Musica Academica
Volume 3. Issue 2 (2026): 6-15
DOI: 10.61215/MA.2026.vol.3.iss.2.01

SOUND AS A LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE: UKRAINIAN BALLET IN TIMES OF WAR[1]

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Abstract. *This article examines the role of sound as a language of cultural resistance in Ukrainian ballet during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. While ballet is traditionally characterized as an apolitical art form rooted in classical European aesthetics, the wartime context has transformed it into a medium through which Ukrainian artists articulate national identity, collective trauma and resilience. The study argues that the works by Ukrainian composers has become central to the decolonization of Ukrainian ballet. Drawing on perspectives from musicology, dance studies, cultural nationalism and warfare theory, the article demonstrates how music functions semantically, emotionally and diplomatically within contemporary Ukrainian ballet. The ballet music conveys narratives of suffering and resilience, enables communal mourning, supports psychological endurance and communicates Ukrainian cultural sovereignty to international audiences.*
Keywords: *Ukrainian ballet, wartime culture, Ukrainian composers, Russo-Ukrainian war.*

Introduction

The experience of war has never been solely visual. While historiography and visual arts frequently privilege the image of destruction, the acoustic dimension of violence, its detonations, silences, mechanical pulses and human cries, constitutes an equally potent field of cultural inscription. In ballet, a genre traditionally associated with idealized corporeality and

[1] This article created as a part of the Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship, *New Europe College Fellowship* 2025–2026

harmonious musicality, the representation of war confronts a paradox: how to embody violence within an art form historically oriented toward aesthetic sublimation.

Ukrainian ballet art provides a uniquely fertile terrain for exploring this paradox. Situated at the crossroads of imperial legacies, Soviet cultural policies and contemporary struggles for sovereignty, Ukrainian ballet has repeatedly returned to the theme of war as lived acoustic reality. Ballet is an important phenomenon within the contemporary cultural space of Ukraine. The interpretation of the ballet phenomenon, with its inherently synthetic nature, constitutes a significant field of research for musicologists. It is precisely within the genre of ballet that contemporary problematic issues are reflected socio-cultural, ethical and even historical-political ones.

1. Sounds in the ballet performance

Over the past years, Ukrainian ballet has undergone significant transformation, gradually erasing the boundaries between classical tradition and experimental artistic practices. Stylistic innovation has become one of the key factors in the renewal of the genre and its adaptation to the cultural demands of the present day. Contemporary Ukrainian composers and sound-artists increasingly employ new musical techniques, combine diverse stylistic elements and experiment with the structure and organization of the soundscape of ballet performance.

The soundscape of a ballet performance may be conditionally divided into three categories: musical, staging and technical sounds. The most straightforward category is that of technical sounds. These include three principal types. First are physiological sounds produced by dancers, such as the stamping of feet, the sound of jumps landing on the floor, and natural (non-theatricalized) breathing. The second group consists of technical sounds of the stage, created by stage mechanisms or the movement of objects, including the shifting of props and scenery or the rustling of cables. The third group comprises audience-generated sounds, such as rustling, coughing, sneezing, movement within the hall, and other incidental noises that are an inevitable component of a live performance environment.

Staging sounds, in contrast, arise within a specific stage production and may vary depending on the interpretive concept of the performance. These sounds are typically introduced by creative contributors other than the composer, such as the choreographer, stage director or producer. A crucial feature of scenic sounds is that they are not included in the composer's musical score. Examples include clapping, striking the body,

laughter, shouts, screams, spoken phrases and other performative vocalizations produced by the dancers.

The category of musical sounds encompasses all sonic elements that are intentionally included by the composer in the musical or sound score of the ballet. These may include acoustic instrumental or vocal sounds, electronic and electroacoustic elements, synthesized sounds, as well as concrete (recorded) sounds. Notably, the classification of certain sounds as musical may only become evident when the researcher has access to the composer's score or the sound design project of the ballet.

2. War as an Acoustic Environment

Violence, in its material manifestation, produces sound: the detonation of artillery, the metallic friction of weaponry, the percussive collapse of structures, the tremor of mechanical engines and the rupture of silence. These sonic events are not neutral, they generate affective states as a fear, shock, paralysis, that precede visual cognition. The acoustic dimension of violence thus operates as a pre-discursive field of experience.

Since 2014, and even more after 2022, Ukrainian cities have been subjected to missile attacks and air-raid sirens. These sounds have entered collective consciousness. Ballet artists working in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv and other cities rehearse and perform under conditions where sirens interrupt artistic processes. The sound aesthetics of violence now derive from actual urban acoustics. The boundary between stage and street dissolves.

