

Alexander Koshetz

Alexander Koshetz was a choral conductor, arranger, composer, ethnographer, writer and lecturer, whose compositions, choral arrangements, concert tours and teaching helped popularize Ukrainian musical culture throughout Europe and the Americas. Throughout his life Koshetz never departed from the most important elements of traditional Ukrainian music. His works were based on the national musical identity in both religious and secular music. Although almost half of his creative life was spent in North America, few scholarly works about Koshetz have been written or disseminated in the West. The absence of printed music and other materials prevented scholars from studying his works in the context of Ukrainian music history. In his homeland, his music was unknown and neglected under the Soviets for more than fifty years. Koshetz did not compose in large genres, such as symphonies, cantatas or operas. He produced predominantly arrangements of traditional music for choir, religious music and a relatively small number of solo compositions. However, his achievements as a composer who presented Ukrainian folk music through transcriptions and arrangements were outstanding.

Alexander Koshetz was born on 12 September 1875 into the family of a priest in the village of Romashky near Kaniv in the Kyiv region. He spent his childhood in the village of Tarasivka near Zvenyhorod. There he was exposed to a powerful tradition of folkloric music-making, especially the tradition of Ukrainian folk singing, which became his stylistic paradigm. In 1891 he became a student at the Kyiv Academy, where he was assigned to lead the student choir, which soon distinguished itself in the quality of its performances and the originality of its musical interpretations. During this period he became acquainted with Mykola Lysenko, to whom Koshetz showed his first attempts at folk-song arrangements in 1893. Koshetz also graduated from the archeology department, and his training as a

historian, combined with his interest in folklore and ethnography, would spur his comprehensive treatment of traditional music.

After graduating from the Academy in 1901, he took up a teaching post in Stavropol in the Caucasus. At the recommendation of Mykola Lysenko, Koshetz was invited by the Kuban division of the Russian Ethnographic Society to collect and notate Ukrainian folk songs among the Kuban Cossacks. After three ethnographic expeditions, Koshetz collected some 500 Cossack, historical and work songs. At an ethnographic exhibition in Ekaterinodar in 1907, Koshetz received a gold medal for his work as a folklorist.

In 1904 Koshetz returned to Kyiv, where he worked as a teacher at various schools and as the choir director at the Lysenko Music and Drama Institute. In 1905-06 Lysenko and Koshetz directed the choir of the Boyan Philharmonic Society, and in 1906 he began studying composition at the Lysenko Institute. In 1908 he became director of the choir of Kyiv University. As a conductor he performed compositions by Mykola Lysenko, Kyrylo Stetsenko, Vasyl Stupnytsky, Porfyrii Demutsky, as well as his own works, and his concerts of Ukrainian ritual songs were especially notable events, given the repressive, anti-Ukrainian policies of the Imperial Russian administration in Ukraine.

At Lysenko's recommendation, in 1911 Koshetz was invited to lead the choir of the Imperial Music College, and the following year he became chief conductor of Mykola Sadovsky's Ukrainian Theatre. In 1913, when the Imperial Music College was reorganized as the Kyiv Conservatory, Koshetz was invited to teach choral singing there. In the same year he became director of the choir at the St. Olha Women's Institute.¹ During the 1915-16 season, he worked as a conductor and chorus master at the Kyiv Opera House. Despite his work load,

¹ When this choir was merged with the University choir in 1913, Koshetz would become conductor of the five main student choirs in Kyiv until late 1918.

