

## Music in Wartime: From Wagner's Militarism to Ukraine's Freedom Orchestra and the Cellist of Sarajevo"

Comparing music that inspires war with music inspired *by* war—from Wagner's mythic battles to the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra's healing performances—Cumhur Görgün shows us how music can empower propaganda or create peace.

By Cumhur Görgün

"I don't have a gun, but I have my cello."

"If we are not fighting for culture then what is the point of fighting?"

These moving sentiments, expressed by musicians of the new Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra, tie musical performance directly to Ukraine's war with Russia. But music's relationship to war is complex.

### WAGNER

Richard Wagner, among the most creative and innovative composers in the Western tradition, held anti-Semitic views; brought to life a powerful Germanic mythology that set the German people apart from the Roman-Christian tradition embraced by other Europeans; and his works were promoted by Hitler as positive contributions to what Nazis referred to as "the German folk community" [Volksgemeinschaft].

Wagner's thunderous passages certainly sound like war. Not a real war, but a mythological war of fictional heroes. "The Ride of the Valkyrie" is the theme song of both *Apocalypse Now* and *Star Wars*, the two outstanding war films of the last century, precisely because it inspires strong feelings for the youth who fight wars, enabling the films' audiences of teenagers (or with teenage sensibilities) to identify with and enjoy the prowess and agility of young heroes in combat. Where do I sign up?

### SOUSA & COHAN

Then there's upbeat war music for the home front, whether John Philip Sousa marches encouraging bravery and determination that are "in-step" and obedient, or George M. Cohan's recruiting song "Over There" with lyrics that trivialize war and promise a girl's affection for signing up:

Hear them calling, you and me<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
Every son of liberty<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
Hurry right away<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
No delay, go today

Make your daddy glad<sup>[SEP]</sup>  
To have had such a lad<sup>[SEP]</sup>

Tell your sweetheart not to pine<sup>[L]</sup>  
To be proud her boy's in line<sup>[SEP]</sup>

The social power of music has long been recognized by those who wage war. Napoleon wrote a letter to the Paris Conservatoire in 1797, "Among all the fine arts music is the one that exercises the greatest influence upon the passions and is the one that the legislator should most encourage. A musical composition created by a master makes an unflinching appeal to the feelings and exerts a far greater influence than a good book on morals, which convinces one's reason but not one's habits."

Similarly, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin held strong convictions that the right kind of music was essential to their grasp on power. As master conductor John Mauceri puts it, "Music has power to control behavior, and those who wished to conquer the world sought to harness its power. Music is dangerous because it possesses an invisible force that can represent emotions and create tribal affinities."

Yes, music can promote tribalism, nationalism and militarism. It can cheer the folks on the home front and stiffen the spines of soldiers marching into combat. But there is an entirely different kind of war music that expresses the deepest human sympathies and frees the soul from the bonds of suffering.

#### UKRAINIAN FREEDOM ORCHESTRA

The Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra creates non martial war music, engaging entirely different emotions from those of Wagner, Sousa, or Cohan. It is music that draws defeated souls upward from the ashes of destruction, weaving a broad tapestry that mixes despair and grief with joy, hope, peace and spirituality. This is the UFO brand of war music.

Led by the Canadian-Ukrainian conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson, the UFO features Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov's Symphony No. 7 in every concert. A series of breathing sounds for the brass bring the seventeen-minute piece to a conclusion. Silverstorv stated that the sounds represent the last breaths of his dying wife, but conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson, with delicate sensitivity, creates an atmosphere not of death, but of continuation. She connects the last notes with silence. Low sounds and silences containing them bring listeners, without hesitation or variation, to a closing that is not death, but spiritual grace.

"It's the breath of life, to show that their spirits go on," Wilson states. "This has connected our hearts. We feel part of something bigger than ourselves."

#### VEDRAN SMAILOVIĆ

In 1992 Vedran Smailović witnessed a mortar round from the surrounding hills kill 22 innocent citizens waiting in line for bread in Sarajevo's market square.

The next day found Smailović, fully exposed to sniper fire, dressed in concert tails to play the Adagio in G Minor (once attributed to Albinoni but actually written by twentieth century

composer Remo Giazotto). Smailović returned the next day to repeat the performance, then again, day after day, until he had made 22 performances, one in honor of each victim of the breadline killings.

The nine-minute Adagio's stately pace and quiet rhythms evoke a meditative calm. Smailović's cello provided soothing relief from the violence of war. He wanted to leave a mood of peace and acceptance in the space where the victims died, urging listeners to move beyond anger and fear to a higher plane. His performances were a deep-felt response to the insanity of war. "You ask me am I crazy for playing the cello in a war zone, why not ask THEM if they're crazy for shelling Sarajevo!" Smailović reportedly once exclaimed.

#### THE CELLIST OF SARAJEVO

Vedran Smailović's heroic gesture for peace and understanding gained him global recognition, including composer David Wilde's solo cello piece in his honor, "The Cellist of Sarajevo", recorded by Yo Yo Ma, available on YouTube. Wilde, an accomplished pianist, won major prizes including a first at the Liszt-Bartók competition in Budapest in 1961, where Nadia Boulanger was a jury member and invited him to study with her.

This six-minute piece opens with a droning sequence of bass register notes, a mood of darkness and despair. Each slow-paced note carries its own burden of melancholy. These dirge-like, drawn-out tones continue for more than a minute. Then, moving to a higher register, melody is introduced and tempi change, signs of life and hope in the darkness. Descent again to the lower register, only to lift back up into the melodic higher register, integrates the tones of despair with the tones of hope. The shifts back and forth between darkness and light grow richer harmonies and changing tempos that weave despair and hope into a complex tapestry. Following is series of single string tones in a meandering middle-register melody. Then the low register dirge-like tones return, the pace slows, hope now tempered with grief, leading to a slow fade into silence. A silence beyond words.

Performances of the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra fill the hearts of musicians and audience alike with profound sadness, but a sadness that by being shared becomes testament to the depth of the human spirit. For the citizens of Sarajevo, Smailović's performances were spiritually restorative. We can only imagine what the cellist himself experienced as he played. David Wilde's "The Cellist of Sarajevo" is an imaginative musical narrative that integrates grief with peace.

#### THE MUSIC OF A POOR MAN

Master teacher, composer and conductor Nadia Boulanger was in personal despair when, as Germany invaded, she fled France, arriving in New York in November of 1940. Deeply worried about those she had left behind, in a March 18, 1941 letter to Polish bass Doda Conrad she wrote:

I drag with me the shame of having left ... [and] I carry around my old incurable wounds ... Nevertheless other duties call, and we have to

find again our enthusiasm and our energy ... we will be touched to the bottom of our souls by the music of a poor man, as miserable as we are ... because it was given to him to encounter God, and to make us encounter Him, everything—even our most profound and legitimate distress—will take on a different color. And between friendship and art, we will quickly find again the real meaning of life, its beauty and our love for it. (1)

“The music of a poor man, as miserable as we are” is the music of the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra. It is the music of Vedran Smailović in the Sarajevo market square. It is music that brings us from the depths of despair to encounter God, as Boulanger would have it, or to encounter a higher understanding, a form of enlightenment, as non-Christians might describe it. Boulanger’s particular friendship with Doda Conrad is in a continuum of broader kinship with all who share the experience of being deeply inspired by music.

Souls can be linked and spirits lifted through the art of music,

(1) Miller, James Whipple. *Nadia Boulanger: War Years in America and Her Last Decades*. Chestnut Hill Press, 2023, pp. 92-93. [Link to landing page for this book]