

Ukrainian Songs with Historical and Cossack Themes in the Works of Western European Composers

TARAS FILENKO

Examples of the national song heritage, which surfaced at various times beyond the boundaries of Ukraine have an interesting history, connected with their adaptation into other musically stylistic environments, connected with an accompanying transformation of their genre. One might speak of the relatively widespread existence of dumy and Ukrainian songs, in particular of songs with a Cossack theme in the countries of Europe – Germany, France, England, Italy, Austria, Holland, as well as in the lands of the Slavic nations, from the middle of the eighteenth century, although particular examples relate even to the sixteenth century. Traditionally, most of the songs were created by Kobzars or minstrels who are anonymous today, but simply were talented and educated persons, some of whom tied their lives to Cossackdom, and their creative output to Cossack themes.

Because of the relatively limited scope of this lecture, I will not stop to examine the numerous examples of Ukrainian musical folklore, which existed in a foreign environment. Focusing one's attention on the songs of the Cossack era, one wishes to mark the special role of the musical base in the further artistic life of a particular work or its arrangement into various forms and genres. After analysis and comparison between variations of a certain type, one may notice a particular quality in the structural stability of the melodic line in comparison with the textual part of these works on a Cossack theme, which are rather interesting in their musical arrangements and thematic borrowings. The verbal half of a particular example of folklore experienced rather free interference of poets and translators, which led, in turn, to the loss of primary pictorial-constant features of the musical-poetic work. Using the resulting comparative research of Ukrainian literature scholars and folklorists on versions of songs published in Europe, one notices a rather wide pictorial polarity, which essentially changes the poetic base of the song, duma, or ballad. Instead, the melody of the

folk paradigm saves the primary features of intonational and metric-rhythmical base. Doubtless I do not speak of the purposeful active interference of composers into the structure of the songs during the use of musical themes for further arrangements or for completely new works.

Researching folkloric examples and the professional musical heritage of many nations with which Ukrainians contacted historically during certain periods, scholars have found related metric-rhythmical melodic turns, and often even intonational phrases which having been borrowed from Slavic sources, and in particular, from Ukrainian musical folklore, were eventually adapted into the context of a certain national culture. Occasionally Ukrainian folksongs or artsongs, published in folkloric anthologies were identified as belonging to other national groups. In this manner several songs were “adopted” into German folklore, for example.

Very often the adaptation of the Ukrainian example or of a certain fragment, melodic line, or entire work into a foreign musical stylistic tradition, was so organic, that in the future, this work or element became accepted as traditional for the musical culture in question. So it is understandable when an autograph of Beethoven’s Scottish folksongs, among which was included one Ukrainian song, *The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube*, was examined by an eminent historian and musicologist, Stasov, who identified the song as Scottish in origin. Eventually no small efforts were required to correctly reidentify it as Ukrainian.

The penetration of Cossack songs, dумы and ballads into the territory of European countries was linked with the contacts throughout history, of Cossack political missions, Ukrainian travellers and students, who introduced into various cultures, the wonderful vocal examples of their nation. Direct dialogues between Ukraine and other European countries in the areas of active artistic and musical contacts have been documented, and are usually dated from the second half of the 16th and the beginning of the 18th centuries.

This process, without a doubt, reached even more ancient times, so that in England by the beginning of the 17th century, there already was a special interest evinced in the Ukrainian theme. *The London Gazette* regularly announced military events transpiring during the times of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, and there was a noticeable general enthusiasm toward Ukrainian folk poetry. The Cossack influences, in particular, of the duma *Marusia Bohuslavka* could be encountered in the works of John Ford (1582-1686), and one can find masterfully drawn images of Zaporozhian Cossacks in the burlesque poem *Hudibras* by Samuel Butler (1612-1680).

The attention paid to Ukrainian music is also an indicator of active contacts between Ukraine and England, which was the first non-Slavic country to publish an anthology of Ukrainian and Russian songs. In the *International Quarterly Review* (1840, 20th volume), the local contributor, with great piety describes Ukrainian dумы as a totally original phenomenon, which is unparalleled in England and in Europe, and states that the songs and dумы of Ukraine, which were all gathered and carefully

published, could stand in a place of honour in world culture, alongside the *Ring Cycle of the Nibelungen* and even the *Iliad*.

In general, one could say that the Ukrainian theme was rather widespread in Europe during this period. In Holland, map of Ukraine with engravings of Ukrainian and Cossack subjects were exhibited, dating from the end of the 16th century. Old established contacts with French culture are seen in many artistic and historical events. One ought to remember at the least the names and surnames of Ukrainian origin of graduate and postgraduate students at the Sorbonne University; or the popularity of Ukrainian dumy (as researched by H. Nudha in the paper "Ukrainian dumy in France") which were characterized in Paris periodicals as "the most original and richest genre of Slavic folklore" (*Revue Britannique*, 1845, volume 27, pages 367 to 383).

