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SING WITH UKRAINE: POLITICAL KOLIADA OR GUERRILLA CAROLLING AS A RESPONSE TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Introduction

On the eve of February 23, 2022, Eastern Standard Time, a small group of singers had already gathered to "Sing with Ukraine." They represented a community of singers and other arts-oriented people in Toronto with varying degrees of interest in Eastern European music, who simply got together to express comradery and concern over the Russian military build-up around Ukraine. It was serendipitous that they were gathered together to sing at the very moment when the war broke out.

Since then, singing polyphonic Ukrainian folk songs by this community has channeled the cathartic powers of these songs into education, raising awareness, and fundraising. They started with singers who were professional musicians and the purpose was to sing in a traditional Ukrainian style described in Canada as "*ridnyj holos*" (native voice). Most of the songs come from a complex polyphonic tradition that is even hard to access in Ukraine and, as I have described in other papers on the topic, identifies this singing as part of a transnational revival movement with a unique Toronto style (Kuzmich 2016).

Political *Koliada*[1] and guerrilla caroling were terms used almost immediately by the singers to identify their initial musical activism, which involved interrupting the scheduled program at different Toronto venues to "awaken people from indifference." Along with caroling were short speeches highlighting updated information about the war, Russian misinformation campaigns, and the validity of Ukraine as a unique culture. The audiences were also encouraged to be active, whether that meant simply staying informed with credible news sources, writing companies and government agencies to change their relations with Russia, donating to reliable organizations, or other ways.

This paper will document the activities of these singers, reviewing the origins and development of their musical practice and identifying how aspects of the Sing with Ukraine (SWU) practice reflect an organic folk practice. A defining characteristic of the practice is an energy or drive linking their powerful singing to the intense outreach of their humanitarian efforts. It is curious, however, that such a powerful organic folk practice can arise in Toronto, so far from the homeland, from a people and culture clearly repressed for hundreds of years, with a musical form that has historically been underrepresented. To address this, the paper contextualizes the vastness of the polyphonic tradition and its historic underrepresentation; then provides some background to the diaspora community in Toronto and the unique and necessary conditions for the development of SWU.[2]

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[1] *Koliada* means Christmas carol. In the Toronto community, it is also referring to the caroling practice and/or the caroling season, which starts in mid-December and ends in February.

[2] Please note that while I will be discussing topics of the ongoing war in Ukraine, I am not a war expert, nor even a Ukrainian music scholar, and ask that you recognize the preliminary nature of this paper and this subject. It is also important to note how dehumanizing the subject of war is, and that reference to Russians as aggressors or Ukrainians as heroes grossly overlooks the complexities of these people and their histories.

Origins of Sing with Ukraine: The First Month

Three days before the war started, some concerned messages and the desire to meet and sing were sent on the WhatsApp 2022 *Koliada* group. Caroling, especially on January 7, was a big event for the community. Many singers, including those from non-Ukrainian backgrounds, were siphoned into 2 or 3 caroling groups of 6–8 singers, each sent to bring blessings and carols to 5–7 houses. The evening they were always ended as a mass of *kolyadnyky* (carolers) at the Ihnatowycz's house, a mansion where musicians and carolers were welcomed to celebrate Christmas. But this hadn't happened since January of 2020. Because of the pandemic, there has been no in-person group singing since March of 2020. And for *Koliada* 2022, there were only 4 of us to start, and 2 others joined for the last 2 houses.

On February 23, 4 singers met at an apartment. They were singing songs – Ukrainian and others – and just chatting when the war broke out. Disbelief and shock followed by one more song: "Plyve Kacha," a lament turned anthem for the fallen in the Maidan of 2014. A few texts were shared with other concerned community members and the singers went home – but the evening didn't end. A Messenger group chat started at 1:30 am, expressing a need to do something. By 8 am, a few more were added to the group and they started organizing a benefit concert; by 12 PM, some members were featured on Curtain Call, a live Instagram show, talking about the war and offering ways to support. By 1:20 PM the graphic for SWU was created and shared.

The messenger group chat kept growing with people ready to aid in the defense efforts for Ukraine. Most worked in music or the arts but not all were singers and a new chat group was formed just for the singers, which consists of Ukrainians, Ukrainian-Canadians, Poles, Russians, Sephardic-Jewish-Canadians, a Canadian-Italian, and a mixed Western European-Canadian-First Nation.

