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Verkhovna Rada again votes for state support of Plast



Eugene Zavhorodny

Plast members bring the Bethlehem Peace Light to the Verkhovna Rada on December 17, the same day the new law on state recognition of Plast was passed.

by Roman Tymotsko

KYIV – With 316 votes on December 17, Ukraine's Parliament backed a law on the state recognition of Plast – National Scout Organization of Ukraine. This is the second affirmative vote on the legislation. On May

30, 2019, members of the previous convocation of the Verkhovna Rada had voted in favor of the earlier edition of this bill. But then, after more than three months, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rejected

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Latest prisoner swap provokes heated exchanges



Presidential Office of Ukraine

A former prisoner of war is welcomed home. He was among the 76 detainees returned to Ukraine in a swap with the Russian-controlled occupation authorities in the Donbas.

by Bohdan Nahaylo

KYIV – Ukraine and the Russian-controlled occupation administrations in the Donbas on December 29 carried out an exchange of prisoners. Welcomed by many, it was strongly criticized by others because

of the terms on which it was made.

Seventy-six Ukrainian prisoners were returned in a swap for 127 people handed over to Russia's proxies who, controversially, included five ex-Berkut officers suspected

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Celebrating 100 years of cultural diplomacy in Ukraine

by Marta Kolomayets

KYIV – One hundred years ago, the Ukrainian Republican Capella, under the direction of the talented conductor Oleksander (Alexander) Koshetz, set out on a world tour to promote Ukraine as a newly independent state, to show the world who the Ukrainians were, and how they longed for a free and independent state.

Commissioned by Symon Petliura, the head of the Ukrainian National Republic, and funded by his government's Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs, the 100-member choir had a mission: to conquer the West through soft power, to tell the story of its emergence on the world stage through the melodies of such great composers as Mykola Leontovych, Kyrylo Stetsenko and Mykola Lysenko, through songs of the glorious Kozak past and hymns of Ukraine's rich choral tradition.

"The concept of cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding. But cultural diplomacy can also be more of a one-way street than a two-way exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view or 'telling its story' to the rest of the world," wrote Milton C. Cummings, a professor of political science and an expert in comparative cultural policy in an essay published at the beginning of this 21st century.



Sergy Gavrishovich

The Dnipro Choir of Taras Shevchenko National University, which debuted "Shchedryk" in the same location 100 years ago, repeats history 100 years later.

To highlight Ukraine's centenary triumph of cultural diplomacy, and to observe its own 100th birthday, the Institute of International Education, which administers the Fulbright Program in Ukraine, organized a commemorative concert on October 9 at the Ukrainian National Philharmonic, highlighting the music of Leontovych and his "Shchedryk."

Over 500 guests, including U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission in Ukraine Kristina Kvien, ambassadors to Ukraine from Switzerland, Belgium, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovenia, Denmark, Finland, Argentina, Brazil and Canada, as well as cultural attachés and representatives from the Ukrainian govern-

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Celebrating 100 years...

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ment, toasted the double anniversary celebration with champagne and hors d'oeuvres at the magnificent National Philharmonic Hall, the site where in 1916 the uplifting melody of "Shchedryk" was first performed by the Dnipro Choir of St. Volodymyr's (Taras Shevchenko) University. At that time, the National Philharmonic was known as a private club, the Kupetsky Gathering Hall.

"Our event tonight is celebrating two important centennial anniversaries this year. First, the U.S. Institute of International Education, IIE, a key partner in the Fulbright Program in Ukraine and around the world – they have been promoting international exchanges since 1919. And, of course, 1919 was the year the world heard the 'Shchedryk' composition by Leontovych," noted the diplomat from the U.S. Embassy in her opening remarks.

"One hundred years ago, the Ukrainian song became the voice of Ukraine in the world, and these days it comes back to us as a part of world culture. This soft power is truly song power," said Tina Peresuinko, the evening's mistress of ceremonies, who is the author and curator of a project on 100 years of cultural diplomacy in Ukraine that includes the book titled "The Cultural Diplomacy of Symon Petliura: The Mission of the Oleksander Koshetz Capella."

Even today, few people know that the popular Christmas melody heard throughout the season as "Carol of the Bells" was composed by Leontovych and was the signature piece of the Ukrainian Republican Capella as it took Europe by storm, visiting 10 European countries in 1919-1921, before embarking on a tour of North America, South America and Cuba in 1922-1924.

"Shchedryk" (The Little Swallow) premiered in North America at New York's Carnegie Hall on October 5, 1922, and was met with rave reviews. Unfortunately, Leontovych did not live to see this day, as he was assassinated by a Soviet agent in 1921 for his Ukrainian patriotism and national activism.

Over the next two years, Koshetz and his choir performed over 200 concerts from New York City to San Francisco, from Terre Haute, Ind., to Waco, Texas, playing such grand places as Orchestra Hall in Chicago and the American Academy of Music in Philadelphia, as well as high school auditoriums, including in Bayonne, N.J., and college halls such as that in Columbia, Mo.

In a letter to Petliura dated April 16, 1920, sent while



U.S. DCM Kristina Kvien meets with Marta Kolomayets, Fulbright Director in Ukraine for the Institute of International Education and U.S. Embassy Cultural Affairs Officer Sean O'Hara.

touring Europe, Koshetz wrote: "The critics are unanimous about this musical miracle, about the new musical world, and in connection with this about Ukraine, its people and our matters. In our concerts, we embrace all circles of society, beginning with kings and presidents, and ending with workers and children. Whenever possible, we give lectures about Ukraine and its current situation."

