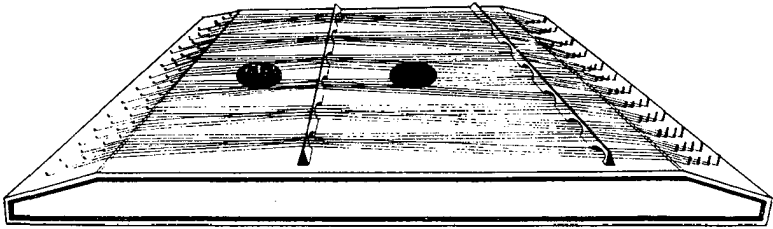


# “THE WESTERN CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIPS”: *TSYMBALY* COMPETITIONS AT THE RED BARN<sup>1</sup>

MARK J. BANDERA

The *tsymbaly* (hammer dulcimer)<sup>2</sup> has been played in Western Canada for over a hundred years, yet little has been written about the instrument or its players. The “CFCW”<sup>3</sup> *Tsymbaly* Competition provides an opportunity for studying the playing of this instrument. Although popular among Canadians of Ukrainian origin in the Prairies, the *tsymbaly* is almost totally unknown among mainstream Canadian folk musicians. Typical *tsymbaly* music is available on a number of records. The disc of the 1974 competition, *Award Winning Dulcimer Sounds*, can provide a basis for defining both musical and extra-musical elements of a typical competition. Moreover a competition of this sort can have interesting sociocultural implications.

The *Tsymbaly* is a stringed-percussion instrument with similarities to the Hungarian *cimbalum*, European *psaltery*, Arab *santyr*, Chinese *yangchyn*, and Iris *timpan*. Early European art reliefs depict many dulcimer/*psaltery*-like instruments. Indeed, early dulcimers were distinguishable only in manner of sound production (plucked with plectra or struck).<sup>4</sup>



The *tsymbaly* consists of a trapezoidal frame (approx. 95–130 cm. long, 35–55 cm. wide), a sound board (with 1–4 sound holes) and two bridges. (On this structure rest over a hundred strings of wound brass and iron wire. The strings slope, alternately passing over one bridge and under the other. The strings are in groups of 2–6 called *bunty*, and are played with sticks (12–16 cm. long).<sup>5</sup>

Tunings for the *tsymbaly* are varied. They are generally tuned chromatically, though depending on the system used, there may be gaps in the scale. The bridge in the middle of the instrument divides a string into two pitches with a perfect fifth difference. The range of the instrument is approximately three octaves.<sup>6</sup>

The *tsymbaly* were popularized in Eastern European areas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and were avidly played in the Carpathian mountains. Early Ukrainian immigrants to Canada (many from the mountains) brought musical traditions, including the *tsymbaly*, with them. Traditionally the *tsymbaly* were played solo, accompanied by a violin, or in *troista muzyka* (a group of three instruments, featuring *tsymbaly*, violin, a flute-like instrument called a *sopilka*, or drums in various combinations). Today, in Western Canada *tsymbaly* are often featured in bands with combinations of electric guitars, synthesizers, violins, accordions, and drums. Thus, *tsymbaly*, though featured in a new way, manage to retain their traditional popularity at functions such as weddings.

Western Canada boasts several Ukrainian festivals of note in Dauphin, Manitoba (The National Ukrainian Festival), Vegreville, Alberta (*Pysank* Festival), Saskatoon (*Vesna* Festival), and Vancouver (Vancouver Ukrainian Festival). They feature dancing, singing, *tsymbaly*, guest performers, parades, arts and craft exhibits and traditional foods.<sup>7</sup> Only Vegreville and Dauphin regularly include *tsymbaly* competitions in their programs. Dauphin has been defined as "the Canadian Championships."<sup>8</sup> Another event is different from all the above: the CFCW *Tsymbaly* Competition and Old Time Dance. Here, all the action revolves around *tsymbaly*, and it can be thought of as the "Western Canadian Championships." The event first began in Lakeview, then moved to the Polish Hall in Edmonton, and finally to the Red Barn.<sup>9</sup> The Red Barn, located twenty minutes north of Edmonton, is a popular gathering-place for country-western entertainment. It offers a large dance floor, seating along the sides and on a balcony to each side, as well as a bar and food service towards the back.

The evening begins at 6:00 p.m. with the *tsymbaly* competition. The bar is opened. People sit and listen to the competition or not, depending on inclination. A supper of Ukrainian-Canadian food is served after the competition. This is followed by a dance with two bands that feature *tsymbaly* at 9:00 p.m. The festival today averages twenty competitors, half junior and half senior players. Prizes are given to the first three in each category, to the player who came the farthest, and for the most original playing. Everyone has a good chance of winning. The commercially available disc, *Award Winning Dulcimer Sounds*, a recording of the 1974 Red Barn festival, provides a representative look at the competition portion of the evening. The disc itself contains information in addition to the musical numbers. The 1974 festival had nine entrants ranging in age from ten to seventy-two and included one woman and one junior. Occupations ranged from secretary to farmer and warehouse-man.

