

THE DULCIMER ON THE TERRITORY OF BELARUS

The talented Byelorussian people have carried over the centuries and have preserved their language and culture, their national character and customs, their folk songs and musical instruments. The best patterns of folk song and dance melodies and also musical instruments, being polished and perfected, were passed from generation to generation.

Among folk musical instruments the dulcimer is the most widespread and the most favourite instrument in Belarus. Unfortunately, the exact time and the ways of appearance of this instrument on the above-mentioned territory still remain unknown. Scientists state different versions. Some of them suppose that the dulcimer was brought in the 12th-13th centuries by German feudal lords. Others name the Gipsies who wandered along the territory of the present Grodno region and mastered the dulcimer. Still others consider that the dulcimer might have been brought by the youth who in the 16th century went to study to Italy, Germany, France.

The earliest document that contains the mentioning of the dulcimer is the Bible (1517) by the Byelorussian thinker-humanist F.Skorina where the dulcimer is named among other folk instruments. According to various literary source-books the dulcimer was widespread both in the country and in towns. Among professions of the second half of the 17th century a profession of a dulcimer player is also named. There are many witnesses of dulcimer players' participation in different national celebrations, weddings, christening-parties, pleasure ceremonies at courts, in national theatre performances, etc. The names of some of the famous dulcimer players of the past who were remarkable for their rare skill of playing this instrument have come down to us, they are: T.Mikhailov-Besov, M.Stepanov, Kh.Pravinsky, I.Kurovsky, A.Andreev and others. The Byelorussian master S.Gutkovsky made dulcimer for the tsar Peter the First.

Among people dulcimers, as a rule, were made by musicians-performers themselves or by skilful masters-joiners, that's why in all this mass the instruments differ among themselves both in outward appearance and in constructive peculiarities. For instance, according to the observations of the scientist-folklore specialist I.Nazina, the sizes of folk dulcimers differ in different parameters: the length of two bottoms of the body and sides (that is to say, in general sizes

of the instrument); the height of the body; the width of the heads; the diameter of sounding-board holes; the length of the sticks; the quantity of string rows (from 12 to 24); the quantity of strings in one choir; tone systems which have, depending on the place of existence, a great variety and individual peculiarities in their volume, high-altitude position, quantity of sounds and their high-altitude correlation. More often occur folk dulcimers with the range from one and a half to two and a half octaves with diatonic, chromatic and mixed tone systems.

The art of playing this instrument was comprehended in several ways: a musician masters the instrument independently by watching other dulcimer players' performance; the other way was learning in one's own family, where somebody can play the dulcimer; one more way was to go as a pupil for a certain payment to a dulcimer player famous all over the neighbourhood.

The basis of the repertoire of folk musicians included folk songs and folk dances, sometimes with refrains.

The dulcimer sounded both independently and in ensembles: in small ensembles - dulcimer, violin (two violins); dulcimer, clarinet; dulcimer, accordion; dulcimer, tambourine, cymbals and others, and in large ensembles: accordion, violin, dulcimer, drum; two bayans (accordions), three dulcimers, two violins, zither, pipe, spoons, triangle; accordion, dulcimer, violin, clarinet, trumpet, double-bass, drum; and others.

The 20th century has become a new stage in the history of dulcimer development. The general growth of musical culture put forward the questions of reconstruction. Of imperfect folk instruments, of widening a number of professional performers who form the groups, of improving their technical skill, of enriching the repertoire at the expense of including in it the works of world classic.

The work in perfecting the dulcimer began in 1923. But only in 1927-1928 with the active participation of the master K. Sushkevich, who was a self-educated person, and the group of progressive dulcimer players there appeared a detailed elaboration of the main questions of dulcimer reconstruction, and the realization of them was begun.

The perfection was being done in:

1. Change and improvement of the inner construction of the instrument by using scientific acoustic data.
2. Widening of the general range of the instrument up to 3 (and

later on - up to three and a half) octaves. The range of the concert dulcimer "prima" is G of a small octave - B of the third octave.

3. Introduction of the full chromatic scale within the limits of the whole range of the instrument and the arrangement of its sounds in the order of degree after degree movement.
4. Change of the form and of the construction of the hammers (sticks) for striking the strings.
5. Creation of the whole family of dulcimers: prima, alto, bass and double-bass.

