

Fedir Akimenko (Yakymenko)

The Ukrainian composer Fedir Akimenko was a distinctive figure of the early 20th century. His legacy and creative activity revealed three important tendencies in Ukrainian musical culture in the second part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. One was associated with Russian musical culture, a second with the influence of western European, especially French, music on the development of Ukrainian art music, and the third with the development of classical genres based on folk elements. The last tendency became dominant in musical culture not only in Ukraine, but also in neighboring countries, which witnessed manifestations of nationalism in art and music.

Akimenko's life coincided with many dramatic events in European history, including World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, the subsequent dissolution of the Russian Empire and the emergence of Bolshevik ideology that would shape political and cultural life for several generations in eastern Europe. The composer lived through the hardship of revolution, immigration and war. On December 28, 1944, he collapsed on the Place Saint-Michel in Paris. He was taken to the nearby Hôtel-Dieu hospital, where he died around noon on January 3, 1945.

Audiences cannot fully appreciate his musical legacy, since many of his compositions have been lost. Some of his music had been sold along with the copyright and subsequently published under different names. Some scores were performed but never published, and the manuscripts were lost during the German occupation of France. Some of Akimenko's scores and manuscripts now presumably reside in private archives.

Nevertheless, Akimenko's compositions evoked interest at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was considered by some musical critics at that time to be one of the most talented young composers of his generation. His name was cited alongside masters such as Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Rachmaninov, Nikolai Medtner and Alexander Scriabin.

Fedir Akimenko received his professional education first in Russia and later in France. Despite his success in the concert halls of Moscow and St. Petersburg, his music was popular only among a small circle of connoisseurs and concertgoers. He was considered a composer of symbolism, a trend that

flourished only briefly, but which sparked interesting trends in music and other arts, especially in painting.

Very little is known about the composer's life. Not many critical reviews of his performances and compositions survived, and the few short articles about Akimenko that exist do not allow for a thorough analysis of his works and performances. His destiny was changed by political turmoil, and his life in an alien cultural milieu did not prove helpful for the development and popularization of his works. In his everyday life Akimenko did not enjoy favorable working conditions and owing to the private nature of his personality, his music did not receive adequate attention.

Fedir Akimenko (Yakymenko) was born in 1876 in Ukraine. Akimenko's family gave three distinguished musicians to the world. His youngest brother, composer Yakiv Yakymenko (Stepovy), became one of the founders of the Ukrainian national school. Another brother became a cellist and music educator.

Akimenko's house in a suburb of Kharkiv was surrounded by cherry trees. A narrow, sandy stream gave the name to the entire area—Pisky—which means sands. Today it stands almost in the center of the large industrial city that played an important role in the cultural life of Ukraine and the Russian Empire. For a short time Kharkiv was Ukraine's capital and enjoyed a rich and diverse cultural life. The founder of the Ukrainian national school, Mykola Lysenko, spent time studying in Kharkiv, where the musical milieu sparked his interest in composition. The city attracted many first-class performers, which in turn facilitated the formation of a tradition blending Western music with Russian influence. Ukrainian musical culture at that time existed primarily in folk vocal and instrumental performance, along with choral traditions, both religious and secular. Akimenko's father enjoyed choral music, and being a good singer, he served as a cantor at the neighboring church. In his home, music by great Ukrainian composers such as Dmytro Bortniansky, Artem Vedel and Maksym Berezovsky was heard as a part of his children's cultural upbringing, which inspired great interest in composition among his sons.

Because of his exceptional voice, at the age of ten Akimenko, like Ukrainian composers Berezovsky, Bortniansky and Semen Hulak-Artemovsky, was selected to sing with the Imperial Court Chapel Choir in St. Petersburg. To be a member of the Cappella meant not only to be exposed to an elite choral tradition, but also to have access to the best possible music education. Akimenko took piano lessons

with composer and conductor Mily Balakirev, who became a founder of the progressive group of Russian composers called the Mighty Handful (Moguchaiia Kuchka). Acquaintances with composers such as Balakirev and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov at the early stage of his musical education had a tremendous impact on Akimenko. Along with Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky and César Cui, these composers changed the course of Russian music and subsequently made a strong impact on the musical culture of Europe. The Mighty Handful worked hard to promote the idea of national music, blending realism, folk or traditional elements and the eloquent style of Romanticism. These concepts had been laid down by the founders of the Russian national school Mikhail Glinka and Alexander Dargomyzhsky and associated with freedom, nationalism and the exotic. The last element evoked the composers' interest in the music of "others," especially folk music of the non-Western tradition. Initially this interest related to an Oriental theme incorporated in traditional musical form, but later resulted in a wide range of musical projects involving Asian and European traditional music.

From 1886 to 1895, in addition to piano and vocal classes, Akimenko was taking lessons in composition with Rimsky-Korsakov, who recognized Akimenko's immense talent and favored him above his other students. Rimsky-Korsakov found Akimenko to be exceptionally talented and admitted him to his class at the Conservatory, where the young musician studied composition and theory. Recommended by Rimsky-Korsakov, another prominent composer, Anatoly Lyadov, accepted Akimenko into his class to master composition technique. At that time, Lyadov was interested in Expressionism and "officially" represented the Neo-Romantic school. He exposed Akimenko to the most recent trends in European music from France and Germany. In addition to composition, music analysis, harmony and theory, Lyadov taught Akimenko piano and violin, and introduced him to orchestration technique.