However, by 1924, Koshetz and his choir members put an end to their exhausting tour, settling in the United States and Canada, as émigrés. Ukraine was no longer independent; it was now overtaken by the Soviets and ruled by Communists.

Upon hearing the chorus sing, Robert Nathaniel Dett, a black American composer, remarked: "Their mission has a very deep meaning especially for America," referring to the Ukrainians' struggle for independence.

"In everything they sing, one hears a particular nationalistic spirit, which has nothing at all in common with so-called Russian music," wrote The Michigan Daily, based in Ann Arbor, on February 14, 1923.

"They showed our country not only the best singing we have ever heard but put Ukraine on the artistic map of the world," wrote playwright Clay Greene in the San Francisco Journal in February 1924.

"Not by the power of weapons, but through the enchantment of the arts do they aim to conquer the world – does everyone understand how this is already a victory," wrote the Nieuwe Courant from The Hague on January 1, 1920.

A century ago, the Ukrainian choir had to confront the press, adamantly insisting that Ukrainians were not Russians. "Your newspapers refer to us as Russians, but they are wrong," one choir member told the Dallas Morning News on December 4, 1922. "We are Ukrainians, despite that the Soviets are currently ruling our land. America is very nice and we would like our country to resemble it. We hope that one day we will once again have our own government and we will be like you."

From "Shchedryk" to "Carol of the Bells"

On March 30, 1936, Peter Wilhousky, an American conductor of Ukrainian ancestry, presented his adaptation of Leontovych's "Shchedryk" with English lyrics, performed by a student choir during the Convention of American Music Teachers at Madison Square Garden in New York City. (More than 15,000 people participated in this convention.)

A year earlier, in September 1935, "Summertime," from the opera "Porgy and Bess" by George Gershwin, premiered in Boston. In the 1920s, Gershwin had heard the Koshetz Choir perform "Oy Khodyt Son" (The Dream Wanderers), a lullaby composed by Leontovych in the 1910s, and adopted the melody for his opera.

Now, in 2019, on the initiative of Ms. Peresuinko, the Institute of International Education and the Ukrainian Fulbright Circle, the genius of Leontovych and his enchanting "Shchedryk" once again came to life and the magical sounds of the sparrow chirping again filled the majestic halls of the Philharmonic, as the Dnipro Choir performed the song in the foyer, leading the audience into the hall, where they were met by rock star Oleh Skrypka, lead vocalist for VV, who popularizes the melody among Ukraine's youth in an annual Christmas concert in Kyiv.

Throughout the evening, the "Shchedryk" was performed in various ways: The Kyivska Kamerata, a classical chamber orchestra, offered its rendition of the Leontovych melody, arranged by contemporary Lviv composer Yuriy Laniuk and conducted by Valeriy Matiukhin. The orchestra also performed Scott Joplin's "Ragtime," in keeping with the spirit of the music of the 1920s.

Opera diva Susanna Chakhoyan joined the orchestra,



Members of the Fulbright Jazz Group, pianist Fima Chupakhin and Yakiv Tsvietinskyi with Fulbright staffers Inna Barysh and Olesya Kotsiumbas, share in the evening festivities.

singing "Oy Khodyt Son," a lullaby written by Leontovych, which she then masterfully evolved into Gershwin's "Summertime."

Kyrylo Stetsenko, grandson of the composer Kyrylo Stetsenko who often collaborated with Leontovych, presented Leontovych's "Oy Didu," and turned the number into an audience-participation event, as tap dancer Volodymyr Shpudeiko stepped in tune with the violinist and the audience sang the refrain of "Oy, dudaryku."

Intertwining American spirituals with Leontovych melodies, the popular Ukrainian bandura boy band Shpyliasti Kobzari entertained the audience with its rendition of "Shchedryk," and "When the Saints Come Marching In."

ManSound, Ukraine's premier a capella group, performed its version of "Shchedryk," which is a staple in its program as they travel around the world. ManSound was joined by Ms. Chakhoyan, to perform the Gershwin classic "They Can't Take that Away From Me."

Taras Kompanichenko and his Chorea Kozacka brought the audience back to the era of Ukraine's struggle for independence, 1918-1921, singing two numbers from that era and featuring the music of Kyrylo Stetsenko.

The concert concluded with the Fulbright Jazz Group – Fima Chupakhin on piano, Bogdan Gumenyuk on saxophone and Yakiv Tsvietinskyi on trumpet – playing Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm" and offering its own arrangement of "Shchedryk" as a final note in this tribute to 100 years of cultural diplomacy.

The organizers of the event said they hope to bring this cultural happening full circle, to bring "Shchedryk" back to Carnegie Hall in the winter of 2022 – 100 years after the successful North American premiere of the classic melody, once again using the power of the arts as a cultural and educational tool to spread the word about Ukraine.

The commemorative concert was financially supported by the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, as well as the Ukrainian Fulbright Circle, the U.S.-Ukraine Business Council, the Western NIS Enterprise Fund and Evrotek Business Group.

To hear excerpts of the concert, readers may follow this link: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10aZ-vV4BGFML0mYbLN64Glr5CMWNEE/view>.



The First Ukrainian National Choir, which was later transformed into the Ukrainian Republican Capella in Kyiv, on January 1, 1919. Seen front and center is Kyrylo Stetsenko. Mykola Leontovych is in the third row, on the left.



The announcement of the Ukrainian National Chorus's American tour.