

## **SONGS OF THE WAR: UKRAINIAN CHILDREN PROCESSING THE WAR TRAUMA THROUGH SINGING**

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**Abstract:** On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The Ukrainian population has suffered from Russian attacks on civilians, hospitals and schools. In the media, we have seen the Ukrainians as a singing nation. Songs are sung in bomb shelters and by soldiers, in the streets to celebrate victories and in memorials for the dead victims. This article discusses how certain songs can find a special place in the nation's collective memory as comfort, protest and a catalyst for emotions. A search for war songs that are sung by children and adolescents and posted on social media shows that there are a number of popular war songs, from the national anthem and traditional folk songs to more recent pop and rock songs. "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna" seems to be the most popular and important war song in Ukraine and has been posted on social media in several versions. The article analyses this Ukrainian war song as a multimodal expression, in which the artist's appearance, clothing, colours, gestures, body language expression and singing voice, timbre, pitch, melody, rhythm, instruments, arrangement, movement and dance – all of these expressions are carriers of meaning, and together they contribute to the totality (Machin 2010, 2). Furthermore, using examples from social media of Ukrainian children and young people singing "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna", the article discusses how the younger generation can build national identity and process the trauma of war in the nation's collective memory by singing this song and sharing their performances on social media. The analysis is rooted in Martin Clayton's (2009) theory of the functions of music, recent studies on neuroscience and music (Levitin 2008; Brean & Skeie 2019), and the concept of collective memory (Assmann 2006).

**Keywords:** song lyrics, the function of music, national trauma, Ukrainian war songs, children singing, "Oi u luzi chervona Kalyna", songs as multimodal expressions, vyshyvanka, national identity, collective memory

**Introduction**

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The Ukrainian population has suffered from Russian attacks on civilians, hospitals and schools. In the media, we have seen the Ukrainians as a singing nation. Songs are sung in bomb shelters and by soldiers, in the streets celebrating victories and in memorials for the dead victims. In this article, I will discuss how certain songs may find a special place in the nation's collective memory as consolation, as protest and as a catalyst for emotions. Through examples from social media of Ukrainian children protesting and processing the war trauma through singing, I will discuss how songs may build national identity and create unity, hope, comfort and resistance.

Seven-year-old Amelia Anisovych was filmed singing "Let It Go" in a bunker in Kyiv on 4 March 2022. The film went viral through social media around the world, and shows adults being moved to tears when listening to the young Ukrainian girl singing. "From the first word, there was complete silence [in the bomb shelter] [...] everyone put their business aside and listened to a song by this girl who was just beaming light [...] even men couldn't hold back the tears", wrote the photographer Marta Smekhova. A few days later, Amelia was fleeing from Ukraine with her grandmother and siblings to Poland. Her mother Lilia and father Roman stayed in Kyiv. On 20 March, Amelia reappeared on YouTube and other social media singing her a cappella version of the national anthem of Ukraine<sup>1</sup>, "Shche ne vmerla Ukraina i slava, i volia" (Ukraine's glory and freedom has not yet perished), at the start of the "Together for Ukraine" charity concert that was held at the Atlas Arena in Poland. She performed to an ocean of thousands of people in a huge stadium, wearing a traditional *vyshyvanka* Ukrainian embroidered shirt.

As a scholar of children's literature, I am especially interested in the songs' impact on children and young adults. Thus, I have searched for war songs that were sung by the younger generation and that have received a special place in the collective memory.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian national anthem was first performed in Lviv in 1864, the same year as the Norwegian national anthem was first performed at Eidsvoll.



Amelia in the bunker. Photo: Marta Smekhova. Amelia performing in the arena. Photo: Marian Zubrzycki/AP

“Music [...] is about cultural definitions as people come to create meaningful worlds in which to live” (Machin, 2010, 2). In my search for songs (also) sung by the youngest generation in Ukraine “to create meaningful worlds in which to live”, I found many popular war songs, including the national anthem, traditional folk songs, popular pop and rock. For the multimodal analysis in this article, I selected a song that has been performed in numerous versions and posted on social media by children, adolescents and adults alike – namely, “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna”. “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” seems to be the most popular and important war song in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> I will analyse the song as a multimodal expression in which the various artists’ appearance, clothes, colours, gestures, expressions and singing voice, as well as the timbre, pitch, melody and rhythm, and the instruments, the arrangement, movement and dance – all of these expressions are carriers of meaning, and together they contribute to the totality of the multimodal experience (Machin, 2010, 2). The analysis will be based on three theoretical frameworks: Martin Clayton’s (2009) theory about the functions of music, recent studies on neuroscience and music (Levitin 2008, Brean & Skeie 2019), and the concept of collective memory developed by Jan and Aleida Assman.

