

THE UKRAINIAN BANDURIST CHORUS OF NORTH AMERICA

The history of the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of North America (UBC) can be traced directly to the 12th Archeological Congress in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in 1902. Hnat Khotkevych, a prominent writer, ethnographer, and composer, first presented the question of forming a professional orchestra of bandurists at that historic gathering. He provided stimulus for a renewed interest and remarkable 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 struggle for independence following World War One. Under the direction of bandura virtuoso Vasyl Yemetz, the first chorus was named the “Kobzar Choir” («Кобзарський хор») and first performed in Ukraine’s capital on November 2, 1918 at the Bergone Theater (the current Lesia Ukrayinka Theater). In 1925, another bandura ensemble formed in Poltava, Ukraine in under the direction of Volodymyr Kabachok, and under the tutelage of Khotkevych.

The mid-1920s were marked by a period of resurgence of Ukrainian arts and culture, and the Bandurist Chorus developed into a professional touring troupe. As the ensemble’s membership, expertise, and repertoire were continually refined and enhanced, the bandura was transformed from a folk to a classical concert form.

The Chorus's 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 Joseph Stalin's rule, artists and intellectuals were arrested, exiled or executed in an attempt to eradicate every 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 imprisoned or executed. In 1935 the remaining members of the Poltava and Kyiv bandura ensembles were forced to reorganize into the State Bandurist Chorus of the Ukrainian SSR.



WORLD WAR TWO and EMIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA

In the years that followed, the Chorus was exploited and persecuted by both the Soviets and the Nazis. As the German army moved East onto the territory of Ukraine in 1941, the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus was one of the few state-sponsored professional ensembles disbanded and mobilized to the front in order to stop the invading Nazi army as they approached the capital of Kyiv. After German occupation of the city, the musicians re-organized into the Taras Shevchenko Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus (Українська Капеля Бандуристів ім. Тараса Шевченка) and began an active touring schedule throughout Ukrainian cities and the countryside.

However, the German occupation force soon discovered the strength of Ukrainian song and the bandura. They ordered the musicians onto a railroad cattle wagon, transported them to Germany, and imprisoned them in a hard labor camp. The bandurists who survived the Soviet horrors of the 1930s now joined the millions of *Ostarbeiters* from Ukraine. After five months of incarceration in Hamburg, the ensemble began to perform for their fellow Ukrainian slave-laborers who were now in Germany.



At the conclusion of World War Two, the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus ended up in the American zone of post-war Germany. They spent the next several years in displaced persons camps throughout Germany, continuing to perform for countless Ukrainian refugees who would face imprisonment or death if they returned to the Soviet Union. It was not until 1949 that through the assistance of allied forces many of the ensemble members emigrated from refugee camps to the United States, establishing a home base in Detroit, Michigan.

FREEDOM IN NORTH AMERICA

Freedom was a great blessing but not without its difficulties. Most of the members had to learn new skills that were often unrelated to their musical ability and experience in order to support their families. Approximately 90 percent of the ensemble joined Detroit's automotive industry labor force. This, however, did not prevent the bandurists from launching a series of concerts in their newly adopted homeland. The Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus was reborn!

Notwithstanding these difficulties in a new land, the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus took part in concert tours throughout North America. In 1958 the Chorus embarked on a triumphant concert tour of Western Europe. The ensemble performed in England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands, all while garnering critical acclaim in leading newspapers. 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. This period also saw the educational involvement of the Chorus flourish. To this day, the ensemble continues a robust education program organizing outreach programs and providing instructors for various bandura workshops and seminars.

Sydney, Australia (1980)

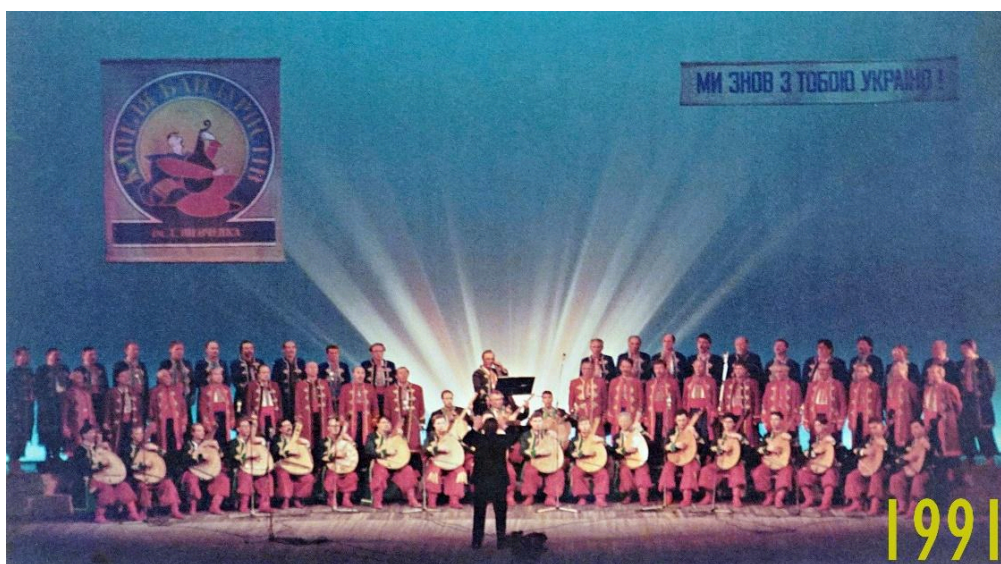
The musical and spiritual leader of the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus from the World War 2 era until the early 1980s was Hryhory Kytasty (1907-1984), the longest serving artistic director in the history of the ensemble. Considered a legend in his own time, this composer, conductor, performer, and teacher was a role model and inspiration to young bandurists. He continued the legacy of the bandurist (also known as a *kobzar*) and furthered the art of the bandura in the free world. Not only did he conduct the ensemble for many decades, he also contributed many memorable compositions and arrangements to the repertoire of the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus and passed along his knowledge to the next generation of bandurists.