War-related acoustic phenomena can be classified according to their origin, function and perceptual role within the urban environment, although in practice these categories frequently overlap within a continuous soundscape. War-related sounds in the urban environment can be categorized into several distinct types.

First of all, these area Military sounds directly related to combat actions and military equipment, including explosions, gunfire, artillery strikes, the movement of armored vehicles, and other forms of weaponry. The Russo–Ukrainian war is characterized using a wide spectrum of modern weapon systems. Both sides employ a combination of missile systems, artillery, armored vehicles, drones, and small arms, which collectively form the acoustic and technological landscape of contemporary warfare. The armed forces of the Russian Federation use a diverse arsenal that includes ballistic and cruise missiles, aerial bombs, artillery systems, armored vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), small arms and anti-tank weaponry.

For people living in Ukraine, the sounds of war have become an inseparable part of everyday life. Many have developed the ability to intuitively identify types of weapons, artillery, and air defense systems purely by their acoustic signature. For example: Cruise and ballistic missiles ("Iskander", "Kalibr" etc.) produce a distinctive whistling or humming as they travel at high speeds, signaling imminent impact. Attack drones and kamikaze UAVs (Shahed, Geran etc.) emit low-frequency buzzing or high-pitched whines, allowing residents to anticipate their direction and trajectory. Air defense systems (for example Patriot) have their own acoustic signatures: the launch of an interceptor missile is accompanied by a sharp whistle and the operation of radar and launch systems creates pulsating background noises that signal defensive activity.

For many Ukrainians, this acoustic map of war functions as a natural early warning system: experience allows them not only to identify the type of weapon but also to estimate its distance, trajectory, and potential impact zone. "The thesis of 'sound as a weapon' acquires an expanded interpretation: sound functions not merely as an instrument of influence or a carrier of information about danger, but as a factor that directly modifies the temporal organization of experience, bodily readiness, and the existential disposition of the subject. Its weapon-like quality lies in its capacity to forcibly structure experience around the anticipation of possible destruction. From this perspective, war emerges as the formation of an acoustic regime of reality, in which even the absence of sound is not neutral, since silence itself retains the potentiality of threat"[2]. This phenomenon illustrates how modern warfare generates a unique auditory knowledge among civilians, where sound is not only a signal of danger but also an essential source of survival information.

Signal sounds are the sounds that serve communicative or warning functions during wartime, such as air raid sirens, alarms, military commands and other acoustic signals used to alert or coordinate individuals.

Every day (domestic) sounds are sounds associated with daily life that acquire new meanings in wartime contexts "War creates a spectrum of sounds that are not so easily distinguished from the 'normal' sounds"[3], such as footsteps, the closing of doors, the noise of trains or vehicles during evacuation, and other elements of ordinary soundscapes disrupted by war.

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[2] Davydov, D. Sound as a Weapon: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Auditory Experience of War. *Multiversum. Philosophical Almanac, 1*(183) (2026). p.11-12

[3] Bull, M. Into the sounds of war: imagination, media, and experience (Version 1). University of Sussex. (2019) https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23469404.v1

Human sounds vocal expressions produced by people in extreme situations, including screams, cries, calls for help, speech or other forms of emotional or communicative vocalization. The scream acquires particular significance as an affective marker. It not only signals the emotional state of a character but also establishes a communicative interaction between people.

Amid intensified sonic aggression, silence acquires new ethical weight. "A crucial element of the wartime soundscape is silence, which is positioned not simply as the absence of sound but as an extreme form of sound itself. Silence is tense, anticipatory, or laden with the aftermath of tragedy"[4]. The absence of sound becomes a representation of death, displacement, or unspoken grief. Such silence is not neutral; it is charged with the memory of interrupted sirens or the expectancy of renewed attack. In acoustic terms, it heightens perceptual awareness.

3. Resistance and Ukrainian Ballet

Ballet, often perceived as an art form detached from the urgencies of contemporary political crises, has undergone a profound reconfiguration in Ukraine since the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The full-scale invasion of 2022 intensified cultural processes that had quietly begun after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, compelling Ukrainian artists and institutions to re-examine the ideological foundations of their repertoires, pedagogical traditions and historiographical narratives. "Within the ballet genre, there is an ongoing adaptation of new technologies and philosophical reflections on the destiny of humanity. It reflects diverse trends in the development of contemporary art, sociocultural processes, and political events in Ukraine, particularly the Russo-Ukrainian war. The transformation of ballet genres is accompanied by the progressive work of Ukrainian choreographers with modern choreographic vocabulary, as well as by the reinterpretation of Ukrainian ballet productions through the prism of sociocultural trends and political events".[5] This broader transformation, music has emerged as a central medium through which ballet expresses resistance, resilience and national identity. Music functions in Ukrainian wartime ballet as a symbolic language capable of articulating political meaning, emotional complexity, cultural continuity and collective trauma.

