

Sound Expertise Season 3:4 –

Music and the War in Ukraine with Maria Sonevytsky and Oksana Nestrenko

Transcript prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

Maria Sonevytsky 00:00

I think it's so, so critically important to push back against those really simplistic narratives that are born out of a lot of ignorance. And so that neatly dovetails with my longer scholarly project which has been to show the kind of complexity, the complex personhood of Ukrainians.

00:17

[Music]

Will Robin 00:38

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm Will Robin, your host. And this is a podcast where I talk to music scholars about their research, and why it matters. So obviously, one of the central questions of this podcast concerns the role of the scholar, what we do, why we do it, and what kind of impact it can make. I definitely spend a lot of time thinking about this. And it tends to be fairly ongoing, important, but also non urgent issue. How can I do what I do better or make more of an impact, et cetera, et cetera? At certain times, though, this question can become deeply and suddenly urgent. And one of those times is war time. What is the role of the scholar when one's country or people or heritage is under attack? There's a lot of great historical writing, for example, about how musicians and musicologists participated in the world wars. But there's a much more recent and ongoing situation we can look to as well, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, beginning in February 2022, and still very much happening today. I wanted to know more about what it means to be a scholar of Ukrainian music in this moment, to be researching and writing about a culture that is under attack and fighting back. So I'm very happy to say I got to talk to two of them. Maria Sonevytsky, Associate Professor of Anthropology and music at Bard College, and Oksana Nesterenko, who teaches at Union College. I learned a lot about how the war has shaped Ukrainian music, and how these amazing scholars have responded to this moment. And I think you will as well.

02:09

[Music]

Will Robin 02:21

So I'd like to start back in February of last year. And I'm wondering if you could each talk a little bit about your response -- how you felt and what you did -- to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both as people with deep ties to Ukraine and as scholars of Ukrainian music. Oksana, you're on my left on Zoom. So maybe would you like to start?

Oksana Nesterenko 02:50

Yes, I have to say it, it was unexpected. Of course, as for everyone else. I was at home, I was writing an essay about the Revolution of Dignity and musical responses. And it was very difficult to write while I was expecting or not expecting that there will be this escalation of conflict. So when the invasion started, my first response was, of course to check if all my relatives are okay. But I also have a lot of composers from Ukraine on social media. So I was just checking if they are okay. And I didn't know what else to do. It was just emotionally very difficult. And then in a couple of weeks, maybe even just one week after the invasion started, I was contacted by Andrea Bohlman, who is the editor of Musicology Now, and she wanted to have a collection of stories about Ukrainian musicians. So she offered me to write about one of the musicians that I was thinking about at the time. And then she offered me to write a longer article about music responses to the war. And it was very helpful to work on something in this respect because I spent so much emotion and time looking out for what these composers are feeling and doing and then to reflect all of this in writing was very helpful.

Will Robin 05:04

Hmm, hmm. Maria.

Maria Sonevytsky 05:07

I was in California actually, I was giving a lecture at the University of California at Santa Barbara on February 23, I guess it was, on... I was presenting on a chapter of a book that I have coming out imminently. And I had really... I also, like Oksana, I just didn't believe it was going to happen. Not because I thought it was like the US media hyping this up and beating the war drums, I just -- having spent so much time in Ukraine and having family and such a wide network of colleagues and friends there, the idea that Russia would invade and think that they could take over the country just was so ludicrous. It was just unthinkable to me that they would actually try to do it. And so I remember that in the days... it's funny how much social media became one of my coping mechanisms or trying to figure out how to use the skills that I have and reach new people. In the days between when Putin gave that really menacing speech where he said, you want decommunization, we will bring that to you, we are coming to de-nazify Ukraine. I think I posted my first Twitter thread ever, I'm pretty terrified of Twitter. But I posted a thread just about Ukrainian music and Oksana, if I'm not mistaken, you responded to it because my thread was very biased towards popular music and folk music, which is really the world that I know the best. And I'm pretty sure, Oksana, that this was our very first acquaintance you said, well, also, what about all of these, composers, right, and experimental music and avant-garde music and the history of classical music. And so it was this really interesting space, to say, not only does Ukraine have a history, but it has this incredible diverse history. And one way to look at that is through its musical history. And so that was in anticipation of just rebutting that Kremlin narrative, I guess. But then, on the actual ... it's one of those memories I'm always going to have, but I was having dinner after my lecture with two colleagues, one of whom was also Ukrainian. And we got the news that they had started the invasion. And I just totally broke down at this nice restaurant in Santa Barbara, as did my colleague, and we just were sobbing. It was really a very dramatic scene. And that emotional response was a huge feature of the first six months, I would say. And so it was this really dramatic toggling between a very personal and emotional feeling. And then trying to harness whatever professional skills I might have, I put out a call and said, I'm available to zoom into your classroom, if you want. And if you can pay me an honorarium, I will redirect it to a worthy cause in Ukraine. And I was able to raise for me a considerable amount of money that way. I gave a public lecture on how to