Koshetz continued to compose, and his first set of choral arrangements of Ukrainian folk songs were published by Léon Idzikowski.²

In January 1919, the leaders of the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic directed Kyrylo Stetsenko and Koshetz to create the Ukrainian Republican Cappella as an “artistic ambassador” to acquaint the broader European public and elected officials with independent Ukraine, its culture and political aspirations. In the spring of 1919 the Capella—without Stetsenko, who was unable to travel—embarked on its cultural and political mission, performing in Austria, Switzerland, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. From the reminiscences of bass chorister Gleb Chandrowsky, during the Cappella's performances in Germany, critics were so astonished by the low register of the basso profundo singing, that they searched the backstage for a hidden pipe organ. According to the memoirs of assistant conductor Platonida Schurovska-Rossinevych, the choir was reformed and renamed several times while abroad, varying between 75 and 35 members. In 1921, during a tour of Poland, it was renamed the Ukrainian National Choir and embarked on a second tour of France and Spain. By 1922 the Ukrainian People's Republic had fallen, and Koshetz assembled a new choir to tour the United States. It performed at Carnegie Hall in New York, and in the autumn of that year it toured Washington, Richmond, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Columbus, Tulsa, Memphis, Dallas and Pittsburgh. It was during the performance at Carnegie Hall that Americans first heard “Shchedryk” by Mykola Leontovych, which would henceforth be known as “Carol of the Bells” in its English version. In 1923 it embarked on a South American tour, performing in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, Trinidad and Barbados. During the 1923-24 season it toured Canada, California, Florida and Cuba. The choir met with great success everywhere, as attested by the reviews of

² Some of these arrangements were recorded on phonograph, becoming some of Koshetz's first Ukrainian folk song arrangements to be recorded.

music critics in many countries. In addition to his own arrangements, Koshetz and his choir performed works by Mykola Lysenko, Kyrylo Stetsenko, Yakiv Stepovy and Mykola Leontovych.

When the choir disbanded in the mid-1920s, Koshetz attempted to return to then Soviet Ukraine, but was denied permission to do so. In 1926 he settled permanently in the United States, where he directed amateur choirs and conducted seven church choirs in the Ukrainian communities of New York and New Jersey. He continued to work on arrangements of folk songs from Ukraine and other countries. He began to compose more liturgical music, and because he was working primarily with amateur choirs, the polyphonic structure of his works became simpler. As before, he combined the principles of Classical choral polyphony with the monody of church chants, while utilizing the typological features of Ukrainian folk music. These features dominated his five liturgies.

In the early 1930s Koshetz and the 300 members of the seven choirs performed at Carnegie Hall and in Washington, D.C. Subsequently Witmark & Sons published 42 Ukrainian folk songs arranged by Koshetz and translated into English by Max Thomas Krohn, director of the Arthur Jordan Conservatory of Music in Indianapolis.³ This sheet music was transferred to the British Museum, and in the United States it was utilized in university courses on folk music. In the mid-1930s these arrangements were frequently performed by student and amateur choirs.⁴ Koshetz's arrangements were sold in substantial quantities and created a commercial market for Ukrainian music.

In 1938 Koshetz worked as vocal arranger, chorus master and music director on the

³ The Arthur Jordan Conservatory of Music specialized in music education, performance, drama and dance. It was later renamed the Jordan College of Music and is currently the Jordan College of Fine Arts.

⁴ For example: concert at the John Harrington Art Institute (16 April 1933); concert at the World Trade Fair, Chicago (13 June 1933); by the 200-member choir of the State of Illinois (20 April 1933); at the First Choral College Festival, Indiana (22 April 1933); by the All-High School Choir of West Virginia, Parkersburg (26 October 1934); at the National Convention of Music Inspectors in Chicago (11 April 1934); by a 500-member choir at the All-Schools Festival in Chicago (11 April 1934).

feature film *Marusia*, based on Mykhailo Starytsky's play *Oi, ne khody, Hrytsiu, ta i na vechornytsi* (Do not go, Hryts, to the party) and featuring orchestrations by Roman Prydatkevych. Directed by Leo Bulgakov, the film was shot in New Jersey, where a Ukrainian village set was constructed, with a cast of 500 Ukrainian-Americans. In 1939 Koshetz conducted a 500-strong Ukrainian choir at the New York World's Fair.

