

CS Anna and Dmitri Shelest Transcript.wav

[00:00:01] **Speaker 1** This video was taken in an army barracks in Ukraine. That's the Ukrainian national anthem on violin. The shuffling is the player's fellow soldiers standing in reverent silence. It's one of many musical scenes caught on video in a now war torn Ukraine instrumentalists playing over air raid sirens, an orchestra defiantly together in the street. A woman dusting off her piano, playing it one last time to say goodbye. A child singing her favorite song from frozen hiding in a shelter. Yes, the Ukrainian people have taken up arms in their own defense, but for themselves, they're making music.

[00:00:51] **Speaker 1** I'm Colleen Phelps, and this is classically speaking.

[00:00:59] **Speaker 2** You just need to have something to keep the hope up and and kind of look forward to the days when you can kind of make jokes and be safe and happy.

[00:01:09] **Speaker 1** That's pianist Anna Shelest, she and her husband, fellow pianist Dmitri Shelest, live in New York now, but they're from the same city in Ukraine, and their family is still there. Not leaving. And it's things like music that Anna has said are keeping people going.

[00:01:26] **Speaker 3** And I think it's just amazing to see how their spirit is so unbreakable in a way because obviously the whole world sees that Ukraine and Ukraine and Ukrainians are living in horror. Yet when we call them, they're trying to not live in the moment, but to try to live in the future, past this moment and to start look forward to rebuilding the country and to resuming their normal life. They're trying to maybe do their best to keep the spirits up to separate them from the horrors that they're living. And so which is it's very difficult for them and for us. And what we keep on admiring is that when we call it an ocean away is how they're in the midst of all of it are trying to carry on with their lives and to resume as much normalcy as humanly possible.

[00:02:19] **Speaker 1** As a duo, Anna and Dmitri Shelest released an album of Ukrainian music in 2018 called Ukrainian Rhapsody, which they've rereleased now because while the physical fronts of this war are crucial moments that will be recorded for history, the culture front is also incredibly important.

[00:02:37] **Speaker 2** Part of the Kremlin's very aggressive narrative from Russia is that Ukraine doesn't exist, is it a country doesn't exist as a people. It's artificial and this is something that millions of people in Russia believe. And this propaganda, it's even kind of being brought into the West. And I've heard some people, even in American media, entertain these ideas, which are very dangerous and we see what they can lead to. I think what we can do as musicians is show the world that Ukraine is a country that was unique. Culture was very, very old culture and it has been aspiring to be part of the western world for centuries. And this is something that I think not many people realize outside of the Ukraine. In Ukraine, it's it's very, very important that people know about it. People want to become part of the West through a culture, a part of Europe. And I'm sure our president, President Zelensky, he talked about it very passionately how Ukraine wants to be a part of the European family. Please accept us. And you know, they are doing everything - they are paying for this right with their blood to be part of Europe. And I think what culture can show even pieces of music that has been written over 100 200 years ago is that Ukrainians, they were aspiring to be independent to have their unique their own identity. They just want to leave peacefully. They want to speak their language. They want to raise their children in peace and be proud of their lands, their culture, the language and just, you know, being

people who can live in peace. Ukrainian composer to me, those who really made their Ukrainian identities a center of their art. Like, for example, composers like Prokofiev, who was born in Ukraine. I think he was a Russian composer. He was really a Soviet composer. And the reason for it is that Russia is a huge empire. It took resources from countries and from lands it occupied and often for artists, for people who wanted to get somewhere. The only way to promote their art was to actually enter. And, you know, go to Russia, go to Moscow, to St. Petersburg schools. Of those were centers in which it was possible for them to have more opportunities.

[00:05:45] **Speaker 1** Let's take Michaela Lysenko as an example. Lysenko wrote an opera in the 1800s called Taras Bullba, a story set in Kiev composed in Ukrainian. It hadn't been performed, so fellow composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky tried to arrange for it to be debuted in St. Petersburg. But to be performed there, it would have had to be translated into Russian. Lysenko refused because it was a Ukrainian story. It was never performed in his lifetime. The Shelest duo here is playing their arrangement of the overture.