understand the narratives about this war through music, that hundreds of people attended, way more than have ever attended anything I've ever done. And so it felt like just trying to educate, especially a North American or Anglophone population, whose knowledge about Ukraine is so pathetically small, in part due to the very dynamics that we see playing out in this war, which I can say more about, but I'll stop there. But it was a frantic time and it still is, I think it's changed but for those of us who are strongly connected to that time in place, the war is not over. Every day, there are new horrors. I check in on my friends. And I'm in constant contact with people over there.

Will Robin 08:53

You mentioned that you were finishing a book and Oksana, you were working on an essay, how did that moment ... did that moment shift how you were approaching your scholarly writing, the in-progress research? Obviously, it would affect how research... how possible or how different research itself could be, but even the act of conceptualizing your work.

Maria Sonevytsky 09:18

I'm happy to just speak to that quickly, because I have an easy response, which is to say -- in terms of my writing, it was a full stop, like I couldn't bring myself to open a manuscript, it felt so indulgent, it felt so irrelevant, honestly, it just felt like what am I doing writing a book about the punk scene in Kyiv in the 1980s at this moment of emergency. And honestly, I had been on this rhythm of writing and working towards the goal of finishing that book. And then February 24, was the day that it stopped. In May, I was in touch with one of my interlocutors for that project, who by then had become a refugee in France. And he and I had been in touch a bunch, but he got in touch with me on Facebook Messenger, and just said, How's the book, by the way? And I said, Oh, I mean, the book, it's completely stopped. It's so dumb, why would I work on that? And he kind of, almost through the Facebook Messenger video chat, shook me by the shoulder. [She and Will laugh] And just said - That's what you do, we need you to battle on the intellectual front. And we need you to contribute knowledge. And so it almost gave me permission to reopen that manuscript, I reopened it to the moment I had left it, which happened to be an extended analysis of a song about his son. And I completely burst into tears and had to put it away again. But eventually, I got back into it. And I would say that the book will be out soon, so people can judge for themselves. I really tried not to allow the current events to infect the remaining writing I had to do. But the conclusion in particular, which is short, addresses the current moment because it felt like I couldn't not address it. And I sent that conclusion around to a lot of my trusted Ukrainian colleagues to say, Does this ring true? Does it sound too biased? Does it sound too emotional? Because it is addressing this current moment. And I got the approval and some feedback from colleagues there, which was really helpful, and made me feel like I hadn't kind of entirely lost the plot. But, of course, it was impossible to finish writing without having in mind, almost the fact that one of the arguments I advanced in that book was that this Ukrainian punk band sort of happened upon almost an accidental politics that triggered a new kind of Ukrainian consciousness among these, like youth nonconformists. And I felt vindicated in that argument, because it felt like yes, there was an anti-colonial politics that was nascent in that moment, that we can see the long tail of now in the Ukrainian resistance. And so that appears in the conclusion, and I feel like it's evidenced I hope other people feel that way, too. But that's the story of how all that happened.

