

КОНТЕКСТ

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THE BANDURA AND KOBZARDOM IN UKRAINE TODAY

Mishalow Victor

PhD Adjunct Research Fellow,
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
victor.mishalow@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5194-8964>

Opinions regarding the polarisation of bandura performance in Ukraine. The juxtaposition of authentic and academic approaches to the bandura performance, repertoire and construction, and the evolution of audience musical preferences and its influence on contemporary performers.

Key words: academic performance, bandura, folklorism, kobzar, kobzarstvo, traditional bandura.

БАНДУРА ТА КОБЗАРСТВО В УКРАЇНІ СЬОГОДНІ

Мішалов Віктор

PhD Adjunct Research Fellow,
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
victor.mishalow@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5194-8964>

Погляди щодо поляризації в мистецтві гри на бандурі в сучасній Україні. Порівняння автентичних та академічних підходів до бандури, репертуару та конструкції, а також розвиток музичних переваг слухачів і вплив на сучасних виконавців.

Ключові слова: бандура; традиційна бандура; академічне виконавство; фольклор; кобзар; кобзарство.

БАНДУРА И КОБЗАРСТВО В УКРАИНЕ СЕГОДНЯ

Мишалов Виктор

PhD, Adjunct Research Fellow,
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
victor.mishalow@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5194-8964>

Взгляды на поляризацию в искусстве игры на бандуре в современной Украине. Сравнение аутентичных и академических подходов к бандуре, репертуара и конструкции, а также развитие музыкальных предпочтений слушателей в современных исполнителей.

Ключевые слова: бандура; традиционная бандура; академическое исполнение; фольклор; кобзарь; кобзарство.

In Ukrainian culture, the itinerant folk musicians known as kobzars have an esteemed position. Taras Shevchenko's first collection of poems, published in 1841, was entitled "The Kobzar", and from at least that time the term and associated concepts have been at the forefront of an emerging Ukrainian identity.

The Ukrainian term "kobzarstvo" encompasses the traditions and culture of the kobzars (Humeniuk, 1967). The term "kobzar" however, is interpreted differently in different parts of Ukrainian society. For some people the definition is quite loose and not specific. It seems that for some it is enough to just hold the bandura and strike several strings and you will be considered a kobzar (Kononenko, 1997). Others are more specific, and consider that only males who have undergone appropriate professional training can be considered as kobzars. Others consider all those singing to the accompaniment of the bandura as kobzars. This is a more precise understanding, but the parameters for defining a kobzar can be even more specific. The notion of kobzardom is restricted by some to those playing on the old-time traditional instruments while yet others restrict these parameters even more by repertoire, that is, to those who perform works that were traditionally performed by the traditional blind kobzars (dumas, psalms, kants, etc.) of the 19th century (Kushpet, 1998).

The date of the first appearance of the term "kobzar" is not known. Although the appearance of the term "kobza" can be traced to the 14th century, it seems the term "kobzar" arose in the Ukrainian language somewhere at the end of the 18th century. Although the term "bandura" appears later in the 15th century, the term "bandurist" is found in earlier documents, than the term "kobzar" (Kononenko, 1997). This raises some questions: Why was the term "bandurist" more common in written sources than the term "kobzar" if the musical instrument known as a kobza is considered to be older than the bandura, and a precursor for the bandura? Can the court bandurists be considered kobzars? Is the kobzar tradition a separate phenomenon from bandura playing, and what and how do they differ?

In rural settings, kobzars were considered professional musicians (Kushpet, 1998) i.e. they had specific training and received remuneration for their services. In 19th century rural Ukraine it was thought that some 3 % of the population had some form of blindness, and being apprenticed to become a kobzar was a career choice for the blind. Being a kobzar was considered a vocation. Blind boys or boys who had physical injuries, that did not interfere with the pursuit of this professional activity were encouraged to be apprenticed to a kobzar. After an apprenticeship to a master, the novice had to demonstrate his knowledge of specific skills, repertoire and technical mastery of their specific instrument. Amongst the kobzars themselves there existed different ranks, which differentiated the kobzars according to age, skill, knowledge and experience (Cheremskyi, 2002).

Today, few contemporary performers on the bandura are blind, and as a result it is difficult to call these modern performers "kobzars". Those blind performers who

exist often do not perform traditional repertoire, whilst others do not play the traditional instrument. Even fewer people adhere to the kobzar lifestyle and traditions.

