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Commentary Series on Putin's War: "The Shattered Frame of Cultural Exchange?"

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The war in Ukraine is, irremediably, a cultural, if not civilizational, conflict.¹ If culture is always a component of power relations and strategic interactions, key actors made sure it would also be a battlefield in this instance. "Let me emphasize once again," Russia's President Vladimir Putin declared on February 1, "that Ukraine for us is not just a neighboring country. It is an integral part of our own history, culture, spiritual space."² Playing into Western anxieties over book bans and "cancel culture," Putin suggested on March 25 that he led a war in defense of global values, posing for example as a defender of the embattled British writer J.K. Rowling who, in his words, was "canceled" because she "did not please fans of so-called gender freedoms."³ (Rowling promptly objected on Twitter.⁴) For Putin, "cancel culture" and LGBTQ rights are manifestations of Western hegemony that go hand in hand with NATO expansion.

Far from rejecting this characterization of the war, US President Joe Biden had already underscored a conflict of values, stating on December 9, 2021, in his remarks at the first Summit for Democracy, that "all around the world, democracy needs champions" against "autocrats" who "seek to advance their own power, export and expand their influence around the world, and justify their repressive policies and practices as a more efficient way to address today's challenges."⁵ Three months later,

¹ Ross Douthat, "Vladimir Putin's Clash of Civilizations," *New York Times*, February 26, 2022.

² Valerie Hopkins, "Highlights from Putin's Address on Breakaway Regions in Ukraine," *New York Times*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/world/europe/putin-speech-transcript.html>.

³ Anton Troianovski and Javiec C. Hernández, "Putin Goes Into Battle on a Second Front: Culture," *New York Times*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/world/europe/putin-cancel-culture-rowling.html>. Amanda Taub, "Why Putin Name-Checked J. K. Rowling," *New York Times*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/putin-jk-rowling.html>.

⁴ On Twitter, she wrote that same day: "Critiques of Western cancel culture are possibly not best made by those currently slaughtering civilians for the crime of resistance, or who jail and poison their critics. #IStandWithUkraine," https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1507364792834666511.

⁵ Remarks By President Biden At The Summit For Democracy Opening Session, *The White House*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/09/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-summit-for-democracy-opening-session/>.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky picked up the gauntlet to become one of these champions — “the comedian who has become a global icon of freedom and bravery” in the words of journalists Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg.⁶

In his prerecorded message at the Grammy Awards ceremony in April, Zelensky, rather than foregrounding the noise of war and destruction, depicted a soundworld animated by the struggle of autocracy and democracy: “The war doesn’t let us choose who survives and who stays in eternal silence. Our musicians wear body armor 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. We defend our freedom to live, to love, to sound on our land. We are fighting Russia, which brings horrible silence with its bombs. The dead silence. Fill the silence with your music. Fill it today to tell our story. Tell the truth about the war on your social networks, on TV.”⁷ In defining autocracy as a silencing regime, Zelensky enrolled those whose voices can still resound as allies in the global defense of democracy.⁸ The objective is to counter the official propaganda of Putin’s regime, both abroad and in Russia, with all it takes — truth, but also humor, among others.⁹

But do we need to cultivate defenses or create connections to end the war? “If Ukraine is to have a secure future,” Zelensky shared in his interview with Applebaum and Goldberg, “the Russian information barrier will have to be broken. Russians ... need help understanding their own history, what they have done to their neighbors.”¹⁰ At the same time, Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, taking to Twitter in the wake of the bombing of Odessa on April 23, also advocated for cultural isolation: “Russia must be designated a state sponsor of terrorism and treated accordingly. No business, no contacts, no cultural projects. We need a wall between civilization and barbarians striking peaceful cities with missiles.”¹¹

As the war continues, the travails of democratic cultural statecraft in the face of loss, suffering, and anger have extended to Ukraine’s allies. While British Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Nadine Dorries proclaimed culture and sport the “third front in the Ukrainian war,”¹² the then French Minister of Culture Roselyne Bachelot-Narquin observed that some boycott requests “are at odds with what culture is for us,” and German Commissioner for Culture and

⁶ Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg, “Liberation Without Victory,” Interview with Volodymyr Zelensky, *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/04/zelensky-kyiv-russia-war-ukrainian-survival-interview/629570/>. See also Maureen Dowd, “Zelensky Answers Hamlet,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/12/opinion/zelensky-ukraine-russia-biden.html>.

⁷ Dani Blum and Julia Jacobs, “Volodymyr Zelensky Speaks to Grammys Audience in a Prerecorded Video,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/03/arts/music/ukraine-zelensky-john-legend-grammys.html>.

⁸ Similarly, Zelensky invited artists to support Ukraine through their work in his video recorded for the exhibit “This is Ukraine: Defending Freedom” in Venice. “Emmanuelle Lequeux, “La cité des Doges affiche son soutien à la culture ukrainienne,” *Le Monde*, April 23, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2022/04/23/la-cite-des-doges-affiche-son-soutien-a-la-culture-ukrainienne_6123359_3246.html. On the exhibit, see <https://new.pinchukartcentre.org/thisisukraine-en>.

⁹ Applebaum and Goldberg, “Liberation Without Victory.”

¹⁰ Applebaum and Goldberg, “Liberation Without Victory.”

¹¹ Dmytro Kuleba, Twitter, April 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/DmytroKuleba/status/1517850557926580224>.

¹² “Culture Is Third Front in Ukraine War, Says Nadine Dorries,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-60598294>.

the Media Claudia Roth similarly noted that “we will not stop listening to Tchaikovsky or reading Chekov.”¹³ The European Union has taken a collective stance by expressing solidarity with Ukrainian artists and by halting all collaborations with Russian cultural institutions.¹⁴

The cultural resonance of the war and its implications for cultural diplomacy have found significant echo in the media. By our count, the *New York Times* alone published over 50 news reports and op-eds on the topic between February 24 and April 24. Several historical comparisons have been invoked to make sense of the moment: the backlash and internments experienced by German musicians in the United States during WWI;¹⁵ the implication of the German musical world in the Nazi regime and postwar reconstruction;¹⁶ and the cultural boycotts of South Africa whose memory had already been revived in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁷ In what follows, we focus primarily on the impact of the war on music: we paint in broad strokes the extent to which music has become embattled in this war, explore the fault lines that set into question assumptions about music and the very possibility of cultural exchange, and reflect on possible recompositions in the wake of the war in Ukraine.

Music at War

¹³ Sophie Perrin-Ravier, “La culture nous rend humain,” *Classica*, March 25, 2022, <https://classica.fr/contre-le-boycott-de-la-culture-russe/>.

¹⁴ “Declaration of the European Ministers Responsible for Culture, Audiovisual and Media,” Meeting in Angers on March 7-8, 2022, <https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/media/zttmq2cj/declaration-of-the-european-ministers-responsible-for-culture-audiovisual-and-media.pdf>.

¹⁵ The case of the German Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor Karl Muck is a focal point. See Jonathan Rosenberg, “A Putin Supporter’s Carnegie Hall Appearance was Canceled. Should Art Be Separated from Politics?” *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-03-05/op-ed-a-putin-supporters-art-politics>. Rosenberg is the author of *Dangerous Melodies: Classical Music in America from the Great War through the Cold War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019). See also Jessica Gienow-Hecht, *Sound Diplomacy: Music and Emotions in Transatlantic Relations, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), and Melissa D. Burrage, *The Karl Muck Scandal: Classical Music and Xenophobia in World War I America* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2019).