Will Robin 12:30

Yeah. And Oksana, Maria works more on popular ... as you laid out popular punk music, and you work more on the avant-garde experimental end of things. I know you sent me this essay last night that deals with this question of how composers were responding to Russian incursions in Ukraine, going back more than a decade. Can you talk a little bit about how that might have changed in the last year?

Oksana Nesterenko 12:53

I actually wanted to answer your previous question. Because so much happened throughout this year that, like you asked about that moment, a year ago, and I almost forget what was happening. So I just remembered, as Maria was talking about her book, that two days before the full scale invasion, I received two emails confirming that I received funding to do an additional chapter for my book, which came from my dissertation. And that chapter is about music in Armenia. So all chapters in my book are about different places in the Soviet Union. And this was completely unrelated to that present moment, something that I applied for a long time ago. And I felt -- I'm not going anywhere, this is just impossible with all these things going on. And then, as I mentioned, I wrote this shorter piece, which felt that it was important to write about the music during the war, and to get it published, something that can be published immediately or as soon as possible for people to read right now. But then, it was just emotionally so difficult to go back to this longer essay about the war. Because you always think about, oh, is this composer still alive? How are they doing right now? And then this news -- my parents are still in Ukraine and we thought because they are in the West, which is much farther away from Russia that they are safe. But then you get the news that there's actually missiles reaching my hometown. So eventually I felt that it would be a kind of therapeutic experience for me to go somewhere else. And I did go to Armenia in June, I spent six weeks there doing research for my book. And I still was thinking back about Ukraine, but it was very helpful especially to do archival research with completely new material. And not to think about the war for at least a short period of time.

Will Robin 15:55

I can imagine that sense of daily urgency, especially with your parents still there. Putting aside the invasion context for a little bit. Could you each talk about how you came to work on Ukrainian music and what aspects of Ukrainian music ended up being your main focus and, how?

Oksana Nesterenko 16:16

So I don't see myself as a scholar of Ukrainian music. Actually, I see myself as a scholar of late 20th and 21st century music. So I chose my dissertation topic based on the music I like, which is music by composers Arvo Pärt, Valentin Silvestrov, Sofia Gubaidulina, Alfred Schnittke. And so you probably noticed that out of the four of them, three, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, and Pärt, were quite well known, at least known among scholars of late 20th century music, before I started writing my dissertation, and almost no one knew about Silvestrov until Peter Schmelz began to work on him. So I wanted to choose a topic that would incorporate all of these composers. So I wrote about religious themes in music in the Soviet Union from the 60s to the 80s, and I eventually chose the structure to focus on one city in each chapter. So I have one of the chapters is about Kyiv, because I wanted to write about Silvestrov. And so I started doing more research into Ukrainian music of that time and about other composers who worked alongside Silvestrov. And the music that I found from that period, required more knowledge of history, because a lot of works represented the historical narrative that would be promoted by the Soviet state for example, there was one piece I wrote about by Lesia Dychko. Lesia Dychko wrote an

oratorio about the baptism of Kyvan Rus in the 10th century. And she felt this work, which is based on historical chronicles, as something that can connect her to her Christian beliefs, which of course, she didn't publicize as it was not allowed to be a Christian. But this oratorio was represented everywhere as a story about unification of Slavic nations. So this idea that Russia and Ukraine have always been together as one nation. So this was just one piece that I found, but I saw this narrative coming up in other works, in music and in literature, and I also talked to an art historian who mentioned, this just keeps coming up. This idea that everything has to be presented from the point of view of Russia and Ukraine as one state. So just one example of something that got me interested more in Ukrainian history.

Will Robin 20:17

I was curious -- I think it's the Musicology Now piece, or it might be the thing you sent me, where you talked about the existence of the Ukrainian new music scene being predicated on an independent Ukraine. This flourishing of all this experimentalism wouldn't happen under a Soviet or Russia controlled Ukraine. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Oksana Nesterenko 20:42

Yes - so, of course, since independence, there is more freedom to compose whatever you want. There are two parts in this question. First, that avant-garde music was not acceptable in the Soviet Union as a style. So the composers who wanted to write this kind of music were less acceptable as composers and even Valentin Silvestrov was expelled from the composers unions for several years. So he was not considered a composer even because of his avant-garde alignment. And in independent Ukraine, of course, you don't see those restrictions. And especially the young composers who grew up in independent Ukraine, they, just get educated in Germany, or in Europe, they can go and study anywhere, and come back, something that they would never be allowed to do in the Soviet Union. They can travel to other countries and see new music that is composed today and get inspired. They can choose any style. And they are not censored.

