

Ukrainian Folk Music Revival: Transformation of the Movement and the Impact of War(s)

Anastasiia Mazurenko

DOI: 10.21104/CL.2026.3.03

Abstract

The folk revival movement in Ukraine, arisen in the late 1960s, has undergone a significant transformation with new forms since the outbreak of the conflict(s) in Ukraine (beginning in 2014 and in larger extent after 2022). Under conditions of war, these practices have rapidly gained popularity among wide audience and responding to a shared social need to support national idea through Ukrainian rural music and dance traditions. A distinctly politicized and national character of the current Ukrainian folk revival movement became a resistance reaction on an armed conflict. The role of grassroots representers have become crucial to new forms of folk music movement, which shifted from performative to participatory music-making after 2014. Its increased visibility across a wide range of media has influenced other spheres of the country's musical life.

Keywords

music and conflicts, music and war, Ukrainian tradition, Ukrainian folk music revival, national identity, music and nationalism, folk dance revival, urban traditions, music subculture

Contact

Dr. Anastasiia Mazurenko, ZRC SAZU, The Institute of Ethnomusicology,
Novi trg 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia;

e-mail: anastasiia.mazurenko@zrc-sazu.si

ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3276-274X>

Jak citovat / How to cite

Mazurenko, Anastasiia. 2026. Ukrainian Folk Revival: Transformation of the Movement and the Impact of War(s). *Český lid* 113, 3: 295–315.
<https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2026.3.03>

Given the four years of ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine, ethnomusicological attempts to study folk music and its current forms in the context of war have become increasingly relevant. Times of crisis often bring about rapid and significant changes in society, particularly in the cultural sphere. Violence perpetrated by one side of the conflict, especially when justified by cultural and historical arguments, naturally provokes responses from the other. These include resistance, the radical re-examination and reinterpretation of shared history, and the emergence of a radical political movement, all of which are reflected in culture. In times of protracted war(s),¹ such as Russia's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the occupation and illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas region, before escalating into a full-scale invasion in 2022, the intensification of national movements appears to be a systematic (and symptomatic) phenomenon.

In Ukraine, which gained independence in 1991 relatively peacefully following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, such a conflict with the imperialist and colonialist ambitions of its neighbour may appear to have been merely postponed. Because the conflict is of an existential nature for the Ukrainian nation, the question of the Ukrainian national idea has become a central aspect. The emergence and development of the idea of Ukrainianness can be traced back to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as in many other European nations.² However, the contemporary understanding of Ukrainian national identity as a political concept, drawing to a considerable extent on folk culture, has its roots in the period before independence, specifically, in so-called Brezhnev-era Stagnation (from the 1960s onwards). Since that time, the development of the national idea can be periodised according to the major political, economic, cultural, and social changes in Ukrainian society.³ Against this background,

1 The article uses both singular and plural forms of the terms "conflict" and "war" according to context, reflecting the varying nature and multi-phased character of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine since 2014, as well as the hybrid forms of conflict that preceded it.

2 At the same time, the modern national idea is building its national myth, drawing on a more distant past, a characteristic of most modern states and their national ideas. See Timothy Snyder's open lectures at Yale University on the formation of the national myth in Ukraine (Snyder 2022).

3 In this article, I draw on the generally accepted periodisation of Ukraine's economic and political system following the Second World War, which is reflected in various spheres of culture. That is (the approximate dates): 1945–1953 – post-war reconstruction and Sovietisation; 1953–1965 – Khrushchev's Thaw (slight liberalisation); 1965–1985 – Brezhnev-era Stagnation (the intensification of Russification, repression of Ukrainian dissidents, the crisis of Soviet regime);

the article examines the contemporary Ukrainian folk revival movement in urban musical life in the broader context of the processes of shaping the national idea, paying particular attention to the period of the current conflict. Through an analysis of events, published and archival audiovisual materials, media content and fieldwork interviews with representatives of the community, I argue that the current conflict in Ukraine, the processes of democratisation of society, and the country's shift towards the West have given rise to qualitatively new forms of the folk revival movement. The wartime context in which this movement has developed determines its specificity and distinguishes it from the earlier manifestations of folk revival in Ukraine, as well as from those in other European countries, which have not experienced the traumatic impact of communist ideology and modern warfare on such a scale. I further argue that grassroots initiatives play a prominent role in the formation of the current Ukrainian folk revival movement, leading, among other things, to the emergence of a new type of activity in this field—namely folk music cultural management. Given the growing significance and popularity of the folk music revival movement in Ukraine during the war, the article also provides a brief overview of its principal forms, with particular emphasis on the transformations that have taken place since 2014.

A note on positionality

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the fact that this article examines ongoing processes in Ukraine, it is appropriate to clarify my personal position as a researcher. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, I was forced

1985–1991 – Gorbachev's Perestroika (economic stagnation, the emergence of national movements), Declaration of Independence in 1991; 1991–2004 – state building, economic crisis; 2004 – the Orange Revolution, and following geopolitical transformation; 2013/2014–2022 – the beginning of the war (South and East), democratisation, westernisation, Europeanisation; since 2022 – Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, dramatic increase in significance of national idea, large wave of migration, social, economic, infrastructural and other crises, mobilisation for war, semi-closed borders, etc. The twentieth century prior to the Second World War was marked by events no less significant for the formation of the Ukrainian national identity (including the establishment of its own army and the proclamation of an independent people's republic whilst under the rule of two empires), the Soviet occupation from 1922 onwards, followed by so-called 'indigenisation' (Voloshyna 2023), collectivisation and industrialisation. Due to the limited research into the role of folklore during this period, and because this article focuses on contemporary folklore revival movements, I shall not discuss the pre-Second World War period here, whilst emphasising the relevance of further research in this area.

