

Nadia Tarnawsky: A Ukrainian-American Singer's Journey
by Eileen Condon, from autobiographical notes provided
by Nadia Tarnawsky

Sometime in the mid-1970s a Ukrainian mother was walking around a grocery store in Cleveland. The toddler at her side spied a rack of books and lingered as the mother continued on. A few minutes later, the sounds of a Ukrainian Christmas carol could be heard, drifting from another aisle. "Where is that kid?" the mother wondered in desperation. Luckily, Mrs. Tarnawsky found her daughter, Nadia, sitting in the middle of a nearby aisle, surrounded by books and happily singing away. As Nadia wrote, in an autobiography she provided to the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, "Music has always been a part of my family's life. My parents both sing and adore Ukrainian folk music and how fortunate for me that they had a large collection of vinyl records of Ukrainian folk music. How fortunate also that they had such a keen desire to maintain Ukrainian culture within our home. My mother taught me how to embroider and how to draw (Ukrainian Easter eggs). My father spoke to me exclusively in Ukrainian, often to my frustration, but now to my great relief. And, of course, in 1983, when a school of *bandura* [the Ukrainian harp-lute] opened in Cleveland, they signed me up as one of the first students."

Nadia Tarnawsky studied Western classical music on the piano and the cello before she attended her first *bandura* camp in 1984, an experience which, she confesses, she didn't enjoy. "It was my first time away from home and everyone was considerably older than I was. The one good thing was that it was where I first met Julian Kytasty [director of the New York Bandura Ensemble]. We met again at camp in 1988. This was a much better experience for me and it set me on a path." All Saints Ukrainian Orthodox Church facility in Emlenton, PA has been the home of the Kobzarska Sich Bandura Camp since 1988. Nestled in the Allegheny mountains on the banks of the river, as Nadia describes it, the camp was a pilgrimage site to which she would keep journeying, first as a student, next as an assistant instructor, and finally as a full-fledged faculty member.

Here Nadia first met New Jersey-based singer Lilia Pavlovsky. "Lilia was intensely interested in Ukrainian women's polyphonic singing and that's what she taught in Emlenton. She was there for three consecutive years

and in that time the women's ensemble flourished under her direction. You must understand that this is an amazing thing. The *bandura* is a chronically male instrument. Boys can have a decent singing voice and get good at playing the instrument and go on to sing with the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus. Girls can sing really well and play the instrument well and.... Yes, and what? For those years, those girls could work with Lilia and get an opportunity to sing powerful music together as an ensemble. It was an unparalleled experience."

When Lilia moved on, Julian asked Nadia to lead the women's ensemble at Emlenton. Nadia served in this capacity for three years, beginning in 1994. By this point in time, Ukraine had become an independent nation. "This was something I never expected to see in my lifetime. I had read about Ukrainian poets' desires for an independent nation and I had sung about wanting a free Ukraine, but the Soviet Union seemed permanent. When the Iron Curtain dropped, the opportunities to work with musicians from Ukraine abounded and I took advantage of everything I could." Nadia first traveled to Ukraine in 1992 as part of a UNA (Ukrainian National Association) sponsored project for teaching English as a second language. She spent four weeks teaching English in Chernivtsi, and spent weekends in the nearby village of Bedrykivtsi, visiting family members and singing songs with women in the village. "I became a regular in the church choir which sang in an open-throated style so very far removed from what we sang in Cleveland every week. I loved it." Nadia traveled a second time to Ukraine in 1995 with her brother and her father, the first time her father had returned since childhood.

Nadia attended Case Western Reserve University (CWRU), which has a Joint Music Program with The Cleveland Institute of Music. Here she started working with actors and began learning to use her voice for the stage. As her career continued to develop in music and theater, she would find occasion to return for much more intensive fieldwork in Ukraine. At CWRU Nadia first began to perform early music, which led to engagements with Quire Cleveland, an ensemble which focuses on early music works for unaccompanied singers, and Apollo's Fire, Cleveland's Baroque Orchestra. As a student Nadia organized "The Workshop for Women's Voices," in 1995 and 1996, an opportunity for women to work with Canadian Ukrainian singer Alexis Kochan and learn Ukrainian folk

music.

