**Just war? Just music?**

I left the opening concert of the Spring Festival in Utrecht featuring the Ukrainian band ‘Dakha Brakha’ feeling deeply disturbed, a chill running down my spine. With all my faith in the power of the arts to constructively transform conflict, I looked forward to a music concert that would call for an end to the war in Ukraine, an end to the military-industrial complex and masculinist escalation of conflict that is making nuclear disaster a very real threat for the entire planet. Yet the motto “Ukraine Will Win” projected on the back wall of the stage indicated from the start that this was no ordinary opening concert. Why “win”, I thought to myself? Why not: “Ukraine will overcome”, in the tradition of anti-war musicians around the world? That question set the tone of how I experienced the entire concert.

Like most in the sold-out hall of Stadschouwburg Utrecht, I was energized by their colourful stage appearance and the heart-thumping music: an unorthodox mix of Eastern European styles, pop and techno, set to hypnotic rhythms, accompanied by carefully crafted and arresting visual projections. The three women in the band with their large *kovpak* hats and embroidered dresses, and the male singer’s charming falsetto evoked associations of folklore. Yet their renditions and vocal harmonies were highly stylised and theatrical arrangements of folkloric elements in a funky, urban, contemporary register.

It is more than obvious that the ongoing brutal war of aggression by Russia in Ukraine had to be at the heart of the concert. Grief, fury, extraordinary pain, images of destruction and desolation all took centre stage. Dakha Brakha’s specific musical idiom and sophisticated integration of visuals in their music made all this palpable, paid homage to the people of Ukraine and their brave day-to-day resistance to the war.

But Dakha Brakha is not what one would call an anti-war band. As a society we seem to have come very far from John Lennon or Joan Baez or Pete Seegers. The concert was a battle cry, openly nationalist and militarist, wrapped in ‘civilizational’ rhetoric. Songs ended with projections on the wall screaming out in all caps: “ARM UKRAINE NOW” or “RUSSIA IS A TERRORIST STATE”.

In one song, which felt like the centrepiece of the concert and was announced as being dedicated “to those who fight for our freedom and democracy”, the visuals showed a collage of smiling soldiers, young men operating heavy weaponry, firing, loading canons. In the silence at the end of the song, one single person in the hall shouted ‘boo’! To me, this was an act of civil disobedience, a lone refusal to share in the glorification of the military, or to unquestioningly accept that the only possible response to a war of aggression is more militarisation. The audience, however, cheered on with generous applause.

In all fairness, one of the artists did end the show wishing everyone ‘peace, love, and and an end to the war’. That was a redeeming moment for me. Yet the overarching tone was one of a war becoming absolute. This was reinforced by the band inviting the audience to donate to the foundation *Come Back Alive* which supports the Ukrainian military.

I have no doubt that if (and what an unimaginable ‘if’ that is!) this was a Syrian or Afghan or Palestinian or Kashmiri or Tigray or Sudanese band that called for more arms and spoke the vocabulary of victory and conquest, European audiences would have been aghast and condemned it outright as extremism. I have no doubt that the very same liberal audience at this opening concert is simultaneously deeply concerned about the ecological crises and the refugee crises and all the other stupefying crises of planetary magnitude, but are nonetheless willing to believe that as far as Ukraine is concerned ‘There Is No Alternative’ to what [Raul Sanchez Cedillo](https://jacobin.com/2023/03/russia-ukraine-war-fascism-authoritarianism-european-left) has rightly called a war machine. I have no doubt that the festival and its audiences take a lot of effort to learn from the Global South, except when it comes to listening to what South Africa or Brazil have to say about the war in Ukraine. When will the theatre and art world come to terms with these double standards?

I know that this is not a popular stance today in Europe. Those who are opposed to a militarised response are easily condemned as naïve, defeatist, elitist, opportunist and at worst, pro-Putin! It is not my intention to question the Ukrainian right to resistance and right to life and survival. In response to the cynics who read this as coming from a position of not being Ukrainian, therefore supposedly from a position of ignorance, I would like to end with a quote from the Ukrainian thinker and analyst [Volodymyr Ishchenko](https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii138/articles/volodymyr-ishchenko-ukrainian-voices).

“Ukrainian scholars, intellectuals and artists face a dilemma. Either we allow ourselves to become incorporated as just another ‘voice’ in a very specific field of institutionalized identity politics in the West, where Ukrainians would be just the latest addition to a long queue of a myriad of other minority voices. Or instead, starting from the tragedy of Ukraine, we set out to articulate the questions of global relevance, search for their solutions, and contribute to universal human knowledge. Paradoxically, this requires a much deeper and more genuine engagement with Ukraine than happens now.”

It is this deeper engagement that I would like to see in festivals and art events that talk about centring Ukrainian perspectives. Artists and the international festivals that host them must ask themselves some tough questions about the role they play in these dark times. Shouldn’t artists be wiping out these lines that divide friends and enemies, winners and losers? Shouldn’t artists be envisioning plurinational and internationalist and planetary perspectives? Shouldn’t artists be charting visions for a world where wars will be overcome, rather than won?

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