

Yuriy Oliynyk

Yuriy Oliynyk is a Ukrainian-American composer, pianist and teacher, active in the field of music performance and education. Despite his departure from Ukraine to the West at a very early age, the composer has steadfastly maintained a vital connection to his cultural, historical and musical roots in Ukraine. Oliynyk has worked for decades as a concert pianist and lecturer in the United States and Europe, shifting more attention to composition in the middle years of his professional career. In addition to his works for solo piano, voice and piano with orchestra, Oliynyk is known primarily as a composer for the bandura.¹ He is one of the first to compose serious concert works for bandura and symphony orchestra. Oliynyk is representative of a generation of artists, who blend traditional elements of Ukrainian music with contemporary European and American concert forms.

Oliynyk was born in the western Ukrainian city of Ternopil on 1 December 1931. He is the son of a prominent lawyer, who placed a strong emphasis on musical education. From 1938 to 1944 he studied piano with renowned Ukrainian pianist Iryna Krykh. His early years coincided with turbulent and tragic times, the Soviet occupation of western Ukraine and the outbreak of World War II. To escape the advancing Soviet Army, the Oliynyks, together with many other families of the western Ukrainian intelligentsia, were forced to leave Ukraine. They fled first to Austria and later to Germany, where Yuriy Oliynyk resumed his education.

From 1946 to 1948 Oliynyk's music teacher was the Ukrainian pianist and pedagogue Roman Sawycky. Sawycky provided Oliynyk with performance technique and shared an extensive knowledge of classical and contemporary Ukrainian music. Oliynyk's talent was obvious, and he dedicated most of his time to his musical education and to performance. Following the family's relocation to Bavaria, Oliynyk continued his studies in Berchtesgaden with pianist Franz Wagner.

¹ The bandura, a Ukrainian folk musical instrument, traditionally contains between 32 and 55 strings. Yuriy Oliynyk often composes for an enhanced 65-string instrument.

Because post-war Germany was not an environment particularly conducive to the development of an artistic career, the Oliynyk family decided to move to the United States. After arriving in Cleveland with his parents and sisters in 1950, Yuriy Oliynyk entered the Cleveland Institute of Music, graduating from the studio of Arthur Lesser in 1956. Oliynyk's interests broadened from teaching and piano performance to include composition, music theory and musicology, leading to his decision to pursue theoretical studies in music. Oliynyk was admitted to Case Western Reserve University, where he received Master of Arts in musicology and composition in 1959.

Since the late 1950s Yuriy Oliynyk has given numerous solo piano and chamber recitals in the United States. His artistic interests incorporate music of different styles and epochs, including Baroque, Classical, Romantic and contemporary. His piano repertoire includes the standard concert selections and works by Ukrainian composers such as Vasyl Barvinsky, Mykola Kolessa, Viktor Kosenko, Stanyslav Liudkevych, Lev Revutsky and Roman Sawycky, as well as his own pieces. To a great extent, the musical idioms prevailing in the Ukrainian school of composition at the turn of the 20th century are creatively blended in Oliynyk's works, along with traditional tunes and folk motifs. This style might be called "creative Neo-Romantic folklorism": original thematic materials developed within a classical form, which are heavily influenced by Ukrainian and Slavic rhythmic and melodic patterns.

In his works for bandura, Oliynyk expands the image of the instrument, which had become a symbol of Ukrainian folk music in particular and ethnic identity in general. Before Oliynyk, few original, concert-oriented works had been written for the bandura. Undoubtedly Oliynyk has helped to break the tendency to treat the bandura as purely a folk instrument, appropriate for traditional *dumas*,² historical songs, psalms or for dance accompaniment. In advocating for the bandura, Oliynyk compares it to the guitar, an instrument that is widely accepted as appropriate for orchestra works. According to Oliynyk, the bandura has remarkable possibilities and

² A *duma* is a lyric-epic work of folk origin about events in the Cossack period of the 16th-17th centuries. The *duma* is different from other epic and historical poetry in their form and manner of performance. They do not have a set strophic structure, but consist of uneven periods governed by the unfolding of the story. Each period constitutes a finished syntactical whole and conveyed a complete thought. (*Encyclopedia of Ukraine*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

