


A Gateway to Ukrainian Choral Music: Guide to the Ukrainian Language and Mykola Lysenko's "Prayer for Ukraine"

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In recent decades, American choirs have been exploring Eastern European choral repertoire with ever greater frequency and ease. Currently, the Rachmaninoff “Bogoroditse Devo” is performed by many high school choirs in its original Church Slavonic language. Many college, community, and professional choirs undertake the entire *Vsenoshchnoe bdenie** (Vespers) from which that movement is extracted. More advanced choirs might take on Arvo Pärt’s setting of “Bogoroditse Devo” with its fast-pattering text or Igor Stravinsky’s even more challenging *Svadebka (Les Noces)* whose Russian words fly by so quickly that even native Slavic singers have difficulty getting all the syllables out in time. Choral music from Ukraine has been largely in the background but is now coming to the fore.

The full-scale war in Ukraine that erupted in late February 2022 prompted many choral directors to take immediate interest in music from Ukraine. Scores with various transliterations of the Ukrainian national anthem and the “Prayer for Ukraine,” for example, circulated quickly around the globe. The present article will provide background information on “Molytva za Ukrainu” [Prayer for Ukraine] and its composer Mykola Lysenko. This information will be preceded by an introduction to the Ukrainian language and a guide to its pronunciation that can then be applied to the “Molytva” [Prayer]. Ukrainian choral music is deeply-rooted—with documented repertoire reaching back to the eleventh or twelfth centuries. It is varied, plentiful, and particularly rich in *a cappella* repertoire. This article provides a point of entry into this vast choral realm.

*[Within the prose of this article, titles of works will be transliterated letter-for-letter, not necessarily reflecting their pronunciation. The pronunciation of words as needed will appear in brackets with IPA.]



“Prayer for Ukraine” Score
<https://tinyurl.com/42beh4w>

The Ukrainian Language

Ukrainian is spoken by approximately 40 million people world-wide¹ and has been documented as a distinct language at least since the twelfth century. Modern literary Ukrainian has existed since at least the eighteenth century.² Although it was banned and suppressed for many years of its history—first under the Russian tsars and later under the Soviet regime—the language has survived against all odds. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukraine’s declaration of independence in 1991, Ukrainian has been the official state language of Ukraine. It is important to note that Ukraine is a highly pluralistic country of many ethnicities, religions, and many languages spoken within its borders. Many Ukrainians, like its current president Volodymyr Zelensky, speak both Russian and Ukrainian fluently, though since the war began in 2014 and more so after 2022, many Ukrainians who previously spoke it have now disavowed Russian. Belarusian, Bulgarian, Crimean Tatar, and Yiddish are also among the languages spoken in Ukraine.

Together with Belarusian and Russian, Ukrainian belongs to the Eastern branch of Slavic languages. These three share a relationship to the ecclesiastical language Church Slavonic, just as modern French, Italian, and Spanish are related to each other as Romance languages and share a relationship to the ecclesiastical language Latin.³ Church Slavonic, Belarussian, Russian, and Ukrainian employ a common Cyrillic alphabet (with a few differing letters), similarly to the way Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish use a common Roman alphabet (with a few differing letters). All three vernacular languages differ from Church Slavonic, and all three differ markedly from each other.

Linguists commonly regard the difference between Russian and Ukrainian as being as great as the difference between Portuguese and Spanish or between Danish and German.⁴ They sound different. Their vocabularies differ substantially. While there are many cognates (for example, the word for water in both languages is *voda*), there are also many words that are unrecognizable between the languages. As just one stark example, Russians greet each other with *zdravstvuyte*, while Ukrainians say *pryvit*. Ukrainians thank each other with *dyakuyu*, while Russians say *spasibo*. Even if some words look the same, they are often pronounced

differently.

When rehearsing choral music with words originally in Cyrillic letters, American choirs typically rely on Western transliterated editions. Unfortunately, inaccuracies large and small often creep into many editions of music originally in Cyrillic. Few publishers have editors adept in Slavic languages on staff, and Ukrainian music is just coming into their consciousness. The Chant du monde edition of Prokofiev’s *Alexander Nevsky*, for example, is rife with errors.⁵ The excellent publisher Musica Russica, the gold standard for Church Slavonic and Russian texts, nevertheless includes some errors in its editions of Ukrainian choral music. Its edition of “Shchedryk” by Leontovych (known as “Carol of the Bells” in English), erroneously transliterates the word *прилетіла* in a Russian manner with the consonant “л” [l] palatalized before the vowel “e” [pri lʲe ˈtʲi la], whereas Ukrainian does not palatalize consonants before the e vowel [pri lɛ ˈtʲi la].⁶ For the non-Slavic singer, distinctions like this one might seem too slight for concern. Consider, however, the difference in English between the word “million” (with softened l followed by the semivowel i or j) and “mill on” (non-palatalized l, no semivowel). The sound and meaning are different. Transliterations can also be confusing since every country and every editor seems to transliterate Cyrillic differently.

