Ukrainian *Tsymbaly* Performance in Alberta

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The sound of the Ukrainian *tsymbaly* has been a fixture on the Canadian prairies for almost a century. Virtually obligatory at Ukrainian dances, festivals, and weddings (Klymasz, 377), this hammered dulcimer is little known in other musical circles. Describing the instrument and its contexts, I show how it has become a symbol of identity for Ukrainians in Alberta and how its tradition has taken on uniquely Canadian aspects.

The *tsymbaly* is widely popular throughout western Ukraine, where it most often has been used in trios with violin and percussion. Although traditionally it has fulfilled melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic functions, Mark Jaroslav Bandera has suggested that its role among Ukrainian groups in Canada has evolved from providing harmonic accompaniment to a new position as "lead" instrument (1991, 12f.). What was once a ubiquitous and essential component of Ukrainian music-making in western Canada is, paradoxically, either nonexistent in many bands, or has assumed special status in others. Meanwhile, the music performed on this instrument has become increasingly monophonic.

Physical Description

The Ukrainian *tsymbaly* is technically classified as a box zither (Hornbostel and Sachs, 22). Known by several names in various cultures, instruments of this type are often called dulcimers (Kettlewell, 696f.).

The *tsymbaly* consists of a trapeziform hardwood box, approximately 90–120 cm. x 35–50 cm., across which strings are stretched. The wrestplank holding the tuning-pins is on the right side, the hitchpins on the left. Metal bars on both sides of the instrument separate the wrestplanks from the soundboard, and determine the speaking length of the strings. The soundboard is made of softwood and may have from two to four sound holes (Mierczynski, 150–55; Bandera 1991, 59f.; Humeniuk, 109; Nezovybat'ko, 16).

The strings are grouped in courses of two to six strings tuned in unison. Instruments have as few as 10 string-courses or as many as 35. Set in two intersecting horizontal planes, they pass over and under two separate bridges. The left bridge divides half the courses into the ratio 2/3, enabling each to produce two notes separated by a perfect fifth. The right bridge carries the remaining courses undivided. Iron, steel, brass, copper, and bronze wire of various gauges can be used for strings (Lysenko, 51-54; Nezovybat'ko, 17; Kettlewell, 704-07; Humeniuk, 105).

Wooden hammers, known as *molotochky, palychky,* or *pal'tsiatky,* strike the strings. Occasionally, to achieve a more delicate tone quality, the hammers are covered with cloth, felt, or soft leather. Most commonly in tradition the

instrument rested on the seated performer's lap. At one time performers stood when accompanying wedding marches and dances, the *tsymbaly* held by a strap around the performer's neck (Lysenko, 52; Bandera 1991, 44).

According to folk belief the sides should be constructed of ash, the bottom deck of maple, and the soundboard of fir which has been struck by lightning. The ash is believed to have the power to charm serpents, the maple personifies humankind, and the lightning-struck fir, representing fertility, wards off illness and evil. Often *tsymbaly* are decorated with magical symbols. Most common are soundholes shaped like a six-petaled flower and surrounded by a hexagon, which symbolizes wealth, beauty, love, harmony, and peace, and is connected with the energy of life and the sun (Shramko, 16).

The *Tsymbaly* Tradition in Canada

Ukrainians immigrated to Canada in three main waves: the first and largest beginning in the 1890s and lasting until the First World War, the second, during the inter-war years, and the third following the Second World War. The first two waves settled primarily on the Canadian Prairies. Among these early communities *tsymbaly* flourished and provided a link to the cultural life of their villages in western Ukraine, where the instrument was popular. The immigrants of the third wave came from various regions in Ukraine and settled primarily in urban centres. For this group the *tsymbaly* held little or no special significance.

Many of the first settlers arrived with very little knowledge of what kind of life awaited them. Consequently they transported a wide range of material items from the old country. These usually reflected the practicality of the peasant farmer, and included cooking utensils, foodstuffs, articles for sleeping, furniture, clothing, washing utensils, tools, and such miscellaneous items as icons, crosses, jewelry, wax, and fabric (Nahachewsky, 82f.). Sometimes musical instruments were transported, as though they were essential to community life (Polomark; Semeniuk).

Early pioneers tended to bring such small instruments as the violin. However, John Maga, who settled in the Wostok, Alberta, area in 1898, brought from his home in Molodia, Bukovyna, both a violin and a homemade *tsymbaly*, possibly the first in Canada (Semeniuk, 443f.). The John Savich family, who settled in the Mundare, Alberta, area in 1911, interrupted their immigration journey to play for a wedding in Edmonton. Since they gave this performance on the way to their new home, it seems they carried the instruments with them (Polomark).

