

# The Musical Horrors of *Mariupol*

Jordan Dykstra scores Mstyslav Chernov's PBS/Associated Press co-production on the Russo-Ukrainian War.

By Chris Hadley



When Pulitzer Prize-winning Associated Press correspondent Mstyslav Chernov and his colleagues entered the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol on February 24, 2022, they and its besieged residents would bear witness to a terrifying campaign of bombings and civilian killings perpetrated by Russia. Taking shelter in various hospitals while accompanying the physicians who fought to save those that fell prey to the carnage, Chernov and the rest of his unit risked their lives to tell the story of the invasion. After 20 days under attack, and with Russian forces making significant headway in what would later become their successful occupation of Mariupol 66 days later, Chernov and his team finally fled, having gathered hours of footage that motivated the world's democratic leaders to support Ukraine militarily while provoking the rage of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his forces. Almost a year after the war started, that footage, plus Chernov's memories of the first three weeks of the invasion, became the riveting components of the award-winning documentary *20 Days in Mariupol*, a co-production of the Associated Press and PBS' current events series *Frontline*, directed by Chernov.

As the bombings and fatalities surged in the invasion's early phase, the daily mission of reporting on Ukraine's suffering was psychologically challenging for Chernov and his team of fellow journalists. Once their footage was organized into the film's complete edit, the process of having to put the chilling images to music was an even tougher emotional test for *20 Days* composer and documentary film veteran Jordan Dykstra. Like every viewer who experienced the brutal sights of the ongoing war on newscasts or in Chernov's now-cinematic recollection of the first 20

days of Russia's invasion, Dykstra saw up-close the pain—and strength—of those caught in the conflict's unending crossfire, while remembering that the calm of an undisturbed battlefield can sound even more agonizing than the deafening terror of the next attack that occurs on it.

Dykstra matched the film's visuals with the disjointed, mournful and unbearable sounds of wind, weeping strings, piercing electronics, a pulsating bass effect that recreates the motion of an oncoming tank, and an off-key piano, among other elements. The score's combination of eerie sound design and twisted instrumentation conjures up the darkness and desperation of the Russo-Ukrainian war itself, while also boosting the dramatic urgency of Chernov's second-by-second struggle to share his coverage of the onslaught, and quietly emphasizing the unbreakable resolve of the citizens of Mariupol as their fight becomes a worldwide cause.

**Chris Hadley:** You've done several films for PBS's *Frontline* and you happened to be working on another one when you got the call to do *20 Days in Mariupol*. Considering the gruesome subject matter and graphic imagery of the film, how did you prepare yourself emotionally for scoring it?

**Jordan Dykstra:** I don't think I could have prepared myself for such a thing. I didn't know what a toll it would take on myself and the other people working on it, including the editor and others that looked at this footage over and over. I know that there's systems in place for people like Mstyslav [Chernov] at the AP, who are war journalists, and at the AP and *Frontline*, as well. They have mental health experts and therapy available for people that have to deal with such traumatic footage for many, many weeks, if not months, and sometimes in real life, like Mstyslav, because that footage is a really troubling thing to see. I don't think it's anything you can prepare for. I think it's something you have to get through, and just let yourself be vulnerable and then take care of yourself afterwards.

**CH:** How did you get through it?

**JD:** I focus on the music. I can't really watch the film anymore, to be honest. I saw it when it was playing here in New York on opening night, and I saw it again with friends the next day, and I had to leave because I had seen it so many times. There was a woman who was weeping for about 25 minutes, very loudly in the theater, and it was what we were all feeling, but she was very much heard, and it was just really upsetting.



**Man of the Hour:** War correspondent Mstyslav Chernov.

**CH:** The film is a raw, real-time account of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the human impact as captured through Mstyslav's camera. With that narrative style established in the film, and with all of the gut-wrenching moments, how do these elements influence the harsh, haunting and noisy score you created for it?

**JD:** Mstyslav and Michelle Mizner, the editor and producer, had some really good ideas going into the film. When I saw the first assembly, it was already in really good shape. The form was there. As you know, it goes from day one to day 20. It's a very simple, expected form. You know what's going to happen. Mstyslav, Michelle and I use that form, I think, very well with the music, by having different kinds of themes for different sections. There's a number of times where you see Mstyslav's reporting through his own lens and then you see it being shown on different TV networks all across the world, and so that had its own little theme, this kind of [making the news](#) music.



There's different themes when we see very traumatic hospital scenes [when people die](#). There's different music when we are wandering through Mariupol and looking at all of these industrial buildings that are completely blown out; windows gone, rubble, the university destroyed, hospitals destroyed, [these kinds of things](#). I think that's how we compartmentalized our musical, visual and audio cueing. That was a good way to start.