¹⁶ The comparison between Russian conductor Valery Gergiev and German conductor Wilhelm Fürtwangler predates the current crisis. See for example, Peter Eltsov, “Russia’s ‘Hero of Labor’ Comes to Washington,” *The Atlantic*, July 12, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/russias-hero-of-labor-comes-to-washington/277735/>, and Alex Ross, “As If Music Could do No Harm,” *The New Yorker*, August 20, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/music-harm>. More recently, see Isaac Chotiner, “Q&A: Classical Music Iron’s Curtain,” *New Yorker*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/q-and-a/classical-musics-iron-curtain>. The Q&A interviewees are scholars Emily Richmond Pollock, author of *Opera After the Zero Hour: The Problem of Tradition and the Possibility of Renewal in Postwar West Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), and Kira Thurman, author of *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

¹⁷ See for example Chris McGreal, “Boycotts and Sanctions Helped Rid South Africa of Apartheid — Is Israel Next in Line?” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/23/israel-apartheid-boycotts-sanctions-south-africa>; Joseph Gedeon, “‘Hypocrisy’: Lawmakers Fighting Israel Boycott Now All-In for Russia Sanctions,” *Politico*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/07/bds-lawmakers-boycott-russia-00014813>; and Alex Marshall, “To Boycott Russians, or Not? In Film and Beyond, That’s the Question.” *New York Times*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/movies/film-boycott-russia-ukraine.html>. Marshall quotes media scholar Jane Duncan, who published “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Campaigns as Tools for Change: Lessons from South Africa’s Cultural Boycott” (*Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 92 (2016): 60-83).

No doubt histories of the soundworlds ushered by the war of Ukraine will emerge in the years to come, and one hopes they may be written collaboratively by scholars of music, cultural policy, and international relations. As musicologist Andrea Bohlman writes, “music and musicians have been part of many of this war’s unfolding stories”¹⁸ — stories of destruction and displacement, resistance and defiance, guilt and protest, solidarity and hope.

On the soil of Ukraine itself, music, displaced and disabled by war, remains a resource to resist the invasion and confront its trauma. “Belliphonic sound” is not restricted to signals or noises produced by weapons and includes civil sounds reframed by the war.¹⁹ Musicians use social media platforms to share performances that underscore loss and resilience, giving energy to combatants and civilians alike.²⁰ Playing a Ukrainian folk tune, Baroque music, and Tchaikovsky in a cellar during bombings is an act of defiance as much as a coping mechanism: without “naivety,” but with conviction, professional violinist Vera Lytovchenko sees in music the “only weapon to show that I am not afraid and stand by my people.”²¹

Underground and open-air public performances — of the Ukrainian national anthem played in the center of Kharkiv by cellist Denis Karachevstsev, of classical and folk music in the subway of Kharkiv, or by the Kyiv Classic Orchestra in Kiev’s Maidan (Independence Square) — as well as new compositions amplify a sense of community. In the occasional presence of public officials, they signal the total mobilization of a nation against the invasion.²² Ukrainian music, played across airwaves that the Russian military have never succeeded in entirely suppressing or controlling, irrupts in unexpected spaces, disrupting the imposition of fear and terror, as in the Russian military car that took the kidnapped director of Kherson’s theatre, Oleksandr Kniga, away from his home: “at that moment, the radio was playing a song on Bayraktar.”²³ (Named after the Turkish drone used by Ukrainian forces, the song mocks and insults Russian forces and gave its name to the newly created Radio Bayraktar, which, with the endorsement of the Ukrainian information service, broadcasts patriotic songs.²⁴)

¹⁸ The Collective on Music from Ukraine, “Music from Ukraine: A Collaborative Portrait Gallery from March 2022,” *Musicology Now*, Blog of the American Musicological Society, March 13, 2022, <https://musicologynow.org/music-from-ukraine/>.

¹⁹ Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

²⁰ Javier C. Hernández, “Ukrainians Fill Streets With Music, Echoing Past War Zones,” March 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/arts/music/ukraine-music-war-zones.html>.

²¹ Marion Mayer, “‘La musique est ma seule arme’: contre la guerre, les artistes ukrainiens résistent en chanson,” *La Croix*, March 23, 2022.

²² Le Figaro/AFP, “Dans Kharkiv en guerre, un concert pour ‘continuer à vivre’ malgré l’invasion russe,” *Le Figaro*, March 27, 2022; Suna Erdem, “A Symphony in Defiance,” *The New European*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/ukrainian-musicians-swapping-instruments-for-weapons/>; and Javier C. Hernández, “Ukrainians Fill Streets With Music, Echoing Past War Zones,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/arts/music/ukraine-music-war-zones.html>.

²³ Faustine Vincent, “Ils m’ont demandé : ‘Pourquoi vous nous détestez ?’” Le directeur du théâtre de Kherson raconte son enlèvement,” *Le Monde*, March 25, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/03/25/ils-m-ont-demande-pourquoi-vous-nous-detestez-le-directeur-du-theatre-de-kherson-raconte-son-enlevement_6119199_3210.html.

²⁴ On the song, see Spencer Kornhaber, “The Military Weapon That Has Become a Musical Touchstone in Ukraine,” *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/03/ukraine-war-music-history/627024/>.

This musical investment is not new in Ukraine — painted in national colors, the “Kiev piano” during the Maidan Revolution (or Revolution of Dignity) became an emblem of peaceful resistance²⁵ — and is part of a broader topos of war zone performances that have become focal points for discourses of transnational emotion, activism, and policy.²⁶ These musical performances overlay visual and auditory symbols of endurance and destruction: here, the beauty of skill and spirit over against material and personal loss; there, the brave frailty of amateur performance in the face of adversity.²⁷ Shared repertoires make audible the banality and tragedy of the moment, capturing both the sound of transnational everyday life with its local disruption and displacement, in performances that artists can recognize and reframe. Readers might have in mind the video posted by journalist John Stanmeyer on Instagram of a pianist who “wouldn’t stop, playing [the music of *Inception*] louder against the air raid warning,” which film music composer Hans Zimmer broadcast at his concert at the O2 Arena in London.²⁸ Or the performance of Disney’s “Let It Go” by 7-year-old Amelia Anisovych in a bomb shelter, punctuated on social media by singer Idina Menzel’s acknowledgement — “We see you” — that brought the young refugee onto the stage of an arena in Poland to sing the Ukrainian national anthem, dressed in white and flooded in light.²⁹ In that arena, if the folk dress of Amelia Anisovych, embroidered with red, white, and blue flowers, referenced national tradition, the scenography of white and light could also evoke Western representations of quasi-religious transcendence and futurist world peace (as in the final stage of Disney’s theme park ride “It’s a Small World”).³⁰

In turn, artists and activists organize support and benefit performances that preface existing programming or emerge as ad hoc events to invite donations for humanitarian aid in Ukraine, the support of Ukrainian refugees, and future reconstruction efforts. Making the list of these events would be research of its own, and in some instances, there may be no record, especially where the performance happens outside the written program, denoting the exceptional, spontaneous, and engaged nature of the gesture. At the start of the war, one such televised moment was the cold open of *Saturday Night Live* which featured a “Prayer for Ukraine” by the Ukrainian Choir of New York, with no other commentary than the briefest introduction.³¹ By March, the Ukrainian national anthem had “reverberate[d] around the world,” prefacing the Beethoven

²⁵ Erica Buist, “That’s Me in the Picture: Markiyian Matsekh Plays the Piano for Riot Police in Kiev, 7 December 2013,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/dec/05/thats-me-in-picture-ukraine-protest-piano-matsekh>. The story was amplified in Vita Maria Drygas’s documentary film *Piano* (Drygas Production, 2015).

