

## EXPLORING THE ROLE OF UKRAINIAN FOLK ELEMENTS IN MODERN CLASSICAL MUSIC: CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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**Abstract:** Interest in folk art is one of the most complex issues in today's globalised world, driven by market mechanisms and economic interests. At the same time, art cannot avoid the existential questions of existence and identity, which are especially relevant in countries that face the threat of external aggression, as happened to Ukraine in the 2020s. This fully applies to musical folklore, which does not lose its attractiveness for modern classical composers. The subject of our study is the use of Ukrainian folklore in composers' works of the early twenty-first century. The aim of the work is to investigate the nature of the use of folk motifs in works of contemporary symphonic, chamber instrumental and electronic music. The chronological framework of the study is 2000–2024. Conclusion. The article analyses the works of 12 Ukrainian composers written in Contemporary classical music traditions, including melodies of Ukrainian folk songs. It is shown that Ukrainian melodies are used in various contexts – experimental electronic sounds, atonal and aleatoric orchestral sounds, jazz harmony, and the dramatic and semantic centre of a symphonic work. Although the problem of preserving folklore is relevant for many countries in the world in the context of contemporary globalisation, it is Ukrainian folklore that shows the most extraordinary vitality and ability to adapt in the context of contemporary art.

**Keywords:** postmodern, folk revival, Ukrainian music, Contemporary classical music

### 1 Introduction

Interest in folk art remains relevant in today's globalised world, especially in countries that have experienced colonial oppression in the past or are under threat of intervention. One such country is Ukraine, which gained independence only in 1991 and has faced the threat of destruction by the Russian Federation since 2014.

In such circumstances, artists' appeal to folklore has a profound basis in aesthetics and socio-politics. It is connected with the desire to preserve national identity against external threats (Moore, 2011). Musical art has a wide range of possibilities for incorporating recognisable elements of folk art, broadcasting and demonstrating them to the general public, which makes it possible to use musical art as a specific tool of cultural diplomacy – conveying to the world the idea of the self-worth of each nation, the right of peoples to self-determination and the right to protection from aggressive encroachments by other countries.

How can elements of folk art be incorporated into contemporary academic music, which is characterised by a complex musical language, using the latest compositional techniques and multimedia technologies? Does folklore lose its recognisable features when integrated into a modern orchestral or electronic score? These questions became the starting point of our research.

### 2 Analysis of recent studies and publications

The interest of musicologists in the study of folklore motifs in classical and later modern classical music is associated with the concept of "Nationalism in Music", which covers a range of phenomena associated with political independence movements and was characterised by an emphasis on national musical elements such as the use of folk songs, folk dances or rhythms, or on the adoption of nationalist themes for operas, symphonic poems, or other forms of music (Liasenko, 1991; Kennedy, 2006).

In Ukraine, the concept of "nationalism in music" was first comprehended by Lyudkevych (1999), although the term

nationalism itself was not widely used due to excessive political connotations. In his monograph, Liashenko (1991) examines the influence of folklore through the prism of the dialectic of the national and the international, which means that "the national always carries the charge of the outgrowth of its local-ethnic thoughts", and "the international, in turn, is not "near", "above" or "below", but within the national" (Liashenko, 1991, p. 15). We consider the fundamental work in this direction to be the work of Kozarenko (2000), in which the phenomenon of national musical language as a distinctive feature of composer's creativity was first substantiated.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in the interest of Ukrainian researchers in folklore topics, which is to some extent related to foreign policy factors, namely the aggression of the Russian Federation. In particular, Tormakhova (2017) and Tkach (2020) study folklore trends in Ukrainian pop music, Chabanenko (2019) explores folklore motifs in choral and symphonic music, Bondarenko (2021a) in contemporary electronic music, and some works are devoted to the works of Ukrainian composers who have addressed Ukrainian folklore, in particular, L. Kolodub (Makarenko, 2014, 2015) and H. Liashenko (Markova, 2007).

In European countries, interest in folklore remains relatively modest, with the culture of Eastern Europe – Bulgaria (Draganova, 2002), Poland (Nidecka, 2015), Czech Republic (Kouba, 2015), Romania (Vlad, 2013), and Slovenia (Kovačič & Šivic, 2023) – being more represented. Instead, in Western European countries, in the context of globalisation, researchers are forced to defend the right to use the terms and concepts of 'traditional music' (Morgenstern, 2021).