to relocate abroad in 2022. While I condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine, my principal concern in this article is to analyse contemporary transformations in traditional music in Ukraine. During my studies at Ukrainian educational institutions, I had the opportunity to work closely with members of the Ukrainian folk revival movement, including both the academic lecturers who pioneered the movement and the younger generation of amateur musicians. As a student at music college (2003–2007), I sang in a student folk revival ensemble, thereby acquiring practical experience in folk singing, performing at concerts and prominent festivals (e.g. *Kraina Mriy* in 2005 and 2007). Although I have not been involved in performance since then, I have maintained personal relationships with the participants. In my research, I have sought to maintain the etic/outsider perspective of an observer, which has become more appropriate since I left Ukraine and continued my research outside the country, while field research carried out as part of my short-term visits to Ukraine after 2022.

Folk music in a time of war

The folk music revival movement in Ukraine has undergone significant changes over the past twelve years (since 2014). This is largely due to the major geopolitical, economic and social changes that have taken place in the country during this period. The outbreak of full-scale war in 2022 has created a context in which these transformations are taking place at an accelerated pace, as Ukrainian society has responded to traumatic experiences and profound changes in all aspects of everyday life. To understand the development of the modern national idea in Ukraine, it is necessary to adopt an even broader perspective, extending back to the beginning of Ukrainian independence, or even to its antecedents during the Brezhnev-era Stagnation, which also had certain features of conflict.

Folk music in the countryside is generally regarded by many Ukrainian scholars as authentic, archaic—that is, preindustrial—and is believed to represent living folk tradition (although in most cases it has become de-contextualised and survives “silently” in the memory of its oldest bearers until activated upon request from outside). The significant transformation of this type of tradition throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is commonly explained by historical, political, social and other changes, including modernisation, industrialisation, technological and media development, fuelled by economic migration from rural to urban areas and abroad, national traumas (such as the Holodomor), technological disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and war. Attempts by activists to revitalise rural traditions in villages from outside only had limited success.

Where they succeeded they often transformed the most talented local singers into nationally recognised performers.⁴ However, in other cases, attempts by young folk music revivalists to “bring folklore back to the people” received a rather cool reception from local residents.⁵ At the same time, the war has disrupted research fieldwork in rural areas: the few remaining tradition bearers are often living through bereavement and, due to their emotional state, many refuse to participate in performances and recordings.

The situation in urban areas is quite different (which, in general, highlights the disconnect between rural and urban Ukraine). In popular culture, national motifs, often expressed through elements of rural folk music, have proliferated exponentially during the current war. The use of the open vocal timbre specific to Ukrainian folk singing, elements of traditional polyphony, the timbres of traditional folk music instruments incorporated as recorded samples, and even the direct involvement of folk singers have all become more prominent since 2014, and especially since 2022. Anti-war and patriotic motifs, motivational lyrics on struggle, praise for the courage of Ukrainians, references to military victories, the use of ritual motifs (such as incantations, lullabies wishing the death of enemies, and witchcraft), as well as themes of separation and reunion, migration, images of home and family, have all entered the mainstream musical culture during the war. At the same time, the surge of interest in folk music has broadened the range of genres and approaches to folklore. Today, in the Ukrainian music scene, one encounters both the subtle incorporation of folk elements into compositions and highly simplified adaptations, which disregard the structural principles of folk music.

At the same time, music is equally important for those fighting on the front lines. Although soldiers generally treat folk music with respect, they would not typically turn to it to boost their courage. By contrast, music broadcast on radio and TV for the general public serves primarily as a source of motivation on the home front. At the front, however, a distinct musical “code” has developed. Often, this music is composed by the military itself. It is characterised by dark humour and specialised vocabulary, understand-

4 For example, the singer Dominika Chekun from Rivne oblast (northern Ukraine) was first encountered by the researcher Iryna Klymenko during her fieldwork in the Polissya region several decades ago. Following the release of the fieldwork recordings, other researchers and folklore enthusiasts (including some from abroad) took an interest in the singer. Since then, she has taken part in a significant number of commercial projects and performed on major stages both in Ukraine and abroad.

5 Interview with Yaroslav Yerin, 26 June 2025, Kyiv, interview conducted by Anastasiia Mazurenko.

able only to those serving in the military. As for official ceremonies, military orchestras continue to play the same repertoire as they did before the war.⁶

Another important manifestation of folk music in Ukraine today is found in the national, state, regional, and local music and dance ensembles that trace their origins back to the post-Second World War Soviet era and continue to play a significant role in the representation of cultural life of the country. Most of these ensembles and choirs, described by Nahachewsky (2012) as “spectacular”, emerged as politically approved top-down forms of staged representation of folklore at the national level in the USSR. Their initial aim was to replace existing rural and urban (“bourgeois”) traditions and to become national symbols of the culture of the working-class (so-called *samodeyatelnost*—Russian: “self-activity”). Promoted by the Soviet media and education system, these practices and their repertoire became firmly established in the public consciousness as an emblematic form of folklore. Following independence, these ensembles continued to perform with state support. Today, the most prominent among them play both diplomatic and political-representative functions for Ukraine as a nation state, including performances at ceremonial governmental meetings and official concerts. The transformation of their repertoire and their evolution from the Soviet-era Ukrainian performance tradition to a contemporary Ukrainian one constitutes an interesting, yet still under-researched, phenomenon in Ukrainian cultural history.

