



Tradition: Ukrainian Folk Singing

A folk song is a song that is connected to a place or community. Folk songs can be very old, but can also be new. Many folk songs are passed from one generation to the next and from one group to another through oral tradition, meaning hearing and singing, rather than learned from books. With folk songs, words and even melodies are adapted from singer to singer and from generation to generation. Over time folk songs often change and can exist in many different versions. Folk songs are part of life in communities the world over, including your own!

In the eastern European country of Ukraine, folk songs have long been sung for important life events, such as when people are born and when they get married. People often sang to welcome each other and to say goodbye. They sang about working on their farms. They also had songs to describe everyday events like doing chores, walking in the woods, noticing the changes in the seasons or to share local gossip. Usually, these Ukrainian folk songs are performed in groups, or choirs. And they are often sung a cappella. This means that they are sung without any instruments. Ukrainians believe that their folk songs say something special about who they are.

Women and girls have always played an important part in keeping the tradition of singing folk songs in Ukraine. As primary keepers of traditions and culture, many Ukrainian folk songs were created and performed by women, particularly songs of love, loss, and longing, often sung in multiple parts

Long ago a Ukrainian village's young people would gather together at the end of the school or work day; not only to play but to sing folk songs that they had learned by heart. They often even sang in harmony. Some children sang high, others in the middle. Some sang the low parts.

While many of Ukraine's folk songs are very old, they are still familiar, and many young people have begun to update and modernize them. They mix the old melodies with dance music and DJ beats. They still say something special about the people but they sound new! One group of performers who have recently added their own creativity to traditional folk songs is Kurbasy.

Artist: Kurbasy

Kurbasy is a performing arts group from Lviv (Lu-veev), Ukraine. The main members of the group are Maria Oneschak and Natalia Rybka-Parkhomenko. They are both singers and actors. Sometimes, they perform together as a duet, but for bigger shows, Vsevolod Sadovyji and other musicians perform with them. These musicians play a wide range of different acoustic instruments and sing as well.

Maria and Natalia often sing in harmony. Maria usually sings the higher notes, and Natalia sings the lower ones. They are part of a long tradition of women singing folk songs in Ukraine, a tradition that goes back many generations. Natalia says, “We sing old Ukrainian songs that our grandmothers taught us—songs passed down from grandparents to grandchildren in villages all across Ukraine.” Maria adds, “It was singing that brought us together.” Over time, they became close friends.

Maria and Natalia met while working as actors at the Les Kurbas Theater in Lviv. The theater is named after Les Kurbas, a famous Ukrainian director and teacher from the 1920s and 1930s. At that time Ukraine was under the control of the Soviet Union, which is now known as Russia. The Soviet government didn’t like that Kurbas promoted Ukrainian culture. He was arrested and later executed for his work, which was seen as “anti-Soviet.” Today, Maria and Natalia named their group Kurbasy to honor him and his dedication to Ukrainian culture.

Les Kurbas liked to use creative ideas, such as symbols and abstract images in his plays. Kurbasy also uses this style in their performances. They add videos and images to their shows to help the audience use their imagination. This helps people from all over the world enjoy their performances—even if they don’t speak Ukrainian and understand the lyrics of the songs.

“Our songs are filled with love,” Natalia says. They show love for Ukraine’s history, and also for the strength and beauty of the Ukrainian people today.

Place: Lviv, Ukraine

“Ukraine is a country in Eastern Europe. It’s about the same size as the U.S. state of Texas and is the second-largest country in Europe, after Russia. Russia is one of its neighbors, along with seven other countries. The capital and biggest city is Kyiv (Keev).

Much of Ukraine is made up of wide, flat lands called steppes. These open fields don’t have many trees and are great for farming, especially growing wheat. That is why Ukraine is one of the top wheat producers in the world. In the western part of the country, near the city of Lviv, there are the Carpathian Mountains. This area has forests, lakes and valleys where many small villages are found. Because Ukraine has different kinds of land, it also has many different traditions and customs.

Lviv is a city in western Ukraine, close to the border with Poland. About 1.1 million people live there. Lviv was founded in 1250, so it has a long and rich history. You can see it in the colorful old buildings, narrow walkways, stone streets and big ancient churches. Parts of Lviv looks like something out of a fairy tale. The city's mix of styles comes from many cultures that have influenced it over time, including Polish, Austrian and Ukrainian, as well as a large Jewish population.

Today, Lviv celebrates its past, but it is also a modern city full of creativity. Artists paint large murals on walls, and traditional designs from embroidery are used to decorate homes and shops. Music is everywhere. People play instruments in the streets, and there are lots of theaters and bookstores. Lviv is one of the most exciting cultural places in Ukraine. It's a city where history and art come together.

Ukraine has a long and difficult history. In the late 1800s, it became part of the Russian Empire. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Ukraine became independent for a short time. But soon, it was taken over by the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, Soviet decisions caused a terrible famine in Ukraine that killed millions of people. During World War II, Nazi Germany took control of Ukraine for a time and killed many Jewish people who lived there.

Ukraine finally became an independent country again in 1991, but its relationship with Russia has stayed tense. In 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine in a full-scale war. Ukrainians have been fighting ever since to protect their country and freedom.

Maria says the war is a constant source of tension. "Even when we try to forget," she says, "it's still there, pressing on our hearts." For the music group Kurbasy, singing helps them deal with that feeling and remember what it means to be Ukrainian.

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