Lyadov recommended his talented student to lead the Cappella's student orchestra, and in 1892, at the age of 16, Akimenko became its youngest conductor. He conducted symphonies by Joseph Haydn, W.A. Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven. He was interested in Romantic music and the leitmotif technique used in the orchestral works of Ferenc Liszt and Richard Wagner. It was natural that being among musicians, composers and musicologists eager to develop a musical culture distinguishable from the dominant Western, especially German and Italian, tradition, Akimenko understood the importance of studying Russian music. He added scores by Glinka, Dargomyzhsky and Peter Tchaikovsky to the orchestra's repertoire. The young composer had the opportunity to rehearse and to perform the best music of the classical repertoire but also to perform his own compositions, which had been appreciated

by Lyadov and Balakirev. At the age of 21 Akimenko taught conducting classes at the Imperial Cappella, where his students included future composers Yakiv Stepovy (his brother), Heorhii Kozachenko,¹ Paul Pecheniha-Ouglitzky² and others.

Since its inception, the music and cultural milieu at the Cappella had a strong element of the Ukrainian folk music tradition. The majority of its singers were recruited from Ukraine. Ukrainian composers such as Bortniansky, Berezovsky, Vedel and Hulak-Artemovsky developed strong musical traditions rooted in Ukrainian music during their tenures at the Cappella. Their own compositions—choral concertos and religious music and also secular music in different genres, ranging from chamber and instrumental works to choral cantatas and operas—had distinguishing features of Ukrainian traditional and academic music.

The cultural milieu of St. Petersburg was advantageous to Akimenko's musical development. In his biographical notes, he reminisced that his professional training, along with the city's diverse musical culture, played extremely important roles in his formative period. The quality of schooling and also the "highly professional performances of secular and religious music by the Court Cappella, recitals and other public appearances by the choir and the orchestra, which took place at the beautiful Court Concert Hall, along with wonderful piano performances given by Mily Alekseevich [Balakirev]" all had a tremendous impact on the professional growth and development of young musicians.³

During his time with the Court Cappella, Akimenko showed himself to be an exceptionally talented young musician with a great interest in Classical and Romantic music, and also a musician who expressed vivid interest in contemporary trends in music, such as Neo-Romanticism, Symbolism and Impressionism. After graduating from the Cappella, his professors invited Akimenko to continue his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music. He was accepted into the class of Rimsky-Korsakov to study theory, orchestration and composition, and his dual-major was piano and organ. Akimenko's interest in Baroque organ music, along with music by Felix Mendelssohn, Liszt and especially the

¹ Kozachenko was a composer, choirmaster and arranger. After graduating from the Imperial Court Cappella, he was appointed as a choirmaster and subsequently Choral Director at the St. Petersburg Imperial Opera Theater. He was the author, according to Pavlo Matsenko, of the one-act opera, *Pan Sotnyk*, based on Taras Shevchenko's poem, which was staged in St. Petersburg in 1916.

² Paul Pecheniha-Ouglitzky (1892-1948) was a Ukrainian-American composer and conductor and the author of the opera *Vid'ma* [The witch], symphonic poem *Ukraïna*, cantata *B"iut' porohy* [The rapids crash; text by Shevchenko], choral and instrumental music. He studied at the Imperial Music School in Kharkiv, later at the St. Petersburg Conservatory with Akimenko, Vasily Kalafati, Alexander Glazunov and Nikolai Tcherepnin. He taught theory and composition at the Conservatory from 1914 to 1919. In 1922 moved to New York, where he played with the Wagnerian Opera Orchestra, City Symphony Orchestra and State Symphony Orchestra. Several of his works were performed at Carnegie Hall and broadcast over radio, including NBC.

³ F.S. Akimenko, "Avtobiograficheskaia zametka" [Autobiographical note], *Russkaia muzykal'naiia gazeta*, 11-12 (1911): 287.

French composers, led him to the studio of professor Louis Homilius, with whom Akimenko studied organ and the rudiments of organ improvisation. Homilius had studied piano with Carl Czerny. The years Akimenko spent at the St. Petersburg Conservatory gave him a strong musical education, exposed him to the most recent trends in European music and enabled him to define an individual style in his compositional technique. As he was developing facets of his artistic personality, his musical language had already distinguished him among the composers of his generation.

Akimenko's first compositions were written during his studies with the Cappella, and most of them did not survive. As a student at the Conservatory, he developed an extensive portfolio. He was composing in different genres, and his stylistic palette was diverse; the young composer experimented with tonality and polyphonic elements, as well as impressionistic harmonic juxtaposition.

His graduation from the Conservatory in 1900 or 1901⁴ was marked by the premiere of his *Poème lyrique*, op. 20. At this time, he had already composed more than fifty art songs, several works of instrumental music, compositions for orchestra and music for piano and organ. At that age of 24 he was known in a circle of professional musicians as a very promising composer. His public appearances as a pianist and conductor always sparked interest for his interpretations, which were marked by a great sense of style and personal involvement. Music critics often emphasized his style, which blended great expression and expansive gestures with attention to small but vibrant musical details. His music often evoked associations with grandeur and cosmic philosophical notions by an artist, whose inner world was extremely fragile, sensitive and introverted. "It cannot be denied that Akimenko possesses a world of his own," wrote the musicologist Leonid Sabaneyeff, "a convincingly stable world. It is not a chance whim of fancy, not a chance practical choice, but it is precisely his own native world. Akimenko, least of all 'a man of this world,' has estranged and shut himself off from people. Isolated, somehow even unfamiliar with the earth and its inhabitants, impractical and infinitely naive as saints and children can be naive, he seeks neither fame nor money and in his attitude towards art there is a holy touch and some antique devotion and purity which seems almost insane to us moderns. The world which he endeavors to embody in sounds is the world of heaven."⁵ Even in his early instrumental and orchestral works Akimenko presented conceptually innovative ideas that largely coincided with the formation of the new and different representations in art, embedded in Art Nouveau, Expressionism and Symbolism in European poetry, literature, painting and music at the beginning of the twentieth century.

