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Music

## Ireland and Ukraine united in music by a travelling stage on the back of a van

Festival in a Van, initially an idea to provide entertainment during Covid, is now touring the country to provide a vital cultural link for Ukrainian refugees

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Rozumovsky Salon Ensemble, Valery Supruniuk and his wife Olena Supruniuk and their son Vadym Supruniuk at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Dundalk, Co Louth, for one of the Shared Music Sessions. Photograph: Tom Honan

Gemma Tipton

Sun Jul 24 2022 - 06:00



We're in a car park at the back of the Crowne Plaza in Dundalk on a sunny Saturday morning. It's a space that does service for overflow parking, deliveries and, right now, it's also the venue for a classical music concert.

Dressed in full white tie and tails, Ukrainian trio The Rozumovsky Salon Ensemble are playing a programme that includes Strauss, Corelli, Mozart, and more. Valery Supruniuk and his son Vadym are suited up, while Olena Supruniuk is dressed in a glorious floor-length silver gown. Their stage is the back of a van, the audience sits on chairs borrowed from the hotel function room, and the atmosphere is so hushed you could hear a pin drop. When Valery announces, through interpreter Alla Mikhnova, that

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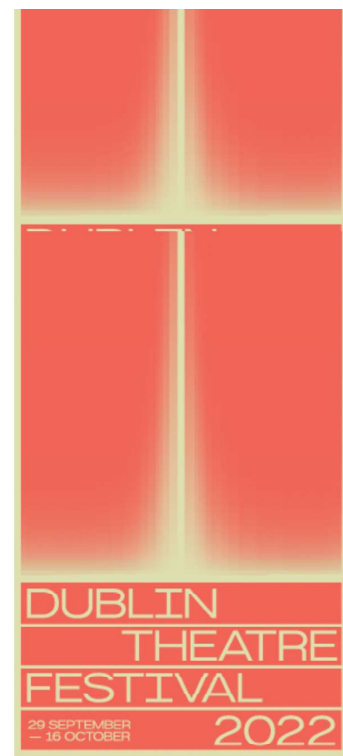
the next piece was written by Josef Franzl for the people of Ukraine, a ripple of emotion goes through us all, and then the music sweeps us up.



The Rozumovsky Salon Ensemble at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Dundalk, Co Louth: Valery Supruniuk, son Vadym and wife Olena. Photograph: Tom Honan

I set up Festival in a Van in 2020, turning a box van into a mobile stage, as a way of keeping live performance going during Covid. Travelling in a bubble, and armed with oceans of hand sanitiser, we were able to visit care homes, schools, residential centres and direct provision centres touring music, theatre and poetry. We put together a talented crew and got help from Creative Ireland and later the Arts Council. It was hard, heart-warming work, and as Covid concerns ebbed, I wondered what might happen next.

One of the things we discovered on the course of our travels was that our little van could refresh places and people that other venues couldn't reach. One day in May, Deirdre Johnson from Music Generation mentioned her visits to one of the hotels housing refugees from Ukraine. She had been attempting to source instruments for musicians who had had to leave theirs behind. Listening to her, I thought about how music connects, and I thought: what if? And so, with help from Kerry County Council, the Shared Music Sessions were born.





Rozumovsky Salon Ensemble member Valery Supruniuk. Photograph: Tom Honan

At our first session at the Inisfallen Hotel in Killarney, Irish and Ukrainian musicians played sets and sessions together. Ukraine had just won the Eurovision and there was a celebratory atmosphere. Olena Basko and Yevheniia Omelchenko stunned us with their voices, and we had an impromptu stage incursion by a dog called Wittgenstein, who was making himself at home in his new home. “Thank you for making me feel needed in Ireland,” wrote Basko in reply to our own email of thanks.

In times of global turmoil, small things can feel like a drop in an angry ocean, and yet it is also never more important to keep doing the small things. As we planned the sessions in Louth, Valery Supruniuk sent me a video of his trio playing in a beautiful Kiev concert hall, the Christmas before his world turned. Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy has conferred them with a medal for their services to music. I wondered how they would feel about playing in a van.

