Art Music

DakhaBrakha: Bringing the Sound of Ancient Ukraine Into 2020 Focus

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By **Oskar Smith** - November 9, 2020

Hailing from Kyiv, Ukraine, World music outfit DakhaBrakha see themselves as ambassadors for their culture, which influences everything from their name ("Give/Take" in Ukrainian) to their outfits. They aim to keep Ukrainian musical and storytelling tradition alive by making it more accessible to a younger, international audience. The result – a musical melting pot described as "ethno-chaos" – bursts at the seams with rhythms, instruments and stylistic effects from across the globe. The question is, have they forsaken their goal in pursuit of this international sound?

Ukraine, as a country, hasn't had the easiest time of it. Formed in 1917 at the tail end of the First World War, it sits next to Russia amidst constantly changing borders and turbulent shifts of power. Despite gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 the nation remains divided, with a largely western faction relishing independence while many in the east yearn to rejoin the USSR.

Ukrainian's culture remains largely off the map. Once the musical heartland of the Soviet empire, its contribution to music remains somewhat unacknowledged and even within the country folk songs are sometimes eschewed by traditional ensembles. Many within Ukraine see their cultural identity as being under threat, a situation not helped by Russian attitudes towards their independence.

"We thank God and all the generations of people who have fought for our independence and took part in keeping of our songs, language and our traditions."

DakhaBrakha

While DakhaBrakha choose to stay away from overtly political themes, their simple goal of having Ukraine's voice be heard could be considered rebellious by certain countries. '*Considering that Ukraine has a big neighbour which thinks that even the existence of our country is a historical misunderstanding*' collaborator Marko Galanevych says, '*every one of our concerts abroad can be regarded as a political act in itself*.' DakhaBrakha certainly make a statement with their appearance, donning striking head-to-toe outfits based on various ethnic cultures.

You can see an example of these outfits and hear them talk for themselves about what they're trying to achieve in the video below.

"For over three hundred years Ukraine didn't exist on the political world map… The task we set ahead of us now is to reveal Ukraine to the world and more importantly to ourselves – Ukrainians."

DakhaBrakha

The theatrical aspect of DakhaBrakha comes from their origin. They formed in 2004 under the mentorship of theatre director Vladyslav Troitskyi and were initially just the house band at the avant-garde *Dakh* theatre in Kyiv, an experience to which they attribute to the darkly theatrical tone of their first two albums. Since then they've toured the globe but still regard the *Brakh* theatre as their spiritual home and primary rehearsal space.

Despite incorporating an international plethora of instruments from African drums to the Didjeridoo, DakhaBrakha remain firmly rooted in the sound of Ukraine, featuring instruments like the harmonica, *Garmoshka* (an accordion typical of the surrounding areas) and *Zhaelika*, (a single-reed horn instrument that sounds not unlike the bagpipes). They also incorporate the Ukrainian vocal style known as "*white voice*", a singing style that utilises the tight register at the top of the chest with an open throat to create a uniquely resonant tone.

The instruments and techniques are not the only traditional feature of DhakaBrakha's music. Ancient folk tropes such as **ostinato** (a repeated pattern of notes) and **drones** pop up repeatedly, and rhythms from cultures around the world are featured throughout, such as the African inspired polyrhythms in *Козак* and infectious samba groove of *Русалочки*. Their lyrics are derived almost exclusively Ukrainian folk tales, and nonstandard pitches and scales are used to create breathtaking harmonies unlike anything you're likely to hear on UK radio.

DakhaBrakha's discography strikes me as something of a samplers paradise. If you understand this way of listening to music you may have an inkling of what you'll hear from them: incredible individual performances making up a tight ensemble, beautifully recorded and mixed by some talented hands. Despite much of their work being entirely acoustic it appeals to me in the same way that electronic music does, creating a unique sound and headspace out of novel sounds.

For me, some of the most memorable of these individual performances come from the cello, who's Eastern European equivalent *(*the *basolio)* has been used in Ukrainian folk music for centuries. Played by the inestimably talented Nina Garenetska, the cello is one of the constants of the DakhaBrakha ensemble, spanning all six of their albums. Garenetska explores the range of the cello not only through the rich variety of tones produced across its register but by employing a plethora of playing techniques, from plucked bass in tracks like *Dostochka* to a sliding call-and-response lead in *Zainka*, to whatever horsehair-based madness is happening in *Vanyusha* to create such a chilling variety of tones.