⁴ Graduate in composition under Rimsky-Korsakov, Lyadov and Jāzeps Vītols.

⁵ Leonid Sabaneyeff, *Modern Russian Composers* (New York, 1967), 195.

The Belaieff Publishing House accepted Akimenko's compositions for publication. Mitrofan Belyayev had paved the way for most of the prominent composers at that time, including Sergei Taneyev, Scriabin, Nikolai Myaskovsky and Balakirev, and later Rachmaninov, Medtner, Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev. Belyayev was the first to accept Akimenko's compositions for piano and vocal music. He was so impressed with Akimenko's music that he invited him to take part in his musical gatherings. These concerts were similar to the Parisian *salons* where Liszt and Fryderyk Chopin presented their works for connoisseurs and elite groups of listeners.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Belyayev Circle was the most progressive group of musicians developing Russian national music. It advocated for the presentation of a composer's personal style, as formed by national elements and "contemporary" trends. Akimenko was part of the Belyayev Circle, which became a successor to the Russian National School. The idea to gather composers who shared similar ideas resembled French circles of painters and musicians. Belyayev had the wealth and vision to initiate the creation of the group, including Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin, as well as young musicians, such as Taneyev, Scriabin, Alexander Glazunov and others. According to Sabaneyeff, this group of composers was less aggressive and less nationalistic in nature than the Mighty Handful had been. The majority of the Belyayev Circle was more interested in individual expression, along with an "academic" interest in the overall development in musical culture, rather than in promoting a socio-nationalistic agenda. Akimenko, as a young member of this group, found himself in the midst of discussions about the progressive development of national and world music. He was among those who laid the foundation for the national musical culture that later underwent a dramatic transformation, owing to the disruption of the cultural process. Issues discussed among the members of the Circle sparked Akimenko's interest in enhancing his studies and becoming acquainted with traditions beyond Russian music. He developed a great interest in the non-Western music and in Oriental musical idioms, forms and genres, as did many artists at that time.

After a series of concerts in 1901, in which he performed as a soloist, as well as conductor, Akimenko was invited to teach at the School of Music (Conservatory) in Tbilisi, and he eagerly accepted this proposal. He wished to explore the musical culture of the Georgian people who, in his view, maintained their ancient traditions along with astral concepts of being and human existence, interwoven with

spiritual beliefs and an “unspoiled” nature of emotional expression. Soon after his arrival in Georgia he became a director of the School of Music (1901-03).

Ukrainian composer and folklorist Alexander Koshetz taught music and choral classes at the Tbilisi Gymnasium from 1903 to 1904. It is possible that he met Akimenko there, since Koshetz assumed the position of piano teacher at the very end of August of 1903, the year when Akimenko received an invitation to work in Ukraine and left the Caucasus shortly thereafter. This acquaintance later resumed when Akimenko was working in Prague. The time that Akimenko spent in Georgia was productive not only as far as his compositions were concerned—he made several sketches for future works—but also because of the pedagogical experience he would utilize later in Czechoslovakia and France.

Three years after his graduation from the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music Akimenko left the Russian Empire. Invited to head a music school in Nice, to perform as a pianist and to conduct its choir, Akimenko decided to work in western Europe. From 1903 to 1906 he dedicated himself to composition, as well as to performances as a pianist in France, Italy and Switzerland. In addition to working as a conductor at the Russian Orthodox church in Nice, Akimenko composed music for chamber orchestra, for piano and violin, and vocal cycles. While studying French music, poetry and painting, Akimenko became fascinated with the astrological ideas of French author Camille Flammarion, whose concepts and philosophical notions were influential in the circle of poets, musicians and artists, who called themselves Expressionists and Neo-Romanticists. The idea of renunciation of individual expression for cosmic power and divine objectivity fascinated many composers at that time. One of the prominent figures who developed similar ideas in music was Scriabin, who was very close to Akimenko in his philosophy and musical palette. During the last period of his life (1910-15), Scriabin maintained relations only with a small circle of close friends, Akimenko among them.