Will Robin 22:19

Maria, can you talk a little bit about how you got interested in ... your work is more specifically within Ukraine, at least your first and your upcoming book. So how that became a site of fascination for you as a researcher?

Maria Sonevytsky 22:31

Yeah, thanks. I have a heritage connection to Ukraine, obviously by my last name, perhaps. My parents were both post war displaced persons who came to North America in the 1950s as children. My first language was Ukrainian, etc. I'm mentioning this only because when I started graduate school, and I had to pick a field site, I was an ethnomusicology PhD candidate, so ethnography was the name of the game. I really resisted going to Ukraine. I didn't want to be the heritage person studying the heritage site. And so I actually had numerous forays into other field sites. But at some point, I realized that I was best equipped to go to Ukraine, because that was my best language.

Will Robin 23:18

Why were you avoiding it? Was it just that -- not wanting to research yourself kind of thing?

Maria Sonevytsky 23:24

No, it wasn't. And I've spent a lot of time in the last year thinking about this. It was because there was such a strong bias against Ukrainian studies. It was not believed that you could study Ukraine, unless you took on a nationalist position. I mean, there was a sort of baseline skepticism that Ukraine existed...

Will Robin 23:43

in the US?

Maria Sonevytsky 23:45

in the US 100%, especially within Slavic studies, which is very Russo-centric, and remains that way. And this is a huge crisis for Slavic studies that they are supposedly taking on in this past year.

Will Robin 23:58

That's not something I knew about.

Maria Sonevytsky 24:00

Yeah, so I think it was really that. It was sort of, it's not legitimate enough, AND it will be compromised because of my last name. And because the only reason that anyone would study Ukraine is because they are some sort of nationalist patriot in the diaspora. And I really reacted against that, I did not want... because that's not how I feel about Ukraine or the Ukrainian project. I've done a lot of work to undo any of the nationalist, diasporic upbringing that I *was* raised with. And so I was taking a lot of human rights coursework, and I was learning about the history of the Crimean Tatars, who are one of the indigenous groups of Crimea, and who consider themselves today to be Ukrainian. The story of Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian solidarity is a story of postcolonial solidarity. And it really fascinated me and I realized, with all of my Ukrainian upbringing, I had never met a Crimean Tatar. I had only encountered them in the historical narratives where they were marauding or something. There was a very Ukrainian gaze upon the Crimean Tatars that was quite Orientalizing. And so I decided, why not go and try to actually learn about the story of the Crimean Tatar community that is building back an indigenous presence in Crimea. And that really excited me. And then at the same time, this was 2004, this Ukrainian Popstar Ruslana won the Eurovision song contest with a song called Wild Dances. And it was a hugely big deal for people everywhere who I knew. Lots of mixed reactions, I had a lot of friends in Ukraine who were sort of horrified by the spectacle of Ruslana on the Eurovision stage. And then I had a lot of friends in Ukraine who were really excited that finally Ukraine is on the map/ And then even people close to me here in North America, my mother who could care less about pop music was like -- this pop star, from Ukraine won! And I got really interested in the ways that she was depicting this Hutsul group, which is a minority group in the borderlands, as this kind of Ur, wild population inside of Ukraine. And it occurred to me that a kind of comparative project, looking at comparative histories of exoticism could be meaningful, and interesting to think about how the state reproduces itself through its internal others, and also to contribute to knowledge about Ukraine as a diverse space that's multi ethnic, multi lingual, multi confessional, and that has been that way for 1000 years. And so I think once I conceived of that project, it was hard to let it go, none of the other avenues I was pursuing felt nearly as exciting. And I was lucky enough to get grants to support me, both in Crimea and in western

Ukraine. So I can do this kind of like multi-sited fieldwork project. And that eventually led to my first book.

