

ARP – Dramaturgical Notes

ACT I

The Approach to War

The first act is set in historical reality. Unlike the later parts of the opera—where satire, diplomatic theatre and, ultimately, dream and allegory come to dominate—the outbreak of the war itself is central here.

For Ukraine, the war did not begin in 2022 but in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas. Since then, the country has in practice been at war continuously, although for a long time this remained outside the field of vision of the rest of Europe. The large-scale invasion therefore does not constitute a sudden rupture, but an escalation of an already existing conflict—one that arose as a spin-off of the end of the Cold War.

After 1991, NATO and the European Union expanded steadily eastwards. For many countries, that meant security and self-determination. In Moscow, however, the same development was experienced as a loss of influence and as strategic encirclement.

Within the field of international relations there has for years been debate about how this process unfolded. So-called realists emphasise that great powers react fiercely when their sphere of influence is encroached upon, and they point out that Putin repeatedly warned that further NATO expansion would be unacceptable to Russia. Idealists respond that sovereign states have the right to choose their own alliances and that security cannot be built on the veto of powerful neighbours. The latter position appears better aligned with the UN Charter than the former. Yet even non-realists must acknowledge, as a matter of realism, that the strength of the system introduced by the Charter “does not come from its truth, but from everyone’s willingness to perform as if it were true”, as the Canadian Prime Minister Carney recently put it in his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos. The opera places its characters within that tension. What one side calls self-protection, the other experiences as aggression.

Behind ideological and historical justifications there are often more prosaic motives. The Donbas region belongs to the economically richest areas of Ukraine, with energy sources and valuable mineral resources. The Russian economy runs on selling whatever lies beneath the ground. How convenient if that stock can be replenished. Some observers therefore regard the conflict not only as a struggle over security and identity, but also as a struggle over resources, infrastructure and strategic control.

The war also fits into a broader political logic. Authoritarian regimes tend to strengthen their legitimacy at home by creating a foreign enemy. A nation under siege will tolerate more sacrifice and less contradiction. In that light, threat becomes functional: it binds power together and

justifies hard measures at home and abroad. As an explanation for starting a war this is not very strong, but as an explanation for continuing one it is far stronger—especially when the results of the fighting are hard to sell.

Finally there is the person of Putin. Catherine Belton has shown in her book **Putin’s People** how Putin, as prime mover (and gang leader), played a central role in transforming the post-communist Russian state into a kleptocracy, in which the boundary between public and private is blurred or non-existent and all important lines converge on an immensely wealthy clique around Putin and the Kremlin. Although Putin locates his public justification for the war in post-war European history (the loss of imperial power following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the alleged obstruction by the West), it is plausible that his deepest motives are directed above all towards keeping this kleptocracy intact. If so, it appears that he has painted himself into a corner with his Ukrainian adventure. Let us take a closer look at that painting.

1.02 I’ve built a fortress high and wide

This aria functions as Putin’s ideological self-declaration. He sees the world as a chessboard in which states are pieces and power is the only ordering principle. The fall of the Soviet Union is experienced as betrayal and humiliation, which legitimises his drive to restore spheres of influence—symbolised by “Yalta”. Images such as the fortress and the removal of “flies” suggest isolation and a pitiless purging of opponents. The scene does not present him as a cartoon villain, but as a rational power-thinker for whom fear and admiration are the foundations of authority.

1.03 Dear Vlad, give me a break

This aria forms the rational counterweight to Putin’s ideological monologue. Macron speaks the language of diplomacy, cooperation and international law, and tries to keep the last diplomatic channel open. References to Napoleon and the UN Charter place Putin’s ambitions within an outdated, legally untenable perspective on power. The tone is not heroic but worried, almost weary: the plea for reason sounds like a final attempt to prevent history—already slipping its rails—from doing what it is about to do.

1.04 Putin’s war speech

Where Putin’s earlier monologue exposes his personal ideology, here we hear his public propaganda voice. The language is bureaucratic and defensive: not attack but “protection”, not war but a “special military operation”. Through euphemism and repeated justification, aggression is presented as moral duty. The contrast with his earlier imperial ambitions creates dramatic irony: the audience hears the lie while the motive is already known. The scene shows how language is deployed to legitimise violence.