[00:06:29] **Speaker 2** He was prosecuted for the fact that he wanted to separate his music from kind of a Russian worldview. When you read about composers in, you kind of see what then as a tool in this constant and rotation, you know, sometimes maybe they weren't even thinking so clearly in terms of this identity and not of maybe judging some composers who chose to go to Russia. And you know, it's not about that, but is it? But do you think composers really had a very firm stance and they had to sacrifice a lot to make sure that they published? It is the same thing with writers rooms into the publishing. Ukrainian zeroed in Ukrainian as they made Ukrainian kind of folk music. They put it at the heart of their music language or. I think there are a lot to learn about kind of what really makes a Ukrainian culture and identity, and I hope when we help this full time, you know, there will be many, many more hours and in the years that we can devote to examining it, it's a very important issue.

[00:08:14] **Speaker 1** On Ukrainian Rhapsody, Anna also plays a solo work by Lysenko, a set of folk songs in the style of a baroque sweet mixing old and well old to make something new.

[00:08:30] **Speaker 2** That Piece, when I actually came across that piece, It was a few years back and I thought, Wow, this is so amazing that he wrote it, you know, 100 years ago, but it's the same conversation. He he was presenting Ukrainian music in the light of the European tradition. So he took Ukrainian songs and he kind of uses baroque suite type to structure to make it into this beautiful art. So that was something very striking to me about this particular work, how Ukrainian it sounded to me at the same time, it kind of has this very western streak as well.

[00:09:07] **Speaker 1** Anna and Dmitri also included on Ukrainian Rhapsody, their album, a More Contemporary Voice. Miroslav Skoryk - a decorated awarded Ukrainian composer who died in 2020.

[00:09:23] What was his or is his stature sort of like among composers in Ukraine?

[00:09:28] **Speaker 3** Oh, still, number one still at this point. I think maybe when he was alive, he was like the most famous living composer, was commissioned to write music for a Ukrainian movie and an early 80s The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors. And he wrote a tune called The Melody. And since then, it was absolutely no one is the most recognized composition, and I think many people who don't even know his art so much would most

likely hear that melody. And it's performed every which way on the piano, on the violin, voice choir, you name it, because it's, you know, it's like a vocalists format and doesn't have lyrics. And it's. I think he was quite pleased that, you know, that we chose to record his work and he was very supportive. And that was unfortunately the only time he got to meet him in person. But we still cherish that memory.

[00:10:56] **Speaker 1** The piece Dmitri is referring to, Melody from High Pass, was recently recorded by violinist Daniel Hope, along with Ukrainian pianist Alexei Botvinov, which you're hearing right now. It was also heard in the U.S. Congress accompanying a film shown by Volodymyr Zelensky, reflecting the damage to Ukraine.

[00:11:15] **Speaker 3** So romantic and so powerful as far as expressing the the nationalistic identity that he wanted to convey in that movie's.

[00:11:50] **Speaker 1** During troubled times, art and music become more poignant, but so does the act of making music. We'll talk about how after the break.

[00:14:24] This is the Shelest duo, Anna and Dimitri, playing Morgen by Richard Strauss on their YouTube channel. The video is a bird's eye view of just their hands on the keyboard, and it's not a technically complex piece. There's not runs or big chords, it's just played with a lot of expression. I can't see their faces, just the hands, and I don't know if this is because for the last two years, music-making has been so deprived of physical proximity because of COVID. But the nearness of their hands, the slow speed that they move, the moments when they just barely brush their fingers against each other. This video feels incredibly intimate, but it can't be that easy to just play the piano with your spouse, can it?

[00:15:37] **Speaker 2** Dmitri and I we met when we were children in Kharkiv. We were in the same musical school together. Then we kind of reconnected again in the United States. We knew each other for a very long time, but we started playing together actually after we got married and a few people asked us, Do you guys play together? And we thought, Well, why not? Why we can try and see what happens? And just became a really wonderful experience to make music together. And there was so much great music for piano duos. So it's just something that happened later in life.

[00:16:13] **Speaker 3** Maybe on some level, I regret that we did not start doing this earlier, but it so happens that when you're in college, you have a certain curriculum, musically speaking.

[00:16:23] **Speaker 1** If you go to a music school to be a concert pianist, that's what you do. You play piano solos. Anything else is extra. Despite the fact that even some of history's best pianists like Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann, they play duets. Plus it's fun with four hands and an entire keyboard. You can play full orchestral pieces like Franz Liszt's Les Preludes, which the Shelests created their own arrangement of.

