

УДК 78(71)''712''КОШИЦЯ

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## **RENAISSANCE OF CREATIVITY OF OLEKSANDR KOSHYTSIA IN CONTEMPORARY CANADA**

Oleksander Koshyts (1875-1944), the celebrated Ukrainian-born choral conductor, who worked predominantly in the area of Ukrainian religious and folk songs, holds a special place in my heart not only because he belongs to the group of Ukrainian artists who inscribed a glorious page in the history of Ukrainian music and culture, not only because this conductor, composer, and ethnographer of genius brought universal recognition to Ukrainian folk songs, but mainly because during his life, which was marked by a series of dramatic rises and falls, he maintained the highest ideals of his profession without ever compromising or betraying his artistry and his national roots.

The story began many years ago, when the McGill University Choir, whose conductor I was, performed Koshyts's liturgical music

at Pollack Hall in Montreal. After the concert an elderly Ukrainian expressed his sadness at the fact that the last time the music of this talented composer was heard in North America was 60 years ago, during a performance of the Ukrainian National Choir conducted by Koshyts himself. I was quite surprised to learn that the music of this composer, who introduced to North America a Ukrainian carol that later became the world-renowned Christmas song called “Carol of the Bells,” and whose performance of a Ukrainian lullaby inspired George Gershwin to write his famous song “Summertime,” was not widely known and rarely performed. Since that time I have always felt a responsibility to reopen this forgotten page in the history of choral music by researching and performing Koshyts’s compositions, and exploring and bringing a range of aspects related to his artistic activity to the attention of musicologists, conductors, and performers. My modest role here is to connect the missing links of one big chain.

The life of Oleksander Koshyts is closely tied to the historical period in which he lived. It is widely known that after the communist regime was established in Ukraine in 1920, the country’s artists were allowed to create and publish only those works that illustrated Bolshevik ideology and Socialist Realism. Everything that was related to Ukrainian culture, Ukrainian music, or the Ukrainian language either perished under the repressive communist regime or was hidden away to await its time. The Soviet system wiped out any vestige of hope for creative or national freedom. All those who refused to be artistic slaves of the revolution and live in conditions of ideological falsehood were crushed and exterminated.

During 1919-1922 Koshyts and his choir, the Ukrainian Republican Kapelle, later renamed the Ukrainian National Choir, were travelling abroad, propagating Ukrainian national culture and music during a triumphal European concert tour. The tragic deaths of the artists and poets Oleksander Murashko (1919), Heorhiy Narbut (1920), Hryhoriy Chuprynka (1921), Vasyl Chumak (1919) and especially Koshyts’s friend and colleague, the composer Mykola Leontovych (1921) forced Koshyts to make the difficult decision not to return home but stay abroad with his choir.

After embarking on this brave action, which was unprecedented in Soviet history, he was considered a political refugee and enemy of the state. For many decades his very name was taboo and his works were deliberately neglected and never performed. His beautiful

arrangements of folk songs and liturgical music were banned for seventy years. The impossibility of returning to his native land, which he considered the most beautiful on earth, brought deep sorrow and heartache to Koshyts, which he endured to his dying days. Years of misery, constant struggle, and bitter disappointments affected his health, and he paid a high price for his artistic independence and devotion to Ukrainian music. Nonetheless, Koshyts found his refuge and salvation in the very thing for which he had sacrificed everything – his music. In Koshyts's 2 songs we find a reflection of the soul of the Ukrainian nation, with its turbulent history, hopes and dreams, sorrows and sufferings, and joy.

The life of Oleksander Koshyts may be divided into three main periods: Ukraine (1875-1919), Europe (1919-1922), and North America (1922-1944). The Ukrainian period (childhood, years of formation, and the beginning of his professional career) was the happiest one. Born into the family of a third-generation Orthodox priest, Oleksander received the best possible education. The Kyiv Theological Seminary, the Kiev-Mohyla Sacred Academy, and the Higher School of Music were the three institutions that, together with his family, contributed to his formation as an accomplished theologian, knowledgeable historian, talented musician, and ardent patriot. After completing his studies, Koshyts worked successfully as a conductor in Kyiv University, the Theatre of Music and Drama, and the Municipal Opera Theatre, and he quickly became a leading figure of the choral movement in Ukraine.