Along with his piano compositions, vocal music, especially art songs, was the most developed genre in Akimenko's music portfolio at that time. He developed a unique style in his vocal opuses, which included more than 50 compositions for soprano, baritone and bass with piano accompaniment. His ability to combine sophisticated melodism with sensitive, impressionistic tonality, along with a traditional and not especially complex structure, enabled him to present subtle nuances in his vocal and instrumental compositions. At this time, his musical style included some elements derived from French Impressionism, along with rich orchestrations reminiscent of Rimsky-Korsakov's works. Later

Akimenko developed a sophisticated technique that clearly distinguished his works from most presented at that time. The folklorist and musicologist Zenowij Lysko analyzed the composer's style: “The harmonic structure in his compositions is typically impressionistic, still tonal, but saturated with very sophisticated and complex harmonic clusters, enhanced by heavy alteration. With this technique the composer intentionally depicted a very fragile, flexible and even ambiguous tonal and harmonic texture.”⁶

In late 1905 Akimenko received an invitation from his native Kharkiv to teach theory and composition at its music school. In his curriculum vitae dated March 24, 1924, he wrote, “After 1906 I returned to Kharkiv, to my motherland, where I remained until 1911, performing at different concerts, along with my solo recitals; I also taught theory and music classes at the local music school. In 1912 I received an invitation to join the Moscow Public Conservatory as a professor. In 1914 I became a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music.”⁷ Akimenko eagerly accepted this invitation and performed various teaching duties until 1923. More recently discovered documents reveal that Akimenko received an invitation from the director of the Glazunov Conservatory in 1914, and from 1915 to 1918 he taught as a docent (associate professor) and was appointed full professor in 1919. During his tenure as a professor of theory and composition until 1923, Akimenko was a strong influence on the development of the group of young composers whose works subsequently shaped to the course of 20th-century music. Many students warmly remembered Akimenko, as a famous composer in the “circle of progressive musicians in St. Petersburg.”⁸ Among them was Paul Pecheniha-Ouglytzky who became, at the age of 22, the youngest professor of the same conservatory, future composers Vadim Salmanov and Igor Stravinsky, who studied theory and counterpoint with Akimenko,⁹ and others. It is probable that Stravinsky’s father, Fyodor, introduced his son to Akimenko. Fyodor Stravinsky, a star of the Russian opera and one of the leading bass-baritones of the Mariinsky Theater, maintained a strong interest in Ukrainian matters. He had spent his youth in Ukraine studying law in the 1860s in Kyiv and Odessa, where the future singer met Lysenko. Later they both were engaged in many concerts together, especially outside Ukraine. Several concerts in St. Petersburg focused primarily on Slavic music. These Slavic Ethnographic Concerts, as they were called, were not merely presentations of traditional music from Slavic lands, but were also considered cultural and political events.

⁶ Zenowij Lysko. “Fedir Iakymenko – vyznachna ale malo znana postat' v istorii ukrains'koï muzyky” [Fedir Akimenko: A notable but little-known figure in the history of Ukrainian music]. *Ukrains'kyi samostiinyk*, 27 (181), (1953): 4.

⁷ Central State Archive of Government and Administration of Ukraine. fond 3972, fol. 1, case 299: 2, 7.

⁸ Pavlo Matsenko, “Iakymenko Fedir Stepanovych.” *Kul'tura i osvita* (1954): 4.

⁹ Stravinsky continued his studies in composition and counterpoint with another graduate of Rimsky-Korsakov’s class, Vasily Kalafati.

While teaching in Kharkiv, Akimenko often performed in St. Petersburg and other cities. His music became known to publishers in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Leipzig and Paris. His works attracted the attention of Belyayev (Belaieff, Leipzig/Moscow); V Bessel & Co. (Leipzig/St. Petersburg); P. Jurgenson (Moscow), Alphonse Leduc and Rouart, Lerolle & Cie. (Paris). Only a few reviews of Akimenko's concerts and performances of his music survived. One of these described Akimenko as one of the most talented composers. The critic was fascinated by his poem for piano *Uranie*, which had been performed at one of the concerts arranged by Belyayev. He expressed his captivation with the exquisite harmonic richness of Akimenko's musical texture, which coincided with the simplicity and elegance of the composition's structure. In his article titled "Musician-Impressionist," the critic commented on how contemporaries perceived Akimenko's music. "A musician-astrologist, he sensed and experienced the trembling and attraction of mystical forces in their interchangeable and glittering auras...The highly distinguishing characteristics [of his style] and exquisite artistic 'taste' were eloquently expressed in his harmonic colors...From this point of view, Akimenko was rather inventive, independent, fantastic and full of novelty, such as Debussy, however, completely independent from him...The musical form of the majority of Akimenko's music is not especially complicated, reminiscent of the folk song."¹⁰

Akimenko first became famous for his works for chamber orchestra and especially for piano. He was "essentially an instrumental composer, and although he is often considered a miniaturist, he wrote extended chamber works, symphonic poems and two operas."¹¹ After the presentation of his *Poème lyrique* for orchestra, Akimenko was encouraged by his colleagues to write in different genres for chamber and full orchestra. In a very short time, he composed several chamber pieces: Trio for Strings, op. 7 (1900), the orchestral piece *Rusalka* (Water nymph; after 1900), several other instrumental pieces, including *Eclogue*, op. 12 (1901), *2 Morceaux*, op. 11 (1901) and Four Romances for voice and piano, op. 5 (1900).

The beginning of the 20th century became exceptionally fruitful for Akimenko. In 1902, he finished several instrumental pieces: Berceuse, op. 15, *Idylle*, op. 14 and Romance, op. 13. The following year he presented three recently finished pieces for orchestra, *Élégie*, op.15, Nocturne, op. 18, and *Petite*

¹⁰ E. P-skii. "Muzykant-impressionist" [Musician-impressionist]. *Russkaia muzykal'naia gazeta*, 11-12 (1911): 283-86.

