

## Women Playing the Bandura Challenging Discourses of Nationhood

Marcia Ostashewski

Volume 23, Number 1, 2001

Festival

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087919ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087919ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ostashewski, M. (2001). Women Playing the Bandura: Challenging Discourses of Nationhood. *Ethnologies*, 23(1), 123–145. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087919ar>

Article abstract

As Ukraine's national instrument, the bandura evokes contradictory and conflicting national narratives. In this article, the author provides a brief history of the bandura, including its role in Ukraine's modern nation-building process, its performance practices and issues relating to gender. She examines contexts within which two main bandura performance styles are practiced, by relating them to specific events at the Bandura Festival 2000. Interviews with bandura player Nadia Tarnawska reveal how the Bandura Festival 2000 functions within and as a part of the continuing construction of the instruments history, and discourses of Ukrainianness. Tarnawska's experiences constitute a poignant illustration of the nature of these discourses in relation to the Bandura Festival 2000, Ukrainian musical production more generally, and wider issues relating to gender and nationhood. For this reason, the author discusses the place of life stories in the larger context of changing musical practices.

# WOMEN PLAYING THE BANDURA

## Challenging Discourses of Nationhood

**Marcia Ostaszewski**  
*York University, Toronto*

From my fieldnotes, 18 March, Bandura Festival 2000:

a senior-aged Canadian Ukrainian woman, speaking in Ukrainian to a mid-30s, obviously respected and well-known male banduryst from Ukraine (trying to get him to pose elegantly with his instrument for a photo), “Bandura — to ye kozaka zhinka!” [“A bandura is a Cossack’s woman/wife!”].

Contemporary performance practices associated with the Ukrainian national instrument, the bandura, reveal both the negotiation of gender and the implications of discourses of nation. The fieldwork I conducted at Bandura Festival 2000, held in March in Oakville, Ontario, was initiated as part of my dissertation research to examine how diasporic Ukrainian communities use music simultaneously to create “local” identity and to participate in the construction of a Ukrainian sense of history and nationhood on a global scale. Cultural festivals like this function as sites of intense negotiation; the sounds and songs people choose to perform, debate, evaluate, listen to, and produce are important means by which Ukrainians create senses of local identity in direct relation to and often in conflict with other Ukrainian communities around the world.

As Ukraine’s national instrument, the bandura evokes contradictory and conflicting national narratives.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I provide a brief history of the bandura, including its role in Ukraine’s modern nation-building process, its

---

1. See Radhakrishnan’s discussion regarding the internal contradictions of nationalism (1992).

performance practices and issues relating to gender. I examine contexts within which two main bandura performance styles are practiced, by relating them to specific events at the Bandura Festival 2000. Interviews with bandura player Nadia Tarnawska reveal how the Bandura Festival 2000 functions within and as a part of the continuing construction of the instrument's history, and discourses of Ukrainianness. Tarnawska's experiences constitute a poignant illustration of the nature of these discourses in relation to the Bandura Festival 2000, Ukrainian musical production more generally, and wider issues relating to gender and nationhood.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, I discuss the place of life stories in the larger context of changing musical practices.

### The Bandura: Ukraine's National Instrument

The bandura is highly politicised as a marker of Ukrainian culture. Common performance practice, on this instrument "similar in construction and appearance to a European lute" (Hornjatkevyc 1984: 170), involves the player placing the bandura upright in his or her lap, and plucking the strings (of which there are generally 32-55) with his or her fingers (see Hornjatkevyc 1984, for a more detailed description).

By the seventeenth century, the instrument was firmly established as part of a tradition of male wandering bards, called *kobzars*. *Kobzars* roamed the countryside, travelling between villages, Cossack encampments and gentry manors. "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" (Hnatiukivsky 1984: 575). They accompanied themselves on their instruments, narrating great exploits of Ukrainian Cossack heroes (Subtelny 1988: 122). Their epic ballads, or *dumy* (plural of *duma*), are considered the "original" and traditional bandura repertoire (Wytwycky 1984: 171).

- 
2. With this essay, I challenge "the relative lack of concern with women's perspectives and activities among the people we study and the relative suppression of women's voices in the practice of folklore" (Young and Turner 1993: 13), and discourses of nationhood with respect to Ukrainian historical particularities. I thank all those who participated in this study, particularly the Festival organisers and film crew who were always graciously accommodating and helpful. In an e-mail conversation with Nadia Tarnawska, she mentioned that she felt honoured to be the focus of this essay. I must offer my heartfelt gratitude to Nadia for sharing with me her story, and allowing me to share it with you; I have been truly honoured by her openness and warmth.

The tradition of the wandering minstrel *kobzars* continued into the early twentieth century, although by the late nineteenth century it had begun to wane due to Russian persecution. Through times of colonization, serfdom and political oppression, these men evoked heroic and glorious images of Ukraine's past. One folklore enthusiast, Prince Nikolai Certelev, while travelling the Ukrainian countryside in the 1800s, noted

Unexpectedly, I came upon a blind bandura player, who like the old rhapsodes, walking, from one place to another, sang of the exploits of the native heroes. I took down everything he knew...the genius and the spirit of the people, the customs of the times and, finally, this pure moral quality for which the Little Russians<sup>3</sup> have always been known and which they preserve even today as a heritage of their ancestors, saved from the greed of the neighbouring nations (Certelev, in Luckyj 1971: 26).

These comments highlight two fundamental issues of bandura performance and meaning. First, the bandura is implicated through its repertoire in the nation-building project of Ukraine. It contributes (or is seen as contributing) to a "sense of history and the perception of cultural uniqueness...an authentic and particularistic ethnic heritage" (Smith 1986: 22), and invention of national mythologies, based on folklore. Second, the author describes the instrument's historical situation within a male context, both in terms of who played it and the song texts its music accompanied. "In past centuries the art of bandura playing was an exclusively male domain" (Wytwycky 1984: 171),<sup>4</sup> reads the *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* entry on "bandura." According to nineteenth century folkloric discourse and the "history" of past centuries, the bandura is not a woman's instrument.