On occasion, choral directors might rely on Slavic-speaking singers within their ensembles to guide pronunciation. Every singer of Slavic descent who can read Cyrillic, however, cannot be expected to know how to pronounce all Slavic languages. Russian or Ukrainian-speakers, unless they are devout churchgoers, might not automatically know how to pronounce Church Slavonic, particularly Church Slavonic of earlier centuries. Just as an Italian-speaking singer might not know how to pronounce Latin or Spanish, not every Slavic-speaking person knows how to pronounce Church Slavonic or Ukrainian.

Each shift of diction changes the vibration that singers feel internally and changes the sound they convey externally to the audience. It is important to take care and honor these nuanced differences between Slavic languages, particularly at this moment. During the current war, when Russia’s political leadership claims that Ukraine has no distinct historic culture, it is helpful to exercise sensitivity. Americans have learned to say “Ukraine” instead of

“the Ukraine.” They have learned to call Ukraine’s capital city Київ “Kyiv” [ˈkɪ ɪv]⁷ instead of “Kiev” [ˈki ɛv] or [ˈki ɛf], the former Russian-Soviet pronunciation of the name. American choral directors are now exercising the same attention and specificity to Ukrainian they have accorded every world language.

Singing in Ukrainian: Diction Chart

Many singers who have performed in Ukrainian, non-native as well as native speakers, find it gratifying to sing. Among the internationally renowned singers who have recorded Ukrainian art songs, tenor Benjamin Butterfield writes: “I have felt from the beginning of my time with Ukrainian song that the language is akin to Italian: open, simple, sustained vowels with a clean, cantabile

quality in its poetic line. A true language of song.”⁸ Kseniia Poltsiankina Barrad, a native of Ukraine and coach for productions at the Metropolitan Opera and San Francisco Opera, shared a similar summation during a recent panel discussion regarding Russian and Ukrainian music.⁹ The pronunciation chart below aims to demystify the Cyrillic alphabet and clarify how its letters are pronounced in Ukrainian. The chart also clarifies how these sounds are transliterated in the score of “Prayer for Ukraine” (see page 41 for a QR code and link). Choral directors familiar with Russian might take note of how Ukrainian differs from Russian in obvious and more subtle ways. (Ukrainian vowels, for example, are consistent regardless of syllable stress.) The prose description that follows offers some tips for conveying Ukrainian sounds to American singers.

Diction Chart

The transliteration system in the right column follows a hybrid of two transliteration systems.

- For vowels: the Musica Russica system. Using ĭ for [ɪ] prevents a disambiguation with y, which is here used for the semivowel/consonant [j] at beginnings and ends of some words.
- For consonants: the European system as used by Carus International, for example. This system uses č, š, and ž instead of ch, sh, and zh, respectively. This choice is in part practical: it occupies less space in the score. These letters also signal to American singers not to pronounce them in the habitual English way of ch, sh and zh, but with the tongue pulled a bit further back.

Consonants marked with asterisk can be pronounced in either of two ways: either unpalatalized or palatalized. They become palatalized either when followed by the letter ь (called the soft sign, which “softens” or palatalizes) or when followed by the vowels і [i], є [je], ю [ju], or я [ja]. For a description of palatalized/unpalatalized consonants see page 46.

For choral directors familiar with modern Russian diction, this chart highlights in red the notable differences in Ukrainian from Russian. NB: Ukrainian palatalizes fewer consonants.

Cyrillic Letter	IPA	Transliteration in Score
а	ɑ <i>always</i>	a
б	b <i>always</i>	b
в	v (sometimes f)	v (sometimes f)
г	ɦ (deep-set)	h

Continued on the next page

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Diction Chart (Continued from the previous page)

Cyrillic Letter	IPA	Translit. in Score
г (letter not in Russian)	g	g
д*	d (dental when not palat.)*	d*
е	ɛ <i>always</i>	e
є (letter not in Russian)	jɛ	ye
ж	ʒ (tongue further back)	ž
з*	z*	z*
и	ɪ	ï
і (letter not in Russian)	i	i
ї (letter not in Russian)	ji	yi
й	j	y
к	k	k
л*	l*	l*
м	m	m
н*	n*	n*
о	ɔ <i>always</i>	o
п	p	p
р	r [flipped or a single tap]	r
с*	s*	s*
т*	t* (dental when not palat.)	t* (dental)
у	u	u
ф	f	f
х	x (like German “ch” in ach)	kh
ц*	ts*	ts*
ч	tʃ̞ (tongue further back)	č
ш	ʃ̞ (tongue further back)	š
щ	ʃtʃ̞ (tongue further back)	šč
ь (soft sign)	see page 46	ʹ
ю	ju	yu if initial, otherwise iu
я	ja	ya if initial, otherwise ia

Tips for Choral Directors and Singers

The o [ɔ] vowel

The Ukrainian “o” is typically the most elusive to American singers but is key to Ukrainian pronunciation. The Ukrainian version of open o [ɔ] is as fundamental as [a] is to Romance languages. It is the most common vowel in Ukrainian, and choral vocalises in Ukraine often start with [ɔ]. American singers tend to pronounce it either too closed (approaching the [o] in German) or pronounce it as “aw,” which is too open or spread. It is similar but not exactly the same as the German [ɔ] as in Gott: in Ukrainian, the vowel is a bit more vertical, and the sides of the lips come further inward. The Ukrainian “a” [ɑ] too is more vertical. A useful reference might be this video https://youtu.be/1_IAkXrAiuM produced in March 2022 by the Lviv Opera Chorus singing the hymn “Z namy Boh” [God is with us]. The professional singers exhibit uniformly vertical [ɔ] vowels and rather vertical [ɑ] vowels.

