

“A Gesture of Solidarity Through Music”:

Local and International Community in Canadian Benefit Concerts for Ukraine

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In the months following Russia's February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine, groups and individuals around the world responded, taking to social media to express their solidarity with Ukraine, holding fundraisers to support the many organizations providing humanitarian aid, and standing with their local Ukrainian communities at protests and rallies. Canada's music community was no exception to this, as throughout the Spring and Summer of 2022 benefit concerts were organized from coast to coast to coast, providing opportunities for musicians, organizers, and audiences to express their support. From a sombre concert held by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, to a joyful celebration of Ukrainian culture in a St. John's, Newfoundland bar, to creating space for community reflections at St. Jude's Cathedral in Iqaluit, Nunavut, these events were all strongly tied to their local contexts and the needs of the community in which they occurred¹. As one piece of a much larger, global response to the conflict, these local music events create and strengthen links to a broader international community, through their connection to these local contexts, their potential to combat feelings of helplessness, and their roles as forms of resistance against the oppression of the Russian regime.

Before examining Ukraine-specific benefit concerts, it is first important to understand the context of the benefit concert as a tool for fundraising and social engagement. These events as they are seen today emerged out of an early 19th century tradition of individual musicians holding so-called benefit concerts for their own personal financial gain. Despite criticism for being "over-commercialized" and "lacking artistic merit,"² these events were also seen as

¹ It is important to note that the concerts examined in this paper do not constitute a comprehensive list of Canadian benefit concerts for Ukraine. The concerts selected for this paper were chosen based on the amount of information available on the event, prioritizing the availability of first-hand accounts from participants and organizers.

² Manuel Erviti, "Bochsa's Compositions for his Annual Benefit Concerts of the 1830s," *American Harp Journal* (2015): 36, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A425112350/AONE?u=lond95336&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=4bb9d4e7>.

“prestigious high points of the concert season,”³ and were financially lucrative for those involved.⁴

Eventually, recognizing the power of music as a tool for social change and engagement – its ability to “initiate, motivate, collaborate, communicate, instigate, nurture, dispute, repulse, and reconcile”⁵ – the goal of these events shifted away from financial support for the performer and towards support (both financial and ideological) for a variety of causes. Using a combination of entertainment value (encouraging audiences to purchase tickets), empathy (using the event as “an outlet for [the] impulse to help”⁶), and the mobilization of peer groups (making giving a social norm), these concerts remain a popular and effective form of fundraiser.⁷ In addition to fundraising, the music performed at these events can also support the cause in question through its capacity to “reflect political tensions and suggest social compromises,” with different compositional styles and programming choices allowing the music to “individualize as effectively as nationalize, and unite as effectively as divide.”⁸

With this new, broader focus, benefit concerts began to interact with communities in different ways, particularly as the concerts’ beneficiaries were often distinctly separate from the groups holding the events. Frequently (and especially in the case of large-scale events such as

³ Erviti, “Bochsa’s Compositions,” 35.

⁴ Erviti, 36.

⁵ Ingrid Bianca Byerly, “What Every Revolutionary Should Know: A Musical Model of Global Protest,” in *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 231. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/detail.action?docID=1251037>.

⁶ Christopher J. Einolf, Deborah M. Philbrick, and Kelly Slay, “National Giving Campaigns in the United States: Entertainment, Empathy, and the National Peer Group,” in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2012): 242, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764012467230>.

⁷ Einolf, 242.

⁸ Byerly, “A Musical Model,” 231.

