

MUSIC OF WAR: GENRE–STYLISTIC AND ACOUSTIC REFLECTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN COMPOSERS

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SUMMARY. The article investigates the ways in which contemporary academic music interprets the experience of war in Ukraine through genre, stylistic, and acoustic parameters of composition. The study approaches wartime music as a form of cultural mediation in which historical trauma is translated into an organized sonic structure that combines ethical reflection with aesthetic form. Within this perspective, musical works become spaces where collective memory, individual emotional experience, and symbolic representation converge. The analysis is based on compositions by contemporary composers, including *Sunflower Seeds* (2022) by Cesare Chiacchiaretta, the first movement of *Symphony No. 5* (2023) by Fazıl Say, *Maria's City* (2022) by Zoltan Almashi, and *Dedication to the Heroes...* (2024) by Valentyna Martyniuk. A methodological combination of structural-intonational, genre-typological, timbral-dramaturgical, semiotic, and contextual-comparative approaches allows the study to reveal the principal artistic strategies through which contemporary composers articulate wartime experience. The results demonstrate that modern compositions addressing war develop specific models of representation. One of them is connected with the activation of historically established memorial genre markers such as requiem or elegiac forms, which preserve the semantic codes of mourning and remembrance. At the same time, it should be stated the transformation of the acoustic environment: clusters, noise textures, extended instrumental techniques, and unstable rhythmic structures construct a sonic field associated with tension, anxiety, and disruption. In this context timbre acquires a structural role, shaping the dramaturgy of the work and functioning as a carrier of symbolic meaning. The study concludes that contemporary music related to war in Ukraine functions simultaneously as an act of cultural memory and

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as a reflective artistic practice in which genre, style, and programmatic orientation interact to form a new acoustic image of historical experience.

Keywords: war in Ukraine; contemporary music; cultural trauma; genre models; timbral dramaturgy; acoustic environment; Ukrainian music; collective memory, modern European composers, Cesare Chiacchiaretta, Fazıl Say, Zoltan Almashi, Valentyna Martyniuk.

Introduction

War is a tragedy that profoundly affects humanity, leaving its mark not only on history but also on art. Music, as a universal medium for the expression of emotions and ideas, becomes a powerful means of comprehending and artistically representing war. It enables the transmission of the horrors of combat, human suffering, heroism, and hope, while also facilitating reflection on events at both the individual and the collective levels of experience. Musical works often function as distinctive documents of their time, reflecting both concrete historical events and the emotional condition of society. Numerous composers responded directly to wartime realities by creating works that subsequently came to be perceived as emblematic of a particular historical period. As researcher Olena Berehova observes, “Artists, as the most sensitive spiritual locators, are capable of perceiving and reflecting in their creativity the moods of their contemporaries and of their epoch. Endowed with empathy, vulnerable yet at the same time spiritually resilient, Ukrainian artists respond to new life realities, infuse their works with personal emotions, existential concerns, and the reverberations of psychological trauma, actualize the meanings and values for which Ukraine is fighting, and reveal the absurdity of the new wartime reality.”³

In this context, contemporary compositional practice proves particularly revealing, as the experience of the past four years in Ukraine crystallizes into heterogeneous genre-stylistic solutions – ranging from chamber meditations and memorial opuses to programmatically oriented large-scale works marked by pronounced timbral dramaturgy. An engagement with this repertoire (primarily Ukrainian, though also situated within a broader international context) appears methodologically justified: it not only registers current tendencies in contemporary musical language but also reveals the mechanisms by which traumatic historical experience is transformed into an artistically organized sonic form. In essence, it is music that functions as a space of

³ Berehova, Olena. “The Art of the Unbreakable: Ukrainian Composers’ Creativity in Response to Russian Aggression”. In *Musicological Thought of Dnipropetrovsk Region*, Issue 27 (2), 2024. p. 117.

reflection: programmatic orientations, intonational formulas, genre models, and acoustic regimes interact to construct a complex palette of meanings – ranging from individual affect to collective memory. It is precisely this plurality of strategies, together with the variability of programmatic orientations, that constitutes a particular object of scholarly interest, makes it possible to conceptualize contemporary wartime music as a multidimensional cultural phenomenon in which the aesthetic and the ethical converge within a unified sonic space.