1.05 I need ammo not a ride

This aria is the moral and human counterweight to the preceding ideology, diplomacy and propaganda. Zelenskyy speaks not in abstractions but in concrete images of defence and survival. The refrain “I need ammo, not a ride”—based on his historical remark—gives the song an almost documentary immediacy. No rhetoric, but resolve. As it unfolds, the personal struggle broadens into a European stake, so that the defence of Ukraine becomes at the same time a defence of freedom in a wider sense.

1.06 Helmets song

In this lightly ironic aria the war acquires a technocratic face. Rutte speaks in the tone of a businesslike telephone call and lists protective equipment and systems, while the weapons actually requested remain absent. The inventory of helmets, radars and “prudence” contrasts sharply with the urgency at the front. The song does not depict hostility but administrative restraint and half-measures. Precisely that well-intentioned caution makes the scene tragicomic, and highlights the contrast between a Europe addicted to peace and the reality of war.

1.07 The battle of Kyiv

This scene moves the action from diplomacy and rhetoric to the physical reality of the battlefield. In a double chorus the Russian troops appear as an anonymous, mechanical force of “steel and might”, while the Ukrainian voices are tied to landscape, night and winter. The bogging down of steel in mud and cold symbolises the failure of brute force in the face of local knowledge and determination. The scene makes the war crushingly concrete and sensory: the first direct tableau of combat in the opera.

1.08 Zeitenwende Reform

In this aria there is no heroism, but policy language. Scholz articulates the war in terms of funds, reforms and defence capacity—an allusion to the German “Zeitenwende”. The tone is sober, faintly hesitant and administrative, almost prosaic, which contrasts sharply with the immediate reality of the battlefield. The aria shows how war is processed not only militarily but also bureaucratically: through budgets, caution and incremental decisions. Precisely that technocratic approach lends the scene a faintly ironic undertone.

1.09 UN Charter song

The text is derived from the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly in which the Russian invasion of Ukraine is formally condemned. The register is deliberately legal and unpoetic: no rhetoric or emotion, but norm and law. By explicitly referring to Article 2(4) of the UN Charter—the prohibition on the use of force against the territorial integrity of states—the chorus functions here as the voice of international law. Against propaganda and power politics, the law sounds as a measure.

1.10 My God, this man cannot stay in power

This aria is inspired by the speech the American president delivered in Warsaw in March 2022. Unlike the legal language of the United Nations or the technocratic tone of European leaders, Biden here opts for moral and rhetorical mobilisation. The address stresses unity, appeals to values and calls for resistance to tyranny. The exclamation “this man cannot stay in power” refers directly to the historical phrase with which he framed the conflict as a struggle between democracy and autocracy. The formulation immediately caused diplomatic unease; shortly afterwards the White House clarified that the president had not meant to call for regime change. The tension between moral outrage and political caution thereby becomes part of the scene.

1.11 In Bucha town

This lament shifts the audience’s gaze from political leaders and international declarations to the fate of individual civilians. The text refers to the events in Bucha, where after the Russian withdrawal in 2022 mass graves and numerous civilian deaths were discovered. The tone is deliberately sober and almost documentary: searching for missing family members, opening body bags in the hope of recognising a loved one, empty streets. The song avoids revenge and chooses law and truth as the answer to violence. The final line—“God sets it straight on judgement day”—will, in the fourth act, take concrete, imagined shape as a personal reckoning. In this way the human lament binds historical suffering to the later symbolic ‘divine intervention’.

1.12 Azovstal (1)

This scene takes place in and around the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol, where Ukrainian soldiers and civilians held out for weeks during the siege. Unlike the lament of Bucha, what we hear here is not mourning but resolve. The language is concrete and earthy—food, fuel, ammunition—and emphasises comradeship and improvisation. The factory, symbol of labour and industry, becomes at once refuge and weapons workshop. The song shows resistance as collective dignity under extreme pressure.

1.12a Azovstal (2)

This scene contrasts with the previous one. Where the defenders speak from within their determination, here the outcome of the battle is shown. We hear an onlooker who must helplessly watch as the fighters are taken away by the Russians. The adrenaline-charged atmosphere of resistance gives way to silence and emptiness: the factory echoes, the voices disappear. The repeated recollection of a shared past as ‘brothers’ underscores the tragic rupture between two peoples who were once closely bound. The song functions as an elegy and emphasises the human price of the siege.

ACT II

The International Arena

The second act shifts the perspective from the direct experience of war to the international arena. Where the first act shows the invasion and its immediate human consequences, this part reveals how the conflict reverberates through religion, diplomacy, economics and world politics. The war is no longer a local drama, but a global crisis.

