

Stop the War!
Performing Artists
Across the World Call
for Peace in Ukraine

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By

Wei-En Hsu, Patrick Lo, Rebekah Okpoti
and Hermina G.B. Anghelescu

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The authors will donate the royalties of this book to help the refugees
in Ukraine.

I applaud the sincere efforts of my colleagues around the globe for taking a stand against the horrifying and unjustified invasion of Ukraine. I too strongly condemn this immoral and completely unjustifiable action and pray for an immediate halt to this illegal aggression. This kind of terrorism must not be allowed to succeed. Reparations must be fully instituted and war criminals must be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Writing from Detroit I am compelled to quote from the legendary Motown recording artist Edwin Starr. The lyric is as true today as it was in 1970. “War.... What is it good for? Absolutely nothing.”

Dr. Tim Lentz
Archivist & Director, Detroit Opera Archive & Resource Library
Detroit Opera House
Detroit, Michigan

The Russia-Ukraine war has not only caused the world economy to turn down but also caused numerous death tolls, tremendous losses of property, as well as devastation of cultural heritage in both countries. Each of us is involved in this terrible war, even though we live far away from the main battlefields. We have seen many innocent Ukrainian children, women, and the elderly die in the war, and many musicians fought for their own country and sorrowfully sacrificed. Every global citizen should stand with the Ukrainian people and try our best to stop Russia’s crude invasion using our own ways. We should take action and express our determination to restore peace as fast as we can.

Dr. Ya-Pin Lyu
Research Fellow at National Taiwan University

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As academics, we had the privilege of collecting interviews from artists from Ukraine and from various parts of the world. To begin, we would like to acknowledge the immense effort and dedication of the book's publisher, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, for trusting in us and bringing this project to fruition.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the artists featured in the book, specifically those who were physically still in Ukraine during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in 2022. Thank you for sharing your stories, experiences, and perspectives on the ongoing conflict in your country. Through your music and other forms of artistic expression, you have helped build awareness and understanding of the critical issues Ukraine is facing today. Your voices give this book a powerful and authentic sense of urgency and importance.

The interviews included in this volume provide valuable insights into the ways in which political conflict and armed violence impact artists and the art community. The interviews highlight the resilience and determination of Ukrainian artists to continue to create and perform despite the challenges they face. The diverse range of perspectives presented in the book underscore the complexity of the situation in Ukraine and the need for continued dialogue and collaboration between artists, as well as between the artistic community in Ukraine and its counterpart worldwide.

We would also like to thank the editors, designers, and other contributors who worked tirelessly to bring this book to life. Your hard work and creativity have ensured that this volume will serve as a powerful testament to the courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people.

Furthermore, we would like to acknowledge the research and documentation included in the book, which was critical in providing context to the interviews and ensuring the accuracy of the information presented. We hope this book will be the voice of this generation to enable further research on the impact of war on the arts.

For anyone who is interested in the interaction of art, politics, and social justice, this book's first-hand accounts represent an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about the role of artists in times of conflict.

Special thanks go to British photographer Simon Townsley for generously allowing us to use his photo "Ukrainian fighter guarding the Opera House, Odesa" for the cover design of this publication.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the many individuals and organisations who have supported this project, including those who generously donated their time, resources, and expertise. Your support has been invaluable in making this book a reality. Thank you all for your contributions and for being part of this important movement for peace, justice, and freedom in Ukraine.

The Authors

FOREWORD

NANCY RHODES

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR/CO-FOUNDER OF ENCOMPASS
NEW OPERA THEATRE, IN NEW YORK CITY



After days of an intense heatwave and a hefty workload, I took a short break to enjoy the cool summer breeze off the Hudson River and clear my mind. It was a beautiful evening and I sat down on a bench in front of my apartment building near Times Square, sometimes referred to as “the crossroads of the world,” in the heart of Manhattan. A young man approached and sat down on the bench next to me. He held a large, scented candle in his hands and was enjoying the aroma of mango and orange, he told me, as I smiled. We began to talk...about his studies in Psychology, about music, and how he loves New York, we shared our interests in physics and spirituality, as if we had known each other for a long time. I learned he

was from the country of Georgia which he explained was free and independent but had a pro-Russian government. I asked him about the war in Ukraine and his face fell, his body slumped, and he replied that it was a horrible, brutal war, and every day he anxiously watches the news hoping it will all be over. “Why is this happening,” he said, “haven’t we learned anything from WW II? More aggression and destruction! What is wrong with humanity?” His sister and mother live in Georgia, and he was not able to return for his father’s funeral. Tears welled up in his eyes. In frustration, he cried out, **“Nobody is doing anything about the war! Nobody is doing anything about it! Nobody!”**

