



# UKRAINIAN BANDURISTS CHORUS



*The Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus*

# WITH BANDURA ACROSS THE WORLD

By WASYL WYTWYCKY, Ph. D.

## The Last Bandurist

He was gifted with a beautiful voice and with great musicianship; he played the bandura masterfully. He was blind, and this very fact that he did not see worldly and temporal things increased the conviction that he saw and understood higher and more important things. "Oh, world," he used to say, "even though I do not see you, how beautiful you are!" His contemporaries regarded him as a phenomenon not of this world.

He lived in the nineteenth century and his name was Ostap Veresay. He came from the region of Poltava in Eastern Ukraine, a region with a rich historical and cultural past. Veresay was highly respected by the inhabitants of the villages through which he wandered for over seventy years, as well as by artists and scientists. He was invited for scientific meetings in Kiev and Petersburg, and was reported on in the press as far as Paris.

He was regarded as the bearer of something extraordinary, but something which was irrevocably passing away. "The last bandurist" was the thought of his contemporaries. "There no longer are, nor will there ever be, any bandurists," they said and wrote with great sorrow.

Fortunately, this was not actually true. There were bandurists, only they were in hiding because the Russian Czarist power persecuted them — the police smashed more than one bandura. One scholar who collected data on

all the bandurists living at the beginning of the 1900s in Ukraine counted them at 150.

At that time there appeared a person who came to the defense of these suppressed musicians and undertook to revive the art of the bandurists. Hnat Khotkevych convened and led the first conference of bandurists in Kharkiv in 1902. With his name and work the present Bandurists Chorus was later closely bound.

As the result of the work of Khotkevych and of other enthusiasts, banduras began to appear more widely. During the years of Ukraine's independence, 1918-20 (before the occupation of Ukraine by the Bolsheviks), whole choruses of bandurists began to be organized. There arose many master-soloists, and among them was Wasyl Yemets, well known in Western Europe and America. The bandura was not only preserved but became increasingly popular.

## The Birth of the Chorus

This new spirit, this enthusiasm for the bandura as an instrument, was the groundwork from which developed the Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus.

The fact that it was organized in Poltava was not accidental. With the Poltava region are bound the ancient traditions of the bandurists. There on the walls of the peasant huts, hung banduras which had been preserved as special treasures handed on from generation to generation. It was in this region that Ostap Veresay was born.

However, the immediate impulse came from the bandurist Ivan Kucherenko (called Kuchuhura). He participated in the 1902 conference and also was one of the first to perform in concert halls. Kucherenko was from the Kharkiv region but frequently visited Poltava where he was always warmly greeted. Coming on stage, he often had two banduras with him — one set in the major key, the other in the minor. Whichever key was needed, he merely picked up the proper bandura. It was in conversations with him that the idea came about, in January of 1923, to set up a studio of bandurists from which the complete chorus would arise.

The first group consisted of twelve members, the very finest singers from local choirs. Their conductor, Wolodymyr Kabachok, had had advanced musical training and was a voice teacher and choir director. From the start there were difficulties: there were not enough banduras, no uniform key, the pegs did not hold, old strings broke. Besides, not one of the members of the studio, not even Kabachok himself, knew how to play the bandura. They had to observe Kucherenko play and then learn themselves.

But the young members of the studio overcame all obstacles. The work went on as planned, aimed at a high and distant goal. One thing was very important: from the first session all instruction was given by means of musical notation. This was completely new in comparison to the memorized singing of the earlier bandurists.

After a year of training came the first public appearance. A member and soloist of the original group, Joseph Panasenko, who from the first moment of the Chorus' work until today has shared all its joys and sorrows, tells about this, as follows: It was a year after the start of their practice, but neither the director nor the bandurists themselves, felt sure that their first appearance in a large hall would turn out well. "We spent the night without sleep and went

on in a depressed frame of mind as if to the great judgment. The hall was jammed. Our turn in the concert came. Our excitement had no bounds, the banduras seemed so heavy that you couldn't hold them in your hands." But their success was great. "They embraced us with tears of joy in their eyes," recalls Panasenko.

Thus the Chorus underwent its first concert baptism. After that came numerous appearances throughout the Poltava region, as well as trips to other regions.

## Development

The reputation of the Poltava Chorus must have been great, since Hnat Khotkevych decided in 1927 to take over its directorship. Thus the Chorus had not only the best teacher-bandurist, but also the one who worked diligently to perfect bandura technique and to create a new repertoire for bandurists.

Working with Khotkevych meant associating with a very interesting personality. He was by profession a railway engineer, but engaged in such varied activities that it is amazing he had energy and time for all of them. He was a writer (author of stories and tales), a folklorist, composer, teacher and author of handbooks on bandura playing, and in addition a singer with a beautiful and mellow voice (baritone) and a bandurist with a playing technique that evoked astonishment. To this should be added his winning personality — his independence of spirit, his audacity, and above all his excellent sense of humor. It is not surprising at all that he overwhelmed the young bandurists. Nor is it surprising that the first year of training (meeting every night!) went by without a single absence on the part of the members.

