Opinion

Cartographies of Meaning

Can musicians stand for Ukraine without participating in propaganda?

by Luis Velasco-PufleauJune 23, 2022

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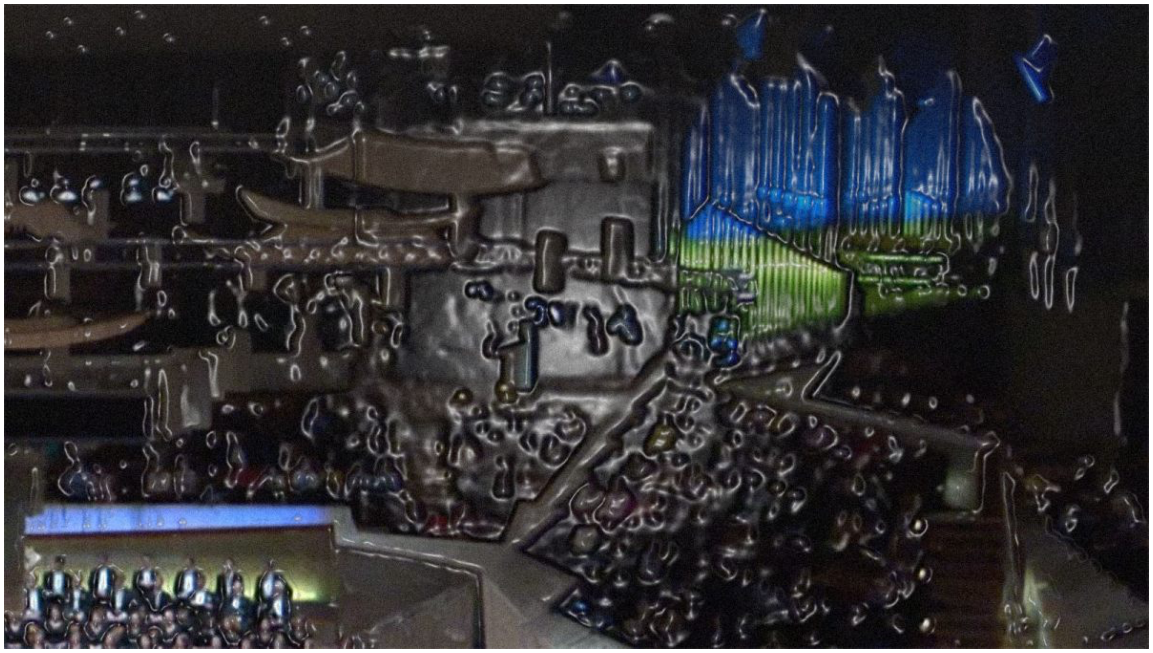