How desperately we want this war to end. We denounce this outrageous invasion on the people and country of Ukraine. All of us feel the anguish and heartbreak of immeasurable human suffering and devastation. Are more tanks, bombs, and aeroplanes the answer? Is there another way? The clarion call to rally for action is potently expressed in the title of Dr. Patrick Lo, Wei-En Hsu, Dr. Rebekah Okpoti, and Professor Hermina G.B. Anghelescu’s new book: ***“Stop the War! Performing Artists Across the World Call for Peace in Ukraine.”***

This united proclamation from musicians and singers of Ukraine and countries around the world is a beacon of hope, a candle of light that music and people working together across borders will illuminate a path to a new reality. An alternative to war, death, and destruction. Featuring inspiring and thought-provoking interviews, the musicians and singers in ***Stop the War!*** share their personal stories and deeply felt connections to music during this unimaginable time of crisis and intense emotional need. Individually and collectively, their unified voices send out a dynamic vision of the communal and healing resonance of music around the world.

May we go one step further? Imagine, 50,000 singers and musicians, maybe 100,000, or more from around the world, playing their instruments and singing their songs as they march across the villages, towns, and cities of Ukraine en masse. Imagine thousands, millions more from every continent, country, and city of the world singing and playing their instruments simultaneously as they march through the streets and fields, valleys and mountains singing and playing for peace in Ukraine.

The music engulfs the landscape, every bird, flower, and tree feels the vibration of music, all the families come out from their bomb shelters and hiding places: grandmothers, grandfathers, children, mothers, and new-born

babies, fathers, sisters, and brothers to witness their musical friends from around the world, as they march across every inch of Ukrainian landscape. Tanks, missiles, aeroplanes, and bombs have no chance.

If we think this vision is impossible, let us imagine in our minds and hearts, and if we all envision together, and believe, miracles happen.

Remember Tiananmen Square – one courageous man stopped the line of tanks from rolling forward? The brave violinist Vira Lytovchenko played a lullaby for a child in a darkened bomb shelter, and “decided that I would play until I die.” She stayed in her home city of Kharkiv, Ukraine, to play music and give hope and emotional support to her neighbours and friends. Yuri Dudar, a Ukrainian violinist sang the National anthem outside the barricaded Odessa Opera House. In ancient times, Joshua’s musicians marched around the fortress walls at the Battle of Jericho blowing their long, horned trumpets so loud that the musical vibrations and their shouts caused the walls to come tumbling down.

Music is the cosmic structural truth of the universe. Pythagoras, the ancient Greek mathematician, philosopher, and musician who played the lute, explained the cosmos through his wave theory of the ‘string’ in a system that came to be known as *musica universalism*, the music of the spheres. Quantum physicists today tell us that everything in the universe, reduced to its smallest element consists of strings, vibrating in multiple dimensions simultaneously. Yes, music rules the spheres!

Humans have been battling for territory from the beginning of time. And yet, Earth, our Planet, our one Household for all humanity, is struggling to keep us all alive.....witness fires burning, floods, droughts, the extinction of wildlife, and the pandemic taking the lives of millions around the world. Humanity’s aggressive greed for territory and nature’s resources causes wanton destruction and affects every living being and organism on our planet.

We the music-makers say “Stop the madness! Stop the war!” We declare and demonstrate the vision for humanity is based on truth, beauty, joy, and life! We stand for music....for love.

Edgar Mitchell, the Astronaut on Apollo 14, as he flew back to Earth from the moon, looked out the spaceship window and saw the shimmering blue jewel - our planet, hovering in space. He saw no boundaries, no borders,

everything flowed beautifully together in harmony, and he was filled with awe.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the courageous leader of Ukraine has rallied the world to embrace freedom for his people and country and for all humanity. No one wants to fight, to kill, to destroy (on either side). Everyone has families, loved ones, reasons for living. Let us restore paradise to our planet. Let us bring peace, beauty, harmony, and good health. Our indigenous sisters and brothers say, “we dream our world.” Let us dream together! “If music be the food of love, play on!”