In the early twentieth century bandura-playing was revived and pursued at amateur and professional levels; the first bandura *kapelia* [capella]<sup>5</sup> was

3. Another name for Ukrainians, used to denote a lesser status and evoke the paternal attitude of Russians toward Ukrainians. Russians believed that Ukrainians were essentially Russians, or merely a "tribe" of Russians, who had been somewhat culturally misguided (Subtelny 1988: 210).
4. This continues to be the prevalent understanding of the bandura's history with respect to performance practices, due in part to the many historical accounts (and their implications for nineteenth century folkloric discourse) such as the one from the 1800s I quoted above. All references that I have come across, academic or otherwise, are consistent in this.
5. An ensemble of singers or instrumentalists or both.

organised in Kyiv<sup>6</sup> in 1918 (Wytwycky 1984: 171). 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. In the early 1930s, he assembled many bandurysts for a conference and attempted to eliminate them by committing a mass murder on the site.<sup>7</sup> Other bandurysts, including the notable Kobzar Khotkevych, were repressed and deported (Wytwycky 1984: 171). Some bandurysts, many of whom belonged to the *kapelia* that originated in 1918 Ukraine, escaped persecution by fleeing to Western Europe and subsequently to the United States. The *kapelia*<sup>8</sup> players and *kobzars* are at the root of the bandura tradition in North America.

It was at this point that the history of the instrument forked; it took one pathway in the New World, and another in the Old Country. North American performance styles are largely characterised by kobzar and *kapelia* performance styles; in Ukraine, after the exodus of bandurysts, the bandura became institutionalised. As part of socialist-realist constructs of Soviet identity vis-à-vis Communist politics,<sup>9</sup> the bandura became a conservatory instrument. Large ensembles were formed, and women's trios became especially popular (Wytwycky 1984: 171). This institutionalization largely nullified its once troublesome nationalist evocations, and allowed its return to a public cultural

- 
6. Kyiv is transliterated from the Ukrainian language spelling; "Kiev" is transliterated from the Russian spelling.
  7. Somewhat mythic, this assembly of bandurysts and subsequent mass murder is not recorded in Ukrainian history books. This is not surprising, considering the political climate in Ukraine at that time. I was told several times during the course of the Bandura Festival 2000 that the composer Dmitri Shostakovich notes the event in his memoirs. In fact, some young bandurysts were on edge as they were now participants in their own conference; some said they almost expected some KGB troopers to storm in shooting guns.
  8. These *kapelia* bandurysts established a base in Detroit, Michigan, under the long-standing direction of Hryhoriy Kytasty. They are known as the "Kapelia Bandurystiv."
  9. Socialist realism is defined as "The only officially sanctioned so-called 'creative method' in Soviet literature and art from the early 1930s...As applied...[its] principles had a very narrow meaning. The 'true depiction of reality in its revolutionary development' meant that literature and art were to serve as glorifying illustrations of the CPSUs policies, and to portray what was hoped for in such a way that it seemed real. Deviations into truly realistic portrayals of Soviet reality and its deficiencies were attacked as 'slavishness to facts' or 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.' That response resulted in the formulation of such theoretical conceptions as the 'varnishing of reality' and the 'theory of no conflict,' that is, painting reality with a rosy hue" (Koshelivets 1993: 794).

forum. It also permitted women access to the instrument; in fact, currently most conservatory bandurysts are women.<sup>10</sup> In the light of Stalinist persecution, a man would have put himself in serious danger if he chose to play the bandura.

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 *narodni pisni* [folk songs]; many are original compositions. The demands placed on the bandura by this new repertoire necessitated the instrument's reconstruction.<sup>11</sup> The man credited with the most important elements of reconstruction and the greatest developments of the last 50 years is Vasyl Herasymenko, a renowned instructor and performer who lives in Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

Herasymenko attended the Bandura Festival 2000 in Oakville, Ontario, and played a visibly important role that included a keynote address. Two of his daughters were also central participants at the festival; both are professional bandurysts. One daughter, who immigrated to Sacramento, California approximately 15 years ago, has established a bandura school where she teaches the conservatory style of playing. While she has been quoted as saying quite emphatically, that "we" do not sing folk songs with the bandura,<sup>13</sup> she does include many adapted stylizations of this music in her repertoire. She does not sing dumy, but women's songs like "Hey, Ivane," with the text "what a nice looking boy he is...how nicely he kisses."

## The Politics of History and Folklore

Contemporary developments of the bandura and its relationship to folklore and tradition suggest Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept of "the invention of

10. Gendered performance styles have also been noted by Andriy Hornjatkevyc. See his article "The State of the Bandura in Contemporary Ukraine" (1992). He discusses the three main playing styles: the conservatory, kapelia, and kobzar.

11. For example, "Some banduras use an additional set of strings for the semitones; others use a mechanism for retuning individual strings by a semitone; and some banduras employ both devices" (Hornjatkevyc 1984: 170).

12. While most bandura students in conservatories are women, the major teachers are men. In both the major conservatories in Ukraine where students can train on the bandura, the professors are male. In the United States, until recently, the bandura teachers were from the legacy of the Kapelia Bandurystiv, an organisation that is not open to women.

13. From my fieldnotes, a conversation with a banduryst.

tradition;" rather than instances of continuity within a culture, "traditions" are actually an adaptation (usually highly formalized) of an older element in a new cultural situation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The bandura is the "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 — by women as well as men, and with a new repertoire. It has even been physically reconstructed.<sup>14</sup> Its nationalist image essentially portrays what it means to be Ukrainian.

