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RECORDINGS



# WAR POEMS

SZYMANOWSKI · CHOPIN · NARODYTSKA  
SHOSTAKOVICH · LIAKHOVYCH

MARIA NARODYTSKA *piano*



# WAR POEMS

If, as Carl von Clausewitz claimed in 1832, “War is an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfil our will,” the creative artist, inherently more sensitive than the warmonger, will seek alternative, more peaceful solutions to any schismatic conflict. The artist always attempts, knowingly or not, to achieve transcendence by artistic means; for composers, this means transcending the period in which the music was created, speaking both to contemporaries and to future generations in language the music lover may readily comprehend.

Within the music of the last half-millennium we can find many works of genius that speak of war and of its cessation; from Handel’s *Te Deum for the Peace of Utrecht*, Haydn’s *Mass in Time of War*, Beethoven’s *Wellington’s Victory* and Brahms’s *Triumphlied*, to Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem* and John Adams’s *On the Transmigration of Souls*, alongside music composed in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Such music is not, however, invariably to be seen as seeking pacification, although the absence, or resolution, of conflict surely lies at the heart of all genuinely civilised creation, its depiction reinforcing to the observer or listener the consequences of destruction as a principle. Maria Narodytska’s programme reflects the creative reactions of composers from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries when confronted by, or contemplating, clashes of ideology taken to extremes.

The Polish master Karol Szymanowski was born in 1882 in Tymoszwówka (Tymoshivka), part of the Cherkasy Oblast of Ukraine, into a wealthy family of strong Polish extraction. His musical gifts – especially as a pianist – manifested early, encouraged by his father, whose wealth and standing enabled the young musician to meet and become friends with several notable contemporaries and to travel quite widely in Europe and North Africa.

Among those contemporaries was Arthur Rubinstein, who told the present writer of his deep and lifelong friendship with Szymanowski and admiration of the man and his music. Szymanowski in turn dedicated his Fourth Symphony, for piano and orchestra, to the great pianist, who gave the American premiere, championed the work there and went on to record it. As did Rubinstein, Szymanowski found outlets for

musical expression – especially for composers – relatively limited in Poland at that time; he settled in Berlin and later Vienna, where the final years of the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires initially offered far greater opportunities for creative acceptance. But those final years were the consequence of World War I: Szymanowski suffered from a damaged leg and was militarily unfit; he returned to his Ukrainian home where those war years saw him devote much time to composition, notably piano music, from which period his suite *Maski* (Masques) Op.34 comes. This three-movement work was composed in 1915–16 and consists of portraits of (or, perhaps more accurately, “reflections upon”) three literary characters – “Shéhérazade”, “Tantris the Buffoon” and “Don Juan’s Serenade”.

The suite affords an excellent example of Szymanowski’s mature style, evolved from, and perhaps revealing passing influences of late Scriabin and – harmonically – late Debussy, but at all times curbed and directed by the power and intellect of an individual master. The music demands a profound virtuoso technique, yet not one bar has been created for pure display – the virtuosity of all three movements arises from the personification of the literary programmes thus depicted, always in completely musical terms. The three movements of *Maski* are dedicated individually to Sasha Dubiansky, Harry Neuhaus and Arthur Rubinstein. “Shéhérazade” is both a study in texture and in cellular development: marked *Lento assai* and *Languido*, the piece paints an evocative picture of the temptress – seductive and strangely welcoming, underpinned by a fluid tonal fundamental of A major–minor, thus creating labyrinthine textualizations that are wholly evocative. A central faster section in 3/8 reveals the coquettishness of Shéhérazade, before the seductress returns to diminished passion.

*Vivace assai* and *Buffo e capriccioso* are the indications for “Tantris the Buffoon”, the name being a corruption of Tristan, from the story of Tristan and Iseult which had been told in 1908 as a comedy drama by Ernst Hardt, wherein Tristan masquerades as a jester. Szymanowski brilliantly recreates the scenes in a coruscating scherzo movement, music capriciously moving this way and that, suddenly seeming to stop and reflect before dashing off elsewhere, until the final tonally ambivalent bars suggest breathless exhaustion.

The final movement, “Don Juan’s Serenade”, is dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein. With unique indications underpinning the main *Vivace* tempo – *Quasi Improvisando Fantastico* (tremolo lungo ad lib.) – here is a great composer’s early 20th-century war-time imagination let free, epitomised by the unique time

signature of 4+5+3/8, the lover both urgently seductive and languid, the keyboard gently stroked before passion returns, more demanding, and this masterpiece of post-Impressionist pianism is over.

