

Article by Jay Handelman, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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Ukraine Philharmonic musicians bring a nation's spirit to Sarasota concert

The musicians of the Lviv National Philharmonic Orchestra of Ukraine have had to work together in unusual ways to rehearse for concerts and their current 40-performance tour of the United States, including a Jan. 18 program for the Sarasota Concert Association.



Rehearsing amid a backdrop of missile attacks or air raid sirens creates challenges for the ensemble, but principal guest conductor Theodore Kuchar said they have “gotten off much easier” than people in other parts of the country. “Look at the destruction in places like Kharkiv or Donetsk.”

Lviv is on the Eastern side of the nation, close to the Polish border and far from Russia's main attacks in the capital of Kyiv and the more eastern cities.

“We have air raid sirens go off at least several times a day, and as soon as you hear the sound, the ground is buzzing,” he said. “Stores close. If there's an opera performance going on, the opera stops right where it is and people go into an underground shelter. A concert stops and waits for the siren that says the alert is gone.”

The sirens don't always mean that a rocket is heading for Lviv. “It means a rocket has crossed the border and could be coming from Belarus or coming from the center in Kyiv,” he said.

“People always ask how can you practice, but you learn to live with it.”

Kurchar is a Ukrainian-American conductor who was born in New York and graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Music, but has had a long music career in Ukraine. In 1992, he was named the principal guest conductor of the Ukrainian State Symphony Orchestra, which changed its name to the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine in Kyiv after the nation became independent from the former Soviet Union. He led that ensemble through dozens of recordings for Naxos Records.

He chose to live in Lviv a few years ago to serve as a home base because of its proximity to Krakow, Poland and Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, where he could easily travel to other European cities for concert dates.

Not long after he arrived “whispers got out that I was in Lviv, and I developed a relationship with the Opera House and the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Ukraine in Lviv.



Music and military

The concert tour was “planned, discussed and formalized long before the war started. We started discussing it nearly two years ago,” he said. While most men in Ukraine can’t leave the country without special permission “because every male is a potential soldier,” those who are in political delegations or affiliated with cultural institutions can get approval to travel.

“You can leave as long as you come back,” but the travel is more of a challenge because it requires long bus trips between Lviv and Krakow. On one recent trip to the U.S., he missed three planes after leaving Ukraine 36 hours late, and then spent 36 hours at Newark International Airport because of a snowstorm.

But Kuchar is not complaining, and he is looking forward to leading the orchestra in a program that features Brahms’ Tragic Overture, Op. 81 and Violin Concerto (with soloist Vladyslava Luchenko) and Dvořák’s Symphony No. 9, From the New World.

The pieces fit together in part because Dvořák’s “symphonic output, his entire output from an architectural and musical sense, was most influenced by Brhams. Dvořák would never have become Dvořák had it not been for the musical presence of Brahms,” he said.



Kuchar said he is a big fan of Luchenko, who was born in Ukraine, but left at an early age to study in Europe.

“She has the most solid central European training and has been successful in several major competitions,” he said. “She’s just the most exceptional young violinist from Ukraine that I’ve worked with in the last five years so I felt it was essential for her to be with us on this tour.”

The concert is the second of two special programs to launch the 2023 Sarasota Concert Association season, which officially begins at 7:30 p.m. Jan. 30 with a farewell performance by the Emerson String Quartet, whose members plan to split up after nearly 50 years together.

The season also includes Pianist Awadagin Pratt Feb. 15 at the Riverview Performing Arts Center, Riccardo Muti leading the Chicago Symphony Orchestra March 1 at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, the English Chamber Orchestra on March 12 at Van Wezel, and JoAnn Falletta leading the Buffalo Philharmonic March 27 at Van Wezel.

Lviv National Philharmonic Orchestra of Ukraine

Theodore Kuchar, principal guest conductor. 7:30 p.m. Jan. 18. Presented by Sarasota Concert Association at Venice Performing Arts Center, 1 Indian Avenue, Venice, FL 34285. Tickets are \$50-\$115 but seating is extremely limited. For more information: 941-966-6161; scasarasota.org