The act opens with a religious song, drawn from the Orthodox tradition, which asks whether violence can ever be holy. The gaze then shifts to the world: the grain blockade causes hunger in Africa, energy and food chains are disrupted, and the conflict is shown to have consequences far beyond the battlefield.

Against this geopolitical scale the act sets the individual. In shelters and underground stations small moments of intimacy and consolation arise. Love, grief and vulnerability provide a human counterweight to the language of states and treaties.

The middle section consists of diplomatic confrontations. Conversations with Xi Jinping, Ursula von der Leyen and other leaders reveal divergent attitudes: calculated neutrality, institutional caution, and solidarity with conditions. Ukraine asks for immediate protection; the world responds with plans, procedures and delay.

In the encounters with Trump this tension becomes satirically sharp. Here war is reduced to negotiation and transaction. Law and history crumble into bargaining chips in the hands of a deal-maker who thinks transactionally. A fundamental contrast appears: an international order based on rules versus a politics without order, based on opportunism.

The act ends with a sober balance of facts and figures. All rhetoric falls away. What remains is the bare reality of loss, disruption and exhaustion—in Ukraine and in Russia. The second act thus becomes the political and moral middle piece of the opera: a many-voiced panorama of a world searching for justice, yet trapped between ideals and interests.

2.01 No war can be conducted in God's name

The first part of this song is derived from a song by Rachmaninoff, Op. 26 No. 6. In that work an Orthodox Easter hymn is heard in which the believer turns to God amid a world that has come off the rails through human failure. The tone is not triumphal but condemnatory: humanity has sullied creation so thoroughly with violence, guilt and sorrow that Jesus would burst into tears on his return. The song is placed within the tradition of Russian Orthodox church music, a sound-world associated with contemplation, penitence and moral self-examination. Attention shifts from the sinfulness of humanity in general to the sin of war and to the schism it has produced within the Orthodox world. Whereas the Ukrainian Orthodox Church distanced itself from violence, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow openly supported Putin's military campaign and lent it

religious legitimacy. The song draws a principled line against that: no war can be conducted in God's name. Faith that justifies war-violence loses its moral essence.

2.02 Grain song

This song shifts the gaze from Europe to the wider world. The war in Ukraine has direct consequences for food supply and grain export, particularly for countries in Africa that depend on imports through the Black Sea. The language is simple and concrete—bread, silos, grain—and avoids political rhetoric. Hunger is presented as unlawful collateral damage; it too has legal and moral limits. The song functions as the voice of the world community, calling the warring parties to account for their responsibility.

2.03 Subway love

After the global and political perspectives of the preceding scenes, this scene returns to the individual. Amid bombardment and loss, two survivors meet while sheltering in a metro station. The song avoids heroism and focuses on vulnerability: broken hearts, quiet grief and the tentative rediscovery of connection. Love appears as a fragile form of consolation. The duet thus forms an intimate counterweight to the large-scale misery of war.

The next scene is a telephone conversation between Xi Jinping and Zelensky.

2.04 I tread the path of ancient ways

Xi's opening monologue is reflective and detached. He speaks in terms of balance, tradition and historical continuity. The war is acknowledged, but caution and strategic silence are given priority. The song depicts neutrality not as weakness, but as geopolitical calculation.

2.05 your words of balance weigh like chains

Zelensky responds with moral and legal urgency. By quoting passages from the UN Charter verbatim, he shifts the debate from diplomacy to international law. Not emotion but normativity frames his words. He appeals to China's weight as a great power—a weight that entails responsibility.

2.06 I hear your cries, your heavy heart

Xi answers with pragmatism. Historical continuity and long-standing alliances weigh more heavily than immediate outrage. The relativising remark that American presidents come and go underscores the difference between short political cycles and long-term strategy, but also conveys disapproval of Western democratic models. And in the parallel with Moses' 'peace plan' one chiefly hears the message that the West's sense of superiority has had its day.

2.07 you speak of peace, but where's your fight

In the closing section the diplomatic tone evaporates. Zelensky confronts Xi directly with a moral choice: “a tyrant’s plea, a sovereigns cry, you cannot serve both truth and lie”. Neutrality can become complicity. The appeal to reflect on “your place in history” situates the decision within a larger historical and ethical frame. The conversation ends without resolution, but with a clear question of conscience.

