

Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus returns for benefit

Music preview

Wednesday, September 28, 2011

By Manny Theiner



The Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus will perform Saturday to benefit the Ukrainian language program at the University of Pittsburgh.

The Rolling Stones and The Monkees can't say it. B.B. King and Ralph Stanley can't either. Few musical acts anywhere (except the Vienna Boys Choir) can claim to have been performing together as long as the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus, which was formed in 1918.

In Ukraine, briefly independent after World War I, writer/composer Hnat Khotkevych proposed the formation of a professional bandura orchestra. Unlike the mandolin or the balalaika, the bandura is an obscure instrument outside its home country. Composed of 60 strings and held in a seated embrace, the bandura is not fretted but rather a cross between a lute and harp. The bottom 10 or so strings create a diatonic bass line, while the upper strings are tuned chromatically for the melody.

According to Anatoli Murha, current president of the Bandurist Chorus, the players grow long nails on nine of 10 fingers to pluck their instruments. Though possessing the capability for classical music, the bandura is mainly used in tandem with vocals for folk pursuits. For centuries, the instrument was the domain of a regulated and respected guild of wandering bards (often blind) called kobzari.

Josef Stalin feared the resurgent Ukrainian nationalism that bandurists represented, and along with many other attempts at eradication of dissent, he invited a group of kobzari to a fake ethnographic conference in 1935 and had them all killed (Mr. Khotkevych was executed in 1938). Fleeing both Soviet and Nazi persecution, a group of chorus members escaped to America and established themselves in Detroit, finding jobs in the auto industry.

Today, members of the group represent three generations in age from 18 to 86 and are scattered across the United States and Canada, returning to Detroit regularly for grueling practices. Mr. Murha himself, now 33, joined the group at age 14 after attending Kobzarska Sich, a summer program based in Emlenton, Pa.

That tradition is where Adriana Helbig comes into the picture. An assistant professor of music at the University of Pittsburgh. Ms. Helbig's focus on Eastern European music led her to teach about Romani (gypsy) music and form a student Carpathian Ensemble. She heard about the peril of Pitt's Ukrainian language program.

According to Christine Metil, the administrator of the Department of Slavic Studies and associate director of the Summer Language Institute, the Ukrainian class was about to be eliminated. "There's a new rule that a course should only be funded

The Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus

Where: Bellefield Hall, Oakland.

When: 7 p.m. Saturday.

Tickets: \$25 at the door or from
www.proartstickets.org 412-394-3353;
www.bandura.org.

if it has 14 students enrolled, and Ukrainian was in danger because it typically had five to six students," she explains. "We had the same problem with Slovak, but a number of years ago, former department chair Oscar Swan pulled in a fraternal organization that [sponsored] a half-million dollar endowment. Now we want to do the same with Ukrainian, otherwise the course will be canceled."

Ms. Metil says that after an initial donation of \$10,000 from the Maria Hulai Lion Foundation, the endowment kitty has risen gradually to around \$18,000, but they still have a considerable way to go. Enter Ms. Helbig, who took it upon herself to fundraise and liaise with the Ukrainian community and Pitt's development office. "I contacted the Bandurist Chorus, where my late father, Omelan Helbig, used to sing. I remember as a child going to their packed concerts. They said they'd been looking for a reason to return to Pittsburgh, and so they agreed to play a benefit concert."

When appreciating an ensemble of close to 50 men (all-male according to the tradition, although Mr. Murha adds that there are some female bandurists in the Ukraine) of dedicated professionals, students and retirees who share a passion for the bandura, audiences should be aware of the gamut of their repertoire. "We take a *duma* [folk epic] that a soloist would play and turn it into four-part harmony with the orchestra. It's mostly Ukrainian folk, but we do take some religious pieces and contemporary songs. We tell stories about village life or the difficulties in Ukraine, but there's also a lot of love songs."

The Bandurist Chorus has spread its music far and wide, this year touring Western Canada, and in past seasons traveling across the States and to Europe and Australia.

The players also completed three triumphal tours of the homeland, including one in 1991 as Ukrainians prepared to declare independence from the Soviet Union ("we uplifted the people and added to the momentum of what was going on," recalls Mr. Murha) and another in 2001 celebrating the renewed country's 10th anniversary.

They've also amassed a discography to suit their longevity -- about 30 releases include cassettes that have been available since the '70s. One of the latest CDs, "1659," commemorates the events of the Battle of Konotop, where Ukraine defeated the Russian army.

A DVD release documenting their 2003 European tour is available, and another film by California documentarian (and nonactive Chorus member) Orest Sushko is in its final stages.

The film documents how the 17 original members of the group left Ukraine in 1949 and made their way through European refugee camps to America. "For someone like me, the generation born in the U.S., it's an incredible story, because if it wasn't for those 17 heroes, I wouldn't be able to do this," Mr. Murha explains. "My father plays in the group, and I've made my closest friends [among them]. I remember a time when the bandura was taller than I was."

Much like the local *Ridna Shkola* (the Saturday school which conducts classes in Ukrainian language and culture), the Chorus preserves a vanishing art which has lost a lot of ground even in its country of origin. "Today, everything's Americanized in the Ukraine. They have a version of Subway and Quizno's called 'Mister Snack,' written in Cyrillic letters. They put a lot of the old songs to a pop or techno beat. There are bandura groups, but they can't do much because there's no longer any government support. I guarantee you that in 10 years, they'll be coming to us, because there's a generation there that has no exposure to this [music]," Mr. Murha laments.

"The bandura is the soul and voice of Ukraine," he adds. "I haven't seen another instrument so tied to its country and history. [*Kobzari*] went from village to village, and anything that Stalin could do to oppress them, he did, because he knew that through music, tyranny could be defeated. And yet we're still here today."

Manny Theiner is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer.

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