

Right-wing Ukrainian nationalism as applied in the field of musicology

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The May 15 “Arts and Leisure” section of the *New York Times* featured a full-page article entitled, “When Music From Ukraine Once Thrived.” The author is Gabrielle Cornish, an assistant professor of musicology at the University of Miami’s Frost School of Music.

The ostensible purpose of Ms. Cornish’s essay is the examination of the classical music tradition in Ukraine, to give due attention to this musical history that has in her opinion been neglected. She poses this issue, however, within the framework of the current war in Ukraine. The basic theme of the article is that, just as Ukraine has languished under the Russian jackboot, so too has its classical music suffered from this oppression. Thus Ukrainian music is enlisted—quite apart from its overall history and an objective examination of its merits, which may be considerable—in the service of the current US-NATO war against Russia. The Putin regime’s reactionary invasion in February triggered this conflict aimed at humiliating and if possible dismembering Russia, a project that had long been planned.

Cornish begins by spelling out her endorsement of the frenzied campaign currently being waged against Russian literature, Russian music and performers, Russian film and Russian culture in general. “Since the invasion began,” she writes, “the question of whether to perform music by Russian composers in the shadow of Putin’s war has been debated, with arguments both in favor of and against cancellations.” In other words, according to this logic, there are perfectly legitimate reasons for banning the music of Pyotr Tchaikovsky, who died in 1893, and Dmitri Shostakovich, a victim of Stalinist repression who died almost 50 years ago. Cornish delicately ignores any comparison between her “modest proposal” and the Nazi edict against performing the compositions of such 19th century musical giants as Felix Mendelssohn (a convert to Lutheranism), Giacomo Meyerbeer and scores of others. The Nazis clamored

about “Jewish and Bolshevik” cultural “influence” and the need to “cleanse” German art of this contamination.

The author goes on to discuss some of the major figures of Ukrainian music from the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th. These include Mykola Lysenko (1842-1912), Mykola Leontovych (1877-1921), Borys Lyatoshynsky (1895-1968) and Nikolai Roslavets (1881-1944). In the interests of her pro-war nationalist line, Cornish implies that they were all equally victims of Russia, the “enemy” of the Ukrainian people and its culture. She makes reference to vicious Stalin-era repression, but downplays the fact that Ukrainian composers and other artists were hardly the only ones to suffer during that period. The basic lie, common to the great majority of contemporary historians, and in this case extended to the field of musicology, is that the Bolshevik regime of Lenin and Trotsky and the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy headed by Stalin were two species of the same “evil” of communism.

However, Cornish contradicts herself repeatedly. Her argument has numerous and obvious holes in it. The glaring inconsistency—a distortion that approaches outright falsification—is that the author intentionally minimizes the significance of the October 1917 Revolution in order to demonize Russia in general.

It is not possible to write about the music of the modern era, as she is forced to acknowledge, without mentioning the period “between the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s.” She tellingly admits, for instance, that during the 1920s, under Soviet rule, with Ukraine a component of the newly formed USSR, “the city of Kyiv was a hotbed for modernist music and experimentation—often, with a particularly Ukrainian twist.” So much for the immense damage done by Lenin and the Bolsheviks!

Two paragraphs later, Cornish informs us that Ukrainian

“choral culture was given an important place by ... the Soviet government in the 1920s.” Further on, she writes that the Leontovych Musical Society, founded in Kiev in 1921, by 1928 had “found a corollary in the Association for Contemporary Music, an organization based in Moscow that sought to merge modernist idioms with revolutionary ideals.” This group “was even headed by a composer of Ukrainian origin, Nikolai Roslavets, who had worked extensively in both countries,” she writes.

It was the Stalinist regime—the regime that liquidated virtually the entire surviving leadership of the 1917 Revolution—that executed such Soviet Ukrainian figures as Les Kurbas (1887-1937), a film and stage director, as Cornish notes. Kurbas, an associate of such leading figures of the Soviet theater avant-garde as Vsevolod Meyerhold (executed in 1940) and Yevgeny Vakhtangov, was arrested by the Stalinist regime in 1933 and shot in 1937. Roslavets was exiled to Uzbekistan, “where he conducted a secondary school band for two years.” He died of a stroke, probably brought on by his persecutions.

After tracing this music history with at least some accuracy, even if in a disjointed and confused fashion, Cornish explains that efforts are presently being made to promote Ukrainian classical music. It is not possible to form opinions on this music without having heard it, and there is certainly no reason to neglect it. But that is not what the *Times* feature is primarily up to. The forgotten or less well known Ukrainian composers of the past are cynically being used for purposes that many of them would indignantly reject if they were here and aware of them. And there are also strong reasons to suspect that nationalism is being used to elevate composers simply because they are Ukrainian, and to lower the estimation of others simply because they are Russian.

As in politics and other fields, the Stalinist degeneration of the October Revolution is utilized to advance the most right-wing arguments. Cornish summarizes the views of Kiev Symphony Orchestra artistic director Liuba Morozova, who argues that “performing music by canonical composers like Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich obscures the realities of Putin’s Russia.” How in the world does it do that? Cornish doesn’t bother to ask. She further cites Morozova’s claim that their music has become a sort of “cultural weapon” that serves to “make Russia attractive to Europeans.”

There you have it! Stop performing Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich. Add Sergei Prokofiev, Alexander Glazunov and some other musical giants while you are at it. Lately, some major musical organizations like the Metropolitan

Opera, have claimed they have absolutely nothing against Russian music. Tchaikovsky and others have indeed been programmed, but, as the *Times* article shows, the liberal assurances are not the whole story. As the war fever escalates, the anti-Russian drumbeat intensifies. Cornish is careful not to openly endorse the banning of Russian music—instead she approvingly quotes those who do.

Morozova’s argument is stupid and absurd, and sinister. One might as well argue that George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein are nothing more than “cultural weapons” who serve to “make America attractive to Europeans.”

There is little difference between the chauvinist rubbish being peddled here and the argument of black nationalist Hunter College professor Philip Ewell, who has claimed that Beethoven was at best only “an above average composer,” and that the focus on Beethoven is part of “white music theory,” and a racist attack on black musicians!

It should also be added, that even if Ukrainian music had not thrived in the early years of the Soviet Union, the argument that Russian composers should be devalued because of Great Russian chauvinism would be no more progressive than similar arguments against performing the music of German composers because of the Nazis, or American composers because of the crimes of US imperialism.

There is also a rough analogy between the dishonest way in which the history of the Russian Revolution is barely alluded to and then minimized by Professor Cornish, and the technique of the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, which was more brazen in its dismissal of the role of white abolitionists, Abraham Lincoln and even the mass civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, in order to depict American history as a period of unbroken and unchanging racism. In both cases, the *Times* is promoting right-wing nationalism in line with the political requirements of American capitalism.



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