One of the immediate results was the mastery and first performance in Kharkiv of the highly complex work by Khotkevych—"Bayda." In this work for the first time, music of the ban-



Posters announcing the "Three Last Concerts of the Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus" in Baku, Azerbaidzhan in 1937. Dmytro Balachykyi, the conductor, whose name appears on the posters was later banished to Siberia.

durists was integrated into a larger form and banduras were treated orchestrally, divided into separate groups with separate parts. The growth of the Chorus was reflected in the varying names which were given it. At first, it was the "Poltava District Bandurists Chorus," later the "Poltava Exemplary Bandurists Chorus," and finally, after the addition of Kievan bandurists, the "Ukrainian National Exemplary Bandurists Chorus."

From the little group of enthusiasts, members of the studio, was created a professional, highly artistic ensemble. During that time a repertoire also was developed, mainly from the pen of Khotkevych himself. The instrument as well was perfected, a new means having been found for rapid tuning — thus it was no longer necessary for our bandurists to carry two banduras on stage (as Kucherenko once did) in order to go from the major to the minor.

The concert tours of the Chorus extended over all the larger centers of Ukraine: Kiev, Kharkiv, Odessa, Dnipropetrovsk, Zhitomir, Chernihiv, and others. And the Chorus did not omit the villages. It performed at both brightly illuminated concert and theater halls and at unpretentious accommodations of village clubs.

In summer they were often taken to the Crimea, where the audience consisted mainly of the Soviet bourgeoisie, that is, of greater and lesser Party officials who basked at the Crimean resort. The Chorus performed at all the important centers of Crimea, and even sang in an open summer theater of the later-famed Yalta.

It seemed as if they had everything: the possibility of concertizing, excellent teacher-conductors, a first class artistic ensemble, and new finely fashioned instruments as well as exquisite national costumes. What more could one desire?

But this appeared so only on the brightly lit stage and in the Soviet press where the "astounding development of culture in the Soviet Union" was described. The reality of the situation was not like that at all.

### Conditions Under the Soviets

Living conditions for the bandurists under the Soviets were the same as for all people everywhere, where power is in the hands of the Bolsheviks. As all others, so too the Chorus was held in a state of constant terror by the Bolsheviks. This was demonstrated above all in the arrests and physical annihilation of members of the Chorus. These arrests occurred systematically, at any hour, keeping all the bandurists in a state of constant tension with the eternal threat: "Maybe today it's my turn?"

One of the first to be arrested was the conductor, Wolodymyr Kabachok. It was in December of 1933 and took place under the most peculiar circumstances. The Chorus was giving a concert in the capital of Ukraine, Kiev. After the successful concert, several men approached Kabachok and invited him into a separate room. It seemed to the bandurists that these were newspaper men as had happened so often before. But no! This was the arrest of the conductor of the Chorus immediately after the thunderous applause of the audience died down.

The Bolsheviks even raised their criminal hands against Hnat Khotkevych. This prominent artist, who devoted himself to the rebirth of the art of the bandurist, whose name was and always will be remembered with gratitude and love by Ukrainian people, was arrested by the Bolsheviks and sent to a concentration camp in some unknown place. His fate is not known even today.

Perhaps class or social factors played a role in this? No! Hnat Khotkevych was the son of a poor widow who earned her living with her

hands. He himself took an active part in the revolution of 1917.

After Kabachok and Khotkevych, the subsequent director, Dmytro Balacky, was arrested and later a number of bandurists, members of the Chorus. They were starved in dungeons and shipped to remote, miserable slave camps. Sometimes it happened that one of the bandurists succeeded in procuring a bandura at his place of exile. Then this instrument, really like "a faithful wife," brought momentary distraction to the exiled ones. A member of the present Chorus, Danylo Kravchenko, wandered with his bandura through Siberian Kolyma after having spent long months of torment in jail.

If one were to go through the entire Chorus and listen to their life stories, it would be shown that reprisals affected 24 out of 30 bandurists, either themselves directly or else members of their families (which meant being in a state of constant terror).

The conduct of the Bolsheviks towards the Chorus, the arrest of conductors and members, was inhuman, coldly worked out terrorism and extermination.

Arrests were not the only manifestation of the terror. It proceeded in various ways, constant spying on the bandurists and setting up conditions of work at times unbearable. The Chorus was mercilessly exploited by the Soviet authorities. Evening concerts were held 24 times a month, and besides these there were day "chief" concerts at clubs, military houses, factories and mines. Immense income went to the official Soviet booking agency, and for the bandurists, enough did not remain from their pay to provide food and clothing for themselves and their families.

In order not to leave a free moment to the unfortunate bandurists, between concerts and rehearsals they were schooled in the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. This was attended to by ever-present "spirits," managers of the



The Chorus in Lviv, Ukraine, 1944. Fourth from the left: Hryhory Kytasty, conductor; fifth: Nicholas Prychodko, director.

Chorus who were, according to the rule, Party communists.

