INTERVIEW WITH

MARIA SONEVYTSKY

BY
RONALD MEYER

HARRIMAN STAFFER, ALUMNA, POSTDOC, INSTRUCTOR

From left to right: Interview with Odosyia Plytka-Sorokhan, a member of anti-Communist insurgency in 1940s and 50s, and a self-taught musician and songwriter who documented her war experiences in song (Kryvorivinia, Hutsulshchyna, Ukraine, 2009; photo: Oksana Susyak); a nightclub accordion performance; promotional shot for *The Debutante Hour* (2008; photo: Thomas Bayne); background photo of the top of Mount Pip Ivan in Hutsulshchyna (photo: Alison Cartwright).

On launching a career in Ukrainian studies and ethnomusicology.

Ronald Meyer: You've had a pretty amazing year. First, you defended with distinction your dissertation in ethnomusicology at Columbia, then you spent the fall semester as a Mihaychuk Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Ukrainian Studies at Harvard, and you taught a new course this spring for the Harriman Institute as Petro Jacyk Visiting Professor, "Musical Exoticisms of the Former Soviet Union." Could you tell us a little about your dissertation, how you envision making the transition from dissertation to book manuscript, and, finally, how this fed into your new course?

Maria Sonevytsky: Thanks for your kind words. My doctoral dissertation was titled "Wild Music: Ideologies of Exoticism in Two Ukrainian Borderlands" and was a comparative (or contrastive, really) study of competing histories of exoticism as tied into two indigenous groups that are Ukrainian by citizenship: the Hutsuls of the Carpathian Mountains and the Crimean Tatars of Crimea. Currently, I am revising and expanding my dissertation into a book manuscript with the working title, "'Wild Music' on the Margins of Europe: Ukrainian Indigenes and the New Exoticism." At this stage, the revisions have centered on fleshing out a more complete history of the discourse of "civilization and barbarism" in the Slavic world, on deepening the theorization of Ukrainian "indigeneity," and on revisiting some of my field materials from 2008 to 2009. The class that I taught for the Harriman Institute reflects my interest in how "exoticism" or discourses of "otherness" have operated on the territory of the former Soviet Union, which has its own history of liminality and internal colonization that has been tied into "civilizing" missions at different points in modern history. My primary interest lies in how Soviet ideology shaped and reimagined ideas of "civilization" vis-à-vis music and expressive culture in the twentieth century, but we examined earlier examples stretching back to Catherine the Great's conquests in the south of Ukraine and into Crimea.

Celebrating the anniversary of Sergei Paradjanov's film *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* with a song ("Verkhovyna, Hutsulshchynaverk," Ukraine, 2011; photo: Alison Cartwright). Paradjanov's 1964 work was filmed in and around Verkhovyna, where he lived in a cottage, now preserved as a museum, while making the film. It is a Romeo and Juliet story set in Hutsulshchyna and is an iconic representation of that part of the world.

Ronald Meyer: You've had a very Harriman-intense career, starting out as the first Ukrainian Studies Program coordinator in 2003–2004 under Mark von Hagen, and continuing now as Jacyk Visiting Professor. Along the way you contributed an article to *The Harriman Review* on ethnography in Ukraine and have had funding from the Institute for research travel and support for your studies as a junior scholar. I'd be interested to hear how these separate pieces fit together in your academic career.

Maria Sonevytsky: The Harriman Institute has been a wonderful resource for me on campus since I was an undergraduate at Barnard, double majoring in music and Slavic regional studies. I was lucky to have Professor Catharine Nepomnyashchy as my undergraduate mentor, to take rigorous courses with Professors Frank Sysyn, Vitalty Chernetsky, and Mark von Hagen on the history and literature of the region at that formative stage in my scholarly career, and later to work under Mark as the first administrator of the Ukrainian Studies Program. Harriman has also supported me for some short-term trips to Ukraine, both to pursue fieldwork and to attend and participate in scholarly conferences there. Along my path in the pursuit of the Ph.D. through the music department, the Harriman Institute functioned as my second intellectual home and a great support of my various endeavors.

