

Art in Defiance

By Viktoriia Vitrenko & Roman Melish

(Excerpt: “Kyiv Dispatch”, live from Stuttgart 2022, Sound design by Ian Spektor, Guitar by Max Werner)

Kyiv Dispatch - is an audio diary compiled by Ukrainian sound artist and producer Ian Spektor with material recorded mainly in Kyiv and its surroundings in 2022: from emblematic locations such as the Przemysl-Kyiv train (one of the main lines of evacuation) or the Kyiv Central Army Hospital to the very intimate moments of family celebrations, solitary walks and deep kitchen conversations from besieged Kyiv in March 2022. (Sasha Anrusyk, from the installation “Kyiv Dispatch” Stuttgart, 2022)

One year after the bloody and brutal war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, our culture is in a constant state of flux. Art as resistance against corrupt and inhumane Russian politics, art as consolation for the 43 million strong Ukrainian population fighting to prove their authentic historical identity. Despite the constant shelling and power cuts, artists on all fronts (both in Ukraine and abroad) united to fulfil their only mission: to carry Ukrainian culture into the world.

The name of my friend who is helping me to write these lines today and to document the atrocities of war at first hand is Roman Melish. He is 34 years old and a graduate of both the National Academy of Music in Ukraine and the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis - the Basel Academy for the Study of Early Music (Switzerland). He is a soloist at the renowned National House of Music in Kyiv and, like many other Ukrainians and my dearest colleagues, experienced the most horrific winter of his life in Kyiv.

Since 09th October 2022, Russia has started systematically shelling energy installations in Ukraine. It was done not only to undermine the core of the very physical existence, in a country where the harsh winter temperatures can decline up to -25C, but mainly to break the spirit and to weaken the resistance. Since then, Ukrainian artists had to create art in more than demanding conditions: They had no electricity for 12-16 hours a day. And sometimes 30-48 hours following another round of shelling. No electricity meant they could not cook, had no hot water, could not heat the flat, had no internet and no communication. The power cuts were also emergencies, which meant without a

timetable and any sort of notification as the power system had suffered incredible damage. For many Ukrainians, candles ceased to be associated with romance. They have become a means of light and heating. Bunkers and all types of underground facilities were made to a “cement”-cosy shelter, - a place of gatherings with music, collective readings and all sorts of art interventions. There were no strangers in these places as everyone shared the same wounds.

Despite everything, my friend, together with many other musicians, continued to rehearse and prepare concerts. Paradoxically, no fewer listeners came to the concerts because they found comfort and protection in the music. For the artists itself, though, once they had overcome the initial shock of the war, art became a very effective weapon on the battlefield: to manifest our national identity, our fundamental right to exist and defend our legal borders. Ukrainian art has changed just as the Ukrainians have during this past year.

(Excerpt: Music by Alla Zagaykevych, Lyrics by Iya Kiva from the “Signs of Presence” - “Song I”)

Air raids and shelling could catch Ukrainians anywhere: at home, in a taxi, in the metro, on the way to work or on the way to a rehearsal. They waited in bunkers or in the underground for the shelling: anywhere you could hide. But the question was always the same: would they reach the rehearsal location or would the rehearsal take place at all? Events were planned not days but hours in advance, with the constant possibility that they would have to be cancelled due to power outages. If that happened, the concerts continued with torches, because music was what motivated and kept everyone going despite the fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. At that time, the sounds of generators, the smell of candlelight, completely dark streets, tremors and the echo of explosions became a terrifying but soon permanent normality of life and at some point was even integrated in the artwork.

(Excerpt: Music by Alla Zagaykevych, Lyrics by Iya Kiva from the “Signs of Presence” - “Song III”)

Currently being an artist in Ukraine is no longer a profession, but a mission:

1. To develop cultural content within the country such as exhibitions, concerts, master classes, conferences, performances, readings of Ukrainian poetry etc. To promote interest in one's own identity (not the so-called

"Sharovshchyna" imposed by the Soviet Union to reinforce the complex of inferiority), but as Ukrainian historical ethnicity.

2. Promotion of Ukrainian culture in the world. Ukrainian musicians and artists from other cultural fields introduce the world to the unique creative and rich heritage of our country.

We artists are warriors and we defend everyday our own cultural front. We unify the nation and spread awareness of the Ukrainian culture globally. Many Ukrainian artists have changed their conductor's batons and instruments, left their paints and film sets, left the theatre stages for the war, and took up real weapons. Thanks to them, many artists as my friend Roman Melish can perform on stage in Kyiv right now. Many of my colleagues will not return to their normal lives, many of them have already died, and many of us continue to go to war because it is still going on. It is cruel and unjust. But we strongly believe that Ukrainian culture, its history and heritage, though drenched in blood, will persist. Because it must. Because there is no other way.

Credits:

Viktoriia Vitrenko - Voice, Text, Performance, Editing, Mixing

Roman Melish - Text

Sasha Andrusyk - Text

Studio Radar - Video art, Camera, 3D art

Ian Spektor - Sound design & Production

Max Werner - Guitar

Alla Zagaykevych - Music

Iya Kiva - Lyrics

German Safonov - Sound

Rashad Becker - Mixing