The sounds of [ɔ], [ɑ], and of the Ukrainian language in general, however, are not “dark” or pulled back per se, as many American choral directors might misperceive. Ukrainian choirs avoid nasality (a Ukrainian colleague refers to nasality as the equivalent of nails on a chalkboard), but the vowels are never swallowed. Rather, the [ɔ] vowel is aimed toward the center of the hard palate and sent upward toward the dome of the head. The director of the Kyiv Chamber Choir Mykola Hobdych sometimes instructs his singers to put a *shapochka* [little hat] on top of the vowels;¹⁰ the sound may be more covered, but it is not sent to the back of the throat. The brightness of the Ukrainian choral sound comes from sending energy upward and through the eyes rather than smiling or spreading vowels. It might also come from the typically high cheek bones of Ukrainian faces. The warmth of the Ukrainian choral tone perhaps comes from the relaxation of the jaw and from the feeling that the sound emerges from deep within.

Ukrainian Vowels: What You See is What You Pronounce

In Ukrainian, vowels do not change depending on their location in stressed or unstressed syllables.¹¹ This differs from Russian, where the vowels in unaccented

syllables are modified or “reduced.” The process of vowel reduction in Russian is called “akanye” for the unaccented vowel “o” changing toward “a” and is called “ikanye” for the vowels “a” or “e” changing toward “i.” A prime example of “akanye” is the word for milk, молоко; in Russian, the unaccented o vowels change in pronunciation to something approximating [mɫ la 'ko]. An example of “ikanye” is the composer Chaikovsky’s name, which current residents of Moscow might pronounce something close to “Cheekovsky.” As strange as this phenomenon might seem at first brush, Americans often treat vowels similarly in English. For example, in the word “locomotion,” Americans typically alter the unstressed “o” vowels to [lo ka 'moʃʌn]. Regardless, Ukrainians do not “reduce” their vowels. When seeking milk, they ask for [mɔ lɔ 'ko].

Words ending in [ɪ] or combining [ɪ] + [i]

Many words in Ukrainian end with и, pronounced as the open vowel [ɪ]. The word at the end of the first line of “Prayer for Ukraine” is храни [xra-'nɪ]. This never happens in English except perhaps in certain regions of the American South, where the final vowel of “Kentucky,” for example, is pronounced with an open [ɪ] instead of [i] sound. American choral directors should take care that their singers not over-open [ɪ] at ends of words to [ɛ].

The combination of [ɪ] + [i] that occurs in words such as the name of the Ukraine’s capital city, Київ (Kyiv) can be difficult for Americans to pronounce since it almost never occurs in English. An example of [ɪ] + [i] that might help singers pronounce Kyiv or other Ukrainian words with that vowel combination is “Kentucky evening” spoken with a Southern accent. Isolating the middle syllables of that pair of words, Americans can find the name of Ukraine’s capital city: “Kentu-[kɪ ɪv]-nin. Choral directors might include an exercise in their warm-ups to isolate these vowels, perhaps a progression from [i] to [ɪ] to [ɛ], making sure their singers feel the distinct shifts and not over-open the [ɪ].

Note: in current conversational Ukrainian, the [ɪ] is somewhat different from the American [ɪ], pronounced with a concave back of the tongue. Particularly in Central and Eastern Ukraine, where Russian had been a predominant language and influenced the vocabulary

and pronunciation considerably, this vowel differs from the standard [ɪ], and verges on the Russian vowel ы [ɨ], called yeri.

Palatalized Consonants

In Ukrainian, the consonants d, t, l, n, ts, s, and z can be pronounced plainly as written or can be “palatalized.” Palatalization means that the consonant becomes softened: the middle of the tongue is raised to the hard palate during the articulation of the consonant, and it is indicated in IPA with a small j: [dʲ], [tʲ], [lʲ], [nʲ], [sʲ], [tsʲ], and [zʲ].¹² It can be useful to ask the singers to imagine they are pronouncing the consonant while trying to loosen peanut butter from the middle of their hard palate. Syllable combinations that might help American singers find the palatalized consonants are (pronounced with tongue brushing the middle of the hard palate): led you, let you, million, niño, miss you, it’s you, or please you (or switching to [ɑ], led ya, let ya, etc). Of these, the one that is typically the most difficult for American singers is the soft “l.” Singers might find this sound by starting the “l” with the tongue in center of the hard palate and letting it slide slowly in a relaxed/goosey way toward the front.

These seven consonants are palatalized when followed by the letter “ь” called the *miakiy znak*, or soft sign. One example of an “l” palatalized by the soft sign is found in the name of the city in Western Ukraine Львів, pronounced with a soft “l.” These consonants can also become palatalized if they are followed by the Ukrainian vowels і [i], я [ja], є [je], or ю [ju].