Nancy Rhodes is the Artistic Director/Co-founder of Encompass New Opera Theatre, in New York City. On June 18, 2022, she produced *MUSIC FOR PEACE: We Stand with the People of Ukraine* in collaboration with violinist Milena Dawidowicz, originally from Ukraine. Twenty-five musicians and singers from Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, the former Yugoslavia, New York City and New Jersey, gave a concert featuring music from these countries at Christ and Saint Stephen’s Church. Natalia Mudrenko, the highest-ranking woman at the Permanent Mission of Ukraine in the General Assembly of the United Nations, spoke about the dire situation. All proceeds were donated to an organisation in Odessa, Ukraine, to provide families and children with food, clothing, and medicine.

FOREWORD

AUGUSTS ZILBERTS

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LATVIA

HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS

MEMBER OF UKRAINE'S SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGNS



Art, no matter its form, is a universal international language. It unites, creates a sense of security, and encourages, and makes you even sad and longing, but above all, and we see this today, it is a verb that works as a call to action and peace. There are not many moments in the history of the democratic world when all nations have breathed in the same rhythm. Moreover, when all our heartbeats have been tuned to the same tonality. To the tonality of love, hope, unity, and peace.

People in the performing arts and the field of culture might not be the best soldiers. In fact, they do not have to be ones. Their bullets, shields, and armour are made of creativity and the ability to captivate and inspire. Here! Inspired people, guided by humanity, pure will, love, compassion, and

patriotism – all of the characteristics that Russia's leaders and troops do not and will not ever possess – is a powerful and dangerous weapon. Actually, today it has even a name – solidarity with Ukraine.

I believe that power and the key to achieving goals lie in will and actions. Therefore, I must say – no matter in what way, but do not remain half-hearted! Keep sharing news about the war in Ukraine, draw solidarity posters and take part in demonstrations, donate money or goods to refugees and soldiers, wear blue and yellow clothes, write, sing, play music or theatre, participate in idea hackathons, join the National Guard, discuss the situation with your family, friends, and colleagues, or do whatever you can – the best you can. And do not be afraid! Do not be afraid to speak your mind, speak back, and speak about what is important to us, Ukraine, the whole of Europe, and the world's democracies! I will not stop believing that everything we are doing now will accumulate in some great and decisive common good.

Since 24th February 2022 words by Mr. Dainis Īvāns, the leader of the Popular Front of Latvia, which was one of the key persons during the recovery of Latvia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, keep replaying in my head: “A nation that fights for freedom is extremely beautiful!” We are also very beautiful right now, supporting Ukraine in various ways. Because we are united, because we act because we do whatever we know the best, and because we inspire and call for peace.

Слава Україні! [Glory to Ukraine!]

FOREWORD

PROFESSOR DAVID BAKER, PHD

DIRECTOR, DAVID BAKER CONSULTING

DIRECTOR, HALIFAX ORGAN ACADEMY



War is a terrible thing. Always has been, and always will be. Is it ever necessary? Can it be justifiable to kill and maim others? Where and what is the scope of displacing, depriving, and destroying?

We are in a period of great turbulence. Not for the first time and – almost certainly – not for the last either. The war in Ukraine repeats the ills of past conflicts while adding new horrors of its own into the evil mix.

And yet, in the midst of death and destruction, there remains hope – embodied, preserved, and celebrated through the creative arts – of an end to conflict and a path to a brighter, more peaceful future. If only we are prepared to follow it.

Music is a universal language transcending borders: physical, virtual, religious, political, social, and economic. It is a common good that

everybody owns and from which each of us -- irrespective of origin, belief, hope, fear, prejudice, ambition - can derive so much.

Patrick Lo is well known for his interview-based books. I have collaborated on one of them and reviewed several more, both before and after publication. This ethnographic approach provides a rich seam of experience, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, not only for the library profession (the primary readership for his work) but also for education and society at large because of the broad spread of life history that is represented. The present work is no exception.

It is apposite that the book is being published at the present time. Would that there were no need for it! But there is, and its appearance is to be welcomed as a fitting addition to his *oeuvre*. The war in Ukraine must end, just as all wars have to cease. Let us see this work as one small step away from a war-torn present towards a future of peace and prosperity.