¹¹ Virko Baley. "Akimenko [Yakymenko], Fedir Stepanovych." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. ed. Stanley Sadie, 2nd ed., vol. 1, 263.

ballade, op. 19, along with several piano sets: *3 Morceaux*, op. 16, *5 Morceaux*, op. 21, *5 Preludes*, op. 23.

Despite his private, introverted nature, Akimenko never avoided writing musical criticism, which he considered an important vehicle for creative expression and the formalization of the artist's credo. His articles in journals and newspapers were widely acknowledged not only by performers but also by musicologists. According to Akimenko's personal data, recorded later during his employment at the Ukrainian Institute in Prague, he was writing reviews and also essays, critical analyses and memoirs about fellow musicians and composers. "I wrote essays and articles on different subjects in the professional journals and magazines." In his autobiographical notes, Akimenko wrote that before his departure from Bolshevik Russia in 1924 his portfolio included more than 100 works for different instruments, art songs, choral arrangements and music for chamber orchestra that had been published or were in the process of publication. Even though critics regarded Akimenko as a miniaturist and a composer "who first and foremost wrote predominantly in the genres [pertaining] to instrumental music,"¹² his portfolio contained several major works, including operas. Akimenko wrote that his major works up to that time were two Symphonies, a Trio for Strings, an Overture for symphony orchestra and the opera *Feia snegov* (The snow fairy; based on Hans Christian Andersen), which had been accepted by a publisher in Paris. In addition to compositions, he wrote several critical essays and articles on the subject of musical aesthetics and the history of music, which had been published in *Ruskaia muzykal'naiia gazeta* (Russian Music Newspaper).¹³

The period following World War I was extremely turbulent and not just in the political life of the Russian Empire. The dissolution of the social infrastructure and the collapse of imperial political doctrine sparked a tremendous sense of national awareness, hunger for freedom and the expression of nationalistic sentiments. Despite many years of separation from Ukrainian culture, its language and traditional music, Akimenko maintained a great interest in Ukrainian issues, especially music. The period from his return to St. Petersburg in 1914 until his emigration in 1924 to Prague and later to France became transformational in terms of his national awareness. Akimenko's participation in Ukrainian musical events and concerts was facilitated by an invitation to become a member of the Ukrainian Art and Literary Society in St. Petersburg. He was well known among Ukrainian intellectuals

¹² Matsenko, "Iakymenko Fedir Stepanovych," 15.

¹³ Valeriia Shul'hina. "Povernennia spadshchyny Fedora Iakymenka natsional'nii muzychnii shkoli" [The return of the legacy of Fedir Akimenko to the national music school], *Narodna tvorchist' ta etnohrafii*, 1 (2000): 133.

of the Russian capital. A member of the Society, Serhiy Zhuk, who invited Akimenko to take part in its concerts, reminisced about his meeting with the composer in 1916. “I became acquainted with the famous composer, professor of the St. Petersburg Conservatory Fedir Akimenko”, wrote Zhuk in his memoirs published in 1953. “Who among the artists of St. Petersburg did not know his name? I had heard a lot about him from the actress Yelyzaveta Petrenko, and I wanted to invite him to join the Ukrainian Art and Literary Society. I was excited by the prospect of him promoting traditional [Ukrainian] musical culture, so I decided to meet him...I told him about our Society, our goals and the difficulties that we had experienced. He became excited; it sparked his sincere interest.”¹⁴

Akimenko accepted the invitation and became a member of the organization. He took part in its next concert on January 21, 1917, on the eve of the February Revolution. That time, marked by uncertainty and turmoil in the imperial capital, coincided with an interruption of the basic food supply. Nevertheless, interest on the part of the public in cultural events, especially musical premieres, was evident. The large concert hall of the Teneshevskaiia School was packed. Prominent singers and musicians appeared on the program. Among them were Society members, who were soloists of the Imperial Theaters. Akimenko performed his new compositions for piano “Morning” and “Funereal Song,” and one of his art songs with Petrenko. After this concert Akimenko participated in several Society concerts connected with Ukrainian literary and historical events. In March 1917 he took part in the celebration dedicated to Taras Shevchenko, at which he performed his piano composition “Dreams at the Sea Shore.” The announcement of this gala-concert sparked such interest that the Society decided to rent St. Petersburg City Hall for the occasion. There are fragmentary comments, without dates, that Akimenko took part in at least three other concerts sponsored by the Society. At his next documented appearance on 7 July 1918, Akimenko participated at an Evening of Ukrainian Song organized by the Society. At this concert, held at the Recital Hall of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, he performed two of his piano compositions, Barcarole and “Funereal Song.”

His participation in these Ukrainian concerts and literary evenings, along with his acquaintance with the members of “Malorusian intelligentsia”—artists, composers, musicians, poets and writers—inspired Akimenko’s sincere interest in Ukrainian traditional music, folk songs and dances. He became interested in incorporating traditional musical idioms into classical compositions and combining formal structure

¹⁴ Serhiy Zhuk. “Moï zustrichi: Iakiv Stepovy i Fedir Iakymenko” [My meetings: Yakiv Stepovy and Fedir Akimenko], *Ukrains'kyi samostiinyk*, 33 (187).

with the flexibility of folk melody. He began to experiment with arrangements of folk songs in different genres—from lyrical ballads to humorous songs.