Furthermore, using examples from social media of Ukrainian children and young people singing “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna,” the article discusses how children and young people can build national identity and process the trauma of war in the nation’s collective memory by singing this song and sharing their performance on social media.

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<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank Aliona Yarova and Olena Diachenko for their useful comments and references pertaining to the most important Ukrainian war songs.

The research questions are: How is the war in Ukraine processed as a national trauma in “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*”? How do Ukrainian children and young adults process the national war trauma through singing the song?

### **The functions of music and earlier studies on national traumas**

We cannot all talk at the same time, but we can all sing together. Music can evoke and alter feelings and moods, and this gives it a great potential for the processing of grief (Ommundsen 2014). Music has the potential to vitalise, to heal and to create experiences of “being one with one another” (Knudsen, Skånland, and Trondalen, 2014, 5). War songs sung in unison can strengthen the sense of fellowship as a nation and boost the fighting spirit. This happened in Norway during World War II when Norwegians “sang for life” (Vollestad 2022). A Norwegian teacher who was imprisoned during the war (one of the survivors from the resistance movement) claimed that “Our songs became our weapon”. Per Vollestad’s research on how songs were used in the resistance during World War II notes that the songs created a sense of unity, hope, comfort and resistance across all strata of the population. The position of the song and the sing-along has perhaps never been stronger in Norway than in the years just before the end of the Second World War (Vollestad 2022, 236). Precisely the ability to quickly align our emotional state with that of others, in a shared experience, is among music’s greatest wonders. It is not accidental that almost all communal ritual actions – from football matches to weddings and funerals – start with music. Music’s ability to quickly and wordlessly unite us emotionally is completely unique (Brean and Skeie 2019, 84).

In Ukraine, throughout several wars, music, songs and singing have played an important role in the life of the soldiers, and have even been used during soldiers’ training:

It [singing] was a significant tool used during soldiers’ training and in battle by the military authorities to bolster the soldiers’ morale, improve their fighting efficiency, appease their fears, enhance emotional awakenings of their patriotism and dedication to an ideal. Wartime songs for the populace was a form of propaganda, which helped to promote specific attitudes, support, and a better understanding of the national involvement in war conflicts. (Wolnynetz 2018, p 13)

According to Martin Clayton (2009), music's functions fall into four categories: the regulation of the emotional, cognitive or physiological state of the individual; negotiations and communication between the self and the environment; symbolic representation; and the coordination of action (Clayton, 2009, 40-42). The singing of songs together after Russia's invasion in Ukraine can be understood in the light of all these four categories. The songs may bring consolation and a feeling of "being one" with a larger, collective totality, where everyone is moved by the same feelings. Songs may 'bring people together' and help to coordinate action. In an early phase soon after the war started, the songs may have helped put words to the unutterable, as a tool for "interaction in instances where normal speech communication is found to be inadequate. [...] musical sound and action can specify aspects both of affect and movement more precisely than words" (Clayton, 2009, 41). David Machin (2010) emphasises that music can help people to create meaning: "Music [...] is about cultural definitions as people come to create meaningful worlds in which to live" (Machin, 2010, 2). He refers to Daniel J. Levitin (2008) when he writes that music is "part of the way in which through culture we come to give meanings to what after all are just noises" (Machin, 2010, 2). Songs can be used to process national traumas and to unite a nation. The singing of songs together can strengthen the community and may help to process grief and mobilise inner resources. Certain songs receive a place in the collective memory of the nation as consolation, as protest and as a catalyst for emotions. This happened in Norway during World War II, when Norwegians "sang for life" (Vollestad 2022) and in the aftermath of the terror attacks of 22 July 2011<sup>3</sup>, where music played a significant role in processing the collective grief (Ommundsen 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015).

Earlier studies on national traumas show how the singing of songs together strengthens the community and may help process grief and mobilise inner resources. The word 'trauma' comes from the ancient Greek, meaning wound, damage or "a deeply distressing or disturbing experience" (Oxford English Dictionary). Trauma includes an element of shock, in that an ongoing activity is suddenly disturbed by an unexpected and shocking experience, so that it occurs as a radical change (Neal 1998, p. 3): "In telling and retelling the stories of our past, the events in question become stereotyped and selectively distorted as they become embedded in collective memories" (Neal, 1998, p. 201).