To this was added what perhaps is the most cruel for any artist: perversion of the soul. The bandurists saw all around them want and misfortune, people starving and in tatters — they were witnesses to destruction unheard of in history, arrests and tortures — and in the midst of this they had to sing that “life has become more beautiful, life has become more gay.”

But in this can be found the answer to the question: Why did the Bolsheviks tolerate the hated Chorus, which, according to one of the bandurists, they would have liked to devour, bones and all? By means of cultural and artistic activity, the Bolsheviks tried, and today still try, to conceal from the world that they are basically anti-cultural and inhuman. The Chorus was needed by them for propaganda, primarily to mislead the Ukrainians living beyond the borders of the U.S.S.R., in Europe, as well as those in America and Canada.

## Across the Wide Spaces of Europe and Asia

The Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus went on wide tours stretching from Leningrad to Tiflis and Baku, from Minsk to Karaganda and Ashkhabad in Central Asia. These trips were sometime difficult (how many times did they have to sleep on the stone floors of railway stations!) but they were unforgettable experiences. Again and again this difference was made clear: the Soviet government and the Communist Party were one thing — the people were something else entirely. From the former the Chorus met enmity and oppression, from the latter recognition and warm reception. To this day the bandurists recall many interesting moments of their trips.

The Chorus appeared in Leningrad. There Ukrainians came in droves to the concerts, for on Russian soil they lived somewhat more freely than on their own Ukrainian land.

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and their representatives greeted the Chorus warm-heartedly, showed their admiration, and did all they could not to let the Chorus depart. These were very touching moments for the bandurists, to see how the Ukrainian song was comprehensible and close to the peoples of Uzbekistan and Turkmenia, Kazakhstan and Kirgizia. The Ukrainian bandurists and these people were united by the common feeling of national subjugation.

One of the first stops on this tour was Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Hryhory Kytasty, assistant director at that time and now conductor of the Chorus, recalls that the bandurists had never before had such success. For fifteen days in a row concerts were held before an audience of 2,000. At the end, a grand banquet was held in honor of the Chorus. Toasts were proclaimed to the friendship of the Ukrainian and Uzbek peoples.

At Fergana a surprise was prepared for the bandurists. Just before the start of the second part of the concert, representatives of the local community came on stage and in full view of the public, presented each bandurist with an original gift. These were long frock coats, the local national costume, made of multicolored silks lined with cotton batting. According to local tradition this was the demonstration of highest honor and welcome for guests. The bandurists put on these frock coats immediately on the stage and continued with the second part of the concert. It is true that the sound of the banduras was deadened a bit against the soft cotton coats, but for the bandurists this meant little in view of the warm-hearted demonstration by their Asiatic friends. The Chorus obtained additional similar coats and requested they be delivered officially to the government of Soviet Ukraine. But this never happened — the Party official-manager did not deliver them, perhaps because the Soviets did not like these demonstrations of friendship between the Ukrainian bandurists and the local Asiatic people.

## The Chorus in Moscow

In the capital of the U.S.S.R. the Chorus appeared nine times. The first was in 1931 when the Chorus, in a contest with other choirs, won distinction. It was sent there on several other occasions, as for the opening of the All-Union Exhibit of Village Husbandry.

In the Moscow newspaper, "Pravda," there appeared more than one comment in praise of the Chorus, its make-up of voices, its ability in interpretation. In early 1936, after one concert which took place in the hall of the conservatory, "Pravda" January 6, 1936, published a special article. The reviewer, Georgi Polyanovsky, recognized what an art it was to sing well and to accompany oneself at the same time, mentioning outstanding soloists (Panasenko among them). But at the end, the purpose of the article showed itself: the reviewer wrote, "Hearing the playing and singing of the bandurists brings to mind the illimitable opportunities and the fortunate, happy life of the workers of the sister Soviet republic, Ukraine."

In March of the same year the Chorus was again in Moscow. This time the spectacle "of the fortunate, happy life of Ukraine" was arranged more prominently.

This was the ten-day celebration of Ukrainian art in Moscow. Other groups took part as well: the "Dumka" choir under the leadership of the well-known Ukrainian director and one-time conductor of the Bandurists Chorus, Nestor Horodovenko, a women's ensemble, soloists and the orchestra of the Kiev opera. The concerts took place in the Bolshoi Theater for a full ten days. The last concert in which all soloists and ensembles took part was attended by Soviet top leaders and the Kremlin dictator whom they called — "the father of the working people of the whole world." The bandurists, who had seen his photograph so many times, were curious to see him in person. But it was impossible; he hid himself far back in his box behind a whole row of marshals.



In Germany, 1947; in the middle conductors Hryhory Kytasty and Wolodymyr Boshyk.

The concert finished and once again "Pravda" (March 23, 1936) wrote of the outstanding musicianship of the Bandurists Chorus, of its mellow sound, of its own special directness of performance.