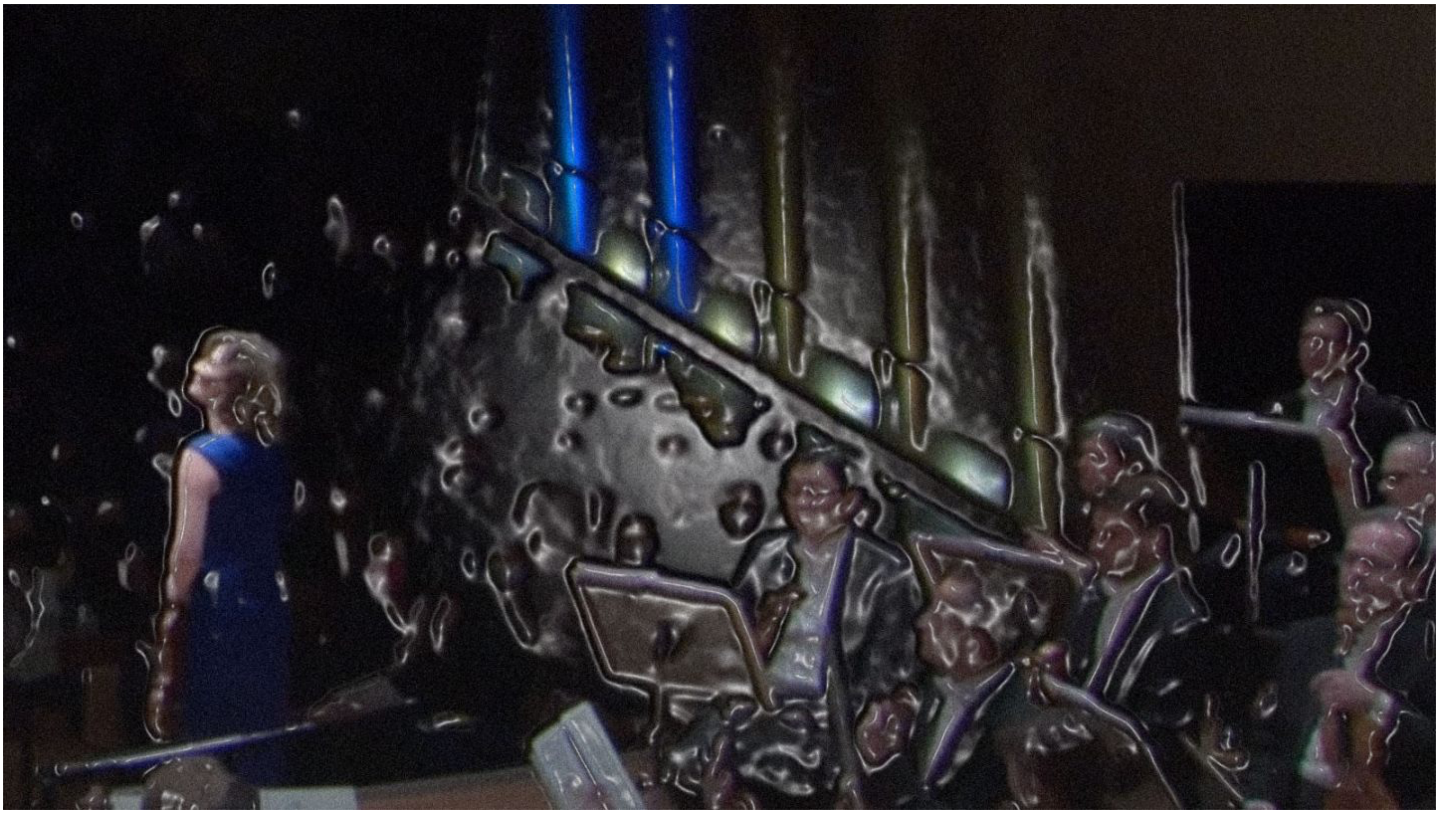
At the 64th annual Grammy Awards ceremony, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky posed the question: “What is more opposite to music?” and answered, “The silence of ruined cities and killed people.” Dressed in his now-iconic khaki t-shirt, Zelensky evoked in a short video the silence which Ukrainians are facing in their own land, and exhorted musicians to support them in their fight against Russia. “Fill the silence with your music,” he said. “Fill it today, to tell our story. Tell the truth about this war. Support us in any way you can, any but not silence. And then, peace will come to all our cities the war is destroying.”

Zelensky was asking musicians to take sides. He was urging them to become storytellers in the war of information, to make music to frame narratives of the invader and the invaded. It seemed like a reasonable request, one analogous to his pleas for anti-aircraft systems, tanks, and artillery from European countries and NATO members. After all, Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine in a war of aggression. Credible reports have been published about atrocities committed by Russian soldiers in Ukrainian cities. But is music the same as weapons? Can musicians stand for Ukraine without becoming propaganda tools?

Orchestras and musicians in Europe did not wait for Zelensky’s call to fill concert halls, online streams, and television and radio with music in support of his country. Dozens of concerts have been organized in solidarity with Ukraine since Putin ordered the invasion on February 24. The program and settings of these benefit concerts have

been extremely diverse, and sometimes included Russian composers–such as the Brussels Philharmonic performance of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony on March 17, when the Russian troops were getting closer to Kyiv.

