

***Transnational Musical Production as a Means  
of Renegotiating Ukrainian Nationhood:  
The Activities of a New York Banduryst***  
Marcia Ostashewski, York University, 2001

As Ukraine's national instrument, the bandura strongly evokes national narratives, contradictory and conflicting in nature as narratives of nation tend to be. Contemporary performance practices associated with the bandura reveal how diaspora Ukrainian communities use music simultaneously to create "local" identity and participate in the construction of a Ukrainian sense of history and nationhood on a global scale. This is especially evident in spaces like Bandura Festival 2000, a site of intense negotiation in the sounds and songs people choose to perform, debate, evaluate, listen to, and produce. In this paper, I provide a brief history of the bandura, including its role in Ukraine's modern nation-building process. Describing main performance styles related with the instrument, I examine contexts within which these styles are practiced. I share with you some insights elicited from interviews with bandura player Julian Kytasty, a New York based musician involved in developing new performance styles for the bandura. By exploring Bandura Festival 2000 as a point in Julian's musical life story, I show how such sites function in the continuing construction of the bandura's history and discourses of Ukrainian-ness. This one bandura player's experiences may be understood to illustrate the changing nature of these discourses in relation to Bandura Festival 2000, Ukrainian musical production more generally, and Ukrainian nationhood. For this reason, I consider the place of life stories in the larger discussion of changing musical practices.

The bandura is similar in construction and appearance to a European lute, a composite chordophone by Hornbostel-Sachs classification. Common performance practice on the bandura involves the player placing the instrument upright in his lap, and plucking the strings.

### *The Bandura: Ukraine's National Instrument*

Indigenous to Ukraine, the bandura is highly politicized as a marker of Ukrainian culture. It comes from a tradition of male wandering bards, called kobzars, firmly established in Ukraine by the 17th century. This period is understood by Ukrainians to be a glorious time for the nation; ruled by an indigenous nobility, the general population reaped the benefits of a vigorous education system and enjoyed strong cultural connections with central and western Europe. During this time, the kobzars roamed the countryside, travelled between villages, Cossack encampments and gentry manors. They accompanied themselves on their instruments, narrating great exploits of Ukrainian Cossack heroes and everyday life. Historian Hnatiukivsky writes, “The epic songs they performed served to raise the morale of the Cossack army in times of war, and some were even beheaded by the Poles for performing *dumas* that incited popular revolt.”<sup>1</sup> These epic ballads, *dumas*, are considered the “original” and traditional bandura repertoire. The tradition of the kobzars continued into the early 20th century, although by the late 19th century it had begun to wane due to Russian persecution.

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<sup>1</sup> Hnatiukivsky 1984: 575

In the early 20th century, at the time of Ukraine's modern nation-building project based on deliberate application of Herder's romantic nationalist ideologies, bandura-playing was revitalized. Through times of colonization, serfdom and political oppression, the kobzars had evoked heroic and glorious images of Ukraine's past. Thus, the bandura and related performance practices were seen as contributing to, as Smith writes, a "sense of history and the perception of cultural uniqueness...an authentic and particularistic ethnic heritage,"<sup>2</sup> and invention of national mythologies. In the 20th century, bandura performance was pursued at amateur and professional levels; the first bandura *kapelia* (an ensemble of singers and/or instrumentalists) was organized in Kyiv in 1918. The strong national narrative of the bandura, related to the historical role of the kobzars, proved troublesome for Stalin in his efforts to control Ukraine under a Communist government. For this reason, in the early 1930s he assembled most of Ukraine's bandurysts for a conference and attempted to eliminate them by committing a mass murder on site. Other bandurysts were repressed or deported. Many of the bandurysts of the *kapelia* that originated in 1918 Ukraine escaped persecution by fleeing to Western Europe and subsequently to the United States. They assembled here and became known as the 'Kapelia Bandurystiv.' These musicians, who played ensemble arrangements and solo works associated with kobzar repertoire, are at the root of bandura tradition in North America.