The inclusion of examples of Ukrainian folklore into the living musical material of other nations was activated with the growth of the romantic aesthetic. Here was upheld the thesis about the raising of songs to the level of phenomena most closely linked with the spiritual realization of one's own nation, and its historical development. Eventually this position was upheld in the theory of the romantic interpretation of F. Schlegel, which to a certain extent, influenced the widespread adoption of the songs and poetic folklore of the Slavic nations and in particular, of the Ukrainian nation, into the mainstream of European culture.

I also wish to note, that attention to the Ukrainian melos and poetic folklore played an important role in the use of Ukrainian themes by Austrian and German composers. Incidentally, transcriptions of Ukrainian songs and dances ("Kolomyjky" "Kozachky", "Tanok") were known in Germany from the 16th century, according to the research-paper by H. Nudha "Song and word", also well known in the transcription in German, of the Ukrainian historical song, "So we were informed by the Deputies" made by I. Miller near the Zaporizhian Sich in the second half of the 18th century.

The selected factological material quoted above, although far from all-inclusive, makes obvious the interest of the Western European countries in Ukraine, its history folklore and musical heritage. Totally understandable is the attention paid to the works with a Cossack theme in which are artistically mirrored, the spiritual yearnings of a nation together with artistic and authentic description of historical events. An important aspect of the songs and dumy was the fact that they not only encoded in song, lasting, and memorable historical events, but also exposed the features of the Ukrainian national character.

It is understandable that the names of works connected with Cossack themes appear throughout Europe in folkloric examples of songs and dumy. In them are united a thorough and perfected verbal-poetic component with an artistically delineated musical stratum. Singable tunes, modal mobility and original metric-rhythms – these are primarily the characteristic features, which made possible the functioning of

Ukrainian songs, Cossack ballads with clearly delineated dmy elements in the works of professional European composers.

References of foreign composers to Ukrainian melodies were to an extent fragmentary, rather than possessing a utilitarian decorative ornamental character. They were primarily interested in the historicity the deep essence of the musical material, the possibility of a multifaceted variation of the thematic base, the exposition of the potential of a concrete Ukrainian theme through changes in genre.

Incidentally, it is worth mentioning, that the extrapolation of historical themes from these vocal works in the context of Western European music, does not carry any unorganic character, nor even a hint of transplanted or exotic elements. This did not have anything in common with the rapture over Oriental themes, quite fashionable in the works of composers of the 19th century, for whom the use of typically Eastern musical elements, had as its primary purpose the showcasing of individual arias or the underlining of the contrasting nature of a certain musical fragment.

Ukrainian musical material, which was used by the composers of Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Russia, and other countries, was to such an extent artistically perfected and compositionally flawless, that it gave the composer unlimited possibilities of genre-thematic, melodic development, modal juxtapositions and polyphonic modifications. Even though the melodies of Ukrainian historical songs were resented in the anthologies of the time, primarily in one voice, and with rare exceptions in homophonic harmonic exposition; nonetheless, the nature of Ukrainian harmonies of these songs was so clear, that the majority of composers which turned to Ukrainian melodies, used imitational or polyphonic element in their works.

Of great importance to Western European composers in their acquaintance with historical Ukrainian songs were anthologies with musical notation, published in Western Europe and Russia. Of especial interest for researchers is the Ukrainian art song by Simon Klymkovsky – “The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube”, which many composers use in their variations. Subsequently one of the first anthologies to publish the music to the song “The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube” was a journal of Italian, French and Russian arias with guitar accompaniment, published in 1798, in the French language, where the song was subtitled “A Ukrainian Melody”. In time, it was also reprinted in the wellknown anthologies of Prach, Lvov, Trutovsky and others. These publications were used by composers who utilized the themes of this song in their works.

One of the first to turn to the thematic development of this Ukrainian work was the talented Italian composer, Tomaso Traetta, who was for many years court composer in St. Petersburg from 1766 to 1779. His variations deserve the attention of researchers and performers.

In the middle of the 19th century there appeared in print analogical variations for piano, harpsicord, violin and instrumental ensembles of Russian and other foreign composers, who were at various times court choral directors and performers in St.

Petersburg. Among them are Nashokin (aria with arrangement), Y. Fodor (twelve variations for piano), H. Frencl and F. Baio (violin variations). In the middle of the 18th century the variations of Meyer and D. Schtebelt were quite popular. Ukrainian songs were used as leitmotifs in the opera by K. Kavos and A. Shachtovsky based on the life of the composer of the song "The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube". Ukrainian melodies were used in the variations by M. Vysotsky, S. Aksonov, O. Syerov. The arrangement for violin and orchestra by O. Alyabyev is also well-known.

