsaw festival exclusively featured Ukrainian music, the orchestra’s repertoire, with the exception of the works by Valentyn Sylvestrov, also included music by Beethoven, Brahms, and Dvořák.¹² It proves again the fact that music during war can serve as an instrument of political weight and that the recognition of its artistic value must be primarily realised in Ukraine itself.

From 18 to 27 November 2022, a festival of new and experimental music featuring Ukrainian performers took place within the framework of the Great Britain/Ukraine Season of Culture in Huddersfield. The ‘Solidarity Project’ is an invitation for the Ukrainian composers to cooperate with the Metropolitan Opera. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of professional discussion about Ukrainian classical music in the Ukrainian media environment. Higher educational music institutions are in desperate need of establishing departments specialising in the post-colonial studies of Russian culture, in the shadows of which Ukrainian culture has long existed. Moreover, according to the pointed remark of Timothy Snyder, this culture has always been overshadowed by prohibitions resulting from the Valuev Circular of 1863 and the Ems Ukaz Decree of 1876. Since Ukrainian musical culture is important for the recognition of identity, the processes of its ‘refixturing’ in the East and South of Ukraine (primarily including Kharkiv and Odesa) can be considered a positive development.

One of the determining factors of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, which has also expanded into the cultural sphere, is the ‘semantic war’ (according to writer Ok-sana Zabuzhko).¹³

¹² Kaufman-Portnikov M. 2023.

¹³ Tereshchuk H. 2023.

This conflict exists not only between Russia and Ukraine but also within Ukraine itself, as it conceptualises and overcomes its colonial past. It affects the nature of discussions associated with the interpretation of the biographies of famous composers (for example, the dispute regarding the name of Petro Tchaikovsky in the title of the National Academy of Music)¹⁴ and the ongoing reinterpretation of Ukrainian classical music, which the world has started to truly explore on its own merits, rather than through the prism of Russian culture. An important factor for the popularisation of Ukrainian classical music is the creation of the first UNESCO Musical Department, ‘Music, Education, Science — For the Sake of Peace’, in the Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music in March 2023.

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