Ethnomusicology in Ukraine and the place of folk revival in ethnomusicological scholarship: authenticity, scientific reconstruction and scholarly orthodoxy

Domestic scholarly studies on the current conflict in Ukraine began to appear gradually following the full-scale invasion.⁷ A more profound interest in the theme of the music of conflict and national identification through music in Ukraine has, however, developed beyond the country’s borders (e.g., Sonevytsky 2016; 2019; 2025, among others). The migration of researchers following 2022 has also stimulated new research related to the ongoing war. Increasing collaboration between Ukrainian ethnomusicologists and their colleagues abroad has further contributed to new perspectives in Ukrainian folklore studies. At the same time, the

6 Interview with an anonymised respondent, 26 June 2025, Kyiv, interview conducted by Anastasiia Mazurenko.

7 With some exceptions, as there are studies on the music of war and resistance that were published before, such as those of Bohdan Lukaniuk on resistance songs (Lukaniuk 2021; 2022).

mainstream Ukrainian ethnomusicology continues to follow the academic tradition established during the formation of folk music scholarly institutions, which is primarily focused on systematic and historical approaches to the study of Ukrainian rural traditions. The research focuses primarily on singing traditions regarded as authentic and/or archaic originating in the autochthonic territories of Ukraine. By contrast, contextual analysis of current musical phenomena connected to folk music functioning in modern society receives relatively little attention. The significant growth of the folk revival movement in Ukraine in recent decades, together with greater integration into the global academic community, is prompting some researchers to attempt to analyse these developments. However, existing studies have concentrated mainly on the vocal performance of academically trained revival performers, their skills, repertoire, and techniques, while often struggling to adapt to anglophone terminology and concepts of folk music revival theory, which is well-developed in Western ethnomusicology (Ronström 1996; Hill – Bithell 2014; Ceribašić 2014; Stavělová – Buckland 2018; Morgenstern 2019).

Beyond the annual reports and encyclopaedic articles on the activities of the most significant folk music revival ensembles from the early years of the movement in Ukraine,⁸ usually marking their anniversaries (e.g., Pelina 2019), the first scholarly attempts to analyse the movement from within Ukraine largely came from an emic perspective, written by the participants themselves—academics, professional musicians, and ethnomusicologists. These include articles by Larysa Lukashenko (2023, 2025), Iryna Klymenko (2023), a chapter in a collective monograph by Marharyta Skazhenyk (2024), and an article (with a more etic perspective) by Olga Velichkina (2024). In the first four articles, Lukashenko and Klymenko attempted to present the Ukrainian folk revival movement as a succession of revival performers and their followers in subsequent generations. The appearance of these publications in 2023 (and Lukashenko's upgraded version in 2025) indicates that a wave of ethnomusicological interest in the movement in Ukraine emerged shortly after the full-scale invasion. At the same time, although the topic has received increasing attention since 2022, it still occupies a marginal position within Ukrainian ethnomusicology.

8 Ulrich Morgenstern describes a similar movement in Britain that emerged at the same time as the Ukrainian one: "Living practices became the model for style and repertoire. What followed was the golden age of tradition-oriented, fieldwork-based revival of the 1970s and 1980s, driven basically by young enthusiasts with an urban middle class background" (Morgenstern 2019: 18). The difference was that, in Soviet Ukraine, there was no middle class, but rather an educated urban youth, often descendants of the working class.

The main purpose of the aforementioned studies is to chronologically identify and list the ensembles recognised by scholars, the so-called reconstructive performance of fieldwork recordings by professional ethnomusicologists,⁹ and the genres and regional origins of their songs. It is notable that a significant proportion of the ensembles recognised by these authors perform primarily singing traditions. It should also be noted that, during its formative decades, the focus of the revival movement in Ukraine was concentrated exclusively on the ethnic traditions of Ukrainians. In her chapter in the collective monograph, Marharyta Skazhenyk presents the entire Ukrainian folk revival movement as a niche musical phenomenon that sprouted from the first recognised¹⁰ ensemble of singers of “authentic” songs in their original form—the ensemble Drevo, led by Yevhen Yefremov (Skazhenyk 2024). Later ensembles and related activities are considered successors of this pioneering group. Thus, Skazhenyk distinguishes three or four generations of performers, where each successive generation emerges from the students of the previous one (Skazhenyk 2022). This approach views the Ukrainian folk revival of the past fifty years as a single continuous lineage of founders and their followers. This points to certain methodological limitations in the existing literature and highlights the need for further research informed by contemporary international scholarship.

Folk music in urban spaces: On the way from underground counter-culture to mainstream in times of war

The modern folk music revival began either in the late 1960s or the late 1970s (see footnote 10). It emerged in the context of Brezhnev-era Stagna-

9 Today, scholar performers refer to this movement as “reconstructive performance”, which corresponds to the widely recognised term “historically informed performance”. However, for a long period, such performance was termed “secondary”, in contrast to “primary”—that is, so-called “authentic”, or traditional rural performance. The issue of terminology regarding folk revival performance practices in Ukraine—whose theoretical discourse was long under Russian influence and cut off from Anglophone research terminology—is highly relevant today and can only be resolved through specialised, large-scale research.

10 In Ukrainian ethnomusicology, the very first ensemble of folk music revival, which is still active, is considered to be Drevo (founded in 1979) (Drevo n.d.), although researchers abroad trace the beginnings of the movement to the activities of Leopold Yashchenko, a researcher of Ukrainian polyphony, and his folk choir “Homin” (which began its activity at the end of 1960s) (Homin n.d.). The first of the aforementioned musicians were inspired by Dmitrii Pokrovsky’s ensemble, which played concerts in Kyiv, as well as by his fieldwork in Ukrainian villages. The main aim was to adopt the tradition “as it sounded in villages”.

tion. The emergence of the folk movement in Ukraine was part of a general trend of folk movements across Europe. The main aim of fieldwork-based “reconstructive” performance practice was to reintroduce so-called authentic, archaic rural folklore into the urban environment, where it had been “hidden” from the public and replaced with politically supported staged forms of folk music representation, and to return Ukrainian culture to Ukrainians.