In the early 1940s Koshetz began working on recording an anthology of Ukrainian choral music. The project required substantial material and creative resources, and resulted in the recording of 27 arrangements of folk songs by various composers on 10 records. Koshetz's aim was to record nearly every type of Ukrainian folk song. Speaking on Myron Surmach's radio program not long before his death in 1944, Koshetz emphasized that the cycle included ancient pre-Christian carols, carols of a mixed pagan and Christian origin and purely Christian carols. He included historical, heroic and military songs, and also ballads, work, love and family songs, lullabies, humorous and satirical songs, dance tunes and *kolomyikas*. They included songs that were slow, fast, sad, joyous, dreamy, realistic, domestic and outdoor, songs for women and for men, songs from central Ukraine, Galicia and Bukovyna. Koshetz wrote that he included songs that remained vocal works and "not material for the distorted deformations of contemporary, so called, modernism."

To demonstrate the continuity of the tradition of arranging folkloric works, Koshetz selected works by Mykola Lysenko and his followers, primarily arrangements by Stanyslav Liudkevych, Mykola Kolessa, Kyrylo Stetsenko, Mykola Leontovych, Vasyl Stupnytsky and Michael Hayvoronsky, as well as his own works. While the works were diverse, Koshetz aimed to make each record cohesive, so that all songs would be tonally related and each disc could be listened to separately or as a unit. The arrangements by various composers represented "an organic integrity, but were also varied, in character,

content, tempo and mood. So that they formed a sort of integrated concert.”⁵

In 1941 Paul Macenko invited Koshetz to lead courses on choral conducting in Canada. In addition to lectures on the practical and theoretical aspects of choral singing, he also taught music history. According to Macenko, “Koshetz had a great impact on everyone and particularly young people. During his lectures and choir practices, he uncovered the rich secrets of his people’s culture and enthralled his listeners. They were captivated and inspired to carry on these cultural traditions.”⁶ The choral conducting courses in Winnipeg trained teachers and chorus masters who would work in the United States and Canada. Macenko wrote that “in 1940, the Ukrainian National Federation organized summer courses for conductors and teachers to be held in Toronto. It was then decided to invite Koshetz to attend the final concert and closing ceremonies of these courses. The community and especially the young people, were so captivated by the personality of this man, that... he was invited to come to Winnipeg the following summer. Thus began a short but significant association with the city. Every summer from 1941 to 1944 he came to Winnipeg to lecture at the summer courses and teach the summer school choirs, made up of students and local choristers from various Ukrainian organizations and parishes.”⁷ His work was extremely important in developing a legacy of choral singing carried on by his students, and similar courses would later be held in Edmonton.

Seeing the gaps in musical education among the Ukrainian communities in North America, Koshetz began working on textbooks and lectures on Ukrainian music history. Throughout 1941 and 1942 he began developing a curriculum that included five large sections and 32 subdivisions: the history of ancient choral music, the sources of Greek

⁵ “Ukrain’ska narodna pisnia na rekordakh” [Ukrainian folk song on records], *Iuvileinyi kalendar-al'manakh* [Jubilee calendar-almanac]. New York: Surma Books, 1945: 31.

⁶ Paul Macenko. “Koshetz and Winnipeg,” from the program of a memorial concert at the Playhouse Theatre on 25 November 1984.

⁷ *Ibid.*

choral music and the typology of Greek chant, the history of Bulgarian music, the history of Ukrainian music, a special chapter on the Ukrainian national choral school, and separate chapters on liturgical music and the arrangement of folk songs. The book *Pro ukrains'ku pisniu i muzyku* (About Ukrainian song and music) was first published in Winnipeg in 1942 with the assistance of Koshetz's conducting students and was based on a series of lectures Koshetz gave at Columbia University and at the conducting courses in Winnipeg.⁸ Unfortunately, Koshetz's plan to write a scholarly monograph on the history of Ukrainian musical culture was never completed. However, his memoirs were published in Winnipeg in 1942. Almost forty years later the Free Ukrainian Academy of Science in New York published the most complete edition of his religious music.

Koshetz continued to popularize choral singing and the complexity and depth of Ukrainian music to the end of his days. Not long after completing a summer choral conducting course, Alexander Koshetz died in Winnipeg on 21 September 1944.