The tradition of the kobzars, seems to have arisen from a single centre but developed into a number of regional traditions, confined to Right-bank Ukraine, and specifically to three gubernias – Chernihiv, Poltava and Kharkiv. At the beginning of the XX century only a handful of blind players had survived, with the kobzar tradition becoming extinct by the late 1930's (Kushpet, 1998).

The kobzar tradition was however replaced by a different art form – one based on the powerful depiction of kobzars in Ukrainian literature, but which diverged significantly, being shaped by the political changes that Ukraine underwent in the 20th century.

Initially the Soviets saw the bandura and traditional folk arts as being proletarian in nature, and supported the musical endeavors of folk musicians who played the bandura, however, in time it grew to be perceived as being unsophisticated and a relic of the past, and ultimately a tool for anti-Soviet agitation. After a short period where bandurists and kobzars were brutally persecuted, the tide turned to using the bandura as a tool for the dissemination of Soviet culture. It continued to be used in folkloric productions, but at the same time was constantly changing being “improved” and ultimately losing contact with its initial base (Humeniuk, 1967).

There was a perceptible drive to perfect the design of the instrument, the technique of performance, and to widen the instruments repertoire. Simultaneously the traditional kobzar repertoire and tradition were considered primitive and unsophisticated and ultimately anti-Soviet. The design and sound of the instrument changed significantly with the introduction of metal strings, the expansion of the range and the addition of chromatic strings, a complex mechanism for the rapid retuning of the strings. The repertoire became more “sophisticated” with the addition of pieces that reflected the realities of Soviet life and which departed radically from the traditional moralistic repertoire of the kobzars. Para-religious works, such as kants and psalms, disappeared, and were considered a religious remnant in a society that fostered atheism. The elimination of para-religious works from the bandurists repertoire was followed by the virtual disappearance of Ukrainian epics known as dumas and also of historical songs. These were replaced by works of a more cosmopolitan nature based primarily on transcriptions of simple piano works and with the inclusion of romances and modern songs about romance or that sang praises to political personalities or projects and events. This repertoire reflected a period of innovation, where everything new was praised. The establishment of a cult of technological invention became the call of the day. However, the audience base did not expand, but in fact shrank. The new repertoire and changed art form did not cater to those who were followers of the new and modern, and at the same time lost many of its listeners and followers of traditional kobzar music.

Society however, demands choices. Monopolies are not tolerated well, and in the absence of choice, an opposition will often develop, because of the needs for personal choice.

In Ukraine, people who were interested in and who honoured age old traditions always existed, but in the 20th century this group began to grow and take the place of an oppositional force. Initially it was a small group who loved folk traditions and folk songs, and who were able to distance themselves from more blatant forms of national awareness. Eventually their interest grew more specific, regarding authentic folklore, with adherents improving their knowledge, scrupulosity and erudition.

In the bandura field, this movement towards authenticity in performance began to form around Heorhiy Tkachenko.

Heorhiy Tkachenko was a trained architect who became interested in Ukrainian traditions and had in the process been drawn to the traditional bandura. He went through the stages of folklorism, where at one time he played on an improved bandura with chromatic strings. Over time he deliberately withdrew from this instrument and turned to the traditional folk bandura. In it, and in the kobzar tradition, he found something that satisfied his artistic nature and he calmly and persistently pursued this art form.

Although Tkachenko was born in an ethnically Ukrainian village, this village found itself on the Russian side of the political border between Ukraine and Russia, a fact that helped him to later study in Moscow, where he had lived and worked as an architect most of his life. In the 1930's, divorced from Ukraine, he missed many of the purges that had decimated Ukrainian intellectual cultural life, and specifically the persecution of the bandurists and kobzars. Upon becoming a pensioner, he swapped his Moscow residence with a relative, and moved to Kyiv, where he was quickly surrounded by a group of people with similar interests. The authentic bandura performances that Tkachenko demonstrated were unique, as this form of performance and its remnants had disappeared in Ukraine.

A group of followers and students quickly established themselves around him. This group grew, especially after Mykola Budnyk and Mykola Tovkailo began making their own traditional banduras. This group of followers ultimately led to the establishment of a formal organization known as the "Kobzar guild" that united those who were interested the traditional bandura and kobzar traditions. This movement has continued to grow in the number of members and followers and also in its activities, with a growing numbers of performances, concerts and festivals, and the establishment of similar kobzar guilds in cities such as Poltava, Kharkiv and Lviv. It has also been the inspiration for the production of films, recordings websites and conferences and has been active in bringing attention to the authentic depiction of the kobzar legacy in artistic works such as painting, recording and film.