In later interviews, participants in this early revival movement recalled that their fascination with folklore arose primarily during fieldwork in the villages in western, northern and central Ukraine, regions well-known for their ritual and lyric folklore performed by open voices polyphonically. They remarked that they had not expected to hear such music, as they had never heard anything stylistically similar before while attending the Kyiv Music Academy. As the composer Alla Zahaikevych said: “Drevo set the trend for performing folk music and adopting rural traditions from various Ukrainian ethnic regions [...]. It is the luxurious singing style of this ensemble that all ethno-singers of each new generation of the traditional community and beyond are guided by” (Khanis 2022). This quotation again indicates that the Ukrainian revival movement is perceived by its initial proponents as the adoption of this tradition of singing by urban ensembles of successive generations. In the words of Drevo’s leader, Yevhen Yefremov, the motivation to perform folk songs “without embellishment” lay in the desire to preserve folk culture in its true form, that is, with an aesthetic approach and a noticeable anti-globalist orientation, and as a countercultural alternative to popular, “spectacular”, and commercial stage culture (Sirenko 2020).

The desire to record, study, and perform folk music in its “pure” form may indicate a tendency towards cultural purism regarding the formation of national identity (which usually manifests itself primarily in language). This is evidence that the shaping of the Ukrainian national idea and identity in the form of counterculture continued more visibly in the 1990s with the advent of independence. Comparable developments in the formation of Ukrainian identity can be observed in other cultural spheres, including literature, theatre, cinema, and television. A significant number of performers representing a pre-industrial type of folk culture in villages, albeit often in a decontextualised form, contributed to the creation of archival collections of folk music recordings in research laboratories during this period. These recordings, together with the researchers’ direct engagement with the bearers of culture, contributed to the rapid development of the folk revival movement and the establishment of ethnomusicologists as important models who had learned to sing directly from village singers during fieldwork.

The difficult economic situation in Ukraine during this period meant that the vast majority of recordings were made either with minimal state support

primarily for educational purposes, or entirely without external funding (from the researchers' own resources), which is why the recordings were typically made on amateur cassette recorders and inexpensive, low-quality media, such as audio cassettes. As a result, most archival material from that time has been preserved in this technically poor format. These collections are now also experiencing a revival, a process that has accelerated during the war due to financial support from various foundations. They are being digitised and placed in the public domain, thereby becoming a principal source for contemporary wartime revivalism and for introducing folk culture to a wider audience.¹¹ Interestingly, among contemporary amateur revival performers, the portable cassette player has become a symbol of authentic folklore and high-quality revival performances, to the extent that some of the newest ensembles now releasing their albums on both streaming platforms and on audio cassettes, despite the limited availability of cassette players today.

Although the formerly underground current of Ukrainian national culture enjoyed greater freedom after 1991 following independence, the country's economic decline did not bring about radical changes. Rather, it was a natural continuation of processes that began in the 1970s, under conditions of greater cultural freedom but persistent economic hardship. The outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in parallel with the development of modern technologies, digital recording, social networks, and online media gave rise to the emergence of entirely different processes and a sharp increase in nationalist sentiment in the country. The appeal of folklore became increasingly relevant, given the need to express national identity and belonging. Ukrainian culture became more popular among younger generations with a strong pro-Ukrainian orientation. Folk motifs could be heard from the concert stage on Kyiv's Independence Square, where the principal events of the Maidan Revolution took place (e.g., the performance of the then-newly formed group Dakh Daughters,¹² who became one of the defining musical symbols of the Maidan). Indirectly, but within the general mood of patriotic uplift, such developments contributed to a flourishing of Ukrainian folk music in various spheres of musical life over the following decade. The subsequent development of the folk revival movement should be considered in the context of the conflict and war that have shaped Ukraine since 2014, during which folklore in urban settings has shifted from an elite subculture

11 For example, the Digital Archive of Folklore of Slobozhanshchyna and Poltavshchyna. Available at: <https://folklore.kh.ua/>; The Electronic Archive of Ukrainian Folklore (with a new, separate collection of digitised folk music recordings from Donbas). Available at: <https://folklore-archive.org.ua/> [2025-12-27], etc.

12 See Sonevysky (2016).

of the intellectual milieu to a wider audience, continuing to evolve amid the rapid strengthening of national identity and solidarity.

Developments in the Ukrainian folk music revival movement since the end of 1960s-1970s

The end of 1960s/1979–1991	<i>Brezhnev-era Stagnation.</i>	Emergence of fieldwork-based folk music revival: the establishment of the movement; development of academic reconstructive performances and ethnographic fieldwork.
1991–(2004)–2014	<i>Independence, economic hardship, the flourishing of Ukrainian identity among intellectuals and in mainstream culture, and the first revolution.</i>	Continuation of fieldwork-based folk music revival: release of studio albums; growing use of folk music motifs in the theatre; expansion of folk music festivals; international performances and workshops.
(2004)–2014	<i>Revolutions. The official shift in geopolitical orientation to the West.</i>	Folk music's increasing relevance in shaping the national idea; greater visibility of folk music performers.
After 2014	<i>Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas.</i>	Emergence of new forms of folk revival; the increasing use of folk music motifs in popular culture (also in the Eurovision contest); the establishment of grassroots initiatives for the popularisation of folk music; amateur participation; grassroots workshops and projects on folk music revival and enlightenment.
After 2022	<i>Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.</i>	Rapid expansion of public interest in folk music; widespread use of folk motifs in different spheres and genres; increasing importance of folk sound as a marker of Ukrainian identity.