1985's "Live Aid"), this separation was reinforced by the ways in which concerts perpetuated ideas of "distant suffering" with relation to their beneficiaries, a form of "othering" which "[reinforced] the idea that those needing help are inert and perhaps hopeless because of their incredibly dire circumstances."⁹ This othering was furthered by what historian William Michael Schmidli refers to as "thin messages," messages around human rights abuses or other social issues which, despite having the potential to raise awareness or inspire activism, fail to communicate the local context of or other key factors behind the issues in question.¹⁰ The use of celebrities as key spokespeople for these events strongly contributed to the use of this messaging style, as "celebrities might misrepresent the issues, oversimplifying them or presenting them without verification."¹¹ This messaging served to increase the perceived distance between audiences and the concert's beneficiaries, positioning audiences and performers as "benevolent, ethical consumers with a shared (somewhat paternalistic) concern" for those their event was intended to benefit.¹² This positioning has been criticized in the years since "Live Aid", both for its portrayal of beneficiary communities, and for encouraging what in many cases amounts to only a surface-level understanding of complex social issues, presenting simplified images while denying beneficiaries the autonomy of telling their own stories.

⁹ Heather McIntosh, "Charity Benefit Concerts and the *One World: Together at Home* Event," in *Rock Music Studies* 8 no. 1 (2021): 78. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1080/19401159.2020.1852773>. Live Aid was organized to provide support for famine relief in Ethiopia, and consisted of two stadium concerts (one in London, UK and one in Philadelphia, USA) featuring extremely high-profile performers. The event garnered a live audience of 89 000, with a further 1.9 billion watching via live broadcast.

¹⁰ William Michael Schmidli, "Rockin' to Free the World?: Amnesty International's Benefit Concert Tours, 1986-88," in *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 4 (2021): 692. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1093/dh/dhab037>.

¹¹ McIntosh, "Charity Benefit Concerts," 79.

¹² Julie Grant, "Live Aid/8: perpetuating the superiority myth," in *Critical Arts* 28, no. 3 (2015): 319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2015.1059547>.

When considering the ways in which Canadian benefit concerts for Ukraine interact with ideas of both local and global community, it is important to note the ways in which these events differ from standards set out by events such as “Live Aid”. In most cases, these Canadian concerts center performers who either are part of the Ukrainian community themselves, or who otherwise hold deep connections to the community. Rather than promoting a sense of distance or separation, this centering of the Ukrainian community returns the autonomy of storytelling to the beneficiaries, removing any sense of othering or paternalistic concern, and building upon ideas of interconnectedness in order to strengthen local links to a broader, international community.

In addition to their centering of the Ukrainian community, these events are also deeply impacted by and responsive to their own local contexts, making them accessible to and furthering their engagement with members of local communities. One such event, the Calgary Jazz Orchestra’s April 10, 2022 “Ukrainian Humanitarian Relief Concert”, marked the ensemble’s return to live music for the first time since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, despite serving as a fundraiser for a serious cause, the event had a celebratory tone, described by bandleader Johnny Summers as “a big celebration, [to] get everyone together, and put a smile on everyone’s face.”¹³

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra’s “A Tribute to Ukraine” was made more sombre by the tragic passing of acclaimed conductor Boris Brott, who was set to conduct the concert. In a press release about the event, VSO CEO Angela Elster described Brott’s death as “heartbreaking” and “terribly shocking,” but also affirmed that the orchestra’s “mission ‘to create, curate, and connect irresistible musical experiences’ continues

¹³ Rachneet Randhawa, “Calgary Jazz Orchestra hosts benefit concert for Ukraine humanitarian relief,” citynews.ca, City News, April 9, 2022, <https://calgary.citynews.ca/2022/04/09/calgary-jazz-orchestra-ukraine/>.

throughout times of crisis – both here at home and across the globe.”¹⁴ Elster went on to describe the VSO’s determination “to keep the music going so that our community has a place for the expression of heartbreak and grief” and her own desire to “let the music bring [the community] together so that we are elevated, inspired, and find comfort in one another and the VSO’s music.”¹⁵ By holding space not only for the Ukrainian community but also for those grieving within the local music community, the event could gain a deeper level of personal resonance for both audience members and performers, giving additional weight to Brott’s own programming selections of works by Myroslav Skoryk and Larysa Kuzmenko, and Mykola Lysenko’s “Prayer for Peace”.¹⁶