As a movement, it has united mainly non-professional musicians, as most of its members are professionals in various professions except music. Despite the lack of professional musicians within its ranks, it has produced or reintroduced a significant body of materials, starting from the resurrection and reintroduction of forgotten repertoire such as the traditional kants and psalms, and has inspired a growth in interest in authentic performance of epic dumas and their authentic performance practice. The group has also fostered an interest in the crafting of handmade traditional folk instruments and also been a driving force in the review of the history

and the traditions of the kobzars.

This traditional movement is juxtaposed by the continuation of teaching the academic bandura in the conservatories. Academic bandurists continue to focus on the technical aspects of bandura performance that were founded and developed in the previous Soviet period. Their repertoire continues to be based primarily on piano transcriptions, the cultivation of trained “opera” singing to the accompaniment of the academic bandura.

The Academic movement in recent years however, seems to have lost much of its vitality, and is trying to find itself within the changing parameters of modern post-soviet society. Previously the number of professionally trained conservatory bandurists was restricted in number, and by gender. The bulk of the performers it is producing were female. This is quite perplexing as only 1 in 25 bandurists studying bandura in tertiary establishments today is male, however, the only professional ensemble is a male bandurist capella. There are no professional female capellas. As a result, the conservatories are not preparing professional musicians for these state funded artistic collectives. It is hard to imagine any other government funded professional musical collective such as a symphonic orchestra, with so few professionally trained musicians.

The bulk of the repertoire for the academic bandura is made up of transcriptions of simple classical piano works that have little to do with the bandura tradition and do not take into account the technical potential of the bandura and how it differs from the piano or other instruments. When the bandura is taught as an accompanying instrument, it is used to accompany romances and operatic arias accompanying a trained operatic voice. There have to date been no bandurists that have a repertoire of songs sung with a folk voice using the chest register, but this can be understood if one understands the developmental direction of academic bandurists – away from what is perceived as unsophisticated sources to more sophisticated academic music.

If one considers that if the conservatories are not preparing performers for state funded bandurist capella, but are preparing teachers for other musical establishments then the matter takes a somewhat dismal turn. The Chernihiv musical instrument factory stopped crafting banduras in 1991, and as a result such banduras are now hard to come by and the price has continued to rise. Most of the banduras available today are refurbished instruments, some over 50 years old. Children’s size and teenage size instruments are not available, with the bulk of such instruments that have survived are becoming unplayable. Without the availability of inexpensive instruments for children and amateurs, the future of bandura courses in these music schools and the need for bandura teachers and the academic bandura in general looks quite bleak.

So what can we see in the future for the bandura in Ukraine?

Firstly, the academic bandurists need to demonstrate a pro-active stance regarding the development of audiences and the development of a support network for professional bandurists. A model that could be emulated is the manner in which A. Segovia and his classical guitarists followers developed their audiences. Audiences mean professional performances, and this in turn means performers are

paid. Performances generate funds for compositions and arrangements and the need for high quality concert instruments in the future as performers vie for a better product. It will generate interest in playing the bandura and also future students. Without an audience the art of playing the bandura will dissipate.

The success of the folk and authentic bandura movement should be seized by the academic community and recognized. Academic bandurists should turn to the authentic tradition for inspiration regarding repertoire, sound production, and technique.

The same can be said about the Bandurist Capella movement. In recent times it has transformed itself into just a choir with bandura accompaniment, which differs from a choir with piano or orchestral accompaniment only in the fact that the works are less complicated. Rather than taking standard choir repertoire and simplifying it, it should turn to its previous legacy and develop some of the para-religious forms and dumas into inspirational large-scale works. To do this, the directors of such ensembles need to be well versed in bandura culture rather than just choral conductors.

Regarding bandura manufacture, factory production of musical instruments in general is falling a round the world. Large-scale production is not feasible in today's musical climate specifically when discussing the bandura, yet there is still a need for quality instruments. A program for the support and education of individual makers should be supported in order that individual makers fill in the gap that has grown with the closing of the Chernihiv musical instrument factory. There is a significant need for qualified repairmen and makers of individual instruments. Maybe the establishment of a set of courses or a school for folk instrument manufacture, and the bandura specifically is warranted.

The polarization of bandura culture into authentic and academic subgroups which seemed to be opposed to each other and working at cross causes should be de-escalated, and the energy that is lost in such activities redirected into more positive directions, such as educating and growing followers and audience.

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