

Virlana Tkacz presents series on master bandura player Julian Kytasty

by Ihor Slabicky

NEW YORK – Besides her productions in New York City at the LaMaMa ETC and The Ukrainian Museum, Virlana Tkacz, the acclaimed director of the Yara Arts Group in New York, has created a series of virtual events that have been streamed over social media. The most recent is the four-part series “Julian Kytasty – Master Bandura Player,” which is part of her “Ukrainian Culture in America” project.

Ms. Tkacz’s latest work offers a reflection on Julian Kytasty, one of the world’s premier bandura players. With Mr. Kytasty and many guests, the series also presents a retrospective of the bandura in the diaspora.

As a performer, recording artist, composer and ensemble leader, Mr. Kytasty has redefined the possibilities of the bandura. His discography includes tributes to the bandura’s deep tradition, innovative ensemble recordings, world music collaborations, a duo with free improvisation master Derek Bailey, electroacoustic projects, and his solo instrumental recording “Nights in Banduristan.”

He has written music for theater, modern dance and film, including an award-winning score for the National Film Board of Canada’s feature documentary, “My Mother’s Village.” His work on Yara Arts Group’s “1917-2017” earned two New York Innovative Theatre Awards for best original score and best musical. In 2021, Mr. Kytasty was awarded the title Honored Artist of Ukraine.

With narration by Ms. Tkacz, the first episode in the series, “The Kytasty Family,” explores the history of the Kytasty family, their entwinement with the bandura while still in Ukraine, and how they, and the bandura, came to America, where they transmitted the bandura tradition through the generations and became the most famous proponents of the instrument in the United States.

Included are a number of bandura performances from the 1960s and 1970s by members of the Kytasty family, among them Ivan, Petro, Hryhoriy and Julian, including a rare 1937 recording of “Vyazanka” by the Kyiv Bandura Capella.

Mr. Kytasty recounts the lessons and traditions he received from various member of his family, going back to his grandfather, Ivan, who heard the itinerant bandura players as they traveled throughout Ukraine. He also got lessons from his father, Petro, who taught Mr. Kytasty the traditional and historic solo bandura repertoire, as well as motivation from Hryhoriy Kytasty.

Surrounded by such great talents, Mr. Kytasty could not help but become a bandurist. Irene Kytasty Kuzma, a renowned bandura player in her own right and founder of the Women’s Bandura Ensemble of North America, tells of her growing up under the musical influence of their parents and relatives. Alina Kuzma speaks about her own music and of being of the fourth generation of bandura players from the Kytasty family. The episode ended with her inspired performance of the song “Koly ne Bulo” (When it wasn’t).

“Bandura in Diasporas” covers the presence of the bandura in the Ukrainian diaspora, including in New York, Canada, Argentina, Brazil and in the Kuban. Mr. Kytasty recounts the development of his own repertoire and arrangements, working with the New York School of Bandura and forming the group Homin Stepiv, his musical



Julian Kytasty and Solomiya Moroz performed during the show “Out of the Studio: Process and Practice” held at The Ukrainian Museum on May 12, 2017.

expeditions to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the Ukrainian colonias in the Brazilian towns of Prudentopolis and Curitiba. He noted that his presence there started the modern era of bandura playing in Buenos Aires.

Mr. Kytasty was joined by Oles Berehoviyy in Buenos Aires who discusses the Capella Banduristiv, founded by Vasyl Vechorak, that has been a presence there for over 60 years. Mr. Kytasty discusses how he acquired a bandura made by Yosyp Snizhnyi, who escaped from Siberia via Manchuria and Shanghai and arrived in Argentina 1948; he still plays that instrument.

Musical treats in the episode include videos from 1989, when, as part of a bandurist trio, Mr. Kytasty made his first concert tour to Ukraine. In Krasnodar, Kuban, the trio rendered a heart moving “In the Year 1791,” recounting the exile of the Cossacks from the Sich. In a film segment from the Chervona Ruta Festival in 1989, Mr. Kytasty solos “Duma pro Pravdu i Nepravdu” (Thoughts about truth and untruth). It was an astounding and heroic performance, considering the theme of the song and that it was performed during the Soviet era.

Episode three, “Reexamining the Bandura Tradition,” follows Mr. Kytasty’s return to the deep traditions of Ukrainian ritual songs and traditional bandura songs. He recounts his collaborations with Alexis Kochan and the ensemble Paris to Kyiv. The formation of the Experimental Bandura Trio (with Mike Andrec and Jurij Fedynsky) explores 20th century modernist musical styles and influences played on the bandura.

Mr. Andrec joins the conversation, covering the origins of the Experimental Bandura Trio, his compositions and influences. Mr. Kytasty relates performing as a solo artist, his work with the Bandura Downtown concert series, performing for over 10 years at The Ukrainian Museum in New York City, and the cross-cultural “Night Songs from a Neighboring Village” project with Michael Alpert.



Julian Kytasty performed on January 26, 2018, in Boston.

Dan Kahn in Hamburg, Germany, recounts those recording sessions. Joined by Volodymyr Voyt from Kyiv, Mr. Kytasty discussed his playing the Kharkiv-style bandura and the influences of Zynoviy Shtokalko. Musical examples include selections from Paris to Kyiv, “Mosaic” written by Mr. Andrec, and “Adam and Eve” arranged and performed by Messrs. Kytasty and Alpert.

The final episode, “Yara Arts Group,” is about Mr. Kytasty, the musical director of the Yara Arts Group since the late 1990s. At that time, Ms. Tkacz began a deep immersion into traditional music, both Ukrainian and that of other cultures, and the creations of musical dialogues with musicians from different backgrounds.

Mr. Kytasty talks about his method of using the bandura as the perfect instrument for accompanying the spoken word and actors on stage, how the sound envelope of the bandura pulls in the listener, how it controls time on stage to bring actors’ poetry and music all into the same space; these techniques are incorporated by him into the works produced by Ms. Tkacz.

The video selections from various Yara Arts Group theater pieces exemplify how his techniques enhance and intensify these performances. Joined by Volodymyr Klyuzko from Kyiv, they discussed their works together. A special treat is their collaborative “Bandura Ping Pong” video from 2014. In it, they randomly drop ping pong balls on the strings of a bandura. Watching their hands, they seem to be playing some sort of game; the result is a selection of very intriguing music.

This virtual event is but the most recent produced by Ms. Tkacz. They are all available on the web at <https://www.yaraartsgroup.net/virtualevents>. There are links to related series on bandura players Tania Vovk (presented in 2021) and Zynoviy Shtokalko (2020), the World Epic Songs Festival (2020), and the Old and New World Music Festival (2021).