At present, Ukrainian *tsymbaly* performers in Alberta can be grouped into three main generations, each reflecting specific performance techniques, repertoire, and the performers' general view of the instrument's role. The first generation consists of performers who are either the children of the first-wave pioneer settlers, or who immigrated themselves during the inter-war period. These musicians maintain traditional techniques, repertoire, and performance

practices, and have often directly influenced the subsequent generation of performers, either as instructors or as role models.

The next generation comprises second-generation Canadians. Although they have retained components of the original *tsymbaly* tradition, they also have done much to develop a new role for the instrument. Because of contact with other musical traditions, they have influenced repertoire and style.

The third generation's involvement with the *tsymbaly* reflects both a continuity within the tradition as well as a search for cultural roots. These performers take their examples from both preceding generations and are affected by even wider external influences. Many have been introduced to the tradition by a single instructor or mentor and have gone on to develop further innovations in technique and repertoire.

Tuning Systems

The *tsymbaly* used in Alberta has 16 to 22 string courses. Depending on how these strings are tuned, the instrument can have a range of up to three full octaves. Various tunings are used and individual musicians often create their own modifications.

At one time *tsymbaly* were tuned diatonically (Humeniuk, 109). Ukrainian composer and musicologist Mykola Lysenko documented a *tsymbaly* tuning common in the late 19th century (53–55). Transposed up a half step, his example produces a system which allows for playing in the keys of C major, G major, and D major, and related minors (see Figure 1). Most Alberta tunings are based on this skeletal structure.

Contemporary *tsymbaly* tuning closely follows the chromatic scale. To expand the instrument's range without increasing its size, rarely used chromatic notes sometimes are omitted, especially along the bass bridge. Although instruments with a smaller range usually have all twelve chromatic steps, often these are not arranged consecutively, so that the musician has to shift octaves to play melodic or harmonic figures requiring certain chromatic steps.

Variations on the standard tuning arise in connection with other instruments in an ensemble. If a band has a saxophone and often plays in keys using two or more flats, the highest course of strings is often retuned to e♭″. Other tsymbalists prefer e″ at the top of their instrument because they often play with violinists who prefer sharp keys.

Perhaps the most common idiosyncrasy concerns the centre bridge. Here the ascending chromatic pattern of notes is altered, with g#′/c#′ preceding g′/c′. This reversal of notes was common even on instruments in Ukraine (see Figure 1, iii). Although many performers continue to use this system, few can offer a clear explanation. Some feel that it allows them to play certain common chord patterns with less motion from course to course; others believe it allows the player to maintain a constant physical relationship between strings (for example, three courses apart) when playing melodic passages harmonized at the interval of a third.

Although the tuning systems vary, the actual instruments used in Alberta are quite similar in appearance and construction. All consist of a hardwood frame, usually maple or oak, with a softwood soundboard, usually sitka spruce or cedar. At the left wrestplank, strings are attached by looping them around hitchpins made from nails or rivets. At the right wrestplank they are passed through pre-drilled holes in threaded pegs, then wound (Bandera 1991, 21–39).

Alberta *Tsymbaly* Repertoire

The repertoire of Alberta *tsymbaly* players can be divided into three main categories: 1) traditional music for accompanying rituals, 2) arrangements of non-ritual songs, and 3) dance music.

The Ukrainian wedding tradition is filled with songs which are necessary to make the celebration ritually complete (Ivanyts'kii, 55). Weddings included such traditional ritual elements as the *vinkopletennia* (wreath making), blessing by the parents, march to the church, and celebrations at the homes of the bride and groom. Each stage had its own music, which the tsymbalist had to learn. Although less commonly heard at contemporary weddings in Canada, many of these pieces remain in the repertoires of Alberta tsymbalists. They are often modal, and frequently feature fluctuations between major and minor tonalities. They are generally performed in a rubato style that imitates the way the piece would be sung, and are often followed by a coda known as a *zakryshka* (literally, a spice or seasoning). A coda is taken from a dance melody or a folk song, or occasionally is improvised.

Many Alberta *tsymbaly* performers have added instrumental adaptations of folksong melodies to their repertoires, especially as they search for new pieces to showcase on recordings and in contests. In Ukraine, arrangements of folk songs were popular at weddings and dances, where they were often performed for people to listen to while eating. In Alberta they are now used during specific parts of the wedding ritual, such as the presentation, where they function as markers of Ukrainian identity.

