



“There is no truth
in the world,
Truth can’t be found,
For now the Lie
is calling itself Truth.

Now Truth is kept waiting
at the door,
And the Lie is invited
to the table.

Now Truth is thrown
into the dungeon,
And the Lie sits in
the councils of power.

Now it seems that Truth
is dead,
And the Lie has devoured
the world.”

~ from *Song of Truth*

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|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Ангел-хранитель / Guardian Angel | 3:32 |
| 2. Святий Боже / O Holy God | 3:34 |
| 3. Потоп / The Flood | 2:55 |
| 4. Саврадим / Savradym | 0:58 |
| 5. Невільницький Плач / Captive’s Lament | 6:40 |
| 6. Кисіль /Waiting for the Porridge (Ostap Veresai, Arr. Julian Kytasty) | 3:36 |
| 7. Про Хому і Ярему / Khoma and Yarema (Ostap Veresai, Arr. Julian Kytasty) | 10:12 |
| 8. Всякому Городу Нрав і Права [Сковородинська] / To Every City Its Customs and Laws [Skovorodyns’ka] (Hryhory Skovoroda, Arr. Julian Kytasty) | 2:49 |
| 9. Про Правду / Song of Truth | 4:09 |
| 10. Про Бондарівну / Bondarivna | 4:17 |
| 11. Козачок / Kozachok (Hnat Honcharenko, Arr. Julian Kytasty) | 1:30 |
| 12. Про Дворянку / The Noblewoman | 3:25 |
| 13. Метелиця / Metelytsia | 1:23 |
| 14. Про Страшний Суд / The Last Judgement | 4:47 |
| 15. Множество аз Соприших / The Sinner at the Gates of Heaven | 3:38 |

All songs arranged by Julian Kytasty unless otherwise noted.

INTRODUCTION BY JULIAN KYTASTY



Mamai. Anonymous artist. Mamai—warrior musician, trickster—was an archetype of the Steppe frontier and an iconic figure in early 19th century Ukrainian folk art. *National Art Museum of Ukraine*.

century and a good deal of work by folklorists who documented hundreds of singers performing a rich repertoire that included historical epics (*dumy*), many religious and moralistic songs, humorous songs and some instrumental dance tunes. By the 1920s, a high-powered propaganda campaign in the Soviet press had begun, painting these impoverished old singers as dangerous enemies of the people. Soon after, the singers weren't there anymore.

The world of the *kobzari* and *lirnyky* is tantalizingly close to us in time. Yet it remains hidden behind cultural barriers and the hermetic secrecy the singers' guilds imposed on their members. Still, some of their music did survive, imitated—however imperfectly—by urban musicians who had taken up the bandura.

It was my good fortune to be born into a family and community of these players, who had come to Detroit as displaced persons in 1949. Among the bandurists I grew up with, performing songs from the *kobzar* repertoire was a mark of prestige and conveyed a sense of connection to an ancient tradition. I was captivated by this music and went

Until the 1930s, blind singers were a common sight in the marketplaces and public squares of Eastern and Central Ukraine.

Their accompanying instrument was sometimes a hurdy-gurdy, locally known as *lira*, and sometimes a bandura, a 20-plus-string plucked harp/zither native to Ukraine. The plucked instrument players were called *kobzari*, after the *kobza*, a lute that was common in earlier eras but had given way to the bandura; their crank-turning colleagues were called *lirnyky*. There are some scratchy field recordings of the last generation of singers from the early 20th



Lirnyk with guide. Early 20th century. Courtesy of Julian Kytasty



L to R: Julian's great-uncle Hryhory, grandfather Ivan, and father Petro Kytasty, dressed in performance costumes. This photo was taken while they were in a Displaced Persons camp in Europe, 1948. *Courtesy of Julian Kytasty*

on to explore the tradition documented a century ago and to seek out its echoes in later recordings and the work of living players.

