

# Preserving Ukrainian Canadian Heritage Music

In the 1890's and early 1900's, many European immigrants made the long and arduous journey to the western Canadian prairies. They came with the promise of 160 acres of homestead land, and dreams for a better future for themselves and their children.



They also came for freedom – freedom from oppression; freedom from conscription and conflict; freedom to make their own decisions; freedom to worship; and freedom practice their traditional Ukrainian culture as they pleased! In the early years, life for these pioneers was difficult and challenging. They endured and overcame many hardships and obstacles. They eventually succeeded in establishing themselves in the new land and contributed significantly to the building of Canada.

Music was an important and integral part of the Ukrainian culture for our Canadian pioneers and for those of us who grew up in that milieu. In addition to the Divine Liturgy and other church services music, there were annual Christmas carols, concerts, Ukrainian weddings, and plenty of sing-alongs on many an occasion. This music is a strong link to our Ukrainian heritage, history, and culture.

I thought there should be websites (other than *YouTube*) where I could find and listen to the Ukrainian music that I enjoyed in years past. However, it appears that our historic Ukrainian music, created, played, and sung by hundreds (or perhaps thousands) of choirs, bands, performers, and musicians, has yet to make it to the Internet in any significant way. Most of this music remains on old cassette tapes, LPs and CDs that are stored away in institutions and private home collections.

It is important to recognize that the various media used to record and play this music is rapidly becoming obsolete. Players for cassette tapes, LPs and CDs are disappearing and no longer easily available. They are being replaced by memory sticks and online digital files. Most current computers do not have CD drives, and standalone CD players are rare.

Some 50 to 100 years in the future, none of this media will be playable. However, once music is digitized, it will be available to whatever technology exists at that time. Therefore, while we have the technology now, we must digitize this music to ensure its accessibility in the future. If we do nothing, the beautiful music that the early Ukrainian-Canadian settlers created, played, and lived by, will be lost forever!

I felt obliged to do my little bit to digitize and preserve heritage Ukrainian music. Using my own LP collection, and with LPs, cassettes and CDs provided by friends, I was able to digitize music using the technology and software I already had available. Digitizing alone was not sufficient. The music had to be made shareable so that I and others could listen to it on our mobile phones, iPads and laptop computers.

Therefore, I created a *Music Library* on my new *Pioneer Churches on the Prairies* website. This *Music Library* consists of web pages with a music player so you can listen to the tracks on each album. Also, each web page has as much information as was available from the album, cassette or CD covers. As of this writing, there are over 80 digitized albums in the *Music Library* categorized by *Sacred*, *Festive*, *Traditional* and *Ukrainian bands*.

Although digitizing and posting the music on the website was a time-consuming and complex process, I found it an enjoyable, emotional, and educational experience. Such diversity in the music. So talented performers and artists. I had the pleasure of listening, and working with, beautiful music. Also, from the

information provided on the covers and/or inserts, I learned a great deal about the history, purpose, and role of music in Ukrainian culture and the lives of early settlers.

I wanted to share some of the music and stories that I found most interesting and fascinating while doing this project.

## Freedom to Sing

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and its attempt to destroy Ukrainian culture is nothing new. The story of the *Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus* is a reminder that this has been going on for a long time.

The history of the *Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus* can be traced directly to the 12th Archeological Congress in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in 1902. The question of forming a professional orchestra of bandurists was first presented by Hnat Khotkevych, a prominent writer, ethnographer, and composer. He provided stimulus for a renewed interest and remarkable growth in the bandura's popularity at the beginning of the 20th century

The first professional bandurist chorus was formed in Kyiv in 1918 during the height of the country's brief period of independence. Under the direction of bandura virtuoso Vasyl Yemetz, the first chorus had 15 members. Another such chorus, in Poltava, Ukraine, was formed in 1925 under the direction of Volodymyr Kabachok.



The Chorus' history rapidly evolved into a turbulent one. Under Joseph Stalin's rule, artists and intellectuals were arrested, exiled, or executed in an attempt to eradicate every remnant of Ukrainian culture. Hnat Khotkevych was executed in 1938 in Kharkiv. His compositions were banned throughout the Soviet Union. Many conductors, chorus members, and blind bandurists-minstrels were also accused of enticing the populace to nationalism, and were executed. In 1935, the remaining members were forced to reorganize into the State Bandurist Chorus of the Ukrainian SSR.

In the years that followed, the Chorus was exploited and persecuted by both the Soviets and the Nazis. It was not until 1949, that through the assistance of the allied forces, many of the Chorus' members immigrated from refugee camps to the United States. Fortunately, the *Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of North America* was reborn. With members from Canada and the United States, the Chorus is alive and well and continues its performances and recording of music.