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<sup>3</sup> On 22 July 2011, two terror attacks killed seventy-seven people in Norway, most of them children and young people.

The memory will then acquire an ideological character, being reduced to a few elements and symbols. Jan Assmann describes this process:

Alongside the individual bonding memory, there is also a collective memory in an authentic and emphatic sense. The task of this memory, above all, is to transmit a collective identity. Society inscribes itself in this memory with all its norms and values and creates in the individual the authority that Freud called the superego and that has traditionally been called “conscience”. [...] Collective memory is particularly susceptible to politicized forms of remembering. [...] These are the irreconcilable, mutually opposed memories of the winners and losers, the victims and perpetrators. Memorials, remembrance days with corresponding ceremonies and rituals [...], flags, songs and slogans are the typical media of this form of commemoration. [...] It is a projection on the part of the collective that wishes to remember, and of the individual who remembers in order to belong. (2006, pp. 6-7)

Using the concepts developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann, we can observe how Ukrainian songs of war are shifting the trauma of the Russian invasion out of the communicative memory and into the collective memory. The numerous recorded performances of “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” are good examples of this transmission of a collective identity.

#### **“*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*”**

“*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” (Oh, in the meadow a red guelder rose) is a Ukrainian folk song. It was first performed in 1875 by Volodymyr Antonovych and Mykhailo Drahomanov as a Ukrainian patriotic march, originating from a 17th-century Cossack song. Soldiers of the Ukrainian armies, especially the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (Sichovi Striltsi), created many new songs by composing original melodies and writing lyrics (Wolynetz 2018). In 1914, “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” was modernised by the composer Stepan Charnetsky, and it was a beloved anthem for Ukrainian Sich Riflemen during the First World War (Sribniak 2022). It was later adopted by the Ukrainian People’s Army during the Ukrainian War of Independence 1917–1921. There are many versions of the song, and they are all associated with the Ukrainian people’s aspiration for independence. Singing of the song was banned during the period when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Republic 1919–1991. Nevertheless, it was

sung by Ukrainian patriots with defiance. Anyone caught singing it was jailed, beaten or even exiled (Wolynetz 2018). The song was revived after the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula in 2014. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Crimea, the singing of "nationalist anthems" like Chervona Kalyna is punished by fines and imprisonment.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has made the song even more popular, both in Ukraine and among the Ukrainian diasporas. Only a few days after Russia invaded Ukraine, the song became a viral hit and gained international attention through an Instagram video of an a cappella rendition. Andriy Khlyvnyuk, the lead singer of the Ukrainian band Boombox, was actually touring abroad at the time of the invasion, but returned to Ukraine to fight for his country. Dressed in his soldier's uniform, he was singing the first verse of the song, with a changed melody. His song was later remixed in a number of versions by different artists around the world – one of many examples being Pink Floyd's single "Hey Hey Rise Up", featuring Andriy Khlyvnyuk of Boombox. All profits of Pink Floyd's remix were donated to The Ukrainian Humanitarian Relief Fund.