2.08 Dear Ursula

In this duet between Zelensky and Ursula von der Leyen the relationship between Ukraine and the European Union takes on a personal face. The conversation moves on two levels. On the surface it concerns political solidarity and European support; beneath it a more personal, almost intimate undertone can be heard. Zelensky addresses Ursula not only as Europe’s representative, but also as an individual. Words such as ‘touch’, ‘sway’ and ‘stay with me’ betray a desire for closeness that reaches beyond diplomacy. His tone is emotional and direct. Von der Leyen, by contrast, remains warmer yet more restrained; she speaks in terms of unity, duty and future action. Her answer repeatedly shifts fulfilment into the future—‘another day’. That recurring contrast between desire and postponement embodies the tension between personal involvement and institutional reality. Europe wishes to help, but is bound by procedures, compromises and political limits.

The duet thus introduces a lighter, human note within the act. Amid war and diplomacy, Europe appears not as an abstract institution but as an encounter between two people, in which sympathy, hope and caution are present at the same time.

2.09 Wings for Freedom

In this aria Zelensky addresses his allies with an urgent appeal for air support. The concrete request for fighter jets is rendered as metaphor: “wings” stand for protection and freedom. The language stresses defence rather than attack; the aim is to guard the skies and protect civilians. By translating modern military means into symbolic images of flight and upward motion, the plea acquires an almost mythic dimension. The song marks a return of action after the diplomatic and moral reflections of the act.

2.10 I had Trump on the phone

In this narrative aria Zelensky reports to his cabinet on a telephone conversation with Trump. Trump approaches the conflict not as a moral or legal question, but as negotiation and transaction. Trump’s language is businesslike and blunt—territory as bargaining chip, peace as deal—and sharply contrasts with Zelensky’s appeal to law and to the UN Charter. The scene carries a satirical undertone and shows the collision between real-estate market logic and legal order. The song thus functions as a deflating counterweight to the more elevated political and moral rhetoric of the act.

2.11 I’ll make the deal in twenty-four hours

In this aria Trump speaks directly. He boasts in the manner characteristic of him about his negotiating talent. The war is reduced to deals, relationships and personal dominance. His language is simple and repetitive, saturated with self-congratulation, and stands in sharp contrast to Zelensky's legal and moral arguments in the preceding scenes. The number has a nihilistic undertone and illustrates the banality with which geopolitical matters are treated like property transactions. The line "Ukraine may loose" at the end captures the core of Trump's 'art of the deal': take it or leave it.

2.12 Too little too late

This song has the character of a chronicle. In almost journalistic language, Western military support for Ukraine is traced: tanks, artillery and later aircraft are indeed promised, but each time constrained by political caution and fear of escalation. The imposed range limits in particular—symbolically summarised in the repeated boundary of "three hundred kilometres"—render the aid insufficient. The sigh "too little too late" expresses not anger but fatigue: frustration with half-measures while the fighting continues. The song thereby places the allies under a critical light and adds a sober, documentary tone to the act.

2.13 EU-NATO Campfire Song

In this ironic campfire ballad Zelensky addresses his Western allies. Diplomatic promises and cautious support are set against the daily reality of cold, destruction and exhaustion. The recurring complaint "too little too late" connects to the preceding song and underscores frustration at partial measures. Playful images—NATO as an exclusive "tennis club", Europe as a "Brussels dame"—give the critique a satirical tone. The simple, almost folksy musical setting with guitar underlines the character of a protest song and brings geopolitics back to human interaction around a campfire.

2.14 This is where we stand

This closing song of the second act abandons all imagery and presents the war in bare facts and figures. The dead, the wounded, refugees, destroyed infrastructure and economic damage are listed as a sober balance sheet. The tone is businesslike and recording, which makes the human toll strike all the harder. The perspective then shifts to Russia, where repression, imprisonment, brain drain and the death of opposition leader Navalny form the texture of societal impoverishment. The song shows that the war tears both societies apart. As a sober epilogue it becomes a moment of reflection and poses the question: what is the true price of this conflict?

ACT III

Introduction

The third act shifts the perspective from the Ukrainian front to the Western centre of political power. Where the first two acts primarily show Russia's aggression and Ukraine's resilience, this part focuses on a less visible yet equally far-reaching process: the undermining of the post-war international rule-based order from within. Since 1945 the Western security system has rested on a number of fundamental assumptions: the sovereignty of states, collective security, multilateral cooperation under the protection of the prohibition on the use of force in the Charter of the United Nations. For decades the United States served as political and military anchor. NATO, the EU and the UN were expressions of a single idea: power embedded in rules.