The "father" was seen on the next day when all the participants were invited to a banquet at the Kremlin — to be more precise, not really all, because the NKVD, which had already in Kiev thoroughly investigated all the performers, their pasts and their family connections, now at the last moment refused admittance to the Kremlin for two of the bandurists, two well-known basses.

The bandurists, who participated in this banquet and the concert which was part of it, recall that event to this day, for it was sad and strange at the same time. It was uncomfortable and simply funny to be part of a reception at which the guests, that is, the bandurists and

other artists, were systematically searched and then warned against talking at the tables or even turning around. Besides, they were seated in such a way that each bandurist sat alone at a table with complete strangers. Behind every two of the guests stood a "waiter," who closely observed each move. Alongside the table also sat a stranger in dark clothes who neither ate nor drank, but just watched attentively. The tables were finely set and spread with food and drink, meats of all kinds. And never was this frightening difference made more vivid: in Ukraine they had seen poverty and hunger; here, incredible, thoughtless excess. Coldly and falsely for the bandurists, music wafted down from the orchestra in the balcony playing Ukrainian melodies all the while; so, too, were the words of V. Molotov who greeted the Ukrainian artists in the name of the Soviet government in stereotyped, oft-repeated sentences.



The Chorus in 1948 celebrating its 25th Anniversary in Ingolstadt, Germany; conductors: Hryhory Kytasty (extreme left) and Hryhory Nazarenko (extreme right).

During the banquet there was a concert, at the end of which came the appearance of the bandurists. They were brought through side corridors to the platform right next to the table where "he" sat in company with his cohorts. They saw his pale, repugnant face. It seemed that he was preoccupied all the time. During the concert people came to him with papers which he signed at the table. He did not react at all to the singing of the Chorus. Marshal Voroshilov paid greater attention and even attempted to sing along with the Chorus.

Late at night came the end to this comedy, during which not a single person, from the Kremlin dictator himself to the ordinary member of the police dressed as a guest, certainly not our artists, felt himself free or safe.

### The First Hole in the Soviet Wall

"And how does the world really look there beyond the barricade wall of the U.S.S.R.? Does it look anything like what the Soviet

press, radio and films have pictured it?" These were the questions which bothered almost every person living under the Soviets. These thoughts bothered the bandurists as well. Once in 1930 they almost left for a concert tour in America. An American impresario came to Kharkiv where he heard the Chorus and liked it considerably. But the fulfillment of this scheme was never realized.

Only in 1939 did a break come in the Soviet wall: then began the march of the Red Army to the west for the "liberation of subjugated brothers." In the very first days of the campaign, over the fresh tracks of tanks which led westward, the Bandurists Chorus was brought up. Before their departure they were assembled and warned not to separate from the Chorus under any circumstances.

Concerts took place in newly occupied territories. The initial chill of the audience quickly passed away and changed to delighted applause. But could these listeners know the

truth? Could they know the martyred fate, not only of the Chorus, but of all the people who had been tormented for twenty years under the Soviets? Obviously not! The bandurists themselves would have been glad not to sing, but to shout from the stage: "Don't believe them. Don't believe our forced singing!" Surrounded on all sides by agents, they had to play out their allotted role.

Then the notion matured among them, that not in the Soviet Union but beyond its borders it was necessary to look for respect for humanity and freedom of human thought. The firm determination arose among the bandurists to tear themselves away at any cost from the clutches of the Soviet regime. The opportunity for this came with the withdrawal of the Red Army from Ukraine during the war in 1941.

### Under Hitlerian Occupation

Soon after the Germans took Kiev the Bandurists Chorus was reorganized at full strength. Now it could add to its name that of the Ukrainian poet and awakening spirit, Taras Shevchenko. The Bolsheviks had not allowed this earlier.

At first the Chorus' rise was tremendous. But it soon became clear that the new power, this new occupier was perhaps not as cunning, certainly was no less cruel than the previous one. It was clear that the Chorus' concert activity would be possible only far from the capital and the center of Ukraine. The plan arose to travel to Western Ukraine, which up to that time had been within the borders of the Polish state.

The trip through Volyn in the Spring of 1942 made up one of the brightest pages in the activity of the Bandurists Chorus. The Chorus and its conductors, Hryhory Kytasty and Hryhory Nazarenko proceeded in triumph from city to city, from town to town, and was greeted everywhere with respect and love. There was no end to the applause; the listeners showered



Joseph Panasenko, a member of the original group, with his daughter and two grandchildren.

flowers on the bandurists; poets composed verses in their honor. The upsurge was even greater because at that time in Volyn the Ukrainian underground was increasing and becoming more powerful, undertaking similar measures against both occupations, Soviet and Nazi. At the very peak of its concert tour in Western Ukraine, an order came from the German command in Kiev to stop the trip immediately. The bandurists then returned to the city of Lutsk. Along the way a column of motorcycle police unexpectedly caught up with them. The bandurists were forcefully brought to Kiev.

This was the time when Hitler's provost in Ukraine, Reichskommissar Erich Koch said that "the humming scythe should drown out the strings of the banduras." The situation steadily worsened. When the order came for their trip to Germany for concerts in workers' camps, it seemed a good resolution of the situation.