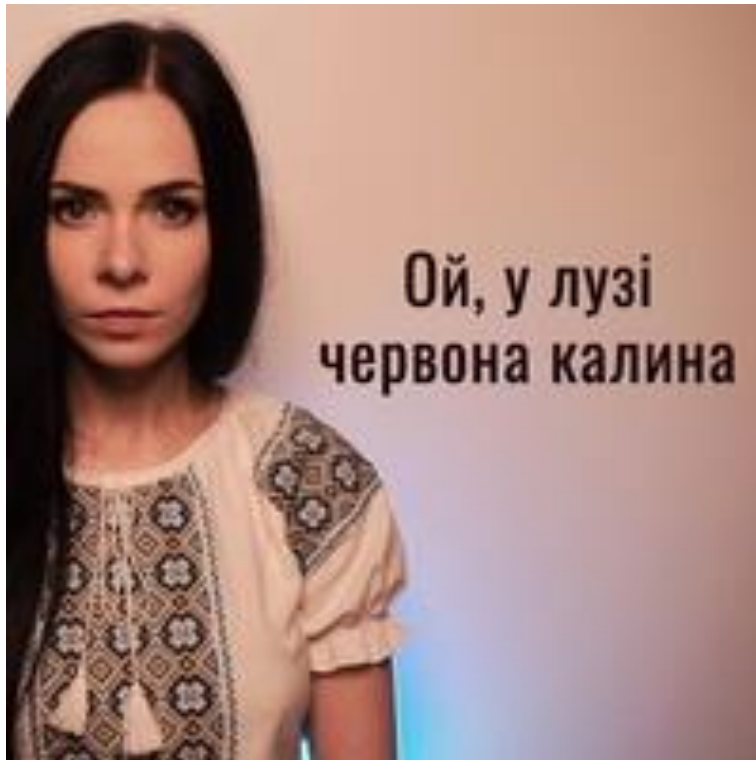
### **Multimodal analysis**

When analysing this Ukrainian war song in terms of multimodal expressions, the various artists' appearance, clothes, colours, gestures, expressions, and singing voice, the timbre, pitch, melody, rhythm, the instruments, the arrangement, movement, and dance – all these expressions are bearers of meaning, and together they contribute to the totality (cf. Machin, 2010, 2). In the following, I will analyse the rendition performed by Eileen – a popular Ukrainian artist and translator, with a high number of followers on social media (her real name is Helena Androsova). Her version of the song has been seen more than 11.1 million times on YouTube and is also popular on other social media channels, like TikTok and Twitter. She has her own YouTube channel @SplendentEileen. Eileen's a cappella version is stripped down to a minimum of modal expressions, elements and symbols (cf. Assmann 2006).

Eileen is dressed in a traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirt, called a vyshyvanka, which in the video functions as a symbol of resilience and unity. The vyshyvanka is the central feature of Ukraine's traditional clothing that experienced a resurgence in popularity after the Russian annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Cherednychenko 2022). Traditionally, it is made of linen, with colourful

embroidery representing features of Ukraine's landscape or cultural values. The patterns often include three main motifs: plants, animals and geometric shapes. Plant patterns represent the "tree of life", prosperity and harvest (Cherednychenco 2022). The design of the vyshyvanka varies depending on the region, and villages may have their own specific vyshyvanka patterns that vary from village to village. The traditional colours of Ukrainian embroidery are white, black, red, blue, yellow and green. Red and black are the most commonly used colours, representing luck, joy and love (red), and wisdom, prosperity and Ukraine's fertile soil (black). Eileen has chosen to wear a white vyshyvanka with blue and yellow embroidery. The white represents purity, innocence and holiness. Vyshyvankas with blue embroidery were traditionally worn by men, especially those going to war, "as the color blue is considered a kind of amulet that protects against diseases and brings peace of mind" (Cherednychenco 2022). By choosing a vyshyvanka with blue embroidery, Eileen may be seen as a soldier herself, fighting for the freedom of her country. Yellow represents the sun and wheatfields, symbolising abundance, joy and well-being. Together, blue and yellow constitute the colours of the Ukrainian flag. Ukrainians wear vyshyvankas for special occasions, such as Easter, Vyshyvanka Day (16 May) and Independence Day (24 August). Since the Russian invasion, it has served as a symbol of national identity, cultural belonging and resilience against the Russian aggression (Saint Javelin 2024).

The symbolic effect of Eileen's vyshyvanka is strengthened due to the video's absence of other details, symbols or colours. Her performance is almost without any bodily movement. By fixing her determined gaze directly into the viewer's eyes, she challenges us to action. With this stripped-down performance, the steady rhythm and intense lyrics are in focus. The only instrument is her voice. She sings both the melody and a harmony line that is a third below the melody, along with some pedal tones. This creates an especially strong emotional effect (cf. Brean and Skeie 2019).



Eileen's "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna". Photo: YouTube.

Eileen's YouTube video ends with these words: "I thank the Armed Forces of Ukraine for defending Ukraine from the Russian occupants! Ukraine will win!" This is just one of many examples from social media of how the song has been used to keep up the fighting spirit and to support the Ukrainian armed forces in their fight against Russian occupants.

"Oi u luzi chervona kalyna" is known for its powerful melody and lyrics, which have inspired many Ukrainians in times of struggle and hardship. The rhythm is a continuous, driving, march-like rhythm with four beats to the bar. This makes it easy to sing, as does the fact that the song has been passed down through generations.