In 1999, Nadia fell seriously ill. While recovering, she engaged in intense personal reflection, reading and translating Ukrainian poetry, especially the work of Oleksander Oles. "One day, as I was sitting [in the Cleveland Clinic] in my hospital gown, waiting for the next round of tests, I began to think about legacy, how I wanted to be remembered. At that point I determined that I wanted to create a project which would allow me to do what I love---sing Ukrainian folk music---with my closest friends and colleagues." Upon recovery, Nadia asked her friend, dancer Natalie Kapeluck of Pittsburgh, to join her in creating a theater piece which told a story through modern dance, using Ukrainian folk music and Ukrainian poetry for its story line. Natalie agreed. Other fine Ukrainian immigrant musicians and choreographers eventually joined in, including *cimbalom* player Alexander Fedoriouk. By 2000, Nadia, Natalie, and Natalie's cousin Melissa had created their own production company, MN2 Productions. In June of 2000, the theater piece "Ancestral Voices" premiered in an art gallery in Cleveland. Nadia and friends have continued creating musical theater productions based on Ukrainian folksong for American and Canadian audiences, including "Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors" (based on the novel by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky) and Lesya Ukrainka's *Forest Song*. Their productions have been performed in Cleveland, Cincinnati, New York, and Toronto.

While teaching music and simultaneously pursuing a master's in music history/ethnomusicology at Cleveland State University, Nadia received a fellowship which paid for her return to Ukraine in 2002. She accompanied University of L'viv Professor Ivan Denysiuk on an expedition to northwestern Polissia, collecting folklore about *rusalky* (river mermaids) along with wedding songs, songs of lamentation, folk songs, and more. She returned from the field to finish graduate course work and then returned to Ukraine to meet up with Mariana Sadowska, whom she had met previously through the Ukrainian singing community in Cleveland. "I had the opportunity to see Mariana on her occasional state-side visits, but now we were in Ukraine together. We rented a car and drove to Kriachkivka. She had to go on to another village, but I ended up staying in Kriachkivka for a few days. I had seen some of the singers in this village on a documentary called *Oi u poli drevo*, but I was not prepared to hear

them sing in person."

"The sound of their voices completely overwhelmed me. I stayed with Halyna Popko, the leader of the group and voraciously filled notebooks with lyrics and had Halyna sing individual lines of the complicated Kriachkivka harmonies. At one point she said, 'It's so hard to sing it without the other voices there. These songs need a group of people to sing them.' It was in Kriachkivka that I recorded the ancient voices of Iavrosynia Zahorulko and Hanna Levada, two women who since my time in Ukraine have passed away. Vichnaya pamiat--memory eternal to them both. When the time came to leave, as I had to finalize some things in Kyiv before heading back to L'viv for my flight home, I walked with reluctant feet to the bus stop in Kriachkivka. I have not had the opportunity to visit that village since 2002 and when I sing, I see the faces of those women as if they are the mother for whom I am longing. It has been too long since I have been in their yard. Perhaps that is why so many of their songs have ended up on the concert program. They are not songs I can sing alone--I need the women of this ensemble to sing them, just as Halyna needed them."

Nadia continued to teach at The Cleveland Institute of Music through July of 2010. Since 2008 she has somehow found the time to fly back and forth to nurture Ukrainian Women's Voices in New York, several times a year. She has performed and recorded with Quire Cleveland, Apollo's Fire, and a small Ukrainian folk/fusion ensemble, "The Ancestors." The latter group includes excellent Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian folk musicians, such as Alexander Fedoriouk and Brandon Vance, two-time Open U.S. National Scottish Fiddle Champion (1999 and 2001). Brandon and Alex joined forces with Nadia and the Ukrainian Women's Voices singing group in June 2010 to present this year's Ukrainian Women's Voices concert, "Seven Deadly Sins: Traditional Songs of Good and Evil," at the Ukrainian Museum in New York's East Village. The Center for Traditional Music and Dance thanks Nadia for leading the lovely singing session for seniors at the Self-Reliance Association for American Ukrainians Senior Center, and we wish Nadia well on her July 2010 move to Seattle, Washington, where she will explore (and enrich) the West Coast traditional and classical music scene, continuing her musical collaborations with fiddler Brandon Vance. Nadia assures us she will be back to New York

again to work with Ukrainian Women's Voices next season, no matter how far the distance.

--Eileen Condon, Project Director, Ukrainian Community Cultural Initiative

The Center for Traditional Music and Dance

(Biography summarized from autobiographical notes supplied to CTMD by Nadia Tarnawsky)