Two concerts involving European orchestras and international soloists, both broadcast online by the French-German TV station ARTE, reveal some of the strategies used to politicize classical music and make it part of the war of information. They also show how music can be used to frame conflicts according to nationalistic narratives that exacerbate antagonistic identities, a proposition to be questioned even when the aggressor—in this case Russia—is clear.



Two weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on March 11, the Lithuanian National Opera Orchestra and the Lithuanian National Opera Choir performed a concert in Vilnius called Strong Together – A Concert in Solidarity with Ukraine. The date was carefully chosen. It coincided with the 22nd anniversary of the restoration of the independence of Lithuania, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The concert setting displayed European identity and the common history of Lithuania and Ukraine. During the concert, on the stage just behind the orchestra, several versions of the flags of Lithuania, Ukraine, and the European Union were projected onto a huge screen. The concert program, conducted by Ričardas Šumila and Margaryta Grynyvetska, began with the national anthems of Lithuania and Ukraine, and featured music by composers from each country. The concert, which also included a dance performance, ended with the European anthem: the final chorus from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. (Played regularly at political events in Europe as a symbol of peace and democracy, the same symphony was also performed in 2017 at the Elbphilharmonie during the G20 summit in Hamburg before Putin, Trump, Erdoğan, Jinping, and other leaders from the world's top economies.)

In Vilnius, the performances of musical works were interjected with recorded political speeches, projected onto the screen, by Lithuania's Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė and the Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. These speeches were complemented by a live speech by Petro Beshta, the Ukrainian Ambassador in Lithuania. The speeches turned what was supposed to be a concert into something like a war council.

"Today Ukraine is fighting for the freedom of all of us. For a democratic world and for the hope that terror is not the most powerful force," Šimonytė said, standing in front of the NATO flag and the three other flags shown since the beginning of the concert. She ended her speech by saying that "the sounds of guns and bombs can seem to drown out all the world's music and make it no longer worth playing. But I am convinced that music needs to be even louder than before, because it is not the sound of indifference but the sound of hope. *Slava Ukraini*!"

Šimonytė described music as the sound of peace and hope, replacing the sounds of bombs and guns. This common view about musical practices as inherently good omits the fact that music has often accompanied and intensified the sound of guns during war, as demonstrated by countless historical and contemporary examples of soldiers listening to music in training and combat, as well as music and sound used as torture.