The aim of the article is to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the genre-stylistic, compositional, programmatic and acoustic parameters of works by contemporary composers in which the events of Ukraine's twenty-first-century wartime experience are artistically conceptualized.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives are to be accomplished:

- to elucidate the mechanisms of artistic symbolization and the semantic transformation of historical experience within the genre-stylistic structure of musical works;

- to examine genre models, stylistic idioms, and timbral-instrumental scenarios employed in the realization of wartime themes in music;

- to identify the specific features of the acoustic regime in works addressing wartime subject matter;

- to compare genre-stylistic strategies in works of varying ensemble configurations related to the theme of war in Ukraine in contemporary European music.

Review of literature on the topic. The theme of war in music has been repeatedly addressed in scholarship within the broader problematics of music–politics relations, as well as in studies of cultural trauma. In the article by Susanna Välimäki⁴, music is approached not merely as an aesthetic artifact but as a specific cultural practice capable of articulating the experience of war, genocide, and violence within the horizon of collective memory and the transgenerational transmission of traumatic burden. The researcher focuses on the concept of cultural trauma, noting that “A collective trauma requires collective processing and recognition in the form of public cultural representations in order to transform, little by little, from an unnamable affect that disables the culture (and its individuals) into the symbolic sphere of collective remembrance and mourning work. This process is called the cultural trauma process, and art and popular culture have a significant role in it.”⁵ Cultural trauma is not exhausted by the fact of an

⁴ Välimäki, Susanna. “Musical representation of war, genocide, and torture Treating cultural trauma with music”. In *Acta Translatologica Helsingiensia*, 2015, p. 122–136.

⁵ Välimäki, Susanna. “Musical representation of war, genocide, and torture Treating cultural trauma with music”. In *Acta Translatologica Helsingiensia*, 2015, p. 122–123.

extreme event itself; rather, it is constituted through its displacement from the shared symbolic space, thereby acquiring a transgenerational character and initiating a prolonged struggle over meaning within the field of collective memory. Only through public cultural representations, social mediation, and the gradual delineation of responsibility does it become possible to transform this paralyzing burden into the sphere of conscious remembrance, empathy, and social healing. In this respect, music proves to be “an effective vehicle for contributing to the cultural trauma process.”⁶ Within this framework, the researcher examines *Different Trains* (1988) by Steve Reich, the rock classic *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984) by Bruce Springsteen, and *Stress Position* (2009) by Drew Baker.

At the same time, in recent years a considerable body of research has emerged focusing on the role of music in interpreting traumatic events associated with the military conflict in Ukraine. In the article “Art Music and War: Ukrainian Case 2022,” Iryna Tukova⁷ analyzes the conceptual foundations and compositional strategies through which Ukrainian composers interpret the experience of full-scale war following 24 February 2022, drawing in particular on *Eyes to Eyes* by Yevhen Petrychenko and *Lullaby for Mariupol* by Illia Razumeiko, Roman Hryhoriv, and the ensemble Opera Aperta. The study focuses on the structural, semantic, and receptive parameters of these compositions, outlining the specific modes of functioning of contemporary Ukrainian musical culture under conditions of wartime.

In the article of Violetta Dutchak⁸ the author offers a panoramic overview of the evolution of Ukrainian musical content from 2014 to 2022, interpreting it as a continuous trajectory of national resistance – from the aesthetics of the Maidan to the multi-genre wartime reflections that emerged after 2014 and, in particular, following 24 February 2022. The author analyzes the coexistence and interaction of folk, academic, and popular strata, demonstrating the mechanisms of resemantization of historical songs (notably *Plyve kacha* and *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*) and the formation of new musical symbols. She also delineates thematic clusters (heroic-patriotic, lyrical-patriotic, tragic, and humorous-satirical) and identifies the social functions of wartime music – psychological support, community mobilization, cultural diplomacy, and the construction of a positive international image of Ukraine.

⁶ Välimäki, Susanna. “Musical representation of war, genocide, and torture Treating cultural trauma with music”. In *Acta Translatologica Helsingiensia*, 2015, p. 123.

⁷ Tukova, Iryna. “Art music and war: Ukrainian case 2022.” In *Musicologica Brunensia*. 2023, vol. 58, iss. 2, p. 193–204.

⁸ Dutchak, Violetta. “From the Music of Maydan to the Music of War: Ukrainian Phenomenon.” In *Publishing House “Baltija Publishing”*, 2022, p. 716–725.