Donald Trump's return to the White House marks, in the opera, a break with that tradition. For Trump, rules are not limits but obstacles to be overcome. Instead of seeing alliances as a shared good, he treats international relations as transactions. Solidarity gives way to self-interest, the search for mutual benefit to "zero-sum deals", and assumed obligations to personal loyalty. In this approach the state's line of sight shifts from law to power. The question is no longer: is what I want permitted? but: what does it yield?

Ukraine thereby loses its position as the protection-worthy victim of a grave breach of international law. Over the heads of Ukrainians, Trump negotiates with the aggressor—"my friend"—about the conditions on which the war must end: self-interest first.

The third act shows how this change—this nihilism—works through in conversations with Zelensky, in international politics and in the course of the war. It also portrays the moral decay of an ally who degrades into an antagonist. The drama illustrates that the danger to Europe now comes not only from the East, but also from the West.

3.01 No more the land of the free

Mockery and grotesque exaggeration are deployed as weapons. Central is the image of Trump looking into his swimming pool and seeing not an "orange fool" but a gilded, almost god-like version of himself. The image echoes the classical Narcissus motif: the ruler who falls in love with his own reflection and thereby loses contact with reality. Self-glorification replaces self-criticism. But the water turns out to be "owned by a Vladimir" and "filled with lies". The reflection is not neutral but manipulated. The metaphor suggests Trump's susceptibility to Russian influence and disinformation: his thinking and self-image are programmed by an adversary that has turned the so-called 'kompromat' approach into an instrument of foreign policy.

The text then piles up images of corruption and moral decay: personal vanity, business conflicts of interest, technocratic dismantling of institutions and political vengeance against "enemies within". The inversion of the American anthem in the refrain—"no more the land of the free, no more the home of the brave"—sounds like a complaint, but also contains an accusation: how can a land of boundless possibility be so foolish as to place its fate in the hands of this nonentity. The song marks the moment when America in the opera shifts from part of the solution to part of the

problem. The theme is developed in a sharp, rhythmic, lightly grotesque idiom—almost cabaret or vaudeville. The audience may smile, but cannot miss the disturbing consequences, perhaps more disturbing than war itself.

3.02 you don't have the cards

This is a musical rendering of the well-known confrontation between Trump and Zelenskyy in the White House, broadcast worldwide. Trump reduces war and diplomacy to a game of cards, deals and appearances, while Zelensky speaks in terms of security guarantees and existential necessity. The clash between gambler's logic and responsibility is the core of the number. The repeated metaphor "you don't have the cards" underscores Trump's simplistic power thinking, while Zelensky's closing line—"your peace is a surrender, not an answer to our call"—sharply summarises his moral position. The song marks the beginning of a more personal and direct phase in the act.

3.03 I just saw him get off the plane

A coda to the previous scene. In this intimate monologue Olena Zelenska speaks as wife and witness. Where earlier scenes are political and public, the perspective shifts to the personal. Behind Zelensky's smile she sees the exhaustion and humiliation of a meeting staged as media spectacle. The scene contrasts domestic vulnerability with geopolitical power and places moral responsibility with the American public itself. The reference to John F. Kennedy appeals to an ideal of American leadership ethics and holds that ideal up as a mirror.

3.04 We stood as bonded nations

In this song—a chorus with soloists—Europe responds to growing uncertainty about American protection and leadership. Where one long relied on the American security umbrella, there now arises the awareness that one's own defence is necessary. The text shifts from dependence to action: build, arm, train and protect. In this way the song depicts Europe's effort and the European pillar within NATO to assume responsibility for its own security. The number functions as a collective response to the political chaos of the preceding scenes and introduces a tone of determined self-reliance.

3.05 The perfect candidate

Rutte reflects on his newly acquired role as Secretary General of NATO and on how he will have to inhabit that role in contacts with Trump. He describes a practice of manoeuvring, flattering, speaking to please and sometimes keeping silent in order to retain access and influence. The relationship between NATO and its European member states and the American president takes on the contours of court politics, in which assent seems more important than conviction and flattery becomes a tool. Rutte pairs insight with doubt: is he player, witness or fool? The song shows the moral ambiguity of diplomacy and gives a human face to Europe's (im)power game.