[00:17:06] **Speaker 3** I think that perhaps in retrospect, that would be much beneficial if we looked at that before we graduated college.

[00:17:14] **Speaker 1** Are there particular challenges to playing along with your spouse?

[00:17:19] **Speaker 2** Actually, I don't think there are. I think in a way it's easier because, you know, the rehearsal process, it can be kind of a challenge from a perspective of how

to communicate your wishes. So if you play with the person that you might not know so well, it might take time for you to tell them diplomatically said, Well, you know, I think let's try this, you know, you spend a lot of time explaining. But when you know each other so well, I think that can be very efficient and kind of telling each other, OK, idolizes, let's try this. It's very easy to be kind of honest, open and I find it. I thought it was fun. I don't think we ever had strong arguments or fights or were whoever you know whose idea is in the bedroom. It's it's been always a very open process for us.

[00:18:07] **Speaker 3** I actually think there is also a logistical side to it that will flip this question backwards because when you're in a regular setting, a chamber music setting, let's say a piano trio or a piano duets, generally speaking, and most of those ensembles, most of the time is spent to learn each part. And then, you know, if you really have a deadline in a few days, if you really know if everyone really knows their parts, you could put together a program because you know what everyone's doing. But when it comes to a piano four-hand ensemble, which is what we're focusing on, the unique part there is two people share one instrument or one keyboard, and that creates all sorts of logistical issues. So the process of preparing a program is sort of backwards, you know, or disproportional an amount of rehearsing because you could spend all the time you want learning your bottom part or your top part. But most progress will happen when you together because all of a sudden you start realizing that there is not as much space as you thought there would be. And you have to figure out the whole elbow bumping situation and what where each hand goes in the middle because there is a lot of. Just logistically speaking, so we're I'm getting with this whole thing is just like in couples figure skating or dancing. Most of them are either brothers or sisters or husbands and wives because they just get to spend so much time together. That's probably one of the more unique elements of playing one piano four hands.

[00:19:58] **Speaker 1** What do you have to say to your fellow classical artists who sort of look around and think? What what what am I doing right now with the world looking like this,

[00:20:11] **Speaker 3** People in Ukraine, ah politicians, public figures encourage to the greatest degree possible to do what it is people do best. They're saying, you know, look, you don't have to go fight because there are soldiers for that. There are people who want to do that, who can do that for good. At that, you are good at certain things. Go open your bakery, go give someone a haircut, go cook a soup and give that to us. So play your music, do the job that you do well because everything you do well helps Ukraine. So I think that after a while, however long it took for individual people, when you kind of come back to your senses from this, you know, shock, then I think it starts making sense that it is actually really uplifting for Ukraine is to see that, you know, the one a metropolitan opera does the national anthem so beautifully it can't not have its effect on the rest of the world, particularly for Ukraine.

[00:21:14] **Speaker 2** When the war started, I kind of felt completely useless, like my family's in danger. What can I do? You know, I I can go fight and I'm too, you know, scared to do this. But it's not like playing piano. It just it's no help to anyone. Why would anyone care about this? But then I notice that how much it meant for people when, for example, Metropolitan Opera, they performed the Ukrainian anthem? You know, it meant so much to me, and I know too many Ukrainians. And just seeing now when people play Ukrainian music, they acknowledge Ukrainian culture. I see that it makes a difference. Soul, I think it kind of made me realize that we can play a part in making sure that a Ukrainian identity is reaffirmed every day or.

[00:22:16] **Unidentified** And just like that, Anna and Dimitri Shelest have already answered the call Volodymyr Zelensky sent to all musicians during the Grammy Awards telecast

[00:22:25] **Speaker 3** on our land. We are fighting Russia, which brings horrible silence with its bombs. The dead silence. Fill the sands with your music. Fill it today to tell our story.

[00:23:03] **Speaker 1** Classically speaking, is a production of Nashville Public Radio. The show is edited by Anita Bugg and mastered by Carl Pedersen. This interview was recorded as part of WUOL Classical Louisville's Behind The Playlist series. I'm Colleen Phelps. A complete playlist of the music in this episode can be found in the show notes at Nashville Classical Radio dot org. Thanks for using your backstage pass to classical music. Classically speaking.