INTRODUCTION

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky appeared in a surprise cameo at the 2022 Grammy Awards, to say he hoped Ukraine and its musicians could soon "be free" like those on the Grammys stage. "Our musicians wear body armour instead of tuxedos. They sing to the wounded in hospitals, even to those who can't hear them. But the music will break through anyway," says Volodymyr Zelensky.¹ His speech was followed by a performance of "Free" by singer John Legend who was joined by Ukrainian artists Mika Newton, Lyuba Yakimchuk, and Siuzanna Igidan.²

Since Russia launched a full-scale military invasion into an independent Ukraine on 24th February 2022, the fighting has resulted in one of the greatest humanitarian crises facing the world today. The conflict in Ukraine continued to escalate. The war situation both in the air and on the ground in Ukraine is changing by the hour. In addition to causing great loss of human lives, and massive destruction of civilian infrastructures, historical landmarks, and cultural heritage sites,³ the brutal assaults launched by Russian military forces led to overwhelmingly large floods of displaced Ukrainian refugees fleeing across the Polish-Ukraine and Romania-Ukraine borders. According to the United Nation's Humanitarian Crisis Relief, over five million Ukrainians have been internally displaced, and over 6 million have been recorded as refugees worldwide.⁴

Meanwhile, the world has spoken with one united voice to express its outrage and condemn the unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine launched by

¹ Rewatch Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's Impassioned Speech at the 2022 Grammys: A Call for Peace During War, Truth during Lies, and Sound over Silence. (2022). Available at: <https://www.grammy.com/videos/ukraine-president-volodymyr-zelensky-speech-2022-grammys>

² France, L.R. (2022). President Volodymyr Zelensky Makes Appearance at the Grammys. CNN, 6 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/03/entertainment/zelensky-grammys/index.html>

³ Damaged Cultural Sites in Ukraine verified by UNESCO. 15 September 2023. Available at: Damaged cultural sites in Ukraine verified by UNESCO | UNESCO

⁴ United Nations Humanitarian Crisis Relief. Ukraine Emergency. (2023). Available at: <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>

Vladimir Putin. Ballet dancers, opera singers, violinists, and pianists are amongst the Ukrainian performing artists who are swapping their instruments for AK47s, waging a courageous fight against Vladimir Putin's invading force.

As human beings, around the world, with conscience, and the ability to think and act, we cannot afford to stay silent on the unimaginable horrors that we are witnessing in Ukraine every day. As musicians and music lovers, we truly believe that music has the power to change the world for the better.

"Historically, literature, painting, and photography have been able to adapt by claiming direct relevance. Paintings and literature can bear witness to war's horrors.... [On the other hand], music may have an even greater claim than the other arts to being indispensable in time of war."⁵

Hearing music during wartime refers us to the condition of life we would most wish to see exist around us, a condition of freedom and peace that used to be the norm. Music during a time of war signals an agenda for making more out of common life. It evokes what war destroys and strengthens bonds among people. Music has been found to be particularly beneficial for those who are grieving or suffering from any type of trauma. Listening to certain types of music can evoke memories of happier times, providing a sense of hope and optimism even when faced with difficult circumstances. Through its harmony, music helps people heal. It gives the ability to cope with loss and hardships. Music is medicine. Music is able to enhance the quality of life and can, in addition, overcome emotional pain and promote recovery.

Through their performances meant to support certain humanitarian causes, artists, actors, and musicians turn into activists, such as multi-Grammy award winner Joyce DiDonato who states: "I know music can save lives, heal deep wounds, unify communities, and bring real hope and comfort in the darkest hours. This is why I am an activist." "I'm trying to balance activism and joy" has become her credo.⁶

⁵ Botstein, L. (1991). Classical Music; Why Music in a Time of War? *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/03/arts/classical-music-why-music-in-a-time-of-war.html>

⁶ Joyce DiDonato: 'I'm Trying to Balance Activism and Joy.' 15 September 2019. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/sep/15/joyce-didonato-interview-agrippina-royal-opera-house>

Over the past years, various online social media platforms have been showing footage of performing artists, both Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians, inside and outside of Ukraine, making music outside the barricaded Odesa Opera House and bombed-out public squares; as well as inside the subway stations, and candlelit underground bomb shelters. A YouTube video features Ukrainian pianist Irina Manyukina giving a heart-wrenching performance of Chopin on her grand piano as a way to bid farewell to her home near Kyiv ruined by a Russian shell.⁷