Particular attention should be given to the scientific works of Olena Berehova⁹, who examines a number of compositions written by composers during the military conflict. She identifies works by Valentyn Sylvestrov – *Maidan–Kyiv*, *Prayer for Ukraine* – as well as *The City of Mary* by Zoltan Almashi, *Lacrimosa* by Oleksandr Shchetynsky, *Duma* by Liudmyla Yurina, and *In The Cage* by Anna Korsun. The researcher notes that under conditions of wartime cataclysm, artistic creativity emerges not as an autonomous aesthetic practice but as a form of civic action, in which artistic expression acquires a distinct ethical dimension. The figure of the artist is transformed into an active participant in public discourse, whose creative work functions simultaneously as a cultural testimony of the era and as an act of social responsibility.

In another article by Berehova, “Art as a Weapon: The Works of Composer Bohdana Frolyak During the Russia–Ukraine War”,¹⁰ the corpus of Bohdana Frolyak’s wartime compositions of 2022–2023 is examined (including *The Way*, *Let There Be Light*, *Cello Concerto* and *Oboe Concerto*, as well as the music for the theatrical production *The War That Changed Rondo*). These works encompass a broad semantic spectrum –from intimate lyrical reflections to tragic-memorial intonations – and interpret the symbolism of light as a model for overcoming darkness within a sonic continuum.

Although a substantial number of musical works have emerged in response to the tragic events in Ukraine, this phenomenon remains insufficiently explored, particularly in terms of the genre, stylistic, and acoustic principles manifested not only in the works of Ukrainian composers but also in those of composers from other European countries.

Materials and methods. The methodological framework of the study is based on a combination of structural-intonational, genre-typological, timbral-dramaturgical, semiotic, and contextual-comparative approaches, which makes it possible to consider works on wartime themes as artistic models of the symbolic interpretation of historical experience. Structural-intonational analysis is directed at identifying features of form-building, thematic organization, and dramaturgy; the genre-typological approach determines the relationship between historically established genre archetypes and their contemporary transformations; the timbral-dramaturgical approach clarifies the function of instrumental forces and acoustic density as carriers of meaning; the semiotic approach reveals the internal oppositions shaping

⁹ Berehova, Olena. “Artists and War: Creativity as a Civic Position.” In: *Ukraine in Flames: Artistic and Cultural Reflections on the Events of War*. 2024, p. 253–263.

¹⁰ Berehova, Olena. “Art as a Weapon: The Works of Composer Bohdana Frolyak During the Russia–Ukraine War.” In: *Artistic Culture. Topical issues*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2024, p. 81–86.

the work's system of meanings; and the contextual-comparative approach correlates programmatic orientations with musical structure and delineates a typology of artistic strategies in works of different ensemble configurations.

Source base of the study comprises *Sunflower Seeds* (2022) by Cesare Chiacchiarretta, the first movement of the *Fifth Symphony* by Fazıl Say (2023), *Maria's City* (2022) by Zoltan Almashi, and *Dedication to the Heroes. To the Dead, the Living, and the Unborn Defenders of Ukraine* (2024) for bass clarinet, organ, and snare drum by Valentyna Martyniuk.

Results and Discussions

The theme of war in the history of art music has assumed diverse generic embodiments – from the programmatic symphony to large-scale vocal-symphonic forms. The symphony, in particular, enables the representation of war on an expansive scale, generating images of battle, tragedy, victory, and mourning, as this genre is distinguished by a profound dramaturgical logic and the capacity to encompass the full emotional spectrum of war – from the chaos of combat to heroic exaltation or philosophical reflection. Thus, the idea of heroism and struggle is transformed into a dramaturgy of conflict and overcoming in *Symphony No.3, "Eroica,"* by Ludwig van Beethoven. In the twentieth century, wartime themes continued to develop within the symphonic genre. A notable example is the *Third Symphony ("Pastoral")* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, conceived as a melancholic reflection on the events of the First World War.

Monumental vocal-instrumental genres – such as oratorios, cantatas, masses, and requiems – have likewise frequently served to commemorate the dead or to reconstruct wartime events. Among significant examples are *War Requiem* (1962) by Benjamin Britten, *A Child of Our Time* (1941) by Michael Tippett, and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (1946) by Paul Hindemith, as well as the anti-fascist cantata *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1935–1957) by Karl Amadeus Hartmann and *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, Krzysztof Penderecki.

In contrast to orchestral music, chamber works concentrate on the personal experiences of individuals during wartime. They convey inner suffering, memories of loss, pain, and the tragedy of human destiny. In chamber music, war often appears not as a mass phenomenon but as the tragedy of a single human's life. A masterpiece of twentieth-century chamber music is *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* by Olivier Messiaen, composed in a concentration camp; it is remarkable for its emotional depth and its meditation on the eternal.