At the same time, studies of the musical folklore of Asian peoples in the context of its influence on contemporary music are worthy of attention, in particular in Kazakhstan (Mukhitdenova, 2016; Zhussupov et al., 2024) and China (Lei, 2024). In recent years, the musical folklore of African countries in modern interpretations has also become the subject of research, particularly in Zimbabwe (Muparutsa, 2013) and South Africa (Izu, 2022; Yende, 2023). However, the studies mentioned above focus more on popular than academic music.

Most researchers agree that folk art is a source of indigenous knowledge systems as exuded through societal norms, values, and cultural belief systems (Mauwa, 2020). In developed countries, the aesthetics of attitudes towards folklore "has begun to mutate" (Moor, 2011), and the number of folklore ensembles has been rapidly declining over the twentieth century (Morgenstern, 2017). Folklore remains relevant mainly among "older, less-educated, religious, politically right-leaning people in the countryside" (Stanković & Bobnić, 2022). Contemporary culture leaves virtually no room for folk music in its original form, and therefore, in order to maintain its attractiveness, traditional music has been fused into modern genres as a strategy to remain commercially relevant (Caleb, 2020). The nature of such fusions in academic music became the starting point of our research.

### 3 Research methods

To collect information about contemporary Ukrainian works of academic music, the programmes of the KyivMusicFest music festivals, which traditionally perform premiere works by Ukrainian composers, and concert programmes of philharmonic societies in the largest cities of Ukraine were analysed. In order to identify trends and study the influence of folk motifs on academic music, a set of musicological methods was applied, including formative, melodic, harmonic and performance analysis of musical works, which allows us to identify the immanent features of musical folklore reflected in symphonic, choral and electronic works by contemporary composers. In

addition, the study of performance techniques used by performers of contemporary academic music and their comparison with the performance techniques of folk music also allows us to identify common approaches that give grounds to speak of folklore influences in contemporary academic music. The study's results were summarised in a table, indicating the authors, date of composition, genre of the work and the nature of musical folklore. The timeframe of the study is from 2000 to 2024.

#### 4 Results

The role of folk motifs in composing has been a subject of considerable interest to European artists since at least the late nineteenth century. It is associated with the emergence of national schools in countries where secular musical culture developed in the European traditions and church culture - within the canons of the Catholic or Orthodox Church. It is in this context that the national schools of Poland (F. Chopin, S. Moniuszko), Ukraine (M. Lysenko), and Hungary (F. Liszt) developed in Eastern Europe, characterised by the implementation of intonational models of musical folklore in secular genres of European music, such as opera, symphony, instrumental and vocal miniatures.

The modern stylistic trends of the twentieth century introduced new approaches to musical fabric's rhythmic and harmonic organisation, which encouraged artists to search for new approaches to working with folklore material. This period was characterised by the development of neofolklorism, a trend that

combined folk melodies with innovative elements of the musical language of the modern era. The neofolklorism of the first half of the twentieth century is mainly associated with the use of "songs of archaic folklore origin, which were developed based on repetition and variation, often with blurring the contours of the folklore theme" (Derevianchenko, 2005). Among the representatives of this trend are B. Bartok and I. Stravinsky, and partly the early works of B. Lyatosynsky and W. Lutosławski.

The second folklore wave, associated with the postmodern era, is characterised by "a bolder use of folklore in its 'pure', 'pristine' form, along with the latest means of expression" (Bondarenko, 2021b). A characteristic compositional technique is ethnophonisms, defined as "the timbre and sound aspect of folk instrumentation" (Broiako, 2020) for instrumental music or the use of folk singing styles (Bondarenko, 2021b) for vocal music. Referring to folklore motifs in this period is seen as "opposition to cultural assimilation and globalisation" (Marchun, 2024) and "acquires the features of genre-style and semantic duality" (Zlotnik, 2018).

The following table presents the list of the most relevant works with folk motifs. The table is limited to the period 2000–2024. Works in the genres of folk song arrangements and music written for Ukrainian folk instruments are not included; only independent compositions in the traditions of academic music that were performed in public and written for choirs, symphony orchestras, and chamber and instrumental ensembles are included.