Akimenko knew the approach of Russian composers and musicologists from Rimsky-Korsakov and the Belyayev Circle. Most of them saw this dilemma either from a “preservationist” point of view, or in terms of subjugating the nature of folk tunes to the rules of classical composition. The issues that interested Akimenko still puzzled him: how to merge traditional music values, such as pitch fluctuation, tonal flexibility, frequent metric change, interpretation and the semi-improvisatory nature of performance, with “Western” structures and rules of composition. At that time very few composers were involved in folkloristic research; most of them used collected sources or transcribed tunes that would be used merely as a citation in their compositions. Some of them used folk elements only to introduce non-Western “freshness,” or to convey a sense of national distinction.

Akimenko was acquainted with the work published by Petro Sokalsky in *Ruskaia narodnaia muzyka, velikoruskaia i maloruskaia* (Russian folk music. Great Russian and Little Russian). He knew of the compositions, arrangements and folkloristic works of Lysenko, who had studied in Leipzig and later in St. Petersburg with Rimsky-Korsakov and subsequently became central to the musical and cultural life of Ukraine in the latter half of the 19th century until his death in Kyiv in 1912. Akimenko also knew of Lysenko’s music through his correspondence with his brother Yakiv Stepovy, other musicians from Ukraine and members of the Ukrainian Society.¹⁵ Stepovy informed Akimenko about folklorists and their approach to collecting and presenting traditional tunes, new compositions and the development of the Ukrainian music in eastern, as well as western Ukraine. Being very close to Lysenko's circle, Stepovy was familiar with Lysenko’s efforts to collect and develop folk materials in his compositions.

Akimenko wished to have first-hand experience of traditional Ukrainian musical culture in attempting to develop his own style of arranging folk songs. When the opportunity arose at the end of June 1918, Akimenko joined the members of the Ukrainian Art and Literary Society in their visit to now independent Ukraine. He spent several months in Kyiv and visited many other places. In his memoirs, Zhuk reminisced that a month after arriving in Kyiv, Akimenko proudly mentioned that “he already had made about 75 arrangements of Ukrainian folk songs.” It was certainly not an “overnight” project; the composer had been working on these arrangements for several years. What is notable is that he was

¹⁵ Ivan Alchevsky, Yelyzaveta Petrenko, Serhiy Zhuk and others.

among the first members of Ukrainian intelligentsia, who, having lived outside of Ukraine almost all of his life, decided consciously to dedicate his talent to the cause of the professional development of Ukrainian national culture. It was a time of a great expectation, a time when people re-evaluated their national and cultural attachments, when nationalism, in its positive connotation, sparked creative forces and facilitated the formation of a nationally rooted social and cultural mentality.

Invaded by the Russian Red Army, the Ukrainian state was brutally destroyed by Bolsheviks and most of the nationally conscientious intellectuals were either prosecuted and sent to Gulags or fled the country. Akimenko was among the last that were able to flee Soviet Russia. He had been very active within the Ukrainian community in St. Petersburg, and his experience and talent were appreciated by professionals and students. Not surprisingly, he was invited to teach in different schools, and when the opportunity arose in 1923, Akimenko found himself at the center of the Ukrainian emigration in Prague. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century the city had been a meeting place for several political, social and cultural organizations opposed to tsarist Russia. One of the leaders of the opposition, Mykhailo Drahomanov, worked for many years in Prague and served as a liaison between Ukrainian and west European intellectuals. He played an active role in establishing a cultural milieu that facilitated the social and cultural groundwork for an unexpected wave of immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Drahomanov Ukrainian Pedagogical Institute was opened in Prague. There an extended community of Ukrainian immigrants established several academic and cultural institutions, social organizations, music ensembles and choruses. Being a prominent composer interested in the development of Ukrainian musical culture, Akimenko received an invitation to write a curriculum and develop an academic program for the Department of Music Pedagogy with two subdivisions, instrumental (piano and violin) and vocal (studio of solo performance and conducting). On 26 March 1924, the composer was appointed by the Institute's Academic Council as a Professor and Dean of the Music Department. In addition to composition and frequent performances at concerts, he took "an active role in the cultural life [of Prague] as a conductor of Ukrainian choirs, as well as a pianist."¹⁶ At the same time Akimenko taught two courses, "four hours every week: two hours of special piano [performance] and a two-hour class on harmony."¹⁷

¹⁶ Lysko, "Fedir Yakymenko," 21.

¹⁷ Central State Archive of Government and Administration of Ukraine, fond 3972, fol. 1, case 299: 2.

This period of Akimenko's life can be described as “Ukrainian.” He worked as a composer, but also as a pedagogue and manager to establish an excellent school of music, comparable to those where he had been taught in the past. In 1925 he was very glad to welcome his young colleague, composer Nestor Nyzhankivsky, who became his assistant in the composition class. Akimenko’s students admired their professor for being “understandable, very friendly, scrupulous, open and honest, and at the same time demanding and encouraging professionalism from his students and staff. Some were afraid of his truthfulness.” Among other duties, Akimenko supervised the conducting and choral singing classes taught by Platonida Shchurovska-Rossinevych, associated with the Koshetz Choir in Ukraine and on its tour across Europe and the Americas. According to one of the singers, Iryna Shchokh, Shchurovska-Rossinevych also directed the Choir at the Ukrainian Agricultural Academy in Poděbrady. Akimenko planned to enhance the choral department of the Institute and to develop a strong faculty. He wanted “to invite Alexander Koshetz to teach the class of choral conducting and worked actively to this end.”¹⁸

Among his students were Ivan Kopuliv, Dmytro Ravych, Borys Levytsky, Yaroslav Masliak, ethnomusicologist Zenowij Lysko and the conductor, folklorist and composer Mykola Kolessa. Serhiy Zhuk left a rare personal reminiscence about Akimenko as a person: “His daily life was very simple, [he] was constantly working and practicing as a pianist, composing music for his instrument (piano), symphony orchestra, arranging and harmonizing Ukrainian folk songs for chorus...In the circle of his students he very often discussed the [fate of] Ukrainian music, its future and expressed his concerns that the chamber and symphonic genres were still underdeveloped. He worked very hard for an enrichment of [Ukrainian] music and encouraged his students to work in this direction.”