More traditional roles for the cello aren't ignored however and it's employed for folk features such as ostinato and drones to underpin the ensemble, such as in *Весна чілі*. Even aside from its striking appearance this is no ordinary cello. It has a unique tuning created solely by **Garenetska** that the other musicians work around. The reason for this? Garenetska found an old cello and didn't know how to tune it correctly. She's not a trained cellist, and her wild punky approach to the instrument reflects her unique position.

Many of the performers in DakhaBrakha are not trained in the instruments they play. While three of them have a background together in Ukrainian folk singing they had never touched an instrument until the formation of DakhaBrakha, and the world elements in their sound come from music shown to them that they enjoyed, not a

cautiously studied approach. Their musical process has a decidedly punk ethos: pick it up and play it; if it sounds good, it's in. As collaborator Marko Galanevych says, '*It's very naive, minimalist. It's not virtuoso*'.

As with the cello, the vocals span a broad variety of tones. One of the most prominent of these is the "*white voice*", who's distinctly rich tone that can be heard throughout DakhaBrakha's discography. The tone isn't the only traditional vocal feature, however. Ukrainian folk music often utilises close four part harmonies (such as those heard at the start of "Dostockhka") and duophonically improvised melodies, where a single lead line is sung with slight variation by multiple singers creating a rich, shifting harmony. *Ягудки* showcases this very well, along with tight harmonies and the rich throaty ornamentation that the "white voice" can create. Later in their discography rapping, spoken word and non-traditional singing are also incorporated into their sound.

"It's very naive, minimalist. It's not virtuoso"

Marko Galanevych

Perhaps my favourite track that reflects DakhaBrakha's traditional roots is *Vesna* from their 2004 album *Nah Mezhi*. It begins with a droning accordion pattern and builds up into a pounding percussion ensemble before dropping out into a wordlessly uplifting vocal ostinato. This then builds up to a four part harmony typical of Ukrainian folk before giving way for one of the most poignantly beautiful melodies I've ever heard; a vocal line that seems to defy western tonality, shifting chromatically through modes and accidentals to create a hauntingly evocative musical moment that sounds unlike anything I've heard before.

While DakhaBrakha's first two albums stick close from their traditional roots, their third studio album *Light* (2010) signified a major shift to their sound, embracing technology and elements of western pop to create something less theatrical and more suitable for home listening. One instantly recognisable shift is a change in language: the album title, several track names and some of the lyrics are now in English.

Sukhyl Dub, the first track on the album, fuses Jamaican and Ukrainian elements in the *Garmoshka,* which takes over from the electric guitar in playing "*skank*" chords, the often offbeat electric guitar part used in reggae and dub to accentuate the rhythm. A slew of vocal styles are also used in the track with chants, spoken word and Ukrainian choral sections sitting next to each other. In keeping with the dub aesthetic the voices each have distinct space within the mix, with overt electronic effects used to create an artificial soundstage.

DakhaBrakha have a habit of linking ancient and modern and *Karpatskyl Rep* is a prime example of this. The track opens with a melody sung in that familiar "white voice" over a didjeridoo before dropping into a vocal style that definitely didn't originate in a village in Ukraine: rapping. The lyrics, although relayed in this contemporary style, come from an old Ukrainian folk tale, creating something rooted in village culture that wouldn't sound out of place on a festival stage. As with *Sukhyi Dub*, DakhaBrakha fully embrace the culture while adding their own touch, eschewing traditional percussion for a hip hop beat played on a drum kit accompanied by the *Garmoshka* and a chorus sung in "*white voice*".

While DakhaBrakha avoid the hip hop tradition of sampling drum hits in *Karpatskyi Rep* the same cannot be said for *Tjolky*, an unashamedly brutal mix of heavy electric bass, weighty drums and sampled sirens. DakhaBrakha show again how thin the divide between ancient and modern techniques really is, with chants and traditional vocal lines fitting naturally with the noughties hip-hop aesthetic. We're so used to electronic music sampling other cultures, it seems, that when other cultures take an electronic aesthetic it sounds instantly familiar.