Artem Liakhovych is undoubtedly one of the more remarkably gifted Ukrainian musicians of the 21st-century's younger generation: when the public at large will be able to experience his exceptional all-round musicianship is uncertain. He was born in Kyiv in 1982 and studied the piano under the late Igor Ryabov at the Tchaikovsky Musical Academy in that city. Until the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Liakhovych's career had taken wholly exceptional creative divergences, but since the war, of course, in common with all men between the ages of 18 and 60, Liakhovych has been forbidden to leave Ukraine, and his career has therefore largely been put on hold.

As an exceptionally gifted pianist, Liakhovych has performed and recorded the complete Rachmaninoff Preludes, the complete Sonatas of Prokofiev and the complete Études of Chopin. He has also published an admired monograph on Rachmaninoff and excels as an award-winning author of children's books.

In addition, Liakhovych is a professional photographer, whose work has been exhibited widely in Ukraine – but it is as a creative musician that his compositions commend his work in this context. Until the current conflict is resolved and young Ukrainians can travel freely once more, the opportunities for coming into contact with the breadth of Liakhovych's exceptional output remain restricted, but in this recital Maria Narodytska plays seven pieces from his 24 Postludes for solo piano, or “War Notebook”, composed in the wake of the February 2022 Russian invasion of his homeland.

In May 2022, Liakhovych wrote of the work:

“This cycle is my reaction to the war in Ukraine. It covers all tonalities, but the tonal architecture is built in contrary motion [to a circle-of-fifths key sequence with relative major–minor pairs, as in Chopin's set of 24 Préludes, for example]: from D minor (No.1) to C major (No.24). This is due to the importance of the postlude as an epilogue, an afterword, which encodes a certain ending of time, even a reversal of it. The role of the finale is played by the 23rd Postlude, wherein themes of all previous issues of the cycle are played. The last, the 24th, is the coda.

I did not strive for originality. The cycle is full of quotes that imperceptibly turn into plagiarism, and plagiarism that its author confidently pretends to be quotes. In each postlude is hidden a certain piece of another text. The range of quotations is wide: from the Renaissance to everything we hear around us; in particular, the final 24th Postlude quotes Bach's Prelude in C major from the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, but upside down. Some postludes have signs of jazz and popular music. I willingly accept all accusations of eclecticism and bad taste and can only justify myself by saying that 'it's not me, it's the era'. The only thing I wanted to do was to create a musical image in each postlude that would catch the listener's ears. After all, it is for them – for the listeners and their ears – that we work.

The cycle is designed to be performed both in full and in individual numbers. Some of them are linked by a through-connection and can be performed in pairs: 1–2, 3–4, 4–5, 5–6, 6–7, 7–8, 8–9, 11–12, 18–19, 23–24.

The cycle was written during the evacuation in Uman. I am infinitely grateful to all the people in Uman who gave me the opportunity to work on the piano: Gennady Bezyazychny, Hanna Yurichuk, Olga Tereshchuk, Lyudmila Zhyvtsova and especially Yegor Vasylychenko, in whose hospitable home most of the cycle was written. Uman, May 11, 2022: 77th day of the war."

Further contemporaneous Ukrainian music is found in the most recent music on this album, a work by Maria Narodytska herself. Titled *After* and composed in November 2023, of this piece Ms Narodytska has written:

"I wrote this piece shortly before the recording, and for me it is a direct reflection of the war in Ukraine. While I was writing this piece, I was imagining what happens after one gets a call that no one would want to get or reads the news that no one would like to read. It's the kind of 'after' as in: 'life got divided into before and after'. I believe that for every Ukrainian there will be no 'before' anymore.

The piece is not based on any real folk theme, though the main theme does imitate a lullaby-like folk song.”

The material of *After* evolves from the smallest of musical organisms – those of pulse, of rising and falling thirds, the gentle clash of opposing micro-rhythms – transmuted into a simple theme, itself the progenitor of an intense, continuous, thought-processed variation technique that is always demanding our attention until a final, high-rising phrase lifts our consciousness as a gentle waft of cirrus cloud to the highest E flat.

The polonaise – the traditional national dance of Poland – has long been considered the musical personification of the country itself. The musical notation *alla polacca* – rhythm in the manner of a polonaise – has been used by very many composers since the beginning of the 18th century, and the Polonaises of Chopin are undoubtedly the best-known – and doubtless the finest – examples of the dance transferred to the recital room. For many artists and music lovers, in the light of the historical troubles the country underwent in the 19th and 20th centuries, the two Polonaises that comprise Chopin’s Opus 40 are the musical personification of the country’s soul; indeed, Arthur Rubinstein claimed that the first, in A major, represents Poland’s glory and the second, in C minor, Poland’s tragedy. They were composed in 1838, and it was the A major Polonaise that was broadcast daily at the outset of World War II by Polish Freedom Radio as a rallying call and symbol of defiance against the German invasion. Although the rhythm and metrical emphases of both Polonaises are subtly varied, there can be no doubt as to the underlying connecting musical threads that join these immortal national dances.