After the proclamation of the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) in 1919, Koshyts was appointed chairman of the Music Department of the National Board of Education. During his early career two significant events occurred, which would have a significant impact on Koshyts's life. The first took place in 1902-1905, when Koshyts conducted ethnographic expeditions to the Kuban region of southern Russia, where he found and recorded over a thousand folk songs of the Kuban Cossack Army, the descendants of the Ukrainian Zaporozhian Cossacks. While transcribing folk songs in the Kuban region in 1904, Koshyts admitted that listening to these historic songs "enlightened my mind, gave national force to my soul... Songs have become the only sacred thing that I worship and serve" [3, Vol. 2, p. 47]. For this work Koshyts won a gold medal at the Kuban National Ethnographic Exposition in 1908. In 1905, three years after Koshyts,

the Hungarian Béla Bartók began collecting and documenting the folk music of Hungary, Transylvania, and Romania. Koshyts and Bartók unearthed a treasury of ancient melodies and preserved them for future generations. Despite the differences in the way these two composers utilized folk melodies in their music (while Bartók incorporated folk modal and pentatonic scales, rhythmic ideas, strophic structures, and melodic turns into his original music, Koshyts arranged folk melodies and provided a new means of musical expression for them) both composers were convinced that the roots of national culture resided in the folk (culture) and for both of them their national music was an aesthetic priority.

In addition to collecting folk songs, Koshyts studied the ancient religious chants of numerous Ukrainian monasteries. The collected materials were not only of exceptional artistic-historical value in terms of preserving the golden treasury of Ukrainian folklore, but also served as the foundation of his arrangements and concert repertoire.

The second important event took place in 1919, when Koshyts founded the Ukrainian Republican Kapelle and became its conductor. In 1919 the cappella went abroad, mandated by the fledgling Ukrainian government to promote the young Ukrainian republic and Ukrainian national idea in Europe through Ukrainian folk songs. This trip launched the second, European, period of Koshyts's life. Touring in many European countries, the choir gave more than 1,000 concerts, impressing audiences with the staggering beauty of Ukrainian songs as well as its high level of performance. The extraordinary success of Koshyts's concerts resulted in rapturous reviews by music critics and journalists in France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, and other countries. "O. Koshyts is not merely a conductor – he appears to be a god before whom everyone is humbled. The choir's musical execution is unparalleled... Two hours of singing in a foreign language followed by four encores is the biggest testament to its success", wrote Raymond Charpentier, a Paris-based music critic.

In 1920, the Ukrainian National Republic was crushed and the communists established control over the country, making it unsafe for Koshyts to return home. This was the beginning of the third and final period of Koshyts's life. Together with his choir members, Koshyts decided to remain in exile and, by continuing the choir's performances, to promote Ukrainian music around the world. Since the Ukrainian National Republic no longer existed, the Ukrainian

Republican Kapelle changed its name to the Ukrainian National Choir and went to the Americas, giving concerts in the USA, Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and Brazil. (This concert tour provided the first opportunity for these countries to acquaint themselves not only with Ukrainian songs but with the music of such superb Ukrainian composers as Mykola Lysenko, Kyrylo Stetsenko, Dmytro Bortnyansky, Artem Vedel, Mykola Leontovych, and others.)

In the early 1930s the performing contracts ran out, the choir was disbanded, and Koshyts had to endure difficult years without paid work. He settled in the United States and became its citizen. At this time he was over 55 years old and had almost no money or possessions; his life became a constant struggle, both artistically and financially. He was compelled to start over in a new country in the hope of supporting himself and his wife by recording and publishing his arrangements and new compositions. Despite the success of some of his projects, he endured financial misery and poor health, feeling alone in an alien society speaking a different language.