To listen to their *Golden Echoes of Kyiv*, go to:

<https://pioneerchurches.ca/bandurist>

## Kobzar

Paul Konoplenko-Zaporozetz was born in 1890 in Kherson Province, Ukraine. He completed his musical academy on violin from Professor Karbulka, and School of Music on guitar in Odessa from Italian Spetsi. In 1902, Mr. Konoplenko had the privilege of meeting the only Kobzar with a "kobza", Danylo Potapenko, the last of the Zaporozian Kozaks. He presented Mr. Konoplenko with a kobza which then was over 150 years old.

It was from Potapenko that Mr. Konoplenko acquired the ability of playing the kobza. Over many years, he mastered the technique of playing the beautiful instrument, and at the same time, improved the kobza itself.



In 1910, at the Musical Festival in Odessa, Mr. Konoplenko achieved fame as a soloist-virtuoso. He was awarded a gold medal for his performance.

Before the first World War, Mr. Konoplenko put on concerts for many cultural organizations and in various operatic theatres in Ukraine, Crimea and Caucasia. Until the second World War, he periodically presented concerts in Europe. After the war, during a period of seven years, he presented his famous concerts in Canada. These were highly recognized by many cultural societies and authoritative musicians. As a soloist, Mr. Konoplenko played his beloved kobza for over 50 years in the style of "Puteado,". He did not use a pick. By means of special techniques in tonal vibrations, he creates an impression of more than one instrument.

Mr. Konoplenko lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba and died there in 1982.

His album – *The Kobza: Songs and Tunes* – was recorded in 1961. I find it very gratifying to be able to listen to a musician, who won a gold medal for his performance in 1910, play the kobza.

To listen to this album and find out more about the kobza and Paul Konoplenko, go to:

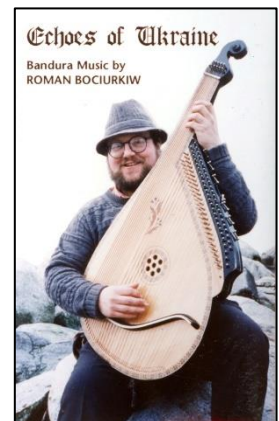
<https://pioneerchurches.ca/konoplenko>

## The Minstrel

Roman Bociurkiw was born in Edmonton in 1960. Roman planned to become a Ukrainian Catholic priest. After three years of minor seminary at St Vladimir's College in Manitoba, he continued his religious studies elsewhere. But he was uncomfortable with church policies against married priests, and its exclusion of women. He fancied his busking to be a kind of ministry. Indeed, we often heard from people who said his music brought them comfort and strength.

A unique Canadian busker, Roman Bociurkiw was a fixture on Vancouver streets in the 1980s and 1990s. There, Roman gently plucked the strings of his bandura, an ancient Ukrainian string instrument, attracting listeners from a cross-section of society. The other worldly strains of his music could make the most hurried commuter or distracted tourist stop and absorb its luminous, light-filled sounds.

Roman saw himself as a travelling musician in the tradition of the Ukrainian kobzar, who, in the pre-modern era, journeyed the steppes of Ukraine bringing news, poetry and music to the common person. He was a frequent visitor at Canada's fringe festivals and on Main Street Canada, performing his unique blend of Ukrainian folk songs and mainstream pop music.



Roman died in 2002 at the age of 42 of natural causes. To listen to his music album, *Echoes of Ukraine*, go to:

<https://pioneerchurches.ca/bociurkiw>

## St. John's Cathedral

**St.** John's Ukrainian Orthodox Cathedral in Edmonton is celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year (1923 – 2023). I was able to obtain an LP album that the St. John's choir recorded in 1973 for their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I digitized and remastered this 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Liturgy. Several of the hymns were used as background music for a centenary video created to celebrate the event. Hopefully, when the Cathedral celebrates its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it will be able to listen to this Liturgy recorded 100 years prior.



To listen to this St. John's Cathedral music album, go to:  
<https://pioneerchurches.ca/st-john>

To view the St. John's Cathedral Centennial video, go to:  
<https://pioneerchurches.ca/st-john-video>

## References and Other Resources

Here are links to related sources of information.

Ukrainian Musicians Association – <https://www.ukrainianmusiciansassociation.org/>

Ukrainian Canadian Zabava Bands – <http://www.ukr-can-zabavabands.ca/>

Internet Archive – (Search for Ukrainian Music) – <https://archive.org>

WikiSpiv – The Ukrainian diaspora music project – <https://www.wikispiv.com>

Roman Bociurkiw – [http://www.infoukes.com/newpathway/Page335\\_2002.htm](http://www.infoukes.com/newpathway/Page335_2002.htm)

Paul Konoplenko – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Konoplenko-Zaporozhetz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Konoplenko-Zaporozhetz)

Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus website – <https://www.bandura.org/>

Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus history – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian\\_Bandurist\\_Chorus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_Bandurist_Chorus)

There is more Ukrainian heritage music, and associated stories in our *Music Library*. To listen to this beautiful music, and learn more about the artists, go to <https://pioneerchurches.ca/music>

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[PioneerChurches.ca](https://pioneerchurches.ca) | [Steppingstones.ca](https://steppingstones.ca)

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