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[4] Zinchenko-Hotsuliak, V. Soundscape of War in the Jazz Album Music Under Siege by Volodymyr Balaba and Galyna Dub. *Human Affairs*, *36*(2), (2026) p. 218

[5] Terada N. Repertoire Policy and Activities of the National Opera and Ballet Theatres in the Conditions of Military Aggression. *National Academy of Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts Herald: Science journal,* 3, (2024). p. 11-12

The outbreak of war in 2022 forced institutions to confront the political implications of their artistic choices. Removing Russian classical ballets from programming became an ethical imperative for many companies, not due to hostility toward individual composers but because these works had long been employed as instruments of cultural hegemony. The Russian state historically used ballet, particularly Tchaikovsky's oeuvre, as a symbol of national sophistication and civilizational superiority. Ukrainian institutions recognized that continuing to perform these works during active conflict risked reinforcing narratives that marginalized Ukraine's own cultural heritage. The symbolic weight of ballet music thus became inseparable from questions of sovereignty, decolonization and resistance. Accordingly, Ukrainian theaters initiated a shift toward national repertoire, foregrounding Ukrainian composers whose music had been suppressed, marginalized, or insufficiently explored.

Music's semantic power in wartime Ukrainian ballet derives from its ability to communicate meaning without reliance on verbal discourse. In Ukraine, the act of performing music by Ukrainian composers becomes a symbolic reaffirmation of cultural continuity in the face of attempts at annihilation.

Composers respond to wartime realities by encoding grief, tension and resilience within sonic structures, thereby transforming personal and collective experiences into artistic material. Their works often navigate between commemoration and defiance, articulating both loss and endurance. Within this framework, the composer occupies a complex position that exceeds traditional artistic roles. As both observer and participant in a society undergoing trauma, the composer becomes an intermediary through whom the emotional and psychological conditions of wartime are rendered perceptible. Sound, in this context, operates as a critical medium for articulating what may resist verbalization, enabling the transmission of collective affect and the preservation of cultural memory under conditions of crisis.

Several ballet reflections on the war in Ukraine are currently represented in the Ukrainian artistic space: the ballet *Fates* by Yuliia Homelska, *Mariupol* by Ivan Harkusha, *My Home on Two Legs* by Viktor Rekalo.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated new choreographic and musical strategies through which ballet functions as a performative medium of witnessing, mourning and resistance. Contemporary Ukrainian ballet increasingly transcends the traditional framework of narrative dance theatre and enters the sphere of documentary and affective performance, where sound, bodily movement and scenographic

minimalism become mechanisms for articulating collective trauma. Within this context, war is no longer represented solely as a historical event or dramatic сюжет; rather, it emerges as an embodied sonic condition that restructures perception, temporality, and corporeal experience.

One of the earliest ballet responses to the war was the full-length production "*Fates"* by composer Yuliia Homelska (1964–2016), premiered at the Odesa National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre in 2017 after the composer's death. The libretto and choreography were created by Serhii Kon, while the work itself was defined by its creators as a "documentary ballet". This designation is significant, as it signals a departure from purely fictionalized theatrical representation toward a performative reflection on contemporary catastrophe. Although the ballet unfolds in an abstract "city X", the minimalist scenography and generalized spatial markers clearly situate the action within the Ukrainian wartime experience.

Structurally, the ballet is organized around the opposition between two existential states: peaceful civilian life and the violent rupture introduced by military aggression. The first act constructs a sonic and choreographic image of everyday normality, whereas the second transforms the stage into a space of destruction, loss and psychological darkness. Y. Homelska employs a relatively traditional symbolic language in which timbre acquires ethical meaning: strings function as carriers of intimacy, tenderness and emotional continuity, while brass instruments are associated with militarized violence and destructive force. Particularly symbolic is the transformation of bell sonorities in the introduction to the first act. The initially transparent Glockenspiel timbre gradually mutates into an alarming funeral-like toll, foreshadowing the collapse of peaceful temporality. In this sense, "*Fates"* preserves certain conventions of classical war dramaturgy, especially the binary opposition between love and violence, light and darkness, yet simultaneously reframes these conventions within the immediacy of contemporary Ukrainian reality.