It was at this point that the history of the instrument forked; it followed one pathway in the New World, and another in the Old Country. North American

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<sup>2</sup> Smith 1986: 22.

performances styles are largely characterized by kobzar and *kapelia* performance styles; in Ukraine, after the exodus of bandurysts, the bandura became institutionalized. As part of socialist-realist constructs of Soviet identity vis-a-vis Communist politics, the bandura became a conservatory instrument. Large ensembles were formed (and women's trios became especially popular). This institutionalization largely nullified the bandura's once troublesome nationalist evocations, and allowed its return to a public cultural forum.

The conservatory style of playing, virtuosic and pianistic, Romantic and neo-Classical in content and stylization, includes sonata and concerto repertoire as well as lyrical arias and chamber music. Many of these compositions are based on highly stylized and adapted versions of folk songs; many are also original compositions. The demands placed on the bandura by this new repertoire necessitated the instrument's re-construction (for example, an additional set of strings for the semitones; and/or a mechanism for retuning individual strings by a semitone).

The bandura is a "traditional" instrument with accompanying repertoire that has been re-translated through history; it is now played in new contexts—there have been no kobzars wandering Ukraine for many decades—it is played by women as well as men, and with new repertoire. It has even been physically re-constructed; along with it, a nationalist image has been re-constructed and portrayed, of essentially what it means to be Ukrainian.

I'm now going to move to the year 2000, a site where these issues are being negotiated in a more contemporary space.

### *Bandura Festival 2000*

The bandura world converged at Bandura Festival 2000, which took place on a March weekend at a Ukrainian Cultural Center in a suburb of Toronto. It was the first festival of its kind since the 1930s, with respect to its focus on the bandura. Several bandura players from the homeland came together with bandurysts and audience members from around the world, including, Argentina, Canada and the United States. The bandura's importance in Ukrainian cultural development and its characterization as Ukraine's national instrument was evoked and celebrated several times throughout the festival event. Constructed much like a conference, the festival schedule interspersed discussion sessions with concert performances.

The festival began on Friday afternoon with a religious service honouring bandura players who died at Stalin's bandura conference of the 1930s, and the first concert following this service consisted of dumas. During the festival, performances were primarily in the conservatory style, by musicians from Ukraine and others who studied there, and with teachers of that school. Several diaspora musicians performed in the *kapelia* style. Two new performance styles were presented at the festival; one was a young American woman's re-creation and re-membering of Ukrainian village songs (whose performances I have highlighted in another paper<sup>3</sup>, addressing bandura and gender). The other new music performed at Festival 2000 was an experimental style performed by a group of three American men.

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<sup>3</sup>Ostashewski 2001

At this point in my paper, I focus my examination of Bandura Festival 2000 on one of the musicians of the experimental trio; specifically, I explore the festival as a point in the musical life story of Julian Kytasty. Inquiry into “oral history” and individual “life stories” continues to be controversial in academic research; I will return to this issue in the conclusion of my paper. What follows are some cogent points in my investigation and interpretation of Julian’s musical life story, often related from his perspective.

Julian’s command of varied performance styles draws largely upon traditions that came to America with the exiled banduryst immigrants of the *kapelia*. Born in the United States, he has concertized and taught in North and South America, Western Europe, Australia and Ukraine. A premier banduryst, he creates and performs with drama, dance and musical ensembles. Julian’s collaborations include work with New York’s Yara Arts Groups and the ensemble Paris to Kyiv, who recently performed at the World Music Institute. His work began in Ukrainian communities, where he continues to teach bandura.

When I asked Julian how he understands his role in the bandura world, he promptly and pointedly replied that he challenges the community. He is a totally committed and capable performer of traditional music and he is, in his own words, “throwing it in [the] face” of the bandura community, challenging them to be untraditional. What does Julian understand to be traditional music? He has inherited one tradition through his family; the ensemble arrangements that hail from the Kapelia players, among them his father and uncles. These bandura players also played some solo music, dumas and humourous songs that came out of the kobzar repertoire. The “old

blind [kobzar] singers” are the other major tradition Julian speaks of; he learned to play this music by listening to recordings that were made in Ukraine. Julian performed a *duma* in this solo kobzar style at Festival 2000, titled “There is no truth in the world.”