Akimenko’s presence at the Institute laid down a foundation for the professional development of the Musical Pedagogical Department. At the same time Akimenko’s goal was to present and develop an awareness of Ukrainian art and folk music within the western European music world. He highlighted the interconnection between traditional and national elements embedded in Ukrainian music, with the current Western theoretical systems.

In his inaugural lecture at the opening of the Music Department Akimenko emphasized the importance and legitimacy of the professional presentation of Ukrainian musical traditions: “The Ukrainian people, based upon their natural inclinations, have a great admiration for music (remember only the great

¹⁸ Matsenko, “Iakymenko Fedir Stepanovych,” 7.

number of first-class singers in Ukraine or of Ukrainian descent); its people have a natural talent for music. I would say even more—everything is singing in Ukraine. They have a great foundation for the extended development of musical culture, to a large extent rooted in Ukrainian song. [Ukrainian] music has already gained appreciation and admiration among the nations of the Old and New Worlds, which is especially apparent in the context of the masterful presentation of national music by the Choral Cappella under Koshetz. Ukrainians have a great possibility for developing their musical culture, and through their music they have a unique chance to assume (in a relatively short period of time and without great effort) a fitting place among other nations.”¹⁹

Akimenko and his colleagues strove to develop high standards of musical education at the Institute and also to incorporate music curricula to expose their students to both traditional and professional music. He was familiar with current trends in the European musical institutions, especially at Polish and Czech conservatories, and with the inclusion of musical culture in the curricula of a liberal arts education as a vital component of national awareness. This concept was embedded in his “Note at the Inception of the Institute.” He wrote, “music and vocal programs in Ukrainian schools focused not only on general education, but also on the long-term pursuit of the same goals as in the schools of western Europe, especially in Czechoslovakia, to elevate this national and cultural treasure to a pan-European level through education of the young generation of leaders in the field.”²⁰

Akimenko understood that his mission at the Institute as an educator was limited owing to the absence of teaching materials and textbooks that would reflect current trends in musicology, theory and composition. As far as Ukrainian music was concerned, very few collections of traditional music and some articles and essays on the subject were available to his students. In his efforts to design systematic theoretical curricula that would conform to the standards of European colleges and universities he communicated with folklorists, musicologists, composers and educators such as Filiaret Kolessa, Koshetz, Fedir Steshko, Lysko and others. Encouraged by his colleagues, Akimenko wrote the first Ukrainian textbook on counterpoint, harmony and theory, the *Praktychnyi kurs nauky harmonii* (Applied course of [music] harmony). This work laid down a foundation for the development of the theoretical discipline of higher Ukrainian musical education. In this Akimenko can be seen as a founder of the national pedagogical literature in music, designed not only for Ukrainian students of the Institute, but also as a cornerstone of national music education. The book was published in Prague in 1925 with the

¹⁹ Central State Archive of Government and Administration of Ukraine, fond 3972, fol. 1. case 222: 2.

²⁰ Central State Archive of Government and Administration of Ukraine, fond 3972, fol. 1. case 222: 5.

support of the Ukrainian Civil Publication Foundation.²¹ In his work Akimenko enhanced and developed the traditions of the Russian school of theoretical concepts associated with his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov, whose expertise in harmony and counterpoint was unsurpassed, and whose books and essays on the subject were required study at the St. Petersburg Conservatory for generations.

In 1928 Akimenko returned to live in Nice, and from 1932 he was vice-director of the Russian Normal Conservatory in Paris, where he taught piano performance. Little about his life after 1936 is known, and only a fraction of his compositions has been recovered.

²¹ The textbook was dedicated to Fedir Steshko with the inscription: “Dedicating this work to Fedir Steshko, the Chairman of the Ukrainian Music Society in Prague.”

List of Compositions

Opera:

Feia snegov (The snow fairy), libretto by Michael Calvocoressi, after Hans Christian Andersen (1914)

Rudy (unfinished)

Ballet:

Ballet fantastique

For Orchestra:

- 2 Symphonies (1899?)
- Concert Overture (1899)
- Fantasia for Orchestra (1900)
- *Poème lyrique*, op. 20 (1899)
- Nocturne for String Orchestra (1910)
- Symphonic Poem *Rusalka* (Water nymph), after Mikhail Lermontov (1922)
- Ballet Suite, op. 50 (1916)
- Orchestral Suite in G minor

For Strings:

- Trio for Violin, Viola and Cello in C Major, op. 7 (1897)
- Romance for Viola, op. 13 (1902)
- Sonata for Violin and Piano, op. 32, no. 1 (1901)
- *Air lointain* for cello and piano (1903)
- *Berceuse de Noël* for violin and piano (1936)
- *Eclogue* for violin or viola and piano (“Méditation,” “Le rêve,” Scherzo), op. 38
- *Évocation* for violin and piano (1924)
- Sonata for Cello and Piano no. 1, (1906)
- Sonata for Cello and Piano no. 2, op. 37 (1908)
- *Mélodie russe* for cello and piano