Twenty-first-century music reflects a new reality of war, particularly in the context of globalization, technological advancement, and shifting modes of communication. From established forms such as the symphony and the cantata to contemporary electronic and multimedia media, composers employ innovative expressive techniques to articulate the tragedy, chaos, and affective intensity accompanying the wars of our time. Contemporary compositions addressing war and political violence in the 21st century include works responding to the attacks of September 11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and other geopolitical conflicts. Among such compositions are John Adams's *On the Transmigration of Souls*, Steve Reich's *WTC 9/11*, Mohammed Fairouz's *Symphony No. 3*, and John Corigliano's *One Sweet Morning*.

Contemporary composers increasingly integrate music with other art forms – literature, film, and the visual arts – creating multimedia or intermedial works. Accordingly, music about war is often not confined to narrative illustration; rather, it is embedded within a genre model or disrupts it from within, demonstrating that historical experience in music is realized primarily through the transformation of form, sound, or temporality.

Wartime events in Ukraine continue to serve as an object of artistic reflection within the European music context. Already in the first years of the full-scale aggression, a distinct international corpus of works appeared, in which the Ukrainian context emerges either as a direct addressee or as an imperative underlying the authorial statement. Indicative in this regard is the orchestral *Ukraine Triptych / Ukraine Triptychon* by Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, created in collaboration with the Kyiv Symphony Orchestra and described by the composer as a poetic response to the contemporary war. The Danish composer Morten Jessen has written the compositions *Kyiv* and *Slava Ukraini*. A memorial dimension is likewise evident in *Pavane* by Derek B. Scott, dedicated to the victims of the war in Ukraine, as well as in the solo *Elegy, for the victims of Ukraine war* (2022) by the Italian composer Alberto Guidobaldi for viola.

The stylistic profile of musical works addressing wartime theme combines both traditional and innovative techniques, conveying the atmosphere of combat, the tragedy of loss, heroism, the inner experiences of the individual, and the depth of philosophical reflection on war. Composers often foreground a realism of representation, since the events they respond to unfold in real time and within lived historical reality (a form of what may be termed historical memory). To this end, a range of sonic devices is using, including the imitation of military sounds (gunfire, explosions, sirens), clusters, and noise-based textures. The selection of timbres and specific instrumental techniques becomes a crucial means of wartime dramaturgy. Composers' experiments with registers, dynamics, and articulation, drawing on the resources

of the orchestra, choir, and electronic media. Particular emphasis is frequently placed on brass instruments (trumpets, trombones, horns), which evoke military pathos, fanfares, and signals. Percussion instruments (timpani, snare drum, tam-tam), in turn, articulate marching rhythms, explosions, or artillery rumble. String parts are often marked by extended techniques – harmonics, pizzicato, glissandi – that create an atmosphere of anxiety or chaos.

For example, in *Sunflower Seeds*¹¹ (2022) by the Italian composer Cesare Chiacchiaretta, which is examined in detail in the article by Yevhen Zhyla, the premiere performer of the work¹², cluster sonorities imitate automatic gunfire; the percussion group depicts violent explosions, while the brass evoke the sound of warning sirens. During performances of this work, a video projection featuring photographic documentation of wartime devastation, ordinary civilians, and landscapes of pre-war Ukraine by the artist Nikolay Karabinovych was incorporated. Such integration of music with video and other visual components – documentary film, animation, theatrical staging, installation – enables the creation of a more profound and multidimensional perceptual experience.

In the first movement, *Revolts and Longings*, of his *Fifth Symphony*¹³, the Turkish composer Fazıl Say likewise engages with the events in Ukraine. His music presents a generalized model of historical rupture in which the experiences of the pandemic and war are conceptually integrated into a unified musical space. Chronological specificity is deliberately effaced; events are not differentiated but fused into the image of a force that destabilizes the habitual coordinates of existence. It is the composer's programmatic note that activates the Ukrainian context; absent this indication, the work would function rather as a symphonic abstraction. This reveals a perspective "from without," in which war is interpreted through the prism of global existential turbulence.

At the same time, the first movement concentrates characteristic stylistic markers of Fazıl Say's compositional language: an energetic metric-rhythmic impulse, asymmetric accentuation, frequent metrical shifts, reliance on modal complexes tending toward makam-derived intonational patterns,

¹¹ Dnipro Academy of Music. "SUNFLOWER SEEDS – Yevhen Zhyla & Symphony Orchestra 'The Festival.'" YouTube video. Accessed March 4, 2026.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YSvBfEhT0g>

¹² Zhyla, Yevgen. The Imagery–Stylistic Palette of Accordion Works by Contemporary Composers (on the Example of Sunflower Seeds by C. Chiacchiaretta and Guernica by G. Hermosa). *Musicological Thought of Dnipropetrovsk Region*, Issue 26 (1), 2024. Dnipro: Hrani Publishing House, 2024, pp. 314–324.