Folk music and dance revival: Grassroots initiatives and amateur participation

After the Revolution of Dignity and the start of the conflict in 2013–2014, dramatic changes in Ukraine's geopolitical orientation were evident in culture, particularly in music. New actors began to participate in the folk revival: young, motivated enthusiasts with little experience in folklore but interested in their nation's musical heritage created a public organisation to carry out projects to promote Ukrainian culture. Such civic activism was significant, given that earlier manifestations of the folk revival existed predominantly within higher music education institutions and their infrastructure. Within academia, attracting the national cultural grant funds to carry out independent projects had been impossible due to the inertia of the inherited Soviet bureaucracy there. At the same time, despite a lack of accessible information and resources, a new generation of students were increasingly motivated to learn about the culture of their nation, whose traditions had been suppressed by the previous political regime, leading to a break in their transmission. Drawing on the tools and opportunities offered by contemporary society, they gradually built a new independent infrastructure for their activities.

Thus, during the revolution, the NGO Rys (Ukrainian: Рись), named after the endangered species of lynx, was established in Kyiv. Its activities focused on organising educational and cultural events dedicated to promoting folk music in Ukraine. Its founders, Kateryna Yefremova (Капра) and Andriy Levchenko, successfully obtained grant funding¹³ to create an online course of lectures on traditional music featuring ethnomusicology and ethnology experts from Ukrainian higher education institutions. The course proved highly popular among people interested in folk music. Simultaneously, for the first time in Ukraine, they introduced a series of workshops in traditional singing, folk instrumental performance, and traditional folk dance. These were inspired by the activities of the folk music organisation Fundacja Muzyka Kresów in Poland (where many of the same Ukrainian ethnomusicologist-performers had frequently been invited).¹⁴ This programme continued until the early years of the full-scale war, when it was suspended due to complex organisational and safety conditions. The activities of Rys have stimulated the creation of numerous youth amateur

13 From the Ukrainian Culture Foundation, the first national grant scheme, which was launched in 2017.

14 See the video report of the Rys summer school in 2017. Available at: https://youtu.be/zuE9b_-FHD0?si=kMUOEYaks2IvBSqo [2025-12-27].

singing groups, instrumental ensembles, and folk dance workshops (one of the defining features of the current revival movement).

While young performers in the field of folk singing often attend workshops led by singers from the earlier movement or their students (often organised by Rys), the flourishing of instrumental ensembles is an important feature of the current movement and may be seen as evidence of the growing professionalisation and diversification of its participants. Andriy Levchenko, who became interested in playing the frame drum (*bubon*), began to search independently for village performers of this instrument, built his own collection of historical instruments, and eventually became an instrument maker. Other members of the current revival community have likewise become makers of folk instruments, including fiddles, various wind instruments, and wheel lyres. During the period of Rys's activity, other similar grassroots organisations began to form in Ukrainian cities, including Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kropyvnytskyi, and Chernihiv, promoting the musical traditions of their respective regions. Thus, Rys helped establish a new sphere of activity within Ukrainian folk music revival, namely, cultural management, and sparked a new form of folk revival.

Singing

Around a dozen new singing ensembles have been established in Ukrainian cities, primarily in Kyiv, and some have even been formed abroad. Among their members are students with professional backgrounds in music and ethnology, as well as amateurs who have taken up folk singing for a variety of reasons. These include national self-expression, therapeutic purposes (such as singing as a form of meditation), an attraction to a rustic or slower lifestyle, and historical interest. To a certain extent, women predominate in this field, although male ensembles and male participants in folk singing have also increased in number in comparison with earlier periods of urban folk music revival. The choice of singing repertoire may depend on the season, as teachers hold seasonal workshops, (such as Christmas carols in winter and songs of the Kupala around the Midsummer festivities, etc.), or on specific circumstances (such as the revival of the ritual of seeing young men off to military service). The context of war has also revived interest in nationalistic repertoire in Bohlman's sense (2004: 117–160) of songs associated with the liberation struggles of the early twentieth century. These young performers draw on publicly accessible archives (which were discussed earlier and which contributed to the spread of the current movement), albums released by performers associated with

the previous wave of revival,¹⁵ and, in rare cases, their own fieldwork or transmission from grandparents.

Instrumental music

One of the most striking features of the new form of the folk revival movement is the rapid growth in the number of musicians playing traditional instruments, including ensembles and instrument makers. While the previous revival movement included only a small number of (albeit professional) ensembles or soloists, their number is now increasing every year. Their growth is supported by opportunities to rehearse regularly and to attend courses organised at the Rys rehearsal space. These ensembles include both beginners with a relatively low level of training (who are often criticised by their older colleagues for making their limited skills publicly visible) and performers who, after a long period of amateur involvement in the community, have managed to turn their involvement into a profession, becoming professional musicians or instrument makers. Such ensembles often accompany dance events, which are increasingly popular in urban public spaces. Some have also released their own albums.

One of the major challenges for such musicians is finding archival sources, since instrumental music in Ukrainian villages disappeared more rapidly than singing traditions, while the smaller number of musicians also meant that fewer recordings were made. Ensembles that transformed during the Soviet period, replacing pre-modern instruments with brass instruments and partly replacing their repertoire, are of less interest to revivalists, who tend to regard them as products of Soviet culture.