Another feature of *Light* which will sound familiar to many is the language: it is, to my knowledge, DakhaBrakha's first release that features lyrics sung in English. It's perhaps no coincidence that *Baby* is their

number one track on Spotify, with English lyrics, electric piano and plucked bass coming together over a slow groove that creates a sound familiar to many of us. The expressively crooning "*white voice*" is present from the start, fitting comfortably around the drum kit, piano and harmonica. With verses in Ukrainian sung in tight harmony over the ensemble there's no doubt that this track plays its role in spreading Ukrainian sound and culture. Crucially, the transition from Ukrainian verse to English chorus is seamless, beautiful even, proving again that ancient folk has its place in modern repertoire.

One of my favourite tracks on the album is the unashamedly electronic *Please Don't Cry*. As I've said, DakhaBrakha appeal to my electronic taste due to the unfamiliar sounds and resultant soundscapes but *Please Don't Cry* takes this to the next level, using delay, reverb and Ukrainian vocals to create an artificial soundstage that sounds truly otherworldly. With this penultimate track followed by *Buvayte Zdorovi* , a haunting trip-hop-esque sonic journey with some of the most sublime cello lines I've heard to date, *Light* finishes on a chilling, atmospheric high.

Light signified three major changes to DakhaBrakha's sound. Firstly, traditional percussion was no longer the *de facto* rhythm provider, and although it's still used extensively in their later work it often serves as back up for a drum kit or machine. Secondly, sampling and overt electronic effects took on a more prominent role. While these were used in DakhaBrakha's first two albums they were subtle and tended to highlight the folk nature of the music, with the sound of wind and almost unnoticeable delays echoing the traditionally outdoor setting. The third change is the embracing of modern international instrumentation such as the piano, guitar and drum kit. While this could be seen as a cynical sell out of their vision to spread authentic Ukrainian culture, the argument doesn't stand up next to the plethora of traditional sounds and styles featured. DakhaBrakha take sounds from all over the world and incorporate them, and western pop is no different.

Khemleva Project, DakhaBrakha's fourth studio album and follow up to *Light*, returns on a surface level at least to the more traditional style of the first two albums. There are definite differences between them however, with a drum kit, electric guitar and electronic bass tones playing a backup role to the more overtly traditional elements. The modern elements of this album may have been influenced by their teaming up with "Port Mone", a Belarusian trio who, like DakhaBrakha, incorporate an eclectic mix of styles into their sound.

While *Light* was arguably the crux of modernisation for DakhaBrakha in terms of instrumentation and effects, they continued to push their sound forward in *Khemleva Project*'s *Tonke Derevo* by exploring a new musical form that would (literally) put them in a new space: house music.

It's perhaps no surprise that DakhaBrakha's collaboration with a similarly eclectic trio spurred their foray into house. It's a fairly forgiving genre, based on a simple 4/4 beat over which any number of rhythms can work, and due to a long history of synthesis and sampling has an audience generally accepting of exotic or unheard sounds. *Tonke Derevo* is an impressive [song] for sure and showcases DakhaBrakha's diverse sound in a genre that has whole spaces dedicated to it. While the first entry of the "white voice" is a bit jarring on first listen it comes together well and the modern format and ancient instruments blend together seamlessly. With a squelchy didjeridoo reminiscent of a 303 and simple accordion chords that bring to mind classic 60s string machines, the first minute of the track sounds largely like an old house tune, albeit a very cultured one. It's a mixture of soothing and energetic, and well worth a listen.

While not as obvious as the electronic carnage of *Please Don't Cry*, the structure of the tune is an undeniable step forward for music rooted in a culture spanning back millennia. The house layout is clearly followed, with defined sections in a 16 bar structure, percussion that builds over time and a 4/4 drum beat underpinning a funky bass loop. So smooth is the blend between the style that I'm once again questioning whether ancient and modern music is really so different. What is a bass loop, after all, other than a high-tech ostinato? One

technique that really highlights this marriage of tradition and technology for me is the use of delay on the drums, which feeds back into itself in dub-like fashion to create a drone, recreating a function as old as music itself with technology invented in the 40s.