Dances are the largest category of material performed by Alberta tsymbalists. Providing music for dances has become their most typical function. Most of these pieces are polkas, waltzes, and foxtrots, not necessarily of Ukrainian origin. However, some melodies originally used to accompany set dances are still performed.

Contemporary *Tsymbaly* Performance

Currently weddings are the most common venue for *tsymbaly* performance. However, as the Ukrainian community in Alberta adapts to the Canadian mainstream, modern customs have replaced many traditional elements of the wedding celebration. Three-day weddings, complete with wreath-making ceremony, ritual blessings, and parties at the homes of the bride's and groom's families, have been replaced by a church ceremony followed by a catered reception in a hall or hotel. But weddings in contemporary style still call for

"traditional" music. For instance, when guests arrive at the reception they are often greeted near the entrance by the wedding party and the parents of the bride and groom. The musicians perform near the entrance to the hall: generally up-tempo pieces, often including wedding "marches" that once were played as the bride and groom processed to and from church.

Another component of earlier weddings is the presentation. Traditionally this was the point where the bride and groom were presented with items for their new household (Shukhevych, 53). Today the guests greet the wedding party and parents, and present the couple with material gifts or money. The music performed at this time usually consists of folk-song melodies.

Although musicians are increasingly required to play non-Ukrainian music during wedding dances, many families will not hire a band unless it incorporates *tsymbaly*. Bands that usually do not include *tsymbaly* often hire an extra musician to secure such bookings.

A more recent context for performance is the *tsymbaly* contest. The first such competition was held in Lakeview, Alberta, in 1967, and its popularity led to several more. *Tsymbaly* playing had been a component of amateur music competitions at such events as the National Ukrainian Festival in Dauphin, Manitoba, and the Pysanka Festival in Vegreville, Alberta. More recent contests, such as those sponsored by local radio stations, are more specialized, focusing solely on *tsymbaly* (Bandera 1983, 29).

Tsymbaly competitions are modeled on old-time fiddle contests. Since *tsymbaly* styles are imprecisely defined, competitors are usually allowed to perform any two pieces of music, but are encouraged to choose contrasting selections. Competitors are generally grouped according to age, and some contests include a special category for novelty performance. Often a dance follows the competition, with music provided by a band featuring *tsymbaly* (Bandera 1983, 29).

These contests are largely responsible for a renewed interest in *tsymbaly* playing throughout east-central Alberta. The first competitions attracted most of the well-known, experienced performers and offered younger performers opportunities to test their skills and win cash prizes. Whereas the older performers were eager to legitimize their status as carriers of Ukrainian tradition, fierce competition developed among many of the younger players. As they achieved success at contests, some performers developed a network of students, who also were encouraged to enter competitions.

Non-specialized Ukrainian festivals have also showcased *tsymbaly* performers, both in their Grandstand entertainment and at booths throughout the grounds. As well, *tsymbaly* performances often are part of non-Ukrainian festivals. Most small towns in east-central Alberta hold community fairs that have parades and dances. Sponsored by Ukrainian businesses, many parade floats feature live music by bands that include *tsymbaly*. In towns having a large Ukrainian population, such a band may be hired for the local fair's dance.

Recordings of Ukrainian music, including *tsymbaly*, were among the first ethnic recordings commercially produced in North America (Spottswood, v. 2: 1045-1126). Alberta *tsymbaly* bands have been recorded since the late 1940s and appear on most of the albums produced by various independent Ukrainian companies in western Canada. Throughout the province these recordings are often broadcast on Ukrainian radio programs.

The *Tsymbaly* as Icon in Alberta

The *tsymbaly* has become an icon of Ukrainian identity for the Ukrainian community of Alberta. Because of its distinctive appearance, the *tsymbaly* has replaced the violin as the symbol most representative of Ukrainian instrumental music. *Tsymbaly* is the sole focus of music competitions. Many organizers of weddings and other musical events insist on the presence of *tsymbaly*, and make special efforts to secure bands that include the instrument. Its prominence in non-specialized Ukrainian festivals is also due to its power as a symbol. For example, the 1983 issue of the annual souvenir coin minted by Canada's National Ukrainian Festival in Dauphin featured a seated musician playing the *tsymbaly*.

The elevation of the *tsymbaly* to such a prominent position is a Canadian development. At present in Ukraine the instrument has not achieved status as an icon of Ukrainian identity. Instead, the *bandura* is considered the national instrument. Perhaps because Ukraine shares borders with many eastern European countries where hammered dulcimers are important, the *tsymbaly* is not viewed as uniquely Ukrainian. In western Canada, since dulcimers from other cultures are less common, the instrument can be identified as Ukrainian.