It can take time for many American singers to sense that a palatalized consonant is one sound. Singers might be reminded that in the Spanish word niño, the ñ is a single sound [ɲ] or [ni-ɲo] not two [n j] or [nin jo]. Similarly, it takes time for singers to erase the glide part of the vowels ja, je, ju once the consonant is palatalized. It is useful to think of the initial “j” component of the Ukrainian vowels ja, je, ju (or as written in the Lysenko score, the “i” component of ia, ie, iu) as an agent for change that loses its own sound after it has palatalized the consonant. For example, in the word люд, spelled “liud” in m. 23 of “Prayer for Ukraine,” the “i” palatalizes the “l,” and the softened consonant then proceeds immediately to [u] with no intermediary semi-vowel sound: [lʲud], not [lʲi ud].¹³ It can help to

tell singers to “get to the main vowel!” Within the score of “Song for Ukraine,” there are relatively few palatalized consonants, only those followed by “i” in voli, osini, znannia, liubovi, fsi, liud, voliu, doliu, lita.

Diphthongs/Glides

American singers are used to singing diphthongs in words like “buy” [a:i] “bay” [e:i], or “boy” [ɔ:i] and delaying the second vowel sound until the last split second. These three diphthongs occur in Ukrainian as well, but it is perhaps more useful to think of the second vowel as a glide: [aj], [ej], [ɔj]. Another diphthong/glide common to Ukrainian is [uj], and American singers often struggle with this at first encounter. For example, they typically need to be reminded to prolong the [u] vowel and delay the glide [j] in the second syllable of the word па-дуй-ся [pa duj sʲa] that appears toward the beginning of Roman Hurko’s Ukrainian “Bohoroditse Divo”¹⁴ or Rachmaninoff’s “Bogoroditse Devo.” They also need some time to get used to words ending with [ɪj]. This common ending for Ukrainian words¹⁵ appears in the first measures of “Prayer for Ukraine” in the words Великий/Velikiy, and Єдиний/Yediniy. It is helpful to remind singers to allow their tongue to remain flat longer than they are accustomed before letting the tongue rise for the final glide. It is also important to be sure the singers don’t over-open the [ɪ] vowel to [ɛ].

Devoicing Consonants

Standard Ukrainian, particularly in singing, does not devoice final consonants. (This differs from Russian, where for example the name Рахманинов/Rakhmaninov is pronounced with an “ff” at the end). In sung Ukrainian, the consonant “в” [v] can be devoiced when it precedes an unvoiced consonant. For example, the “в” [v] in the words “в чистий” (m. 13) and “всі” (m. 21) the “в” [v] is devoiced, yielding “fkrayinu,” “f čistiy,” and “fsi.” When it follows an unvoiced consonant, it can be somewhat devoiced as well as in “світ” (m. 5) and “світлом” (m. 9). Many American singers find it easier to pronounce “sfitu” and “sfitlom.”¹⁶

When not devoiced (not adjacent to another unvoiced consonant), singers should let the [v] vibrate strongly, as in the words “Velikiy” (m. 1), “voli” (m. 5), “liubovi” (m. 13), and “zverny” (m. 23). In sung Ukrainian, final “v” is sometimes, though rarely, changed to [w].

The z [ɦ] consonant

There is some disagreement among linguists as to the phonetic nature of the Ukrainian *r* [ɦ]. It is very similar, but not identical to the American [h]. Some linguists describe [ɦ] as the voiced variant of [x]: much as [g] is the voiced version of [k]. The letter *r* can vary in sound depending on its placement in a word. In the initial position, as in the word *Господь* [ɦɔs pɔdʲ] (meaning the Lord), the sensation comes from a deeper place than the American [h], as if originating from the solar plexus. In the final position, as in the word “Boh,” which means God, the *h* can approach the [x] sound in the German *Nacht* or *Bach*. In “Prayer for Ukraine,” the letter appears only once, in mm. 31-32: “mnohaya,” pronounced as [ɦ].

The uʲ consonant [ʃtʲ] and multiple consonants

The consonant *ш*, which appears in m. 21 and m. 29, in and of itself is made up of two separate sounds *ʃ* and *tʲ*, each with the tongue pulled a bit further back than in English. The composite is then [ʃtʲ]. Singers might find this consonant by saying “fresh cheese” with tongue back somewhat. In singing, it can be useful to place the *ʃ* ahead of the beat and *tʲ* on the beat.

Non-Slavic singers often have difficulty fitting in consonants clusters that might occur in the space of one or two words. At the end of mm. 23–24, for example, the combination “naš zverni” is challenging. One solution is to apportion the *š* ahead of the beat and *zv* on the beat. Another solution is to add a slight schwa between the *š* and *z*. Double consonants should be sustained and enjoyed as the double consonants in Italian: for example in the word “prominniam” (m. 6).

Mykola Lysenko and His “Prayer for Ukraine”

On February 26, 2022, a few days after Russia’s explosive invasion of Ukraine, *Saturday Night Live* opened with the New York City choir *Dumka*, an ensemble of Ukrainian and Ukrainian-American singers, performing “Prayer for Ukraine.” A song composed in 1885, it expresses a simple prayer for protection, guidance, and freedom. It exemplifies the strong belief among Ukrainians in the power of song and prayer.