“deserves to be established as a world-class instrument of unusual beauty with an exquisite sonority.”³

Oliylyk, through compositions such as his bandura concertos, explores the possibilities of this still “exotic” and infrequent participant in classical music. The composer, aware of the expressive powers and delicate nature of the instrument, structures his compositions masterfully, careful to balance the woodwind or brass sections of the orchestra with the harpsichord-like sound of the bandura. According to critic Ola Myrcalo, his clever handling of the orchestra and intensification of the solo part have eliminated the innate imbalance of a full orchestra pitted against the delicate string sound of the bandura.

A central feature of the composer’s overall style is his blend of trends dominant in contemporary American music with folk elements from Ukrainian musical culture. Rhythmical diversity, tonal juxtaposition, complex modal texture and an extensive use of harmonic dissonances are examples of the modern stylistic techniques evident in Oliylyk’s music. Elements from Ukrainian music are incorporated in a variety of ways, from the pure collage of the melodic patterns to the fragmentary use of rhythmic and melodic idioms. His melodic “palette” consists of short motifs with clear rhythmic beats and lyrical melodies associated with the *cantilena* of traditional Ukrainian songs. Blending the two, Oliylyk develops and ornaments the source material through polyphonic imitations and sequential progressions, incorporating different timbral layers to enhance the overall effect.

The composer’s attention to the bandura as a legitimate instrument for the classical concert hall is a modern chapter in the history of this instrument. From the beginning of the 20th century the bandura was not welcomed by the Soviet regime owing to its association with Ukrainian nationalistic sentiment. As far back as the 15th century, bandurists⁴ were the most effective transmitters of oral history associated with Ukrainian aspirations for independence. Through the

³ Ola Myrcalo, “Yuriy Oliylyk’s Music Featured in Lviv.” *Ukrainian Heritage Quarterly*, July 1995: 3.

⁴ Bandurists (or kobzars) were wandering folk bards who performed a large repertoire of epic historical, religious and traditional songs while playing a bandura or kobza.

years of Soviet dominance, the bandura was marginalized, mainly relegated to performances of folk music and, according to official policy, not worthy of inclusion in concert performances.⁵

Oliynyk continues the recently established trend of writing music for bandura with orchestra. The first concert pieces in this genre were written by Kostiantyn Miaskov (Concerto for Bandura with Folk Orchestra, 1976), Mykola Dremliuha (two-part concerto, 1987); Dmytro Pshenychny (single-movement concerto), Volodymyr Tylyk (two concertos, 1976, 1982), Ivan Taranenko (2002), Anatolii Haidenko (2004) and others. Most of these concertos are related to a post-Romantic tradition, with a strong emphasis on folk elements—melodic, rhythmic and harmonic.

Oliynyk's First Bandura Concerto (*American*), was completed in 1987 and premiered on 5 December 1992 with the Sierra Symphony Orchestra in California.⁶ In this work, Oliynyk elegantly and in the manner of late Romanticism, incorporates the traditional sonoric, melodic and rhythmic elements of Ukrainian folk music. Following the tradition of presenting a solo instrument in the concerto genre, the bandura part is juxtaposed to the orchestra, revealing the full capacity of the instrument in diverse applications. As critic Bohdan Storozuk wrote in his review: "Melodies played by various orchestral instruments were often accompanied by rapid passages on the bandura. In some sections the bandura sounded rich and exotic against the orchestral background."⁷ The composer cleverly enhances the score of the concerto with several cadenzas for the solo instrument, where the brilliance of the bandura's tone blends with the emotionally lyrical modes, further intensified through chromatic passages.⁸

In this original piece, the composer achieved a broad expressive spectrum, from the tense and dramatic dialogues between the solo instrument and the orchestra, through the virtuosic cadenza, to the lyrical, almost melancholic second part. All are presented in a well-balanced manner. The

⁵ In his memoirs (*Testimony*, 1979), Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich noted that Ukrainian bandurists, who were mainly blind, were summoned by officials during Stalin's regime in late 1930s to a conference. Subsequently they were rounded up and sent by train to Siberia, where they were shot to death. Thirty-seven bandurists had been identified as members of the First Republican Conference of Kobzars and Lirnyks held in April 1939.