²⁶ See Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen, and Lene Hansen, “Images, Emotions, and International Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 46/1 (2020): 75–95, doi:10.1017/S0260210519000317.

²⁷ Adriana Helbig, “Ukraine’s War-Time Pianos and the Sounds of Resistance,” *Musicology Now*, Blog of the American Musicological Society, April 6, 2022, <https://musicologynow.org/ukraines-war-time-pianos/>.

²⁸ For the instagram post, see <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbS-DD-q5oO/>. Zach Sharf, “Hans Zimmer Honors Ukraine Pianist Who Played ‘Inception’ Music During Air Raid: ‘I’m Astonished,’” *Variety*, March 25, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/music/news/hans-zimmer-ukraine-pianist-inception-air-raid-1235214583/>.

²⁹ Annabelle Timsit, “A Ukrainian Girl Sang ‘Let It Go’ in a Kyiv Bunker. She Just Performed for Thousands in Poland,” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/22/ukraine-girl-national-anthem-let-it-go-amelia-anisovych/>.

³⁰ For an analysis of the ride, its music, and scenography, see Laudan Nooshin, “Circumnavigation with a Difference? Music, Representation and the Disney Experience: It’s A Small, Small World,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13:2 (2004): 236-251, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1741191042000286239>.

³¹ Associated Press, “SNL Offers a ‘Prayer for Ukraine’ in Its Cold Open,” *NPR*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/27/1083359982/snl-cold-open-ukraine-chorus>.

concert of Emanuel Ax, Leonidas Kavakos, and Yo-Yo Ma at the Kennedy Center in Washington, Verdi's *Don Carlos* at the Met, and symphony concerts across Europe.³²

Benefit concerts and festivals for Ukraine promptly ensued, with the Met and ITV concerts for Ukraine offering two early high-profile examples.³³ In Belgium, "Classical Music for Ukraine" brought together several musical entities across the country's multilingual communities for a multi-day event, from March 25 to 29, whose revenues were donated to Ukraine 12-12 (a consortium of seven humanitarian organizations responsible for raising funds).³⁴ Overall, Google News aggregated close to 260 reports for the phrase "concert for Ukraine" for the second month of the war, offering a glimpse of events across musical genres (pop music, jazz, classical music) and institutions (youth orchestras and conservatories, symphonies, museums, festivals, churches, to name a few). "Concerts for Ukraine, Again and Again," the *Wall Street Journal* reported by April 6, suggesting that "the recent outpouring of musical events appears unprecedented in scope" — a claim that, at a later time, may draw further historical examination and reflection.³⁵

One particular form of engagement is that of scholars and institutions involved in knowledge production and curation. There is urgency — and a moral imperative — around archiving and transmitting cultural practices and artifacts threatened by the war.³⁶ Scholars alongside UNESCO are inventorying and mapping the heritage sites lost to fighting.³⁷ These have included sites of shared memory and patrimony, as in Trostianets, which had memorialized and cultivated the memory of Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's summer villeggiatura in 1864.³⁸ In the process, Putin's claims on Russian and Ukrainian cultures have set into relief historical narratives that, in Western institutions, left imperial representations

³² Alex Marshall, "Ukraine's National Anthem Reverberates Around the World," *New York Times*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/arts/music/ukraine-national-anthem.html>. Before the concert at the Kennedy Center, Yo-Yo Ma played cello in front of the Russian Embassy in Washington next to an improvised street sign "Zelinsky way." "Yo-Yo Ma Performs Outside Russian Embassy in Protest," *The Violin Channel*, March 9, 2022, <https://theviolinchannel.com/yo-yo-ma-performs-outside-russian-embassy-in-protest/>.

³³ Dave Simpson, "It Feels Like Live Aid: All-Star Concert for Ukraine Joins War Relief Effort," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/mar/25/it-feels-like-live-aid-all-star-concert-for-ukraine-joins-war-relief-effort>. Zachary Woolfe, "With Anthems and Flags, the Met Opera Plays for Ukraine," *New York Times*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/arts/music/met-opera-ukraine.html>.

³⁴ Gaëlle Moury, "Le monde de la musique classique s'unit autour de l'Ukraine," *Le Soir*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.lesoir.be/432192/article/2022-03-24/le-monde-de-la-musique-classique-sunit-autour-de-lukraine>.

³⁵ Peter Funt, "Concerts for Ukraine, Again and Again," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/concerts-for-ukraine-again-fundraisers-support-musicians-russia-war-perform-11649278037>.

³⁶ See for example the transfer of field research recordings to cloud-based archives described under "Resources on Ukraine" on the website of the Society for Ethnomusicology, March 1, 2022, <https://www.ethnomusicology.org/news/597371/Resources-on-Ukraine.htm>.

³⁷ Isabelle Regnier, "La richesse du patrimoine ukrainien menacée par la guerre," *Le Monde*, April 12, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/04/12/la-richesse-du-patrimoine-ukrainien-menacee-par-la-guerre_6121819_3210.html. Isabelle Regnier, "Pour le patrimoine ukrainien, l'ampleur du désastre est déjà colossale," Interview with Lazare Eloundou Assomo, Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Le Monde*, April 27, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2022/04/27/lazare-eloundou-assomo-unesco-pour-le-patrimoine-ukrainien-l-ampleur-du-desastre-est-deja-colossale_6123801_3246.html.

³⁸ Sophia Kishkovsky, "Ukrainian Cultural Site Where Tchaikovsky Once Composed Music Damaged by Russian Forces," *The Art Newspaper*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/04/08/ukrainian-cultural-site-where-tchaikovsky-once-composed-music-damaged-by-russian-forces>.

unquestioned, and contributed to their legitimization — with Ukrainian artists calling for, and museum curators exploring, decolonial approaches to collections that would, for example, recognize the work of avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevitch (1879–1935) as the contested memorial site it has become.³⁹

Statements of transnational emotion by Russian cultural actors have particular significance. Public opposition to the invasion in Ukraine upends lives in various ways: voluntary withdrawals from public engagements, loss of professional prospects, threats to personal safety, and exile from Russia. “We made the mistake of keeping a dictator in power,” conductor Maria Kurochkina stated in *Le Figaro* as she competed in the second edition of *La Maestra*, an international competition for women conductors.⁴⁰ “I have friends who are demonstrating in Russia against this conflict, taking great risks. Many fear repression. They fear losing their jobs and more. I know that many, too, do not realize what is happening, nor the terrible consequences this war will have on their daily lives. I want to believe that there is still time to protest to free Russia, and to show the world our opposition to this conflict.”⁴¹ Within days, thousands signed an open letter or made statements against a “senseless and unnecessary” war, calling on their government to withdraw troops.⁴² Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conductor Kirill Petrenko denounced Vladimir Putin’s actions as an “insidious attack on Ukraine.”⁴³ The rapper Face left Russia in protest and begged Ukrainians for forgiveness.⁴⁴ The list goes on: examples are legions across art forms, genres, and media.

Against this background, public attention has turned to the place of Russian artists and Russian culture in countries and sites that affirm solidarity with Ukraine. “The mass murder of innocent people in Ukraine is done [...] in the name of Great Russia of Culture that was so admired by the whole world until very recently,” choreographer Alexei Ratmansky has observed in response to the call made by the famed dancer and former USSR defector Mikhail Baryshnikov not to “punish Russian artists and athletes” for the war.⁴⁵ Should one guard against Russian cultural presence, whether defined by

³⁹ Claire Moulène, “Faut-il décoloniser l’histoire de l’art ukrainien de l’influence russe,” *Libération*, March 25, 2022, https://www.liberation.fr/culture/arts/faut-il-decoloniser-l-histoire-de-l-art-ukrainien-de-l-influence-russe-20220325_BDXKU5Y75NGBZBFWVQR2BM3SSM/. The call, of course, predates the war: see for example Daria Shulzhenko, “Centuries Later, Russia Still Claims Ukraine’s Cultural, Scientific Heritage,” *Kyiv Post*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.kyivpost.com/lifestyle/centuries-later-russia-still-claims-ukraines-cultural-scientific-heritage.html>.

