

From Don Morrison

In 1869, a young Russian artist and architect named Viktor Hartmann entered a design competition for an ornamental gate in Kiev, capital of Ukraine. The gate was to commemorate a failed assassination attempt against its ruler, Alexander II, the Tsar of Russia.

Hartmann's design won, but he never saw it realized. He died of an aneurysm three years later, at age 39.

As you read this, Russian bombs are falling on Kiev – or Kyiv, as the capital is known in Ukrainian. A new tsar, Vladimir Putin, is pursuing his mad-monk vision of reassembling the Russian empire. Ukraine – independent since 1991 – is at the top of his shopping list.

While the world agonizes over the Russian assault, my thoughts flew to what is perhaps the city's most famous monument: Hartmann's masterpiece, an onion-domed pile known to this day as the Great Gate of Kiev. Will it survive?

I think so. The reason has to do with a display of Hartmann's works, organized in Moscow after his death by friends. Among the latter was Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky. He was so moved by the show that he wrote "Pictures at an Exhibition," a 10-part piano suite that attempts to translate some of Hartmann's drawings into music. The final and most famous piece, inspired by the artist's prize-winning design, is titled "The Great Gate of Kiev."

Piano virtuosos embraced it. In 1922, French composer Maurice Ravel arranged it for full orchestra, with a slam-bang finale that will make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up and cheer. You can find several versions on YouTube.

The "Great Gate" theme has been used on movie and TV soundtracks for decades. Emerson, Lake & Palmer wrote lyrics for it. Michael Jackson sampled it on an album. World Wrestling Enterprises used it as a theme song. Over the years, Mussorgsky's musical tribute has become one of the best-known classical pieces ever written.

And it helped put Kiev, or Kyiv, on the map – at least for me. At the height of the Cold War, my new bride and I were studying history and politics in London. Summer break came, and we decided to drive through the Soviet Union, then America's strategic enemy. One of our first stops was Kyiv, an atypically graceful Soviet city. But when we asked about the Great Gate, the locals would shrug.

That's because it doesn't exist. After Hartmann's death, the Tsar lost interest in the project. His successor was assassinated in 1917 by the communists. Their mighty Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and Ukraine went its own way.

Whether Ukraine can, like Alexander II, survive this new assassination attempt is yet unclear. The U.S. and its European allies, wary of risking a nuclear war, are grumbling loudly and imposing a few sanctions. But Ukraine is not a NATO member, so they've concluded there really isn't much they can do to prevent the country's subjugation.

Maybe there is something the rest of us can do. Mussorgsky turned his friend's dream, a gate that never got built, into a monument that has survived for generations and is known the world over. So why can't we try something similar: make a monument in our hearts and our voices to a free Ukraine. Enshrine its impending destruction as a crime that will echo through the ages, merit eternal infamy, make the hairs on our neck stand up and fight.

Maybe the leaders of our democratic West will hear our song come in on the chorus. Perhaps, instead of continuing to drift apart, they too can orchestrate a suite of measures, sharp and flat alike, that can deter Putin.

Maybe, by acting in harmony, the free world can make sure that Ukraine – like the Great Gate of Kiev – remains a masterpiece of the human spirit, a triumph of friendship over death. And if we sing its gated glories loud enough, that monument will long endure.

Donald Morrison is an Eagle columnist and co-chairman of the advisory board. The opinions expressed by columnists do not necessarily reflect the views of The Berkshire Eagle.