

Pianist Antonio Pompa-Baldi shows his support for Ukraine with a performance in Kyiv

by Stephanie Manning



Pianist Antonio Pompa-Baldi is no stranger to the life of a traveling musician. When I spoke with the pianist via Zoom earlier this month, he was wrapping up performances in his home country of Italy and preparing for a few days in Germany and then Cleveland, where he is Distinguished Professor of Piano at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

But his next destination will bring some new challenges — and new rewards. On Saturday, November 29, Pompa-Baldi will perform Edvard Grieg’s Piano Concerto with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, conducted by Theodore Kuchar. The concert takes place in Kyiv’s historic Lysenko Hall, and getting there requires the pianist to fly to Warsaw before taking a 16-hour train ride across the border.

Pompa-Baldi and Kuchar have collaborated frequently over the years, performing and recording in California, Slovakia, and South Africa. They first met and hit it off when Kuchar visited Cleveland to work with conducting students at CIM, his alma mater. And in 2022, Kuchar began planning a concert of American music with the Lviv National Philharmonic, featuring Pompa-Baldi and pianist Emanuel Ax as soloists.

“And then, of course, the war broke out,” Pompa-Baldi said. “And everything fell by the wayside, understandably.” Since then, he’s kept up with news from Ukraine, including photos of destruction caused by Russian bombings. But recently, some different kinds of photos caught his eye — ones showing the country’s concert halls packed with people, eager to listen to music to soothe the anxiety of wartime.

“I already felt very strongly about the Ukrainian people and their resilience, but these images and the contrasts that I saw there really made that admiration skyrocket,” he said.

So when Kuchar, now the principal guest conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, offered another performance opportunity, “I felt compelled to say yes.”

The country has plenty of talented soloists to draw from, Pompa-Baldi emphasized — his appearance in Kyiv is primarily a show of solidarity from a non-Ukrainian. “My hope is that by the end of that concert, not only are we going to have this communal experience sharing the beauty of music, but also they will feel that there is strong support from the international community.”

Understandably, the Orchestra is avoiding Russian music at the moment, so the loosely Nordic-themed program features works by Grieg, Nielsen, and Sibelius. The Grieg Piano Concerto “is my old friend — I’ve loved it for many years,” he said.

In the context of this concert, the pianist said he resonates with the idea that the real story of Ukraine will eventually echo the musical arc of the concerto. “It starts from this powerful gesture, with this melancholy and sad theme in a minor mode, and finishes triumphantly in major.”

Ultimately, Pompa-Baldi’s message to Ukrainians is that “we haven’t forgotten you,” he said. “Naturally, I hope that this nightmare ends soon for them, that they can restore some normalcy in their way of life, and that there will be a just solution to their plight.”

To those outside the country, his Kyiv performance will be “a drop in the bucket, but it’s hopefully something that continues to raise awareness that this is still going on.”

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