

‘We are very grateful’



Conductor Theodore Kuchar, standing at left, leads the Lviv National Philharmonic Orchestra of Ukraine during pre-concert rehearsal at Stephens Auditorium in Ames on Friday. The show was the orchestra's last stop on a U.S. tour that began in January. PHOTOS BY PHILLIP SITTER/AMES TRIBUNE

Lviv National Philharmonic Orchestra plays final U.S. tour stop in Ames

Phillip Sitter Ames Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

The orchestral music in Stephens Auditorium on Friday became a soundtrack for the arrival of hopeful new beginnings and returns to brutal wartime realities, an anthem for the partnership between two nations and a sonic symbol of resilience. • The Lviv National Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine chose Stephens Auditorium in Ames as the place to end a nearly two-month-long U.S. tour. • The orchestra planned its tour for two years in advance and knew Ames would be a stop, with conductor Theodore Kuchar having first been on stage at Stephens in March 2017.

Kuchar at that time conducted a different Ukrainian orchestra on the only Iowa stop of a different tour, but during the same Russian war against Ukraine, which at that time had been simmering since 2014 in Ukraine's eastern region of the Donbas.

Friday's performance gave people from Ukraine who've settled in Ames and Marshalltown a chance to listen and greet orchestra members after the concert. But Kuchar said he was focused on Americans in the audience.

"It's essential that you and all Americans realize what we realize," that American support not only protects Ukraine, but the entire free world from Russian tyranny, Kuchar told the audience at the end of the performance.

He also acknowledged that the fight has not been easy for Ukrainians, including the members of the orchestra.

"It's been such a physical but also emotional stress for all of us," Kuchar said.

Starting in mid-January, the orchestra's U.S. tour has taken its members to venues including Carnegie Hall in New York City, and universities and performing arts centers in North Carolina, upstate New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Virginia, Missouri, Illinois and Kansas — with some performances having been scheduled as tightly as 24 hours apart and with a drive across two states between.

But even life on tour is one of relative comfort, Kuchar told the Ames Tribune during rehearsal before the concert. That leads to conflicted feelings about being away from home, where many orchestra members have young children or el-

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Ukrainian piano soloist Oksana Rapita plays during a pre-concert rehearsal at Stephens Auditorium in Ames.



Conductor Theodore Kuchar leads the Lviv National Philharmonic Orchestra of Ukraine.



A close up of some string instruments of the Lviv National Philharmonic Orchestra of Ukraine during pre-concert rehearsal at Stephens Auditorium in Ames on Friday, show some blue and yellow flair, the colors of the Ukrainian flag. PHOTOS BY PHILLIP SITTER/AMES TRIBUNE

Orchestra

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derly parents, and the grim news of war continues.

“They’re going back to hell tomorrow afternoon,” Kuchar said of the end of the tour.

The orchestra, based in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, was established in September 1902 and has survived the Soviet regime and German occupation during World War II, though there were no performances during the German occupation.

There was a moment of silence for the Ukrainian people before the start of Friday’s concert and the stage was decorated with sunflowers as symbols of peace.

For Sofia Ivanitska, 14 years old, who listened in the audience with her mom, Iryna Ivanitska, the concert was a chance to hear a bit of home.

Sofia and Iryna have lived in Ames since August after leaving Ukraine’s capital of Kyiv, where Iryna’s husband Vladimir and 27-year-old son Vyacheslav remain.

“I will be happy, because it’s people that I know,” Sofia said through Google Translate ahead of the concert of what it would mean to her, though her family had not previously seen the orchestra perform.

Sofia, in eighth grade at Ames Middle School, plays the violin and said Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is her favorite classical composer.

Playing the violin has meant a lot of things during wartime and settling into a new home: finding new friends at school; her mom enjoying listening to her practice; and Iryna having recorded a school concert to share with Sofia’s father and brother.

Sofia hopes her father and brother can join her and her mother in the U.S. someday.

Sofia and Iryna are still learning English, but Iryna credited the assistance of school staff in translating what they need.

“My mother doesn’t know what we would do if it weren’t for the people that surrounded us. They did a lot for us and supported us in many ways, for which we are very grateful,” Sofia said.

Sofia said she sees her future here, not back in Ukraine, and America has



Sofia Ivanitska, 14, of Kyiv, Ukraine, holds her violin near the “Air Bass Guitar” public art installation in Tom Evans Plaza in Ames on Feb. 26. Sofia and her mother Iryna have been living in Ames since August but the male members of their immediate family remain in Ukraine.



Sunflowers, a symbol of peace, sit backstage at Stephens Auditorium in Ames during a pre-concert rehearsal. The flowers were later placed on stage for the concert, the last of a U.S. tour the orchestra started in January.

always been the country of her dreams.

“What pleases me most here is that I understand new opportunities can open up for me and my family, and I also really liked America because people accept each other regardless of who they are,” she added.

On stage at the end of the concert, some members of the orchestra unveiled a flag, half American stars and stripes and half Ukrainian blue and yellow.

Kuchar said Ukrainians believe the

war will end victoriously for them. He said nobody had expected Ukraine would last as long as it has against Russia’s all-out assault, and for that, “We thank you, the Americans.”

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