During the final years of his life, which were mainly devoted to teaching and composing, Koshyts gave lectures on the history of Ukrainian music and folk songs at Columbia University and taught conducting technique during Ukrainian summer courses for teachers and church conductors in Winnipeg. In 1943 he was a guest conductor of the United Ukrainian Choir in Montreal. He died in Winnipeg in 1944, and his wife Tetiana Georgievsk-Koshyts donated all his manuscripts to the Winnipeg-based Ukrainian cultural organization Oseredok, where they are currently stored in the archives. Koshyts's legacy consists of five settings of the Divine Liturgy, numerous arrangements of folk songs, psalms, canticles, ritual music, as well as his memoirs, letters, and theoretical works.

Koshyts's folk song arrangements occupy an outstanding place among his compositions. A profound understanding of the essence of the national folk song together with his wonderful intuition served as a promising basis of his works, a number of which have achieved lasting artistic value. Koshyts's folk song arrangements may be divided into two main categories based on the type of text, religious or secular.

The first category consists of songs of a religious or moral nature, called canticles and psalms, which are not prescribed to be sung during the Divine Liturgy and Offices. These canticles were

closely associated with church festivals and holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Usually accompanied on the *lira* (*vielle*), an early European bowed string instrument brought to Ukraine in approximately the ninth century, or on the *bandura*, a traditional Ukrainian string instrument, these songs were sung from the 12<sup>th</sup> century until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by singers called *lirnyks* or *bandurysts*, respectively. Often blind or maimed in some way, *lirnyks* and *bandurysts* formed a professional guild and played the same role in Ukrainian society as minstrels or Minnesingers did in Western Europe (In 1936 Poltava were killed last bandurists).

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century “true” canticles, based on ancient monastery chants, gave way to so-called “artificial” canticles in which religious poetry was set to famous folk melodies. Such canticles reached their greatest development in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as they were used by the clergy as a weapon in the struggle between Greek Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. In fact, this process occurred at the same time and had the same roots and consequences as in sixteenth-century Germany, when Martin Luther revised the old German *Leisen* and rewrote existing popular folk songs by furnishing folk melodies with new, evangelical, texts.

A number of psalms and canticles, together with various Kyivan, Greek, *znamenny*, and Bulgarian chants were collected by the monks of Pochaiv Monastery in a compilation called *Bohohlasnyk* (God’s Voice) and printed in the eighteenth century. Koshyts paid particular attention to songs from the *lirnyk-banduryst* repertoire. This semi-sacred, semi-secular genre greatly attracted him, as it was an unstudied phenomenon of an ancient musical art in which the ethnic and spiritual memories of the Ukrainian people were concentrated.

Working with the *Bohohlasnyk*, Koshyts understood that neither Western classical harmony nor counterpoint were suitable for the polyphonic handling of these canticles. The melodies needed both harmony and counterpoint but of a home-grown Ukrainian variety, based on the heterophony (counter-voiced polyphony) of secular folk songs and the unique melodic style of sacred chants without losing their individuality. In his book *About Ukrainian Songs and Music* Koshyts wrote: “In addition to the main melody, voices...over the course of time took on the character of various melodies and became counter-voices, that is, their natural instinctive counterpoint. These counter-voices are always new but never do they break the connection

with the basic melody. It is like a variation on a theme. All this is contrary to the European understanding of harmony...and full of strange musical heresy...however, it is fresh, interesting, and novel. Your European logic is tricked and the paradox becomes logical. Before your very eyes unfolds an enchanting flower of an unknown plant. The sensation is inexpressible, unforgettable”.

Arranging these ancient melodies was no simple task. As Béla Bartók once wrote: “Many people think it is a comparatively easy task to write a composition on found folk tunes... This way of thinking is completely erroneous. To handle folk tunes is one of the most difficult tasks; equally difficult, if not more so, than to write a major original composition. If we keep in mind that borrowing a tune means being bound by its individual peculiarity, we shall understand one part of the difficulty. Another is created by the special character of folk tune. We must penetrate it, feel it, and bring out its sharp contours by the appropriate setting... It must be a work of inspiration just as much as any other composition”.

