

Stage

Metropolitan Opera holds special benefit concert for Ukraine

NEW YORK, March 15, (AP) — Vladyslav Buialyski spoke to his mother from Berdiansk, a Ukraine seaside town, and told her not to listen to him take the stage at the Metropolitan Opera on Monday night.

With electricity out because of Russia's invasion, he didn't want her wasting power for the Internet stream.

With three huge yellow-and-blue Ukraine flags draped across the front of the house, the Met held a benefit for the under-attack nation. The concert began with the 23-year-old Ukrainian bass-baritone as soloist in front of the Met orchestra and chorus and music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, starting the 90-minute program with Ukraine's national anthem.

Buialyski struggled to hold back tears, and tapped his heart. "It was so emotional and powerful. In some moments it was so sensitive and hard to not show my emotions," he said later. "I'm so grateful to the theater, to all the people who helped to do this."

Sergiy Kyslytsya, Ukraine's ambassador to the United Nations, was introduced from the parterre level and received a standing ovation from the sellout crowd of about 3,600. Tickets sold out within 10 minutes last week at \$25, and additional money was raised in online donations.

Met general manager Peter Gelb, who last week dropped star Russian soprano Anna Netrebko from future performances over her failure to condemn Russia President Vladimir Putin, also received a standing ovation.

"Members of the Metropolitan Opera company stand in solidarity with the proud Ukrainian people, so strong in the face of such injustice, destruction and death," Gelb said in remarks from the stage.

The concert was broadcast on radio world-wide, including on

Ukrainian public radio.

Norwegian Lise Davidsen, ascending to the rank of opera's top stars, gave an emotional account of Strauss' "Vier letzte Lieder (Four Last Songs)." She filled the hall with her silvery, soaring soprano, bringing some tears to the audience when she sang of "O vast, tranquil peace" in "Im Abendrot (At Sunset)."

Principal horn Erik Ralske's solo in "Frühling (September)" was haunting, and concertmaster David Chan's impassioned violin solo between the second and third verses of "Beim Schlafengehen (When Going to Sleep)" will long be remembered.

Thrown together with one primary rehearsal of the orchestra and chorus together on Monday afternoon and using singers currently in New York for Met productions, the concert showcased the Met chorus and chorusmaster Donald Palumbo. Everyone on stage wore a yellow and blue ribbon.

Movement

The anthem was followed by "A Prayer for the Ukraine," a choral work by a Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov, Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings and an unusually solemn "Va, pensiero," the chorus of Hebrew slaves from Verdi's "Nabucco."

After Davidsen, soprano Elsa van den Heever, mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, tenor Piotr Beczala and bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green joined for the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the "Ode to Joy." All four were vibrant under Nézet-Séguin's baton, with Green sounding especially booming at the front of the orchestra, positioned over the usual pit.

Buialyski, a member of the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Develop-

ment Program, has been with the company since 2020 and last visited Ukraine in December and January.

He was about to telephone his mom when she called him first. "It's a bit cold there," he said. "I told her try not to use the phone as much as you can."

He didn't have to teach the chorus Ukraine's anthem, which they also sang before Verdi's "Don Carlos" on Feb. 28, the night Buialyski made his Met debut as a Flemish Deputy.

"They already knew it," he said.

Also:

MIAMI BEACH, Fla.: Conductor Michael Tilson Thomas is resigning as artistic director of the New World Symphony after 34 seasons with the orchestra, wanting to lessen administrative responsibilities as he deals with a brain tumor.

The 77-year-old had surgery last August for the tumor. He has conducted 20 concerts since then with the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony.

"Making music with these great artists and for so many friends in the audience felt like coming home, like coming back to life. I couldn't have been happier," he wrote in a letter to friends that he made public Wednesday.

"It takes strength to meet the demands of the music and to collaborate on the highest level with the remarkable musicians who so generously welcomed me. I now see that it is time for me to consider what level of work and responsibilities I can sustain in the future."

Tilson Thomas said he was diagnosed with a glioblastoma multiforme, an aggressive tumor.