Concerts across Canada have also pivoted from their originally scheduled programming into benefit concerts in response to the February 24 invasion. At Ontario’s Western University, a vocal studio recital was turned into a full-scale benefit concert, inspired by both the instructor’s and students’ personal connections to Ukraine.¹⁷ Similarly, when a PEI Symphony Orchestra performance of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony had to be cancelled due to concerns about the number of musicians on stage amidst rising COVID-19 cases,¹⁸ president Wraychel Horne described the

¹⁴ Tom Zillich, “VSO’s ‘A Tribute to Ukraine’ benefit concert now pays tribute to conductor killed on a Hamilton street,” abbynews.com, The Abbotsford News, April 6, 2022, <https://www.abbynews.com/entertainment/vsos-a-tribute-to-ukraine-benefit-concert-now-also-pays-tribute-to-conductor-killed-in-crash/>.

¹⁵ Zillich.

¹⁶ Zillich.

¹⁷ James Chaarani, “London musicians use music to fight for Ukraine. They hope you’ll listen,” cbc.ca, CBC, April 7, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/london-musicians-use-music-to-fight-for-ukraine-they-hope-you-ll-listen-1.6404453>.

¹⁸ PEISO, “April 2022 Pivot,” PEISO Musician News, accessed August 5, 2022, <https://rubysquaredesign.wixsite.com/peiso-musician>.

decision to pivot to a benefit concert as “a natural direction to take.”¹⁹ Horne went on to call the April 2022 concert “a gesture of solidarity through music and a mindful reflection of our global sense of justice,” noting that “live music is a shared experience of how we bond as a community” which, whether “locally or globally, [...] is a mechanism to express our humanity.”²⁰

In each case, these concerts have demonstrated a high level of responsiveness to conditions in their local communities, whether through the tone of the concert, or through changes made to pre-existing events in order to fulfill local needs. This responsiveness highlights the degree to which these events are connected to the communities in which they occur, a connection which is also made clear by the depth of support local community members have provided for the events.

In addition to supporting the concerts’ beneficiaries, local communities have also extended support to the concerts’ performers. Brian Cherwick, a musician in St. John’s, Newfoundland-based Ukrainian band The Kubasonics, experienced this support firsthand as Music NL – the province’s music industry association – reached out to the band following the February 24 invasion to express its support and solidarity.²¹ Cherwick describes this support as characteristic of The Kubasonics’ experience in the province, describing how, unlike their experience elsewhere in Canada where they were “pigeonholed” into playing only at specifically Ukrainian events, in St. John’s, the band are “musician[s] that [play] Ukrainian music” as

¹⁹ PEISO, “PEI Symphony Orchestra: A Concert for Ukraine,” [upei.ca](https://www.upei.ca/communications/news/2022/04/pei-symphony-orchestra-concert-ukraine), University of Prince Edward Island, April 13, 2022, <https://www.upei.ca/communications/news/2022/04/pei-symphony-orchestra-concert-ukraine>.

²⁰ PEISO, “A Concert for Ukraine”.

²¹ Sarah Smellie, “N.L. Ukrainian band shoves against Russian narratives with album launch, packed shows,” [thestar.com](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2022/03/06/nl-ukrainian-band-shoves-against-russian-narratives-with-album-launch-packed-shows.html), Toronto Star, March 6, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2022/03/06/nl-ukrainian-band-shoves-against-russian-narratives-with-album-launch-packed-shows.html>.

opposed to “Ukrainian musicians,” with much deeper integration into the local music scene.²²

The depth of the group’s integration into the local community was made evident when The Kubasonics began to organize their own benefit concert, as they were met with support from popular Newfoundland musicians The Once and Tim Baker, an offer of venue space from the St. John’s Arts and Culture Centre, and eventually a sold-out audience which raised over \$30 000 for the Red Cross.²³