Ian McKay describes a similar case in which elements of rural life were used to represent a culture's essential identity. Folksong collector Helen Creighton collected folk songs and narratives from the province's coastal areas, and published her material as a representation of Nova Scotia as a whole, shaping a Nova Scotian identity as essentially rural and innocent.<sup>15</sup> Creighton's ideals, based on an implicit hegemonic order and reinforced by her upper middle class social position, created a Nova Scotian identity: "naturalized conservative assumptions about class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, irrationalism, and local identity...[they represented] a universe of assumptions about class and cultural distinction" (McKay 1994: 100). In both Creighton's Nova Scotia and the Ukrainianisms associated with contemporary bandura performances, the "folk" concept and gendered identity markers function together in the creation of a national or cultural identity. The pastoral perspective allowed the folk to be picturesque and quaint exotics, not fellow participants shaping a common culture and political order (McKay 1994: 109).

Creighton's influence became even more powerful when sponsored, and therefore legitimised, by the state (McKay 1994: 43-151). In the case of the bandura there are similar implications; the recent history of state sponsorship in Ukraine links developments of the bandura and the construction of cultural

---

14. Richard Handler has written about the Quebec government using folklore for social and political ends, a strategy conditioned by nationalism. They wanted to find somewhere in the past an "authentic" version of their nation or society that could be used to make sense of the present situation, thus stimulating a national culture. "Elements of a national culture, once secured, allow for adaptation"; folk traditions become objectified, re-translated, invented and re-invented" (Handler 1988: 52).

15. Creighton was one individual who played a part in a much larger movement of the objectification of "folklore" and "folk life"; McKay discusses this movement at greater length in *The Quest of the Folk* (1994). Also see Bendix 1997.

identity. Ukraine's modern nation-building began in the nineteenth century and was largely the result of earlier national projects in Western Europe and deliberate applications of Herder's Romantic Nationalist ideologies, including the heightened role of folklore and an effective patriarchy (for an extended discussion of this issue, see Linke [1995], and Kamenetsky [1973]). Bandura performance practices were actively "revived" during the early part of the twentieth century and carried into the New World 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 the Bandura Festival 2000. The values being reproduced may be specifically related to Ukrainian nationhood — understood as particularly diasporic Ukrainian or as related to transnational constructs continually being re-created between Old Country and diaspora communities — or linked more generally to constructs and discourses of the modern nation.

In the bandura's history and performance traditions, the conservatory style of playing allowed the instrument a safe venue. It allowed women access both to the instrument and to accompanying discourses of nationhood (though not the same national discourses used by the kobzars). However, the bandura's institutionalization is also perceived by some New World practitioners as limiting. In the words of a well-known diasporic banduryst who wished to remain anonymous, "the conservatory stuff is second-rate bandura repertoire." Furthermore, this performance style and associated conservatory and concert contexts strongly evoke high/low culture, rural/urban dichotomies and modes of prescribed behaviour.<sup>16</sup> But what are the values associated with appropriating a sound and mapping it onto a new space? What does it mean to take something "rural" and use it to represent national identity as a whole? 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 folklorists in their search for social theory (McKay 1994: 132).

---

16. This includes, for example, stage setup, concert attire of gowns and black skirts; audiences are also expected to behave in an appropriate manner.



## Bandura Festival 2000

The Bandura Festival 2000 took place on the weekend of March 17 to 19 at the St. Volodymyr Ukrainian Cultural Center in Oakville, Ontario (a suburb of Toronto). It was the first festival since the 1930s to focus on the bandura. Constructed like a conference, the international event included scheduled discussion sessions interspersed with concert performances.<sup>17</sup> The organisers invited several bandura players from Ukraine, and also arranged for their transportation and housing.<sup>18</sup> Other performers, participants, and audience members came from Argentina, Canada, and the United States.

The festival began on Friday afternoon with a prayer service honouring bandura players who died at Stalin's bandura players' conference in the 1930s. The first concert following this service consisted of *dumy*. This and all other concerts were presented in a large hall, on a stage flanked with a massive assortment of lighting and film equipment to accommodate the documentary filming that had been commissioned by the festival organisers.<sup>19</sup> The setting for the concert strongly contrasted with the cramped room, upstairs through a winding hallway in the Center, in which the prayer service was held.

Panel discussion sessions alternated throughout the Festival weekend with concerts. Discussion topics included "Teaching Bandura," "Bandura in Ukraine," "Bandura in Diaspora," "Composers and Bandura," "Bandura Construction," and, "Stepping into 2000." Concerts were thematic, and included "Dumy," "Soloists-Women," "Duets, Trios, Ensembles," "Soloists-Men," "Youth Ensembles," "Youth Soloists/Duets," and "New Trends."<sup>20</sup>

---

17. Victor Mishalow, one of the festival organisers, told me that it was named a "festival" because the Center had been given funding to create more festivals. The events of this weekend were deliberately and carefully arranged so as to access this funding.

18. It is entirely likely that no one from Ukraine could have participated without this financial help.

19. This was part of the organisers' agenda to have the bandura reach wider than Ukrainian audiences. Victor Mishalow also hopes to facilitate the importation of banduras into music stores and to market them as popularly as guitars (from fieldnotes). In the words of one of the film crew members, a Ukrainian also connected to community running the festival, "[we] want to bring the instrument out to the world...to the level Paul McCartney brought Indian instruments" (from fieldnotes).

20. This last concert was planned, but cancelled, some say in the interests of time. A trio of men who grew up and live in the United States and call themselves the Experimental Bandura Trio were to be the main performers in this concert. They were simply allowed a performance space in the final concert.

Saturday evening, a formal, catered dinner preceded the keynote address by Professor Herasymenko.<sup>21</sup> An extended Gala Concert concluded the festival late Sunday afternoon. 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.