Table 1. Works by contemporary Ukrainian composers 2000–2024 based on folklore

Composers	Work, Year	Genre	Folk elements present in a work
Lev Kolodub	Seven Ukrainian Folk Songs (2000)	Symphonic cycle	use of folk song melodies
Lev Kolodub	Symphony No. 8 "Pryluky" (2003)	Symphony	melody of folk songs
Yevhen Stankovych	Sounds of a Sad Dream (2005)	for cello and chamber orchestra	imitation of the sounds of folk instruments (drumming)
Oleksandr Shymko	"Chosen of the Sun"	ballet	melodies of folk songs and dances, in some numbers singing in a folk style is used
Sergiy Yarusky	"Viy" – mystery-buff No. 2 (2009)	piano solo	folk song "Oh, there is a dream" combined with aleatoric music
Alla Zahaikevych	Nord/Ouest (2011)	Electroacoustic	the use of authentic singing combined with electronic sound
Volodymyr Runchak	An excursion into Ukrainian off-colour humour on texts of Ukrainian folk songs (2015)	Choir	a theatrical work based on the plot and melody of the song "Oh in the Cherry Orchard".
Zoltan Almashi	Quartet "Carols" (2014)	String quartet	Melodies of Ukrainian carols were used
Alla Zahaikevych	Friend Li Po (2015)	Live electronics (versions for Bandura and Guzheng).	folk instruments (Bandura or Guzheng) with electronic audio processing
Hanna Havrylets	"The Winds Are Blowing" (2018)	Oratorio, for a capella choir	folk songs combined with drums
Bohdan Kryvopust	"Songs from the Ancient World" (2018)	For soprano and chamber orchestra	Melodies of archaic folk songs with orchestral accompaniment, mostly in atonal form
Volodymyr Runchak	Folk – concerto No. 2 for percussion quartet (2019)	Ensemble	The folk instrument used is the drybma, a fretted instrument based on Carpathian folklore
Andriy Bondarenko	Ukrainian folk songs (2018–2020)	Piano solo	melodies of folk songs arranged with the use of modern harmonic means
Ivan Taranenko	Fusionfonia (2002)	Symphony	folk vocals are combined with jazz motifs in the orchestra and some folk songs
Ivan Nebesnyy	Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (2023)	Ballet	Ladotonic features of Carpathian folklore in a symphonic setting
Olena Ilnytska	To Victory (2023)	Symphony	The song "Plyve Kacha" was used

Source: compiled by the author

The provided table is not exhaustive. In addition to the mentioned works, it is worth mentioning a large number of folk song arrangements for choirs (composers such as Hanna Havrylets, Yevhen Petrychenko, Nadiia Kurinna, Hanna Khazova, and others), for a trio of bandura players (Viktor

Stepurko, Lesia Dychko), for piano four-hands or two hands (Maksym Kanke), and others. These works are performed at festivals such as Kyiv Music Fest, Two Days and Two Nights of New Music, and Contrasts, among others, and are also included in educational repertoires.

Pop music performers partly adopt the experience of working with folk motifs accumulated by academic composers. This refers to the possibilities of modern harmonisation, expanding instrumental composition, and using changing time signatures, which are generally not characteristic of pop music but are typical of certain genres of Ukrainian music and modern contemporary music in general.

It is also worth noting that the course on musical folklore is one of the mandatory disciplines taught in music education institutions in Ukraine at composition faculties. The discipline includes mastering folklore theory, becoming familiar with various genres of Ukrainian musical folklore, and several practical tasks in notating folk melodies. Thus, composers already gain experience studying musical folklore during their education at music academies (universities) and approach their professional careers with sufficient skill sets and expertise.

## 5 Discussion

The table above shows that Ukrainian folklore is relevant as a source of inspiration for many composers of both older and younger generations. In some cases, the authors try to use not only the melody of the folk song itself but also the manner of its performance (for example, in the works by A. Zahaikevych Nord/Ouest, O. Shymko's Chosen of the Sun). In most cases, we can observe a complex stylistic interaction between folklore material and modern methods of composing, in particular, the means of experimental electronic music (A. Zahaikevych), avant-garde techniques (B. Kryvopust, V. Runchak, S. Yarunsky), postmodern allusions and games (V. Runchak), elements of jazz stylistics (I. Taranenko, A. Bondarenko, partly O. Shymko). Particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of the song "Plyve kacha po Tysyne" (A Duckling Swims in the Tisza) in O. Ilnytska's compositions, where it performs an essential dramatic and semantic function – in Ukraine, this song is traditionally performed during the commemoration of the fallen Ukrainian soldiers in the fight against the Russian aggressor. Hence, its inclusion creates a thematic link to the events of the current Russian-Ukrainian war.

## 6 Conclusion

It is shown that the Ukrainian song occupies a significant place in the work of contemporary composers, both older and younger generations. Folk songs often combine atonal composing techniques, electronic sound, and jazz harmony. In some cases, using folk songs in the context of avant-garde sounds adds a semantic load that refers to current events. Compared to the folklore of other nations, Ukrainian folklore is the most represented in contemporary academic music, both in quantity and quality.

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