Hryhory Kytasty, conductor.

This concert trip was certainly one which no other musical ensemble ever had. In Kiev the bandurists, despite their protests, were set in a freight car within which there was nothing to sleep on, nor even to sit on. The train left and traveled for two days without a stop. No one cared whether or not the riders had anything to eat. Only on the third day was it possible to step out into the air. The bandurists hopped off at least to stretch their legs. But Gestapo men who were convoying the transport rushed up with clubs and beat the bandurists for no reason at all. They beat mercilessly two of the older, grey-haired members of the Chorus.

The bandurists were brought, not to Halle or the concert bureau, as it had been arranged in Kiev, but to a forced labor camp outside of Hamburg. Instead of banduras, they issued

other instruments to the Chorus—shovels, saws, axes and hammers. They were placed behind barbed wire and were surrounded on all sides by guards.

Hard labor began with insufficient and abominable fare (almost always cooked turnips, a little bread as black as the earth and a bit of margarine). The routine was that of a concentration camp. They slept on narrow double-decked beds under filthy covers. They got up for work at 5 A.M. and went to bed at 9-10 P.M., exhausted and hungry. Some of them began to swell from hunger. Treatment by the guards was inhuman, with no walking outside of the barracks, no writing to one's relations upon threat of the firing squad. The "New Europe" was revealed in its essence, stark and brutal.

After a six-month confinement in the Hamburg camp, the Chorus was released and allowed to travel for concerts at the same kind of camps scattered throughout Germany and filled with the same kind of laborers brought by force or guile from Ukraine and other East European countries.

In ten months' time during 1942 the Chorus gave 386 concerts (Nazi exploitation was no less than the Soviet). Under such conditions concertizing was difficult. But it was more difficult to gaze upon young, 13-14-year-old boys and girls, taken from their families by force and confined in these filthy, overcrowded camps, fenced off from the world by barbed wire. One of the bandurists recalls in his memoirs:

"There were instances when the Chorus after two or three songs, could not go on with the concert and sing because the whole room was crying loudly — unconscious girls were carried out. Seeing this, tears rose and prevented us from singing."

But as the position of the Germans on the fronts worsened, life for the slave laborers became easier. Permission came to return to

Ukraine. The Chorus began to give concerts in Western Ukraine and visited as far as Lviv. There in November of 1943 the Chorus performed in the rooms of Metropolitan Andrei Sheptycky in Lviv. The Grand Metropolitan wrote with trembling hand in the souvenir book of the Chorus:

"The Bandurists Chorus named in honor of Taras Shevchenko teaches us how we ought to value and feel deeply the tragedy of our position, and further, with its happy songs it supports the spirit and gives hope for the future."

### Freedom — At Last

With the enormous masses of refugees from the European East knowing Soviet actuality from their own experience, the bandurists found themselves in Western Germany. The end of war came and with it the first encounter with military allies. At first there were misunderstandings. There was the threat of forceful repatriation to the East. The answer, finally free without censors or supervisors, came through the singing of the Chorus, in full voice, resounding throughout the whole world. In the history of the Chorus a new page was started.

The Chorus increased its make-up. For its artistic guidance, besides Hryhory Kytasty, Wolodymyr Boshyk served as conductor. Concerts were given in the finer halls of the cities of Western Germany, at military installations of the allies and at numerous refugee camps.

One cannot be surprised that the concerts of the Chorus evoked enthusiasm in the many thousands of Ukrainians who had emigrated to Western Germany. To the many unforgettable moments belong the concerts arranged for the famous "Week of Ukrainian Culture" which took place in Munich, Germany, in 1948.

The Chorus also performed for the German public in Wagner's city, Bayreuth. The mayor of the city wrote in the souvenir book of the Chorus under the date of August 10, 1946:



Wolodymyr Boshyk, conductor.

"With great delight, Bayreuth listened to the performance of the Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus. We hope to have again in a short while the opportunity to rejoice in this artistry."

At that time in Western Germany the Chorus found a great number of friends and supporters among the soldiers and officers of the allied forces. The souvenir book is full of their words of recognition, delight and gratitude. The following are a few excerpts from the inscriptions of several officers of the American army:

"This is one of the very finest concerts I have ever heard."

"It was a great pleasure to listen to your delightful music."

"I hope that one day I can hear this Chorus in the United States—where their efforts will be

appreciated and their talents unfettered by the Gestapo or NKVD."

Leafing through the book page by page, we can see that there are many moments of international closeness and understanding. Here, alongside the words written by American officers and respected representatives of the German community are many other notes written in French, Czech, Polish, Lithuanian and other languages besides Ukrainian. In these notations very often there is the theme: "Your song is the means and foundation for international understanding."

One of the latest to write in the Chorus' book is the American Vice-Consul, A. T. Moot. He wrote:

"After listening to your concert last night, you have my sincere best wishes for many future successes — in America!"