Ronald Meyer: How did you come about writing your blog "My Simferopol Home"? Do you currently write a blog? Where did your fieldwork in Ukraine take you and what exactly was it that you were looking for? Did you find it?

Maria Sonevytsky: While I was conducting fieldwork in Crimea and Western Ukraine, I maintained the "My Simferopol Home" blog as a way to process my experiences, to keep in touch with family and friends, and to share some of my insights and questions with a broader public. Now, I maintain a website (www.mariasonevytsky.com) that functions more as a repository for my projects, gigs, lectures, etc., and less as a site to stimulate exchange and conversation. Depending on where I land down the road, I could imagine starting up another blog, but at the moment, I am too focused on writing, revising, and publishing articles.

My fieldwork experiences in 2008–2009 formed the bulk of my ethnographic research for my dissertation, though I had been conducting fieldwork expeditions in the region since 1999, and

some earlier data made it into the dissertation as well. I knew upon setting out that my fieldwork would take me to Crimea—I was based in the rather unspectacular capital, Simferopol—and to the mountains of Western Ukraine. Over the course of the 18

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months that I spent in the field, I developed and expanded on my network of friends, colleagues, and interview subjects and had a variety of incredibly memorable and significant experiences. These in-the-field experiences—the documentation of musical events, conversations, social occasions—form the backbone of my doctoral work, which theorizes how people today negotiate histories of exoticism that stretch back to previous imperial, social, and political regimes.

Ronald Meyer: In addition to being an academic ethnomusicologist, you're a musician. I know your group *Zozulka* has played at Barbes in Park Slope and that you're involved in some other music-making ventures. And I would definitely like to hear about the all-woman accordion orchestra, how it came into being, where you played. How did this fit in with your M.A. thesis?

Maria Sonevytsky: My M.A. thesis, "The Accordion Project: Narratives in the Social Life of a Music Object" (2006), was an ethnography of 22 accordion players based in New York City and reflects my interests in the intersections of material culture with music in culture, especially related to the history of immigration in the United States. Much like my doctoral dissertation, the M.A. thesis combined ethnography with historical analysis. In it, I advocated for a model of "critical organology" that considers the social history of the musical instrument alongside its morphological and sonic qualities. I published an article in *The World of Music* based on this work in 2008.

The project developed organically, in a sense, related to my own emergence as an accordion player. I had been a serious classical pianist (and oboist), and after graduating from college, I decided to pick up an instrument that would allow me to travel more easily and that would challenge me to play music without using notation, which has always been—and still is—a real crutch for me because of my classical training. Picking up the accordion literally changed my musical life—suddenly, I was being asked to play klezmer tunes for beer-launch parties, play German beer-hall polkas, record "French musette-sounding" solos, or play the piano accordion parts from experimental atonal operatic scores. I fell in with *The Main Squeeze Orchestra* (led by the legendary Walter Kühr), where I spent a few fun years getting comfortable performing in relaxed nightclub contexts, and had an opportunity to flex my arranging muscles. It also got me back into singing, which has become a huge part of my life in the last few years.

Today, my primary musical/performing activities are dedicated to singing traditional village songs from various regions of Ukraine—which I have been doing lately with my new trio *Zozulka* (with Eva Salina-Primack and Willa Roberts), and also to my cabaret-pop trio *The Debutante Hour*, which has been described as the "existential Andrews Sisters." Last March, I also sang in Stravinsky's *Les Noces* with the Brooklyn Philharmonic.

Ronald Meyer: Some of your recent research and publications address musical heritage and activism in Ukraine and Crimean Tatar songs of exile and ideology. How do politics, ideology, and activism inform your work?

Maria Sonevytsky: As the daughter of two post–World War II Ukrainian refugees, I was raised with a real sense of how the political affects our daily lives. My musical interests steered me toward ethnomusicology, a discipline with an illustrious (and sometimes embarrassing) history of activism, where advocacy for underrepresented, discredited, or marginalized musical traditions is given serious, rigorous attention. Since the canonic works of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms are treated with nearly reverential respect in the academy, why shouldn't we take the traditions of indigenes all over the world seriously? Why shouldn't we ask how popular

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music informs and reflects contemporary society? Why shouldn't we ask how music bears upon the political, the ideological, the social?

