UKRAINIAN CANADIAN FOLK MUSIC

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Introduction

At the turn of the century, all productive forms of folk music were successfully transferred from Ukraine to Canada. Some, like the haivky have almost completely disappeared; others, like the winter carol, have become petrified; still others, like tsymbaly-making and -playing, remain dynamically active albeit unstudied; and some completely new folk-music phenomena--Ukrainian country music in western Canada--have emerged. The essentially rural folk music has been joined in recent years by arranged folk music imported from highly sophisticated folk-production sources in urban Soviet Ukraine. All folk music has been greatly influenced by the impact of mechanical, portable and impersonal mass means of dissemination (e.g., the commercial recording industry and ethnic programming on radio and cable-TV), which shall be the focus of this paper.

First, it is important to review briefly the nature of the sound recording per se, comparing it with at least one other instrument of communication, the printed word, with which the sound recording shares such attributes as portability, economy and impersonality, permitting it to be used indiscriminately by anyone wishing to exploit its potential. Such exploitation may promote conformity, standardization or regimentation for purposes of predictability, social control and economic gain.

Essentially, the sound recording is an acoustic record of almost any audible sound imaginable, which allows for lieder the sounds of Nature, or common smut to mingle freely in combination with personalized interpolations and varied forms of ostensibly creative editing. This democratic and seemingly wanton nature of the sound recording must be fully appreciated to understand the parameters within which ethnic sound recordings operate today, for folk music from the old country is not the only material that is available. Because of the instrument’s inherent liberality, it is not uncommon for ethnic spokesmen to criticize as irresponsible commercially popular ethnic recordings that reinforce stereotyped patterns of ethnic behaviour and threaten the group’s self-image.

Certain specific features of the sound recording set it apart as a distinctively different medium of communication. Unlike print, the sound recording is gloriously free of such intermediate and visually based encoding and decoding systems as old-fashioned and cumbersome script. Moreover, the techniques of sound reproduction may enhance egos through novelty items which even feature duets by one and the same person!

The laissez-faire nature of the sound recording applies not only to what is recorded but to the who, how and why of recording. In certain countries such license is considered politically dangerous and governments exercise strict control over production, circulation and public transmission of commercial sound recordings. Such fettering abroad has had a special impact on the recordings of Ukrainians in North America, whose ancestral homeland is strictly controlled.

The Ukrainian Canadian Experience

The discussion of Ukrainian sound recordings in western Canada will focus on Winnipeg, where
10 per cent of the residents are of Ukrainia descent, one of the highest ratios of any Canadian city of comparable size. Moreover, North America’s most productive and unique manifestations of Ukrainian sound recordings may well be in Winnipeg. One Ukrainian church in the city, for instance uses recorded Ukrainian liturgical music as a kind of inspirational Muzak between masses and during the offering of communion; a few miles away, a funeral home that caters to Ukrainian uses similar recordings as background music. Close by, the city’s largest credit union caters to the Ukrainian population during the winter holiday season with recording of Ukrainian Christmas carols while customers queue at wickets. At altar and bier, café juke boxes and weddings, community-hall socials and ethnic celebration, the commercially produced Ukrainian sound recordings in Winnipeg penetrate and infiltrate almost every aspect of the Ukrainian community’s way of life. On public radio and television, Winnipeg currently receives about then weekly hours of Ukrainian programming (ranging from daily variety hours to a weekly produced by a nativistic religious cult). The CBC contributes negligibly since its official mandate is to offer programming only in English and French. Radio stations for the province’s large French and Mennonite minorities in the St. Boniface and Altona areas respectively have catered to Ukrainians. Winnipeg’s multicultural radio station, CKJS, air a daily Ukrainian hour from seven to eight in the evening. The programme, hosted by young and congenial announcers, bravely juggles materials to meet varied tastes. In a typical week, works by classical Ukrainian composers alternate with Ukrainian country music from western Canada, assorted polka-playing wedding bands and a judicious mix of non-Soviet musical recordings and Soviet Ukrainian imports of the most popular current song and instrumental renditions by amateur and professional folk song-and-dance ensembles, urban rock groups and soloists. Because Christmas within the Ukrainian community is celebrated according to either the Julian or Gregorian calendar, the festive season poses special problems and carols are aired in December (Gregorian) and January (Julian).

Winnipeg is the unofficial capital of Ukrainian country music because of the long-playing and cassette releases of V-Records, an enterprising commercial company headed by Alex Groshak. In the mid-sixties the company initiated a series of promotional activities, including both a “national cymbal contest” with Ukrainian dulcimer artists from various parts of Canada (two contests were released on commercial long-playing records) and an annual Ukrainian New Year’s “Malanka” Ball in 1977 in the city’s prestigious downtown Holiday Inn with assorted bands and artists on the V-Records label. Other companies in Winnipeg and elsewhere in western Canada have issued similar releases. The 1976-7 season saw “Nestor” and “Metro” make their successful debuts as recording artists.