Arranging these old chants, Koshyts took the step of composing his work out of traditionally strict, four-part harmonization. The Western style of imitative polyphony and fugue also did not play an essential role in his works. A study of Koshyts’s scores uncovers the composer’s determined effort to interweave choral texture with essential melodic elements. The result is a totally new synthesis of traditional melodic material and the creative process of composing. Hence, Koshyts’s works may be called not arrangements but compositions. The term “arrangement” is accurate only to the extent that a melody, originally performed monophonically, has been arranged for polyphonic presentation.

The most significant characteristics of Koshyts’s compositional technique may be identified as follows:

- Counter-voiced polyphony (heterophony): the same melody and its variations are distributed among different voice parts, with one leading voice, often in a middle register. The principle of heterophony allowed Koshyts to give the voices much room for continuous variation and embellishment. It also had an effect on the lyrics, insofar as single words or phrases are lengthened with vocalisms or enlarged with additional syllables.
- Parallel voice leading (fifth and octaves) which violates the rule of classical harmony.

- A single melodic line with a drone (more often perfect fifth) on the tonic or dominant in the lowest register. The drone is a pedal point intended to imitate the sound of the lira as the foundation of a *lirnyk*'s recitative.

- Male or female voices doubled in an octave. This was Koshyts's favourite method of representing the expression of lamentation, crying, or despair.

- Compositions based on chant melodies have no meter signatures, and bar lines appear only between major musical or textual phrases, just like in chant-books. Since the Orthodox Church recognized any music independent of text, the rhythm and meter are text-related. In order to coordinate the meter with the word's stresses, in some compositions Koshyts often employs constantly changing meter signatures.

- In Koshyts's works the chant-bearing voice is not always the soprano or tenor, as this is done in *cantus firmus* technique. Well aware of the prominence of the bass voice in Orthodox religious music and loving its strong, powerful, and bright timbre, Koshyts was the first Ukrainian composer to place the *cantus firmus* in the bass line.

- Koshyts's greatest talent, however, lies in passing the original melody around from voice to voice, creating an immense variety of textures. Varied subordinate voices, variations of melodic moves and turns, the transfer of line fragments from voice to voice and from register to register point to a constant concern for an unceasing cultivation of the vocal fabric.

Koshyts's cycle "Religious Canticles and Psalms of the Ukrainian People" consists of fifteen superb treatments of ancient chants and *lirnyk* songs. According to the composer, these melodies were derived from an eighteenth-century monastery manuscript. One work from this collection, "The Passion Trilogy," always had the greatest public success and stood out as a unique example of choral incorporation of an apocryphal subject, a folk singer's recitative, and elements of theatre drama. Three canticles comprise this trilogy: "The Trial before Pilate," "The Crucifixion," and "The Resurrection." Aside from the historical significance of this work, it is believed that there is nothing in Eastern Orthodox choral literature that compares with the magnificence, poignancy, and naïve simplicity of the musical and textual delineation of Christ's Passion as portrayed in these three



canticles. The composer maintained the specific *lirnyk* meter signatures (3/2, 7/4, 5/4), particular the chord progressions (I-Vnat.-I-II-IV-I-VII nat.-I) and pedal point, imitating the sound of the *lira*.

The second category of Koshyts arrangements consists of folk songs with a secular text. The diapason of genres and themes is richly varied and covers a huge range of historical ballads, epics, and calendrical, work, love, and children's songs. A large part is made up of arrangements of humorous and dance songs, some of which feature elements of play and dramatization.

His profound understanding of Ukrainian musical traditions as well as his vast experience of choral conducting allowed Koshyts to create brilliant choral concert pieces that stand out by their folkloric style, masterful application of compositional technique, and dramatic effect. In these songs Koshyts's polyphony remains heterophonical and, like the canticles, it is constructed of a melody in one voice and a series of counter voices joined with the former.