Will Robin 27:07

At that point, the first book comes out, it's 2019. How did the book evolve alongside what was happening in Ukraine at that point in terms of the politics and border incursions?

Maria Sonevytsky 27:25

Hugely, that book, the first book grew out of my dissertation also. And so the dissertation was completed in 2012. So before the Maidan, before the temporary occupation of Crimea, and before violence on the east had erupted. So the book was rewritten very substantially, it was delayed, in large part because sort of similar to February 24 of last year, but in retrospect, to a lesser degree, I just couldn't bring myself to work on writing, because I was so consumed at that point, especially with my Crimean Tatar friends, and what was happening there. But the book had to be radically re-conceptualized. I had conceived of the dissertation as a comparative study that was conveniently bounded by the borders of a nation state, a post-Soviet independent state. And after 2014, you couldn't take that for granted anymore. Crimea was now a frozen conflict. It was no longer neatly included into the polity we would recognize as Ukraine. And so for me, the interesting question became, how are these musical practices actually contributing to a discourse of sovereignty in Ukraine, which was not a question I had asked in the dissertation. And so I went back and really tried to reconceptualize the theoretical apparatus in a pretty radical way. And then I did additional field work in a third site, also, which is in central Ukraine, which offers another very different kind of perspective on what it means to identify or not as Ukrainian today through musical practice. And so I would say more than half of the book is really written about the post 2014 moment, when you see these really radical shifts happening in Ukrainian society, both produced and mirrored in musical culture. And so there's a good amount about Ukrainians coming to terms with what it means to be Ukrainian, how Crimea fits into that piece of the puzzle, how the East fits in, and then how the Hutsul on the Western periphery also fit in.

Will Robin 29:39

I guess both of you now are working .. your new book, which is on 80s post punk, I guess, or punk, I don't know how ... new wave. Tell me a little bit about that project before I try to label it in a single sentence.

Maria Sonevytsky 29:53

Sure. Yeah, that project ... I was asked to contribute a Ukrainian album for the 33 1/3 a third Europe series in 2019. I was in Kyiv at the time actually, on sabbatical. And I thought this is cool. I want to do this, because no Ukrainian albums have been written about and I really agonized, there's so many deserving Ukrainian albums. I really talked to a lot of friends. And eventually I came back to the first idea I had, which is often how it goes with me, which was this. It's kind of like a cult -- *magnitizdat* would be the term, it's like Samizdat, on cassette tape, sort of, from the 1980s. This release from the first Ukrainian punk band. I think the best genre description might be theatrical post punk, that comes from Kyrylo Stetsenko, who was one of the people I interviewed for this project. And they had this huge breakthrough in 1988-89, with that cassette album, and also with the first Ukrainian music video that was shown on all union Soviet television, with a song called Tantsi, which means dances. And it's a

video that has been on YouTube for over a decade. And I just have been obsessed with it for a very long time, and I really wanted to get to the bottom of that story. And I was lucky in that I was in Kyiv at the time. So I figured, well, why don't I see if the original band members will talk to me, and two of the four agreed. And so I had an in for that project. And it became for me a really interesting personal story in terms of coming to understand how this Ukrainian punk band that I was exposed to as a teenager and changed my vision of what Ukraine was connected to the present day. And it also allowed me to try to understand the context of this moment when things were radically changing in late Soviet Ukrainian society. So it led me to really interesting places that I didn't anticipate, including talking to Eugene Hütz, who's known today as the front-man of Gogol Bordello, but was at the time a teenage superfan hanging out at the Kyiv rock club. And it allowed me to go into the archives in Kyiv and read about all of the Soviet bureaucrats at the union of composers talking about the problem of rock and roll and what to do about it. It's just really fascinating documentary evidence. So that project is finally coming out next month. And the most exciting -- and I'll stop talking because I don't want this to become a commercial -- the other really cool part of that project, from my point of view, I hope other people think it's cool, is when I was doing the 2019 interviews, Sasha Pipa, who was the original bass player of the band, revealed that he had the master tape of that session. So the cassette album never came out formally. It was outside of the state held monopoly record label.

