

Classical Music Still Plays in the Theater of War

John Mauceri

The author of "The War on Music: Reclaiming the Twentieth Century."

THERE is a trope often heard in discussions about culture that classical music is irrelevant — an elite and moribund art form disconnected from contemporary life.

If the trope were true, however, would Russian soldiers have assassinated a Ukrainian conductor in his home after he refused to conduct a concert celebrating Russia's "improvement of peaceful life"? That is the claim of the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture, which issued a statement on the recent death of Yuriy Kerpatenko, an active and influential leader of theaters and orchestras in the occupied city of Kherson. (One wonders what would have been on that program. Tchaikovsky? Prokofiev? Surely not Musorgsky's "The Great Gate of Kyiv.")

And if classical music is irrelevant, why would the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, which resides in Kyiv, announce a three-week tour to Britain — the most extensive in its more than 100-year history? And why would a recent performance of Adolphe Adam's 1841 "Giselle" in London by the United Ukrainian Ballet be praised as a triumph of civilization against the barbarism of Vladimir Putin's Russian Federation?

Those who believe the trope, then, that classical music has little or no currency are mistaken. At least the leaders of Russia and Ukraine believe it is very important indeed.

When the Metropolitan Opera's general director, Peter Gelb, announced in February, soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that the company "can no longer engage with artists or institutions that support Putin or who are supported by him," the Met and other arts institutions that followed suit were scrutinized. But the clash of classical music and world politics, for better or worse, was nothing new.

In 1917, the Metropolitan Opera banished

the operas of Wagner and Beethoven in the run-up to America's entrance into World War I because the very spirit of the German Hun was thought to be embedded in this music. Wagner's musical depiction of the descent of the Holy Grail in his prelude to "Lohengrin" and Beethoven's hymn to marriage and the triumph of freedom over political repression in "Fidelio" were now unacceptable in the free city of New York.

In Boston, the German-born Swiss conductor Karl Muck — along with more than 20 members of the Boston Symphony — was arrested and jailed in 1918 on suspicion of being a German sympathizer. Muck spent more than a year incarcerated at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga. At so many flashpoints over the past century, war on another country has also been a war on music.

Making classical music a target and a weapon is one of the legacies of the 20th century. Before World War I, there were styles of music attributed to certain countries. The German-born Handel wrote Italian operas in London. His exact contemporary, J.S. Bach, composed what became known as the French Suites in Germany. These were not seen as political acts. However, when Arnold Schoenberg joined the Austrian Army in 1916, he was determined to wipe out the music of France's "kitsch-mongers." Classical music had become proof of the superiority of countries as well as their political regimes.

Unlike the case during World War I, Wagner's works were performed throughout World War II in America as well as in the Third Reich. Hitler marketed Wagner's operas as the artistic epitome of Nazi Germany, even though the composer had died in 1883, six years before Hitler was born. Beethoven was claimed by both the Allied and Axis powers. The opening of his Fifth Symphony became the musical motto of victory over the Germans who had claimed those very same four notes as another example of their über alles superiority.

When the Bayreuth Festival — an event founded by Wagner and devoted exclusively

A Ukrainian conductor's death underscores an art form's relevance.



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to his music — returned in 1951 after seven years of wartime silence, the program opened not with a Wagner opera but with something that was, at the time, politically neutral: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, conducted, nonetheless, by Hitler's favorite maestro, Wilhelm Furtwängler.

The emotion of the Bayreuth performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony can be summed up by listening to its last minute and a half and hearing the pandemonium of notes as the conductor and orchestra accelerate into warp speed and the chaotic world of The Unplayable — and yet somehow end together. And when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it was Leonard Bernstein who led that same symphony, having replaced the word "joy" (Freude) in the work's finale with "freedom" (Freiheit), thus transforming it into an overt "Ode to Freedom."

Despite the vast number of people who claim to have no interest in or understanding of classical music, it's clear that something

very powerful is at work here. It is what the 20th-century American composer Charles Ives once described as "in-known" — something that we can sense profoundly even if we can't fully grasp or explain it.

There are few who understand what Ukraine gave us in the last century. Much of the music we think of as American was composed by the children of Ukrainians who escaped another kind of terrorism — anti-Semitism. Our country was the safe harbor for many who escaped the pogroms that surely would have killed them. And who were some of their children, their American children? Bernard Herrmann, Alex North, Elmer Bernstein, Alfred Newman, Leonard Bernstein and George Gershwin.

Any time you hear the music of "West Side Story" or "Rhapsody in Blue," or watch "A Streetcar Named Desire," "Psycho," "The Ten Commandments" or "The Magnificent Seven," you are hearing the sound that freedom gave back to us and to the world.