Music does not only overcome language and cultural barriers, but it also helps unify our consciousness, as well as engage our emotions, thereby giving us a united expression of a sense of national character as well as virtue during times of crisis. As Felix Mendelssohn wrote in 1842 when he sought to defend the idea of “songs without words”: “People often complain that music is too ambiguous; that what they should think when they hear it is so unclear. With me, it is exactly the reverse... Only the melody can say the same thing, can arouse the same feeling in one person as in another, a feeling which is not, however, expressed by the same words... Words have many meanings, but music we could both understand correctly.”⁸

Musicians of many nationalities stand against the war and play together in solidarity concerts for Ukraine. The proceeds have been donated to aid organisations for Ukraine. “Renowned artists have joined forces to send a widely audible signal for peace and freedom and to protest against the attack on Ukraine in violation of international law with the means of music,” the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin writes on its website. On Thursday, 31st March 2022, the United Nations Chamber Music Society presented a virtual concert for peace for Ukraine as a humanitarian appeal to secure support to people in Ukraine in their time of need. Actors, musicians and artists are joining the movement to Stand Up for Ukraine. Actors, musicians, and artists are joining the movement to Stand Up for Ukraine, amplifying advocates’ calls for governments, corporations, and institutions to mobilise funds to provide displaced people the urgent relief they need. The world rallies around the people of Ukraine. As a global response, celebrities worldwide are doing their bit to protest the war and create powerful art in solidarity.

⁷ Irina Manyukina Palys Chopin in the Ruins of Her House. (2022). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Q0sKfua394>

⁸ Schwarm, B. (2018). *Songs Without Words*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Songs-Without-Words>

Aims of the Book

To recognise their noble efforts, this book includes a series of interviews with performing artists around the world, artists who have been using their musical talents and skills, along their incredible compassion and generosity to raise funds to support the Ukrainian cause. Interviewees share their experiences, emotions, and stories and express a message of solidarity with all the people in Ukraine.

The aims of this volume are:

- to raise funds to help the refugees fleeing Ukraine;
- to lift the spirits of Ukrainian soldiers every day;
- to boost both civilian and military morale and resilience;
- to send messages of hope and encouragement to the refugees who have lost their homes and loved ones;
- to support the civil society, cultural actors, and peace activists in Ukraine;
- to promote human rights, democratic values, and fundamental freedoms in war-torn Ukraine.

Swiss-American conductor, educator, and scholar Leon Botstein states: “Music is unique in that the acts of listening and playing together preserve the secrecy of emotion characteristic of privacy and intimacy yet at the same time deepen a sense of human connectedness, even though most concertgoers are strangers to one another. Each individual derives a personal pleasure that is opaque, but mirrors the joy of others in the hall. Listeners need not defend the meaning of their own experiences with words and images. The pursuit of music, therefore, particularly in public places, provides a welcome contrast to the frequent political conflict and violence of wartime.”⁹

⁹ Botstein, L. (1991). *Op. cit.*

DANIEL RAISKIN
MUSIC DIRECTOR
WINNIPEG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
CHIEF CONDUCTOR
SLOVAK PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Introduction

Having grown up in St. Petersburg, Daniel Raiskin attended the celebrated conservatory in his native city and later continued his training in Amsterdam and Freiburg. Since August 2018, Raiskin has been serving as the Music Director of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. From the 2020-2021 season, he serves as the Chief Conductor of the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra in Bratislava, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra from season 2017–2018.

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine broke out, Raiskin wrote on social media, “In these extremely distressing times, while my family members are being bombed by the armed forces of the country I was born and grew up in, I am suspending all immediate and future work and concert appearances in Russia...Until the senselessly barbaric bestialities are halted, peace restored and justice served, I do not feel I am on the moral ground while collaborating with institutions subsidised by the murderous Russian regime.” In the following interview, Raiskin shares a story about reuniting with his wife after her harrowing escape from Ukraine, as well as his conviction in the duty of every artist to speak out to condemn the war in Ukraine.

Could you tell me about your educational background, for example, what musical instrument do you specialise in? At what age did you begin your music education? Do you come from a family of musicians?