¹³ Can Okan. "Fazıl Say: Symphony No. 5 – Presidential Symphony Orchestra." YouTube video. Accessed March 4, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC4HlipuFM0>

as well as extended harmonic constructions marked by a pronounced late-Romantic coloration and a penetrating, expansively shaped lyricism in the more contemplative passages.

Structurally, the first movement of the symphony takes the form of a multi-sectional composition built from contrasting blocks, in which three impulsive, rhythmically saturated episodes alternate with two reflective segments, unified by a wave-like dramaturgy of accumulation and release of energy. The opening section, characterized by elastic rhythmic patterns grounded on Turkish *usul*, a rapid tempo, and sharp *sforzando* accents, generates a sense of uncontrollable force. This is followed by a slower segment featuring characteristic third-based motion in the strings and woodwinds, associatively evoking the ambulance siren. Against this background, isolated intonations in other instruments are perceived as voices emerging from an acoustic haze. The subsequent *Allegro assai* intensifies the effect of instability through displaced metric accents, triplet pulsations, and the active deployment of percussion – particularly *kudüm* and *bongo* – which in the composer’s intonational semantics are often associated with images of attack or heightened confrontation.

In the *Andantino espressivo*, a modal intonational profile unfolds through stepwise development, returning the listener to the lyrical pole of the symphony. A noteworthy timbral solution is the introduction of the ocean waves (suggesting a breathing motion) alongside bells and harp, which contribute a sense of unreality. At the same time, this section culminates in an apocalyptic *tutti* outburst. The final section synthesizes the accumulated tension and reactivates the initial energetic impulse, as if mobilizing forces for continued struggle.

Thus, in Fazıl Say’s work, the experience of war is rendered as a universalized image of historical time, articulated through a rhythmic-intonational matrix rooted in the Turkish musical tradition.

In its engagement with the theme of wartime experience, contemporary Ukrainian composition reveals several coexisting models of artistic response in which genre, style, and program function as interrelated levels of meaning construction. For some works, a defining feature is reliance on historically stabilized memorial models. For others, it is the transformation of sonic material itself, which acquires a symbolic dimension beyond established generic frameworks. Iryna Tukova¹⁴ proposes a tripartite typology of such compositions. The first category comprises works in which the composers articulate their wartime experience primarily through programmatic framing –

¹⁴ Tukova, Iryna. “Art music and war : Ukrainian case 2022.” In *Musilogica Brunensia*. 2023, vol. 58, iss. 2, p. 193–204.

titles and accompanying authorial commentaries. The second category encompasses compositions in which the reflection on war materializes within the sonic fabric itself, generating an acoustically unsettling environment that may evoke air raid sirens, explosions, or other markers of wartime reality. The third category consists of works grounded in documented evidence of Russia's crimes and thus functioning as explicit political statements.

A number of composers consciously actualize established genre codes – requiem, *lacrimosa*, *lamentoso*. In such cases, genre functions as the function of cultural memory: the semantics of mourning are historically embedded, and the programmatic dedication merely specifies the concrete historical addressee. This strategy rests upon tradition. Representative examples include the Requiem *Maria's City* for string orchestra by Zoltan Almashi, *Bucha. Lacrimosa* for violin and symphony orchestra by Viktoriia Poleva, and *Lacrimosa* for violin, oboe, horn, two trombones, and organ by Oleksandr Shchetynsky, *Largamento* by Olexander Rodin.

At the same time, another tendency becomes discernible. Works appear that lack direct generic marking: programmatic chamber compositions, ensemble or orchestral canvases – often memorial in orientation – in which wartime experience is not codified through a genre archetype. Instead, it unfolds through intonational gestures, timbral decisions, sonorous qualities of texture, and formal organization. The programmatic dimension may be indicated in the title or in an accompanying commentary; sometimes, it is deliberately minimized. In either case, however, it does not determine the structure in a direct manner. Examples include *Toward Victory* by Olena Ilnytska, *With Faith in Ukraine* by Asmati Chibalashvili, *Dedication to the Heroes. To the Dead, the Living, and the Unborn Defenders of Ukraine* by Valentyna Martyniuk, *Bucha* by Victoria Poleva, *Maria's city* by Zoltan Almashi, *Lullaby for Mariupol* by Illia Razumeiko, Roman Grygoriv and the Opera Aperta ensemble, *Bakhmut Rhapsody* by Olga Zaitseva-Herz.