In his arrangements of folk songs, Koshetz relied on his knowledge and experience as a musical ethnographer. A distinctive feature of his arrangements was his ability to maintain a deep simplicity, while seeking a creative approach to folk material. As an interpreter of folk songs, Koshetz developed an individual style and principles of song arrangement, which he approached primarily as a conductor. He understood precisely in which couplet, in which spot and with which artistic means to emphasize a particular voice, a section of a vocal line or an important word to delineate the character of individual phrases. Koshetz wrote: "A song is a musical narrative about something, and so it contains elements of drama. Therefore, a composer ought to develop it by couplet into a series of musical pictures. This is the only sure way to reveal the entire story. This is not only possible, but essential and important, because the folk song, as a product of

⁸ A second edition was published in New York in 1970.

collective creativity, contains so much dramatic material, that in reality it cannot be completely exhausted.”

A large number of Koshetz’s arrangements were prepared for publication with piano accompaniment. At the time practically all Ukrainian composers included instrumental accompaniments, usually on piano, in their arrangements as an auxiliary element for working with choirs. By custom, these arrangements were published with instrumental accompaniments. In reality Koshetz intended his pieces to be performed *a cappella*. He emphasized that a folkloric work “has a self-sufficient beauty and therefore requires no decorative accompaniment. A song ought to be constructed *a cappella*. Like an acorn, it contains within it all the marks of a luxurious, curly oak tree, which the composer must grow. The harmonic arrangement of a song, like its counterpoint, should be derived from the song itself, from its own elements, because otherwise it will be dressed up in someone else’s clothes.” Like his teacher Lysenko, in expanding and enriching the content of a folk song, Koshetz did not alter its modal and rhythmical foundation. In his arrangements he embellished melodies, developed the choral accompaniment and employed masterly polyphony, a crystalline clarity in the vocal lines and colourful harmonic techniques.

Koshetz was a gifted composer, historian, theoretician of Ukrainian song and ethnographer, but as a conductor he was unsurpassed. He began his career as a performer and composer. However, the practical necessity of widening the repertoires of his choirs forced him to work actively on arrangements. The arrangements of his early period sometimes employed typical ornamentation. However, the arrangements of his mature period published prior to 1918 are of very high quality and distinguished by a penetrating understanding of the essence of the source material. To some extent Koshetz followed

the paths of Lysenko, whose arrangements were based on the principles of harmonizing a melody, that is, a leading voice was supplemented by others, maintaining the characteristic features of a folk melody, including its polyphony, mode and rhythm. Koshetz strove to go further by applying the principles of contrapuntal writing, in which each melodic line became independent, but interwoven with each voice to achieve a harmonious whole and polyphonic sound. Koshetz preserved the individuality of each song, revealing its content through dynamics, various polyphonic techniques and choral “instrumentation.” He understood that the Ukrainian folk song could become a foundation for developing an independent branch of Ukrainian national vocal music.

In his arrangements of folk songs, Koshetz was guided by the aesthetic foundations of the source material. However, in the field of Ukrainian church music he relied on the traditions established by Artem Vedel, Dmytro Bortniansky and Maksym Berezovsky. Koshetz had a keen feeling for the Ukrainian spirit of old church chants. Aware of the canonical restraints of church music, he nevertheless introduced elements of undertone development to established harmonic paradigms. In developing the classic type of liturgical chant, Koshetz prudently added elements of song. He strove to bridge the gap between professional church singing and folkloric musicmaking, both of which were the fundamental branches of Ukrainian vocal culture. This period coincided with the reestablishment of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and saw the emergence of a new school of Ukrainian liturgical music, created on the foundations of *znamenny* and Kyivan chant, combined with elements of folkloric singing. These features became dominant in the works of Koshetz, Kyrylo Stetsenko, Mykola Leontovych, Yakiv Yatsynevych, Pylyp Kozytsky, Mykhailo Verykivsky, Petro Honcharov, Hryhorii Davydovsky and others. An analysis of Koshetz’s sacred works reveals old Ukrainian church melodies creatively rethought and supplemented with the folk singing tradition. Koshetz’s legacy in sacred music includes five liturgies—four for mixed choir and one

for three voices), the changeable parts of the liturgy, a manuscript of the All-Night Vigil, chants and carols.