### **Performance:**

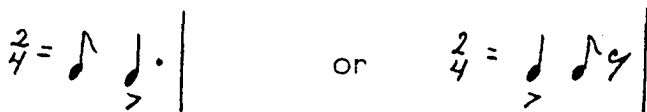
Each performer is required to play two selections for a total of five

minutes (though together they actually average three and a half minutes). The performance is amplified and the second selection is accompanied by a snare drum. The choice of repertoire is totally up to the competitors: This is a breakdown of the tune types found on the record: Scottish 1, *Hopak* 1, *Verkhovyno* 1, Anglo-pop 2, Waltz 3, Polka 3, and *Kolomyika* 7.

Half the melodies played represent traditional Ukrainian forms.<sup>10</sup> The *kolomyika* is the most productive Ukrainian-Canadian form: hundreds of such melodies exist. The typical *kolomyika* has a two-line structure of the following form:



The typical rhythmical cadence is:



*Verkhovyno* is in two parts. The first part is lyrical in  $\frac{6}{8}$  time, and this is followed by a fast *kolomyika* melody. The *hopak* is a popular dance form characterized by dynamic shifts and this cadence



At no time during the competition are the names of pieces indicated, nor does the disc provide this information. When asked, some players identify repertoire by generic name or generic name and area of melodies' origin.

One way a competitor sets himself apart is by playing something the audience recognizes. This could be a distinctive old-world piece such as *verkhovyno*, or something Western as in "Scotland the Brave."<sup>11</sup> In the case of a polka, it is the tempo of the piece that excites the audience. The addition of a drum beat in the second piece likewise adds to the effect.

Playing two different tune types demonstrates versatility. A waltz, as played by M. Palichuk, offers contrasting meter and tempo in comparison to the predominant fast  $\frac{2}{4}$ . Then when he follows with a fast  $\frac{2}{4}$ , the audience response is immediately noticeable.

Performers try to demonstrate skill or virtuosity where possible. The accomplished player tries to use the whole range of the instrument. It is important he use both hands effectively, rather than favor one hand. Runs, use of bases for harmony and accenting melodic

beats, and combinations of rolling help mark a more accomplished player. This is contrasted by simple playing of the melodic line.

Styles vary with each performer. M. Swereba, winner of the 74 competition often ends passages with non-traditional resolutions. B. Iskiw and P. Ewasiuk, two competitors from Lamont, add pop-synkopations to their selections. Another competitor adds the flourish of a short ending to his number. The audience's positive response to these special effects can be measured by the length and intensity of applause.

The successful *tsymbaly* player often ascribes much of his achievement to the special quality of his instrument. It may be louder, more bell-like in tone, more defined or longer.

The competitor finds many extra-musical factors affecting his performance. In effect, he does not compete alone. The announcer who sets the scene is a major participant. First he explains who the competitors and audience are and what they are to do: "Top *tsymbaly* players are to compete for lovely trophies and prizes," and the audience is invited to have a "grand time." Dan Chomiak, the announcer at this competition, is "known by all," having a radio show beamed throughout Western Canada.

As an extension of the performer, the announcer introduces each performer to the audience and the judges. He tells them who the contestant is, how old, where he lives (even the address), how long the contestant has been playing, if currently in a band, and what makes this performer special. At the end of the contestant's selections, the announcer lobbies the audience for more applause, encouraging them to express appreciation: "That's *tsymbaly* music, my friends! Eric Brayer, ladies and gentlemen! Come on, we can do better than that for this young fellow!" Thanks to the announcer, the audience listens to someone they know.

The audience at this festival generally exceeds a thousand people. The competitor brings family and friends to the competition, and so has his own cheering section in the crowd to bolster the performance.

Each judge has "special" qualifications as defined by the announcer. Jimmy Watsko has "done a lot of work, is a fiddler, a musician, and a fine musician." Tony Gurla is "the voice on CFCW, a good friend, familiar to all, and the only Romanian-Ukrainian disc jockey in the business." Albert Bilyi is "the winner from last year and an accomplished *tsymbaly* player." The announcer also acts as go-between for the judges, sympathizing with them for their "tough job."

Criteria for the adjudicating ostensibly rests on how well a person plays, but other factors influence the result, such as where the contestant is from and whether he is known, or the order of performance. A performer who goes first must warm up a cold audience. One who goes last competes with food and the dance that is to

follow. (The winner performed fourth out of nine.) Judges are changed from competition to competition in order to help diffuse possible favoritism.

### **The *Nash*,<sup>12</sup> or the Ethnic Pride Factor**

The competition serves a vital social-cultural function for the participants. Implicit throughout the evening is the affirmation of identity. *Tsybaly*, an old-world instrument, transforms and lends even Anglo music a new Western Ukrainian Canadian distinction. As the Ukrainian language is forgotten by succeeding generations,<sup>13</sup> the non-verbal, instrumental nature of the *tsybaly* offers a unique way of communicating the culture.