In this sense, not only the instruments themselves, the composition of ensembles, and their primary function (for dance) are significant for contemporary revival, but also the selection of repertoire. For instance, among the traditional Ukrainian instruments documented as widespread in various regions of Ukraine during the nineteenth century, some ensembles include klezmer music, which is important part of Ukrainian culture. They also revive a genre that was significant for the Ukrainian resistance at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely Ukrainian tango.

15 This option is often ethically problematic, because such recordings incorporate the creative work of the scholars—the fieldwork-based movement. There is also the issue of performing songs in the exact form in which they were recorded in studio (folk music involves variation within a regional style, which singers from the earlier wave are aware of, but amateur performers may not be). This process leads to the selection of individual favourite “hits” that become representative at the national level, as well as to standardisation.

Dance

The revival of Ukrainian folk dance has also gained wider popularity over the past eleven years. The earliest initiatives took place at the Honchar Museum in Kyiv, an important centre for Ukrainian folklore, where Illia Fetysov, leader of the ensemble Bozhychi, conducted workshops on Ukrainian traditional dance and later made recordings of them available online (Shkola n.d.). Subsequently, the museum organised large-scale events under the title “Traditional Dance Night”, inviting the ensembles from different European countries, while also providing a platform for young Ukrainian ensembles. Dancing was also an integral part of traditional music summer schools. In addition, Rys organised New Year’s parties—costume-themed events at which guests could express themselves freely, accompanied by folk music in its traditional rural sound performed by young bands. Traditional dances with live music are now held regularly in public spaces in Kyiv, including pubs and, in summer, parks and squares. The new “Dancing in the Alley” format, which takes place every Thursday in the historic centre of Kyiv (except in bad weather or on official days of mourning), has already become an established event. It has attracted fans and a regular audience with varying levels of dance experience. In the context of these new developments, traditional dance courses have appeared in Kyiv, taught by representatives of the new revival wave. Among them are Pavlyna Zapolska and Yevheniya Shulga, who founded the traditional dance school, Zachepkyha. Interviews with members of this community revealed that, unlike the previous wave of the folk revival, into which people generally entered through singing, for many members of the new generation, dancing seems to offer a more accessible and interesting way of getting involved in the sphere of tradition.¹⁶

Communication, visibility, and venues

According to Morgenstern (2019: 16–17), the issue of the visibility of folk music as a national symbol in the nineteenth century contributed to changes in both instrument types and ensemble composition: pre-modern handcrafted instruments could not always meet the requirements of national movements, while “small heterogeneous ensembles”, were also regarded as inadequate, which also affected repertoire. Nevertheless, the broader European wave of national movements during the Romantic era, followed

16 Interview with Yelyzaveta Kobylanska, 27 June 2025, Kyiv, interview conducted by Anastasiia Mazurenko. Interview with Pavlyna Zapolska, 11 July 2025, Kyiv—Ljubljana (online), interview conducted by Anastasiia Mazurenko.

by twentieth-century modernisation, produced significant changes in folk music practices. These included the emergence of modern top-down movements of staged (“spectacular”) forms of folklore, as well as the changes in instrument types and repertoire, and the politically motivated substitution of genres and lyrics in rural traditions. In the context of the contemporary folk music revival, some new features of visibility can be observed.

Indeed, substituted staged folklore, which continues to exist in Ukrainian culture in the form of state choirs, ensembles, and orchestras, has retained the tendency to replace pre-modern instruments with factory-made ones. Some of these instruments, such as the chromatic bandura, became distinctive symbols of Ukrainian identity after the Soviet era. At the same time, the internet, social networks and other forms of media have created opportunities to increase the visibility of the contemporary revival, bringing pre-modern instruments, such as the pipe and the wheel lyre, into popular culture and positioning them as symbols of national culture, in contrast to the folk practices inherited from the Soviet era.

The shift of the main platform for disseminating information from television to the internet, as well as the active nature of the current movement, has made it more visible, bringing it out of the subculture and into a still niche but more visible segment of mass culture,¹⁷ which has been further enhanced by the search for symbols of national identity during the war. Although performers of the earlier wave of the revival movement remain active in concert, teaching, and research activities, and consider themselves leaders of the Ukrainian folk music revival (Klymenko 2023), the newest wave has come to the forefront of visibility through publications in the world media (e.g., Méheut – Mitiuk 2024), interviews, podcasts, radio broadcasts, performances in public spaces, activities attracting wider audiences, managerial and organisational work, as well as participation in high-profile events. In addition, participants in the current movement, are often both active in civic and political life and come from the younger generation, including students who, in the context of war, boldly combine genres previously considered incompatible, such as folk music and rave. These events take place in locations significant to Kyiv’s rave subculture (Hryshchenko 2019), creating a distinctive mix of musical styles, but often provoking resistance among their predecessors in the field of folk revival. Thus, CMYK folk-rave parties, which have become regular in Kyiv over the last few years and whose organisers have launched their own label, have sparked considerable attention and criticism among representatives

17 For example, some representatives of current revival movement, such as the ensemble ШчукаРиба [Shchuka.Ryba], have made it onto the shortlist for the national selection for Eurovision 2026.

of the previous wave. The relatively tolerant attitude towards the LGBTQI+ community from Kyiv representatives of the current wave of folk revival bears witness to the urban transformation of the tradition, which is selective in certain aspects. Another significant feature of the current wave is its increased interest in the cultures of Ukraine’s ethnic minorities. Members of the movement include activists working to preserve the musical traditions of the multicultural region of Budzhak (South of Ukraine), Crimean music, and the traditions of the Greeks of Ukraine, among others. At the same time, the primary focus of the overwhelming majority of participants remains Ukrainian ethnic culture.