⁶ The world premiere of the First Bandura Concerto, performed by Ola Herasymenko (bandura) with the Sierra Symphony Orchestra and Hank King (conductor), took place in Rescue, California.

⁷ Bohdan Storozuk, "Music Reviews: First Concerto for Bandura premiers in U.S.," *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 31 January 1993.

⁸ The contemporary bandura is designed with up to 65 strings and includes switches that allow for more flexibility in tonal changing. This technical advancement has enhanced the bandura repertoire, making this ancient string instrument fully suitable for concert-hall performances with chamber or symphony orchestras.

folkdance-like third part reflects the traditional dance repertoire for the bandura. Oliynyk uses rhythmic and melodic dance patterns clearly associated with the motifs related to ritual cycles of *vesnianky*⁹ or *hahilky*.¹⁰ The First Concerto for Bandura is masterfully orchestrated with appropriate use of sonoristic effects in the solo parts, combining traditional elements of Ukrainian folk music with a contemporary presentation of harmonic progression, melodic development and use of dialogue between the bandura and the orchestra.

During May and June of 1995 Yuriy Oliynyk's music was featured in three concerts as part of the Virtuosi Music Festival in Lviv, Ukraine. One of the concerts was devoted exclusively to his music. The Second Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra (*Romantic*), composed in 1993, was given its world premiere there, with his wife Ola Herasymenko as soloist.¹¹ The American premiere of this concerto took place with the Camellia Symphony Orchestra in Sacramento, California, in October of 1995, to the acclaim of public and critics alike.

The Second Bandura Concerto, when compared to the first, utilizes more improvisational elements. Oliynyk broadly employs the principles of variation, where solo interludes provide a sort of bandura monologue and become the microcenter of the dramatic development within the movements. Using similar motifs in a different part of the work, Oliynyk substituted the traditional concerto framework with a relatively open three-part structure. This feature is enhanced by the intensity of the solo parts, incorporating brilliant passages, the presentation of various techniques and harmonic juxtapositions, especially in two extended cadenzas in the outer parts of the concerto.

In his Third Bandura Concerto,¹² Oliynyk explores a new stylistic element associated with the intensity of the harmonic texture in the impressionistic blending of chords. The addition of a tam-tam and xylophone to the percussion section and the elaborate use of woodwind instruments blend with the harp-like sound of the bandura. Oliynyk references the Neo-Romantic stylization

⁹ *Vesnianky* – Spring songs, often including games, maidens' dances, as well as children's dances.

¹⁰ *Hahilky* – traditional, ritual folk melodies sung by girls in conjunction with ritual festivities in early spring, particularly at Easter to persuade the gods to provide the people with a bountiful harvest, a happy marriage, etc.

¹¹ The concerto is dedicated to Ola Herasymenko, the first performer of the piece.

¹² The Third Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra (*Exotic*), composed in 1996-99, is dedicated to Oksana Herasymenko.

associated with folk percussion instruments, which explains to some extent the subtitle of the concerto, *Exotic*.

The Third Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra had its world premiere in 2003 with Oksana Herasymenko as soloist and Eugene Castillo conducting the Camellia Symphony Orchestra. In April of 2006, this concerto was performed in Manila by the National Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, with the same soloist and conductor.

The Fourth Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra was inspired by the rich and mystical Trypillian civilization that flourished between the sixth and first centuries BC in the area that is now Ukraine. This ancient culture left traces that have been preserved and developed in traditional Ukrainian customs, particularly those associated with rites of passage, and elements of design, such as those found in embroideries and ritual egg-painting. Written in sonata form, the movements of the concerto are associated with three historical periods of the Trypillian culture. The first movement, written in sonata allegro form, is called “Dawn.” The second is a rondo, titled “Apogee.” The third, “Beyond the Horizon,” is written in a three-part form with a cadenza. In his concertos for bandura and orchestra, Oliynyk typically utilizes traditional classical forms with tripartite structures (ABA).