Though it was also a collective event, here I explore the festival as a point in the musical life story of Nadia Tarnawska which implicates issues of gender and nation. Nadia grew up in and currently lives in Cleveland, Ohio. Her performance style draws upon the tradition that came to North America with the exiled banduryst immigrants. At the Bandura Festival 2000, she demonstrated her unique style of performance, markedly different from that of all the other women who played well within the rubrics of the pianistic conservatory style.<sup>22</sup> She was one of only two women performers that weekend who grew up in North America, compared to a dozen or so others who either live in or have recently immigrated from Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> Nadia decided to perform only after realising "that no one else would be singing in folk style (e-mail conversation with Nadia)," and that "the North American contingent was very underrepresented at the conference. The Ukrainian (from Ukraine) contingent was greatly represented" (e-mail from Nadia). Audiences enthusiastically applauded her performances throughout the weekend, and many offered personal greetings. "Even Professor Herasymenko...told me how well that style of folk singing was complimented by the bandura. He had never heard anything like it and was moved by it (e-mail from Nadia)," she told me. Others responded, when asked what they thought of her performance style, "it's different," "interesting," or "it's certainly unique" (from fieldnotes).

---

21. Throughout the festival weekend, much emphasis was placed on the importance of this figure in contemporary bandura developments. For example, during the discussion session after the panel "Teaching Bandura," one exasperated audience member took the podium and chastised the conference attendants for bothering to discuss these issues. As she put it, what more could be said than to celebrate Professor Herasymenko, since he is the ultimate and most important contributor to this field and the greatest teacher. This bandurystka had been taught by Professor Herasymenko in Ukraine, as had several other of the weekend's performers.

22. All the other female performers have studied bandura performance in Ukrainian conservatories.

23. The other North American woman, a Torontonion, played extremely proficiently in the conservatory style. I was told that she studied in a conservatory in Kyiv, which is why she plays the way she does.

I asked Nadia, currently in her late twenties, how she understood herself as a Ukrainian musician in the context of bandura performance, as well as within the context of the Bandura Festival 2000. She told me, “it’s been a long, hard road.”<sup>24</sup> Nadia remembers that when she became interested in playing the bandura, there were few opportunities for her. Early in her bandura education during her teen years, she attended a co-ed bandura summer camp in Emlenton, Pennsylvania.<sup>25</sup> When she had learned what the camp could offer, there were no forums in which she could continue to develop her skills and broaden her performance opportunities. The boys, Nadia said, all moved on to play in the Kapelia.<sup>26</sup> Even though many of the girls played just as well as or even better than some of the boys, she continued, there were no girls’ ensembles in which they could further their development.

Nadia realised that she had to develop her own style, her own niche, if she wanted to continue with the bandura. At this time, too, Nadia was attending concerts of touring Ukrainian ensembles and performers like Veriovka<sup>27</sup> and Ukrainian National Treasure Nina Matvienko.<sup>28</sup> These performers sing indigenous folk repertoire specially arranged for ensembles in a style called *vidchynenyj holos* [open voice],<sup>29</sup> a sound understood as essentially rural. Nadia enjoys telling the story of how she met with Nina Matvienko after a concert in the United States. She told me that at a backstage impromptu meeting, she sang for Matvienko, who then gave her suggestions on how to improve her technique. And, as Nadia’s website mentions,<sup>30</sup> Matvienko expressed to Nadia her pleasure of considering Nadia her student.

24. From an interview with Nadia Tarnawska, conducted immediately after the festival..

25. At Emlenton is the Kobzars’ka Sich, a locally operated camp on the Allegheny River. Translated, this term means the Kobzar’s Sich; a Sich is a settlement of Ukrainian cossacks on the banks and rivers of the lower Dnipro.

26. She is referring to the Kapelia Bandurystiv, mentioned above.

27. A premier Ukrainian state troupe that includes a choir, instrumentalists and dancers.

28. Prominent artists within the Soviet Union were recognised with the title “National Treasure” in honour of their contribution to society.

29. The terms “bilyj holos” [white voice] and “vidchynenyj holos” [open voice] are used interchangeably. The artists I have listed here are renowned for their musical style, which includes singing in “bilyj holos”, also known as “vidchynenyj holos”. Many North Americans are familiar with this sound, as it is also the style in which the more famous Bulgarian Women’s Choir (current name, Angelite) sings. It is an indigenous Slavic vocal technique.

30. Nadia’s website address, for the ensemble Divchata v Kuchni [Girls in the Kitchen] with which she performs, is <http://go.to/divchata>. This association with Matvienko

Nadia listened fervently to recordings of open voice singing and tried to imitate the sound. She asked performers for help whenever she could, and she continues to participate in any workshops on Eastern European singing that she can find. In an e-mail conversation, she told me:

Those ancient melodies of Ukraine, sung in that ancient “bilyj holos” style that makes the hair on my back stand up upright. I get goosebumps, tears, laughter, a whole range of emotions from that music.

As a result of her study, Nadia has developed her own hybrid performance style for singing and bandura accompaniment; it is not quite the same as that of performers from Eastern Europe, she recognises, but it is very similar.

Mindful of the repertoire she performs, Nadia told me that most of women’s folk songs, the core of her repertoire, are associated with the seasons, nature, rituals, folklore, work in the fields.<sup>31</sup> These songs, she said, evoke for her a real sense of “power.”<sup>32</sup> Nadia feels strongly about the music she chooses to emulate

---

would be understood by most Ukrainians as somewhat prestigious, due to Matvienko’s status as a revered artist and figure.