Julian identifies the greatest influence in his music and life as banduryst Zenovij Shtokalko. Shtokalko, who died in New York in 1968, was a medical doctor, a researcher, a modernist, and a poet—“very 20th century,” says Julian. Julian continues, “he showed us how to create new music out of the solo tradition, he took the old stuff and carried it way past what the blind players did. Shtokalko played music that was more instrumentally interesting—*dumas* that were virtuosic instrumental compositions that went along with the traditional texts; he experimented with tuning—altering the kobzar modes, making the music sound almost atonal.” Shtokalko’s approach to traditional music, that is preserved in about 20 hours of recordings he made in his basement, was “not from a museum-bound approach—he had a new music approach.” For this dynamic work with the bandura he received no recognition from his community. While, at least in Julian’s understanding, currently in New York people are “more open to this sort of thing—a world music approach,” post-war Ukrainians in New York half a century ago only wanted to hear nationalist songs and familiar *kapelia*-style arrangements.

Julian recently travelled to London to record works inspired by Shtokalko’s “non-academic, non-museum type way” of playing. This recording was largely improvised, Julian told me—“to reproduce [the old kobzar music] is not to do it right; reproducing it note for note is—doing something—but not doing music.” Julian is “following through

on what Shtokalko did, [playing music that has] a sense of being really traditional and yet breaking into modern sensibilities." Julian speaks of new music performance at Festival 2000 as liberating for him, "[we were] on stage with all those ostensibly professional players, and played something completely out of their ballpark." He remembers that it was "the tensest gig we ever played, for an audience of professionals from Ukraine who had their own ideas of what the bandura is about. We really rocked the boat." I agree with Julian especially when I think about issues of space and time at the festival; partway through the weekend the concert for new music, which was to be a space primarily for his Experimental Bandura Trio, was cancelled. They were offered instead some performance time in the final concert of the festival.

Julian shared with me some of his best bandura memories. He recounted a festival in New York this past January, where he made music together with musicians from around the world on Ukrainian pagan themes. At a full program of kobzar repertoire he played last November in New York, he arranged for a student to perform while he took time offstage to tune. Julian remembers this event fondly, saying it felt like he had a real apprentice as a kobzar would have had. As a result of this work, they received a grant from New York State Council in the Arts, Folk Arts for and apprenticeship in traditional arts. He considers his work with children a deeply important part of his work, and mentioned in particular his eleven year old female student's recent compositions. Julian laughed while describing his renditions of Conway Twitty tunes while travelling a folk-fest circuit in the 80s; he played at events like the National Flat Pickin' Guitar Festival to a very appreciative crowd. We also discussed his performance at the *Chervona Ruta*



Festival in Ukraine in 1989, shortly before the nation declared its independence from the Soviet Union, and the collapse of that empire.

Julian feels his international experiences make him stronger, “a little resistant to the standard assumptions of what the culture is, what the instrument is, what it should be playing, all of that stuff.” So, I asked him if the bandura is Ukrainian. “Uhhhhhh,” he replied, “historically, I imagine it is yeah.” “But is it now?” I asked. “No—I think it’s an instrument, laying there on the street, and whoever picks it up it’s going to be their’s...” said Julian. “Is that what Ukrainian-ness is about too then, I mean, you talked earlier about how these people in Ukraine don’t know who they are...” “yeah, they leave a lot of stuff laying around like that, “ commented Julian, “they don’t know what they are.”

### *Toward Some Conclusions*

During the past few decades scholars have been thinking about “invented traditions” and “imagined communities”<sup>4</sup> in discourses and definitions of “nation.” Globalization problematizes “nationhood” at the same time it allows for its re-creation. Particularly amidst re-definitions of nations in Europe, fluctuations of post-Soviet nation-states and new geo-political reconfigurations, music is a prime site for reconfiguring concepts of community and nation. Worldwide systems of circulation and markets of cultural products effect and affect ways in which diasporic communities exchange with each other and with the homeland. A globalizing cultural economy has facilitated this interaction and exchange between various Ukrainian native and diasporic communities.

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<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983, Anderson 1991.