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In the lead-up to the Sessions, Valery was concerned that their bassoon player, Vadym, his son, wouldn’t be able to travel to join them. Men between the ages of 18 and 60 are not allowed to leave the country because of the war. So I wrote a letter to the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture, and Vadym arrives a week later, bringing his children Danill and Philip to see their grandparents for the first time since March.



The Rozumovsky Salon Ensemble. Photograph: Tom Honan

As they play, my concerns about the car-park-and-van nature of the venue



melt away, as music does what it does best. I think about how it can also travel across time. This Strauss waltz that once filled the concert halls of Vienna, threaded across wars and darker days, and now connects us all without the need for words.

## Messiaen

“It makes me think of Messiaen’s Quartet for the End of Time,” says Conal McIntyre, who along with Paul Campbell are creating the Irish element of the shared music. The French composer had written and premiered his quartet while he was at the Stalag VIIIA prisoner of war camp in Germany in 1941. Perhaps it’s something about the incongruity of music and place that makes it all the more powerful – although to be fair, the hotel is lovely, and the team there could not have been kinder or more welcoming.

Housing refugees is tackled differently county by county in Ireland. In some counties, entire hotels are given over, while in others, such as in Louth, rooms are allocated within hotels that continue to open to holidaymakers and business Travellers. I’m not sure which approach is best, and the Ukrainians I speak to aren’t either. Mainly they’re hugely grateful to be here, but want to be able to go home.



Sheet music on display during the music sessions in Dundalk. Photograph: Tom Honan

Afterwards there are photographs, lots of photographs, and the audience, mainly Ukrainian, all wait to shake the artists’ hands. “Thank you for everything you do for us, and for all Ukrainians,” says Vadym. I leave Gemma Murray from Music Generation Louth hastily organising a second concert for the trio, making the most of Vadym’s presence before he has to travel back.

The crew packs up the van, and heads down the road to St Peter’s Church of Ireland in Drogheda for our afternoon set. Here, there’s a fete in full swing, and we’re joined by Sergiy Abramov, Mykhailo Ivanyschenko and Josue Mateo Pinzon Benitez, who had come to Ukraine by way of Ecuador, making his home there when he met his wife, Karina

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making his home here when he met his wife, Karyna.

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Ukrainian audience members Tetiana Kalnysh, Maryna Prokopenko and Liubov Podlesnaia at Festival in a Van in Dundalk. Photograph: Tom Honan

Bunting flutters, and a smell from the barbecue area wafts over as McIntyre and Campbell play some warm-up numbers. There's a strong element of generosity to being the Shared Music Sessions House Band, and the pair have good instincts for when it's the right time to hand over the mic. Pinzon Benitez kicks off with a lively Brazilian number, before switching to a salsa version of Chervone Rutu, a popular Ukrainian song. In Ukraine, he sang at concerts, events and on TV, building his career. Karyna, heavily pregnant, applauds proudly and wildly, and so does the rest of the crowd.

Mykhalio Ivanyschenko is here with his mum Daria, wearing a colourful T-shirt she has painted for him. Shyly he takes to the mic, but soon swings into his stride with Україна молода (Young Ukraine) and Тече вода (Running water). Afterwards, he tells me how he had been taking singing lessons in Ukraine, and sang regularly with a group of friends. "It was really weird," he says. "Until February 21st we were listening to the news. American media were saying Russia will attack, but we don't believe it. We had plans." He describes a cancelled get-together. A friend was feeling sick. A new plan was made for the next week. But the next week never happened.





Conal McIntyre (guitar) and Paul Campbell performing at the festival. The pair are in charge of the Irish element of the shared music. Photograph: Tom Honan

“I miss my friends the most. Only one friend has stayed in Ukraine, and I’m really nervous about her.” In Ireland he will be going into 6th year in school in the autumn. “It’s okay,” he says. “They work us harder in Ukraine.” The family travelled with his little brother, who has autism. “He stopped speaking after the war. He’s just started again. Now he’ll look at the sky and point, and say ‘Is that a good plane or a bad plane?’”