31. Nadia has chosen “Maiden/Wife/Widow” as the theme for a concert and an anticipated recording she is currently preparing. She said that many Ukrainian folk songs deal with young girls and courting, “you know, with seven guys chasing the girl and she can’t decide which one to be with.” For Nadia, “wife” includes motherhood, and therefore lullabies. Widowhood may also have to do with children, as often the husband has died at war and the woman is left alone with a family; these are woeful songs.
32. To illustrate recognition of Nadia’s cultural power, I will relate an emotionally charged moment of the festival weekend. At the end of the Gala Concert on Sunday evening, Nadia came to find me since we had made plans for her to allow me an interview. We sat on chairs in a front corner of what had been the audience space. As technicians and volunteers busily whirled about, stripping down electrical cords, lighting and sound systems, we sat quietly talking. Partway through our discussion, I asked her to demonstrate her vocal technique in hopes of eliciting her understanding of “the sound.” She lifted her bandura onto her lap, cleared her throat, and began. By the second verse, a small group of people had surrounded us, and we all joined in Nadia’s singing at her invitation. For as many verses as our collective memories could muster, we did our best to find harmonies with each other. When we finished, loud cheers came from all around the huge room. Those of us who had been singing looked around at each other; some of us had teary eyes, appreciative of how wonderful it was to sing together. A friend of mine later mentioned that Nadia’s energy and attitude were inspiring to her as a woman; both this friend and I felt bolstered by our meeting with Nadia. As Ukrainian women who play unconventional roles within Ukrainian communities, as academics and with respect to other lifestyle choices, we felt we had found another compatriot.



Nadia Tarnawska playing in her home, January 2001.

in performance; “if you want to go the wellspring of the Ukrainian folk singing culture, you go to the villages” (telephone conversation with Nadia). In addition to the women’s folk songs, Nadia has learned a *duma*. She wanted to learn a piece in this genre because, she remarked, “How can you call yourself a banduryst if you can’t play a piece specific only to that instrument (e-mail from Nadia)?” Nadia originally asked her first teacher, Marta Lys-Hnatiuk, to teach her a *duma*. Lys-Hnatiuk said she couldn’t; “girls don’t sing *dumy* (e-mail from Nadia)” This only strengthened Nadia’s resolve to learn a *duma*, she told me.



Nadia Tarnawska, in her home, January 2001.

Later, when Nadia was studying with Julian Kytasty, he chose to teach her the *duma* “*Vdova i try syny*” [“A Widow and three sons”] when she repeated her request to him. Clearly, Nadia understood that by making this request, she was transgressing what is normally accepted as women’s repertoire.<sup>33</sup> Kytasty is a diaspora musician, one of the foremost internationally respected bandurysts who hails from a prominent family of musicians.<sup>34</sup> He is fully aware of the cultural implications of Nadia performing a *duma*; nevertheless, he encouraged her performance aspirations regardless of accepted performance norms. Julian taught her the particular *duma* of the widow since it deals with the predicament of a woman who

33. Ukrainian historians categorise *dumy* as a genre sung exclusively by men; this is certainly the prevalent contemporary understanding of this genre.

34. Julian Kytasty is the grand nephew of the Kapelia Bandurystiv’s original and long-standing director, Hryhoriy Kytasty.

narrates the story in this epic ballad.<sup>35</sup>

I asked Nadia if and how her repertoire choices relate to her own life. She said that they do not. In fact, she told me that if she were not performing with the bandura she probably would have nothing to do with the Ukrainian community (interview with Nadia, 19 March 2000). When I asked her to explain this to me, she wrote:

What I mean is I probably would have ended up like my brothers and sister. They went to Ukrainian school for ten years, attended Ukrainian church every Sunday, made pysanky,<sup>36</sup> were members of SUM<sup>37</sup> — the whole nine yards. They felt so bombarded by Ukrainian culture that now, they don't speak Ukrainian to their children, and don't send them to Ukrainian school. They don't attend concerts of Ukrainian culture — bandurists, choirs, etc. It's like they went on to lead their American lives with a pysanka or two on the shelf in the house. Because I played bandura, I kept in touch with Ukrainian life. Every week I was at the church hall for lessons, every March we performed in the Shevchenko concerts,<sup>38</sup> every Christmas we went caroling, every summer I went to bandura camp. Bandura had started as something I did to keep my parents happy, but eventually evolved into something I did to keep myself happy. It evolved, as I said in Oakville, on that Sunday afternoon when Jules Kytasty took us into the woods before a bandura camp concert. He told us of the importance we had as bandurysts to remember and tell all that had happened to us as a

---

35. Nadia has described the text to me in greater detail. "The story goes that as a widow was getting older, her sons decided that she should leave their house — 'her coughing and moaning would detract from the gaiety of their time with their guests.' The boys successfully kick their mother out, against all of her protestations and so she curses them three times: 'May the fields not bear you any bread. May people forget who you are and not have any kind words to say about you. May you no longer have any good fortune in your home.' A kind neighbor takes the woman in and treats her as her own sons should have treated her. In three years time there is a great disturbance heard — it is the moaning of the widow's three sons. The curses of the mother have come true. The middle son suggests to his brothers that they go to the neighbor's yard and ask their mother for forgiveness. The *duma* ends with a reminder to the listeners to respect their parents and calls for a blessing upon the audience."

36. Decorated Ukrainian eggs, largely associated in contemporary times with the celebration of Easter.

37. An organisation of Ukrainian youth.

38. Annual concerts held within Ukrainian communities in honour of Ukraine's poet laureate, Taras Shevchenko.

nation — the famine of 1933,<sup>39</sup> the massacre at Baturyn,<sup>40</sup> the Stalinist purges. He sang “Nema V Sviti Pravdy”<sup>41</sup> and I couldn’t stop crying. It was as if the culture I was trying to escape as a teenager (I mean, how COOL is it to dress up in embroidered shirts and flowered skirts when you’re 13) was not letting go as easily as I would have wanted it to.

In reference to contemporary bandura performance practices within and among Ukrainian communities, Nadia clearly articulates her own understandings of her less-privileged position in reproductions of culturally situated musical practices: the original, “traditional” repertoire of the bandura is understood to be a male domain. As a woman, she has fewer opportunities for development. Nevertheless, she is drawn to performing this music; as she eloquently explained, “The music of Ukraine still speaks to me in a way that no other music does. It stirs a feeling within me like no other music does.”