Conclusion

Although the *tsymbaly* tradition of east-central Alberta continues to express Ukrainian culture vibrantly, there has been tremendous change. Some believe the *tsymbaly*'s role is strictly to accompany such instruments as the violin and that its current prominence is only a recent development (Bandera 1991, 12f.). However, for most of this century, the *tsymbaly* has played much more than a supporting role in folk ensembles (Mierczynski). Indeed, tsymbalists in Alberta have shown higher regard for musicians who can perform both solos and accompaniments than for those who merely play chords.

In recent years, *tsymbaly* has tended to be the featured solo instrument in ensembles. Perhaps the *tsymbaly*'s function as an icon of Ukrainian identity has helped define this new, more prominent role. The musicians are merely trying to stretch their own boundaries as performers and redefining the possibilities of their instruments. But for their audiences the role of the *tsymbaly* in a band, and in Ukrainian society generally, has become increasingly important. For many, the instrument has embodied western Canadian Ukrainian music (Klymasz, 377). For most aficionados of *tsymbaly* music, the performer's ability to play an intricate "lead" melody is of prime importance.

For a tradition to remain vibrant it must continue to evolve. Alberta's *tsymbaly* tradition is evolving as performers test new repertoire and performance practices. Tsymbalists are redefining their visual image by developing non-traditional ways of holding the instrument, while reshaping its auditory image by experimenting with new hammers, strings, tunings, and electronic techniques.

A demand for *tsymbaly* music remains within Alberta's Ukrainian community. Although some of the more traditional contexts have disappeared, they have been replaced with such new venues as radio programs, folk festivals, and *tsymbaly* competitions. As tsymbalists continue to become involved in such endeavours as adding the *tsymbaly* to the large symphony orchestras that accompany staged Ukrainian dancing and incorporating *tsymbaly* into non-Ukrainian styles, they will bring the instrument to the attention of an ever-growing audience. However, as long as the *tsymbaly* continues to be featured in small ensembles for community events, a link to its past traditions will remain.

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Résumé: *Brian Cherwick présente un exposé sur le* tsimbali̇ *ukrainien (tympanon frappé), sa construction, ses accords et ses utilisations. En mettant l'accent sur des faits nouveaux récents, Cherwick montre comment cet instrument est devenu un symbole de l'identité ukrainienne au Canada, par opposition à celle de l'Ukraine elle-même, où la* bandoura *conserve son rôle.*

Figure 1. Three traditional *tsymbaly* tunings from Ukraine. Rows and columns indicate positions of notes on instrument (left and right sides of centre bridge, and bass bridge, respectively).

i). Lysenko			ii). Lysenko (transposed)			iii). Mierczynski		
db″	gb′	bb	d″	g′	b	d″	g′	
c″	f′	ab	c#″	f#′	a	c#″	f#′	
bb′	eb′	gb	b′	e′	g	c″	f′	
ab′	db′	fb	a′	d′	f	b′	e′	
gb′	cb′	eb	g′	c′	e	a′	d′	a
f′	bb	db	f#′	b	d	g′	c′	g
						g#′	c#′	f
						f#′	b	e
						e′	a	d

Figure 2: Five Alberta *tsymbaly* tunings. Cf. Fig. 1, above.

i)			ii)			iii)		
g″	a′	c′	d″	g′	b	eb″	ab′	c′
d#″	f′	c#′	c″	f′	bb	d″	g′	b
d″	e′	b	b′	e′	a	c#″	f#′	bb
c#″	e#′	bb	bb′	eb′	g	c″	f′	a
c″	e′	a	a′	d′	f#	b′	e′	g
b′	e′	g	g′	c′	f	bb′	eb′	f#
bb′	eb′	f#	g#′	c#′	e	a′	d′	f
a′	d′	f	f#′	b	d	g′	c′	e
g′	c′	e				g#′	c#′	d
g#′	c#′	d				f#′	b	c
		c						
		A						

iv)			v)		
e″	a′	c′	e″	a′	c#′
d″	g′	b	d#″	g#′	c
c#″	f#′	bb	d″	g′	b
c″	f′	a	c#″	f#′	bb
b′	e′	g	c″	f′	a
bb′	eb′	f#	b′	e′	g
a′	d′	f	bb′	eb′	f#
g′	c′	e	a′	d′	f
g#′	c#′	d	g′	c′	e
f#′	b	c	g#′	c#′	d
			f#′	b	c