Will Robin 32:59

I was looking for it on YouTube and Spotify. It was not coming up...

Maria Sonevytsky 33:02

Yeah. You won't find it. Right. Although except so he had the master tape. I managed to find a label based in California that specializes in reissues, the label's called org music, and they agreed to put it out so I transported the master tape myself, it's behind me on the shelf right now, from Kyiv to California, where they were able to bake the tape, this 1989 tape, restore the audio and remaster it, and that's also coming out, I actually just got the vinyl records yesterday from the pressings.

Will Robin 33:34

Okay, I'm going to have to order that. So when did you make that trip to transport it?

Maria Sonevytsky 33:40

That trip was November of 2021. So before the full scale invasion,

Will Robin 33:46

Wow. So to return to the invasion context, Oksana, how are you seeing the composers you study, especially the younger composers, grapple with the invasion, in what ways are they navigating it both in their music and in their lives?

Oksana Nesterenko 34:07

So the initial response of composers is very similar, actually, to our responses as musicologists, which is they were just shocked and many of them couldn't continue working on their music. And maybe you could read in this longer essay, many composers thought that they wanted to go and fight in the war, that music is meaningless. The only thing they needed to do is to somehow help advance the victory,

and a lot of musicians I know actually did enlist in the army. They're jazz musicians, I don't know any avant-garde composers who did. But it feels terrifying to think of what can happen to them, for me. So, after a couple of weeks, I noticed this pattern among many composers I was writing about. They began making music. So many of them are not just composers, but also performers. And through the process of making music, just for example, the cellist Zoltan Almashi, who wrote a piece dedicated to Mariupol here, started playing the cello again, after a couple of weeks that he just couldn't touch his instrument. And he started performing concerts of his own music and music of other of his colleagues and also established composers. And most of these concerts were online in April and May, because the audiences were not allowed in concert halls because of air raids. And a similar situation happened with Roman Grygoriv and Iliia Razumeiko, who are composers of experimental opera, but they also use different improvisatory elements in their operas. So they both play string instruments, bandura and dulcimer. And in March, when they were so depressed and also wanted to go and fight, they organized this session where they played on bandura and dulcimer with drumsticks for seven hours. They played for seven hours, and this was online, aired on the radio station also. So people could listen. And as they described this experience later, they were thinking about the soldiers who are fighting. And that if they have enough energy to fight, then this experiment of seven hours of playing basically percussive instruments on the strings. It's kind of something similar that they can live through. And after this session, basically, they decided to continue with their tours. So they had a scheduled tour, to present a new opera, Chornobyldorf, which they completed in 2020. But in 2022, they were supposed to have a tour in Europe, in the Netherlands, and in Austria, to present this opera. And initially of course, they didn't feel like doing anything during the first weeks after the invasion. But eventually, they decided they would do it. And they keep presenting it now throughout this year, they got invited in many different places. For example, they performed at the contemporary music festival in Huddersfield, in in the UK, and the opera was called a modern masterpiece that everyone can see in the Times newspaper. So they believe -- and it's really a great opera. I think all of their work is on the level of New York composers. So showing this in Europe, and they are possibly coming to New York soon to to perform this, they feel that this is their contribution to promoting an image of Ukraine as a nation with high culture, which is something that Russia denies. So this is just one story, but all other stories I discuss are similar, with composers first being shocked, first thinking that they cannot do anything to help the war as musicians, but then realizing that music really matters and avant-garde music also matters, because we tend to think about this as highbrow culture that only very small audiences want to see. But the quality of their music allows to appeal to broader audiences. So, for example, Zoltan Almashi's piece "Maria's City" about Mariupol was performed in many concert halls in Europe, alongside Beethoven, and Brahms, and classical works. So the audience that usually goes to just classical, more traditional music concerts, they would listen to this piece with the inscription dedicated to the city of Mariupol and his program notes about how difficult it was to compose this piece thinking about the destroyed theater and bombed maternity hospital and all of this. So this piece reaches the audiences who may be tired of reading the news, or audiences who do not think that Ukraine does have high culture. They can see that.

