



## in profile

Ukrainian lighting designer **George Ivanenko** talks to Louise Stickland . . .

*"That morning, George first thought he was dreaming about a bass drum soundcheck - but the reality check was swift and shocking . . ."*



George Ivanenko is a Ukrainian lighting designer and programmer from Kharkiv. He is the founder of visual design studio, The Corporation of Light. A keen vlogger and social media influencer, he works with high-profile Ukrainian artists, designing for international tours, large events and festivals. In 2019, working with three other teachers, he set up a school to share his experience with those keen to gain an understanding of show lighting.

George awoke on 24 February to the sounds of heavy Russian bombardment. A vibrant, lively city, Kharkiv is and has been a UNESCO City of Music since 2021. As Ukraine's second city, it is a major cultural, scientific, educational and industrial hub, and was a strategic target for Russia's invasion. That morning, George first thought he was dreaming about a bass drum soundcheck - but the reality check was swift and shocking.

### SEEING THE LIGHT

George's passion for lighting began at the age of 14. He had always possessed a creative streak, but during services at the local evangelical church he realised the power of lighting for enhancing mood and emotion. From then on, he single-mindedly dedicated himself to his ambition to be a lighting professional.

When the church's Pastor agreed to purchase some construction lights with parabolic reflectors, the enthusiastic teenager sourced coloured glass, had it cut to size and then manually fitted it to the lights. For control, he built an improvised switch panel, and Sunday services took on a new dimension!

George volunteered to work in local theatres in addition to the church, and began to learn the art, science, and technology of lighting. With no educational paths available in Ukraine, he had to be resourceful. He even learned to play drums to get a more instinctual understanding of rhythm.

He evolved his own style of lighting for music and live performances and soon also realised the importance of contacts and networking. One day, at a concert by

leading Ukrainian hip hop band TNMK (Tanok na Maidani Kongo), the followspot operator didn't show up. George stepped in, ran the spotlight and impressed the rental company, who began hiring him for work when he was free from school.

His increasing professional experience led to more work with numerous rental companies, both as technician and designer. At this stage, even Ukraine's biggest stars rarely had their own LD, instead working with a vendor-supplied lighting person, so there was plenty of scope to design shows.

Around 2012, a boost in recognition of 'production values' saw an increase in professional equipment coming onto the market. As his experience grew, George landed a job with hugely popular multi award-winning singer/songwriter Max Barskih, joining his creative team as LD. The artist liked the designer's musical approach to lighting, and to date George has lit over 500 concerts for the prolific star.

More opportunities soon arose. George found himself touring the US, Canada, and Europe as well as Belarus, Kazakhstan, and the Russian Federation. He continued to learn about every piece of new tech, but those formative years in the church and theatre and his natural empathy with colours, textures and sculpting of light proved to be powerful and effective tools when pitching ideas to clients.

Programming complex timecoded shows was also self-taught. His first major 'live' show was for the 'Kazakh-Cola' festival in Kazakhstan in 2015 with a line-up of 16 performers and a massive audience. Everything ran like clockwork. "It was out of this world, an unbelievable experience and feeling," he recalls.

In 2017 George founded his design studio, The Corporation of Light, because he wanted to be able to cover all the work he was now being offered and to energize others who could help grow the company and their own careers. He had wanted to start teaching lighting and programming skills for some time, and he had just begun this when the pandemic arrived. By moving online, he and his colleagues managed to tutor 30 students over

several months. Discussions were planned with the Kyiv Institute of Culture to establish a more formal and recognised teaching infrastructure. Then the war started.

### DISPLACED BUT DEFIANT

Like millions of Ukrainians, George found himself without any work. In the first weeks of constant artillery shelling, he sourced food for neighbours and assisted in evacuating those older and less able who wanted to leave Kharkiv. Some of his Corporation of Light team scrambled to sign up for the armed forces, while others in frontline areas are trying to look after their families. Many celebrities including Max Barskih have also joined the country's armed defence.

Some working in the arts and music like George have been able to get travel papers and seek work elsewhere, in the process communicating and raising awareness of the need to support Ukraine's fight, not just for its own sovereignty, but for the security of all Europe.

Starting from scratch in a new and highly competitive marketplace has been challenging but has not dampened George's passion for the job. After an initial long, hard slog he has been busy in Poland, Latvia and more recently Germany, and has reached out to major brands like MA Lighting in Germany and Minuit Une in France, both of whom invited him to their factories. While busily vlogging and sending positive messages to Ukraine's production community via his Instagram following, George continues to teach his online lighting classes and is intending to recruit a new group of students in the autumn.

With his parents still in Kharkiv, which remains under Ukrainian control, George has great optimism for a reconstructed post-war Ukraine, filled with positive energy, colour, art and culture, music, shows and events - as well as its amazing people. The courage and strength of Ukraine's resistance has impressed the world. In a strangely converse way, the country is now 'on the map' like never before. Ever hopeful, George's vision sees plenty of light on the horizon. ✕