The Case of “Nestor” and “Metro”

Both “Nestor Pistor” (Don Ast) and “Metro” (Les Pavelick) hail from Regina, Saskatchewan. Ast is of Romanian descent, Pavelick of Yugoslavian. Nestor’s hit song, “Winestoned Plowboy,” is a parody of Glenn Campbell’s popular “Rhinestone Cowboy.” To one radio programme director, Nestor is “the embodiment of every ethnic I’ve seen while growing up in Regina.”

He’s a story-teller who sees things as our parents would have seen them, and he speaks as our parents did when I was growing up. The character has a way of butchering the Queen’s English: he twists things around and the outcome can be a damn funny situation.
Nestor’s style leaves little to the imagination:

Climbing onto the stage in a formidable aura of stale garlic, Nestor uncorked a jug of frothing “bingo” to fortify himself and audience for an hour of so-called humour that should set back Ukrainian culture a thousand years. For this is no herald of a brave new art form, but twice-teller-of-tales heard first at surreptitious stag-parties or read once on long-forgotten lavatory walls.

Metro has two long-playing recordings to his credit. The more popular is “Eleven Days from Christmas” and features a string of hilarious parodies on most of mainstream America’s all-time Christmas favourites. The album’s title song ends with the following stanza:

One the elevent day from Christmas my wife she gave to me,
Eleven pails of borshch, borshch, borshch, borshch, borshch,
Ten pounds chasnyk [garlic],
Nine months pregnant,
Ate all my supper,
Seven four by two shleps,
Six overalls,
Five golden rings-of “koobasa,” [kovbasa]
Four “holubchi” [holubitsi],
Three rubber boots,
Two pyrohy
And a bowl of sour cream for me.

In general, Metro’s stage routine is similar to Nestors’:

On the face of it, someone who wears a funny hat and affects a strange accent while telling long, complex yarns about Ukrainian, sounds as if he might get through a house party without serious damage. But surely this couldn’t be professional humor? Well, this is the Prairies, heartland of Canada’s Ukrainian invasion-and telling Ukrainian jokes is something of an amateur sport. Ask anyone if he knows a good Ukrainian joke and he’ll lay three of them on you....

It’s doubtful if such Bohunk humor can be easily exported. It’s a regional growth that seems to flourish in the hardy soil of the Prairies, the it’s appreciated. But when it travels, it loses something in translation.

The recordings and routines of Nestor and Metro include songs, dialect jokes and anecdotes that poke fun at lingering old-world folkways in a new-world settings. The best known is Metro’s version of “ ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas,” recited against the background of “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas.” The complete transcribed text follows:

‘Twas da night before Christmas, when all true da house
Not a creature was stirrin’, not even a mouse.
Ma and I-dat’s my wife Katrina—we just finished doing da chores, You know—milking da cows an’ everyting.

We just put da kids to bed because dey were makin’ noise all night an’ during da day dey were by da barn an’ da chicken coop playing’ hide-and-go-look. So I says, “Kids! Get to bed right away! School’s tomorrow an’ you have to catch a school bus.”

So mama an’ I had a cup of coffee an’ havin’ launch. Den all of a sudden we said, “Let’s look on da news!”

So we opened da tee-wee an’ we were watching’ da news, An’ I hear in da distance some kind of noise, some rustlin’.
I taught, “Son-of-a-gonna! Must be Halloween joke!
No! It can’t be Halloween joke! It’s Christmas! (But close together-side page like dat).
An’ Katrina says, “I tink dere’s somebuddy on da ourside!”
I say, “No siree, baba! I don’t tink so!”
“Well, Metro open up da light dat shines past da barn dere, near da chicken coop an’ where we keep da dogs in dere.”
So I open, an’ dere standin’ by my Massey forty-four cockshot diesel, next to my half-truck-ton-pick-me-up-one, was some kind of guy wit red suit on!
Now I never looked on his face, but I knew him from some place before.
I knew I knew him from some place but I can’t make him.
But I go our an’ grab my twenty-tree, just in case somebuddy wanted to steal my two end a half bull year-old.
Tree years ago last summer one guy come an’ makeda collection danger like he was some kind of highshot.
Now dis guy—I walk up to him an’ I says, “Dai Bozhe!” How’s everytin’?”
He says, “Like dat, you know—sixty-forty.” (Must be for sure two hundred per cent!)
An’ I look closer on him, an’ he’s got a big beard you know; he looks like a hippie—a hippie, you know a guy dat looks like a Jill but smells like a John! But I look close, an’ he has a red uniform on. I figure he must be from da fire department, but he’s not, he’s got some kind of funny animals you know.
I says, “How’s evertin’ going?”
“Purty good! Purty busy, you know, tonight.”
I says, “Well where are you goin’ wit funny lookin’ animals pullin’ dat uh look like a sleigh but it has you know a caboose an’ you got da fire inside to keep your foots warm so you don’t froze it.”
“I’m goin’ to Solomnchuk’s. Coul you give me directions?”
I say, “I? No problem!” I says, “Now from here you go to da main road; you go past da fifty-turd correction line eleven miles south-no, pardon me—chekai, chekai [wait, wait]- you go tree miles south and turn right four miles-no, pardon me…”
Katrina says, “Metro, Metro-udder direction! Four miles east an’ seven miles south!”