A distinct group is constituted by works that cannot be identified in relation to wartime experience without an accompanying verbal program clarifying the title. These include, for example, *Reading History* by Karmella Tsepkolenko, *Sensation* by Hanna Kopiika, *My Beloved* by Kira Maidenbergtodorova, *Signs of Presence* by Alla Zahaikevych, *The Fishes' Reply to St. Anthony* by Alexey Shmurak, *Footprints on the Sun* by Maxim Kolomiiets, *Still* by Ihor Zavhorodnii, *Post* by Svyatoslav Lunyov, and *Kommos 2022* by Oleg Bezborodko.

Valentyna Martyniuk's composition *Dedication to the Heroes. To the Dead, the Living, and the Unborn Defenders of Ukraine*¹⁵ (2024) exemplifies a memorial form of programmatic expression. In this music genre semantics are constructed indirectly, through a system of timbral and intonational devices. The instrumental configuration itself – bass clarinet, organ, snare drum – delineates a distinctive acoustic space. The organ, historically associated with sacred tradition, functions as a marker of spirituality and liturgical resonance. Its pedal ostinati, seconds- and cluster-based harmonic complexes, and sustained dominant zones generate the effect of concentrated, “suspended” time.

Within this sonic field, the snare drum operates as a sign of a contemporary collective ritual of remembrance, associated with the minute of silence. The bass clarinet, with its deep timbre and vocal individuality, brings to the foreground the folk song *Oi Moroze, Morozenku*¹⁶, preserving its intonational contour while transforming its range and register. In this way, a distinctive tripartite ensemble is formed: a sacred vertical axis, a ritual pulse, and a personal voice.

At the same time, the structural organization of the work attests to an engagement with the archetype of the Ukrainian folk song as a deep-seated genre matrix. A bipartite model consisting of verse and refrain, reiterated in reprise and culminating in a climactic intensification, determines a dramaturgy of gradual accumulation of emotional energy. The quasi-antiphonal principle of “soloist–response” (clarinet–organ), heterophonic stratifications, and intonational variations within a modal framework reconstruct a traditional mechanism of folkloric unfolding, in which the individual and the collective coexist as an integral whole. The coda, grounded in new song material – the well-known Ukrainian song *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*¹⁷ – introduces a horizon of faith in victory and inner exaltation.

A further reflection on the contemporary events of Russian aggression against Ukraine is embodied in requiem¹⁸ for strings *Maria's City* (2022) by the contemporary Ukrainian composer Zoltan Almashi, dedicated to Mariupol – the city of resilience and courage. The programmatic title conditions a semantic personification of the city through the image of Mary, the archetype of the

¹⁵ Dnipro Academy of Music. “Valentyna Martyniuk – Prysnyata Heroyam.” YouTube video. Accessed March 4, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWIRhILGu5w&t=6s>

¹⁶ Ukrainian Opera Artists XX-th Century. “Oi Moroze, Morozenku – Ukrainian Folk Song.” YouTube video. Accessed March 4, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9z8cOIGhqY>

¹⁷ Nataliia Mohylevska. “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna (Concert ‘Dobroho vechora! My z Ukrainy!’).” YouTube video. Accessed March 4, 2026. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EV_vT0Vud5Q

¹⁸ In this case, the designation “requiem” functions rather as a metaphor than as a reference to a specific genre model.

Protecting Mother. The work artistically conveys the psychological and emotional experiences associated with war and human suffering. In this way, the composition acquires the features of a memorial elegy-requiem, functioning within the sphere of contemporary Ukrainian musical memory.

Under conditions of war, when culture becomes an essential dimension of the struggle for identity, Almashi regards music not merely as an artistic medium but as a means of resisting violence. He emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural heritage and articulating it in the works of contemporary composers. In his view, music must convey a positive message, expressing resilience and an aspiration toward peace.

In 2022 (16 and 18 November), Maria's City was performed in Toronto under the direction of Oksana Lyniv¹⁹. Its premiere marked an important moment in the composer's international recognition and in the support of Ukrainian culture on the global stage. The composer himself underscores the significance of fixing the dedication to Mariupol as an act of historical memory that cannot be effaced.