Koshetz extended his interest in the folk music of other cultures. During his tours in Europe and North America he notated and arranged folk songs and included them in his concerts. These included African American, French, Italian, Spanish, Mexican, Creole, Irish, Scottish, Slovenian and Hebrew songs, among others. These arrangements were somewhat different, primarily homophonic in development, emphasizing the rhythmic and harmonic characteristics of the source material.

Koshetz's works combined tradition and innovation, but innovation in the elaboration of the traditional. The primary period of his work coincided with the beginning of the 20th century, the period of the greatest proliferation of avant-garde tendencies in music. At the time, folklore and folklorism were considered second-rate in professional composition. However, with the rise of ethnomusicology in the latter half of the century and increased interest in world music, many composers would adopt it as a primary feature of their work.

Koshetz's compositions and approach to arranging folk songs grew out of his experience as a choral conductor. In this his works have features in common with the work of Yatsynevych, Stepovy, Lysenko, Leontovych and other composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Koshetz focused his attention on Ukrainian music as an interpreter and harmonizer. His output also included original choral works and a few art songs for male voices.

His earliest published works from 1906 consisted of folk-song arrangements for mixed *a*

cappella choir, published as part of a collection of 20 folk songs for mixed and men's choirs. Most of the material for this edition was collected in the Zvenyhorod area. The second collection, for mixed and male choirs with piano accompaniment, was dedicated to Mykola Lysenko, who had recommended Koshetz for an ethnographic expedition among the Kuban Cossacks in 1903-05. The songs collected then formed the basis of Koshetz's second collection of arrangements.

Lysenko's influence on Koshetz's early works was especially strong. Although the latter officially studied composition with Hryhorii Liubomyrsky, Koshetz's work was shaped by his experience as a choral conductor, and in this he was formed by Lysenko's choral compositions and his method of working with choirs. Koshetz's early works were similar to Lysenko's in the modification of couplets or strophic repetitions, through variations in vocal harmonization and alterations of rhythmic and harmonic elements. Koshetz innovated in the transformation of thematic changes. Unlike Yakiv Yatsynevych, another pupil of Lysenko, Koshetz actively introduced chromatic harmonies, and his multilinear vocal lines were based on the folk polyphony inherent in the source material. In general, Koshetz was not receptive to the contemporary compositional trends dominant in early 20th-century Europe, namely, dodecaphony, atonality and serial techniques. Nevertheless, he was an active promoter of young Ukrainian composers, and in addition to performing classic works by Lysenko and Yatsynevych, his concerts also included arrangements by Levko Revutsky, Stanyslav Liudkevych, Pylyp Kozytsky, Vasyl Stupnytsky, Vasyl Barvinsky and Filiaret Kolessa.

In his own works Koshetz also employed techniques of double counterpoint, vocal "instrumentalism" and a bold use of wide *tessitura*. He introduced a fairly original technique of combining two vocal types in parallel. These elements of double-choral

writing, so called “group singing,” can be found in sacred multi-choir compositions, as well as traditional folk singing, such as two separate groups calling to each other or dissonant simultaneous singing. This is a typical characteristic of rural Ukrainian folk singing, when two groups of young people would call to each other from different parts of a village or compete one against the other. In his free use of traditional compositional techniques, Koshetz extended the traditional tessitura of vocal lines depending on the imagery of the source material. In developing variations of the couplet form—some of his arrangements having up to 20 blocks of couplets—Koshetz developed the rhythmic and melodic elements into a self-sufficient paradigm. He often employed the symmetry of arched constructions, usually tripartite forms. Combining the tonal variations of couplets, he achieved an integrity in both formal construction and the logic of the tonal plan.

The dramaturgy and formal construction of arched, symmetrical blocks, variations in melodic development and a free use of polyphonic techniques were the dominant stylistic trait of Koshetz’s compositions. They differed from those of his contemporaries in their multifaceted polyphonic structure. He made liberal use of counterpoint, an imitational development of melodic elements, the *stretto* layering of vocal parts and *ostinato* repetition of thematic material.