The announcer informally defines the evening as Ukrainian. When announcing a competitor of German origin, it is noted that he has a Ukrainian wife and learned from his in-law. While much of the language is lost, a few Ukrainian phrases used sparingly show that this is indeed "*nash*" (ours). The phrase

"*Pshenytsiu robyt* (He grows wheat)"

is used to identify both the occupation (farmer) and identity (Ukrainian). The only youngster of the competition, a ten year-old boy gets special recognition. There is a "cuteness factor" involved; but also something much more important is identified:

"And you know ladies and gentlemen, when we see a little fellow like this, learning the art of *tsybaly* ah, it makes me feel so good.

This means that your grandchildren fifty years from now will still be dancing to the sounds of Ukrainian *tsybaly* at a Ukrainian wedding."

Thus, throughout the competition, the validity of the people's identity is reaffirmed and encouraged.

At times, the performers chafe at the commercialism of the venture. "CFCW," Heritage Records, and the Red Barn certainly make a buck; however, players also realize that without the commercial aspects, the competition would not exist. Indeed, it is more useful to consider the event "in economic terms as a form of investment, as a road leading to recognition and prestige."<sup>14</sup> The longevity of the event, held annually since 1967 to the present, is yet another measure of success.

The competition and disc are adaptations: ". . . new distinctive, highly streamlined affirmation of ethnicity,"<sup>15</sup> . . . "thoroughly Ukrainian yet at the same Canadian."<sup>16</sup> Heritage Record's jingle says it all: "If it's Heritage . . . It's Ours . . . It's Canadian."

*University of Alberta*  
*Edmonton, Alberta*

## FOOTNOTES

1. The "Championship" characterizations are from an interview with Steven Cwok, a young player, former competitor, and now adjudicator for competitions.
2. The hammer dulcimer bears little resemblance to, and should not be confused with, the Appalachian dulcimer.
3. "CFCW" is a popular country-western radio station in the Edmonton area.
4. James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and their History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 201-2.
5. Stanislaw Mierczynski, *Muzyka Huculszczyzny* (Karkow: polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1965), pp. 150-55.; O. Nezovybat'ko, *Ukrains'ki tsymbaly [Ukrainian Tsymbaly]* (Kyiv: Muzychna Ukraina, 1976), p. 34.
6. Nezovybat'ko, pp. 20-21.
7. Robert B. Klymasz, "The Ethnic Folk Festival in North America Today," in *Ukrainsi v amerykans'komu ta kanads'komu suspil'stvakh [Ukrainians in American and Canadian Society]*, ed. Wsevolod Isajiw (Jersey City: M.P. Kots, 1976), pp. 199-211.
8. Steven Cwok.
9. In an interview, Nick Mischi, a tsymbaly player since 1915, offered descriptions of competitions over the years.
10. A. Humeniuk, *Narodne khoreohraf ichne mystetstvo Ukrainy [Choreographic Folk Art of Ukraine]* (Kyiv: Vydav. Akademii nauk Ukr. R.S.R., 1963), p.; A. Humeniuk, *Instrumental'na muzyka [Instrumental Music]* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1972), pp. 27-31.
11. Nick Mischi reports that Ann Paterson learned this piece especially for her new husband.
12. *Nash* literally means "ours" but also connotes "ours" vs. "theirs"; see Andrusyshen, *Ukrains'ko-anhiis'kyi slovnyk Ukrainian-English Dictionary* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 570.
13. Robert B. Klymasz, "Sounds You Never Heard Before: Ukrainian Country Music in Western Canada", *Ethnomusicology*, 16(1972), 372.
14. Klymasz, "The Ethnic Folk Festival," p. 199.
15. Klymasz, "Ukrainian Country Music," p. 378.
16. Klymasz, "The Ethnic Folk Festival" p. 205.

### Discography

- Award Winning Dulcimer Sounds*, 1974, Red Barn competition. Heritage Records, HR 16, 1974.  
*Dulcimer in Concert with Nick Mischi*, Maple Haze, MH 7662, 1977.  
*Prairie Pride*, Western Ukrainian Canadian dance band features Steven Cwok on tsymbaly. Heritage Records, HR 38, 1983.

**Resumé:** *Mark J. Bandera note que les Ukrainiens jouent du cymbalum dans l'Ouest canadien depuis plus de cent ans et qu'ils ont de nombreux festivals et compétitions de cymbalum dans les quatre provinces de l'Ouest. Une des plus importantes de ces compétitions est la "Western Canadian Championships" qui se tient au Red Barn, un important centre de musique country & western au nord d'Edmonton. Celle-ci se tient annuellement depuis 1967 et attire à chaque fois plus de 1000 personnes et contribue à conserver la vigueur de la tradition ukrainienne au Canada.*