It is impossible to document or quantify just how

strong and deep this sentiment is. This author grew up in the 1960s and 70s in a community of Ukrainian immigrants, and my family sang not only for amusement but for sustenance. My home church choir sang hymns every Sunday that prayed for the liberation of Ukraine, which was then under Soviet rule. In current history, many of President Volodymyr Zelensky’s speeches have invoked imagery related to music and prayer. For example, in his April 2022 speech for the Grammy Awards, he implored, “fill the silence with your music.” Yaroslav (“Slava”) Vakarchuk, the lead singer of Ukraine’s most popular rock band, Okean Elzy, requested to fight in the army at the start of the war, but the government asked him to serve his country by singing for the population—in bomb shelters, on battlefields, amid the rubble—instead.¹⁷

The composer of “Prayer for Ukraine,” Mykola Lysenko (1841–1912) is regarded as the father of Ukrainian music.¹⁸ His life coincided with the era of music history we associate with nationalism—the era of Dvořák, Grieg, Sibelius. In his early years, Lysenko studied piano and composition in Kyiv and at the Leipzig and St. Petersburg conservatories. Throughout his life, Lysenko also collected thousands of Ukrainian village songs.¹⁹ Like his Central and Western European contemporaries, Lysenko quoted native songs and consciously used folk harmonies in his music. For Lysenko, however, quoting folk melodies was more than an act of national pride; it was an effort of sheer cultural survival. In Ukraine at this time, expressions of nationalism were regarded by the Russian Empire as a dangerous, illegal offense.

Ukrainians had been pejoratively called “maloros” [little Russians]²⁰ since the seventeenth century²¹ and lived as serfs under the Russian tsars. In 1861, Tsar Alexander II issued a proclamation of emancipation of the serfs (two years before the American Emancipation Proclamation), yet suppression of Ukrainian culture continued. The Russian Imperial leadership wanted to keep Ukrainians and Ukrainian culture “little.”

Assertions of the Ukrainian language or music in Lysenko’s day were cause for punishment.²² In 1876, the tsar signed a decree that outlawed “the printing of books and musical texts in Ukrainian, the staging of Ukrainian plays,” etc.²³ In other words, poets were not allowed to publish poems in Ukrainian, and com-

posers were not allowed to publish vocal music with Ukrainian lyrics. A Russian official in Kyiv wrote in 1880 that he chose to censor Lysenko's music "foremost on the fact that he is a Maloros composer and a Maloros patriot."²⁴ Lysenko persevered in composing songs to Ukrainian words and circumvented laws by publishing many of his songs in Germany that then filtered their way back through western Ukraine. He was also an avid choral director and disseminated his music through his own rehearsals and performances. These too were perceived as subversive by the Russian imperial government. The government police in Kyiv proposed in 1887 "either to forbid the existence of Lysenko's choir altogether or... to force Lysenko to sign an agreement not to include students... and thereby weaken the existence of the choir."²⁵

It was within this context that Lysenko composed his "Prayer." A few months after it was initially published in western Ukraine, "Prayer for Ukraine" itself was marked "unconditionally prohibited," banned from publication by the Russian authorities.²⁶ The song originated as a poem by a Ukrainian activist, Oleksandr Konysky (1836–1900), who penned it in early 1885 at the request of a young seminarian seeking to create an anthology of poems and songs for Ukrainian youth.²⁷ Thus, the poem refers to children—the third line of the poem initially read «нас дітей, просвіти» or "nas ditey prosviti" [enlighten us children]. Within a few months, Lysenko set the poem to music, initially for two voice parts SA. One of his two autograph manuscripts of the piece bears the title «ДІТЯЧИЙ ГИМН» [sic], or *Dy-tiachyi Hymn* [Children's Hymn].²⁸ A colleague wrote a letter to Lysenko, however, suggesting that the song was too difficult for children, and it is perhaps for this reason that the first published version was titled: "Prayer. Hymn, for Women's Voices."²⁹ Lysenko eventually arranged the "Prayer" for mixed chorus (as evident in his second autograph score), as did several other composers in due time. Published or not, the song spread far and wide, like wildfire.³⁰ "Prayer for Ukraine" came to life, survived, and has been known for over a hundred years as a spiritual anthem for Ukraine. Choirs have sung it in countless church services, community gatherings, and political rallies.

The version of "Prayer for Ukraine" shared in this article was arranged by Oleksandr Koshyts in 1910.³¹

Koshyts (1875–1944)—better known in America as Alexander Koshetz—gained renown particularly for leading the Ukrainian National Choir on a global tour in the 1920s. Sent by the Ukrainian government as cultural ambassadors during its brief period of independence, he and his choir earned rave reviews³² and left a lasting impression. Among those impressions was "Shchedryk" by Mykola Leontovych—now known as the ubiquitous "Carol of the Bells" in its translation by the Ukrainian-American educator Peter Wilhousky.³³ Koshetz's arrangement of Lysenko's "Prayer" has been the most performed version.