Will Robin 42:11

So each of you has your own kind of research specialty and expertise. But I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you teach when you teach people about Ukrainian music either in the classroom or to the public. In this moment, what is it that you want people to know ... want students,

whether they're classroom students or students out in the world, to know about Ukraine, about Ukrainian music?

Maria Sonevsky 42:44

My priority in my scholarly research always, and this has maybe just become more pointed and urgent since February 24, is that we understand that Ukraine is a large country with a diverse population and a very complex history that includes a lot of different imperial inheritances. So I have always tried to subvert the understanding of Ukraine as an ethno-national project exclusively, there is a history to that as well. And I'm not trying to deny that. But Ukraine has also always been a territory that has hosted historic Jewish populations, historic Roma populations, historic Crimean Tatar populations, and on and on and on. And so that feels urgent to me in this moment, in part because the baseline ignorance about Ukraine, which allows people to default to believing that the only reason the world cares about this is because these are blue eyed, blond haired white people, for example, which again has a kernel of truth to it, but it's hardly the entirety of the story. Or the question, if there are Russian speakers in Ukraine, are they actually Russians? These kinds of questions that we wouldn't ask in other colonial contexts. I think it's so, so critically important to push back against those really simplistic narratives that are born out of a lot of ignorance. And so that neatly dovetails with my longer scholarly project, which has been to show the complexity ... the complex personhood of Ukrainians. The dehumanizing effects of war are well documented. We are scrutinizing the legitimate reasons that Ukrainians might want to defend the territory that has been so brutally invaded in a way that requires us to believe that Ukrainians are either some sort of superhuman actors who are in defense of *our* values, conveniently. I'm skeptical of those narratives too. I want us to think about the ways that Ukrainians are reacting in this moment in the same complex ways we might react, were our homes threatened in these ways -- that this is not always because there's some sort of like Braveheart style nationalists, or some sort of reactionaries, or right-wing zealots. But there's so many reasons why people are stepping out in defense of this place in the world. And we need to flesh out the picture a little bit. So that's my goal. Always.

Will Robin 45:21

Yes. Oksana?

Oksana Nesterenko 45:23

My goal ... I think everyone who talks about Ukrainian music or Ukrainian culture always has to explain sometimes that Russia is an imperial state, and that Ukrainian music, in the periods of, for example, 20th century history, when they were there was, for example, not that many avant-garde works composed in Ukraine as compared to other places in the world, that the reason for this is Russia's Imperial politics. And there are still a lot of people who just don't want to see that Ukraine needs to be decolonized. But this is kind of a side thought. This is something that everyone just has to address. For me personally, as a scholar of late 20th century music and 21st century music. I want to show to my audiences, for example, the audience of my podcast, Extended Techniques podcast, that Ukrainian music is as good as any contemporary music in the world, and especially living in New York and going to concerts of avant-garde contemporary music in major venues in New York every week, I see that the works I discuss. And, for example, the music of Valentyn Silvestrov, who I dedicated one of the episodes to in my podcast is aesthetically, conceptually, artistically, culturally, in all the ways just as

good as music of composers from the United States or international composers who are showcased in New York.

Will Robin 47:56

How do you each ultimately see yourselves as -- or not see yourselves -- as participating... I'm hesitant to use the word fighting ... in this war? What do you see as the role of scholars in the US in this moment?