⁴⁰ “Nous avons fait l’erreur de maintenir au pouvoir un dictateur.” Thierry Hillériteau, “J’ai honte de cette guerre,” Interview with Maria Kurochkina, *Le Figaro*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/aria-kurochkina-j-ai-honte-de-cette-guerre-20220302>. See also Julie Guillaud, “La colère et la honte des artistes russes ne cessent de monter devant la guerre en Ukraine,” *Le Figaro*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/la-colere-et-la-honte-des-artistes-russes-ne-cessent-de-monter-devant-la-guerre-en-ukraine-20220304>. On *La Maestra*, see <https://lamaestra-paris.com/?lang=en>.

⁴¹ “J’ai des amis qui manifestent en Russie contre ce conflit, en prenant de grands risques. Beaucoup craignent la répression. Ils craignent de perdre leur travail, et plus encore. Je sais que beaucoup, aussi, ne réalisent pas ce qui est en train de se passer, ni les conséquences terribles que cette guerre aura sur leur quotidien. Je veux croire qu’il est encore temps de protester pour libérer la Russie, et signifier au monde notre opposition à ce conflit.” Thierry Hillériteau, “J’ai honte de cette guerre,” Interview with Maria Kurochkina, *Le Figaro*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/aria-kurochkina-j-ai-honte-de-cette-guerre-20220302>.

⁴² Joanna York, “‘La guerre détruit tout’: le monde russe de la culture dénonce la guerre en Ukraine,” *France 24*, March 6, 2022, <https://f24.my/8RaP>.

⁴³ Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Some Russian Performing Artists Are Speaking Out Against Putin,” *NPR*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/28/1083496491/russian-performers-speak-out-putin-ukraine>.

⁴⁴ Marco Biasioli, “How Russia’s Musicians Are Taking a Stand Against the War in Ukraine,” *The Conversation*, March 28, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/how-russias-musicians-are-taking-a-stand-against-the-war-in-ukraine-179997>.

⁴⁵ Vanessa Thorpe, “Mikhail Baryshnikov: Do Not Punish Russian Artists and Athletes for War,” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/mikhail-baryshnikov-do-not-punish-russian-artists-and-athletes-for-war-in-ukraine>.

governmental sponsorship or individual citizenship? Should all Russian artists make their opposition resound on the international stage as a premise and condition for public performance and art displays abroad? Is cultural boycott a moral imperative? Can it contribute to undermining Putin's war and regime? Does it instead play into Putin's narrative of Western opposition to Russia's existence? Can cultural exchange contribute to fostering the plurality of opinions and positions within Russia even in the midst of the war? And more broadly, how does one sustain a diplomacy that puts "people first" once enmity and war have been declared?⁴⁶ For cultural diplomacy, these questions, though not unprecedented, may reverberate well beyond the present day.

Trials of the Artist as Ambassador

If the invasion of Ukraine has turned culture once more from a common ground into a global battlefield, the debates about Russian culture today hinge as before on the processes that identify the artist as an envoy and on the emotions that such identities might elicit. Who or what does the musician represent? International studies have long grappled with the intervention of citizen and celebrity diplomats, interrogating what the extension of diplomatic labor beyond the workforce officially accredited by states and international organizations might mean.⁴⁷

States, through commissions, sponsorships, and accolades, manage one process of identification, but musicians make their own claims, and audiences readily construct their own assignments.⁴⁸ Most notably, musicians have drawn resources and benefitted from the multiple identifications simultaneously available to them: as practitioners in a public sphere — art — separated from politics, as experts of an international (even universal) language that goes beyond language, as members of the nation(s) whose citizenship(s) they hold, as actors of state-funded cultural diplomacy programs, as envoys missioned by international and nongovernmental organizations, and as independent advocates of transnational causes. Quite frequently, all these identities, all these layers of representation coexist in a complex work of incarnation: the musician on the international stage is the proverbial human onion of playwright Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.⁴⁹

Far from requiring clarity, musical diplomacy has operated with and through these definitional ambiguities, which often prove crucial to its very existence. For example, in 2008, identifying the New York Philharmonic as a US orchestra was key to its invitation by North Korea, the public relevance of the trip, and its broadcasting on television, either separately from or in combination with the cosmopolitan nature of the orchestra's membership. It was crucial to the reception of the Korean

Vanessa Thorpe, "Alexei Ratmansky: Russian Cultural Figures Must Oppose War in Ukraine," *The Guardian*, March 27, 2022, <https://theguardian.com/stage/2022/mar/27/alexei-ratmansky-russian-cultural-figures-must-oppose-war-in-ukraine>.

⁴⁶ Anne-Marie Slaughter, "The Biden Doctrine is What, Exactly?" *New York Times*, November 14, 2021, "Week in Review," 4. Petra Goedde, "A 'People' Approach to U.S.-Soviet Relations," *Diplomatic History*, advance publication (April 26, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhac024>.

⁴⁷ In a vast literature, see for example Paul Sharp, "Making Sense of Citizen Diplomats: The People of Duluth, Minnesota, as International Actors," *International Studies Perspectives* 2:2 (2001): 131-150; Andrew F. Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2008); and Riina Yrjölä, "From Street into the World: Towards a Politicised Reading of Celebrity Humanitarianism," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14 (2012): 357-374.

⁴⁸ Emilija Pundziūtė-Gallois, "Music that Divides: The Case of Russian Musical Diplomacy in the Baltic States," in *International Relations, Music and Diplomacy: Sounds and Voices on the International Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 235-256.

⁴⁹ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, Act V, scene 5.

folk song “Arirang,” performed at East Pyongyang Grand Theater at the suggestion of a US State Department official.⁵⁰ Yet while insisting on the historical nature of the event, and despite extensive diplomatic labor and preparations, both musicians and US governmental actors went to great discursive lengths to deemphasize its political import. The US government affirmed that the event served no diplomatic purpose: “At the end of the day, we consider this concert to be a concert,” White House Press Secretary Dana Perino indicated.⁵¹ Conductor Lorin Maazel echoed that statement: “we are here to give a concert, that’s all.”⁵²

Painstaking effort went into dismissing comparisons between orchestral diplomacy today and orchestral diplomacy in the Cold War. The latter Maazel characterized as a component of regime change — for the Soviets, “a two-edged sword ... [that] allowed people from outside the country to interact with their own people, and to have an influence ... so long lasting that eventually the people in power found themselves out of power.”⁵³ Any comparison, Maazel stated, “would do a disservice to the people who live here and are trying to do their art and make a better world for themselves and all of us.” And while one understands how evoking this historical parallel might have made North Korean officials rather cross and the musicians dubious, the conceptual nuance between the two remains difficult to follow. Some musicians foregrounded “human-to-human” connections and the irrepressibly individual nature of musical experience.⁵⁴ But some had doubts: “There are a lot of us who are not buying into this party line that music transcends the political,” violist Dawn Hannay wryly observed.⁵⁵

In actuality, political identities are the bricks of the apolitical worldmaking avowedly afforded by the autonomy of music. Audiences are invited to listen with an awareness of legible, audible, and visible political differences.⁵⁶ The hybridity of the Silk Road Project, for example, builds on the mapping of the musicians’ origins across “the lands of the Silk Road” and their co-creation, at the invitation of Yo-Yo Ma, of “a new artistic idiom, a musical language founded in difference, a metaphor for the benefits of a more connected world.”⁵⁷ The opening credits of *The Music of Strangers: Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble* by documentary filmmaker Morgan Neville replicates this movement of inscription and transcendence: the Silk Road Ensemble is introduced in a scene of transcultural improvisation overlaid with credits that lists a subset of the musicians framed each in turn with their name (lettered in the native language and its transliteration) above the country of origin (“featuring Kinan Azmeh, Syria; Wu Man, China; Kayhan Kalhor, Iran; Cristina Pato, Spain; and Yo-Yo Ma,

⁵⁰ Daniel J. Wakin, “North Koreans Welcome Symphonic Diplomacy,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/27/world/asia/27symphony.html>.

