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The Best in World Music

Ethno-Chaos: DakhaBrakha Reinvents Ukraine's Unsung Roots Music With Global Finesse

Rockpaperscissors Bio for DakhaBrakha

A shadowy procession to the pounding of drums, to the murmur of a cello, morphs into an anthem, an invocation, a wild and wacky breakdown. Drones and beats, crimson beads and towering black lambs-wool hats all serve as a striking backdrop for an unexpected, refreshingly novel vision of Eastern European roots music. This is the self-proclaimed "ethno-chaos" of Ukraine's **DakhaBrakha**, a group that feels both intimately tied to their homeland, yet instantly compelling for international audience.

"We just want people to know our culture exists," muses Marko Halanevych of DakhaBrakha, the remarkable Kyiv-based ensemble that has broken down the tired musical framework for Ukrainian traditional music. "We want people to know as much as possible about our corner of the world."

The quartet does far more than introduce Ukrainian music or prove it is alive and well. They craft stunning new sonic worlds for traditional songs, reinventing their heritage with a keen ear for contemporary resonances. With one foot in the urban avant-garde theater scene and one foot in the village life that nurtured and protected Ukraine's cultural wealth, DakhaBrakha shows the full fury and sensuality of some of Eastern Europe's most breathtaking folklore.

Refined yet saucy, eerie yet earthy, Ukrainian music has languished in relative obscurity, though its achievements are diverse and sophisticated: complex polyphonic singing with interlocking lines so tight the ears buzz, long and philosophical epics, humorous ditties, instrumental virtuosity, and raucous dance tunes. Ritual and ribaldry, urbane composition and rural celebration, Asian influences and Western harmony all combined to give contemporary musicians a true wealth of potential sources.

DakhaBrakha knows these sources well: the three female vocalists have spent many summers traveling around Ukraine's villages collecting songs and learning from elder women in remote areas. Like these village tradition-bearers, they have spent years singing together, a fact that resonates in the beautifully close, effortlessly blended sound of their voices. Marko grew up steeped in village life, and draws on his rural upbringing when contributing to the group.

Yet the young musicians and actors were determined to break away from purist recreations and from the stale, schmaltzy, post-Soviet remnants of an ideology-driven folk aesthetic. Urged on by Vladyslav Troitsky, an adventuresome theater director at the DAKH Center for Contemporary Art, a cornerstone of the Kyiv arts underground, the group resolved to create something radically different. They wanted to experiment, to discover, to put Ukrainian material in a worldly context, without divorcing it from its profound connection to land and people. That's why tablas thunk and digeridoos rumble, filling out DakhaBrakha's sound, and yet never overshadow the deeply rooted voices and spare, yet unforgettable visual aesthetic.

"The beginning was pretty primitive," recalls Halanevych. "We tried to find rhythms to match the melodies. We tried to shift the emphasis of these songs. We know our own material, our native music

well, yet we wanted to get to know other cultures and music well. We started with the Indian tabla, then started to try other percussion instruments. But we didn't incorporate them directly; we found our own sounds that helped us craft music."

Through this experimentation and repurposing of instruments from other cultures to serve DakhaBrakha's own sound, the band was guided by the restraint, the elemental approach that owed a debt to the emotionally charged minimalism of Phillip Glass and Steve Reich.

"At the same time as we explored ethnic music, we got interested in minimalism, though never in a way that was literal or obvious," Halanevych explains. "The methods of minimalism seemed to us to be very productive in our approach to folk. The atmospheric and dramatic pieces that started our work together were created by following that method."

This mix of contemporary, cosmopolitan savvy and intimacy with local traditions and meanings cuts to the heart of DakhaBrakha's bigger mission: To make the world aware of the new country but ancient nation that is Ukraine. "It's important to show the world Ukraine, and to show Ukrainians that we don't need to have an inferiority complex. That we're not backward hicks, but progressive artists. There are a lot of wonderful, creative people here, people who are now striving for freedom, for a more civilized way of life, and are ready to stand up for it."