The lyrics of "Prayer for Ukraine" are unusual and significant in their plea for a guiding light and education.³⁴ The poem, as well as the original version of the song, may seem intended exclusively for school children. Yet, many Ukrainian poems instruct their readers to seek education. A poem by the nineteenth-century poet Taras Shevchenko begins "Learn, my brothers. Think. Read." Along similar lines, a poem by the dissident poet Vasyl Symonenko of the 1960s, during the Soviet era, exhorted Ukrainians to "open their minds."³⁵ Ukrainian poets, composers, and political leaders protested the subjugation of their people and knew that their oppressors feared the power of education. Notably, Lysenko's song urges not vengeance or retribution but rather prays for divine illumination as well as freedom.

The initial melodic motive of Lysenko's song seems to quote the introductory measures of an aria "Vladyko neba i zemli" [O Lord of Heaven and Earth] from an opera that Lysenko would have known.³⁶ That aria too is a prayer on behalf of Ukraine and its people. Koshetz's arrangement starts simply with folk-like parallel thirds in the sopranos and altos, lifted directly from Lysenko's original. At the repeat of the opening melody in m. 17, Koshetz changes the harmonization to feature parallel motion in the soprano and bass, allowing different, perhaps more poignant voicing. In mm. 21–22, Koshetz allows the tenors to sweetly soar in their high range at the words "laski, ščedroti," meaning grace and generosity. The final words of the prayer are "mnohaya lita" [many years]. They appear within the phrase asking God to grant Ukraine many years of good fortune. The words "mnohaya lita" are common to many Ukrainian well-wishes and celebratory songs.

The song, thus, ends not only with the alto, tenor, and bass in rising lines and higher tessitura but also in a spirit of celebration and optimism. (While it is tempting to add a lower bass octave at the final cadence, the ascending bass line underscores spiritual uplift.)


This “Prayer for Ukraine” from over a hundred years ago reminds us that Ukraine has struggled against adversity not just today but for centuries. It reminds us of the miracle of the Ukrainian language and the Ukrainian people to survive against all odds. The song’s words are those of a peace-loving people. This is a prayer not for revenge nor for military domination but for protection, for a light to guide the way. May Ukraine be free. May it shine on. May it live many years.

Editor’s Note: To view a link to the full score of “Prayer for Ukraine,” visit acda.org/choraljournal and choose the May 2023 issue. Or, scan the QR code on page 41.

Conclusion

Of course, Lysenko’s “Prayer for Ukraine” is only one point of entry into Ukrainian choral repertoire. Since February 2022, many American choirs have begun to explore Ukrainian music with increasing interest and enthusiasm. As just three examples: the Cathedral Choir of St. Joseph in Hartford, CT, led a fund-raising event in early April 2022 that included the traditional chant “Z namy Boh” [God is with us] and works by Dmitry³⁷ Bortniansky and Dmytro Kotko. This author led a concert in June, “Echoes from Ukraine,” as part of the Berkeley Festival of Early Music that featured ancient choral music sung by Ensemble Cherubim interspersed with modern Ukrainian poetry recited by San Francisco Bay Area actors. The Seattle-based ensemble Choral Arts Northwest led by Dr. Timothy Westerhaus performed an all-Ukrainian concert “Songs of Freedom: Music from Ukraine” in November 2022 featuring an artist of the traditional Ukrainian folk instrument, the bandura. That concert opened with Lysenko’s “Prayer for Ukraine,” included both traditional and more modern pieces such as “Slava” by Lesia Dychko and “Tsvite teren” by Hanna Havrylets, and closed with the contemporary “Prayer for Ukraine” by Valentyn Sylvestrov. In addition, in the fall of 2022, ACDA commissioned Ukrainian composer Iryna Alek-

siychuk to write a piece for the 2023 National Conference. “Trisagion” was premiered in Cincinnati, Ohio, by the SSAA Honor Choir, conducted by Pearl Shangkuan.

The Ukrainian language and its choral music are highly gratifying to sing. Below are some further resources for choral directors and singers interested in joining the exploration. 

Additional Resources

“Prayer for Ukraine” Audio References

Any transliteration, or any alphabet for that matter, can only approximate the sound of a language. For reference to the pronunciation of “Prayer for Ukraine,” choral directors might contact the author for a diction audio file or consult the following video clips.

- Solo tenor Mykhailo Khoma with footage of the interior of the eleventh-century Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kyiv and nearby landscape
https://youtu.be/9ICZ_LCkKDY
- Adult choir from Rivne singing the Koshetz version (with a few variants of lyrics). This video was recorded in March 2022, several days after a radio tower in Rivne was bombed.
<https://youtu.be/QQFzIu0RjaE>
- Children’s chorus singing the melody in unison. (Warning: the video includes footage—some violent—from the protests that took place during Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity in 2014).
<https://youtu.be/Gskkg4dcNBw>

Representative Ukrainian Choral Composers

When searching for scores and recordings of Ukrainian works, please note that composer names may appear under various transliterations and spellings. The list below shows the internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine transliteration followed by other the common transliterations used in choral scores.