One of the most interesting features of the Fourth Bandura Concerto is the introduction of shifting tonal centers, reflecting folk song traditions and the earliest vocal compositions. An example of this stylistic device is the *kolomyika* “Hei, Ivane” (Hey, Ivan)¹³ in the third part, during which Oliynyk simultaneously employs relative and parallel keys. In the program notes to the premiere of the concerto, the composer describes this approach—the blending of major and minor tonalities occurring sometimes simultaneously and sometimes in an alternating manner. This combination of relative keys is common in traditional singing where, for example, the joyful mood of the lyrics contradicts the minor key of the piece and vice versa. Oliynyk also makes extensive use of the parallel perfect fifth intervals. This, along with frequent changes of meter and the use of non-classical meters, are both associated with the traditions of Ukrainian polyphonic singing.

¹³ Kolomyika is a Ukrainian folk song, dance or tune, popular mostly in western Ukraine, which probably derives its name from the Carpathian city of Kolomyia.

The Fourth Bandura Concerto was commissioned in 1996 by the conductor of the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra, Zvonimir Hacko. The project was supported by a grant from the Sacramento Metropolitan Art Commission. In February 1998 the concerto received its world premiere in Odesa, at the Southern Ukrainian Cultural Center on the Black Sea. The American premiere took place in October 1999 at American River College in Sacramento.

Oliynyk's approach to orchestration evolved through the cycle of the four concertos. With each successive piece, the composer expanded the orchestral part to include a greater variety of instruments. The score for the First Bandura Concerto calls for a limited ensemble (French horn, oboe, flute, clarinet and percussion). For the second, Oliynyk enlarges the percussion section of the orchestra. The score for the Fourth Bandura Concerto calls for a wind section triple the size of the previous works.

Oliynyk's compositional interest in the bandura is also highlighted in his chamber works. In the suite *Four Trips to Ukraine* for bandura and piano, Oliynyk presents a well-matched use of these two instruments. There is no large contrast between them, as in the solo and orchestral parts of the concertos. Here, the timbral qualities are perfectly blended and reflect the elegiac nature of the cycle. The organization of the suite into four individual movements ("Spring Dance," "Harvest Rites," "Multicolored Autumn" and "Winter Contrasts") associated with folk dance idioms enhances the unity of the cycle. Due to their originality, each section can also be performed as a separate concert piece, with virtuosic and unique thematic materials.

Oliynyk's composition skill is not confined to music for the bandura. His *Ritual Piano Concerto* reveals the composer's mastery of the concerto form in general and of the piano concerto in particular. The *Ritual Concerto* consists of three relatively short, interconnected movements: the first is written in a free sonata form; the second in three parts (ABA); and the last in a compact sonata form. In October 2000 the world premiere of Oliynyk's Piano Concerto took place in Lviv, Ukraine, with Oksana Rapita as soloist.

The concerto, slightly under fifteen minutes in duration, reveals an intense spectrum of emotionally charged musical images. The composer uses contemporary musical language with

idioms associated with post-Romantic traditions, especially in European music. In the liner notes to the CD recording of the *Ritual Concerto* with Oksana Rapita and the Lviv Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Yuri Lutsiv, the composer admits that the harmonic texture of the piece includes, “atonal, bi-tonal, twelve-tonal and tonal movements in a highly chromatic setting, with some clearly defined tonal centers on the way.”¹⁴ Oliynyk’s carefully delineated melodic phrases reveal the different nature of each subsection of the movements. The well-balanced structure of the composition sparks strongly kinesthetic and visual images from the thematic ideas presented musically in the score.