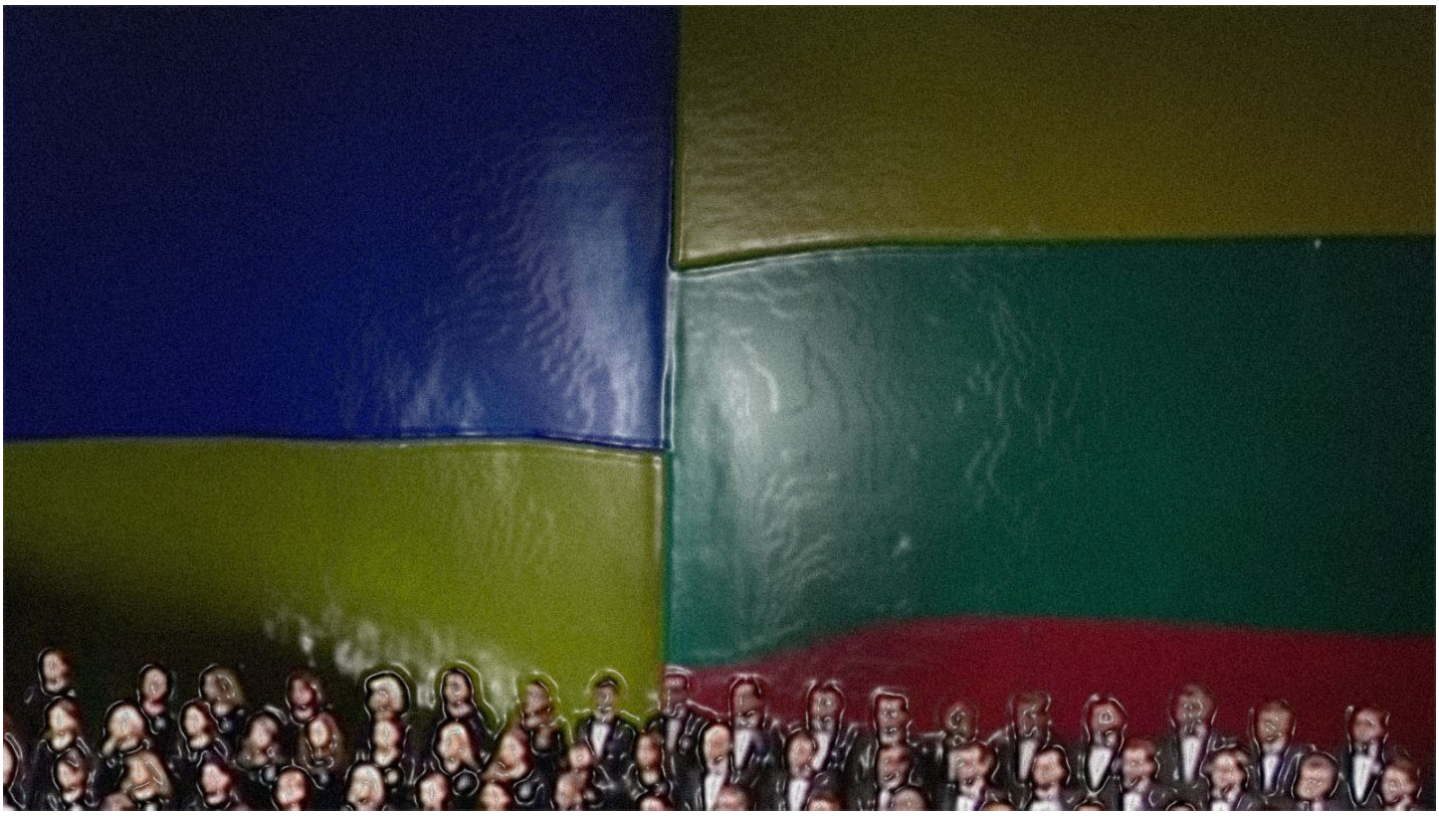
The concert speeches framed Ukraine's fight against Russia as the fate awaiting all Europeans. "Right now, Ukraine takes responsibility to decide what the 21st century will look like. Today it depends on the Ukrainians how Europe in this century will be," Tikhanovskaya said. The Ukrainian Ambassador, Petro Beshta, called Putin the "evil of the 21st century" and compared him to Hitler: "The face of evil of the 20th century is Hitler and Nazism, the face of evil of the 21st century is Putin and Putinism. They kill children, they kill women, they destroy hospitals, they destroy schools. There is nothing sacred left. They want to destroy the Ukrainian nation; they want to destroy democracy in Europe." According to Beshta, the war in Ukraine is about civilization against barbarism, light against darkness. Beshta added, "We will not let these forces bring darkness to our freedom. We will bring everyone who commits war crimes to justice: We will establish the new Nuremberg tribunal of

Europe of the 21st century. And together we will win."

This concert can be considered a nationalistic and pro-militaristic event. Composers' citizenship appeared to be the main reason for their inclusion in the program—just as nationality is the main criteria for conscription in armed forces. The music of Beethoven represented a united Europe facing a clearly defined enemy. By performing music by Ukrainian and Lithuanian composers, the concert became a performance of national communities, initiated by national anthems, emotionally supporting the political speeches that led the narrative.

Four days after the concert in Vilnius, the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin and the Berlin Radio Choir also performed a solidarity concert with Ukraine. Initiated by Georgian violinist Lisa Batiashvili, led by American conductor Alan Gilbert, and held at the Berlin Philharmonie, the concert featured a cast of international soloists: French oboist François Leleux, Russian-American pianist Kirill Gerstein, Franco-Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón, British-German pianist Ian Wekwerth, and German singer Max Raabe.