A more radical transformation of ballet language appears in "*Mariupol"*, created by choreographer Vladyslav Detiuchenko in collaboration with composer Ivan Harkusha (well-known as sound-artist John Hope). Premiered in Washington, D.C., in 2022, the project exists simultaneously as stage production and documentary film, thereby blurring the boundaries between artistic creation, testimony and archival practice. Unlike traditional ballet dramaturgy centered on linear narration, "*Mariupol"* is constructed as a sequence of affective sonic environments in which choreography becomes inseparable from acoustic experience.

The first section, "Unity," reconstructs the sensory atmosphere of wartime existence through an immersive soundscape. The air-raid siren functions not merely as an acoustic signifier of danger, but as a central auditory symbol organizing the perception of the entire section. Through reverberation and expanding electronic resonance, I. Harkusha creates the effect of gradual awakening from paralysis and shock. This process is mirrored choreographically through fragmented bodily activation: dancers initially move as isolated figures before gradually forming collective movement structures. The accumulation of rhythmic pressure, sampled noises and flickering visual effects produces a state of escalating anxiety in which corporeality itself appears destabilized.

The second part, "Treadmill", introduces a different dramaturgical strategy by juxtaposing electronic sound design with Mykola Leontovych's arrangement of the folk song "*Iz-za hory snizhok letyt"*. Here, the Ukrainian musical canon functions as a marker of ordinary civilian existence and cultural continuity. Particularly significant is the sonic rupture at the end of the section, where Leontovych's lyrical musical texture is invaded by noise elements: mechanical clicks resembling gunfire and the sound of explosion. This collision between folk intonation and acoustic violence symbolizes the destruction not only of individual life, but also of cultural continuity itself.

The final section, "Psychology" shifts the work into the sphere of documentary testimony. Its sonic material is based on recorded interviews with civilians from various regions of Ukraine, including survivors of occupation and volunteers involved in evacuation efforts from Mariupol. Consequently, spoken language replaces traditional musical narration and transforms the ballet into a space of mediated witnessing. Significantly, the performance concludes with the direct address of choreographer Vladyslav Detiuchenko to the audience. His spoken words become integrated into the sonic fabric of the ballet, dissolving the boundary between performer, witness, and spectator.

Questions of displacement and forced migration receive a different interpretation in the chamber ballet "*My Home on Two Feet*" by the INSHA Dance Company, staged in 2023 by choreographers Illia Miroshnychenko and Kateryna Kuznietsova, with music by composer and cellist Viktor Rekalo. Unlike narrative war ballets structured around dramatic conflict, this production constructs exile as a continuous condition of movement and instability. The concept proposed by the creators defines home not as fixed geography, but as process and trajectory. Such an understanding reflects broader experiences of wartime displacement in which identity becomes detached from territorial permanence.

The sonic architecture of the ballet plays a crucial role in articulating this condition. The double bass functions as the work's principal leit-timbre, simultaneously evoking the resonance of the air-raid siren and the intimacy of an individualized human voice. The acoustic environment is further expanded through quotidian sounds: railway announcements, train movement, and station ambience. These sonic details transform the stage into a liminal transit space, emphasizing the temporality of evacuation and impermanence. Choreographically, emotional states such as exhaustion, despair and psychological disorientation are expressed through restrained movement vocabulary derived from contemporary dance aesthetics. In this context, bodily minimalism itself becomes a signifier of trauma: movement appears constrained, interrupted and deprived of classical virtuosic expansion.

Taken together, these ballet productions demonstrate the emergence of a new performative paradigm within Ukrainian contemporary dance culture. War is represented not simply through narrative depiction, but through sonic rupture, bodily fragmentation, documentary testimony, and the destabilization of theatrical conventions themselves. In these works, ballet becomes a space where collective memory, resistance and mourning are negotiated through the interaction of sound and movement.

4. Conclusions

The evolution of war's acoustic experience in Ukrainian ballet art reflects broader transformations in cultural consciousness and musical language. Beyond its internal national function, music in Ukrainian wartime ballet plays a vital role in international communication. Ballet companies touring abroad use music as the primary emotional medium through which they convey the significance of the conflict. Audiences unfamiliar with Ukrainian history may not grasp the political details of the war, but they respond viscerally to the expressive power of Ukrainian music. The combination of music and movement bypasses linguistic barriers, enabling Ukrainian artists to express urgency, grief, resilience and hope in universally accessible terms. This form of cultural diplomacy strengthens international solidarity with Ukraine and counters disinformation that seeks to distort or trivialize the conflict. In this sense, music becomes a tool of soft power, shaping global perception through emotional resonance rather than coercive rhetoric.

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