3.06–3.07 The day after

In this two-part duet, a psychological character study, Putin and Trump hold a cynical conversation behind the scenes. International politics is presented as a card game, a power game in which winning is what matters. Zelensky is reduced to a troublesome pawn. While Trump thinks impulsively and transactionally, Putin presents himself as the sly, patient strategist: “you have the clock, I have the time”. The song leaves little doubt as to who has the upper hand. Moral considerations are entirely absent; power and personal advantage are the only measures.

Putin sings: “who of us has got the queen of spades”. In card games the queen of spades is often a risky or decisive card: whoever holds it can tilt the game and strike the other. In the tradition of fortune-telling and in literature (among others in Pushkin, on which Tchaikovsky’s **The Queen of Spades** is based) the card is also a symbol of fate, loss and fatal knowledge. The expression therefore gains a second, darker layer: whoever holds the card controls not only the game, but also the other’s fate. In this scene that fits Putin’s worldview, in which history is strategy and the exercise of power a sequence of calculated moves. The two leaders are depicted here as vehicles of evil. The song forms the opera’s moral cesspit.

The NATO Summit in The Hague

The next three songs form one continuous scene, in which the NATO summit in The Hague is portrayed. Where such summits are typically deadly serious and even somewhat dull, this summit—thanks to Trump and his new politics, the art of the deal—becomes a piece of political theatre in which absurdist scenes are not absent.

The three highlighted events all share an intrinsic inauthenticity. Faith in the reaffirmation of Article 5, the truthfulness of Trump’s compassion for the journalist and her family, and the truthfulness of Rutte’s hymn to Trump’s strength: all three expire before the song has ended.

3.08 Five percent

After the summit Trump presents the meeting as a personal success story. Policy substance gives way to self-glorification, slogans and media show. The repeated “five percent, historic event” sounds like a hollow, clap-along mantra chanted by the American delegation and echoed by the Europeans. Questions from the press dissolve into loose, incoherent digressions, turning accountability into narcissistic spectacle. The song depicts the summit as political performance, and Trump as a world leader unable to control himself.

3.09 patriots song

After Trump’s pompous press show a single individual voice is heard: a Ukrainian journalist speaking about her husband at the front. The geopolitical discussion is brought back to a personal plea for protection. Trump responds with friendly but vague promises, in which empathy and

non-commitment mingle. The question “is this true or theatre?” puts the scene’s core into words: politics as spectacle versus human reality. The song forms the emotional counterweight to the satirical opening scene of the summit.

3.10 Daddy

In this closing piece of the NATO triptych, Rutte addresses the American president in syrupy terms. Gratitude flips into self-abasement: Europe presents itself as a dependent child kneeling before its “Daddy”. References to the Congress of Vienna (1815) place the scene within a longer tradition of power politics and diplomatic opportunism. The song is an ironic commentary on European dependence and stands in sharp contrast to the personal plea of the preceding number.

Alaska

The summit in Alaska is also developed as a triptych. Whereas the NATO summit was generally regarded as a success, this summit—at least from the Western perspective—was seen as a failure. In the second song Trump attempts to sell the failure as a success. In the third, Putin celebrates his victory: he has been received with full honours as a respected leader by the leader of the West.

3.11 This is CNN

The scene opens with a live report. The meeting between Trump and Putin takes place without Zelenskyy, raising doubt about the legitimacy of the talks. In a rhythmic, hip-hop-like style the song looks ahead to what may follow and hurls into the ether the sentiment of the more liberal part of the United States—wavering between hope and fear. The political gathering is presented as media spectacle: cameras, headlines and framing determine the image and the adrenaline crackles. Journalistic questions lay bare the moral stake: will law be upheld, or power rewarded? The song marks the permanent degradation of diplomacy into media circus and places the summit under the full glare of international public opinion.

3.12 Productive today

After the talks the two leaders give a press conference. Trump goes first. In loose, self-assured terms he presents the summit as a personal success story. That success is not a success Ukraine can use—no ‘deal’ has been reached. Yet one can still do good business with the Russians. Diplomacy is reduced to the pursuit of transactions, profit and negotiating positions. Moral and legal questions vanish into the background; achieving a durable peace becomes a side issue, a spin-off of business deals. The relationship with Putin takes on a pragmatic character, while Zelenskyy is mentioned only in passing. The lightly boastful tone underlines the contrast between political gravity and personal vanity. By the end of the song it is clear that Trump’s eye was on himself alone.

