

The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

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Comforting Odesan Souls with Sonic Beauty

The Odesa Philharmonic's springtime performance at the city's elegant Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary gave Odesans an opportunity to delight in beauty even as Russia attacks accelerated.

Saturday, May 10 had been overcast and cool until the sun broke through late in the day. Every ray of sunlight made the city feel spring-like in the face of the ongoing Russian rocket and drone attacks that grew fiercer as the weeks rolled by. The city's exquisite Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary offered sanctuary to all, even in a city where less than one percent of residents identifies as Roman Catholic. Its gleaming white and gold interior sparkled as concert goers gathered for the [Odesa Philharmonic's performance of Anton Bruckner's "Romantic" Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major.](#)

The Odesa Philharmonic Orchestra under Artistic Director Hobart Earle has remained a courageous embodiment of the city's spirit of resistance. From a rousing performance of the overture to Mykola Lysenko's opera *Taras Bulba* just days before Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022 until this summer, the orchestra has performed before hometown audiences despite air raid sirens, blackouts, curfews, martial law regulations, and, earlier this spring, damage to its beloved concert hall by Russian rocket attacks. Within hours of losing its home, the orchestra continued performing at Odesa's Conservatory.

The orchestra's critically acclaimed performance at the 2022 Berliner Musikfest brought world-wide attention to Ukrainian classical music, as did BBC radio shows featuring the orchestra's recordings in the weeks to follow. Maestro Earle has traveled throughout North America and Europe presenting ardent lectures expounding the wealth of Ukrainian classical musicianship; the orchestra has toured in Italy, Korea, and elsewhere.

These important achievements take a backseat to the orchestra's performances at home, which continue to bring musical brilliance to Odesa's annual City Day, New Year's, and Ukrainian Independence Day celebrations. The ensemble's commitment to performing regular concerts provides a touchstone of normalcy in otherwise perilous times.

Bruckner's 75-minute Fourth Symphony is well suited to lifting flagging spirits. The mystical Austrian titled his symphony "Romantic" when he composed the work at the height of Europe's Romantic Movement in 1874. He subsequently revised the score several times before 1888, leaving behind a work that has been controversially amended by others. Audiences embrace the piece's loveliness even as musicologists argue endlessly over which version is most authentic.

In 2016, Earle told Vladislav Davidzon of the *Odessa Review* that the Odesa Philharmonic has developed its own distinct sound. "It is a special sound," he noted, "and it is a sound which is very different from that of any

other orchestra in Ukraine. It is also different from the great Russian orchestras in Moscow and St. Petersburg, in that there is a ‘southern’, warm element to the sound.” A sound, in other words, well suited to Bruckner’s monumental symphonies.

The Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary offered a pleasing backdrop for the orchestra. Odesa’s Polish and German Roman Catholics commissioned architects Feliks Gąsiorowski and Francesco Morandi to design the church when the city was a flourishing entrepôt. They built the three-aisled, domed basilica between 1844 and 1853. An 1850 copy of Raphael’s Assumption of the Virgin Mary hangs over the altar surrounded by treasured paintings, towering crystal chandeliers, and a marble baptismal font donated by Pope Pius IX.

The church proved to be a particularly appropriate venue for Bruckner’s composition. A church organist, the composer wrote and played religious music in similar churches in Austria. His composing has been described as forming “cathedrals of sound” embodying a deep spiritual journey, a sense of collective experience, and a unique emotional depth. These are the same attributes demonstrated every day by Odesans as they stare down Russian aggression.

