

# Musical Ancestries: Ukraine Script

NARR:       Nine-year old Veronika likes going to school and learning new things. She does well in most of her classes, likes sports, and especially enjoys being with her friends. General music is her favorite class, because she sings well and her friends keep telling her she's the best dancer in school.

But above everything else, Veronika loves her Grandfather – her “**Didus**”. (That's an affectionate nickname, kind of like “Grampa.”) He is from Ukraine, and speaks with a beautiful accent that – to her – means strength, warmth and gentle humor. Almost every weekend they spend time together while her Mom and “**Babusya**” (Veronika's Grandma) visit, cook or run errands. Meanwhile, Veronika and Didus explore whatever fascinating subjects happen to come up.

One day, Veronika mentioned something to Didus that opened up a whole new world for them to share.

VERON:       Didus Ilya! Yesterday in school, our teacher told us there's a Ukrainian dance company in Canada that's planning to go on tour, and stopping HERE! I got really excited, and told my class that *you* were from Ukraine.

DIDUS:       Really? Where in Canada?

VERON:       I don't remember, but their name was...Cherry-something?

DIDUS:       **Cheremosh?**

VERON:       That's it! Cheremosh! You know them?

DIDUS:       I do. They're from the city of Edmonton in Alberta. They're one of the leading Ukrainian Dance Companies in Canada. They were founded by a Ukrainian couple back in the 1960s and they're named for the Cheremosh River in Ukraine.

Their Artistic Director and Ballet Master, Mykola Kanevets, was with the very famous **Virsky** Studio in Kyiv.

VERON: You've told me about Virsky. Didn't you play with their orchestra?

DIDUS: Yes... for a couple of years before I came here to the States. The **Pavlo Virsky Ukrainian National Folk Dance Ensemble**... Aaahh! What dancers and choreography! They've shared the beauty and tradition of Ukrainian folk dance with people all around the world. Want to hear a recording?

VERON: Oh yes, PLEASE!

NARR: Didus explained that **Pavlo Virsky** founded the State Folk Dance Ensemble of the Ukraine SSR with Mykola Bolotov in 1937. They developed a program of staged folk dances. Two years later, when World War II broke out, many performers, including Virsky, were enlisted in the military to entertain the troops. There, he continued his folk-themed choreography, becoming the artistic director of the Red Army Song and Dance Ensemble's dancers in 1942.

He did that for many years. Then, in 1955, Virsky returned to Kyiv to direct his original group, and continued his groundbreaking work in Ukrainian folk-stage dance. He founded a school to train dancers in his technique, and toured the world with them. Not only did he celebrate the historical traditions, he used innovative and forward-moving dance as well, with thrilling results.

DIDUS: Virsky and his dancers influenced the world so deeply that the state ensemble was renamed in his honor, the **Pavlo Virsky Ukrainian National Folk Dance Ensemble**. There are other companies, too, one of the finest being the **National Honored Academic Dance Ensemble of Ukraine**

VERON: Tell me about the dances, Didus. How many are there?

DIDUS: Well, there are several, but let's focus on the **Hopak** and the **Kolomyika**.

The Hopak is the national dance of Ukraine... and probably the best-known outside of Ukraine, too. Originally it was a male dance, but later was danced by couples, male soloists, and mixed groups of dancers. In its purest form, the hopak itself doesn't have a fixed pattern of steps. Men improvise steps and athletic moves – almost like a competition. The women dance simpler steps, and sway, clap, or circle.

In more formal dance ensembles, this is danced like a ballet. They use colorful folk-style costumes, which make the men's athletic dance moves seem all the more dramatic.

NARR: There are variations, but basically, the hopak costumes are based in the traditional folk dress. The ladies' has an embroidered shirt with long sleeves that blouse at the wrist (often called "poet" sleeves), an embroidered slip, covered with a wrap-around skirt called a platka, plus an apron ... a sash, if you're not wearing a vest... or a long embroidered vest. Red beads are worn around the neck. This is completed with large flowered headbands that have long, colorful ribbons flowing down the back. They wear flexible red leather shoes or boots, similar to the men's boots. The women often dance in lines or pair off with other ladies or gentlemen. An occasional solo spices things up.

For the hopak, the gentlemen also wear white "poet" shirts, embroidered down the front, with a long red sash and full pants that drape down over the tops of the red leather boots. The loose trousers flow and enhance the motion as the performers accomplish their many acrobatic jumps and maneuvers. They can dance in a group, but solo or featured performers are highlighted for more complicated steps, like roundhouse leaps, repeating squatting kicks, or jumping and touching the toes in mid-air.