Vadym Supruniuk and his sons Philip (eight) and Danill (14). Photograph: Tom Honan



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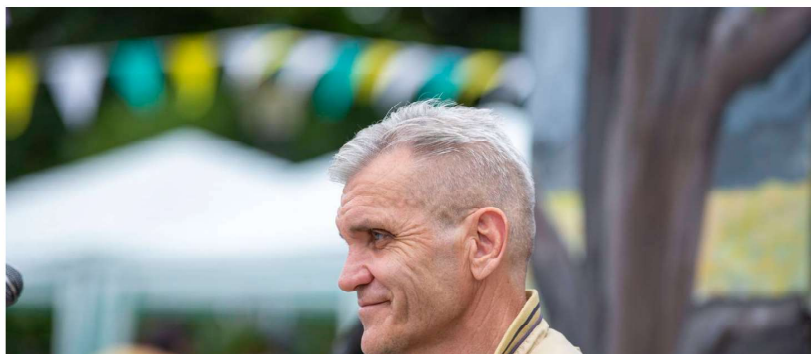
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Interpreter Anastasia Kovalenko. Photograph: Tom Honan

Sergiy Abramov comes to the mic. He has a deep, rich voice and sings unaccompanied, starting with Thomas Moore's *Those Evening Bells*, following it with a Ukrainian song, *Чом ти не прийшов*, which seems to make the earth tremble. The session, he says, is a ray of light. He and his son Maksym travelled for six days to reach Ireland. Through Anastasiia Kovalenko, our interpreter for the afternoon, he tells me his home in Donetsk has now been bombed by both sides. His mother, aged 90, is still living there, frightened by the explosions but frightened to leave everything she knows. Running his own building-materials business in Ukraine, he has just started volunteering at the Vincent's Charity Shop in Drogheda.





Sergiy Abramov from Donetsk sings unaccompanied. He says his home has been bombed and that his 90-year-old mother is still trapped amid the war, afraid to leave. Photograph: Tom Honan

## ‘So grateful’

A tall and thoughtful man, with a reserved manner but a warm smile, he repeats, through Kovalenko’s interpreting: “I am one hundred per cent sincere. What Irish people do. The sharing of spirit. I repeat one hundred times. I am so grateful. For Irish hospitality, for the clear Irish soul.”



Conal McIntyre and Paul Campbell on stage. Photograph: Tom Honan

For Kovalenko, the important thing is that our focus on what is going on in her country doesn’t fade with time as the war rumbles interminably and tragically on. With a psychology degree, she works in HR in Ukraine, but left to travel to Ireland with her mother Huzel and four year old daughter





Daiana. "Covid ended when the war began," she says. "Before we weren't allowed to travel, and now?" She shows me a picture of her apartment block in Irpin, holed by shells and mortars. "Our mayor said that 70 per cent of our infrastructure is destroyed."

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St Peter's Church of Ireland, Drogheda, Co. Louth, at the Festival in a Van. Pictured are three-year-old Lacey Callaghan from Drogheda and six-year-old Oisín McCreanor from Dunleer. Photograph: Tom Honan

Her friends are scattered everywhere. "It's hard, you spend so long making friends. But to stay means to lose your sense of safety. Depending on where you live, every day can start with bombs and explosions." Sadness mixes with anger in her voice. "Your eyes see different realities."



Your left eye sees the calm greens of Ireland, and your right eye sees Ukraine bombed and people killed, and you are frozen between. It feels like a step before madness.”



Rosemary Reilly and Deirdre Howard Russell at the festival. Photograph: Tom Honan

As we sit in the sunshine, locals come by to say hello. A woman offers a lift to an appointment, another shares progress on the work she’s doing to an apartment that she’s planning to give as accommodation. The raffle results are drawn. There is a set of garden furniture and a vegetable hamper to be won. McIntyre and Campbell conclude the set with a rousing version of Dirty Old Town. I think about the day, about our upcoming sessions in Fingal, and the other gigs we have planned. It’s a small thing, but connecting through music and friendship is just one of the things we can do.

*The Shared Music Sessions are supported by Creative Ireland, sharing music with Irish, Ukrainian and other refugee groups. Local authorities can express their interest in hosting sessions by emailing*



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