⁵¹ Quoted in Wakin, “North Koreans Welcome Symphonic Diplomacy.”

⁵² Quoted in Daniel J. Wakin, “Headed for Korea, Orchestra Gets Tips,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/25/arts/music/25prep.html>. Similar statements by government officials and musicians accompanied the performance of Juanes in Cuba: Damien Cave, “Concert Plans in Havana Start Furor in Miami,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/19/arts/music/19cuba.html>; and Associated Press, “Cuba ‘Peace Concert’ Draws Multitudes,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/21/world/americas/21cuba.html>.

⁵³ Quoted in Wakin, “North Koreans Welcome Symphonic Diplomacy.”

⁵⁴ Quoted in Daniel J. Wakin, “A Major Event in a Strangely Minor Key,” March 2, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/weekinreview/02wakin.html>.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Wakin, “Headed for Korea, Orchestra Gets Tips.”

⁵⁶ This also plays into the process of performance and composition: ethnomusicologist Rachel Harris has written eloquently about how genuinely transcultural performance can “throw us back on ourselves in ways that can be disjunctive but can also be productive.” See Rachel Harris, “Applied Experiments in Collaboration Along the Silk Road,” *The World of Music* 7:1-2 (2018): 37–60.

⁵⁷ “About Us,” Silkroad, <https://www.silkroad.org/about>.

USA”).⁵⁸ That Yo-Yo Ma, the tutelary figure who convenes the ensemble, has long been associated with American institutions, appearing alongside several US presidents and officials since the 1960s, has opened the “metaphor” of the Silk Road Ensemble to be read as an American cosmopolitan “dreamworld” that is perhaps at odds with others — China’s especially.⁵⁹

From the 1990s on, the labor of musicians as international actors has thus expanded from national representation and the composition of difference to processes of conflict transformation or resolution.⁶⁰ Hybridity is only one among a range of options in “musical interventions” that aim to produce a “world away from war.”⁶¹ Specific musical genres have also served as neutral or common grounds. Musical interventions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict sponsored by European governments, for example, have engaged the “ethnic music scene,” international mainstream music, and Western classical music, setting the stage for the encounter of Israeli and Arab musicians in ensemble performances, and opening “the door to seeing and hearing the humanity of the Other.”⁶²

In many instances, Europe has served as a physical and logistical site of choice that afforded the representation and experience of coexistence among those otherwise perceived as enemies, reinforcing the self-construction of Europe and the European Union as originary and model sites for diplomacy and peace.⁶³ The cartography of West-Eastern Divan Orchestra performances offers a striking illustration of this phenomenon, further amplified by the symbolic projection of the musicians in the primarily Eurocentric orchestral repertoire.⁶⁴ Transcultural programs combine the European site with a different symbolic endpoint, as at the Royaumont Academy in France, where its founder Frédéric Duval sought to generate “an alchemy or, if we want to use the metallurgical metaphor, an alloy that is created between these two musical subjects [and] that leads to a third matter (...) a new musical imagination that is much more than the simple addition of its

⁵⁸ Morgan Neville, *The Music of Strangers: Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble*, documentary film (2016), published on YouTube July 9, 2021, <https://youtu.be/qx711dmedtA>.

⁵⁹ Harm Langenkamp, “(Dis)Connecting Cultures, Creating Dreamworlds — Musical ‘East-West’ Diplomacy in the Cold War and the War on Terror,” in *Divided Dreamworlds: The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, ed. Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 230–33, and “Conflicting Dreams of Global Harmony in US-PRC Silk road Diplomacy,” in *Music and Diplomacy from Early Modern Era to the Present*, ed. Rebekah Ahrendt, Mark Ferraguto, and Damien Mahiet, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 83–100.

⁶⁰ For a recent overview, see Ariana Phillips-Hutton, *Music Transforming Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108891363>.

⁶¹ Gillian Howell, “A World Away from War: Music Interventions in War-Affected Settings,” Ph.D. Thesis, Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, <https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/1347>.

⁶² Benjamin Brinner, *Playing Across a Divide: Israeli-Palestinian Musical Encounters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 321.

⁶³ On the problematic conflation of the ideas of Europe, diplomacy, and peace, see Iver Neumann, *Diplomatic Sites: A Critical Enquiry* (London: Hurst, 2013), 15–44. The 2012 Nobel peace prize awarded to the European Union celebrated the representation of Europe as a land of peace.

⁶⁴ For the map, see Frédéric Ramel and Michael Jung, “The Barenboim Case: How to Link Music and Diplomacy Studies,” *Arts & International Affairs* 3:2 (2018), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18278/aia.3.2.5>.

components.”⁶⁵ In all these musical interventions, the journey is, all at once, a movement away from the immediacy of war and toward another future.

In this context, it was perhaps to be expected that Russian artists thought it possible to continue to invoke and defend a special status as apolitical peace figures even after the invasion of Ukraine. For Russian artists on the international stage in particular, and for foreign artists working in Russia, the ambiguous straddling of national identity and musical transcendence had been thought acceptable through military interventions in Georgia, Crimea, and Syria. Each in their way, conductor Tugan Sokhiev and soprano singer Anna Netrebko believed it remained (or should remain) possible to affirm their opposition to conflicts writ broadly while refusing to take a political stance against Russia specifically. Sokhiev and Netrebko made emotional appeals on social media, with a similar core affirmation: that, by definition as musicians, they opposed conflicts, but also stood separate from politics.⁶⁶ Under pressure from the mayor of Toulouse (a French city twinned with Kiev) to take a stance against the invasion of Ukraine, Sokhiev simultaneously resigned from his leadership roles at the Bolshoi Theatre and the Orchestre du Capitoul.⁶⁷ “For some people even to question my desire of peace and think that me, as a musician could ever speak for anything other than Peace on our planet is shocking and offensive,” Sokhiev wrote on Facebook.⁶⁸ “We musicians are the ambassadors of peace,” he added in the same message.

Sokhiev, much like the Silk Road ensemble, invokes music as “this international language that can sometimes express more than any words known to civilisation” while wrestling with the continued meaningfulness of nationality in music. “I am always very proud to be a conductor who comes from such a rich cultural country as Russia,” he wrote in his Facebook statement, “and I am also very proud to be part of rich [F]rench musical life since 2003. This is what music does. It connects people and artists from different continents and cultures, it heals souls across the borders and gives hope for peaceful existence on this planet. Both in Toulouse and in Bolshoi Theatre I regularly invited Ukrainian singers and conductors. We never even thought about our nationalities. We were enjoying making music together. And it still remains the case. This is why I started [the] Franco-Russ[ian] festival in Toulouse [...] I believe that this festival can achieve more in building bridges

⁶⁵ Interview Frédéric Duval (2015) in Julie Oleksiak, *Des musiques du monde à Royaumont : fabrication de la diversité et programmation de rencontres dans une institution culturelle*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Paris, EHESS, 2020). For example, *Sleep song* (2011) is a collaborative work between American poets (some of whom are former veterans of the Iraq war), and Iraqi poets and musicians (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3pXJBoqIrg>).