Having left Ukraine in 1919, Koshetz avoided the Soviet terror, persecution, arrest and repression that destroyed the Ukrainian intelligentsia. Koshetz was lost to Ukraine as an artist, and for decades cultural continuity was interrupted. However, he was able to introduce the Ukrainian folk song to the world and to use his knowledge to inspire audiences and colleagues in the United States and Canada.

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List of Works

Liturgical Music

- Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, based on old Ukrainian chants, for mixed choir
- Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, in Church Slavonic, for three male voices
- Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, for mixed choir
- Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, for mixed choir, with changeable parts
- Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, based on Galician chants
- “Na rikakh Vavylons'kykh” (On the Rivers of Babylon), based on Kyivan chant, for mixed choir
- Chants to the Mother of God, based on *znamenny* chant, for mixed choir
- Cherubic Hymn, based on Carpatho-Rusyn chant, for three male voices
- *10 Chants and Psalms of the Ukrainian People*, for mixed choir

Songs

- “Na provody” (Walking together; text by Oleksandr Kovalenko), for tenor and piano
- “Bulo kolys' vykhodyla v sadochok zelenyi” (I used to walk in the green orchard; text by Borys Hrinchenko), for baritone and piano
- “Noch” (Night; text by Vasili Zhukovsky), for mezzo-soprano and piano
- “Byt' mozhet, kogda ty uidësh ot menia” (It could be when you leave me; text by Konstantin Balmont), for tenor and piano
- “Vorota tesovye rastvorialis” (The plank gates were collapsing; text by Ivan Nikitin), for women’s choir
- “Chërnaia tucha visit nad poliami” (A black storm cloud hangs over the fields; text by Aleksei Apukhtin), for men’s choir

Song Arrangements

- 20 Ukrainian Folk Songs, for mixed and men’s choir (1906)
- Five Ukrainian Carols
- Four Historical Songs, for male voices (1918)
- 51 Ukrainian Folk Songs, for mixed, men’s and women’s choir (1923-24)
- *Vesnianky* (15 spring songs), for mixed choir
- 10 Ukrainian Carols, for mixed choir (1938)
- *Songs of Ukraine*, military songbook for men’s choir, 16 songs
- 42 Ukrainian Songs, in English translation, for mixed, men’s and women’s choir
- Five Songs for Children’s Choir

- Nine French Folk Songs, in Ukrainian translation, for mixed choir
- “Prekrasni berehy Lomonda” (The Bonnie Banks o’Loch Lomond), for solo voice and choir
- 10 Songs of the Americas, in Ukrainian translation, for mixed choir
- Five French-Canadian Folk Songs, in Ukrainian translation, for mixed choir
- Two Hindu Songs, in Ukrainian translation, for mixed choir
- Two Japanese Songs, in Ukrainian translation, for mixed choir
- “Honolulu Hula-Hula Heigh,” in Ukrainian translation, for mixed choir
- 10 Belarusian Folk Songs, for mixed choir
- Two Russian Folk Songs
- Two Hebrew Folk Songs, for mixed choir
- Czech, Slovakian, Moravian, Polish, Swiss, French, Dutch, British, Belgian and Mexican national anthems

Choral Transcriptions

- “Träumerei” by Robert Schumann
- “Barcarolle” by Anton Rubinstein
- “The Old Men’s Song” by Arthur Farwell
- “Romance”; “Chanson triste”; “Humoresque”; “Chant sans paroles” by Petr Tchaikovsky
- “Grand Valse Brillante” by Fryderyk Chopin
- *Mélodies populaires de Grèce et d’Orient*, nos. 1 & 2, by Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray

Instrumental Music

- Three Overtures, for chamber orchestra
- Ten orchestral pieces (entr’actes)
- Incidental music to various plays

More than one thousand arrangements and songs, including those collected during ethnographic expeditions, have been lost, among them, songs of the Kuban Cossack Army, collected in 1905-07.