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St Petersburg in September 1906, nine months after an abortive Revolution in the city was ruthlessly put down – an event he was to commemorate in his Eleventh Symphony half a century later.

His natural musicianship was encouraged by his mother, a piano teacher who had studied at the St Petersburg Conservatoire; it was no surprise, therefore, that Dmitri’s instrument was the piano. He excelled both as pianist and composer at the St Petersburg Conservatoire: his graduation piece – Symphony No.1 in F minor, Op.10 – was completed three months before his 19th birthday, and it contains a prominent part for piano, especially in the scherzo. (The First Symphony’s premiere the following year, under the eminent Nicolai Malko, was a sensational success.)

Two months later, still 19 years old, Shostakovich was soloist in Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto and entered the Chopin Competition in Warsaw; he didn't win but was highly commended. Back in Leningrad (as St Petersburg, or Petrograd, had been renamed after the death of Lenin), he played Prokofiev's First Concerto and was one of the four pianists in the Soviet premiere of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*. Despite the public success of these appearances as a pianist, however, the pull of composition was greater.

Notwithstanding his pianistic prowess the instrument does not feature much in Shostakovich's output, although there are the 24 Preludes and Fugues of 1950–51, the 24 Preludes of 1932–33, the early suite *Aphorisms* and two solo Sonatas (the First, Opus 12, was originally titled "October" Symphony). Shostakovich's Second Piano Sonata came in 1943, following the vast Seventh and Eighth Symphonies – both powerfully reflecting the fact that the country was now at war. Shostakovich's Second Piano Sonata and Third String Quartet were his first significant "personal" works written after the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, of their nature so much more intimate than the broad public symphonic statements: if the composer felt great relief at the defeat of Nazism – as did all Allies, of whatever persuasion – victory in Europe had come with a colossal toll in human life. The USSR had seen over 26 million military and civilian deaths in four years of conflict – by far the largest number of any nation, including Germany – a cost met by every stratum of Soviet society, including artists, not all of whom welcomed a return to pre-war life under Stalin.

The St Petersburg-born Dmitri Shostakovich had reason to view the triumph over Nazism and future life under the Soviets with less than perfect faith: ten years earlier he had been the prime target for attacks on his music, causing him to withdraw his as yet unperformed Fourth Symphony – his redemption somewhat grudgingly restored by his Fifth Symphony and (in popular terms) triumphantly so by his Seventh "Leningrad" Symphony (1941), which made him virtually a household name across the free world.

Yet neither Shostakovich's "Leningrad" Symphony, nor the equally-lengthy five-movement Eighth Symphony of 1943 were regarded with equanimity by Western musicians. The first work Shostakovich wrote after the defeat of Germany – the five-movement Ninth Symphony (possessing less than half the playing time of the Eighth) – was not the expected triumph to Communism: light-hearted relief was taken to be the theme of the piece.

But was it relief or, as some believed, the first of a number of compositional sleights of hand by a composer who knew the truth of Stalin's Soviet corruption of the Communist dream? For a society that had successfully defeated fascism and was expecting a Ninth Symphony of Beethovenian import, Shostakovich's Ninth could more readily be heard as a profound rejection of Communist rodomontade – made more relevant as his post-war international reputation increased with a succession of thinly-veiled masterpieces of musical criticism of Stalinist tyranny – as relevant today as it was 80 or more years ago.

Shostakovich's Second Piano Sonata may be seen as a formal and emotional counterbalance to the preceding "public" symphonies, but the subtleties of the Second Sonata are equally compelling. The finale is the longest movement, with the first movement – fast-moving yet (as so often with Shostakovich) seemingly paradoxically marked Allegretto – emotionally the least involving. Such an observation is more apparent than real, however, for the fleet procession of the opening movement's pulse is not a barn-storming, noisy parade but more akin to the swift thought of intense, concentrated activity. The second movement, a lamenting Largo, is a perfect foil to the fleet music of the Allegretto, yet it is far more than that. Like the Piano Trio that followed it, the Sonata is a memorial work, dedicated to the piano pedagogue and composer Leonid Nikolayev, who had died in Tashkent in October 1942, aged 64. Nikolayev was one of Shostakovich's early teachers at the St Petersburg Conservatoire (having been a professor there since 1906); the second movement is surely a searching epitaph for this fine musician.