## Challenging Discourses of Nationhood

Nadia’s choices with respect to an indigenous-sounding performance style and folkloric repertoire are clearly linked with narratives of Ukrainian history and folklore. However, Nadia’s experiences and powerful connection to the bandura and the Ukrainian community are not merely a case of a teenager submitting to parental will and community norms to find approval.<sup>42</sup> Starting

39. “The famine that occurred in 1932-33 was to be for Ukrainians what the Holocaust was to the Jews and the Massacres of 1915 for the Armenians...food was available[;] [h]owever, the state confiscated most of it for its own use. Despite the pleas and warnings of Ukrainian Communists, Stalin raised Ukraine’s grain procurement quotas in 1932 by 44%. His decision, and the regime’s brutal fulfillment of his commands, condemned millions to death in what can only be called a man-made famine” (Subtelny 1988: 413-14).

40. “When Peter I broke his commitment to defend Ukraine from the hated Poles...the Ukrainian [Cossak] hetman no longer felt bound to remain loyal to him. On 28 October 1708, when Charles XII diverted his drive on Moscow and moved into Ukraine, Mazepa [the Cossak hetman] went over to the Swedes in hope that his land would be spared from devastation...Within days of the hetman’s defection...the Russian commander in Ukraine attacked the hetman’s capital at Baturyn and massacred its entire population of 6000 men, women and children...Russian troops in Ukraine began a reign of terror, arresting and executing anyone even vaguely suspected of siding with Mazepa” (Subtelny 1988: 164).

41. “There is no truth in the world.”

42. Mary Pipher discusses this issue in the first chapter of *Reviving Ophelia* (1995).



in her teen years, Nadia's own lifestyle choices and identifications are contrary to that which is considered the "norm" of prescribed roles for Ukrainian women.<sup>43</sup> Seemingly, her lifestyle choices are a mixture of what is available to her as a North American, as well as those that are available to her within Ukrainian cultural communities.<sup>44</sup> More specific to her performance practice, Nadia resists the prevalent conservatory style for women and also refuses to accept gendered limitations in terms of repertoire, demonstrated by her creation of her unique vocal sound performances and her performance of a *duma*. Moreover, her public performances of "women's songs" challenge their relegation to private home spaces.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, Nadia's descriptions of her personal development in relation to the bandura and Ukrainian culture clearly show that "[adolescence is] an extraordinary time when individual, developmental and cultural factors combine in ways that shape adulthood. It's a time of marked internal development and massive cultural indoctrination" (Pipher 1995: 26). An examination of the intersection of the personal and political suggests a link with Ukrainian historical particularities. Contemporary historians Frances Swyripa and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak have attempted to address women's participation in the development of modern Ukrainian nationhood. Swyripa writes that it was originally more important for Ukrainian immigrant daughters to be healthy and strong, hardy for farm life and physical labour. This accompanied a patriarchal structure in families and communities, and prescribed gender constructs that included submissive roles for women. Ukrainian women were charged by their communities with the important role of ensuring the cultural and spiritual education of children in the home, to pass on precious Ukrainian traditions and heritage.

As years progressed, the ideal for women changed somewhat. More and more, young women were educated to adapt to Anglo-Canadian lifestyles and mannerisms, ideals of delicacy and graceful character. Ukrainian women began

---

43. Beverly Diamond makes the point that "music and gender are both sites for negotiating an individual place within communities that tend to reinforce certain values and behaviours as normative" (2000: 100).

44. For an extended discussion of women's identity and plural locations of self, see Diamond (2000) and Khayatt (forthcoming).

45. The touring groups from Ukraine also performed some of these songs. This challenge to accepted norms regarding public/private subject matter is a major topic for feminist writers. Several articles in Hollis *et al.* (1993) address this issue.

to adopt sociocultural roles that had political undertones, that is as Ukrainian homemakers and patriots. Swyripa states that the “intelligentsia emphasised the important role of women, especially in the home, in preserving Ukrainian identity” (Swyripa 1988: 140). Bohachevsky-Chomiak writes, “[n]ational liberation overshadowed the cause of women’s liberation... Women contributed to the struggle, but remained peripheral in its identification... [The nation’s] values and identity remained male preserves.”<sup>46</sup> With regard to contemporary Ukraine and current post-Soviet nation-building projects, Catherine Wanner discusses identity politics (Wanner 1998: 66).<sup>47</sup> “[U]nder current tough economic conditions... regimes that support a ‘return to tradition’ ideology, end up shortchanging women. Women lose rights and power in society as they are recast as mystical mother figures, guardians of home and earth.”<sup>48</sup> While women “did achieve measured advances in the public sphere” within Soviet projects intended to create gender equality, Wanner points out that “on the home front gender roles have remained [my emphasis] very traditional” (Wanner 1998: 112).<sup>49</sup>

While Bohachevsky-Chomiak and Wanner address developments in Ukraine, they are pertinent since post-World War immigrants to Canada and