⁶⁶ Anna Netrebko had made contributions to state propaganda that she is now describing as uninformed and naive: see Elina Viljanen, “Soviet Legacies and Global Contexts: Classical Music and Russia’s Cultural Statecraft,” in *Russia’s Cultural Statecraft*, ed. Tuomas Forsberg, Sirke Mäkinen (London: Routledge, 2021), 152, and then Marie-Aude Roux, “La soprano Anna Netrebko, entre les deux de la scène et de la guerre,” *Le Monde*, May 22, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2022/05/22/la-soprano-anna-netrebko-entre-les-feux-de-la-scene-et-de-la-guerre_6127218_3246.html. Journalist Javier C. Hernández followed the story closely: “Netrebko Loses Work in Russia After Seeking Distance From Putin,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/01/arts/music/anna-netrebko-putin-ukraine-backlash.html>; “Anna Netrebko, Shunned in Much of the West, to Sing in Monte Carlo,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/14/arts/music/anna-netrebko-monte-carlo.html>.

⁶⁷ Javier C. Hernández, “Pressed About Putin, Russian Conductor Quits Bolshoi and French Posts,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/arts/music/tugan-sokhiev-russia-ukraine-putin.html>. Agence France-Presse, “‘Impossible’: Bolshoi Music Director Quits Over Calls to Denounce Ukraine Invasion,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/mar/07/impossible-bolshoi-music-director-tugan-sokhiev-quits-over-calls-to-denounce-ukraine-invasion>.

⁶⁸ Tugan Sokhiev, Facebook Post, March 6, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/tugan.sokhiev/posts/pfbid0xb9EUbrBjK6ox6yhuKQeHwjdtUxkpIFmeDQswCoZj3czcvfzNmRvSeipch5jX5al>.

than political words.”⁶⁹ A few weeks later, the Toulouse orchestra musicians expressed support for their former music director, foregrounding Sokhiev’s “enriching” Russian identity and describing Russian artists as “hostages in a totalitarian regime.” Music, they declared, “is not the enemy (...) With their universal reach, music, culture, and the arts are powerful antidotes against hate among peoples and against all forms of totalitarianisms.”⁷⁰

Yet the “return of war in Europe” has made it impossible for many artists and administrators — in Europe, in the US, and in Russia — to continue to escape the material repercussions of geopolitics and a sense of collective responsibility.⁷¹ The Met’s general manager Peter Gelb captured this sentiment when he stated that “while we [the Met] believe strongly in the warm friendship and cultural exchange that has long existed between the artists and artistic institutions of Russia and the United States, we can no longer engage with artists or institutions that support Putin or are supported by him.”⁷² The wave of Russian and foreign artists departing from Russia or deciding not to return to it assigns to the invasion of Ukraine a distinct historical significance that previous “military operations” did not hold for all. On February 27, choreographer Laurent Hilaire left his position as artistic director of the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Ballet in Moscow before being appointed at the Bavarian State Ballet, an opportunity opened by the resignation of Russian choreographer Igor Zelensky for “private familial circumstances.”⁷³ In April, the Mariinsky conductor and US citizen Gabriel Heine resigned from his position in Saint-Petersburg after seeing images of bombardments in Kharkiv, where Heine served as chief conductor of the symphony orchestra from 2003 to 2007: “That broke me.” Heine noted, “There’s no way I could ever be in denial of what is happening in Ukraine.”⁷⁴

At the same time as the war in Ukraine sheds crude light on the inequitable geography of indignation and responsibility in the twenty-first century, the present moment should force a reckoning with the increasingly embattled nature of arts interventions for peace. Denounced as mockery and distraction, the televised orchestra peace concerts led by Russian conductor Valery Gergiev in Tskhinvali (2008) and Palmyre (2016), are perhaps more properly understood, as Elina Viljanen has argued, as challenging “the global hierarchy of political power through an argument in which classical music

⁶⁹ Tugan Sokhiev, Facebook Post, March 6, <https://www.facebook.com/tugan.sokhiev/posts/pfbid0xb9EUbrBjK6ox6yhuKQeHwjdtUxkpIFmeDQswCoZj3czcvfzNmRvSeipch5jX5al>.

⁷⁰ “Parce qu’ils ont une portée universelle, la musique, la culture, les arts sont de puissants antidotes contre la haine entre les peuples et contre toutes les formes de totalitarismes.” “Toulouse : l’émouvante déclaration de l’Orchestre du Capitole en soutien à Tugan Sokhiev,” *La Dépêche*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2022/03/25/toulouse-lemouvante-declaration-de-lorchestre-du-capitole-a-sokhiev-10194634.php>.

⁷¹ The phrase “return of war in Europe” has quickly become a commonplace of political discourse. See for example the press releases for the Strategic Compass for the European Union, at https://www.ecas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en and <https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/press-release-a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>.

⁷² Quoted in Javier C. Hernández, “Metropolitan Opera Says It Will Cut Ties With Pro-Putin Artists,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/arts/music/met-opera-putin-ukraine-peter-gelb.html>.

⁷³ Figaro with Agence France-Presse, “Le directeur français de la troupe de ballet de Théâtre Stanislavski démissionne,” *Le Figaro*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/le-directeur-francais-de-la-troupe-de-ballet-du-theatre-stanislavski-demissionne-20220227>. “Laurent Hilaire prend la direction du Staatsballett de Bavière,” *Diapason*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.diapasonmag.fr/non-classe/laurent-hilaire-prend-la-direction-du-staatsballett-de-baviere-26357.html>. For a report on the impact of the war on ballet, see Alex Marshall, “War Brings New Iron Curtain Down on Russia’s Storied Ballet Stages,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/arts/olga-smirnova-ballet-bolshoi-ukraine-war.html>.

⁷⁴ Javier C. Hernández, “Citing Ukraine War, an American Resigns from Russia’s Mariinsky,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/18/arts/music/gavriel-heine-resigns-mariinsky.html>.

serves as a symbol of the high cultural level of Russian civilisation.”⁷⁵ Music critics and scholars have long denounced Gergiev’s politicization of music: since 2012, Alex Ross has sought to convince readers that “music is no more apolitical under Putin than it was under Hitler,” and with the invasion of Ukraine, he observes, “overnight, the charade ended.”⁷⁶ Conversely, it might be worth pondering how and why Russia leveraged the uncertain depoliticization of music — just like the ambiguous depoliticization of sports — to turn it into a vector of Russia’s public diplomacy, its opposition to US hegemony, and its contestation of the liberal international order.⁷⁷ If the debate over “canceling Russian culture” has taken hold in the public sphere, it may be because musical autonomy, which after the Second World War offered artists a refuge from the woes of total war and served as a platform for international peace and collaboration, has now become a battleground, and artists, robbed of the neutral ground they had grown accustomed to claim in the name of humanity, are caught in the crossfire.⁷⁸

Reframing Cultural Diplomacy

From this perspective, the debate around “canceling Russian culture” — derided by Alex Ross as a “moralizing stampede”⁷⁹ — stems from the perception that music, at this time, is political. As during the First World War or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the suspension of cultural relations and people-to-people diplomacy is likely no more than temporary, but it serves as a reminder that there are boundaries to the autonomy and universality of music as it has been conceived and to the cultural exchanges it afforded.⁸⁰ In passing, it is worth noting that it never extended to the more-than-human, and the impact of the war on animal and vegetal sound has not preoccupied the public in the way music and human suffering has. The tentative bans and boycotts, however, have sought to affirm, on the one hand, the unacceptability — if not the impossibility — of harboring the inhuman in the arts, and on the other hand, solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian artists whose work the war interrupts. Sokhiev’s statement — “we were enjoying making music together. And it still remains the

⁷⁵ Elina Viljanen, “Soviet Legacies and Global Contexts: Classical Music and Russia’s Cultural Statecraft,” in *Russia’s Cultural Statecraft*, ed. Tuomas Forsberg, Sirke Mäkinen (London: Routledge, 2021), 152. Luke Harding, “South Ossetians Enjoy Requiem Concert in Shattered Capital,” *The Guardian*, August 21, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/21/georgia.russia2>.

