

Zeellia

ЦЕ ТАК БУЛО

TSE TAK BULO/THAT'S HOW IT WAS



Born out of the Ukrainian cultural revival that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union; nurtured during Vancouver's global music "golden age" in the early 90s; and recently revived in conjunction with a renewed fight to protect Ukrainian independence, Vancouver's Zeellia has been at the forefront of a global Ukrainian cultural Renaissance for more than 20 years.

Founded and fronted by Beverly Dobrinsky, the ensemble returns after an extended absence with *Tse Tak Bulo/That's How it Was*, a collection that is both beautifully reverent toward Ukrainian tradition – Dobrinsky has even included the voices of the now-deceased elders from whom she first learned her repertoire – and filled with vital new energy in the form of clever re-workings of many songs.

It combines the powerful, piercing harmonies and mournful, minor key melodies of Slavic folk music with a modern artist's approach to arranging, sung both a capella and with bass, violin, accordion, and hurdy gurdy accompaniment.



Joining Dobrinsky on the album are original Zeellia members Alison Jenkins (accordion), Amelia Slobogean (violin), Russell Sholberg (bass) and Carmen Rosen (voice). It also includes Elliot Vaughan, who has replaced Slobogean on violin in the live ensemble, and new band member Tetiana Zaruba, who is originally from Ukraine, on vocals. Local acapella vocal trio Vostok will open the concert warming up the audience with folksongs from E. Europe and the Balkans.

ZEELLIA is the Ukrainian word for herb as well as the power of herbs to effect reality, to conjure. Vancouver's own musical ZEELLIA, established in 1991 by Beverly Dobrinsky as a means to celebrate her musical roots, is a sextet of 3 female vocalists and 4 instrumentalists. They weave a mystical spell singing and playing Slavic folksongs and dances from Ukraine, the Balkan and Baltic States, and the Canadian prairies.

Musical director Beverly Dobrinsky is a 3rd generation Ukrainian Canadian, who grew up in Winnipeg listening to the Ukrainian language sung and spoken amongst her elders, but not to her. Her mother's experience growing up in Saskatchewan led her to believe that her daughter would have a better life as an assimilated Canadian with no accent and no ancestral baggage to hold her back. Unfortunately this loss of mother tongue led to a sense of dislocation and uprootedness and even evoked a lingering sense of shame rather than a deeper sense of belonging. Despite this confusion, she remained open to the voices of the ancestors as they subtly led her onto the long road of retrieval, reclamation and redemption. She drew upon the memory of her relationship with her maternal grandmother who did not speak English, yet communicated so tenderly and lovingly, nurturing her without common words, embodying a kind of universal sadness, both ancient and foreign, yet fundamentally familiar.

In 2014, Beverly wrote ,*

"This yearning for connection has been a constant companion since childhood; so much so that throughout my adult years I have actively engaged in retrieval of the words of my mother tongue, and sought out elders who would teach me our songs. This act of unfolding relationship with my ancestry has added a dimension of rootedness, which has given me a deeper sensibility regarding my identity, my work and my life. It has been a process of Retrieval, Reclamation and ultimately Redemption."

*FROM THE HEART OF A CITY, Community-Engaged Theatre and Music Productions from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside 2002-2013

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She visited elders in Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1994-95 to learn their old songs, and we hear their voices talking and singing throughout Zeellia's 3rd CD "Tse Tak Bulo/That's How It Was " interwoven with the new songs performed by ZEELLIA with accordion, violin, acoustic bass, hurdy gurdy and female voices. The blessings and the curses, the water, the wood, the fire, the fields, and of course, the herbs, all combine to give voice to a unique Slavic Canadian sentiment which respects its Ukrainian roots and celebrates its Canadian context.

It is SLAVIC SOUL, rooted in the traditional with a contemporary edge, connecting the past with the present and the old country with the new.



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Reviews:

TheWholeNote: Nov. 2016 by Anna Pidgorna
Tse Tak Bulo/That's How It Was
Chickweed Productions #ZL003

"Zeellia's approach to these traditional songs lives firmly in the realm of artistic re-interpretation, rather than an ethnographic recreation."

With its mix of field recordings and original arrangements and compositions, Zeellia's new album *Tse Tak Bulo/ That's How It Was* explores pre-Soviet Ukrainian migration to Canada. Containing snippets of interviews and songs from elderly migrants, which the ensemble founder Beverly Dobrinsky collected in Alberta and Saskatchewan in the 90s, the CD is both a historical document and an artistic statement. Zeellia's approach to these traditional songs lives firmly in the realm of artistic re-interpretation, rather than an ethnographic recreation. With her mixture of vocal and instrumental textures, Dobrinsky takes great liberties with the found materials pushing them into the realm of original compositions rather than mere arrangements. The most striking track is *Oy byv mene cholovik* (My Husband Beat Me). In my own explorations of Ukrainian folk music, I have found that domestic abuse is, unfortunately, a common theme and I commend Zeellia for not shying away from it. Dobrinsky's recomposition of the tune is a highly effective combination of playful rhythms and dissonant a cappella vocal harmonies punctuated by woodblock knocks. As I walk across Canada is a gorgeously mournful song steeped in loneliness and nostalgia for the homeland left behind. Among other instruments, the album features the hurdy-gurdy, known as *lira* in Ukraine. Dobrinsky's approach to the instrument both nods towards its traditional role as accompaniment to spiritual minstrel songs and reframes it in a new light.

Rootsy Zeellia Plays Up Music of Ukraine
Georgia Straight: Nov. 25th – Dec. 2 2004
By Alexander Varty

"The mix is fabulous. All over the world, young musicians are looking for ways to combine their grandparents' culture with modern forms of expression, and Willow Bridge is as accomplished a back-to-the-future move as anything that's come out of such cultural hotbeds as Scandinavia, Ball, or Brazil. The disc is sweet and fierce, deeply moving and eminently danceable, passionate and smart...."