The songs on this album came to me, often in multiple variants, over many years—some directly from my father, Petro Kytasty (b. 1928), and his uncle, Hryhory (1907–1984). Later, I learned the *kobzar* repertoire and



Stepan Pasiuha. One of a series of portraits of the blind singers by artist and folklorist Opanas Slasion (1855–1933). *Courtesy of Julian Kytasty*

accompaniment style preserved by Heorhiy Tkachenko (1898–1993), a direct link to the music of the blind *kobzari*. My first encounter with the then-unpublished “basement tapes” of Zinovii Shtokalko (1920–1968) was a defining moment for me as a bandurist, showing how alive, vibrant, and creative the music of the *kobzari* could still be.

A few published sources are essential for the study of *kobzar* and *lirnyk* music, notably two collections of Filaret Kolessa and Mykola Lysenko, and Porfiry Demutsky's *Lira i ii motyvy*. Many songs from these collections have made their way onto the recording, albeit in versions much altered by transmission through living performers. I have used multiple sources wherever possible and tried never to copy a single source in all its details, preferring to let my performances evolve naturally, informed by a lifetime study of the style. The result of this process is *Songs of Truth*.

In this album, a traditional, rather than modern, bandura is used throughout, and all the songs and instrumental pieces are documented in the repertoire of blind *kobzari*. Yet this recording cannot be and is not meant to be an authentic re-creation of their singing and playing. These songs incorporate a variety of sources and have been worked on and modified over many years. They are the core of a tradition I have lived with, and thus a musical argument that the tradition itself still lives.

ABOUT THE BANDURA

Marcia Ostashewski, Julian Kytasty, and Andrij Hornjatkevych



Old-time bandura. A reproduction of a *kobzar* instrument by William Vetzal of Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. A Vetzal instrument was played on this recording. *Courtesy of Julian Kytasty*

The bandura is a plucked composite chordophone according to the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system. It is similar in construction to the European lute, but with the body generally carved from a single piece of wood. The instrument has a curved wooden back, and is asymmetrical, with its neck offset to one side. The neck houses the *basy* (bass strings), while the *prystrunky* (treble strings) are stretched vertically across the bandura's belly. The bandura, like a harp, is an open-string, unfretted instrument. On the *Songs of Truth* album, Julian Kytasty plays a diatonic *starosvits'ka* (traditional or, a literal translation, "old-world") bandura. The bottom of the bandura rests atop his thighs, while the back of the instrument leans on his upper body. He uses both his left and right hands to play the *basy* and the *prystrunky*. Both in Ukraine and beyond, the bandura has become a symbol of Ukraine, its people, history, and culture. Despite its remarkable cultural significance, few people are familiar with its darker history: censorship, political oppression, and imprisonment are just a few of the obstacles that bandurists have had to overcome in order to pursue their craft. Some were put to death.



Today's precise, concert-style bandura performances have evolved from humbler beginnings—those of lone, blind, itinerant minstrels, who would play and sing as they made the rounds of their circuit of villages and market towns in 19th-century Eastern Ukraine. It wasn't until the start of the 20th century that collaborative concert-style bandura performance emerged: in 1902, the young writer and scholar, Hnat Khotkevych (1877–1938), organized the first ensemble performance by *kobzari* at the 12th Archaeological Conference in Kharkiv. Within a few years, ensembles of sighted urban enthusiasts formed in many cities. By 1918, Vasyl Yemetz (1890–1982) formed the first professional bandurist chorus in Kyiv, starting the modern phase of the bandura's evolution.

The blind *kobzari* maintained their practice in the rural areas of Eastern Ukraine until the 1930s. However, but for a few, these original tradition-bearers did not survive beyond that decade, when Stalinist repression, terror, and the Soviet government-imposed genocidal famine devastated Ukraine. In the 1920s, folklorists documented several hundred *kobzari* carrying on their tradition; in 1939, a Soviet-sponsored congress of traditional *kobzari* found only four.