The Kapelia bandurysts brought with them into the New World their performance practices and accompanying values as powerful identity markers. Within Ukraine, the bandura was deliberately transformed, both physically and in terms of performance practices, in accordance with Communist-controlled discourses of Ukrainian nationhood. This transformation raises questions as to the current significance of performance practices and accompanying discourses of Ukrainian nationhood, and how they are negotiated in contemporary musical performance spaces like Bandura Festival 2000. While the conservatory style of playing allowed the instrument a safe venue, the bandura's institutionalization is also perceived by some New World practitioners as limiting, and the conservatory repertoire as "second-rate." What are the implications of these politics, specifically in relation to developments of the bandura, the re-constructions of cultural identity and accompanying discourses of nationhood? What are the values associated with appropriating a sound and mapping it onto a new space?

Avtar Brah writes, ethnicity, class and nationalism are *all* social constructions that represent "constitutive elements in the formation of different forms of subjectivity and social practices...played out in economic, political, cultural and psychic spheres... saturated with metaphors of origin, common ancestry, blood, kith and kin."<sup>5</sup> In short, identity markers that work together to re-enact culture and values, like those represented in performance choices with specific regard to style and repertoire, cannot be understood as natural models of "authenticity;" instead, they are embodiments of these values and related identity politics. Whether or not the values being reproduced in the material I

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<sup>5</sup> Brah 1996: 154

discussed in this paper are specifically related to Ukrainian nationhood— understood as part of an established Ukrainian folklore, Communist politics, or transnational diaspora or intra-diasporic definitions—it is clear that this production is linked at least more generally to constructs and discourses of the (M)odern nation. These values are related to the dichotomy between traditional community and modern (or postmodern, as it may be) society that has, in the past, guided academics in their search for social theory. Whereas Monson points out in *African Diaspora*, now we understand these discourses and processes of production as multiplicitous, a complex of interwoven alliances.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier in the paper I highlighted the controversy surrounding the exploration of musical life stories in academic research. With this in mind, I refer to Diamond’s recently published article in *Music and Gender*. Here, she asks: “What can we learn by magnifying one particular (abstract) juncture in one specific (concrete) location... the life narratives of musicians in a specific time and place?” Diamond explains that musical life stories “must be heard or read not so much in terms of what the subjects accomplished but in terms of what they desired, not just in terms of what they did but in terms of the individuals to whom they sought to relate by their actions.” She proposes an investigation of points in these narratives as “constructed,” the dialogic nature of their construction, and this strategic use of identity. Then, these rich narratives “enable us not merely to construct the socially reinforced or to reflect the individually differentiated but also to understand the relationship between these value systems.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Monson 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Diamond 2000:100.

I searched for such an understanding amidst the convergence of bandura performance practices and Bandura Festival 2000, and a story of Julian Kytasty's musical life. I offer one interpretation of the relationship between specific national discourses associated with the bandura and the particular history of Ukraine, and the values Julian employs as he negotiates individual places for himself in spaces like the Festival 2000, the bandura world at large, in Ukrainian and other communities. His musical practices force conceptualizations of Ukrainian nationhood into flux, conceptualizations that are predicated on a specific history and constructs of the bandura as a powerful national symbol.

What is it about Julian's bandura performances, and performances and understandings of his identity, that are considered Ukrainian or challenges to Ukrainianisms, and to whom? He says that his country is "the one that never happened—the one where all those village schools were teaching, the one that was trying to define itself but never quite did; the whole Ukraine of the 17th century that we've never been allowed to have—eradicating from memory by a Russian empire that worked very hard to make Ukraine forget it all." In reference to contemporary bandura performance practices within and among Ukrainian communities, Julian articulates his understandings of his position in reproductions of culturally situated musical practices. He and his music are "kind of Ukrainian," he says, "but an alternative Ukrainian that could only exist over here." While interacting with the rest of the world's music, Julian aspires to make music that "speaks to his contemporaries, to people who are alive; to be a completely 21<sup>st</sup>

century artist and still do the old time kobzar stuff.” He has re-articulated the bandura with his own unique style of performance and choices of repertoire in a manner unlike anything that has come before him; he has made it his own. Julian Kytasty’s experiences reveal that diaspora voices are indeed heard in contemporary bandura performance contexts, and in discourses and re-creations of Ukrainian nationhood.

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