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Chorus brings Ukrainian traditions to Hills

The international Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus will offer a free performance at 2 p.m. on Sunday, May 7, at Nardin Park United Methodist Church, 29887 W. 11 Mile in Farmington Hills.

The history of the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus can be traced directly to the 12th Archeological Congress in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in 1902. The question of forming a professional orchestra of bandurists was first presented here by Hnat Khotkevych, a prominent writer, ethnographer and composer. He provided the stimulus for a renewed interest and growth in the bandura's popularity at the beginning of the 20th century, and amateur bandura ensembles rapidly formed throughout the country.

The first professional bandurist chorus was formed in Kyiv in 1918 during the height of the country's brief period of independence. Another such chorus, in Poltava, Ukraine, was formed in 1925. The mid-1920s were marked by a period of resurgence of Ukrainian arts and culture, and the chorus developed into a professional touring troupe. As the chorus membership, expertise and repertoire were continually refined and enhanced, the bandura was transformed from a folk to a classical concert form.

The chorus' history rapidly evolved into a turbulent one. The ideals of the bandurist -- God, truth, freedom and human dignity heralded through song -- were a threat to the then-newly formed Soviet Union. Under Josef Stalin's rule, artists and intellectuals were arrested, exiled or executed in an attempt to eradicate every



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remnant of Ukrainian culture. Hnat Khotkevych was executed in 1938 in Kharkiv and his compositions were banned throughout the Soviet Union. Many conductors, chorus members, and blind bandurists-minstrels were also accused of enticing the populace to nationalism and were executed. In 1935, the remaining members were forced to reorganize into the State Bandurist Chorus of the Ukrainian SSR.

It was not until 1949 that through the assistance of allied forces many of the chorus' members immigrated from refugee camps to the United States where many established a home base in Detroit.

The Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus was reborn and took part in concert tours throughout North America. In 1958, the chorus embarked on a triumphant concert tour throughout Western Europe, performing in England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. Upon its return, the chorus continued its mission of sharing the beauty of the bandura with North American audiences.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the ensemble released many more recordings, continued giving concerts, and toured Australia in 1980. The late 1970s and 1980s also saw the educational involvement of the chorus grow as it began sponsoring bandura seminars and summer music camps.

Today, the majority of chorus members are second- and third-generation Americans and Canadians. Fortified by a whole new generation of young musicians, the chorus has captivated audiences in major concert halls in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and Ukraine for more than 50 years. The chorus continued to perform for dignitaries and celebrities, while earning numerous awards and international acclaim.

During the 1999-2000 season, the chorus celebrated its 50th anniversary in North America. In the spring of 2001, the chorus presented a series of sacred music concerts to various communities in North America. Returning to Ukraine for a third visit in August 2001, the chorus represented the U.S. in Kyiv during Ukraine's 10th anniversary of independence celebration. Performances were

presented in various venues around Kyiv, including the Concert Palace of Ukraine and the U.S. ambassador's residence.

Oleh Mahlay became the artistic director and conductor of the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus in April 1996 at age 26. His four recordings with the UBC have earned artistic acclaim, and features some of his compositions and arrangements.

Chorus members are from the Michigan communities of Livonia, Plymouth, Goodrich, Warren, Redford, Rochester Hills, Sterling Heights; and from Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia.

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