The primary goal was to network, mobilize, and help defense efforts in Ukraine. It was incredibly humbling to watch this community react and mobilize so quickly to the sudden and unimaginable terror of war. They facilitated transportation and lodging for those seeking refuge; advocated and organized services for unfairly treated visible minorities; compiled reliable media, and donor agencies, and form letters to government and corporations; compiled lists of supplies needed and listed drop-off points; and organized a massive musical fundraiser. It was an unbelievable whirlwind of chaotic organization, logistics, messaging, Google Docs and Sheets, slack channels, Instagram posts, and stories. Their drive no doubt paralleled the mobilization of Ukrainians to fight in Ukraine at the same time.[3]

And in the midst of all this, getting together to sing was cathartic, a solace… but it was also done for a point. Powerful polyphonic songs were sung for audiences at different venues in Toronto, interspersed with messages about the validity of Ukrainian culture, the right to live peacefully in a democratic state; and ways to help the Ukrainian defensive efforts.

Through traditional Ukrainian songs, SWU channeled the profound collective memory of courage and strength that Ukrainian people have needed in past wars and genocide. The power of these collective memories came clearly through these songs and affected audiences in just as profound a way. Even when they sang at the popular Drake Hotel or the Supermarket's Big Fam Jam, where the hip youth of Toronto gathered, ready to party and celebrate the end of COVID lockdowns

[3] It should also be recognized that this drive also existed in all sorts of pockets of Toronto, and elsewhere outside of Ukraine. One private Toronto-based Facebook group called Second Front was created in response to the war and was so successful in supporting defense efforts that it incorporated into a non-profit after a few months.

– those youths all stood quietly and listened. When asked, they all joined in on the drone to accompany the singers. And when the songs were over, they cheered with such enthusiasm and force that it felt like Ukraine would be able to withstand anything. Many audiences reacted the same way and there were stories of young people, coming up to singers saying they had no interest in politics and never wanted to be political, but were thinking differently after our performance.

The Performance Practice

What songs were sung at a performance was rather ad hoc and initially established by the urgency of the need to perform: by the end of the second day of the war, we had already sung in 5 different venues, sets of 1–5 songs in length. There was no time to rehearse. Lyrics were shared by taking screenshots at the venue. If you were lucky, you had a moment to review the part outside in the February cold before taking to the stage. If not, you learned your part on the spot. Most of the singers were professional strong singers, experienced with the *ridnyj* style.[4]

Song lyrics and some audio files or YouTube videos were shared via the group chat in an attempt to increase the repertoire but a repertoire of 7 songs was rather quickly established, featuring a cross-section of happy, solemn, and epic tunes. We rarely sang them all in a set but it was important to combine solemn and serious songs with uplifting, happy ones. Within the first month, we sang in 14 different venues. The first 4–6 weeks represented a truly organic practice: supported by the voices of their fellow singers, they sang freely, at the moment, with little thought other than to manifest their desires for peace and survival.

Challenges, Changes, and a Stable State

Challenges set in when more formal and lucrative performance opportunities arose at the end of April, which meant more fitness and more repertoire. This was particularly demanding for singers since COVID restrictions were lifting and everyone was getting busier with work.[5] Coupled with continued relief efforts for Ukraine meant singers were burning out, and by the end of March, there was a call for more singers.

While the group had not grown a lot in size, the 10–11 singers that performed for these more important and lengthier shows were not all professionals, and many of those who were professional, did not have a lot of choral experience, especially the choral experience that requires rehearsing and performing with mixed levels of skills. Needed rehearsals were not just fraught with scheduling issues but also with the inability to have strong choral leadership that wouldn't interfere with the socially inclusive community atmosphere of the group. Some aspects of rehearsing the group seemed counterintuitive to the group's formation, which was based on guerilla-styled, ad hoc, impromptu performances.

Attempts were made to draw in new singers. From May through to August, song workshops exposed many new singers to Ukrainian polyphony. A little vocal technique was discussed in the workshops but mostly focused on repertoire with notes to match the energy and style of the lead singers. Only a few singers were successfully recruited through these workshops, and these new

[4] The style uses a loud voice with a bright timbre and involves distinct inflections and phrasing and vocal techniques like ornaments and slides.

[5] All these activities were in addition to their usual "day" jobs, some of whom were educators, marketing professionals, music producers, designers, etc.

singers still needed lots of training – sometimes being challenged with singing in tune, the appropriate part, or with the power of the *ridnyj* style.

By mid-June, the group evolved into a performance group that raises money and awareness for Ukraine. Guerilla-styled singing was no longer the modus operandi. Performances became a critically thought out, premeditated, and intentional process. Rehearsals became mandatory to distribute parts and ensure the power of the song. Like before, the songs are still organized into a narrative to remind listeners that Ukraine is Europe's largest country, that every generation of Ukrainians has gone through war and/or acts of genocide, and that this trauma as well as the desire to be expressive and happy, sonically shapes the songs sung. While not maintaining the offstage energy and exuberance of the early days, the group's songs and message are still very powerful and well-received.