46. Bohachevsky-Chomiak 1988: xix. Also, Chatterjee is quoted in Radhakrishnan (1992) as making similar statements concerning Indian nation-building projects around the same time period. While Chatterjee’s comments are specific to an Indian historical context, of great importance is the parallel link made between “the women’s question” and discourses of nation.
47. In this ethnographic monograph, Wanner also provides a compelling account and discussion of Ukraine’s Chervona Ruta festival that opened exactly eight days before the failed coup of 1991 that brought down the Soviet regime.
48. Natalia Shostak recently stated that “[i]n the first five to seven years of independent [post-Soviet] Ukraine, Ukrainian folklore scholarship has become one of the intellectual agencies most responsible for promoting national ideology in today’s Ukraine. Being caught in a web of a transitional social reality with its competing ideologies, it has taken the role of producer and purveyor of a national idea based on the primeval presence of ‘the folk.’ Folklorists, with their current project of rehabilitating Ukrainian traditional culture and elevating it to the heights of national currency, have become as much involved in the dramatic new narrative of the nation as politicians, historians and writers... [folklorists] are involved in reinventing a new collective memory, reimposing forgotten symbols and mythologies of the past, so necessary for what Anthony Smith calls ‘the ethnic survival’ of the nation” (Shostak 1999: 93).
49. I have emphasised that throughout recent history, amidst efforts to create gender equality, gender roles in the home have not been as changeable; they have remained traditional.

the United States brought with them their political sensibilities. These immigrants tended to be strongly politically organised and have played a significant role in the development of Ukrainian diaspora communities, particularly those in the Toronto area where the Bandura Conference 2000 was held. There has also been an influx of Ukrainian immigrants to Canada since the 1980s, at a time when the more recent national developments mentioned in Wanner's study had been dawning. This exchange between homeland and diaspora communities was further facilitated at the Bandura Conference 2000, where several of the bandurysts who attended came from Ukraine.

In her groundbreaking discussion of how underlying and implicit frameworks in film narratives function to create "woman as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning," Laura Mulvey writes, "the male protagonist is free to command the stage, as stage...in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (Mulvey 1975: 13). Mulvey's summary of the performative visual framework of film, divided along lines of gender, parallels the gendered hierarchies presented by Swyripa and Bohachevsky-Chomiak with respect to Ukrainian historical particularities. The examples I have provided of Nadia's place as a woman within contexts of bandura performance, and how time frameworks were enacted during the Bandura Festival 2000 weekend, may indeed be understood to constitute reproductions of these same gendered hierarchies. For example, the "Women Soloists" concert (in which Nadia performed) waited two hours past the scheduled time to begin so that an all-male conference panel could finish their discussion to their own satisfaction. Later that afternoon, the discussion panel preceding the "Male Soloists Concert" was cut short by the organisers to ensure that that concert would start on time.

These issues were only partially played out in Nadia's performance experiences at the Bandura Festival 2000 and contemporary bandura performances more generally. However, gender constructs are clearly a part of an established Ukrainian folklore; Nadia makes direct associations between a particular vocal technique and repertoire — part of indigenous folklore — and a discourse of Ukrainianness.<sup>50</sup> This is not surprising, when one considers

---

50. In this way, Nadia subscribes to a central discourse of Ukrainianness. In fact, a basic argument regarding Ukrainianness exists in all Ukrainian communities I am aware of, between this "folk," "rural," "pure" concept and a more urban, elitist and intellectualised concept.

that the deliberate construction of the modern Ukrainian nation was based on Herder's notions of Romantic Nationalism. As previously mentioned, two crucial elements of Herder's ideologies in this context are: the heightened role of folklore (in recognition of ethnic distinctions), and a pervading notion of family-based patriarchy. Furthermore, the link between cultural indoctrination through Nadia's musical experiences and Ukraine's historical particularities inextricably links Ukrainian nationhood to gender.

In fact, as Avtar Brah writes, ethnicity, class and nationalism are all social constructions that represent gendered phenomena. They are "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. The figure of woman is a constitutive moment in the racialised [or 'ethnicised'] desire for economic and political control" (Brah 1996: 154). In short, the "folk" concept and gendered identity markers that work together to reenact culture and values, like those represented in Nadia's performance choices with specific regard to style and repertoire, can not be understood as natural models of "authenticity," but instead are embodiments of these values and related identity politics.<sup>51</sup>

## **Toward Some Conclusions**

During the past few decades scholars have been thinking about "invented traditions" and "imagined communities" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1991) in discourses and definitions of "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. The Bandura Festival 2000 is one example of such transnational interchange. Globalization problematises "nationhood"; at the same time it allows for its re-creation. Particularly amidst redefinitions of nations in Europe (Slobin 1996 and Wanner 1998), fluctuations of post-Soviet nation-states and new geopolitical reconfigurations, music is a prime site for reconfiguring concepts of

---

51. Anne Brydon discusses the intersection of gender and nationalism, and how gender is involved in the construction of national and ethnic identities. Her article that addresses female engendering of nation is rooted in an examination of the Icelandic Fjallkona in Canada, "the Mountain Woman who personifies the Icelandic homeland and 'speaks' during every Festival to her far-flung 'children' in North America" (1997: 87).

community and nation.<sup>52</sup> A globalising cultural economy has facilitated this interaction and exchange between various Ukrainian native and diasporic communities. Many have argued that the globalization of culture works against cultural distinctiveness and local identities (Miyoshi 1998, 259), but is it not precisely this pressure to homogenise that also instills the continuing search for “the authentic” and difference in spaces like the Bandura Festival 2000?

Recently, ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond asked: “What can we learn by magnifying one particular (abstract) juncture in one specific (concrete) location: music and gender in the life narratives of musicians in a specific time and place?” (Diamond 2000: 100). She 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” (Diamond 2000: 100). Her inquiry into gender issues in the musical life stories of Prince Edward Islanders 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” (Diamond 2000: 100).

I searched for such an understanding amidst the convergence of bandura performance practices and the Bandura Festival 2000, and the story of Nadia

---

52. This was certainly true in the case of Polish Ukrainians, whose predicament I examined as part of my M.A. research in June of 1997. I conducted fieldwork in Przemyśl at their Ukrainian Cultural Festival. Of the Ukrainians who gathered there, most now live scattered across Poland, as they were displaced from their homeland when they were forcibly relocated after WW II. They used the social and political spaces and performance places of this politically controversial festival to reclaim cultural and geographic territory. This performance invites comparison with contemporary politics surrounding minority cultures in Canada. Although a basic criticism of Canadian multicultural policies has been that they have produced essentialist representations of the diverse ethnic populations within this country they, too, have allowed communities to practice, produce and maintain cultural connections. These policies have not homogenised Ukrainian Canadian culture into a monolithic sense of ethnic identity. Indeed, this is painfully true for many Ukrainians who verbalise their wish for a more “unified” Ukrainian community in Canada. They often desire solidarity between the older, more rurally-rooted Prairie communities and newer Ontario ones characterised largely by “DPs” (Displaced Persons) after WW II.