The main symbolism in the lyrics is the chervona kalyna, or the "red viburnum" – a leafy shrub peppered with clusters of blood-red berries that may grow to be four or five metres tall. The kalyna is referenced throughout Ukrainian folklore and is depicted along the edges of the flag of the President of Ukraine. The kalyna has been a symbol of Ukrainian culture since ancient times. In the song, it serves as a metaphor for the

Ukrainian nation and its struggles (Jones 2023). It has been sung by generations of Ukrainians and is regarded as an important part of their heritage. Together with the other symbols in the song, the kalyna builds the ideological character of the collective memory (cf. Assmann 2006). According to Maria Sonevystky, Ukrainian folkloric songs often open with a naturalistic image like a tree, bird or kalyna, and from that kind of opening image, you unspool a kind of metaphor, or a story about politics or the complexity of life. “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” is no different, using the ‘red viburnum’ from which the song takes its name as a grounding metaphor for liberation (Ofman 2022). The red colour of the kalyna berries may be read as the blood shed by Ukrainian soldiers in their fight for freedom, while the white flowers symbolise hope for a brighter future. The use of the kalyna tree as a symbol of Ukraine adds to the emotional and cultural resonance of the song, making it a powerful representation of Ukrainian identity. Eileen’s wearing of a traditional Ukrainian vyshyvanka in the video adds to the cultural authenticity of the song. Together, the multimodal interplay of all the different modalities not only tells the story of the Ukrainian people defeating their Russian invaders but also builds a sense of national identity, cultural resistance and hope for a prosperous future for Ukraine.

### **The lyrics**

The song has many variations. What they all have in common is that the lyrics present several symbols in metaphorical ways. The first stanza presents the problem: “/ Oh, in the meadow a red kalyna has bent down low, / For some reason our glorious Ukraine is in sorrow. /” The chorus presents the solution to the problem: “/ And we’ll take that red kalyna and we will raise it up, / And, hey-hey, we shall cheer up our glorious Ukraine! /”

## In the meadow, a red kalyna

Versions: [#1](#) [#2](#)

In the meadow, there a red kalyna, has bent down low ,  
For some reason, our glorious Ukraine, has been worried so.  
And we'll take that red kalyna and we will raise it up,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!  
And we'll take that red kalyna and we will raise it up,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!

Do not bend low, Oh red kalyna, You have a white flower.  
Do not worry, glorious Ukraine, You have a free people.  
And we'll take that red kalyna and will raise it up,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!  
And we'll take that red kalyna and will raise it up,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!

Marching forward, our fellow volunteers, into a bloody fray,  
For to free, our brother - Ukrainians, from hostile chains.  
And we, our brother - Ukrainians, we will then liberate,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!  
And we, our brother - Ukrainians, we will then liberate,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!

In the field, of early spring wheat, there's a golden furrow,  
Then began, the Ukrainian riflemen to, engage the enemy,  
And we'll take, that precious, early wheat and will gather it,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!  
And we'll take, that precious, early wheat and will gather it,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!

When the stormy winds blow forth from the wide steppes,  
They will glorify, through out Ukraine, the Sich riflemen.  
And we'll take the glory of the riflemen preserving it,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!  
And we'll take the glory of the riflemen preserving it,  
And we, our glorious Ukraine, shall, hey - hey, cheer up - and rejoice!

The lyrics in English, posted on Twitter/X by Sofia, 13 November 2022.

As mentioned, the red kalyna is a strong symbol of Ukraine. Bent down, it may be understood as a metaphor of the Ukrainian nation's struggle for independence and freedom. But by using the inclusive "we", it is implied that we, the people, will raise it up and cheer it up again. The lyrics call for action, for the listeners to be active agents. In this way, the song functions as a coordination of action, which is one of the functions of music (Clayton 2009). "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna" can be understood in the light of Martin Clayton's four categories: the regulation of the emotional, cognitive or physiological state of the individual; negotiations and communication between the self and the environment; symbolic representation; and the coordination of action (Clayton, 2009, 40-42). The chorus expresses hope by reassuring the listener that the problem can be fixed, and Ukraine will be liberated. The second stanza personifies Ukraine as a "you", assuring Ukraine that "You have a free people". By communicating between the self, the "we", the "you", Ukraine and the environment, the song functions as a symbolic representation of Ukraine's struggle for freedom and also coordinates action and builds fighting spirit. All the stanzas include words with strong symbolic and political meaning: the kalyna, free people, raise up, Moscow shackles, early spring wheat, the sich riflemen, Ukraine.