### In America

The wishes of Mr. Moot were soon fulfilled. The Chorus settled in Detroit, where came three of its founder-members of Poltava: Joseph Panasenko, Hryhory Nazarenko and Paul Miniaylo. The first concert was sponsored by the Ukrainian Community and International Institute in Detroit. In the Fall of 1949 began the concert tours of the Chorus through the chief cities of America and Canada. The extraordinary appearance of the Chorus, the unknown instrument, the great skill of performance and the loftiness of its art without any cheap effects — all these attributes brought forth delight for listeners and high recognition on the part of critics.

Jointly the critics emphasized that the activity of the Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus was a new, completely original and valuable addition to the cultural life of America.

Apart from their regular concerts it was interesting and enjoyable for the bandurists to perform in Washington and Ottawa and to meet in

straightforward friendship with American senators and congressmen and Canadian government officials. The atmosphere of these meetings was diametrically opposed to the spectacle presented at one time during the Chorus' concert in the Kremlin.

In 1953 occurred the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Bandurists Chorus. On that occasion there was formed in Detroit, the city of its permanent residence, the organization, "Friends of the Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus, Inc.," with the purpose of supporting in all possible ways this valuable artistic group. The concert tour on the occasion of this jubilee was even more magnificent and its reception by the public from New York to Edmonton and from Minneapolis through Montreal and Boston even more enthusiastic. On this occasion the Chorus received many notices of recognition. The American senator, Homer Ferguson, wrote:

"The very existence of your group is a high tribute to the spirit of freedom which exists throughout the world and your music should bring pleasure and inspiration to hundreds of thousands."

A member of the Canadian government, Minister Paul Martin, emphasized:

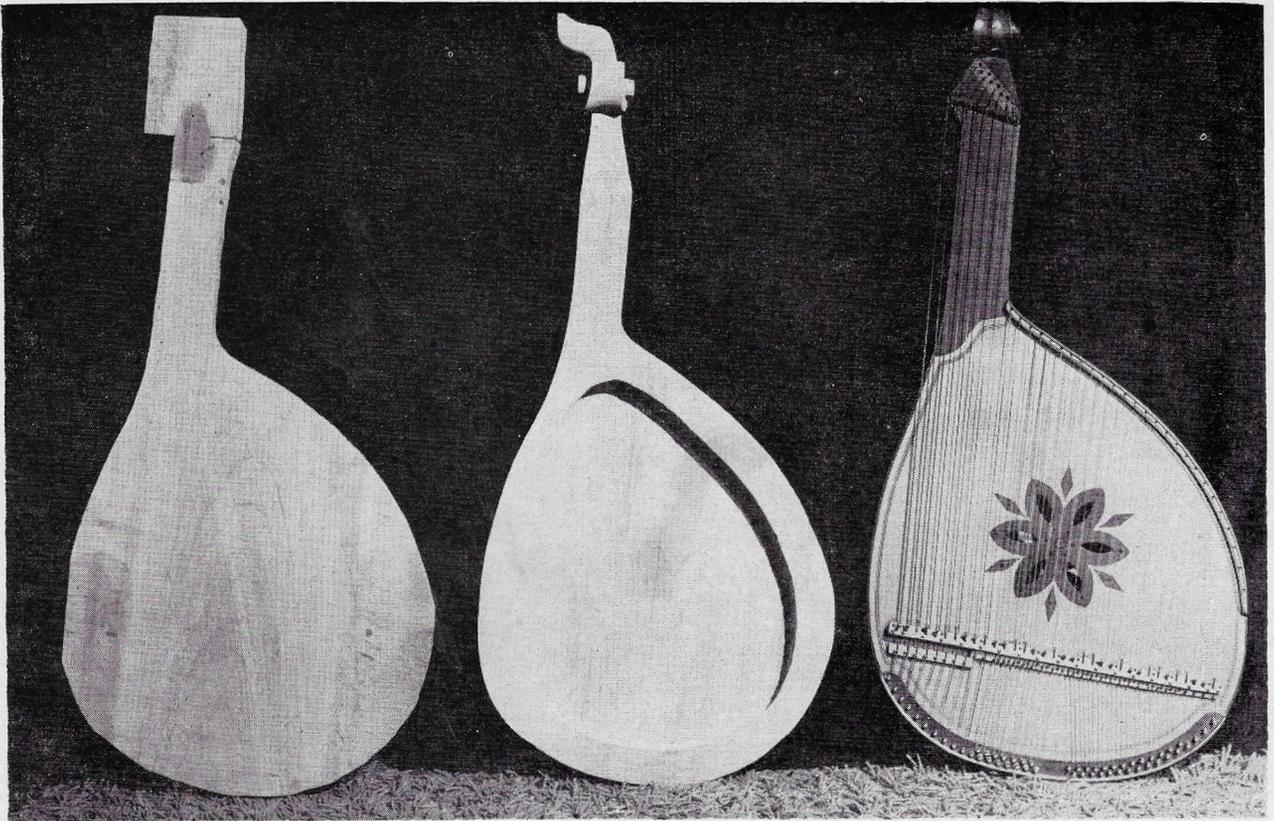
"The authentic folk music of the Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus offers the listener a unique and memorable musical experience. But more than that, the example of this group, who have preserved their cultural heritage through so many vicissitudes, provides an inspiration to all freedom-loving people."