**CH:** Given that Chernov is both a Ukrainian and someone who spent all this time reporting on the invasion of Mariupol, how did those aspects of his personal story help to influence the work you did?

**JD:** Well, there was a lot of thought put into this and a lot of trial and error, a lot of experimentation, and some ideas where I had to involve things like cimbalom and instruments in Eastern Europe that I really love. Some more Eastern Europe-sounding music didn't really fit, and we stayed away from keyboard and piano almost entirely, other than that flatlining thing, but that doesn't really even sound like a piano. We ended up going more in the direction of a horror film, since it is a real-life horror movie. I think that Chernov being Ukrainian is very important to know as we hear and see this story through his eyes, but he's also a very well-traveled person. He speaks many languages and has traveled all around the world and reported from two dozen countries. He is a person of the world, so he was quite aware of what he wanted this piece of documentary art to be. It was much more than a Ukrainian score in that sense, but it was a very unique one, too, because it's all true. It's a living document of hell, so that's a fine balance to have to make.

**CH:** The score's palette consists of detuned piano, eerie electronics, percussion, strings and other ambient effects, including field recordings. Describe how you used those sounds not just to visually punctuate the horrors of this war, but also to represent the emotional toll that it has taken on Ukrainians and the journalists who risk their lives to tell the true story of the conflict.

**JD:** One thing I was trying to do was to make certain sounds that are very much sound design and always moving. Every tone, every bit of noise, every dynamic is always fluctuating slightly, whether in pitch or timbre or amplitude. This moving in the strings, this glistening, moving the finger down and up, the bass rolling in pitch and in volume, brings a constant sense of tension, of dread, of unease, and of not knowing what's going to happen. Honestly, we still don't know, so it's a continued sense even after. Always keeping things moving and slightly removed from a particular emotion was very key in matching the tone of the film.

**CH:** A key part of the soundtrack is a deep-building bass effect that sounds like an oncoming Russian military tank. How was that sound created and where and when did you feel it was best to use it within the other sonic elements of the score?

**JD:** Yeah, that's a very unique sound. We worked a lot on that one particular sound that appears so many times as almost like sound design, like this tank rolling in the background behind a building, moving around in the shadows. It's a very shadowy

sound, a very low, rolling bass that's pulsating, but then it's also round and very deep. It's a strange sound to have so many times in the score. I think it was employed just the right amount, although I was a bit shocked, to be honest, how much they wanted it in there because it's full of silence. If it was a musical cue, it's the same thing repeated in irregular intervals for minutes at a time, but it works. It's something that continues this dissonance and this dread of not knowing, and it's foreshadowing the actual tanks when they finally arrive.



**CH:** We hear it in the opening of the film, when we see [the tanks move in](#). Then we hear it, as you mentioned earlier, during the end credits when it goes on and on.

**JD:** Yes. I've never felt in real life what a tank feels like, but I know that from talking to Mstyslav that you really can feel it. You can feel it in the ground, and I can only imagine what the sense of that would be like. I tried to bring that to the audience.

**CH:** Describe your process for creating and recording not just the tank-like effect, but also the other prominent sounds of the score.

**JD:** One of the counter-elements of the score to the rolling tank bass was this slow, rhythmic pounding. This part is in tempo, but it's in a very slow tempo. It's this rising bass drum knock or pulse that's much more organic. It's made with real instruments versus the bass, which is synthesized. This sound was made with an actual sound of me hitting a door, pounding on a wooden door, amongst other things. It's like hearing an intruder trying to get into your house in slow motion. I thought it worked really well because it did feel, throughout the film, like Russia's bringing war to the door. You know that on the other side of that door it is going to be pure darkness, and it's dreadful. I think it worked pretty well, sadly enough. It was the right thing.



**CH:** It worked pretty well to my ears. One other thing that I noticed is that you didn't make it progressively louder. That would've been too on the nose in terms of how you wanted the effect to register...

**JD:** Yeah. Like I was saying earlier, the line between pushing emotion and of adding to the emotion that we're already sensing from the footage was tough [to find]. *Frontline* and the AP are very good investigative journalists and they have amazing teams that fact-check everything and push away emotion and subjective points of view as much as possible. We really tried to let the emotion of this image live and not push anything too far. That being said, there are a few dramatic moments in the film that call for dramatic music.

**CH:** When spotting the film with Mstyslav, how did you figure out where to place the music? Was the goal of your score to have it reserved only for the most gripping moments so the film could feel as raw as possible?