* A greeting, literally “God give!”
“No sirree, baba! I don’t think so!”
I finally look at him an’ say, “I don’t think you can get dere from here.”
He says, “I'll try my luck,” he says. “I want to feed my reindeers.”
“Reindeers!? Aw come on you’re pullin’ my leg,” I says. “Dat wouldn’t be
reindeers!” I says, “Da only guy dat gotted have reindeer is Kris
Kringalowich-Santa Claus!”
“Sure!” he says, “dat’s I am!”
I say, “Aw come on! You makin’ danger to my head! You’re pullin’ jokes, you
little devil!”
No but-but he jumps, he goes-“I got sleigh!” An’ he shout you know something
like “Merry Nettle!”

Although the above is crude and coarse, it also underlines the spuriousness of an alluring
and seemingly superior socio-cultural system that traps but never quite devours the dazed and
innocent immigrant as the treads the tightened of survival in America. In effects, much of this
“party record” material represents a kind of overdue “Bohunk” backlash—a folkloric confirmation
of Miachael Novak’s “unmeltable ethnics”—that is essentially a vicious and devastating (not
merely devastatingly funny) form of veiled protest against not only the mores of the North
American mainstream, but its self-righteously and materialistic bias and its pressures to
conform. Instead of chestnuts, Metro signs of roasting chasnyk by the fireplace in his rendition
of the all-time American Favourite, “White Christmas,” and transforms the American cowboy
hero of the freedom-loving frontier into a lowly country bumpkin, into an old-world peasant-a
blundering immigrant “plowboy” who appears lost in the land of smart, alert and
up-to-the-minute mainstream WASPs. The thick underlay of covert protest consists largely of
parody that caricatures features of the ur-text that are either easily misconstrued of whose
ambiguities lend themselves to literal interpretation and resulting hilarity.

Synthesis

In several important respects the Ukrainian Canadian sound-recording industry functions very
much like the non-ethnic industry and shows signs of being just as faddish. Even the popularity
of Nestor and Metro waned considerably after the initial winter season (1976-7). Straightforward
entertainment is also high on the list of shared attributes, and for the uninitiated the ethnic
recording can be a kind of exotica that the mainstream generates with difficulty.

But the ethnic recording does have unique and distinctive functions. It reinforces feelings
of ethnic identity and helps to gain recognition for feelings of distinctiveness. As a form of
cultural feedback, it is a sign to those in the Old Country that the loyalties of sons and daughters
long emigrated still linger. It can be part of a two-way boulevard that links a given historical and
cultural centre with its diaspora in an inextricable interrelationship that can enrich the
experiences of both. Thus the Ukrainian community’s recording of liturgical and ethnic-rock
music in North America have stimulated the production of similar works in Ukraine, and in the
case of religious music have served to preserve and document what is officially out of favour.

In alleviating moments of nostalgia and homesickness, the sounds of home, reproduced
instantly, can also provide psychological comfort. The recent arrival of the cassette has opened
up new an richly innovative possibilities for such interpersonal communication, especially since
the personal cassette-letter, like the singing-letter, relies heavily on music in composing its total message.

As in the case of print, the sound recording can raise the prestige or status of individual artists or performing groups. The old excitement of “I got my name in the paper!” becomes an equally telling “I’m on records!” the possibility of creating an ethnic hit and the notion of being “part of everyone’s record library” bring the glint of fame and fortune. Thus the sound recording can raise one’s self-esteem and promote a group’s feeling of solidarity and accomplishment. The preparation, production and release of a sound recording can operate much like a class photo—a personalized memento, a historical souvenir or memoir that is cherished by the participants, irrespective of artistic value.

The above, however, does not obtain in every case. As in the examples of Nestor and Metro, the sound recordings can take on a perfidious character, an ambiguity that almost frees the artist from responsibility because of the time and space that separates the original recording session from countless subsequent listening. The recording can thus take on a life of its own and assume an independence that overtakes its status as merely a popular or prized object.

But while the recording can fix or even fossilize the items recorded, it can also produce new responses to it. Thus and elderly Ukrainian primitive artist in Saskatoon became so enraptured with a recording that he copied in appreciative oils the performers pictures on the LP jacket?

The potential of the ethnic sound recording, at least in North America, can be seen in its ability to compete on the open market as a packaged, saleable commodity. In aesthetic dimension, it enriches the lives of those it reaches. For its listeners, the pleasure and potency of its art matches (and often surpasses) other creative formulations—and all because of the critical kernel of meaning coupled deep within its message of ethnicity.

NOTES

8. Metro’s second album, “Broadway Hits,” is a slam against the ostensibly more important cultural centres on the continent as seen by Metro—a member of the cultural periphery.
9. The painting is by Mr. Dmytro Stryjek, Saskatoon, 12 Aug. 1976.
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