A Gateway To Ukrainian Choral Music

Late Seventeenth to Early Nineteenth Century

Микола Дилетський (ca. 1650—1723)
Mykola Dyletsky, Diletsky, Dylets'kyi

Максим Березовський (1745–77)
Maksym/Maxim Berezovsky, Berezovs'kyi

Дмитро Борзнянський (1751–1825)
Dmytro/Dmitry Bortniansky, Bortnians'kyi

Артем Ведель (1767–1808)
Artem Vedel, Artemy Vedel, Artemii Vedel'

Mid Nineteenth-Century to Early Twentieth-Century

Михайло Вербицький (1815-70)
Mikhailo Verbytsky/Verbyts'kyi

Микола Лисенко (1842 -1912)
Mykola Lysenko

Олександр Кошиць (1875 -1944)
Oleksander Koshyts, Alexander Koshetz

Микола Леонтович (1877-1921)
Mykola Leontovych

Кирило Стеценко (1882-1922)
Kurylo Stetsenko

Mid Twentieth Century

Василь Барвінський (1888-1963)
Vasyl Barvinsky, Vasyl' Barvins'kyi

Борис Лятошинський (1894-1968)
Borys Liatoshynsky, Borys Liatoshynskyi

Late Twentieth to Early Twenty-First Centuries

Валентин Сильвестров (b. 1937)
Valentyn Sylvestrov, Valentin Silvestrov

Леся Дичко (b. 1939)
Lesia Dychko

Ганна Гаврилець (1958-2022)
Hanna Havrylets

Святослав Луньов (b. 1964)
Sviatoslav Lunyov, Sviatoslav Lun'ov

Ірина Алексійчук (b. 1967)
Iryna Aleksiychuk

Links for Finding Scores

- Ukrainian Scores Initiative Group
<http://www.ukrainianlive.org/>
- Ensemble Dudaryk online library
<http://www.library.dudaryk.ua/en/compositions>
- Musica Russica <http://www.musicarussica.com> has several Christmas carols by Ukrainian composers
- Choral directors might also contact Ukrainian choirs and Ukrainian diaspora choirs as well as composers like Aleksiychuk, Lunyov, and Sylvestrov through their websites.
- This author has made editions of various Ukrainian pieces, including “Shchedryk” (Carol of the Bells). Half of the proceeds are donated to Ukrainian charities.
<https://marikakuzmamusician.com>

Sample List of Choral Ensembles in Ukraine and Their Specialities³⁸

Choral culture is very rich and abundant in Ukraine. This is a mere fraction of chorus names. Many Ukrainian choirs had to disband due to the war but are re-assembling now as refugees have been returning to their home cities. American choral directors might like to consult their audio recordings and video clips online.

Alter Ratio— contemporary vocal ensemble in Kyiv
<https://alter-ratio.com.ua>

Dakha Brakha— “ethno chaos band,” based in Kyiv
<https://www.dakhabrakha.com.ua>

Drevo — Folk vocal ensemble, based in Kyiv
<https://drevo.etnoua.info>

Dudaryk Men and Boy's Choir— located in Lviv
<http://dudaryk.ua>

Dumka Cappella Ukraine³⁹— located in Kyiv
<http://www.dumkacappella.com.ua/en>

Ensemble Leopolis— early music ensemble in Lviv
<https://acappella-leopolis.com/en>

Kyiv Chamber Choir — located in Kyiv
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyiv_Chamber_Choir

Shchedryk Children's Choir — located in Kyiv
<https://shchedryk.com.ua/about-en>

Veryovka — Folk dance and vocal ensemble, in Kyiv
<https://veryovka.com/en/>

NOTES

¹ Statistics vary. One tally (taken in 2016) estimated 34 million worldwide. David Eberhard, Gary Simons, and Charles Fenning eds., *2022 Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-Fifth Edition. Dallas, Tx: SIL International. Another study estimated 45 million “Ukrainisch,” in *Forschungsverbund Ost- und Südosteuropa*, December 3, 2018. Both studies included individuals who speak Ukrainian as a primary language, a secondary language, or are bilingual.

² “Ukrainian language” and “Standard Ukrainian” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*. Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies.

³ The linguistic comments have been verified with Professor Andriy Danylenko, professor of Russian and Slavic linguistics in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures at Pace University. For more information, see his article “Ukrainian” in the Brill *Encyclopedia of Slavic Languages and Linguistics Online*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In Movement IV, for example, it transliterates the monosyllabic “Встань” as “Vskagni” when it should be “vstañ” (or possibly “fstañ.”) The “k” and “i” in that transliteration

are inexplicable.

⁶ In its title page, the Musica Russica edition also erroneously transliterates жінка in a Russian manner as “zhinka” with an open [ɪ] (as in the word “shin”) instead of closed vowel [i] in the Ukrainian “zhinka” (as in the word sheen).

⁷ More precisely, Ukrainians pronounce the name Київ [kɪjiv].

⁸ Mr. Butterfield is featured on a recording of artsongs by the Ukrainian composer Kyrylo Stetsenko as part of the Ukrainian Artsong Project (<https://ukrainianartsong.art>) based in Toronto. This quote comes from email correspondence on August 13, 2022.

⁹ Panel discussion sponsored by the San Francisco on October 7, 2022: *The Intersection of Art and Politics: Tchaikovsky On-stage Amidst Russia's War*.

¹⁰ Personal rehearsal observation, Kyiv Chamber Choir under Hobdych in the late 1990s in Kyiv.