The third stanza expresses in a direct manner the history in which Ukrainians fought to free their country from Russian invasion: "/Marching forward, our fellow volunteers, into a bloody fray, / For to free our brother Ukrainians from the Moscow shackles./" The fourth stanza refers to the Sich riflemen, who were one of the first regular military units of the Ukrainian People's Army during the 1917–1919 Ukrainian War of Independence. It also refers to the harvest of the early spring wheat, which is a powerful symbol of prosperity and hope for the future. Wheat is one of Ukraine's most important export commodities, and Russia is dependent on the Ukrainian supply of grain. Together, the symbols in the song strengthen the fighting spirit and build national identity, where one agrees on a certain value, such as freedom from Russia. The song's special place in the collective memory – as part of a shared national heritage – makes it possible for it to be sung together, as all Ukrainians across the generations know the song by heart. They also know the movements and the spirit in which to sing it. For example, when singing the song, the "Hey hey" chorus is often accompanied with bodily movements in which the singers raise their hands, as if in victory.

### Ukrainian children processing the national war trauma through singing

When the city of Kherson in southern Ukraine was liberated from Russian occupation in November 2022, the song “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” was heard throughout the city as a song of freedom and resistance (Norwegian Broadcasting News (NRK) Nov 15.2022 19.34). Residents gathered in the streets in celebration, waving Ukrainian flags, honking horns, and singing the national anthem “Shche ne vmerla Ukraina i slava, i volia” and “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna”. “Chervona Kalyna has become the symbol of freedom and resilience” was the message that was shared by news outlets all around the world (Ofman 2022). Still, although the song has achieved viral success, it remains banned in Russian-occupied territories, and people are fined and arrested for singing it. This may be part of the reason why residents in newly liberated Kherson immediately turned to this song. The fact that the song is prohibited by the Russian authorities proves how powerful it is in maintaining Ukrainian fighting spirit. Sergey Aksynov, the Russian head of the Crimean Peninsula, warned that the authorities would punish people severely for “singing nationalist songs”: “People who do this are acting like traitors”, and a special FSB security service group has been established to deal with this matter (The Moscow Times 2022b). In September 2022, six people singing “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” at a wedding party in Crimea were fined and imprisoned for 5–10 days (The Moscow Times 2022b). The winner of the 2022 Miss Crimea beauty pageant, Olga Valeyeva, was fined 40,000 rubles, and her friend was sentenced to 10 days in prison for “promoting extremist symbols” when they shared their singing of “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” on Instagram (The Moscow Times 2022).

Thus, it is not without risk that Ukrainian children and young adults process the national war trauma through singing the song, yet they continue to sing, in the streets, bomb shelters and refuges. When Ukraine was invaded, the children turned to songs, prayers and social media (Skalietska 2022). You can hear them sing war songs on social media and sometimes see how their singing moves both the singers and the listeners. The singers and listeners are not necessarily physically present in the same place but they experience the music together through social media. Their common musical heritage – songs that they know by heart – creates an imagined community (cf. Anderson 2006). Across borders, through songs, Ukrainians are still part of the same socially constructed community. “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” brings people together, coordinates action, provides consolation and instills a

feeling of being one with a larger collective, no matter which country they are residing in at that moment (cf. Clayton 2009). The song functions as a tool for interaction accross borders (Clayton 2009, 41) as well as reinforcing a cultural definition (Machin 2010, 2). Many experience feeling emotionally overwhelmed by the music, but young Ukrainians still continue to sing their war songs, even when living abroad as refugees.

Ten-year-old Marharyta Pohosova fled to France together with her mother and sister, while her father stayed in Ukraine. Living in France, she remained an online student at the Odessa Musical School N16, and she performed her rendition of “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” on YouTube from her new home.



Photo from YouTube: Ukrainian refugee Marharyta Pohosova singing in France for Odessa Musical school N16.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I wish to thank Marharyta Pohosova and Alexandra Kosyuga, Marharyta’s mother, for sharing the video and the information about the context with me.