At this concert, no statements or speeches were delivered on the stage. No Ukrainian artists were showcased, nor was Ukrainian music performed (apart from the Ukrainian national anthem). But the concert program was curated to build the narrative of a common fate between Ukraine and European states. This narrative was traced through carefully selected musical works, explained throughout the concert by voice-over commentary and subtitles produced by ARTE. “The music of Giuseppe Verdi and Johann Sebastian Bach will seek to heal the wounds, to overcome the fear caused by the atrocities of the conflict. We will then be carried by the sweet melancholy of a set of Berlin songs, and the pianistic virtuosity of Maurice Ravel’s Piano Concerto for the Left Hand,” said the female voiceover at the beginning of the concert. “We will end with an optimistic breeze that blows in the Ninth Symphony created by Antonín Dvořák, the ‘Symphony of the New World.’”



But the rhetoric about the relationship between the musical performance and the war in Ukraine changed over the course of the concert in the voice-over commentary. At the beginning, the musicians were performing “to call for the cease of hostilities in

Ukraine and for peace in Europe." After "Requiem for Ukraine," a work for solo violin written by the Georgian composer Igor Loboda, Batiashvili's performance was said to be "in support of the Ukrainians who are defending the territorial integrity of their country in the face of Russian imperialism, today with weapons, previously with demonstrations in Maidan Square."

According to the voice-over, Verdi's chorus "Patria oppressa" from the fourth act of his opera "Macbeth" gained new meaning in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: The work was "able to articulate the feeling of a whole population, to express their distress faced with the unspeakable in war." It was the same for the song "Irgendwo auf der Welt," by the German composer Werner Richard Heymann, which "sounds a note of hope in the midst of tragic events: It was sung in the early 1930s during the rise of Nazism, it finds an echo today in the conflict in Ukraine."

Contrary to the concert in Vilnius, the narrative of the concert at the Berlin Philharmonic inserted the war in Ukraine into the longer history of Europe. World War I is evoked through Maurice Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, which "makes apparent the absurdity of war and its mutilations." Then, looking further back in the past, the voice-over asserts that the consequences of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) are audible in the music of Bach, hoping that the performance of the aria "Erbarme dich" from the "St. Matthew Passion" will "soothe all those who are closely affected by the war in Ukraine." Again, music is supposed to create hope in opposition to the death and destruction of war.

These concerts could be considered as being part of propaganda frameworks because they give ready-made answers and prevent us from asking questions in different ways. They show how the emotional dimension of music is being used in political narratives. As much as we might hope that these concerts can contribute to a unilateral Russian withdrawal from Ukraine, they can't stop or prevent war. On the contrary, they might support discourses that build antagonistic identities—which are necessary to justify and continue war. These political narratives designate enemies as cohesive wholes. History has proven that music can be used in

opposite discourses during war: Musical narratives frame armed conflicts according to particular, usually nationalistic views.

In my opinion, the musicians' intentions are good: They want to support the beleaguered Ukraine as well as they can, as their governments' military, economic and diplomatic responses fluctuate or seem less than satisfactory. However, we have to accept that musical performance cannot "tell the truth" about the war in Ukraine. If we—musicians, composers and music scholars—hope to replace the sound of guns with music of all kinds, we need to pay attention to potential instrumentalizations of our performances and try to find new modes of action.

Musical performances outside propaganda frameworks can build collective identities that are more open, diverging from those imposed by nation states—whether they are ruled by democratic or authoritarian regimes. Musicians and composers can speak out and position themselves against war and the resulting suffering. Music performances can act on our senses to change our perception of the world, building

creative bonds between transnational communities. Working together with dissident composers and artists, we can draw new cartographies of meaning and broaden knowledge that drives people into action for social justice. As musicians and citizens, we must maintain our capacity for critical thinking and contribute to creating a meaningful common world.

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