1991 – THE RENEWED INDEPENDENCE OF UKRAINE

1991 was a turning point in history as Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union on August 24, 1991. This year also unlocked new opportunities for the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of North America as musicians of the ensemble could create and renew ties with bandurists in Ukraine – sharing much of the rich musical tradition which was preserved by the ensemble in North America and banned by the Soviet authorities for decades.

In June 1991, under Artistic Director Wolodymyr Kolesnyk, the Chorus completed a historically triumphant 14-city tour through major Ukrainian cities from the East to the West. The performances, which encompassed traditional ballads and instrumentals, were received with great enthusiasm and rave reviews, especially in areas of Ukraine where national consciousness had been most dormant. In 1994, the ensemble journeyed to the southern regions of Ukraine, bringing the beauty of the bandura to Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Crimea. Several years later, the UBC was invited to Kyiv in 2001 to represent the American diaspora during the “Ten Year Anniversary of Ukrainian Independence Celebration” in Ukraine’s capital.



Palace Theater of Ukraine (Kyiv, Ukraine)

In 1996, the musicians of the ensemble chose Oleh Mahlay, age 26, as the youngest artistic director and conductor in its history. Many new recordings were released and the UBC celebrated its 50th Anniversary in North America in 1999 with him at the helm. In the spring of 2001, the UBC presented a series of Sacred Music Concerts to various communities in North America. After a 45-year hiatus, the UBC returned to Western Europe in 2003 with concerts in England, France, Germany, and Austria. One of the many highlights of the tour was a Recital in the famed *Notre Dame Cathedral* in Paris.

During maestro Mahlay's tenure over the past 25 years, the ensemble has collaborated with many musicians in memorable musical projects: Metropolitan Opera soloist Paul Plishka, Eurovision winner Ruslana, the Canadian Bandurist Capella (Toronto), the Vesnivka Choir (Toronto), the Hoosli Ukrainian Male Chorus (Winnipeg), the Women's Bandura Ensemble of North America, the Shchedryk Children's Choir (Kyiv), violinist Vasyl Popadiuk, the Shumka Dance Ensemble (Edmonton), the National Bandurist Capella of Ukraine (Kyiv), and various bandura schools and Ukrainian youth choirs throughout the continent.



Ruslana and the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of North America (Massey Hall – 2015)



Commemorative coin minted by the National Bank of Ukraine in honor of the centennial of the Kobzar Choir and the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of North America (Kyiv, Ukraine).



Joint centennial performance of the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of North America with the National Bandurist Capella of Ukraine . (Ivan Franko Theater – Kyiv, Ukraine. October 2018)

In 2018, the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus celebrated its 100th anniversary with concert tours of the United States, Canada, and Ukraine. The multimedia performances highlighted the turbulent and triumphant history of the ensemble, from its roots in early 20th century Ukraine, through the crucible of Soviet and Nazi occupation, immigration to North America, and to the continuing mission of the ensemble in the 21st century. The historic tour of Ukraine included Divine Liturgies in Kyiv and Lviv, outreach programs at various institutions, and concerts in Kyiv, Chernihiv, Berestechko, Rivne, Lutsk, and Lviv.



The UBC sang the liturgical responses at St. George Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral (Lviv, Ukraine – October, 2018).

AWARDS

As a tribute to its role in preserving and perpetuating the legacy of Ukrainian music, the Chorus was selected by Ukraine's Council of Ministers as the recipient of the Taras Shevchenko Ukrainian State Prize, the highest award that can be bestowed for excellence in the contribution to the arts. This award was personally presented by Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk in 1992. That same year, long-time administrator Petro Honcharenko and bandurist Petro Kytasty received the award of Honored Artists of Ukraine. In 2008, Hryhory Kytasty was posthumously awarded the Hero of Ukraine award from the Ukrainian government.

More recently the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of North America received the prestigious Michigan Heritage Award (2022) for teaching, preserving, presenting, and growing its traditional art form. In 2021, Anatoli Murha, long-serving President of the UBC, received the Honored Worker of Culture of Ukraine award; and Oleh Mahlay, the artistic director and conductor of the UBC, received the Honored Artist of the Ukrainian Arts award. These latter awards were presented by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Washington, D.C.



BEYOND THE CENTENNIAL

PRESENTED NEW COMPOSITIONS TO THE POEMS OF POETESS LESYA UKRAYINKA
 REACHED A GLOBAL AUDIENCE THROUGH LIVE-STREAM PERFORMANCES
 INCREASED THE ARCHIVE COLLECTION AND LAUNCHED AN ARCHIVE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM
 CREATED A NEW CONCERT PROGRAM: UKRAINE LIVES!
 PARTICIPATED IN THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF LEONTOVYCH'S SHCHEDRYK AT CARNEGIE HALL
 HELPED RAISE OVER \$150,000 (US) FOR HUMANITARIAN AID TO UKRAINE.



The “Notes from Ukraine” Centennial Concert of Shchedryk (Carol of the Bells) at Carnegie Hall. Oleh Mahlay conducts the Dumka Ukrainian Chorus (NY), the Shchedryk Children’s Choir (Kyiv), and the UBC (December, 2022).

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