These are really some of the guiding questions of my approach to the study of music and have been reflected in most of the scholarly work I have done, especially in the two "public ethnomusicology" projects that I have developed since 2008. The first, "No Other Home: The Crimean Tatar Repatriates," was done in collaboration with photographer Alison Cartwright, who documented the lives of Crimean Tatars in Crimea with me in May of 2008. Together, we compiled a multimedia exhibition that merged visual, sonic, and textual representations of an indigenous community that is largely misunderstood and often discriminated against in Ukraine. That exhibition was shown at the Cocani Palace in Bucharest, Romania, at the Ukrainian Museum in New York

From left to right: Deciphering a map of Crimea, 2008 (photo: Alison Cartwright); interview with Petrovychi Hutsul band in Vorokhtka, Hutsulschyna, Ukraine, 2009 (photo: Oksana Susyak); landscape of unfinished homes outside Yevpatoria, Crimea (photo: Alison Cartwright, from the "No Other Home" project); background photo: Hutsul landscape in the snow (photo: Roman Pechizhak).

City, and at the Honchar Ethnographic Museum in Kyiv, Ukraine. The second public ethnomusicology project, "Chornobyl Songs: Living Culture from a Lost World," brought Yevhen Yefremov, the leading ethnomusicologist and master singer from the Kyiv Academy of Music, to New York to train a group of 12 singers in the ritual and secular repertoires of Kyivan Polissia (the Chornobyl Zone). I felt compelled to design such a project in 2011 because it was the 25th anniversary of the traumatic nuclear disaster that uprooted more than 160,000 villagers from a remote and fascinating corner of Ukraine. Through a collaboration of the Yara Arts Group and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, we created a multimedia theatricalized performance that portrayed a year in song. We recorded the project as a document of our work in late 2011, and that record will be released this year through Smithsonian Folkways.

Ronald Meyer: A typical interview question for an assistant professor: Please tell us about your second book.

Maria Sonevytsky: The performance-based "Chornobyl Songs Project" that I initiated in 2011 is rapidly developing into a substantial research project that looks at the confluence of late Soviet social movements that hinged on ideas of "nature" and the natural: the nascent environmental movement and "econationalism," the reemergence of Native Faith or neopagan beliefs, and the explosion of interest in "authentic" (meaning precolonial, pre-Soviet) village folklore. All three of these phenomena gain steam and coherence as a result of the nuclear disaster that occurred on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR in 1986, and I am in the process of researching how these three movements overlapped, mutually enforced, and gave credence to a certain kind of Ukrainian identity that was emergent in the last years of the Soviet Union.

Ronald Meyer: What's your family background? Did you speak Ukrainian at home? Was Ukrainian culture a big part of family life?

Maria Sonevytsky: Yes, both of my parents were staunch Ukrainian patriots who had been uprooted, as children, from Western Ukraine during World War II. They had parallel stories: both lived in displaced persons camps after the war in Germany and Austria, both immigrated to Canada (my mother's family) and the U.S. (my father's family) between 1949 and 1952. I spoke Ukrainian exclusively until I started school, so much so that I spent kindergarten in an ESL program along with other immigrant children, though I was actually born and raised in Yonkers. My maternal grandmother, whose English never improved past the level of pleasantries, was one of my primary caregivers in my childhood, which further reinforced the need to speak Ukrainian. I grew up attending weekly "Uki school" and church services in Yonkers, the East Village, and later, Washington, D.C. In "Uki school," we took part in declamation competitions, where we had to memorize and recite the poems of the Romantic poet-hero Taras Shevchenko. Typical Ukrainian diaspora upbringing: folk dancing, folk singing, folk arts, summer PLAST camp. As a child, I could not make sense of why this Ukrainian stuff was important, but when we first returned to Ukraine in 1991, when I first met my family there, and later, when I really began to make friends in Ukraine, it all fell into place. Now, I am so grateful that my parents were as strict as they were because it has shaped and given meaning to who I am personally and also professionally.

Postscript, May 2013: Maria will be a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Toronto's Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies in 2013–2014. The following year she will assume her duties as assistant professor of music at Bard College.