¹¹ In conversational speech and in some regional accents, vowels are sometimes modified or reduced depending on syllabic stress.

¹² The palatalized n can also be represented by ñ or [ɲ]. Some linguists also list p [ɸ] and ж [ʒ] as consonants that can be palatalized. In singing, the subtle palatalization of these consonants seems too negligible for concern. For choral directors familiar with Russian: in Ukrainian, the palatalization of t and d is more in the middle of the palate than in Russian.

¹³ The following analogy with French *might* help some choral directors and singers. In French, when the consonant “n” (or “m”) follows a vowel, it nasalizes the vowel but then loses all its power. The French word *bon* is pronounced [bɔ̃] not [bɔn]. In Ukrainian, the “i” part of the vowels ia, ie, iu that follows these six consonants palatalizes the previous consonant but then is not pronounced.

¹⁴ This beautiful, rather simple piece is available from the publisher Musica Russica under Roman Hurko, “Hail Mother of God” or “Bohoroditse Divo.”

¹⁵ It is the typical ending for masculine adjectives.

¹⁶ Without devoicing the “v,” non-Ukrainian singers tend to voice the “s” to pronounce the word “zvitu.”

¹⁷ Featured on BBC news, see <https://bbc.in/3RvBwxr>.

¹⁸ This title is commonly repeated in histories of Ukrainian music. Taras Filenko and Tamara Bulat, *The World of Mykola Lysenko: ethnic identity, music, and politics in nineteenth and early twentieth century Ukraine* (Edmonton: Ukrainian

Millennium Foundation, 2001), p. 121.

¹⁹ Filenko, p. 134.

²⁰ For example, Chaikovsky's Symphony No. 2 is subtitled "Little Russian Symphony" because it includes Ukrainian melodies. (Chaikovsky himself was of Ukrainian descent, but his family assimilated into Russian society).

²¹ Tsarina Catherine II officially implemented the serf system in 1783.

²² "Dokumenty pro zaboronu Ukraïnskoï movy" [Documents on the prohibition of the Ukrainian Language] in *Rid i Vira*, May 10, 2016. This article provides a chronology of Russian laws enacted to suppress or prohibit the language, century by century.

²³ Filenko, p. 118.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 137.

²⁵ Filenko quoting a letter from 1887 now in the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg. Filenko, pp. 162 and 391.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 418.

²⁷ According to Filenko, who possesses copies of correspondence related to the "Prayer," this seminarian was Bohdar (or perhaps Bohdan) Kyrchiv. Conversation with Filenko, August 16, 2022.

²⁸ The word "дятяччий" is mis-spelled with a double ч. Both manuscripts are found in the Lysenko House-Museum in Kyiv.

²⁹ The letter was from the activist and educator Volodymyr Shukhevych. Conversation with Filenko, August 16, 2022. The first edition as published in 1885 shows the full title: Молитва. Гімнъ, на жъночи голоси. Слова О. Я. Кониського, музика Миколы Лисенка, — Львовъ., 1885, Лит[ографія] П. Пришляка, 4 с. [Prayer. Hymn, for women's voices. Words by O. YA. Konysky, music by Mykola Lysenko, Lviv, 1885, Lithograph P. Pryshliak, p. 4.

³⁰ The poet Konysky personally wrote a letter to Shukhevich and colleague composers in March of 1885 entreating them to share the song with villages and schools.

³¹ V. Kuzyk, "Molytva Bozhe velykyi, yedynyi [Prayer, Great and only God]" in Skrypnyk, *Ukrains'ka muzychna en-tsyklopediia* [Ukrainian Music Encyclopedia] (Kyiv: Rylsky Institute of Art Studies, Folklore and Ethnology), p. 460. Date also verified by Filenko in phone conversation.

³² See Tina Peresun'ko, [The Cultural diplomacy of Symon Petliura: Shchedryk against the Russian world. The Mission of the Oleksander Koshetz Choir (1919–1924)]

(Kyiv: ArtEk, 2019).

³³ See Lydia Tomkiw, "Toll of the Bells: the forgotten history of nationalism, oppression, and murder behind a Christmas Classic," *Slate Magazine*, Dec. 19, 2019.

³⁴ The poem and song also might be perceived from the perspective that all are considered the "children of God."

³⁵ From his poem «Люди—прекрасні» or "Liudy —prekrasni" [People—are spectacular]. He writes this in a more poetic metaphor "Розчиняйте серця і чоло" [Open your hearts and forehead]."

³⁶ This aria with chorus comes from the celebrated Ukrainian opera by Semen Hulak-Artemovskyy, *Zaporozhets za Dunayem* [Cossack beyond the Danube]. Filenko states that Lysenko had heard the opera as early as the 1860s. Filenko, p. 42. The aria is also known in a version with secularized lyrics "Blazhenny den, blazhenny chas" [Blessed day, blessed time] promoted during the Soviet era.

³⁷ Ukrainians refer to him as Dmytro, his original name. Dmytry is the name that appears in his autograph manuscripts.

³⁸ This list focuses on ensembles within Ukraine itself and does not include the abundance of diaspora choirs around the globe.

³⁹ This professional choir is distinct from the choir of the same name in New York.