

MUSIC

Love of song, country brings bandurists together

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN
STAFF WRITER

Stalin nearly exterminated Ukrainian bandurists in the early 1930s, but as it has since the 12th century, the spirit of the people's music lives on.

Today, the Ukrainian Bandura Chorus of North America preserves and perpetuates the tradition and culture of the country known as the breadbasket of the world. The bandurists, who brought their music to America in 1949, have performed at Carnegie Hall in New York City and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. They now have five cassettes and three CDs, one of the latest releases was recorded in 1991 in Kiev during a three week tour of northern and central Ukraine.

The following year, the chorus received Ukraine's highest cultural award, the Taras Shevchenko Ukrainian State Award for musical achievement. The chorus returned to southern Ukraine for a two week tour in 1994.

"It was an eye opener," said Vladimir Murha, a Livonia bandurist, who became involved with the music in the 1960s. "Some are still stagnating in the Soviet system, while others smelled the taste of freedom."

"The first tour we couldn't sing the national anthem but we ended each concert with it anyway," added chorus president Arnold Birko of Livonia. "We also sang religious hymns."

In early October, 45 chorus members from Livonia, Plymouth, Troy, West Bloomfield, Bloomfield Hills, Pontiac, Rochester Hills, Toronto, Chicago, New York and Ohio traveled to the East Coast and Canada for a concert tour. On Saturday, Nov. 1 the Ukrainian Bandura Chorus of North America performed religious, traditional minstrel and folk songs, Ukrainian contemporary songs, and American songs at the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts.

"We're trying to maintain the tradition of playing bandura, because of communism it's been lost there," said Marko Farion, a Troy dentist and chorus member

Ukrainian Bandura Chorus of North America

What: A concert of Ukrainian vocal and bandura music including traditional folk and minstrel songs, religious, and contemporary Ukrainian songs.

When: 7 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 1

Where: Macomb Center for the Performing Arts, 44575 Garfield Road and Hall (M-59) Road, Clinton Township. Tickets: \$23 adults, \$21 students/seniors. (810) 286-6666 or (248) 645-6666.

for more than 20 years. "A lot of people in the area are of Ukrainian heritage and still like to hear this," said Farion.

The multi-stringed bandura, a cross between a harp and lute, is the national musical instrument of Ukraine. Murha began taking lessons at age 12 at St. Mary Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Detroit where he eventually joined a youth ensemble. He joined the Ukrainian Bandura Chorus of North America in 1966.

"Ukrainian parents usually say, take something cultural like Ukrainian dance," said Murha, whose 18-year old son Anatoli is a member of the chorus. "It's a way of continuing the culture."

Conductor Oleh Mahlay traveled from Cleveland to lead the chorus in their final rehearsal before the Nov. 1 concert.

The instrument goes back to the 11th or 12th century. 17th through 19th century minstrels going from village to village, they were sort of Ukrainian glue," said conductor Oleh Mahlay, a Cleveland area attorney. "The only sort of history and moral teaching were these minstrels."

Under Stalin, artists and intellectuals were arrested, exiled or executed to eradicate Ukrainian culture. The bandurists' ideals of God, truth, freedom, and human dignity were seen as a threat to the newly-formed Soviet Union.

"On the pretext of attending a convention, Stalin in 1933-34 herded hundreds of bandurists into a field and shot them," said Mahlay.

In 1935, the remaining members were forced to reorganize as the Soviet State Bandurist Chorus. Three years later, Hnat Khotkevich was executed in Kharkiv and his compositions were banned in the Soviet Union. Khotkevich presented the concept of forming a professional orchestra of bandurists. The first, founded in Kiev during a brief period of independence in 1918, was under the direction of Vasyl Yemetz and had 16 members. The roots of the Ukrainian Bandura Chorus of North America can be traced back to this group.

"They were playing in spite of the fact they weren't supposed to be singing nationalistic songs," said Mahlay. "Throughout the centuries, bandurists have always been persecuted by somebody."

Through the assistance of the Allied Forces in 1949, many of the chorus members immigrated from refugee camps to the United States. The majority chose Detroit as home because of the prevalence of jobs in the auto industry.

"During the Nazi retreat from the Soviet Union, the bandurists retreated with them into Germany, the war ended and we immigrated to the U.S. in 1949," said Mahlay. "The westward trek was by horseback and freight car. All the bandurists could count on through it all was each other."

Two of the original members remain active with the chorus - 86 year old Peter Honcharenko of Clinton Township and Peter Kytasty, a 69 year old Livonia resident. Today, the chorus, with members ranging in age from 17 to 87, thrives but at one time membership dwindled. Arnold Birko joined the chorus in 1964. They rehearse 16 to 20 times a year in Detroit as a group. In between Mahlay travels to Toronto, Detroit, Chicago and the East Coast to work with members in smaller groups.

"You always need to replenish



United by song: The Ukrainian Bandura Chorus of North America, under the direction of Oleh Mahlay, brings the bandurists love of song to the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts.

the ranks," said Birko. "Twenty years ago membership declined because members were aging. Today, many of the members are in their late 20s. If you know how to play you're welcome. It's a brotherhood. We call each other half-brother."

Added Murha, "we've had three generations of a family in the chorus all at the same time." Son Andriy Birko, formerly of Livonia now living in Warren, joined the chorus 11 years ago. He attended summer camps sponsored by various youth organizations in London, Ontario.

"That's where a lot of us go our start playing," said Andriy Birko. "The camps are the primary means of perpetuating the bandura."

The 1991 concert tour differed from the 1994 because the chorus returned to a free Ukraine. Instead of playing the major markets like Kiev, the chorus performed in the ports on the Black Sea. It was a time of

uncertainty and unrest.

"They were heavily Russified areas," said Marko Farion who began playing bandura more than 20 years ago. "During the communist days not a lot of Ukrainian was taught in schools. Some of them had never heard the songs before. We brought the old Ukrainian songs because it was banned by the Soviet regime. We brought it back as kind of a gift to the Ukrainian people."

Deep commitment

The chorus feels an obligation to continue what bandura players have continued over the centuries. But as with other nonprofits, that can be difficult.

"The costs are very high but what drives us is the love for the group and the Ukrainian culture," said Murha. "We keep the music alive; we perpetuate our culture. What we've done is go to the community for help. We also raise funds through concerts and

Christmas caroling."

Today, the Ukrainian Bandura Chorus of North America, which is comprised of attorneys, doctors, engineers, architects, and entrepreneurs, have revived the bandurists' spirit and love of song. George Jurkiw and Jarema Cisaruk say it's the love of song that will carry them through the eight hours of the final rehearsal.

"Nobody gets paid money," said Cisaruk of Warren. "We take from vacation time all for the love of song."

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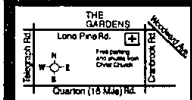
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