Variety



This image released by Janus Films and Sideshow shows Hidetoshi Nishijima, (left), and Toko Miura in a scene from 'Drive My Car.' (AP)

Film

Japanese drama signals a shift

'Drive My Car' rides into the Oscars

By Jake Coyle

Since the flurry of text messages that greeted him when he stepped off a plane in Berlin on Oscar nominations morning, Ryusuke Hamaguchi has had some time to reflect on why his film, "Drive My Car," has resonated as it has.

But he's not so sure. There's only so many ways to reason how a three-hour Japanese drama in which the opening credits don't even arrive until 40 minutes in, can rise to Hollywood's highest summit. "Drive My Car," an emotional epic of grief, connection and art, is nominated for four Oscars, including best picture, best director and best adapted screenplay.

"The more I think about this, the less sure I am," says Hamaguchi. "But one thing I can say is that this is a very normal movie. It's about people who have all these different flaws each trying to have a better life for themselves. Loving someone or something is one way to do that. But when we love someone, one day you lose or separate from that person."

"It's almost like an oxymoron," he adds. "That's sort of the normal aspect of this film, that it's about the loss and gain of love."

"Drive My Car," the first Japanese film ever nominated for best picture, shatters the mold of the traditional Oscar contender. Even Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite," which two years ago became the first non-English language best picture winner, was less surprising. "Parasite" was a stylish genre film from a world-renown filmmaker whose movie had already won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

The road taken by "Drive My Car" to the Academy Awards is, like the movie, more winding. While Hamaguchi's films -- he last year also released the beguiling anthology film "Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy" -- are internationally acclaimed, the 43-year-old filmmaker was far less known in Hollywood. "Drive My Car" won best screenplay at Cannes last summer, but the response to Hamaguchi's lengthy film, fittingly, needed time to gather force.

"Drive My Car" instead found its momentum from critics who championed the film (both New York and Los Angeles critics groups named it the best film of the

year) and a steady rollout in theaters. There was also something undeniable about it. Just about everyone who has sat down and watched Hamaguchi's film has come away deeply moved. "Drive My Car" may be a tough sell, but it's proven easy to love.

"Audiences respond to great movies. They just do," says Jonathan Sehring, the longtime IFC Films chief who released "Drive My Car" with the newly launched distributor Sideshow, along with Janus Films.

Still, "Drive My Car" is less of an anomaly than it seems. Series like the small-screen sensation "Squid Game" have showed that subtitles aren't nearly the hurdle they were believed to be. At the same, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, in striving to diversify its historically white and male membership, has in recent years welcomed waves of new international members.

Once distant movie realms have grown closer. Along with "Drive My Car," a number of foreign films -- "The Worst Person in the World," "Parallel Mothers," "Flee" -- scored nominations this year outside of best international film. At the March 27 Oscars, these films are punching well above their weight. In best director, Hamaguchi edged out A-list favorites like Denis Villeneuve ("Dune"). "Drive My Car" landed twice the number of nominations as "Spider-Man: No Way Home."

Confident

"The fact that it's three hours long also shows us that maybe the times are changing, peoples' receptivity is slightly changing," Hamaguchi said in a recent interview while quarantining in a hotel room in Japan after traveling overseas. "I thought it would be difficult to reach a large audience because of the length of the film, despite being proud and confident with the final product."

Make no mistake, Hamaguchi and everyone involved with "Drive My Car" are still astonished at the film's success.

"We're all pinching ourselves. No, slapping ourselves is more like it," says Sehring. "I'd be lying if I told you any of us thought it would get this kind of reception. But we were all incredibly moved by it."

At IFC, Sehring helped pioneer the now common use of day-and-date releases, with films debuting the-

atrically and on video-on-demand. But he thinks the groundswell around "Drive My Car" could have only happened in theaters. There, it's made \$1.8 million in ticket sales over the past few months, often ranking among the best per-theater averages. On Wednesday, it began streaming on HBO Max.

"A three-hour Japanese movie was going to be very challenging. If it premiered on a streaming service -- and streaming services are great things -- it would be lost," says Sehring. "They would never promote it, and I'd be surprised if any streaming service out there would acquire it except for our partners at Criterion."