It's a sound that's as old as the fields and as wild as the forest; a woman's voice, raised in exultation, answered by a chorus of similar voices. Although the words are foreign to these ears, it's obviously a song of celebration, and of community; it rises up like green shoots in the spring, yet it speaks also of the plenty to come.

"Zelene Zhytto", the title of the piece in question, translates as "Green Rye". It's a traditional Ukrainian song of welcome that might be sung at a wedding feast or har-

vest-time party; it signifies that the table has been set and the wine has been poured, and it makes a perfect opener for Willow Bridge, the new CD from local Ukrainian-music specialists Zeellia. Appetizing though it is, however, it's not entirely indicative of the banquet that follows. Zeellia—which hosts a CD-release party at St. James Hall on Saturday (November 27)—started out as an all-female vocal group but has since morphed into a coed ensemble that incorporates accordion, violin, upright bass, and percussion, in addition to some very accomplished singing.

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A UBC music-department graduate and Kodaly teacher, Dobrinsky could easily have pursued a career in opera or art song but has instead spent the past two decades researching her Ukrainian heritage—and, especially, its musical component. As she explains it, music surrounded her as a child, but it was only once she became an adult that she recognized its true value.

"I grew up in Winnipeg, and I'm third-generation Ukrainian-Canadian," she explains. "So people sang around me, especially on my mother's side. My mother comes from a homesteading family in Saskatchewan, so when we would visit the Saskatchewan people we'd get together and sing. But I wasn't taught to speak Ukrainian; we spoke English in the home."

Eventually she became intrigued by this other language, this other culture, and started documenting it. "First I went to the area where my mother grew up, and got people singing, and recorded them and learned a lot of music from them," she explains. "I also did the same thing in Alberta, and then I just got involved a little bit with what's going on within the Ukrainian community here, 'cause I've been living in Vancouver now for about 30 years. So I looked for what was here, but I didn't really see exactly what I wanted. I wanted to do more village roots music—bilij holos, which translates as 'white voice', or 'pure voice'—rather than concertized music. So I started Zeellia in 1991."

Dobrinsky characterizes the bilij holos sound as being "rougher" than the svelte harmonies most people think of when they think of Ukrainian music, if they think of Ukrainian music at all. "The style is more direct; it's coming out of people being able to sing across the fields," she says. "Basically, you can really direct the voice—as though you're going to call somebody from across the street. The more westernized singing is generally lighter."

And it's this rough, immediate quality that makes Willow Bridge so appealing. This is not state-conservatory music, but a sound that's as attention-getting as the blues—even if, as Dobrinsky allows, some of the music's microtonal edges have been smoothed out by exposure to the North American norm. "I have some early recordings of singers from the Prairies, and you can really hear the difference between then and now," she explains. "It's like going from country-eastern to country-western."

Some of that difference can be heard on Willow Bridge tracks like "Zavjazalom Sobi Ochi", which includes such neologisms as *hazbend*, *policemana*, and *jailyu*. Further explanation will come when Dobrinsky finishes her next project, a personal narrative that could wind up part stage show, part musicological treatise, and part travelogue.

"I'm interested in putting it all together," says this self-described product of the Ukrainian Diaspora. "There's this whole roots and reclaiming aspect to it, and then there's all the songs. And to end it by going to Ukraine—which I have not yet done—would be a great story, so that's how I see the big picture."

Having survived a different but no less disruptive passage to the New World, that's a journey I'd certainly want to hear more about—as would many others in this polyglot town.

Penguin Eggs
no. 24 / Winter 2004
By Tim Readman

"The singing is lusty and has a dark and mysterious feel that goes back to its pre-Christian roots.... Stirring stuff!"

Zeellia
Willow Bridge
Independent

Vancouver's Zeellia specializes in Eastern European folk songs in the traditional style of 'bilij holos' or 'pure voice'. They are Beverly Dobrinsky, Carmen Rosen and Bessie Wapp on vocals accompanied by guest singers and a band featuring accordion, fiddle, bass, clarinet and percussion. They deliver Slavic folksongs from Ukraine, the Balkan and Baltic states, and the Canadian prairies with fire and passion. The singing is lusty and has a dark and mysterious feel that goes back to its pre-Christian roots. The harmonies are intensely beautiful. The lyrics deal with Slavic mythology, love, farming, fertility and nature unadorned. The music is skillfully played and well crafted to suit the arrangements and mood, be it mournful or celebratory.

Stirring stuff!

Ascent Magazine
ascent magazine 14 summer 2002
By Juniper Glass

"She makes a rounding motion in with her hands, from her heart to the air around her. With this simple motion she conveys unity, a connection among performer, listener, and the essence of sound itself."

During the performance of Zeellia, a Vancouver-based women's vocal ensemble, I feel connected to people from another time as well as another place. The ensemble brings alive the pre-Christian music of their Ukrainian foremothers. The group's affection for the music radiates. Introducing a song in praise of grain, they explain: "The belief was that the ancestors lived in the fields and orchards helping them to grow. The ancestors live in the songs as well, helping those who sing and hear them to grow."

Amazingly, I find that it is true—the music of these women who lived so long ago, passed on by the women here now on the stage, helps me. As I listen to the songs, which celebrate feminine power and recognize the joy and sorrow in daily life, I feel renewed courage to accept these aspects of myself.

Beverly Dobrinsky of Zeellia says that when she sings, she listens to "the entire sound that is generated." Her animated voice falls silent for a moment. She makes a rounding motion in with her hands, from her heart to the air around her. With this simple motion she conveys unity, a connection among performer, listener, and the essence of sound itself.

Zeellia