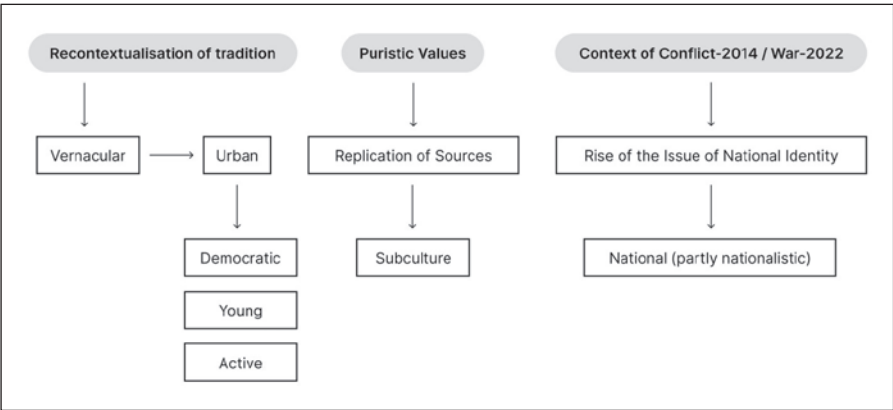


Table 1. A visualisation of the specifics of the current wave of Ukrainian folk music revival.

The revival movement is therefore not as homogeneous as most Ukrainian researchers suggest and cannot be adequately understood by tracing successive generations of performers. With the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, changes in emphasis, practices, participants, modes of communication, visibility, and the organisation of folk revival processes have transformed the movement, shifting it from the academic environment into public spaces and making it more accessible. On the one hand, this reflects the broader dissemination of folk traditions within society; on the other, it signals a shift in their social functions, as Thomas Turino (2008) argues. The earlier revival largely exemplified a presentational type of performance, in which highly proficient professional musicians performed on stage for an audience. By contrast, the current movement is primarily characterised by participatory practices, in which anyone may join in singing or dancing (although instrumental performance generally requires not only the necessary skills but also access to an instrument).

Conclusion

During the conflict in Ukraine, folk music has shifted from an academic and elite subculture into a more widespread movement that has gained greater visibility and popularity, while nevertheless remaining a niche phenomenon whose influence permeates diverse spheres of the country's musical life. Grassroots initiatives, whose importance has grown significantly over the duration of Ukraine's independence and reflects its shift towards democratisation, now also plays a central role in the contemporary folk revival. The movement's increasingly participatory nature and its openness to new musical experiments testify to its qualitative transformation under wartime conditions. By contrast, the tendency towards the depoliticization of the newest waves of folk revival observed in many countries has not yet become a characteristic feature in Ukraine, due to the war and the country's current political agenda. These circumstances shape the essence of contemporary revival movement, influencing its forms of expression and the selection of repertoire, and stimulating the reproduction of specific rituals and genres in the urban context. At the same time, Ukraine's geopolitical reorientation in this period of crisis has required the incorporation of democratic values commonly associated with the West. The movement's opposition to the practices of the staged folklore inherited from the Soviet era demonstrates its counter-cultural character. At the same time, the lack of scholarly attention devoted to the role of state ensembles has created certain competing understandings within society over the right to perform "correct" forms of folklore. Under wartime conditions, when questions of national identity have become more urgent, these disagreements have become increasingly visible in public discourse. Further research into the various forms of folklore representation in the urban environment and how these are perceived by different movement participants and society at large will help to resolve, or at least mitigate, this conflict.

Taken together, the significant role of grassroots practices, the authorities' lack of attention to cultural policy, and the challenging conditions of war currently create a complex and fragmented picture of Ukraine's contemporary musical life, which generally reflects broader social developments in society. Therefore, at this moment, it is difficult to speak of "the creation of all-embracing homeland music" (Ceribašić 2014: 326). Nevertheless, the revival of folk music in urban contexts is clearly playing an important role in this ongoing process.

July 2026

Bibliography

- Bohlman, Philip V. 2004. *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Ceribašić, Naila. 2014. Revivalist articulation of traditional music in war and postwar Croatia. In: Bithell, Caroline – Hill, Juniper (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*. New York: Oxford University Press: 325–349. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765034.013.014>
- Drevo* by Yevhen Yefremov. n.d. [2025-10-21]. Official website of the ensemble. Available at: <https://drevo.etnoua.info/>
- Hill, Juniper – Bithell, Caroline. 2014. An introduction to music revival as concept, cultural process, and medium of change. In: Bithell, Caroline – Hill, Juniper (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*. New York: Oxford University Press: 3–42. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765034.013.019>
- Homin* by Leopold Yashchenko. n.d. [2025-10-21]. Official website of the choir. Available at: <https://homin.etnoua.info/pro-hor-homin/>
- Hryshchenko, Ira. 2019. Yak Nyzhnyoyurkivska stala odnym iz tsentriv nichnoho zhyttya Kyieva [How Nyzhnyoyurkivska Street became one of the centres of nightlife in Kyiv]. *DTF Magazine* [online] [2025-12-29]. Available at: <https://donttakefake.com/yak-nizhnyoyurkivska-stala-odnim-iz-tsentriv-nichnoho-zhittya-kiyeva/>
- Khanis, Nadiia. 2022. Tse buv kaif..., abo shlyakh Ally Zahaikevych u folklori [“That was a thrill...” or Alla Zahaikevych’s path to folklore]. *The Claquers.com* [online]. [2025-10-21]. Available at: <https://theclaquers.com/posts/9169>
- Klymenko, Iryna. 2023. Etnomuzykologia i ruch rewitalizacji muzyki tradycyjnej w Ukrainie i w Polsce: obserwacje porównawcze [Ethnomusicology and the movement to revitalize traditional music in Ukraine and Poland: comparative observations]. *Etnomuzykologia Polska* 5: 129–146.
- Lukaniuk, Bohdan. 2021. Z muzychnoi istorii vyzvolnyh pisen. Problemni narysy [From the musical history of liberation songs. Problem essays]. *Etnomuzyka* 17: 74–105.
- Lukaniuk, Bohdan. 2022. Z muzychnoi istorii vyzvolnyh pisen. Problemni narysy (zakinchennya) [From the musical history of liberation songs. Problem essays (conclusion)]. *Etnomuzyka* 18: 25–64.
- Lukashenko, Larysa. 2023. Rekonstruktyvne vykonavstvo folklore v Ukraini: zarodzhennya, postup, zdobutky (z kintsya 1970-kh rokiv do syohodni) [Revival folk performance in Ukraine: Origins, develop-