Drive Is the Defining Character

Before the stage-performance orientation, SWU seemed to reflect a more organic and authentic urban folk practice that naturally arose and was intricately linked with the incredibly busy activities of their defense efforts. While I can point to all sorts of aspects of this earlier SWU practice – songs sung, the tuning, timbre, and distribution of the voices, the stage presentation, and costumes – I maintain that the defining characteristic was their energy and drive that:

- motivated the will to perform;
- guided the group's singing and musical phrasing;
- bonded the group through musical performances; and
- seamlessly integrated the music with the excessive humanitarian work.

As already mentioned, this energy and drive seemed to parallel the drive Ukrainians in Ukraine had at that moment to fight the war. It also parallels the descriptions of the Maidan's peaceful protest to the violent dispersal of pro-European 2013/14 – that drove people in Kyiv to so effectively mobilize and organize themselves into a quasi city, with medical units, guards, builders, cooks, etc. What remains most striking about SWU is how such a powerful organic folk practice arose in Toronto, especially given the obscurity of the musical tradition and the muted character of Toronto Ukrainian culture.

Vastness & Obscurity of Ukrainian Vocal Polyphony

The vastness of this tradition is clearly demonstrated through the Polyphony Project, the largest online archive of traditional Ukrainian songs. Started only in 2014, it now hosts over 2000 songs from 11 ethnographic regions, with excellent audio and video recording quality, and online multitracked control so you can hear each part separately. The database can be searched by lyrics, genre, location, ethnographic region, theme subjects, etc. It is also responsible for the popularization of Ukrainian polyphony throughout Europe, as is evidenced by the sold-out concert halls.

What is really shocking about the vastness and richness of traditional Ukrainian polyphony is its obscurity. I had no idea of the richness of this music until 2013 when I attended a local folk-arts community workshop in Toronto – and I am not only of Ukrainian heritage but by that time had been studying and researching polyphony for 10 years.

The truth is, that vocal polyphony in Ukraine has been systematically undermined. According to Joseph Jordania, Ukrainian Ethnomusicologists displayed total neglect for their own polyphonic traditions (2006: 68). The Polyphony Project was not even initiated by Ukrainians but by a Hungarian musician/ethnographer, Miklos Both. When Mario Morello and I presented a paper about

Ukrainian polyphony in Toronto at a Ukrainian conference in 2020, one of the first comments suggested that our performance group's work was not really adequate unless we included the beautiful melodic monophonic songs of Western Ukraine. Even today, if you search for "polyphony" or "folk choir" on Ukrainian media sites, there are very few results.

Of course, all of Ukrainian culture, like many local cultures, was repressed by Russian colonization and then Sovietization.[6] The systematic institutionalization and naturalization of undermining Ukrainian vocal polyphony is complex to analyze but some insights may be gained by considering Lara Pellegrinelli's ideas of why singers have been omitted from jazz historiography. In jazz discourse, singers are limited to only a 'precursor' of jazz because the voice, associated with the body, is seen as untrained and emotional, the folk, the vernacular. In gender and cultural studies, these are typically the qualities associated with the female. This is in contrast with the instrument, which is associated with the male due to its technical demands, intellect, and skills required for conquering and mastering it. These features thus legitimize instrumental jazz in a Western cultural sense [and] further play into all sorts of colonialist tropes told through 'birthing' and 'great man' 'genius' histories of jazz, which is part of the process of acquiring the 'cultural capital' to turn jazz into art music (Pellegrinelli 2008: 31–48).

So, Western colonial values around music – which shunned Ukrainian vocal polyphony and prized the genius character of some instrumental or more developed melodic and lyrical songs – were so deeply naturalized by Ukrainians to legitimize forms of Ukrainian folk music as "art" music. Thus, instrumental music and the *kobzar* tradition (especially with its lyrical use of historical subjects set to a song accompanied by the sophisticated *bandura*)[7] are more highly valued than the unintelligible vocables and narrow melodies of rural Ukrainian women.

Toronto Diaspora & Ukrainian Culture

The Canadian diaspora is no exception to this devaluing of Ukrainian vocal polyphony. As a third-generation Canadian-Ukrainian to rural mostly uneducated grandparents, who immigrated in the late 1920s, the Ukrainian culture I inherited was a very muted expression. The closest I came to folk was listening to Trio Marenych, which featured beautiful Ukrainian melodies sung by the perfect academic blend of 2 female voices and a bass, accompanied by guitar. In comparison, my friends who are third-generation Ukrainians from grandparents who were business professionals or intellectuals who immigrated in the 1940s and 50s all speak Ukrainian, went to Ukrainian schools and summer camps, and were part of a highly functioning, insular community of Ukrainians who were conscientiously institutionalizing the distinctness of their culture (Baczynskyj 2009; Sonevytsky 2019: X–XI). Many more folk elements survived and circulated in this diaspora. Major calendar

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[6] Many tangible forms of repression impacted the culture and even threatened people's lives: deportations, internment camps, full-scale invasions, manmade famines, language policies, physical destructions of books and cultural artifacts; and in more modern times destruction of digitized cultural archives. See FN 8 for more about the musical repression in Ukraine.