Maria Sonevytsky 48:15

Nataliya Gumenyuk, this Ukrainian journalist, on the one year anniversary of the full scale invasion, I hate using anniversary, they're actually marking the one year since the full scale invasion, had a piece I think in The Guardian, where she wrote about how Ukrainians are all guilty, that there's this widespread feeling of guilt. I grew up in the Ukrainian-American diaspora I consider myself hyphenated in that way, I have a hard time claiming that I'm Ukrainian without adding American. I have the benefits of being born into the global hegemon in a specific time and place. But the feeling of guilt has been very, very strong. And it's true among so many people that I know, that we all should be doing more, that we should ... that it needs to be all hands on deck. And so I have been motivated by that feeling. Which doesn't feel like an obligation so much, it's just a no brainer. I've been trying to find a way to be effective in this moment. And I think, not to get too personal, most days I feel like I'm wholly ineffective. But occasionally you break through and someone learns something, maybe -- or says, there's a historic Afro-Ukrainian population who is also standing in defense of Ukraine in this moment. Or, there are these cool queer collectives who are doing really incredible mutual aid work, that combat their simplistic stereotypes of this place. And music is a really effective -- as we all know -- music can be a really effective portal into understanding some of that nuance that society can hold. And so, again, that's the goal. In terms of the way you break through, it remains a question, but I am taking any opportunity I can get to have an audience who might listen.

Will Robin 50:18

Yes. Oksana?

Oksana Nesterenko 50:22

Yes, just the fact that I switched to writing mostly about Ukrainian music these past two years, for me, is something that I just felt that I have to do, because I know this music. And there are not that many people who can tell about it to American scholars and American audiences. And so I presented at two conferences, and I presented one public lecture at Queens Public Library, and one more is coming up at New York Public Library, all about this music in Ukraine that was composed since the full scale invasion. And I try to show how Ukrainian composers, how productive they are in these completely inhuman circumstances. So some of them decided to stay in Ukraine. And they hear air raids several times a day, sometimes several times an hour. And many of them said in interviews that it was very scary at first, so it was very hard to compose, but they had to overcome this fear. And now, just by keeping working on their music, in these circumstances, they show the resilience that we also see in many other stories about Ukrainians in general. But also, because of the strong emotions that they experienced during the war, the music changes, and the works that I had the chance to research, there are so many, and now with social media you get so quickly, if someone composes a piece, especially if

it's for a small ensemble, they record it very quickly and post it. And this is something that we have not seen with new music, we always tend to think about avant-garde music as something that needs time to be performed in concert halls before you learn about it. But they are taking advantage of the digital age and composing quickly, composing good music and disseminating it to international listeners. And so I'm talking about all of this in my talks. And I feel it's a very small contribution, of course, but it's just something that I felt I cannot ignore. I just have to talk about this.

Will Robin 54:11

Well, thank you both so much for speaking with me. I really appreciate it.

Maria Sonevytsky 54:15

Thank you, Will.

Oksana Nesterenko 54:17

Thank you.

54:17

[music]

Will Robin 54:25

What a fascinating conversation. Many thanks to Maria Sonevytsky, Associate Professor of Anthropology and music at Bard College, and Oksana Nesterenko, who teaches at Union College. You can check out their work over on our website, soundexpertise.org. So before I do our usual sign off, folks, I have a favor to ask. We're deep into our third season and we've amassed a pretty sizable listenership, which has been really cool to see grow over the past couple of years. There are hundreds of you tuning in each week, but strangely enough, I really have no idea who you are at all. So I'd appreciate it if you could introduce yourselves and tell me why you listen to the show. You can do this in one of two ways. Post something about Sound Expertise on Twitter or Instagram and tag me @seatedovation or email the new email inbox we just set up for the podcast, soundexpertise00@gmail.com. That's our name as one word followed by two zeros at Gmail. Please reach out and say hi, I want to hear from you. Okay, now back to our regular plugs. Thank you to D. Edward Davis for his production work, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at [warmsilence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warmsilence). I'm grateful to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. This episode of Sound Expertise was recorded at the National Foreign Language Center with support from the University of Maryland School of Music. Next on Sound Expertise, looking for music making in the archives of slavery.

Unidentified Speaker 55:53

One does become aware of that sifting -- I have to ignore these people, who are suffering in particular ways, to get at this predefined object -- music -- that I am either trying to get a qualification in, or employed to study, and there is a tension there.

Will Robin 56:12

See you next week.

[music]