The widening of the general range of the instrument and the introduction of the full chromatic scale greatly increased the performing potential of the dulcimer. Shortening of the hammers for one third provided with the opportunity of using the muffling of the sound of the strings with a finger, it became a new element in the technique of playing the dulcimer which was completely absent before. The muffling of the strings provided a more expressive performance. The employment of the leather casing on the sticks softened the sharpness of the strikes over the strings, the sound of the dulcimer has become more diverse. Gradually are widened and enriched the methods of sound production and the strokes.

After the reconstruction of the dulcimer the artistic and virtuoso-technical equipping of the dulcimer players began to improve noticeably. The first professional performers appeared: J.Zhinovich, S.Novitsky, V.Samsonov, Kh.Shmelkin, a little later A.Ostrometsky and others. The dulcimer began to sound actively from the concert stage not only in Belarus, but beyond its borders.

It can be said that since that time the art of dulcimer performance began to develop in two ways: amateur, folk way and a professional one. Moreover, the traditional amateur art began to experience the fruitful influence of the professional art.

The appearance of the family of dulcimers gave the opportunity of organizing in 1929 the first professional ensemble of folk instruments by the talented musician D.Zakhar. The dulcimer made up the basis of the ensemble. The ensemble included the best performers, musicians from the students of the Minsk musical college who were in love with the dulcimer, and the participants of the amateur artistic work. In 1930 the ensemble became the State ensemble, and in 1937 with the creation of the philharmonic the ensemble was transformed into the orchestra of Byelorussian folk instruments, it was

reinforced by young gifted musicians and by the introduction of other instruments.

In children's musical schools the dulcimer classes began to open. Thanks to the fruitful influence of the above-mentioned performers, and also the influence of the ensemble of folk instruments and the orchestra, the influx of children and teen-agers into the class of dulcimer, where the instrument was very popular, noticeably increased. However, the number of teachers was not sufficient. There were no special textbooks and readers, the pedagogical repertoire and the instruments were not sufficient. Much was being done at the expense of personal enthusiasm of the teachers who were in love with their work. And the difficulties were gradually overcome. But the war with the Hitlerite Germany began and for the five whole years the peaceful labour of musicians was interrupted.

The post-war period is a new stage in the development of the art of dulcimer performance. The activity of the Orchestra of folk instruments was being revived. In 1945 on the initiative of J.Zhinovich a class of dulcimer was opened at the Byelorussian State Conservatoire (now it is the Belarus Academy of Music), and in 1954 a post-graduate course was opened. The dulcimer classes in musical colleges and in children's musical schools of the republic were actively opened. Thanks to this one of the important questions was gradually solved - the question of training pedagogical and performing personnel of junior, secondary and higher sections in the system of musical education. In 1948 J.Zhinovich published the first "School of playing the Byelorussian dulcimer", having provided by this the young teachers with a valuable textbook of methodics. The piano factory in the town of Borisov (Minsk region) began to produce dulcimers.

New bright performers appear, they are: V.Burkovich, N.Shmelkin, a little later - A.Leonchik, E.Gladkov, still later - T.Eletskaya, A.Tkacheva, T.Shumakova, V.Gorodkin and others. The whole galaxy of young, technically well-equipped, bright dulcimer players from the students and pupils of the musical educational establishments already begins to declare itself. Practically all of them are laureates of various competitions, including international ones, and they lead an active concert activity.

The repertoire of our dulcimer players, besides original compositions, is based on world violin classic, partly on piano literature and compositions for woodwind instruments. Byelorussian compo-

sers like our dulcimer and dulcimer performers. A great number of compositions for Byelorussian dulcimer is written by them, among the compositions there are many concertos and concert pieces, sonatas, suites, collections of pedagogical repertoire for children and youth. The dulcimer is included into oratorios, chamber-instrumental compositions, etc.

At present the classes of dulcimer exist practically in all musical educational establishments of Belarus. There are more than 550 musical schools, 16 secondary special musical educational establishments and the Academy of Music, which has today 25 students-dulcimer players and two students in the post-graduate course.

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