[7] *Kobzars* were single, often blind roaming minstrels, performing solo, and earning cash in public places. They had a significant role in disseminating information and recalling local histories. They accompanied themselves on the *bandura*, a sophisticated and beautiful plucked instrument that combines elements of a zither and lute. *Kobzars* were the subject of the Soviet purges of the 1930s, effectively effacing the tradition and replacing it with the manufactured Soviet *bandura* ensembles, which became the accepted musical symbol of Ukraine's national heritage (Noll 1997: 181–3).

events, like Koliada, Malanka, Haivky, Ivana Kupalo, and other rituals were celebrated, but arguably, were still muted. For example, pagan folk elements – like the cross-dressing Melanka stage-show character for the Ukrainian New Year "super" dance that occurs in banquet halls (Klymasz 1985), or fortune-telling and eccentric performances of forest nymphs covered in "ooga booga" mud for Ivana Kupalo (summer solstice festival) at youth camps – survived in a somewhat diluted way, often divorced from any meaning other than being entertaining, performative, and identifying as something distinctly Ukrainian (O. Kleban, personal communication, 2016; Klymasz 1985).

The Kosa Kolektiv Community

The singers of SWU, who don't all have Ukrainian heritage, did not come from either of these diaspora communities. The singers came through a singing practice in Canada that started around 2011, with the development of Kosa Kolektiv (Kosa), a Ukrainian-Canadian initiated, folk-arts-based multicultural community in Toronto. The four founding members of Kosa are third-generation immigrants who grew up in this insular community, and the creation of Kosa was in part a reaction to the insular nature of their diaspora Ukrainians.

The singing practice more specifically can be traced to one of those 4 founding members, Bozena Hrycyna who brought back this will to sing from her experiences in Ukraine in 2009. She has trouble explaining why she wanted to sing or share her desire to sing, but doing so went hand in hand with other folk forms that Kosa was active in (crafting, canning, cooking, egg decorating, embroidery, etc.) and helped connect her to a revival of "authentic" folk, which at times distanced her from her Ukrainian-Canadian inheritances that "suddenly [and sometimes painfully] seemed 'hokey' or contrived" (B. Hrycyna, personal communication, July 3 2016).

Polyphonic singing, which started in 2011, involved workshops and singing nights in helping develop repertoire and the *ridnyj* technique. Most importantly, however, singing for Kosa was never organized for the stage, like the diaspora choirs and dance groups they grew up with. Singing was meant to be part of a larger interdisciplinary community experience – where dressing in costumes, displaying or partaking in crafts, storytelling, games, ritual, and dance enhanced and heightened the experience and meaning of singing. Unquestionably, this framing of singing infused it with energy. How could it not when so much energy and coordination had to go into these community events? The impetus for these events rested on Kosa's organizational ability, energy, and drive. This energy and drive, while not something really tangible we can account for and challenging to describe, imbued the experience of singing Ukrainian polyphony and was formative in its practice in Toronto.

Conclusion

Bozena qualifies her vaguely expressed a desire to share folk culture after being in Ukraine by describing the power of the songs – their melodies and particularly their meanings – which in their reference to war, death, and survival, have remarkable currency today. There was, however, no war in 2009 when she was first moved by them, at which time she described them as "unapologetic, 'in your face,' real" (B. Hrycyna, personal communication, July 3, 2016). Unapologetic, "in your face," and real highlights the energy and drive behind the songs. This drive is embedded not just in Ukrainian vocal polyphony and the practices in Toronto; but also, in the will of the citizens rallying in the 2013/14 Maidan, and the heroism of the fighters in Ukraine now. This is the drive to love and express *without restraint* a distinct Ukrainian identity; something that was repressed for too long under Russian and Soviet rule and has clearly thrived since Ukrainian independence.

This *drive* has become a thread that weaves throughout this paper. The drive comes from the memory and stories of collective trauma and joy, which shape the songs lyrically and sonically – they drive their performance and make them so real and palpable… so "in your face." This drive is not just inherent in the songs, but also inherited *from* them, which makes it transferable and explains how so many non-Ukrainians connect deeply with the music; and explains how an elderly Anglo-Saxon couple at Toronto's high-profile CULTURA Festival in July of 2022 lifted their imaginary shot glasses and toasted back with verve as the singers of SWU ended their drinking song; and explains how it made those indifferent 20-something kids at the Supermarket – who in their fortunate privileged and peaceful young lives have absolutely no first or even second-hand connection to death and war – stop and think profoundly about the politics of war. It explains the power and natural practice of SWU, and their ability to stop people from being indifferent, even if just a moment.

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