⁷⁶ Alex Ross, “Valery Gergiev and the Nightmare of Music Under Putin,” *The New Yorker*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/valery-gergiev-and-the-nightmare-of-music-under-putin>.

⁷⁷ “In a similar vein,” scholars Natlia Gronskava and Andrey Makarychev wrote in 2014, “Putin accused the West and its ‘client state’ Georgia of politicizing the security repercussions of the Games and portrays Moscow as a depoliticizing actor open to international cooperation.” Natlia Gronskava and Andrey Makarychev, “The 2014 Sochi Olympics and ‘Sovereign Power’: A Political Linguistic Perspective,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 61/1 (2014): 41-51, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216610103>. For a rich discussion of the concepts and processes of politicization and depoliticization as they apply to cultural heritage and the UNESCO, see Mathilde Leloup, *Défendre l’humanité en protégeant son patrimoine: Un nouveau mandat pour les opérations de paix onusiennes* (Paris: Dalloz, 2021). See also Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens, *Why International Organizations Hate Politics: Depoliticizing the World* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁷⁸ Emily Richmond Pollock and Kira Thurman, “When Classical Music Was an Alibi,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/arts/music/classical-music-nazi-world-war-ii.html>.

⁷⁹ Alex Ross, “Valery Gergiev and the Nightmare of Music Under Putin.”

⁸⁰ On these precedents, see Anna Fett, “U.S. People-to-People Programs: Cold War Cultural Diplomacy to Conflict Resolution,” *Diplomatic History* 45:4 (September 2021), 733, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhab055>.

case” — omitted the crucial acknowledgment of how the trauma of destruction, loss, and displacement might prevent and disable Ukrainian musicians from making music.⁸¹

Confronted with the political nature of art, the culture industry has thus faced two intertwined questions: who holds responsibility for the loss and suffering witnessed and who has the rightful authority to adjudicate the affiliations of musicians?⁸² Defining a policy proved messy as cultural decision-makers examined the possibility of severing relations with either Russian culture writ large or public supporters of Putin specifically, of banning either artworks of nationalist obedience or current productions sponsored by the Russian state, and of refusing cooperation with either Russian official institutions or organizations funded by the economic beneficiaries of Putin’s regime — all with the intent of signaling responsibility for the war and maintaining music under the sign of peace. British Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries could not have put it in plainer terms when she greeted the decision of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) to exclude Russia from the Eurovision: “Eurovision stands for freedom, unity and respect between countries — watched and enjoyed by tens of millions around the world. Glad to see Eurovision taking action and kicking Russia out.”⁸³

This is, of course, the most radical position and the most salient example: the full-fledged exclusion of Russian art and artworks because, to recall the aforementioned position of choreographer Alexei Ratmansky, the war is taking place “in the name of Great Russia of Culture that was so admired by the whole world until very recently.” It’s not the first time that culture writ large is understood to fall under the regime of the unforgivable: for philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch, German music and literature never could find a place again in his life, and there remains to this day an injunction to acknowledge and wrestle with the antisemitism of opera composer Richard Wagner, though Western countries have mostly learned to engage with the work’s critique rather than to suppress the work.⁸⁴ As it happens, just as Berlin wrestles with the degree and nature of its economic and military engagement in support of Ukraine, the Deutsches Historisches Museum is holding an exhibit on “Richard Wagner and the Nationalization of Feeling” (from April to September 2022) and continues to debate whether Wagner’s ideas “come out on stage” (as argued by historian and exhibit co-curator Michael P. Steinberg) and whether his work should be reclaimed from Adolf Hitler (as conductor Daniel Barenboim has advocated in the context of performance in Israel).⁸⁵

In this light, and as an example, should we question the place of Tchaikovsky’s work in the international cultural pantheon? In a much-debated episode, the Cardiff Philharmonic Orchestra, attentive to one of its members with family “directly involved in the Ukraine situation” found that “two military themed pieces ... (Marche Slave and 1812 [Overture]) ... were particularly inappropriate at this time” as was also the case for Tchaikovsky’s second symphony (nicknamed “Little Russian”

⁸¹ Mark Savage, “Under Attack, Ukraine’s Musicians Become War Reporters and Military Fundraisers,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-60586817>.

⁸² Javier C. Hernández, “Too Close to Putin? Institutions Vet Artists, Uncomfortably,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/arts/music/russian-artists-putin.html>.

⁸³ “Eurovision: Russia banned from competing at 2022 Song Contest,” *BBC News*, February 25, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-60530513>.

⁸⁴ The exhibit is curated by Katherina J. Schneider and Michael P. Steinberg. See also Christophe Bourdoiseau, “Wagner était un précurseur de l’antisémitisme,” *Le Matin Dimanche*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.tdg.ch/genie-musical-et-precurseur-de-lantisemitisme-moderne-386633570604>.

⁸⁵ Steinberg is quoted in Ben Miller, “Germany Reckons With Wagner: Cultural Jewel, or National Shame?” *New York Times*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/08/arts/music/wagner-exhibition-deutsches-historisches-museum.html>. Ewen MacAskill, “Barenboim Stirs Up Israeli Storm by Playing Wagner,” *The Guardian*, July 9, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jul/09/ewenmacaskill>. Alex Ross, “The Case for Wagner in Israel,” *The New Yorker*, September 25, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-case-for-wagner-in-israel>.

and featuring Ukrainian folk themes).⁸⁶ The orchestra foregrounded the inadequacy of performing works with military cannons, national themes, and imperialist overtones that could be misconstrued in the present moment.⁸⁷ That was, and remains, a circumscribed argument when, indeed, one might pause and consider that “Putin’s nationalism ... cannot be wholly separated from those roots, which informed the musical language of Mussorgsky, Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov and to an extent Tchaikovsky, some aspects of which were perceived as specifically ‘Russian,’ opposed in particular to what were thought to be Germanic norms.”⁸⁸ Tchaikovsky’s ballets are entangled with the Russian imperial regime and ideology that sponsored them, and the 1812 Overture, composed and performed for the Tsarist regime, can be heard as consonant with the “cultural turn” of Putin’s regime, which has appropriated the work in memorial contexts.⁸⁹ “The names of Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Rachmaninoff are being removed from playbills,” Putin denounced, tapping into paranoid discourses on “cancel culture.”⁹⁰

Simultaneously, tactics to anchor Russian culture within Western aesthetic life have emerged that challenge Putin’s narrative and delineate the contours of another Russia — that of exiles, critics, and opponents to the values heralded by Putin’s regime. Interestingly, Tchaikovsky has a particular place in the US cultural and diplomatic pantheon, and the counter-response was immediate: “The Met Opera disagrees” *New York Times* music critic Zachary Woolfe wrote, adding that “in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine a month ago, it seems remarkable — almost heroic — for the Metropolitan Opera to be putting on Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin” with a cast that’s Russian, Ukrainian, American, French Armenian, Polish and Estonian.”⁹¹ But the response was perhaps as one might expect: North America is, after all, also home to a “Nutcracker Nation” forged, in part, in New York by Soviet exile George Balanchine during the 1950s and 1960s.⁹² What is more, the victory of Texan pianist Van Cliburn at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958 is the stuff of Cold War legend, and, since 1974, the 1812 Overture has been adopted as standard fare for Fourth of July pops

⁸⁶ Emma Mayer, “Orchestras Pull Tchaikovsky from Concerts Over Russia’s War on Ukraine,” *Newsweek*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/orchestras-pull-tchaikovsky-concerts-over-russias-war-ukraine-1686557>. Alyssa Rosenberg, “Two Questions to Ask Before Joining the Culture War on Russia,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/10/cardiff-philharmonic-was-right-tchaikovsky-concert/>.