I was born and raised in Saint Petersburg (still Leningrad at that time), Russia during the Soviet era. My father is a very well-known musicologist and music critic. I started studying the violin from the age of 6 to 15 (for about 10 years), and then I switched to the viola. At a very celebrated music conservatory in my native city, I focused on studying both the viola and orchestral conducting concurrently.

Unquestionably, music has always played a very important role in my life. As long as I can remember, my parents started taking me to orchestral concerts and theatre performances even at a very young age. So, I never had to ask myself whether choosing a life as a professional musician was the right path for me. Of course, there are rare exceptions, but based on my understanding and experiences in working with professional musicians from around the world, 99% of them got their first exposure and impulses into classical music directly from their parents.

I was not an incredibly disciplined young student, but I have always had a very deep interest and a conscious decision to become a professional musician. The person who really inspired me to become an orchestral conductor was my first conducting professor Lev Savich in Russia.

At what age did you decide to opt for a career as a professional musician, specialising in orchestral conducting?

It is very hard to say...I became a professional instrumentalist and a performer when I was about 18, but I was still studying at music college at that time. During the 1980s and early 90s when the USSR collapsed, I soon realised that nothing good would ever happen in this country—and I was right! So, I took the very first opportunity that I got (i.e., to leave Russia and go to the Netherlands), and there I started to work as a professional orchestral musician, and also furthered my music education at the same time.

At that time, I already had a very successful career as a soloist and chamber musician, performing with major orchestras around the world at different music festivals, as well as giving masterclasses. At the same time, I have always wanted to become an orchestral conductor. However, to become a

good conductor, first and foremost, it requires a certain level of musical maturity that will allow you to lead a large group of people (other musicians)—who are very often older, and much more experienced than you in performing certain pieces of music. I gradually switched from being a soloist to being an orchestral conductor when I was in my 30s. I don't perform as a soloist in public anymore...I am now conducting full-time.

What is your repertoire?

It is very broad. I conduct any music ranging from Monteverdi to the most complicated music scores written by contemporary composers. I think in the last 30 to 40 years, conductors have been pushed into becoming specialists, along with the rise of historically informed performances (i.e., people became increasingly interested in “authenticity” and music performed with period instruments). All these have led to the fact that the classical music market is saturated with specialists. However, none of us can be certain how things actually sounded in the times of Bach, or Mozart, or Schubert.

I do conduct the mainstream classical repertoire a lot. But a large part of my repertoire is conducting music of the 20th and 21st centuries. I am also a great fan of Mahler and Shostakovich, and I adore conducting music by these two composers as much as conducting Mozart. When I am giving concerts in different parts of the world, I would often conduct music written by native composers. So, in terms of orchestral conducting I, am well-known for my versatility.

Could you describe your career path to becoming the Music Director of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra (WSO)?

Before becoming the Music Director of the WSO, I had led various orchestras in Europe (notably Germany and Poland) as Music Director and Chief Conductor. I think everything just happened very naturally. Sometimes, you appear as a guest conductor when the orchestra is in the process of looking for a chief conductor or music director. In the case of the WSO, I was not aware that they were looking for a new music director. At that time, I was just invited to appear as a guest conductor to conduct a certain programme. But it appeared that from the very first rehearsal, there was a chemistry between the WSO and myself. The WSO and I both worked very well together which led to very good results. In the process of meetings and conversations, the WSO was actually looking for a successor to their long-serving maestro Alexander Mickelthwate (who served as the WSO

Music Director from 2006 to 2018). After a period of 3.5 years that included another two programmes I conducted in Winnipeg and subsequent negotiations, I was finally offered the position (WSO Music Director), and now it is my sixth season with the WSO.

Can you describe your conducting style?

It's very hard to describe...I would say it is strongly rooted in tradition—because I learned from people, who were treating conducting as an ultimate craft, a unique and very deeply rooted profession, and trained in the traditional and hard ways. Nowadays, many instrumentalists decide to become conductors without enjoying the in-depth and formal training in orchestral conducting. They certainly know and love the music, and they are able to inspire musicians. However, very often, they do not have the technical skills to cope with complicated orchestral scores. My training is very much rooted in the fundamental understanding that conducting is a unique profession, which you can learn and study throughout your entire life. I would also say that my conducting style is very expressive, since I also have a flamboyant extrovert personality, and I am not holding back when I am onstage conducting.