As was the case with The Kubasonics’ concert, the reception of these benefit concerts nationwide has been extremely positive, with organizers and performers both shocked by the levels of interest in their events. Carina Romagnoli, organizer of Winnipeg’s April 3rd “Stand with Ukraine” concert, described herself as being “at a complete loss for words for how amazing the Manitoba community [was] in supporting [the] event,” after all 526 tickets sold out and hundreds of additional viewers joined via livestream.²⁴ Similarly, Steve Melnick, organizer of “Rocking for Ukraine” in Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia, was rendered “speechless” by the approximately \$29 000 raised at his event.²⁵ Melnick attributed the success to the “kindness, concern, and caring of everybody in the community.”²⁶

²² Smellie.

²³ Meagan Campbell, “NLers Find Ways to Raise Funds & Aid for Ukrainians,” *theindependent.ca*, The Independent, April 12, 2022, <https://theindependent.ca/news/nlers-find-ways-to-raise-funds-aid-for-ukrainians/>.

²⁴ Nathan Liewicki, “Manitoba’s Ukrainian community shows its support at 2 benefit concerts,” *cbc.ca*, CBC, April 4, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-ukrainian-community-support-benefit-concerts-1.6407177>.

²⁵ Kyle Moore, “Concert for Ukraine in Cape Breton raises nearly \$30 000,” *iheartradio.ca*, Pure Country 104, March 22, 2022, <https://www.iheartradio.ca/purecountry/woodstock/ctv-news-atlantic/concert-for-ukraine-in-cape-breton-raises-nearly-30-000-1.17412157>.

²⁶ Moore.

The response to these concerts further illustrates the extent to which these events are rooted in their local contexts, as well as the fact that they are not isolated efforts by the organizer and performers, but instead engage the community at large. Rather than supporting a mentality of distant suffering or paternalistic concern, these events more accurately represent the honest desire of one community to help another.

One potential explanation for the strength of the community response to these concerts is music's capacity to provide individuals with an opportunity to actively combat feelings of helplessness such as those which have emerged out of news of the Ukrainian conflict. H. Louise Davis identified benefit concerts as an opportunity to "overtly express compassion and enact protest,"²⁷ and similarly, when discussing London, Ontario's Aeolian Hall's "Concert for Peace," executive and artistic director Clark Bryan described the need for "creative people [...] to be at the forefront to help solve our problems," as "they have the optimism to believe that we can make a difference, make change."²⁸ The expressions of compassion, protest, and optimism found in these benefit concerts work to counter the burnout that comes with emotional overload and exhaustion, including that which many individuals have experienced since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. This burnout is exacerbated when individuals feel powerless, or that they are at the mercy of a situation which they can do nothing about,²⁹ an experience commonly described by those organizing and participating in the benefit concerts.

²⁷ H. Louise Davis, "Concerts for a Cause (Or, 'Cause We Can?)," in *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 212. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/detail.action?docID=1251037>.

²⁸ Joe Belanger, "Loreena McKennitt headlining sold-out London benefits for Ukraine," *lfpres.com*, The London Free Press, March 15, 2022, <https://lfpres.com/entertainment/local-arts/loreena-mckennitt-headlining-sold-out-london-benefits-for-ukraine>.

²⁹ K.N. Kinnick, D.M. Krugman, and G.T. Cameron, "Compassion fatigue: Communication and burnout toward social problems," in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73 (1996): 688. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909607300314>.

Lilya Medyinska, a member of the Rusalka Ukrainian Dance Ensemble and a performer in Winnipeg's "Stand with Ukraine" concert described the ways in which her community's concert helped to alleviate her own feelings of powerlessness:

A lot of us felt very helpless when we learned about the invasion in Ukraine, so being able to come together with the community and a lot of the local performing groups here is really important to us [...] Being able to do this and celebrate our culture when it's in jeopardy right now during the invasion makes it really heartwarming to see the community come together, and really try to do something to help our fellow Ukrainians back home.³⁰

In Medyinska's case, the benefit concert provided an opportunity to alleviate feelings of helplessness and instead feel that she was making a tangible impact. Medyinska's comments also foreground the importance of the community's involvement, both as performers and as audience members, further reinforcing the ways in which local community efforts can strengthen ties to the international community.