In addition to developing heterophonical polyphony Koshyts's compositions feature a technique known as choral orchestration: the use of orchestral/instrumental traits in the choral parts and diverse timbre grouping. The number of voices in the choral texture constantly changes, thus creating outstanding vocal coloristic possibilities, such as:

- Male trio or quartet in long notes in low register as a background for a flowing melody in soprano and alto lines and vice-versa—the men sing the melody, while the women sing the long notes;

- Sopranos as a pedal on the high note;
- Male and female choirs in alternate singing;
- *Divisi* in each part of the choir;
- Chorus without basses;
- Quartet of first and second altos and tenors;
- Bass trio in low register in close position;
- Entire choir at *forte* in low register.

The use of these and many other timbre combinations, as well as giving the main melody to various voices, adds beauty to the song and captivates listeners with the perfection of musical images.

Koshyts's choral orchestration method also includes *divisi* passages, carefully placed articulation, vivid palette of dynamic nuances as well as imitation of instrumental sound. For example, in

his famous Lullaby (Ukrainian Cradle Song), quite often the prevailing legato with a light pizzicato in various registers reproduces the sound of folk instruments and creates gentle sound embroidery of instrumental passages. In many songs, such as “Tam des’ daleko” (Far, far away) or “Vodovoz” (Water carrier), the melody is sung by the soloist with a choir accompanying, often without words. The function of the choir here lies in supporting and developing the emotional element of the solo melody, enhancing its subtle nuances, and underlining its harmony. Moreover, by employing diverse details of dynamic, rhythmic, and timbre modifications, the composer comes very close to recreating the actual sound of instruments. This pinnacle of expressive intensity led the world’s press to proclaim this an artistic discovery in choral music. The critic for a San Francisco paper wrote in 1924: “In Koshyts’s arrangements, as exemplified by the song “Lullaby,” the choir takes on the sound of an orchestra: the humming voices suggest the sound of violins, cellos, or wood instruments. The resemblance is arranged to the last detail, such as the imitation of the string’s attack or its vibration. I have never heard anything comparable to the prolonged pedal points in a bass line. I have also never heard such a high humming soprano so similar to violins with a mute” [7, p. 188].

Although in his compositional technique Koshyts was an innovator, he maintained traditional positions concerning musical form and structure. In his arrangements of folk songs, the composer mainly used the strophic form typical of folk songs with short regular line length and often some kind of refrain. A stanza consists of two to eight lines, four being the most common. In some songs the composer uses the principle of transposing a line to various pitch levels. This tendency was common to the music of the western Ukrainian Carpathian region (so-called Carpathian Music Dialect), as well as in Hungarian, Romanian, and Czech folklore. For example, the song “Plach vnochi” (A cry in the night), which is based on the Hungarian double-harmonic scale, has an A-B-A-B<sup>5</sup>-A<sup>5</sup>-B<sup>5</sup>-A<sup>5</sup>-B<sup>2</sup>-A<sup>2</sup>-B<sup>4</sup>-A<sup>7</sup>-B-A-B structure (Numbers indicate intervals of transposition). Strophic or rondo variations also play a key role in Koshyts’s works, where each line or verse changes depending on its melody, harmony, rhythm, pitch, or tempo.

Oleksander Koshyts was the first Ukrainian composer to achieve an international reputation for his folk song arrangements. Like the

Hungarians Bela Bartok, Zoltán Kodály and Czech Leoš Janáček, Koshyts represented nationalism in music, being a composer who was deeply inspired by his native melodies and songs. Moreover, he integrated this music into own individual style and developed its originality to the highest degree. At the same time, however, Koshyts's interest in folk music was broad-minded and cosmopolitan, and he frequently reached out to other national cultures. Owing to his choir's extensive touring, Koshyts recorded and arranged Mexican, Argentinean, Cuban, Scottish, Mexican, French-Canadian, English, and Indian folk songs, which he not only added to his collection of folk songs *Musical Tapestries*, published in 1924-1927, but also managed to have them translated into the Ukrainian language.