DIDUS: There's a feeling of teamwork as the rest of the dancers cheer each other on while they do their athletic maneuvers.

VERON: I know you played for this type of dancing. Is it hard?

DIDUS: Not too "hard" note-wise, but it takes two very important things. First, we have to pay attention to the dancers so we can *adjust the tempo* to their movements. Sometimes that's very quick. In dance performances, tempos are worked out ahead of time, so the conductor is important. The other thing is *stamina*, especially for the second type of dance, the **Kolomyika**.

NARR: The Kolomyika is a social dance that involves everyone on the dance floor. It's danced at lots of Ukrainian celebrations - like wedding receptions - because it's so much fun! It comes from the eastern Galician town, Kolomyia, along the Ukrainian, Polish and Romanian border. The word *kolo* means circle, and that's just what people do... they form a circle around the dance floor, leaving room in the center for those who want to show off their moves.

DIDUS: So, Veronika, it's basically one big dance off! Like the hopak, the guys do impressive leaps and generally show off. Girls dance or twirl fast. Even little kids who are brave enough can join in, usually with an adult partner.

The band is crucial. As we increase the tempo, people get more and more daring with their tricks and acrobatics, showing their spirit and love of dance. We'll play as long as the crowd wants...and that's where the stamina comes in! If we stop early, we hear about it! So we just play and play!

VERON: (giggling) All night? Don't they get tired?

DIDUS: Well, if you're tired, or you don't want to dance, you just stand in the circle and support the others by clapping and cheering. Kolomyika is Ukrainian dance spirit at its finest!

VERON: It sounds like sooo much fun. And the “dance off” sort of reminds me of hip-hop. Tell me about the instruments.

DIDUS: I will ... *next* weekend, “Veronishka”... it looks like your Mom and Babusya are just about ready to serve dinner.

VERON: OK – thank you, Didus. I’m going to check all this out online.

DIDUS: Good idea! When you do that, look up how many classical composers used the hopak in their music.

Let’s eat! Look! **Borscht** and **Deruni**!

VERON: Deruni?! Oh, I *love* potato pancakes!

NARR: The following week, Veronika was very excited to share all that she’d learned with Didus.

VERON: You asked me to look up classical composers who wrote hopaks in their works – I found a bunch, including the Ukrainian composers Hulak-Artemovsky and Lysenko, and the Russian composers Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and... Tchaikovsky! That one was my favorite. It was a Hopak from his opera about the great Ukrainian leader, **Mazeppa**. I even found a performance of it with the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers. It was TERRIFIC! I’m so glad you asked me to look it up.

DIDUS: Veronika! You have such a good ear for music. This Tchaikovsky hopak is a beautiful piece, indeed. And, you know – I may be saying this only because I’m from Ukraine – but I really think that the beauty and richness in our music comes from its folk roots. Wonderful melodies, sometimes modal, filled with energetic rhythms. It’s marvelous! Listen to this Ukrainian Fantasy with

Maksim Popichuk. He's playing melodies on several different kinds of flutes, and even pan pipes! (Clarinet introduction)

VERON: Didus, that's unbelievable! He's awesome!

DIDUS: I agree, he IS awesome. So are the rest of the players. Speaking of which, you wanted to talk about some traditional Ukrainian instruments – let's start with the **bandura** – it's also known as the **kobza**.

NARR: A bandura is a plucked string folk instrument. In some ways, the newer ones resemble a zither mounted on a lute – and it combines the elements of both those instruments. The instrument originated in Turkey, and scholars think its name was introduced into the Ukrainian language in the 13<sup>th</sup> century... sometime around 1200.

Older instruments had somewhat different shapes and sizes, and fewer strings. For instance, early instruments (around 1700) only had about 5 to 12 strings and were quite similar to the lute. But in the 20th century, the number of strings increased to 31 strings, then to 56 and now there are 68 strings on modern 'concert' instruments.

DIDUS: I should also mention that up until the 1940s, the bandura was known as a kobza. They are beautiful – and versatile – instruments. Just listen to bandurist Victor Mishalow, one of the greatest.

VERON: It has such a wide range – both in the pitches and its sound! It's amazing how it can sound so delicate and then be so full!

DIDUS: Excellent observation, Veronika! It does have an enormous dynamic range, which makes it especially expressive for folk songs and tunes.

Let's listen to another instrument, called the **lira**. It's like a hurdy-gurdy.