Compared to that of the First Sonata, the relative clarity of the Second Sonata's tonal basis acts as an anchor throughout: it is reasonably firmly rooted in B minor, the home key which pervades the first movement and the finale (the Largo falls to A flat major/minor – lower by the descending minor third that marks the opening of the Sonata's first theme). The tonality rises again by the same interval for the finale, the comparative length of which has already been remarked upon. By itself, this finale is as long as the First Sonata.

Shostakovich's use of intervallic cells is shown at its most pronounced in the first themes of each movement: for example, the Allegretto begins with a minor third, the Largo with a falling fourth, the finale with a rising fifth. This "stretching" of the intervals in this manner is unusual, but not unique in the composer's output. At one level, the finale could almost stand as a separate piece, as an extended set of variations on a lengthy, winding and curiously memorable theme (it may well be that this movement was



written first). The subject initially suggests it has been put together from scraps, gradually proliferating into a wholly coherent sonata structure. We may glimpse something of Shostakovich's compositional process in the Sonata's first movement: in Volume 39 of the original Collected Edition there is an early version of one passage, but there is no doubt the final version is preferable.

The finale's moods are wide-ranging, impactful and continuously flowing. In the concluding pages the strands of the three movements are woven together through a masterly synthesis: the semiquavers of the first movement are combined with the solemnity of the Largo through the main theme of the finale. The composer's symphonic mastery not wholly abandoned in this work, it is as impressive a compositional achievement as the First Sonata, the public oration of the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies subsumed through the intimacy of a solo instrument.

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Photo © Christina Körte



With praise for her technique and musicality coming from audiences and critics alike, Maria Narodytska is described as having “a perfect sense of style and character” and as “a talented artist with a strong perspective” (Olga Kern), as she continues to be met with enthusiasm worldwide for performances that are rich in the finest traditions of the instrument.

Born in Ukraine, she is a graduate of the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine in the studios of Professor Natalia Tolpygo for Piano and of Iryna Aleksyichuk for Composition. Currently living in Germany, she has studied there under professors Ralf Nattkemper and Stepan Simonian at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg, as well as in Austria with Milana Chernyavska at the Kunstuniversität Graz.

Recent performances include appearances at the Berliner Philharmonie, Wiener Konzerthaus, Brucknerhaus Linz and Hamburg's Laeiszhalle, as well as at Rexxam Hall in Takamatsu with the Seto Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Maestro Takuo Yuasa.

A prizewinner of the Takamatsu, Santa Cecilia and WorldVision International Music Competitions, she has also achieved wins in many more major competitions while continuing to give concerts worldwide and serving as a much sought-after teacher and jury member.

Narodytska's ever-growing discography includes four albums dedicated to Brahms, Schubert and Beethoven released under the OnClassical label for further worldwide distribution by Naxos of America, which have already brought her nearly half a million streams on Spotify.

**[maria-narodytska.de](http://maria-narodytska.de)**

SOMMCD 0689



# WAR POEMS

## MARIA NARODYTSKA *piano*

### Karol Szymanowski (1882–1937)

*Masques Op.34*

- |   |                          |      |
|---|--------------------------|------|
| ① | I. Shéhérazade           | 9:37 |
| ② | II. Tantris the Buffoon  | 6:19 |
| ③ | III. Don Juan's Serenade | 6:09 |

### Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)

*2 Polonaises Op.40*

- |   |                 |      |
|---|-----------------|------|
| ④ | No.1 in A major | 4:55 |
| ⑤ | No.2 in C minor | 7:25 |

### Maria Narodytska (b.1988)

- |   |               |      |
|---|---------------|------|
| ⑥ | <i>After*</i> | 4:53 |
|---|---------------|------|

### Artem Liakhovych (b.1982)

from *24 Postludes for piano "War Notebook"\**

- |   |                        |      |
|---|------------------------|------|
| ⑦ | No.2 in F major –      |      |
|   | No.3 in G minor –      |      |
|   | No.4 in B flat major   | 6:08 |
| ⑧ | No.5 in C minor –      |      |
|   | No.6 in E flat major – |      |
|   | No.7 in F minor        | 4:46 |
| ⑨ | No.8 in A flat major   | 3:23 |

### Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

*Sonata No.2 in B minor Op.61*

- |   |               |       |
|---|---------------|-------|
| ⑩ | I. Allegretto | 7:42  |
| ⑪ | II. Largo     | 5:54  |
| ⑫ | III. Moderato | 14:22 |

Total duration:

**81:35**

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