3.13 At last, my words are heard

Now Putin speaks. One hears him savour the moment. In solemn and self-assured terms he presents Russia as a misunderstood great power entitled to “respect” and to its own sphere of influence. The war is not aggression, but a means of necessary correction of a historical humiliation. Trump’s clumsy narcissism (and sexism) is set against the perspective of a nihilistic strategist, whose worldview gives priority to power, territory and recognition over international law. The number closes the triptych with a sense of inevitability and underscores that peace remains an illusion without a fundamental change of course.

3.14 Peace is not his trade

This song is a tragicomic confession. Witkoff presents himself not as diplomat but as property developer who has ended up in diplomacy by accident. The recurring motif—“peace is not my trade / I am trained to develop real estate”—contrasts the craft of property development with responsibility for the fate of states and people. Witkoff’s incompetence and naivety invite laughter, yet they also expose the seriousness of the style of power that has taken hold since Trump: negotiations over war and peace are conducted by a man who knows of himself that he lacks the requisite skills. Against hard-nosed and cynical Russian diplomats, a bungler is set—someone who is not (and cannot be) geared towards achieving a just peace. Even with top diplomats that only has a chance if accompanied by sufficient leverage—and Trump does not provide it. He sends a messenger boy who achieves little more than mapping Russian demands. He experiences his appointment as a curse, but it earns him money and that is reason enough to continue.

3.15 The emperor has no clothes

This song refers to Hans Christian Andersen’s tale *The Emperor’s New Clothes* (1837). In that story, rulers and courtiers allow themselves to be deceived by an illusion that no one dares to expose for fear of losing face. Only an outsider speaks the truth. Since then the tale has become a cultural metaphor for collective self-deception and for systems in which power rests on appearance and silence. Here it serves as an allegory for contemporary geopolitical relations.

ACT IV

A Metaphysical Turn

After three acts set in political and historical reality, the fourth act shifts perspective entirely. The world of war and geopolitics—battlefields and press conferences—gives way to a metaphysical or dream-world, in which distances dissolve, imagination and moral judgement become the compass, and dream and deed can slide into one another. A Wagnerian *Verwandlung*.

This transition is not an escape from reality; rather, it is its consequence. When law on earth proves insufficient, when institutions fail and violence seems unstoppable, there arises—time and again—a need for a different kind of justice. Not political, but moral. Not negotiable, but absolute. “The dream of peace”.

That motif is old. In Greek myths, gods descend to the battlefield to set things right. In the Christian tradition, God appears not only almighty but also just, weighing human fates. Later, such intervention more often takes the form of a dream or inner vision: not physical intervention, not ‘incarnation’, but an imagined space—a courtroom, if you will—in which conscience speaks and deeds are judged.

The fourth act aligns loosely with that tradition. What happens here need not be understood as supernatural reality. It can equally be understood as the dream of one of the characters we met earlier: the man wandering Bucha’s streets, or the woman we encountered in the Kyiv metro. When reality becomes unbearable, the imagination creates a place where justice still seems possible. In that space no generals or diplomats appear, but figures of a different order: not bearers of power, but of law, wisdom and morality. Not to rule, but to weigh. The opera becomes allegory. The question is no longer who wins, but what is right. Not who is strongest, but who acts justly. The image creates a space in which law prevails: ‘A Righteous Peace’. Whether such a place truly exists, the opera leaves open. But the need for it is unmistakable—and timeless.

4.01 The time has come

God looks back upon the history of humankind. An era of freedom, law and peace seemed to have been achieved. The “ban on the sword” and “rule by law” refer to the post-war international rule-based order and to the ideal of a world governed by rules rather than brute force. When that order is openly undermined and treaties are ignored, God decides not to remain on the sidelines any longer. The song thus marks the transition from historical reality to symbolic and moral intervention and opens the final act as an almost oratorio-like reflection on guilt, responsibility and justice.

4.02 These are heavy times

We begin on earth. Russia, the Kremlin. Putin sits in his study. His lament portrays him as a solitary ruler, an isolated leader under pressure. Economic problems, international resistance and waning trust gnaw at his position. The song depicts the burden of power as personal tragedy: the crown is heavy, allies waver, and even earlier political calculations—including the relationship with Trump in which he invested so much—offer no certainty. Pride and honour stand in the way of a “righteous peace”. Thus the antagonist is shown as a human being, trapped in his own choices, and the final act takes on the character of moral and psychological unravelling rather than mere reckoning.