For Wind Instruments:

- *Eclogue* for English horn and piano, op. 12 (1902)
- *Idylle* for flute and piano, op. 14 (1902)
- *Petite ballade* for clarinet and piano

For Piano:

- 3 *Morceaux*, op. 27 (1905)
- *Paysages d'un monde inconnu*
- 12 *Récits d'une âme rêveuse*, op. 39
- *Pages de poésie fantasques*, op. 43 (1910)
- *Sonate fantastique*, op. 44 (1910)
- 3 *Morceaux*, op. 48 (1912)
- 2 Pieces – *La pluie d'or* and *Chant funèbre*, op. 49 bis
- 3 *Morceaux* (“*Chant des Orgues*,” “*Méditations*,” “*La Prière*”), op. 53
- 6 Preludes, op. 56
- *Album pittoresque*, op. 59
- Sonata-Fantasia no. 2, op. 60
- 3 Pieces (“*Mélodie*,” “*Étude*,” “*Idylle*”), op. 60 bis
- *Caprices des harmonies*, op. 62 bis
- *Tableaux idylliques* (“*Valse*,” “*Pastorale*,” “*Élégie*,” “*Danse rustique*,” *Romance*) for four hands, op. 62
- 6 *Pièces ukrainiens* (*Dumka*, “*Do tantsiu*” [For dancing], “*Pisnia*” [Song], “*Vesillia*” [Wedding], “*Lystopad*” [November], “*Hrechanyk*”) for four hands, op. 71 (1925)
- *Pour la jeunesse*, op. 93 (1939)
- 21 Pieces (1909)
- Pieces (1911)
- *Ranok* (Morning) (1917)
- *Pohrebal'na pisnia* (Funereal song) (1917)
- Barcarolle (1917)

- *Mrii na berezi moria* (Dreams at the sea shore) (1917)
- *Pièce pour piano* (1924)
- *L'aveu* (1924)
- 4 Preludes (1924)
- Minuet in D Major (1924)
- *Minuet russe*
- *Valse des libellules* (1924)
- *Suite miniature* (1924)
- *Rêve douloureux* (1925)
- *Trois pièces sur des thèmes ukrainiens* (“Tendre idylle,” “Près de berceau,” “Chant de fête”) (1925)
- *Tableaux ukrainiens*: “Sviata” (Holidays), “Mak” (Poppy), “Banduryst” (Bandura player), “Hutsulka” (Highlander girl), “I shumyt” (Clamour) (1925)
- *3 Morceaux* (1925)
- *La rêve, Ballade* (1926)
- *6 Poèmes ukrainiens* (1927)
- *Chant printanier, Danse romantique* (1930)
- *Viens, Petite bergerette* (1934)
- 5 Preludes (“Conte fantastique,” Berceuse, “Songe d’enfant,” “Songe d’une mer,” “Le réveil”)
- *Pour la jeunesse - Recueil*

Choral Music:

To texts by Taras Shevchenko: “U peretyku khodyla” (At the hedgerow), “Zore moia vechirniaia” (My evening star), “Choho meni tak tiazhko” (Why do I grieve?) and others

30 Ukrainian Melodies for Choir: “A vzhe vesna” (Spring has come) “A v nediliu ranen'ko” (Early Sunday morning), “Oi, u poli dvi topoli” (Two poplars in the field), “Podolianochka” (Spring song), “Oi uchora, iz vechora” (From last evening) and others

50 Arrangements of Ukrainian Folk Songs for Choir

3 Choruses (1. Herbst, 2. Lerchensang, III. Die Quelle), op. 3

Sacred Music: The Lord's Prayer; Cherubic Hymn; Six Ukrainian Christmas Carols

For Voice:

- 4 Romances to the texts of Apollon Maykov, Alexei Pleshcheyev and Mikhail Lermontov, for voice and piano, op. 1 (1896)
- 4 Romances to the texts of Lermontov, Maykov and Kareyev, for voice and piano, op. 2 (1898)
- “Rusalka” (Water nymph), for voice and piano, op. 4 (1899)
- 4 Romances, op. 5 (1900)
- 4 Romances to the texts of Alexander Pushkin, for voice and piano, op. 6 (1899)
- 3 Romances, op. 8 (1901)
- “Chisto vechernee nebo” (Clear evening sky), lyrics by Lermontov
- 5 Romances to texts by Semyon Nadson, for voice and piano, op. 61
- “Ozymandias” to the text by Percy Bysshe Shelley, translated by Konstantin Balmont, for voice and piano (1933)
- Romance for bass and piano (1933)
- “Tol'ko uznal ia tebia” (As soon as I found you) to a text by Anton Delvig, for voice and piano

Romances and songs to Ukrainian poets: “V pisni muky” (Song of torment), lyrics by Oleksandr Oles; “Tu ne dyvuis” (Do not wonder), “Ne zalliet'sia spivom sertse” (Without song in the heart) and others, op. 91 (1937)

Musicological and Literary Works

- “Aforizmy khudozhnika” (Artist's aphorisms), *Russkaia muzykal'naiia gazeta* 47 (1909): 1091-94.
- *Zhizn' v iskusstve* (Life in art)

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