Like other Ukrainian children, Marharyta already knew the song lyrics by heart and asked her piano teacher to teach her how to play the song on the piano because she really wanted to know how to play it. Her mother recorded a video of Marharyta playing and singing the song and posted it on YouTube for the Ukrainian musical school. She is dressed in a traditional Ukrainian embroidered vyshyvanka, and her hair is decorated with the national colours yellow and blue, a sunflower and red kalyna berries. In the background we can see the Ukrainian flag. Her face expresses a solemn mood. When I met Marharyta Pohosova in France, she spontaneously sang the song for me in a happy, smiling manner. She told me her friends in Ukraine only want to sing the traditional war songs at their birthday parties, instead of birthday songs.



Ukrainian refugee singing with Lithuanians. YouTube.



Ukrainian Sofia singing on the underground. X.

You can literally see how the young singer Elizaveta Izmalkova, who is living as a refugee in Lithuania, processes the national trauma through singing. In her performance of “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” on YouTube, the young Ukrainian sings with 300 Lithuanians who answered her call to gather in Vilnius and sing this Ukrainian folk song to draw attention to the ongoing war and the struggles of the Ukrainian people. According to the information posted on YouTube, Elizaveta is a young singer who had to flee her country as a child when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Eliza’s family home was

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I met Kosyuga and her daughters in France on 5 May 2024. When I told them about my project on Ukrainian war songs, Marharyta spontaneously started to sing “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” for me. Both daughters showed me videos of themselves playing and singing the song. Kosyuga provided me with additional information in e-mails 08.05.2024 and 12.5.2024.

destroyed for the second time by the Russians. Her rendition of “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” is performed in support of Ukraine, under the slogan “#Stand up for Ukraine”. Her emotional singing coordinates action (cf. Clayton 2009) and creates unity, hope, comfort and resistance (cf. Vollestad 2022), and the feeling of fellowship across the borders (cf. Clayton 2009). The YouTube video has been seen more than 6.6 million times and has almost 9,000 comments from all over the world.

Like Amellia, Eileen and Marharyta, Elizaveta is dressed in the traditional embroidered vyshyvanka. She starts clapping the rhythm and sings the first verse a cappella, when suddenly she is surrounded by a mighty choir of Lithuanian singers, who are dressed in the Ukrainian colours yellow and blue and draped in Ukrainian flags. The video includes film clips from numerous mass demonstrations held in support of Ukraine against the Russian aggression. Sung by a refugee living in another country, the song builds cultural identity, resilience and a feeling of belonging. The song not only brings Ukrainians together but also people of different national backgrounds in support of Ukraine. The singing of “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” coordinates action and fighting spirit in the various settings in which it is performed (cf. Clayton 2009).

Another young singer, who calls herself Sofia Ukraini, has shared Elizaveta’s rendition of “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” on Facebook. Sofia has also shared videos of herself singing “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” at the underground station, posted on X (formerly known as Twitter). She writes in her post: “Ukrainians have been fined, beaten, exiled and jailed just for singing ‘*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*’. We still sing it aloud in our bathrooms, the hallways, parks, wherever we can to defy the oppressive regime that continues to try and destroy us. We will not be broken” (Sofia 2022). These examples from social media of young Ukrainian girls processing the war trauma through singing illustrate how the singing of “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” builds national identity and creates a sense of unity, hope, comfort and resistance. The war in Ukraine is processed as a national trauma in “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*”, and children and young adults seem to process this trauma by singing it. Furthermore, as Sofia writes in her post, singing “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” may also be the young singers’ way of using their agency to protest, to fight and to resist the oppressive regime.

The three examples indicate that “*Oi u luzi chervona kalyna*” has found a special place in young Ukrainians’ collective memory as a form of consolation and protest and as a catalyst for emotions. The song puts words to the unutterable, as serves a tool for “interaction in instances

where normal speech communication is found to be inadequate. [...] Musical sound and action can specify aspects both of affect and movement more precisely than words" (Clayton 2009, 41). It is the kind of song that "[...] document [Ukraine's] historic past, glorify heroic deeds, and grieve over ruin and devastation; [...] give comfort in moments of sadness; laugh at one's foibles; reproach the weak, the traitors; support and strengthen one's faith; uplift one's spirit to lofty ideals" (Wolynetz 2018, p. 13). The song is a common frame of reference for all Ukrainians – children and adults alike – and is an important part of Ukraine's cultural heritage and collective memory.