In addition to events with clearly defined audience and performer roles, concerts have also been held which encourage more active participation across all attendees. The Iqaluit, Nunavut-based group Friends of Ukraine organized their event "Friends of Ukraine for World Peace" in an effort to create "a gathering where people can join together in their support for Ukraine."³¹ In addition to performances by local musicians, the event featured an open mic, where anyone in attendance was welcome to share a "peace-related poem or story."³² This setup provided a way for the community to demonstrate their support, not only through attendance or financial contributions, but also through performances of their own, in turn creating an

³⁰ Liewicki, "Manitoba's Ukrainian community".

³¹ Mélanie Ritchot, "Iqalumiut to stand with Ukraine," [nunatsiaq.com](https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/iqalumiut-to-stand-with-ukraine/), Nunatsiaq News, April 1, 2022, <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/iqalumiut-to-stand-with-ukraine/>.

³² Ritchot.

opportunity for active engagement and thus an outlet for feelings of helplessness. Organizer Julie Vaddapli reaffirmed the value of providing this outlet, explaining that “everyone [wanted] to help, they just didn’t know how,” and that once the event was suggested, it was met with an “outpouring of support and solidarity.”³³

The act of performing traditional Ukrainian music also provides a sense of tangible action for performers. Olena Bratishko, collaborative pianist for Western University’s “Songs for Ukraine” concert, describes the music as a “safety net” which provides a “sense of contributing,” saying: “This is what I can do here. Unfortunately, you know, I cannot go and fight, but I can do it here. I can bring my kids so that they see the Ukrainian concert, they hear the Ukrainian songs. I can bring the community together.”³⁴ In Bratishko’s case, performing Ukrainian music allowed her to strengthen her personal sense of connection to the international Ukrainian community, linking local and international communities while helping to relieve her own feelings of helplessness.

It is clear that across Canada these concerts have provided a venue in which both performers and audience members can feel active rather than powerless, and gain the sense that their local actions can have a positive and tangible international impact. It is also made apparent in the comments from participants that these events are often created due to the strong personal connections to Ukraine held by organizers and performers. The resulting combination of a deep personal desire to engage and strong ties to the beneficiary community once again sets these concerts apart from similar events which distance the event itself from its beneficiaries. Instead, the closeness between the local and international communities involved serves as a major

³³ Richtot.

³⁴ Chaarani, “London musicians use music to fight for Ukraine”.

strength for the event, increasing local support in a way which benefits not only the beneficiaries but also local participants.

While combatting feelings of helplessness, music also acts a powerful and poignant form of political resistance. With historical precedents ranging from its use by prisoners of war to prevent indoctrination, to the emergence of protest music as a reaction to World War II,³⁵ music's influence during periods of conflict has been widely acknowledged. This was recognized by "Stand with Ukraine" organizer Carina Romagnoli as she described her concert as "perhaps one of the most important shows that our artists have ever been a part of" as they "are dancing and singing in solidarity with the people of Ukraine for their safety, for their freedom, and for their sovereignty."³⁶

In addition to the ideological weight behind these concerts, the performance of Ukrainian music specifically is an act of resistance in and of itself. When discussing the planning of the Kubasonics' St. John's concerts, Brian Cherwick described "nearly cancel[ing]" the band's preplanned shows following the invasion, feeling that the band's music – which Cherwick refers to as "Ukrainian party songs" – would be inappropriate given the circumstances.³⁷ However, Cherwick's Ukrainian family members encouraged him to continue on with the shows as a rebuttal against Russian President Vladimir Putin's claims that Ukrainian culture does not exist,

³⁵ Pamela M. Potter, "Introduction: Music and Global War in the Short Twentieth Century," in *Music in World War II: Coping with Wartime in Europe and the United States*, ed. Pamela M. Potter, Christina L. Baade, and Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 4. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/detail.action?docID=6349525>.