4.03 I saw him there

In this scene Irina appears as witness and moral counterweight. She does not observe Putin as a mythical monster, but as a man behind a mask: isolated, unsteady and addicted to power. Her words name the concrete consequences of his deeds—mass graves, devastated cities and deported children—without rhetoric or irony. Irina does not present herself as judge, but as bearer of light.

The perspective thus shifts from punishment to revelation: not retribution, but truth is central. The song is a prelude to Putin's judgement and binds God's decision in the opening number to the human reality of perpetration, guilt and responsibility.

4.04 Vladimir, the fire you see in my eyes

Here Irina reveals herself no longer as personal companion but as messenger of a higher order. She announces a "celestial judgement" carried out not by states or armies, but by the accumulated conscience of humankind itself. In place of religious figures, thinkers, artists and peacemakers appear as judges: Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Thomas Aquinas, Leonardo da Vinci, Baruch Spinoza, Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. Their presence calibrates the standard. Not force, fear or success will count, but moral integrity. The song marks the transition from political history to universal, timeless measures of good and evil.

4.05 I Will not kneel

In response to the announced "celestial court", Putin rejects the moral framework Irina sets out. He appeals to the logic of power and survival: leadership, he claims, means acting in a hostile world in which ideals offer no protection. Philosophers and peacemakers have never "sat in this chair" and do not know the pressure of geopolitical leadership. War is justified as the necessary price of security; history, he insists, is not written in prayers but in blood. The refusal to acknowledge guilt is ultimately existential: to concede would destroy his identity. With the final declaration "I will not kneel" he chooses pride over repentance. The song renders Putin a tragic figure—a man trapped in his own worldview—and sharpens the final act's moral conflict.

4.06 A special place for him in hell

In this scene Navalny appears as an ironic counter-voice—not as martyr or prosecutor, but as a mocking spirit confronting the ruler with humour and sarcasm. His light tone contrasts sharply with the solemn, heavy reflections of the preceding scenes. References to imprisonment, poisoning and Dante's **Divine Comedy** situate Putin's fate within a literary and symbolic tradition of descent and judgement. The scene punctures the heaviness of the "celestial tribunal" with black humour and underlines that justice is not only solemn, but can also be bitterly ironic. Navalny here mocks Putin as his court jester.

4.07 The Court considers

In this scene a symbolic "court" speaks, doing justice on the basis of timeless moral principles. The charge against Putin is not formulated in political terms, but as philosophical judgement: a true leader does not destroy but builds; lack of self-control leads to tyranny; power without justice leads to ruin. Abstract reflections alternate with concrete consequences, such as the destruction of Mariupol, so that human reality remains visible. The court emphasises that power is responsibility, not entitlement. Love and compassion are named as the only possible way out—yet precisely that

is what the accused proves incapable of. The deliberation ends with the sober conclusion: “the judgement is clear”. The court may decide by acclamation.

4.08 The Celestial Judgement

The verdict follows quickly. After the philosophical considerations of the preceding number, Putin’s deeds are explicitly named as breaches of treaties, destruction of human lives, and destruction of the international legal order. Power meant as responsibility has been misused for ruin and personal gain. The tone, however, is not vengeful but inevitable: the judgement follows from the facts themselves. The song forms the formal turning point of the final act and prepares the way for the ultimate denouement and the restoration of a righteous peace.

4.09 Champagne makes the night softer

This seemingly light title acquires a grim double meaning here. The champagne Irina offers Putin is laced with poison. What sounds like an image of luxury and numbing turns out to be literally a lethal softening: consciousness fades, the body slackens. The metaphor binds decadence, moral indifference and physical downfall. The softening of the night is no comfort, but a slipping away into eternal sleep.

4.10 So this is how it ends

This final number offers no climax, but a return to silence. After the symbolic judgement and dream-like trial of the fourth act, the perspective of divine intervention withdraws again. What remains is not the triumph of good, but the sober recognition that history continues. The title therefore sounds almost casual: not as victory or redemption, but as statement. Wars rarely end with clean closure; they die out into loss, fatigue, memory—and enough trauma to occupy artists for a lifetime. The song brings the large words of the preceding acts—power, law, guilt and retribution—back to human scale. The allegory ends in a micro-world, a small self-examination. The number is an epilogue, but the opera does not close with an answer.

“Iryna, get up, you have to go to work”! The woman in the Kyiv metro station wakes, shivering, and tries to hold on for a moment to the memory of what she dreamt. Despite the cold, calm settles over her as soon as she realises where she is—and that standing trial in Moscow is not on the agenda.