Tarnawska's personal experiences. Nadia's narrative, contingent on the specific history of a powerful national symbol, reenacts the "story" of the male-dominated bandura tradition; it also suggests ways in which women find places in this tradition.<sup>53</sup> With this article, I offer an interpretation of the relationship between "normative" values associated with the bandura and the particular history of Ukraine, and the values Nadia employs as she negotiates an individual place for herself in Ukrainian communities. Her musical practices force conceptualizations of Ukrainian nationhood, predicated on specific constructs of gender and class, into flux.

What is it about Nadia's bandura performances, and performances and understandings of her identity, that are considered feminine or challenges to femininity, and to whom? She has appropriated an instrument coded "male," and rearticulated this instrument with her own unique style of performance and choices of repertoire in a manner unlike anything that has come before her; she has made it her own. Nadia's experiences provide another example of how women "have had their own part to play in countering the patriarchal tradition that has marginalized and silenced women" (Young and Turner 1993: 13). In this light, this paper joins the literature of female folklore scholars who "have documented situations in which women either use expressive behaviour as a means of appropriating genres normally reserved for men or exert power that is seen by them as an inherent part of their domain, whether that power is recognized or not" (Young and Turner 1993: 13). Nadia Tarnawska's story demonstrates that women's voices are indeed heard in contemporary bandura performance practices, and in discourses and re-creations of Ukrainian nationhood.

---

53. This offers a direct correlation to Diamond's study (see 2000: 112). The possibilities for cross-cultural understanding here are significant.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991 (revised ed.) *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Antokhii, M., D.H. Struk, D. Zelska-Darewych. 1984. Shevchenko, Taras. In *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 4, eds. V. Kubijovyc and Danylo Husar Struk. Toronto: CUIS, The Shevchenko Scientific Society (Sarcelles, France), the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies by the University of Toronto Press.
- Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: the Formation of Folklore Studies*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bohachevsky-Chomiak, Martha. 1988. *Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939*. Edmonton: CIUS.
- Brah, Avtar. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora*. London: Routledge.
- Brydon, Anne. 1997. Mother to Her Distant Children: The Icelandic *Fjallkona* in Canada. In *Undisciplined Women: Tradition and Culture in Canada*, eds. P. Greenhill and D. Tye. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Diamond, Beverley. 2000. The Interpretation of Gender Issues in Musical Life Stories of Prince Edward Islanders. In *Music and Gender*, eds. P. Moisala and B. Diamond. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Handler, Richard. 1988. *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Hnatiukivsky, M. 1984. Kobzars. In *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 1, eds. V. Kubijovyc and Danylo Husar Struk. Toronto: CUIS, The Shevchenko Scientific Society (Sarcelles, France), the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies by the University of Toronto Press.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1983. Invented Traditions. In *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger. Cambridge: University Press.
- Hornjatkevyc, A. 1984. Bandura. In *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 1, eds. V. Kubijovyc and Danylo Husar Struk. Toronto: CUIS, The Shevchenko Scientific Society (Sarcelles, France), the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies by the University of Toronto Press.
- . 1992. The State of the Bandura in Contemporary Ukraine. *ACUA VITAE* 2, 4. Edmonton: CIUS.
- Kamenetsky, Christa. 1973. The German folklore revival in the Eighteenth Century: Herder's theory of Naturpoesie. *Journal of Popular Culture*, VI, 4: 836-848.
- Khayatt, Didi. Forthcoming. My Place in Queer Canada (from seminar presentation).

- Koshelivets, I. 1993. Socialist Realism. In *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 4, eds. V. Kubijovyc and Danylo Husar Struk. Toronto: CUIS, The Shevchenko Scientific Society (Sarcelles, France), the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies by the University of Toronto Press.
- Linke, Uli. 1995. Power Matters: The politics of culture in German folklore scholarship. *History and Anthropology*, 9, 1: 1-26.
- Luckyj, George S. N. 1971. *Between Gogol and Sevcenko: Polarity in the Literary Ukraine, 1798-1847*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.
- McKay, Ian. 1994. *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Miyoshi, Masao. 1998. Globalization, Culture and the University. In *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. F. Jameson and Masao Miyoshi. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16, 3: 6-18.
- Pipher, Mary. 1995. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Ballantine.
- Radhakrishnan, R. 1992. Nationalism, Gender and the Narrative of Identity. In *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. A. Parker. New York: Routledge.
- Shostak, Natalia. 1999. Scholastic Before and Scholarly After? Ukrainian Folklorists and Their Folklore after 1991. *Ethnologies*, 21, 2: 73-97.
- Slobin, Mark (ed.). 1996. *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Anthony. 1986. *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Subtelny, Orest. 1988. *Ukraine: A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, CIUS.
- Wanner, Catherine. 1998. *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Wytwycky, W. 1984. Bandurysts (*bandurysty*). In *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol.1, eds. V. Kubijovyc and Danylo Husar Struk. Toronto: CUIS, The Shevchenko Scientific Society (Sarcelles, France), the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies by the University of Toronto Press.
- Young, M. Jane and Kay Turner. 1993. Challenging the Canon: Folklore Theory Reconsidered From Feminist Perspectives. In *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore*, eds. S. T. Hollis, L. Pershing and M. J. Young. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.