Polish composers also joined in the reinterpretation of this song. In the year 1833 was published an anthology "Songs of Polish and Ruthenian Peoples of Galicia" by Vatslav Zalesky; this interested the soloist of the Viennese string quartet, Karol Lipinski, whose concerts were attended by Beethoven. Having become enamoured by Ukrainian folklore, he edited the musical pieces of this publication and arranged the song "The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube" for string orchestra. There is also evidence that another Polish composer and student of J. Haydn, Francishek Lessel, who studied and worked in Austria, also composed variations on the theme of this Ukrainian song. By the exposition of the theme one can notice that the composer utilized the essentially varied motif, given in the Leipzig edition of 1809 in the adaptation of Christopher-August Tidge.

Researching the available musical material, in which are used the themes or fragments of Ukrainian historical songs, one can conclude that not all composers felt the specificity of the Ukrainian melos and the essence of its development. To a great extent, the artistic merit of an arrangement or transcription is doubtless dependent on the talent and professional level of the composer. Therefore each comment, element, development of melodic line which corresponds to Ukrainian musical style evokes the special interest of researchers.

In the genre of piano variations on the theme "The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube" is the work titled Opus Forty by the great German composer K.-M. von Weber. This cycle consists of nine variations and differs from previous transcriptions or compositions of Western European and Russian composers on this theme.

Without going into a detailed professional analysis I wish to illustrate entirely the dramatic possibilities of the development and specificity of Ukrainian themes in the context of the given work. First of all, one notices the rather touching pathetic and, on might say, the epic character of most of the variations. This feeling is strengthened by the use of typically orchestral effects and principles of operatic drama, the expositional introduction, tragic in its mood, whose character is reflected further in the musical material. Here one can draw an analogy with the variations of Beethoven in C major and E Flat minor. Weber uses elements of symphonic-orchestral development-variations "a tutti", bringing in, alongside the primary, secondary themes with their parallel development. The composer characteristically feels the timbral piano texture, he utilizes the associative inclusion of orchestral groups, elements of strings passages and so on.

This union of the vocal nature of the Ukrainian theme with Western European (rather, the Viennese School) principles of classical-romantic variations, with the further inclusion of the theatrical element, allows one to yet again experience the potential to genre and characteristic facets, included in the thematic sources of Ukrainian song.

Utilizing the traditional musical arsenal of his epoch, Weber simultaneously operates certain elements, characteristic to Slavic music. It is entirely possible that the composer's position of several years as director of the Prague opera, and also his considerable studies of the musical culture of the Slavic nations had their effect.

We do not find in this work any direct borrowing or quotation from Ukrainian folklore, however, certain characteristic aspects and manner of musical clarity are oriented toward Ukrainian style. And so, the composer in several variations utilizes the so-called "duma" mode, which was typical for the kobzar-lira tradition (in the minor key the fourth and seventh steps are altered). The use of tetrachords in this mode are also characteristic to the *duma* epics of the 16th to the 18th centuries and in Ukrainian ballads of the 19th century.

The fourth (minor variation), is typical for Ukrainian choral miniature in its supporting voice textures. The song development in thirds characteristic in their relationship also relates to the traditions of Slavic and Ukrainian music.

One more characteristic of this cycle is its program quality. Program music was in itself quite widespread among German romantic composers, but the fact that he author subtitled his "Variations on a Russian melody", "Wonderful Minka" and relatively remains true to the general character of the text and its mood changes, emphasizes the composer's special relationship to the Ukrainian source, although in the considerably free German translation by C. Tidge, included in the "Pocket-book for General Enjoyment" (1809) which apparently was used by Weber.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the well-known German composer-pianist and student of Mozart, J. Hummel, turned to Ukrainian themes in his instrumental works. In the year 1818, he published a trio in A-major for flute, cello and piano under the opus 78. Characteristic to this cycle is not only the utilization of one thematic base, but also the development of additional themes of Slavic origin.

One could continue with the names of composers, which turn to Ukrainian themes – this is H. A. Preger, Friedrich Schneider, Dalwimar and others. But especially one wishes to mention Ludwig van Beethoven, who twice referred to the Ukrainian song "The Cossack Rode Beyond the Danube". Firstly, it was used as thematic material in a cycle of folk song arrangements for voice with piano accompaniment and flute, and subtitled by Beethoven himself as "A Cossack song" (1816). Secondly, he turned to this same song in his variations for piano, flute and violin which was published 1819 in London. A characteristic quality of these variations is the fact that Beethoven lyricized the theme, giving it qualities to some extent of a barcarole, although the markedly rhythmical accompaniment relates to the martial elements of

the song. It is entirely possible that Beethoven borrowed this Ukrainian melody not from the German anthologies transcribed and altered by C. Tidge, but directly from the milieu of A. Rozumovski, to whom, in fact, he dedicated his quartet opus 59, one of which uses the Ukrainian theme, "Outdoors a Snowstorm".

Because of the aforementioned, one can affirm, that the use by composers of Ukrainian music, especially of songs with a historical theme, was not accidental. The general interest in Ukraine, its people and history inspired representatives of Western European cultures. The solicitous attitude to the vocal source and its stylistically correct comprehension in a proper context, gives reason to speak of a noticeable influence of Ukrainian music as an integral artistic-figurative system in the professional works of European composers.