VERON: I don't know what that is, Didus.

DIDUS: (laughing) No, I guess you wouldn't! How could you?! (Oh! I really *AM* a Grandpa!) A lira – or a hurdy-gurdy – is an old-time instrument that was played by cranking a wheel to create a drone sound. It has a few keys that can play a melody, but the drone continues on the one pitch. They are hand-crafted of wood, and often accompany a kobza or bandura ensemble.

VERON: That's a pretty wild sound!

DIDUS: Well, it's not something you hear every day, that's for sure!

Now let's talk flutes – the **Sopilka**! Remember the pan pipe player we heard a few minutes ago?

VERON: Yes sir.

DIDUS: The first flute he started with was a sopilka. Actually, the term can be used for several instruments in the flute family.

VERON: Would it include recorders? I'm learning that at school.

DIDUS: As a matter of fact, yes... the term "sopilka" can also apply to recorders. Great question, Veronishka!

There's another folk instrument that you should know about, the **trembita**.

NARR: The trembita is an alpine horn – meaning, it's used in the mountains. It's a straight, long horn made of wood...not unlike the horn in the Ricola ads. But instead of the bell resting on the ground, the player holds the trembita's bell up in the air. It's common among Ukrainian highlanders, Hutsuls, who live in western Ukraine, eastern Poland, Slovakia, and northern Romania.

DIDUS: And one more instrument that you need to know because you'll hear it and see it a lot – the **tsymbaly**. It's a type of hammered dulcimer that can be played resting on a stand or even in your lap.

VERON: I really love the sound of that, Didus. Do you think I might learn to play the tsymbaly?

DIDUS: Why not?! I have a musician friend who'd probably love to teach you! I'll check with her and see what she says. By the way, did you ever hear anything more on Cheremosh coming to town?

VERON: No, sir...but our teacher said it would be after Easter. I love Easter!

DIDUS: Me, too. I love the traditions of our Eastern Orthodox Easter.

NARR: On Holy Saturday (or Easter Eve), it is the Ukrainian tradition to fill your Easter basket (koshyk) with Easter eggs (pysanky), Easter bread (paska), sausage (kovbasa), butter, salt, and other ceremonial foods. The paska bread usually has a white glaze made from sugar and egg and then it's sprinkled with colored wheat grains or poppy seeds. It's also a tradition to create dough ornaments, based on spring themes.

On Easter morning, people take their wicker baskets of food to church. A decorated beeswax candle goes into the basket, to be lighted during the blessing of the baskets and their contents in church. Then everyone returns home to unpack the basket, relight the candle (putting it in the middle of the table) and to feast on the paska, eggs, cold meats, and all the other foods. Other dishes are served alongside, like Deruni (potato pancakes) and LOTS of desserts!

The food is left on the table all day for people to nibble on, also giving the women of the house a chance to rest and enjoy the holiday, too.

VERON: I think my very favorite project is decorating the beautiful Pysanky eggs. Babusya told me that in Ukraine, decorating Easter eggs, in the batik (or wax-resist) method, is an art form that dates back centuries! She also said some archaeologists think pysanka goes all the way back to prehistoric Ukraine! When she, Mom and Dad make them with all those beautiful designs... then etching them, dyeing them and dipping them in wax...well, it really is like a tradition.

DIDUS: My dear girl, it IS a tradition, a beautiful one that is filled with love. And each of the pysanky is so very precious, because it is a reflection of you and your creative spirit. Do you know we have every egg you've ever given us?

VERON: No, Didus, I didn't ... but it doesn't surprise me. You and Babusya are so special to me. You know what I'd like to do? I want to save up all my money and take you, Babusya, Dad, and Mom on a trip up to Alberta, Canada. I want us to visit the Cheremosh Ukrainian Dance Company. I really want us to know more about our beautiful culture and the fabulous dance and music that you grew up with. I'll bet you'd have fun, too, visiting the dancers and musicians!

DIDUS: Yes, Veronishka...we must do that! You are always a success at whatever you set your mind to, so I know that trip is going to happen! But, I insist that we help pay for it. What a great family adventure!

In the meantime, I'm getting us all tickets to the Cheremosh Dance Company performance this spring! What fun!! Who knows, I might even run into an old friend or two ... Or, more likely, their kids!

(They both laugh)

DIDUS: Okay – So now I'm all excited about our trip!

VERON: Absolutely, Didus! I love you!

DIDUS: And I love you, my precious Veronishka!