Koshyts approached the task of arranging folk songs not only as a composer but first and foremost as a conductor, sophisticated expert, and performer. He knew exactly which artistic tools he needed to emphasize a voice, melody line, or key word in order to best reveal the imagery of a song and convey the content of each couplet. In his book *About Ukrainian Songs and Music* the composer writes: "A song has self-sufficient beauty, and that is why it does not need any embellishments in terms of accompaniment. Like an acorn, it contains within itself all the traits of the luxuriant oak that the composer should cultivate. Harmony, just like counterpoint, must be taken from the song itself; otherwise it will be dressed in strange clothing".

As one of the most brilliant choral conductors of his time, and through the finest examples of his creativity, he served as an example of uncompromising and life-long devotion to artistic ideals. On the thorny road of his life the artist achieved great creative victories and experienced difficult failures, but he never deviated from his path. In a letter to his friend and colleague Pavlo Matsenko, written shortly before his death, Koshyts declares: "Blessed be the holy art of choral singing for all time! It never betrayed me during my entire life, it nourished my soul and brought me back to life when it seemed that the doors of happiness were forever closing before me, it united with me the finest people who were the most sensitive to sacred beauty..."

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*Світлана Лісогор*

### **ВІДРОДЖЕННЯ ТВОРЧОСТІ ОЛЕКСАНДРА КОШИЦЯ В СУЧАСНІЙ КАНАДІ**

*Автор, диригент і керівник Хору Монреальського університету (Канада), розкриває причини свого звернення до творчості О. Кошиця. Так, багато років тому після виконання духовної музики композитора в Pollack Hall двоє літніх слухачів українського походження висловили співчуття у зв'язку з тим, що останнім часом музику талановитого композитора чули 60 років тому під час виступу Українського національного хору під керівництвом самого О. Кошиця. Автора до глибини душі вразив цей факт, тому що саме Олександр Антонович подарував Північній Америці різдвяну пісню «Carol of the Bells», а колискова у виконанні його хору свого часу надихнула Дж. Гершвіна на створення славнозвісної пісні «Summertime». Автор завжди відчувала відповідальність за відродження забутих сторінок в історії хорової музики. Далі у статті пропонується періодизація життя і творчості О. Кошиця; осмислюються причини, що спонукали художника залишитися на чужині; глибоко аналізуються особливості його хорових аранжувань українських народних пісень і духовної музики.*

**Ключові слова:** *життя і творчість О. Кошиця, Українська республіканська капела (Український національний хор), художня творчість у тоталітарному суспільстві, аранжування українських народних пісень, духовна музика.*

*Светлана Лисогор*

### **ВОЗРОЖДЕНИЕ ТВОРЧЕСТВА АЛЕКСАНДРА КОШИЦА В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ КАНАДЕ**

*Автор, дирижер и руководитель Хора Монреальского университета (Канада), раскрывает причины своего обращения к творчеству А. Кошица. Так, много лет назад после исполнения духовной музыки композитора в Pollack Hall двое пожилых слушателей украинского происхождения выразили соболезнование в связи с тем, что в последнее время музыку талантливого композитора слышали 60 лет назад во время выступления Украинского национального хора под руководством самого А. Кошица. Автора удивил этот факт, потому что именно Александр Антонович подарил Северной Америке*

*рождественскую песню «Carol of the Bells», а колыбельная в исполнении его хора вдохновила Дж. Гершвина на создание знаменитой песни «Summertime». С тех пор, автор всегда чувствовала ответственность за возрождение забытых страниц в истории хоровой музыки. Далее в статье предлагается периодизация жизни и творчества А. Кошица; осмысляются причины, побудившие художника остаться в изгнании; глубоко анализируются особенности его хоровых аранжировок украинских народных песен и духовной музыки.*

**Ключевые слова:** *жизнь и творчество А. Кошица, Украинская республиканская капелла (Украинский национальный хор), художественное творчество в тоталитарном обществе, аранжировка украинских народных песен, духовная музыка*

Одержано 14.04.2015 р.