And the governor of the State of Michigan, G. Mennen Williams, wished the Chorus well:

"We, in Michigan, are delighted to have you as residents of our great State."

### The Bandura

In Western Germany and later in the United States and Canada, every time the Bandurists



A slab of maple becomes a musical instrument.

Chorus held its concerts many persons, especially musicians, would come during the intermission to see and try this unknown and original instrument. The bandura is a slightly modified form of the old lute, but it lacks the frets on the neck that the lute has and has, instead, on its body many short strings that are tuned similarly to the harp. This is a pure Ukrainian creation.

The outstanding Ukrainian writer, Yuri Yanovski, in one of his stories describes the playing of the bandura thus: "The strings of the bandura sounded, droned like the Spring bumblebees, like the yellow industrious bees." The bandura is the Ukrainian national instrument like the bagpipe for the Scots or the balalaika for the Russians. The earliest traces of the instrument in Ukraine date back a thousand years. Its most ancient form and name (Kobza) had come from the East and was different than it is

today. The present form developed later, at the time when in Western Europe the lute was so surprisingly widespread. It is possible to find an enormous number of expressions of the love for this instrument.

In old historical songs the bandurists turned to it with the words:

"Bandura, my faithful wife!"

This instrument has magic power:

"The Cossack plays on the bandura,  
Whatever he thinks up, that he has!"

The bandura was of particular value for the gallant Cossacks of the 16-18th centuries. It led them into battle, served to cheer them up with gay dance tunes, and at other times turned their thoughts to loftier matters:

"Tell me, gentle strings, which life is best."

The bandura was also the instrument of the Ukrainian elite. Hetman Ivan Mazepa, to whom Franz Liszt dedicated his symphonic poem "Mazepa," played the bandura.

The uniqueness of the bandura lies in its shape, with one side of the resonating chamber expanded, and with two kinds of strings: long ones on the neck and short ones tuned diatonically on the body itself. The banduras of recent construction have 34 strings, tuned diatonically from C below the staff. These banduras also have transposition devices with the aid of which one can change tonality very quickly even while playing.

Thus the bandura is an original instrument incorporating the playing principles of two instruments: the lute and the harp.

### Repertoire

Besides having their own instrument, the bandurists had their own distinctive repertoire. Its basis is Ukrainian folksongs — beautiful, diverse, rich in musical expression and deep in content and feeling. For a long time the beauty of these songs attracted the attention of many folklorists and of even more composers — Ukrainian and those of other nationalities, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Moussorgsky, Bartok. Ukrainian themes are not foreign to American composers, as for example: the suite for violin and orchestra, "Les Veilles de l'Ukraine," by Charles M. Loeffler, and the "Ukrainian Suite" by Quincy Porter.

A special genre linked exclusively with the art of the bandurists was the "dumy." The dumy were epic songs composed in the 16th and 17th centuries during the time of the heroic Cossack epoch. The first historical mention of dumy was made in 1506. The content of the dumy is taken from the historical past and its motifs concern chivalry, comradeship, and respect for the family, especially the mother: her

prayer can even "rescue her son from the bottom of the sea!"

In the presentation of the dumy, the bandurist recites to the accompaniment of the bandura. Bandurists of long ago had a high regard for their songs and believed that they were "given by God as instruction to the people." This, however, did not prevent inclusion in their repertoire of gay and dance songs, into which the bandurists knew how to inject much zeal and fire.

Generally, these traditions of the bandurists lay at the base of the Chorus' repertoire, but as a choir-ensemble it has own peculiarities and possibilities. First of all, the Chorus — in contrast to the ancient bandurists — is skilled in note reading. It can perform even complicated harmonic and contrapuntal works. In the Chorus there are really two parts: a choir and an orchestra of banduras. The fusion of broad vocal-instrumental forms is possible. To these belong the works of Hnat Khotkevych, "Bayda," "Storm on the Black Sea," and Hryhory Kytasty's "Zaporozhian Sich."

One general characteristic linked with tradition and with the Bandurists Chorus' presentation technique is that the text, the word, has an important part in the song equal to the musical meaning.

### The Unique Ensemble

As one looks at the bandurists sitting on stage in even rows and then hears them, something distinctly special is apparent which sets the Chorus off from other musical ensembles. A whole series of attributes makes the Chorus perhaps the most unusual ensemble in the world.

One of these, without doubt, is the ancient and unique instrument. But in the Chorus is represented another stream, a choral tradition which has behind it a development of



After the concert in Washington, D. C., 1950, with Senators Homer Ferguson, Margaret Chase Smith and Harry P. Cain.