³⁶ Mason DePatie, "Dancing, dishcloths and Easter eggs: How Winnipeggers are continuing their support for Ukraine," [winnipeg.ctvnews.ca](https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/dancing-dishcloths-and-easter-eggs-how-winnipeggers-are-continuing-their-support-for-ukraine-1.5846359), CTV News, April 3, 2022, <https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/dancing-dishcloths-and-easter-eggs-how-winnipeggers-are-continuing-their-support-for-ukraine-1.5846359>.

³⁷ Smellie, "N.L. Ukrainian band shoves against Russian narratives".

instead showing that Ukrainian culture is “loved and celebrated, even somewhere as far away as Newfoundland.”³⁸

Similarly, Western University’s “Songs for Ukraine” was described in an April 7 article by the CBC as “a way [...] to fight back against Russian violence and oppression from halfway around the world.”³⁹ Student and performer Mykyta Duvalko specifically attributed this to the historical context of the Ukrainian art songs performed at the event, explaining that the songs’ history of being “covered up and oppressed for hundreds of years” made them a particularly powerful tool for resistance; a testament to the fact that “no matter how many times they tried to destroy our culture, destroy our music, we’ll continue to sing our pieces, we’ll continue to speak Ukrainian, and we will protest and we will thrive and we will overcome.”⁴⁰ The works performed at the Western University concert had historically been censored, first by the Russian Empire, and later by the Soviet Union,⁴¹ but pianist Olena Bratishko notes that composers were still creating Ukrainian music, even under these regimes: “They were promoting Ukrainian culture. They wanted the Ukrainian culture to keep living and they wanted generations to know our history.”⁴² In this way, this concert of Ukrainian art songs builds upon an extensive history of the songs’ use as tools for resistance and the preservation of Ukrainian culture.

Whether through The Kubasonics’ joyful experimentation around traditional Ukrainian music or through “Songs for Ukraine’s” contribution to the extensive political history of

³⁸ Smellie.

³⁹ Chaarani, “London musicians use music for fight for Ukraine”.

⁴⁰ Chaarani, “London musicians use music for fight for Ukraine”.

⁴¹ Mari-Len De Guzman, “Ukrainian art song performances offer hope and healing,” news.westernu.ca, Western News, April 6, 2022, <https://news.westernu.ca/2022/04/ukrainian-art-song-performances-offer-hope-and-healing/>.

⁴² Guzman.

Ukrainian art songs, it is clear that the performance of Ukrainian music and the celebration of Ukrainian culture is inherently an act of political resistance. By countering Putin's claim that Ukrainian culture does not exist, these performances tangibly push back against the Russian regime. In using local events as the vehicle for this resistance, these benefit concerts once again demonstrate both the autonomy of Ukrainian performers to tell their stories and share their culture, and the ways in which these local musical events are powerfully linked to a broader international community.

In conclusion, Canadian benefit concerts in support of Ukraine demonstrate the ways in which such concerts can honour and uplift their beneficiaries, rather than othering or looking down on them. From expressions of performers' deep personal connections to Ukraine, to outpourings of support and solidarity by entire communities, these concerts have served as a forum through which communities can take action, relieving feelings of helplessness and creating a strong basis of local engagement. This local grounding then supports these events as they function as forms of resistance, refuting claims against Ukrainian culture and allowing individuals to take tangible action in spite of geographic distance. It is this strong connection between local and global communities which has allowed these concerts to become as impactful as they have, reaffirming what Clark Bryan describes as "the power of creativity and community to conquer our greatest challenges."⁴³

⁴³ Belanger, "Loreena McKennitt headlining sold-out London benefits".

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