There exist compositional versions for string quartet²⁰ and for string orchestra; in both scores, however, the texture remains timbrally homogeneous, creating conditions for subtle micro-dynamic gradation and for heightened expressivity of articulation and bowing techniques.

The work is conceived as a single-movement through-composed form, internally articulated into three sections with reprise (A–B–A1). The first section takes the character of an elegiac monologue. The principal theme grows out of the opening viola solo and subsequently permeates nearly all voices, developing through dynamic and timbral transformation.

The second section functions as a developmental phase – a dramatic escalation that contrasts with the outer sections in tempo, modal orientation, texture, and rhythmic profile, leading to a culmination. The third section assumes the character of a post-dramatic meditation: a subdued song, a lullaby, a prayer for what has been lost, yet at the same time a luminous hope for the future.

The work opens with a soft and tender viola solo, evoking a sense of recollection of peaceful life. The melodic substance unfolds gradually and expressively, with careful shaping of each phrase. All of this generates an atmosphere of spaciousness, contemplative stillness, and memory.

¹⁹ YSOU / Molodizhnyi Symfonichnyi Orkestr Ukrainy. "Z. Almashi: Maria's City – Oksana Lyniv & YSOU, YoungEuroClassic 2022." YouTube video. Accessed March 4, 2026.
<https://youtu.be/5XXGN2XmUaE>

²⁰ Phenotypic Recordings. "Maria's City (Mariupol) by Zoltan Almashi (2022), performed by Vivere String Quartet." YouTube video. Accessed March 4, 2026.
https://youtu.be/iyW01D_tLk

E.g. 1

♩ = 60
1. solo
Viola
ppp p mf p pp f ppp
Zoltan Almashi
lontano

Zoltan Almashi, *Maria's City: Opening Theme*

The principal theme of the first section, presented in the first violin, is characterized by a smooth stepwise motion in seconds and thirds, a slow tempo, and gentle intonations, forming a sphere of inward concentration. The theme is lyrical and expressive, marked by clear tonal gravitations and a homophonic-harmonic texture. At the same time, all voices function simultaneously as accompaniment and as a complement to the melody, their interaction producing soft second-based sonorities. Harmony and timbre create a sense of open spatiality – as if the music were depicting the luminous, peaceful life of Mariupol before the war. The entire first section is grounded in poetic meditateness, where each phrase resonates like an act of remembrance.

E.g. 2

10
Vln. I p mp p mf mp f mp pp
Vln. II p mp p mf mp f mp pp
Vla. tutti p mp p mf mp f mp pp
Vc. p mp p mf mp f mp pp
dolcissimo
dolcissimo
dolcissimo
dolcissimo

Zoltan Almashi, *Maria's City: main theme*

The dynamics gradually intensify, and in the orchestral tutti a bright, life-affirming melody emerges, derived from the intonational contours of the principal theme.

The second section of the work sharply alters the emotional tone. It is filled with tension, motoric motion, rhythmic aggression, and dissonant

sonorities that may be interpreted as a musical embodiment of shelling, the destructive moments of war, chaos, and fear. The sonic texture here is characterized by an accelerated pulse, aggressive intonational gestures, and an uninterrupted flow of sixteenth-note motion. The melody repeatedly strives to reach a climactic summit through ascending passages, yet each attempt abruptly collapses into the lower registers. The harmonic language becomes unstable and densely chromatic.

In the climactic zone, the orchestral vertical texture becomes increasingly dense, condensing into cluster-like structures. An ostinato, pulsating rhythmic layer emerges, generating the effect of a massive sonic field and a sense of inevitability. Rhythm here functions as the primary carrier of dramatic energy.

At the moment of emotional culmination, only a single sustained note remains in the first violins, sounding in an extremely high register. A sudden dynamic collapse follows: the musical material appears to disintegrate, becoming rarefied and fragmented, which intensifies the effect of catharsis. This moment may be interpreted symbolically as the destruction of the very structure of life, when a peaceful existence is abruptly interrupted.

E.g. 3

The musical score for E.g. 3, measures 110-117, is presented for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score begins at measure 110 with Violin I playing a sustained note in a high register, marked *mp* and then *ppp*, with the instruction *non vibr.* above the staff. Violin II remains silent. At measure 111, the Viola and Violoncello enter with a *ppp* dynamic and the instruction *1. solo con sord.*. The Viola part features a melodic line with dynamics *p* and *pp*. The Violoncello part features a sustained note with a dynamic of *ppp* and a final dynamic of *pp* at measure 117. The Contrabass part remains silent throughout.