However, I realised that as I become older and more mature, I move much less...It is very common to see that many conductors when they are young tend to overconduct. On the other hand, when you become older and more experienced, or when you work as the music director with the same orchestra for a longer period—the more trust you have in the orchestra—the less you have to conduct.

Having said that, there is no formal way of just beating the time. Because the conductor is the only person onstage who is not playing any instrument and not creating any actual sounds. As the orchestral conductor, I am there to lead, inspire, provoke, help, or bring out the best in the orchestra—in creating beautiful music.

In what ways does your Russian heritage contribute to your music-making?

In various ways, but it all starts with the Russian language. When you grow up, the language you hear and subsequently start to speak has its own rhythm and melody, it is in a way a kind of music in itself. And wherever

you go, wherever you live, this stays with you. And so, when I conduct music by Russian composers, I feel this same language.

On the other hand, with years and life experiences, I realise that real culture does not have nationalities, or ethnicities, etc. Real culture speaks all languages or none—as it could overcome many culture and language barriers, geographical boundaries, and even sexual orientations. So, in my opinion, there is no such thing as ‘cultural superiority.’ The real culture does not describe itself as the “national culture” or “high culture.” It belongs to all of us!

How did you find out about President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine? When the news of the Russian invasion was first broken to you, what were your initial reactions?

On 24th February 2022, my wife called me in the morning (I was in Canada at that time, planning to fly to Europe the following day)—she was in the middle of the war zone in Ukraine. She called me and I opened the news and was left in shock and total disbelief that something like this would actually happen in the 21st century.

I was also in terrible fear and the actual realisation that I might not see my wife again. Because the part of the city of Kharkiv where my wife is from was under severe bombardments from the Russian military forces. Only later did we realise the Russian tanks were practically outside her house. My mother-in-law was still in cancer treatment. So, my wife had to rush to the hospital to pick up her mother—because all the hospitals were being converted into military facilities instead, and all the medical personnel were being told to leave or go home. Sometimes, I was talking to my wife on the phone—it was so loud that I could not hear her speak because there was continued bombing in the background. It was absolutely terrifying.

Could you tell us more about the story of reuniting with your wife after her harrowing escape from Ukraine?

It took my wife and her mother about four days to realise that there was no way to stay safe in their hometown—because the streets were completely empty, and there was burning military equipment all over the city. Besides, the Russian military forces were advancing very fast. With the help of some strangers, they packed their necessities and were driven by a car they were able to stop on the street, to the central station in Kharkiv. Finally, they

managed to board the evacuation train with thousands of other refugees who were fleeing Ukraine.

On the evacuation train, it took them 40 hours to travel from Kharkiv all the way to the city of Uzhhorod (on the Slovakia–Ukraine border). My wife and her mother were put inside a very small four-person compartment on the evacuation train, together with 11 other refugees (including one young girl)—without any electricity and heating, and very little food. The train was moving very slowly and would make occasional stops. When they arrived at the station in Kyiv, the train stopped for two hours. Kyiv was fighting off the onslaughts of the Russian forces at that time, so they were under constant assaults and bombardments. As you can imagine, there were real moments of terror.

After they arrived in Uzhhorod, I managed to pick them up at the border of Slovakia. Because of the large number of refugees, they had to spend many hours standing and waiting in line to cross the border. What I was witnessing was like a scene from Apocalypse.

My mother-in-law was already very ill, and during her harrowing escape from Ukraine, she got infected by COVID-19. So, we spent a total of one month in a small hotel room (located just next to the Slovak Philharmonic), and my wife and I would go to the hospital to check out the conditions of her mother. After one month of being treated at the hospital in the intensive care unit, she sadly passed away.

Could you tell us about Mark Kreshchenskyi and his twin brother joining the WSO as refugees from Ukraine, with the help of the Canada–Ukraine authorisation for an emergency travel (CUAET) visa?

Mark and his brother Dmytro were both playing in the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra together in the 8 years leading up to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Before joining the WSO, Mark was already the Principal Bassoonist of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra—a very well-known and fine professional orchestra. His brother Dmytro played in the Viola section of the same orchestra.

When the war happened, Mark and his brother were so bullied by their Russian colleagues (it tells you something that arts and culture are not totally “apolitical”) that they could not imagine staying in Russia any longer. Because they were so afraid for their own lives (for being Ukrainian