While it's not their most popular track, I would argue that in the context of spreading Ukrainian culture it could be their most successful. It combines a familiar, forgiving format attached to a huge fanbase with a plethora of Ukrainian instruments and techniques – even the elusive *zhaleika* gets a look in – and furthers their goal to unite sounds from across the world. If it draws a few club kids and house fans into their discography more power to them.

Three years after *Khemleva Project* was released, Ukraine ousted their elected prime minister Viktor Yanukovych in the "Revolution of Honour" ushering in a new wave of Ukrainian music. Two years later DakhaBrakha released *The Road*, dedicated to those who had given their lives to safeguard Ukraine's independence.

Up until *The Road* (2016) each of DakhaBrakha's previous albums felt like they had a unique identity. *Yahudky* and *Nah Mezhi* plated up a theatrical taste of Ukraine with tribal rhythms borrowed from other cultures. *Light* moved away from the dark, theatrical tone, incorporating modern pop and western electronic elements while still leaning on traditional instruments and melodies and *Khemleva Project* displayed how two avant-garde collectives could combine their sound into something to create something greater.

The change that *The Road* brings to the table is subtle – nothing as in-your-face as the blatant sonic tumult of *Light* – but significant, laying a blueprint for future releases. Geographical influences no longer seem overt and instead blend together into a single sound palette, creating an intriguing cultural enigma that goes beyond a simple combination of geographically disparate elements. *The Road* seems to show a maturation of DakhaBrakha's all-inclusive ethos, as if they've found the sounds they love and now look to consolidate them in new and beautiful ways.

Чумак is one of these enigmas. With jazzy drum brushes, Ukrainian singing and a didjeridoo riff the track seems to have one foot firmly planted in Ukraine while the other treads lightly through Australia and America. The plucked string riff sounds like it could come from any part of the world, laying down a pensive ostinato that reflects the sombre message of the album.

My favourite track on *The Road* is Монах. The music has an obvious American influence, with rapping and spoken word over a hip hop beat, but this doesn't feel intrusive. The hip hop element sits perfectly in the tune with a beautiful "white voice" melody over a backdrop of rapping, piano and cello, and it seems as if there's no single dominant element or cultural influence to it. It's beautifully uplifting and like Чумак this track feels like it belongs nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

Not long after the release of *The Road*, DakhaBrakha's music was included in the American TV series "Fargo", bringing it to an audience of over a million. Soon after, Шо з-под дуба, a track grounded in Ukrainian folk from roots to aesthetic, featured in David Beckham's 2018 aftershave advert. Clearly they were doing what they'd set out to do: introduce the world to the sound of Ukraine.

Against this backdrop we have the groups latest release, *Alambari (2020)*. The aesthetic is undoubtedly Ukrainian with the cello, *garmoshka* and "white voice" playing a prominent role, but other instruments are clearly present, providing a contemporary backdrop to the traditional melodies. In typical DakhaBrakha fashion the album's tone ranges widely, the upbeat freneticism of *Lado* contrasting perfectly with the chirpy *Vynnaya Ya* while the darkly spacious title track *Alambari* harks back to the ominous, theatrical sound of their early work.

As with *The Road,* the classical minimalist influence of composers like Philip Glass can be heard, with broken chords and snippets of melody appearing through the album.

One of my favourite tracks off this album is the wistful *Dostochka*, in which a plaintive "white voice" melody sits atop Ukrainian choral singing and a plucked cello bass line. The piano is sprinkled here and there while the drum kit plays a simple, unobtrusive rhythm in the background. It feels fresh but grounded in tradition, as if their music has taken on a life of its own while still paying homage to its roots.

With *Alambari* the group's sound seems to have developed into more than just the sum of its parts, creating a musical identity that can only be described as "DakhaBrakha": universal music, brought together from around the world and seamlessly integrated with Ukrainian folk. "Ethno-chaos?" I think they're past that. It's "ethno-harmony" now.

With numerous international tours under their belt, placement in films and adverts showing around the world and over 100,000 monthly global listeners on Spotify alone, I think it's fair to say that DakhaBrakha have succeeded in spreading Ukrainian music and culture around the world.

Illustration by Hollie Joiner

Song links are all active on original website:

https://mouthingoffmagazine.com/dakhabrakha-ukraine-world-music/