⁸⁷ Ben Quinn, “Cardiff Orchestra Defends Move to Cut Tchaikovsky from Concert,” *The Guardian*, March 12, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/mar/12/cardiff-orchestra-defends-cut-tchaikovsky-concert-russia>.

⁸⁸ Ian Pace, “Why Cancel Tchaikovsky?” *London Review of Books*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2022/march/why-cancel-tchaikovsky>.

⁸⁹ For an example of the use of the 1812 Overture in ceremonial contexts, see Per-Arne Bodin, “The Monument to Grand Prince Vladimir in Moscow and the Problem of Conservatism,” *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*, ed. Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 304-319. On the political meanings of Tchaikovsky’s battle music and ballets under the reign of Alexander III, see Damien Mahiet, “The Aesthetics and Politics of Wonder in the First Nutcracker,” *19th-Century Music* 40/2 (Fall 2016): 131–158, and “The First ‘Nutcracker’, the Enchantment of International Relations, and the Franco-Russian Alliance,” *Dance Research* 34:2 (Winter 2016): 119–149.

⁹⁰ Zachary Woolfe, “Putin Says Tchaikovsky Is Being Canceled. The Met Opera Disagrees.” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/27/arts/music/putin-tchaikovsky-onegin-met-opera.html>.

⁹¹ Zachary Woolfe, “Putin Says Tchaikovsky Is Being Canceled. The Met Opera Disagrees.”

⁹² Jennifer Fisher, *Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

concerts.⁹³ It makes sense, in that context, that music scholar Simon Morrison would suggest that we — and Russians — should ponder the 1812 Overture as a deeply felt narrative of resistance against invasion, and that Illinois conductor George Stolluto would seek to foreground Tchaikovsky’s queerness and Ukrainian ascendancy.⁹⁴ In effect, Tchaikovsky functions as a shared as well as contested memorial site for the US and Russia.

The present moment may suggest the beginnings of a “new cultural cold war” where cultural diplomacy will recenter on the promotion of national brands, images, and prestige to advance influence abroad: “our music conquers Europe,” Zelensky exulted after Ukraine’s Kalush Orchestra won the Eurovision contest.⁹⁵ Cultural diplomacy, in that mode, functions as a weapon and a gift that reflects wealth and power, if not domination, and does not offer a consistent platform to listen to and engage with alterity.⁹⁶ In light of post-Cold War diplomacy, the present moment should instead beg the question of which aesthetic exchanges and cultural diplomacy remain possible when these cannot be performed under the sign of peace and humanity and must be understood in plainly political terms. Is there a place for cultural exchange even before postwar transition and reconciliation? Is that place elsewhere — on third-party grounds, as European countries have imagined they would serve for Israeli and Palestinians — and, if so, which countries and places may host the parties at war in Ukraine?

But if cultural diplomacy can and should entail a displacement of the self and a recognition of the other — for example to avoid the throes of a new clash of civilizations — what place might and should it have at home? To sustain benevolence in international practices alongside the recognition of suffering and expressions of solidarity is a complicated task. As a disposition toward others, benevolence, far from a form of naivety, should also be understood as a practice of the self “that prepares the political” and is “part of it.”⁹⁷ Benevolence, unlike justice for example, doesn’t provide a basis for international politics. But the work that benevolence entails on oneself opens up possibilities. As a sensibility, benevolence relies on attention, listening, and an equanimous consideration for oneself, others, and the milieu in which international relations unfold. Milieu goals can be defined restrictively as the complement to possession goals if nations are concerned with things other than their own territorial proprieties.⁹⁸ But the milieu in which diplomacy operates might more rightly be conceived of as a living system on which its inhabitants depend. In approaching not only others but the milieu of international

⁹³ Stuart Isacoff, *When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn’s Cold War Triumph, and Its Aftermath* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); and David Schroeder, *Experiencing Tchaikovsky: A Listener’s Companion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 12–16

⁹⁴ “Canceling Russian culture,” *Today, Explained*, podcast episode hosted by Noel King, <https://megaphone.link/VMP3422797896>, transcript at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ELE1Iymk32fEKXJwI7WTO_sLVrmdRZUmMWJofwMxWMo/edit. See also the letter to the *Guardian* by a US reader “Tchaikovsky’s Ukrainian Heritage Should Be Celebrated,” April 15, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/15/tchaikovsky-ukrainian-heritage-should-be-celebrated>.

⁹⁵ News Wires, “‘Our Music Conquers Europe’: Zelensky Praises Ukraine Eurovision Win,” *France 24*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220514-our-music-conquers-europe-zelensky-praises-ukraine-eurovision-victory>.

⁹⁶ For a rich study of the range of Cold War US musical diplomacies, from the “mediation of prestige” to the formation of “cultural relations,” see Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). Nicholas Cull, through the concept of “listening,” has long advocated more open-ended (when not immediately transformational) modes of engagement with the world abroad. See for example, Nicholas Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

⁹⁷ Frédéric Ramel, *La bienveillance dans les relations internationales: Un essai politique* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2022), 37.

⁹⁸ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1962), 73.

relations with benevolence, one attends to the close link between the local and the global in order to preserve life. Cultivating and strengthening relationships entails a concern for the diplomatic milieu, beyond inter-state contacts.

If diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy particularly, consists in forging a link with another who may be so different and distant as to be an enemy, benevolence, as a regulating concept, is a rejoinder to sustain what makes diplomacy: the focus on establishing relations and civility and on “mediating estrangement” that begins first and foremost with the knowledge and experience of otherness.⁹⁹ Musicians and artists, if they think of themselves — or are thought by others — as international actors and diplomats, can contribute to this technology of intermediation, in a delicate balancing act that is all the more difficult to pursue in a context of war. What the first two months of the war may have shown is that artists and institutions may not have had quite the right discursive frame at hand to sustain their diplomatic roles. Which aesthetic experiences pertain to rituals of shared celebration that reproduce and amplify actual or idealized dimensions of who one is?¹⁰⁰ Which function instead as techniques of experienced alterity that might enable individuals and groups to see themselves as others, including as and with those one most abhor?¹⁰¹ If it is not for artists and institutions to prescribe the meaning of international stages and interventions, it is likely crucial that they understand these — and themselves — in political terms.

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⁹⁹ Rebecca Adler Niessen, “Relationalism or Why Diplomats Find International Theory Strange,” *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, ed. Ole J. Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver B. Neumann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 284–308. James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

¹⁰⁰ For a reading of a symphonic concert in those terms, see Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

¹⁰¹ On sympathy and estrangement in music, see for example Sarah Collins, “Aesthetic Liberalism,” in *Music and Victorian Liberalism: Composing the Liberal Subject*, ed. Sarah Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–12.