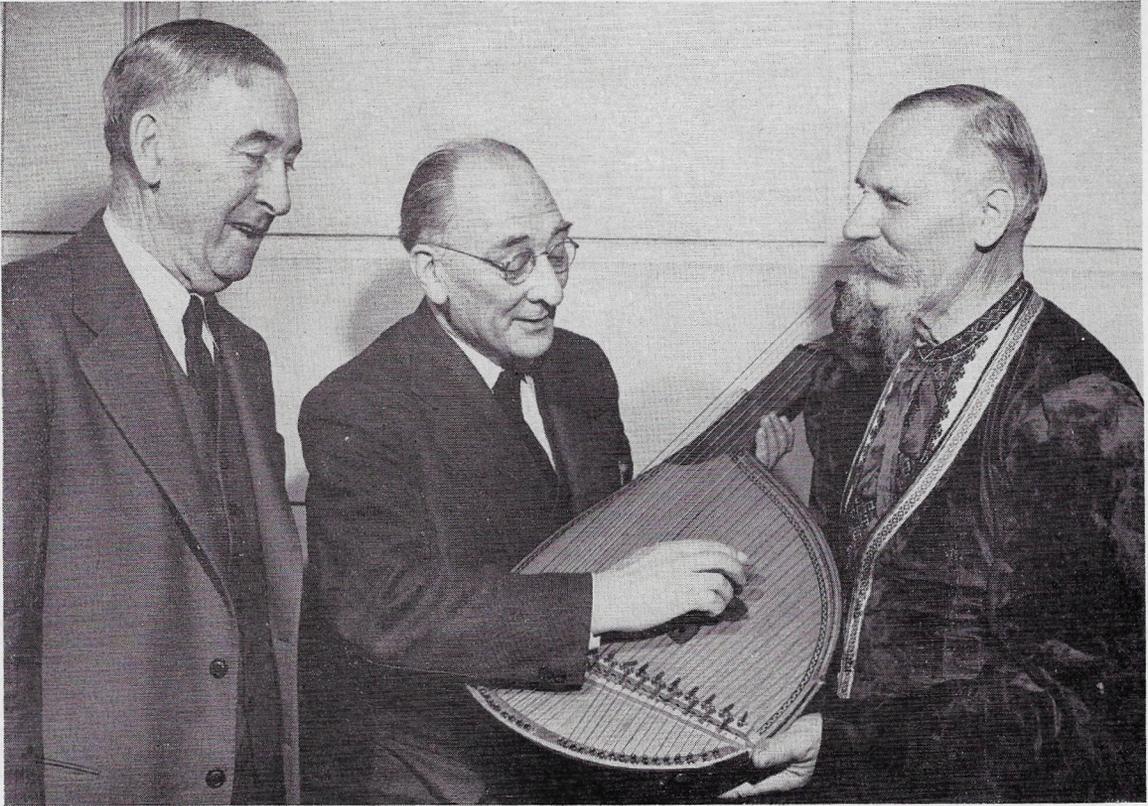
several centuries in Ukraine. Another striking observation is frequently pointed out by professional music critics wherever the bandurists perform. The Chorus is a choir which accompanies itself on instruments — and it is an orchestra which sings while playing. It accomplishes one and the other, playing and singing, with perfection and fineness and, as the Ukrainian connoisseur of art, Yuri Lipa, has observed — with nobility.

Artistic uniqueness also lies in the singing and playing of the Chorus without a conductor. Thus, the choral-orchestral mass of the Chorus is fused with the delicateness of a chamber ensemble in which every member takes part

not at a conductor's beat but rather by his own intuition. Perhaps in this lies the reason why music reviewers and ordinary listeners so often associate the singing of the Chorus with thoughts of love of freedom and democracy.

One American conductor said during a concert of the bandurists:

"I am deeply impressed by their exceptional discipline, not imposed from without, but some kind of strange internal fusion and submission to the total unity." This is an interesting observation. And if we were to search for the roots of this characteristic of the Chorus, we



Canadian Parliament, Ottawa, Ontario, 1951; Hon. Frederick Gordon Bradley, Secretary of State, and Hon. Robert Wellington Mayhew, Minister of Fisheries with Peter Motuz, the oldest member of the chorus.

would find it not only on the purely artistic level.

The Chorus has its own organizational structure, in which, as in its music, is reflected the spirit of the past. This is a remote echo of musical guilds, somewhat like the "Meistersingers." According to its constitution the Chorus has the definite right to elect its leaders and to define its principles of professionalism.

And last but not least, the uniqueness of the Chorus lies in the fact that it is the only musical group in the free world which, having previously been an official Soviet ensemble, came

over to this side of the iron curtain and set itself to the service of art, truth and people. It is an extraordinary thing under present-day conditions to have concertized in Kiev, Leningrad and Moscow, Tiflis, Karaganda and Baku, Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt, and then finally Detroit, New York, Boston, Winnipeg and Toronto. With bandura, the Chorus has circled continents — Europe, Asia and America.

This is the Ukrainian Bandurists Chorus; an ensemble which in our troubled and violent time contributes beautiful, strong and lasting values.

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