- ment, achievements (from the late 1970s to the present)]. *Problems of Music Ethnology* 18: 75–92.
<https://doi.org/10.31318/2522-4212.2023.18.294832>
- Lukashenko, Larysa. 2025. Preconditions, establishment, and development of the folk music revival in Ukraine (late 1970s – early 1990s). *Letonica* 57: 242–272. <https://doi.org/10.35539/LTNC.2025.0057.10>
- Méheut, Constant – Mitiuk, Daria. 2024. As Ukraine rebuilds its identity, folk songs are the new cool. *The New York Times*. [2025-10-21]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/05/arts/music/ukraine-folk-music.html?searchResultPosition=1>
- Morgenstern, Ulrich. 2019. The role and development of musical instruments in European folk music revival and revitalization movements: Some common trends. In: Ambrózová, Jana – Garaj, Bernard (eds.): *Traditional Music and Dance in Contemporary Culture(s)*. Nitra: Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra: 10–27.
- Nahachewsky, Andriy. 2012. *Ukrainian Dance: A Cross-Cultural Approach*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Pelina, Hanna. 2019. Kyivskomu folklornomu hurtu Drevo – 40! [The Kyiv-based folk ensemble Drevo is celebrating its 40th anniversary!]. *Problems of Music Ethnology* 14: 173.
- Ronström, Owe. 1996. Revival reconsidered. *The World of Music* 38, 3: 5–20.
- Rys. *Traditional music NGO*. n.d. [2025-10-21]. Official website. Available at: <https://rysproject.com/>
- Shkola tradytsiinoho tantsiu “Bozhychi”. n.d. *Tradytsiini tantsi Ukrainy* [online]. [2025-10-21]. The series of traditional dance workshops by the ensemble Bozhychi. n.d. Available at: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOYCR1J1IyJKbfHejgtgVyEc4M2_TFQBo
- Sirenko, Liza. 2020. Etnomuzykolog Yevhen Yefremov pro vtratu ta shliakhy zberezhennia ukraiinskykh tradytsii [Ethnomusicologist Yevhen Yefremov about loss and the paths to preserving Ukrainian traditions]. *The Claquers.com* [online]. [2025-10-30]. Available at: <https://theclaquers.com/posts/4463>
- Skazhenyk, Marharyta. 2022. Hurt Drevo ta yoho “parostky”: folklorystychni spivochi hurty Kyieva [Ensemble Drevo and its “sprouts”: folkloristic singing ensembles of Kyiv]. *Kyiv Laboratory of Music Ethnology YouTube channel* [online]. [2025-10-27]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul4ZRfK5sCM&t=236s>
- Skazhenyk, Marharyta. 2024. Folklorystychni hurty Kyieva pershoii chverti XXI stolittya: shlyahy tvorchoii realizatsii [Kyiv folkloristic

- ensembles of the first quarter of 21st century: paths of artistic implementation]. In: *Folk music in Ukraine in the 21st century: performance and pedagogical aspects*. Kyiv: KNUKiM: 175–245.
- Snyder, Timothy. 2022. The Making of Modern Ukraine. *Yale Courses* [online]. [2025-10-28]. Available at: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLh9mgdi4rNewfxO7LhBoz_1Mx1MaO6sw_
- Sonevsky, Maria. 2016. The freak cabaret on the revolution stage: On the ambivalent politics of femininity, rurality, and nationalism in Ukrainian popular music. *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28, 3: 291–314.
- Sonevsky, Maria. 2019. *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Sonevsky, Maria. 2025. Sharovarshchyna: sonic contestations of Ukrainian wildness. In: Beasley-Murray, Tim – Bracewell, Wendy – Murawski, Michal (eds.): *Anti-Atlas: Critical Area Studies from the East of the West*. London: UCL Press: 161–166.
- Stavělová, Daniela – Buckland, Theresa Jill. 2018. Preface. In: Stavělová, Daniela – Buckland, Theresa Jill (eds.): *Folklore Revival Movements in Europe post 1950: Shifting Contexts and Perspectives*. Prague: Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences: 7–17.
- Turino, Thomas. 2008. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press.
- Velichkina, Olga. 2024. Bahatolykyi revaivalizm: pytannia istorii ta terminolohii [Multifaceted revivalism: Issues of history and terminology]. *Problems of Music Ethnology* 19: 107–120.
<https://doi.org/10.31318/2522-4212.2024.19.319767>
- Voloshyna, Iryna. 2023. Petrykivka Painting: Political Implications of Cultural Heritage in Ukraine. *Ethnologies* 45, 1: 113–133.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1111897ar>