Zoltan Almashi, *Maria's City*: mm. 110–117

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In the third section of the work, the melody returns once again to a quiet and gentle sonority, yet now colored by a sense of shadow and subdued sorrow. It represents a musical realization that life continues, although irreversibly transformed – where hope and memory intertwine. The opening viola solo reappears, bringing back the principal theme. The orchestration becomes more transparent, with solo voices predominating.

The composer appears to deconstruct the first section and reassemble it anew: fragments are rearranged, while certain elements are recombined in altered configurations. In the slower tempo, figuration patterns from the second section also become perceptible. All of this leads to fragmentary reminiscences – subtle “shadows” of the initial intonation.

In the final part of the composition, a new theme emerges that resembles a kind of lullaby, characterized by its gentle rocking motion, third-based melodic intonations, and slow movement. The conclusion does not proclaim victory; rather, it affirms memory, thereby emphasizing the memorial character of the composition.

E.g. 4

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabasso. The score is in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a 3/4 time signature. It begins at measure 152. The tempo/mood is marked 'semplice, teneramente'. The first violin part is marked '(1. solo)' and starts with a *ppp* dynamic. The second violin part also has '(1. solo)' and starts with a *ppp* dynamic. The viola part has '(1. solo)' and starts with a *ppp* dynamic. The cello part has '(1. solo)' and starts with a *ppp* dynamic. The contrabasso part has '1. solo con sord.' and starts with a *ppp* dynamic. The score includes various dynamic markings: *ppp*, *p*, *pp*, and *mp*. There are also hairpins indicating crescendos and decrescendos. The music features a lullaby-like motif with a rocking motion and third-based melodic intonations.

Zoltan Almashi, *Maria's City*: lullaby motif

This work offers a vivid example of how contemporary academic music does not remain isolated within the sphere of “high” art but actively responds to the challenges of its time, becoming a platform for dialogue

with society. In this context, *Maria's City* functions as an artistic archetype: on the one hand, it refers to a concrete geographical and historical reality; on the other, it becomes an emblematic image of the destroyed home, lost identity, and at the same time the strength of renewal.

Thus, Almashi's composition emerges as a significant cultural and artistic phenomenon of the present. Within this work, individual experience and national memory, contemporary compositional language and a humanistic ethos are organically intertwined, which determines its importance for the further development of Ukrainian musical culture in the twenty-first century.

Conclusions

The analysis of contemporary works addressing the theme of war demonstrates that twenty-first-century music does not reproduce events literally but transforms them into a system of genre-stylistic and acoustic signs through which historical experience acquires a symbolic dimension. Art – particularly music – in such periods performs aesthetic, humanitarian, and socio-reflective functions. Within musical expression, war is transformed into sonic imagery that represents both external reality (explosions, sirens, silence) and the inner state of the individual (fear, confusion, despair, hope). In the compositional design of such works, one frequently encounters disproportional formal structures, rhythmic asymmetry, the use of clusters, free modality, extended instrumental techniques, elements of theatricalization, and intergeneric transitions. This artistic strategy may be understood as a response of art to the radical transformations of human existence during wartime.

The Ukrainian theme is increasingly integrated into the global musical discourse as a space of empathy and artistic solidarity, assuming diverse genre forms – from symphonic canvases to chamber elegies and choral declarations of peace. Above all, the general principles of representing war in art reveal themselves through universal artistic mechanisms for comprehending collective trauma. In *Sunflower Seeds* by Cesare Chiacchiaretta, one can observe a tendency toward almost documentary expression, articulated through sonorous clusters and timbral signals. In the first movement of the *Fifth Symphony* by Fazil Say, Ukrainian events are integrated into a broader image of a global crisis alongside the experience of the pandemic. Here, national intonational specificity is largely absent; instead, the music is driven by rhythmic–intonational energy shaped by asymmetric meters and modal contours. Valentina Martynyuk's *Dedication to the Heroes...* constructs a sacralized sonic space through the organ's vertical sonority, the ritual pulse

of the snare drum, and the matrix of a Ukrainian folk song. By contrast, Zoltan Almashi's *Maria's City* realizes a memorial model of an elegiac type, structured through the dramaturgy of a continuous arch and the timbral homogeneity of the string ensemble as a sign of concentrated remembrance.

Thus, contemporary wartime music operates within two interrelated dimensions: as an act of national memory and as a form of reflection in which genre, style, and program interact in shaping a new acoustic image of the epoch.

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