In his energetic, elegant and capricious introduction Oliynyk presents a spectrum of dance-like motifs associated with the beginning of a celebration, with women and men dancing around the bonfire. The composer captures the essence of the ritual performances with a variety of moods and characters. “Mysterious summer solstice rituals have been observed by the ancient ancestors of the Ukrainians since prehistoric times,” writes the composer. “In some regions of Ukraine these colorful rituals are still performed as part of the summer entertainment.” The composer provides a very clear description of the programmatic nature of the concerto. After the first movement, the “fortune-telling rituals, centered around flowers and wax candles which are floated down the river, are depicted musically in the second movement.” The composer points out an interesting feature—the second part ends with an E-major chord (piano part, left hand) and an E-flat minor chord (piano, right hand) along with tutti orchestra. “This, humorously, suggests the dual nature of fortune telling, which could mean ‘yes’ and ‘no’ at the same time. Finally, the third movement is inspired by the frantic search for the magical fern blossom, which is said to bloom only once a year at midnight during the summer solstice. He who finds it will become invincible and enjoy great fortune and awesome powers.”¹⁵

The use of distinct rhythmic patterns, especially in the outer movements of the piece, evokes an association with the instrumental music of Igor Stravinsky, especially his piano arrangement of *Petrushka*, or Prokofiev’s piano sonatas. Oliynyk admits that in his concerto “rhythmic textures

¹⁴ All comments related to the *Ritual Piano Concerto* are taken from the program notes by the composer.

¹⁵ Program notes by the composer.

alternate between dance-like, songlike and dreamlike. The final chase after the impossible goal conveys a breathless and futile feeling.”

The orchestra plays an important but discreet role as the “objective” partner in its dialog with the piano. The solo part is profoundly delineated, well-balanced and often presented as a series of short monologues, especially in the technically advanced cadenzas, which roar with octave passages. The composer is perfectly versatile in contemporary idioms; his experience as a concert pianist clearly enhances the palette of the concerto. Interesting orchestration and the well-balanced presentation of the piano part give music a flow that connects this concerto to music by Vasyl Barvinsky or Viktor Kosenko.

Yuriy Oliynyk’s work has received important awards and is available in commercial recordings. YVO Productions produced three of Oliynyk’s concertos for bandura and symphony orchestra on compact disc in 1999. This was a first release of music for bandura with symphony orchestra on CD. A second disc of Oliynyk’s works includes the suite *Four Trips to Ukraine* and his Toccata for Bandura. In November 1999 Yuriy Oliynyk was awarded an honorary citation and a gold medal for his contribution to Ukrainian music by the government of Ukraine. His piano concerto was recorded on CD by CRS Artists of Philadelphia and released in 2005.

Yuriy Oliynyk is a past president of the Sacramento branch of the Music Teachers’ Association of California, president of the Ukrainian Heritage Club of Northern California and co-founder of the Ukrainian-American Academic Association of California. Since 1986 he has been a member of the History and Social Sciences Advisory Committee of Education specializing in East European subject matter at the California State Department. Oliynyk is listed among Ukrainian-American composers in the 1993 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* published by University of Toronto Press and the 1997 *Biographical Reference Directory of the Ukrainian Encyclopedia* published in Ukraine.

List of Works

Compositions for Piano

- *Five Spontaneous Dances for Piano* (1959)
- Five Etudes for Piano (1969)
- Sonata for Piano (1977)
- Piano Fantasy for Left Hand (1982)
- Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (*Ritual*, 1988)
- *Piano Collections for Children*

Compositions for Bandura

- First Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra (*American*, 1987)
- Sonata for Bandura (1988)
- “Ukrainian Christmas” Rondo for Bandura (1990)
- Toccata for Bandura (1991),
- Second Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra (*Romantic*, 1993), dedicated to composer’s wife, bandurist Ola Herasymenko
- *Four Trips to Ukraine*, suite for bandura and piano (1995)
- Third Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra (*Exotic*, 1996)
- Fourth Concerto for Bandura and Orchestra (*Trypillian*, 1997)
- Concerto no. 5 for Bandura, Choir and Orchestra, (*The Millennium*, 2007), dedicated to young people.

Compositions for Voice:

- “Heroic Song,” text by Oleksander Oles’, a winning entry in the 1975 Laryssa Tselevych Competition in New York
- “Ballad about a Chornobyl Village – To Shevchenko” for mezzo soprano, text by Oleksa Hai-Holovko (1991)
- Numerous arrangements of Ukrainian folk songs and Christmas carols for voice with bandura accompaniment