### Conclusion

"Oi u luzi chervona kalyna" seems to be the most popular and important war song in Ukraine and has been performed in numerous versions. The war in Ukraine is treated as a national trauma in "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna", and children and young adults can process this trauma by singing and sharing their own versions of the song. This is a deeply patriotic song about the Ukrainian people defeating invaders, which builds on the kalyna plant as a significant cultural symbol of Ukraine's history, struggles and hopes for the future. The song's popularity demonstrates music's unique ability to quickly unite us emotionally and connect people from all around the world. We have seen how children and young adults may utilise this song to process their trauma through singing and sharing their own adaptations of the song, and how music can evoke and alter feelings and moods. This gives music its great potential for the processing of grief. But singing "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna" may also be the young singers' way of using their agency to protest, to fight and to resist. Through war songs, people may find their own cultural resilience and connect with fellow Ukrainians in different countries, as well as with people around the world who support Ukraine against the Russian aggression. War songs can be used to process the trauma in the nation's collective memory, to build national identity, and as a liberating project of nation-building, where people agree on values such as freedom, solidarity and democracy.

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## SANGER FRA KRIGEN: UKRAINSKE BARN BEARBEIDER DET NASJONALE KRIGSTRAUMET GJENNOM SANG

24. februar 2022 invaderte Russland Ukraina. Den ukrainske befolkningen har lidd under russiske angrep på sivile, sykehus og skoler. Gjennom media har vi sett ukrainerne som et syngende folk. Sanger synges i bomberom og av soldater, i gatene for å feire seire og i minnesmerker for de døde ofrene. Denne artikkelen diskuterer hvordan visse sanger kan finne en spesiell plass i nasjonens kollektive minne som trøst, protest og som en katalysator for følelser. Analysen er forankret i Martin Claytons (2009) teori om musikkens funksjoner, nyere studier om nevrovitenskap og musikk (Levitin 2008, Brean & Skeie 2019) og begrepet kollektivt minne (Assmann 2006).

Ved å bruke begrepene utviklet av Jan og Aleida Assmann, kan vi observere hvordan ukrainske krigssanger flytter traumet fra den russiske invasjonen fra det kommunikative minnet til det kollektive minnet. Søket etter krigssanger som (også) synges av barn og ungdom og postes på sosiale medier, viser at det finnes en rekke populære krigssanger, fra nasjonalsangen og tradisjonelle folkesanger til nyere pop og rock. "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna" synes å være den mest populære og viktigste krigssangen i Ukraina, og er postet på sosiale medier i atskillige versjoner. I artikkelen analyseres denne ukrainske krigssangen som et multimodalt uttrykk, der artistens utseende, klær, farger, gester, kroppspråk, uttrykk og sangstemme, klangfarge, tonehøyde, melodi, rytme, instrumenter, arrangement, bevegelse og dans – alle disse uttrykkene er bærere av mening, og sammen bidrar de til den multimodale helheten (Machin, 2010, 2).

Videre, gjennom eksempler fra sosiale medier av ukrainske barn og unge som synger "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna", drøfter artikkelen hvordan barn og unge gjennom sang kan bearbeide krigstraumet, bygge nasjonal identitet og skape enhet, håp, trøst og motstand. Krigen i Ukraina behandles som et nasjonalt traume i "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna", og barn og unge kan bearbeide traumet ved å synges sangen. Dette er en dypt patriotisk sang om det ukrainske folket som beseierer inntrengere, og som bygger på kalynaen som et viktig kulturelt symbol på Ukrainas historie, kamper og håp for fremtiden. Sangens popularitet viser musikkens unike evne til raskt å forene oss følelsesmessig og knytte mennesker over hele verden sammen. Barn og ungdom kan bearbeide traumet gjennom å synges og dele sine egne versjoner av sangen. Musikk kan vekke og endre følelser og stemninger, og har et stort potensial for å bearbeide sorg. Men de unge sangerne kan også bruke sang for å protestere, kjempe og vise motstand. Gjennom krigssanger kan folk finne sin egen kulturelle

motstandskraft og knytte bånd med ukrainere over hele verden, samt med alle som støtter Ukraina mot den russiske aggresjonen. Krigssanger kan brukes til å bearbeide traumet i nasjonens kollektive minne, til å bygge nasjonal identitet og som et frigjørende prosjekt for nasjonsbygging, hvor man blir enige om verdier som frihet, solidaritet og demokrati.

**Keywords:** Sanglyrikk, musikkens funksjon, nasjonalt traume, ukrainske krigssanger, barn synger, "Oi u luzi chervona kalyna", sanger som multimodale uttrykk, vyshyvanka, nasjonal identitet, kollektivt minne