**JD:** Well, there's so much music in this film. It's 40 or 50 minutes of music in a 90-minute film. That being said, a lot of it doesn't feel like music. A lot of it is just trying to mimic the imagery of the city and what's happening on camera. Something that Mstyslav kept saying over and over is, "This is an industrial city. This isn't a very populous place for vacation. This isn't a tourist town. This is a working-class city, and it's full of industry." So the sounds that he wanted were very metallic and noisy, such as the sounds of engines and things running, and the sound of industry and noise. We tried to bring that kind of tone to help underlie the whole score. When the music is really heard, it's more musical, but when it's felt, it's more like sound design.

**CH:** That sound design also extends to all the imagery of the bombed-out buildings and the bombings themselves.

**JD:** Very much. Something else he kept saying was that we want to bring [the sound of wind](#). When we're seeing images of these shelled buildings where the windows

are gone, and when we see the rubble, we want to be able to hear what it sounds like when wind is going in a place where it shouldn't. It shouldn't be empty. There should be people living in there with their families, but it's completely destroyed and empty, full of space where there shouldn't be space. We want to make that sound, that windy sound, which is done a lot with cymbal, filtered noise, and things of this nature.

**CH:** At an early point in the film, I remember Mstyslav saying something to the effect of, "the scariest sound in a war is not the bombing, but the silence." How do you account for that in the score?

**JD:** He says, "Wars don't begin with a bang. They begin with silence." I think that's a really interesting way to open the film because he gets there when everything is pretty peaceful, just hours before the invasion begins. I think it adds to the audience being with him in that moment alongside him, as he feels, with his camera, things being normal. There is quite a bit of silence in the score, in the sense that a lot of the cues give space in between musical phrases. There are a lot of really slow cues, and a lot of hollow sounds, where it's just a chord for three seconds, space for six seconds, a chord for four seconds, space for nine seconds, and so on. This gives a lot of space for the viewer to process the image and to also give the image a little bit of support. Oftentimes these chords that we hear at irregular intervals aren't different. They're very similar or maybe slightly changed, but they're very much in one world. They live in a placement of harmonic rotation. I think that really helped. That appears quite a bit, these spaces in between these chords and phrases.



**CH:** Were there any specific themes that you created for Mstyslav and his reporting team, as well as for the people of Ukraine and the city of Mariupol itself?

**JD:** This is what I was getting at with the industrial sound of Mariupol throughout. In the score, we have a trajectory to hit the biggest emotional moments that we foreshadow a few times earlier in the film. Towards the last 20% of the film, we go into the hospital and one of the doctors brings us into the basement and shows us

this scene of all of these people that couldn't be saved, including a few-months-old baby. This is where the music gets [extremely devastating](#), more than any other cue. In that one, we really wanted to honor the pain of the killed Ukrainians. That was done with this big string ensemble, mimicking the sound of a mother crying; this falling in the voice, with the pitch going down, and just communicating pain.

**CH:** Was that the most difficult part of the film to score?

**JD:** That one was very hard, not only to get the right beat of when these bigger gestures should happen, but it was also tough to watch over and over and over. That one, and when Kiril (the baby with the head injury) dies, we use the same musical motif when he dies and you see the mother find out on camera. I don't think I've ever seen that scene without tearing up. Mstyslav told me that the doctors knew right when he came in that you can't survive a head injury when you're a baby. It was going to be sad, and they knew it.

**CH:** Was there a theme for the war overall and for the emotional effects that it had on the people of Mariupol?

**JD:** No, I think we tried to focus a little bit more on the specific aspects of the film like the unknown, the news, the hospital, and in the memory cues when we hear Mstyslav talking about wishing that his family didn't have to go through this, and missing them and wanting to say, if his kids ask, "What did you do to help stop this?" and then he can have something to say or show them. That's another thing that I thought of recently, which is that this film, I hope, will shape a lot of what these young Ukrainian kids get to see later on about what happened to them, and kids that maybe aren't even born yet. This will be an important thing. I'm sure at some point, Mstyslav's own kids will want to see this.



**CH:** Besides the sobering look at the cost of war and the importance of telling the truth during wartime, the film also examines how Russia's propaganda, like describing the atrocities in Ukraine as fake news, have made the mission of journalism more urgent than ever. How, if at all, does your score capture that side



of the story?

**JD:** That's a really interesting part of it. There's a shocking amount of Russian footage that calls out these reporters, including Evgeniy Maloletka, the still photographer who is doing a lot of the camerawork in the film, on Russian state news. They have his Instagram page saying that he's creating these movie sets and stuff, and making up this footage, doctoring it. It's wild, just absolutely insane. In this film, they show moving images of exactly what happened and those images are discrediting this obvious lie that Russia's telling its people. The way we highlighted this was with a very intense sound, which was a very noisy drone with a piercing high pitch, like when you hear a ding at the beginning of the news. It was a very high piano note, like an alarm, like this urgent breaking news kind of sound. Instead of having it be singular, we stretched it and we gave this footage a certain color with the score to highlight it.

—FSMO