



Tradition: Ukrainian Folk Singing

A folk song is one that is shared by a particular community. Folk songs may be centuries 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. Thus, as words and even melodies are adapted from singer to singer and from generation to generation, folk songs are open to change and may exist in 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 are written and sung for all occasions, including important life events such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. They may also describe an everyday event like doing chores, or a walk in the woods, changes in the seasons or to share local gossip. In this way, folk songs reflect the memories and lives of people over time. Ukrainian folk songs are often sung a-cappella, meaning without accompanying instruments. Women's voices are viewed by Ukrainians as powerful tools for expressing emotion and preserving history. 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.

As in many places in the world, during the last century, folk songs became less popular in Ukraine. With topics and stories rooted in more isolated and often farm-based activities, many people saw them as old-fashioned and not relevant to their current lives. This has recently begun to change. In Ukraine, folk songs can now be heard again, sometimes mixed with dance music and DJ beats. Others take a different approach, reviving the songs in more traditional ways. Whether rediscovered and renewed or reimagined, these songs are now important and meaningful links to Ukraine's history and the roots of its rich, living culture.

Artist: Kurbasy

Kurbasy is a performing arts group from the city of Lviv (Lu-veev), Ukraine. The core members of the group are actor-singers Maria Oneschak and Natalia Rybka-Parkhomenko. Though they sometimes perform as a duet only, most large-scale performances feature Vsevolod Sadovyji and other musicians accompanying them on a wide variety of acoustic instruments and vocals.

Maria and Natalia's voices often blend together in harmony; Maria takes the higher parts and Natalia the lower parts. Maria and Natalia come from a long tradition of female singers that dates back hundreds of years. As Natalia says "We sing old, ancient Ukrainian folk songs that our grandmothers taught us—what grandmothers taught their grandchildren in Ukrainian villages in different parts of our great Ukraine." Maria adds, "it was the singing that united us." They soon became lifelong friends.

As professional actors, Maria and Natalia met at Lviv's famous Les Kurbas Theater, named for an important and innovative theater director and teacher. Kurbas directed in the 1920s' and 1930s, when Ukraine was under control of the Soviet Union, which is now known as Russia. The Soviet government targeted Kurbas because his productions promoted the idea of a distinct, separate Ukrainian identity rather than as one part of the Russian-dominated culture of the Soviet Union. Kurbas was arrested, accused of "anti-Soviet activities," and executed for his role in promoting Ukrainian culture and artistic expression. Almost a century later Kurbas honors him and his efforts to champion Ukrainian culture by naming their group after him.

Les Kurbas was interested in utilizing abstract images, symbols and metaphors in his theatrical productions. So too does the band Kurbas, adding projected video and images to their performances to inspire the imagination of the audience. This pairing of music, acting and imagery creates connections with people around the world, most of whom do not speak Ukrainian and may not otherwise understand the words of their reinterpreted folk songs. No matter the subject, "our songs are filled with love," Natalia says. They express a love of Ukraine's past but also the strength and beauty of the Ukrainian people today.

Place: Lviv, Ukraine

U Located in eastern Europe, Ukraine is roughly the same size as Texas. It is the second-largest country in Europe after Russia, which borders it to the east and northeast. Ukraine also borders seven other European nations. Kyiv (Kiev) is the nation's capital and largest city. Much of Ukraine's landscape consists of steppes, or open plains, with few trees. Like the American midwest, this landscape is perfect for growing wheat, and Ukraine is one of the world's leading wheat producers. The western part of the country, where Lviv is located, features an alpine-like section of the Carpathian Mountains, with great forests, lakes and valleys that are home to many villages. These diverse landscapes have each contributed to Ukraine's rich and diverse customs and traditions.

Lviv, Ukraine, the city of 1.1 million people that Kurbas calls home, is situated in the west, near the Polish border. Founded in 1250, Lviv's centuries-old history can be seen in its colorful buildings, hidden passageways, cozy cafes, cobblestone streets and grand 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 hundreds of years, including Polish, Austrian and Ukrainian, as well as a large Jewish population.

The city has preserved and celebrates its history and at the same time is building a high-tech economy that supports artistic innovation. Street artists paint murals on old buildings, and folk patterns—taken from traditional embroidery—decorate shops and homes. Street musicians abound. Bookstores and theaters keep the city’s artistic traditions alive.

Lviv’s unique look and artistic spirit make it one of Ukraine’s most exciting cultural centers. Everywhere you turn, history and creativity come together, making it a city full of stories, music and inspiration.

The history of Ukraine spans thousands of years. In the late 1800s, Ukraine became part of the Russian Empire. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the country briefly declared independence, but the Russian Empire, then known as the Soviet Union, soon regained control.

In the 1930s, Soviet policies led to a devastating famine in Ukraine, killing millions. During World War II, Nazi Germany occupied Ukraine and murdered many of the country’s Jewish population.

Ukraine gained independence in 1991, but tensions with neighboring Russia remained. In 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion, and Ukraine has been fighting for its survival and freedom ever since. Maria describes the war as a “heavy tension.” “Even when we try to forget,” she says, “it’s still there, pressing on our hearts.” For Kurbasy, singing is a way to release that tension and remember what it means to be Ukrainian.

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