Hamaguchi says all he can do is be grateful -- and look forward to meeting Steven Spielberg and Denzel Washington. Hamaguchi has one thing in common with Spielberg. "Drive My Car" is one of only six movies to sweep the New York Film Critics Circle, the Los Angeles Critics Association and the National Society of Film Critics. The others are "Goodfellas," "L.A. Confidential," "The Hurt Locker," "The Social Network" and Spielberg's "Schindler's List."

Some have claimed that the Oscars risk becoming too "elitist" when films like "Drive My Car" are honored ahead of most popular ones. But there's nothing elitist about "Drive My Car," a movie that, like Hamaguchi's "Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy," maneuvers to bring disparate characters together in intimate dialogue about their lives. His movie seems to steer steadfastly toward something sincere. Filmed both before and during the pandemic, "Drive My Car" ends with its characters in face masks, like it's trying to meet us where we are.

"There's this higher, more present form of communication that takes place. It's not possible with just my normal self to have that level of communication," says Hamaguchi. "The act of creation really brings forward that authenticity."

"Drive My Car" is based on a Haruki Murakami short story and centers on a theater actor, Yūsuke Kafuku, played by Hidetoshi Nishijima, directing a multilingual production of Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." Still mourning the death of his wife, Kafuku leads the cast in rehearsals where the actors sit and read their lines flatly, ingesting the language for days before acting it out. (AP)

ORLANDO, Fla.: A judge in Florida on Monday agreed to make permanent an order that prohibits the release of photos, video or other records related to the investigation into the death of comedian Bob Saget.

During a court hearing in Orlando, Circuit Judge Vincent Chiu said he would issue a permanent injunction that had been requested by Saget's widow, Kelly Rizzo, and his three daughters. The family members had filed a lawsuit seeking to stop the release of any records from the local medical examiner's office and the Orange County Sheriff's Office involving the investigation into Saget's death.

Saget, 65, was found dead Jan 9 in a room at the Ritz Carlton in Orlando. He had performed in the area the previous night as part of a stand-up tour.

Saget died from an accidental blow to the head, likely from a fall backward, according to the medical examiner. An autopsy report showed that Saget had an abrasion on his scalp, a fracture at the base of his skull, fractures around his eye sockets, bruises to the brain, and bleeding between the brain and tissue covering the brain. A toxicology analysis didn't show any illicit drugs or toxins in Saget's body.

During the course of the autopsy and death investigation, the medical examiner's office and sheriff's office created graphic videos and photos of Saget's body, as well as audio recordings. Such records are prohibited by state law from being released publicly, but some media outlets had already filed requests for them, according to the family's lawsuit. (AP)

BIDDEFORD, Maine: You may have heard through the grapevine that it's Pi Day. That means a Maine teacher dubbed the "Pi Guy" is back at it.

Biddeford High School math teacher Jon Jacques always tries to make Pi Day fun through goofy antics, including musical parodies posted online. This year, he's provided his take on Marvin Gaye's "Heard It Through the Grapevine" featuring the Biddeford Singers, jazz band and Pi-inspired lyrics.

Jacques is always fired up about the faux holiday on March 14 -- which fell on Monday this year --

that celebrates the mathematical ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter of 3.14.

In the past, he's shaved a Pi symbol into his hair, sculpted a Pi out of snow, had a temporary Pi tattoo on his shaved head. He's parodied several songs including Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody"



Rizzo



Saget

and Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive."

This year, he's also using his annual event as a fundraiser for a colleague's husband who's battling cancer. (AP)

LIBERAL, Kan.: A woman from Liberal, Kansas, is this year's

champion of the traditional Pancake Day Race against women in Olney, England.

The race returned after a hiatus in 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Hay, a 21-year-old college student, also won the Liberal race in 2020 but lost to Olney that year. Contestants must carry a

pancake in a frying pan and flip it at the beginning and end of the 415-yard (380 meter) race. The event began in Olney in the 15th century. In 1950, Liberal challenged Olney to an international competition.

Olney in Buckinghamshire, is about 60 miles (100 kilometers) northwest of London. (AP)