During and after World War II, a few representatives of the urban bandura tradition escaped the Soviet Union to places where they were able to continue their musical practice. In this way, the bandura began to extend its reach beyond Europe and into the Ukrainian diasporas of the United States, Canada, South America, Central Europe, and even Australia, with particularly active bandura communities settling in Detroit, New York, Toronto, and other major North American cities.

The diaspora bandura tradition, from which Julian Kytasty's performance stems, has continued to grow and flourish in the 21st century.



Kobzar Pavlo Haschenko with guide, c. 1900. Courtesy of Julian Kytasty



State Exemplary Bandurist Chorus of the Ukrainian SSR, late 1930s. The secret police minder/administrator is front row center. Courtesy of Julian Kytasty

As Ukraine moved towards independence in the 1980s, a modest revival of *kobzar*-style performance and repertoire centered around Heorhiy Tkachenko (1898–1993)—the one living link to the performance practice of the blind singers. Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, and the revival of the *kobzar* style has continued. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 put Ukrainian culture in the crosshairs. Many bandurists and other musicians have joined writers, poets, artists, and scholars at the front; many have lost their lives. Others perform intensively for benefit concerts in Ukraine and around the world, sharing the songs and stories of Ukraine and its struggle. The bandura, and especially the songs of the *kobzari*, are threads that weave together the experiences of today's Ukrainians with the experiences of those who lived on the same lands hundreds of years before.

JULIAN KYTASTY

By Marcia Ostashevski



Photo by Aleksander Khantayev

Julian Kytasty is one of the world's premier players of the bandura, and the instrument's leading North American exponent. A singer, multi-instrumentalist, and third-generation bandurist, he has concertized and taught instrumental and choral music throughout the Americas and Europe. Born in Detroit to a family of bandura players, after decades of singing and playing the instrument, he eventually studied theory and composition at Concordia University in Montréal, Québec, Canada.

Kytasty is especially recognized for his expertise in epic songs and early bandura repertoire. In 1989–1990, he was one of the first North American-born bandurists to tour Ukraine, performing more than 100 concerts. He has often returned to tour in Ukraine, most recently in fall 2024. This was his first trip to Ukraine after a five-year hiatus, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's

war on Ukraine. Kytasty shared his music in concerts, presenting his distinctive repertoire and vision of his instrument, while reconnecting with artists and dear friends. As a performer, recording artist, composer, and band leader, Kytasty has redefined possibilities for the bandura. Serving as the musical director of the New York Bandura Ensemble, he also founded and curated ten years of Bandura Downtown, an innovative music series based in New York's East Village that provided a home for creative explorations of traditional and contemporary sounds and themes. Traveling between Canada and the United States since the 1990s, he has recorded and performed as a soloist, with the Canadian world music group Paris to Kyiv, and in his own Experimental Bandura Trio, all while taking part in creative and educational collaborations with Marcia Ostashevski and eventually the Centre for Sound Communities at Cape Breton University.

Kytasty's passion and artistry have brought him to stages and studios around the world, to play with musical innovators such as John Zorn and Derek Bailey, and with artists from diverse musical cultures including Chinese pipa player Wu Man, klezmer revivalist Michael Alpert, Mongolian master musician Battuvshin, and Asim Kuzuluk, a master singer from Hatay, Türkiye. These experiences have shaped his approach to composition as designing a musical space in which each individual voice and instrument can find room and inspiration to make its own contribution.

Kytasty has won several awards for his musical compositions and performances. He has worked with Yara Arts Group to create music for productions including *Raven*, *Scythian Stones*, *Winter Light*, *Captain John Smith Goes to Ukraine*, *Underground Dreams*, and *Hitting Bedrock*, performing with the company in New York, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. In 2018, the New York Independent Theater Innovative Theater Awards recognized Yara's production, *1917–2017*, as Best Musical, and Kytasty for Best Musical Score. He has also composed music for modern dance and film, earning a Blizzard Award for best film score for a National Film Board

of Canada documentary, *My Mother's Village*. His performance of *kobzar* music appears in the Ukrainian film *The Guide* (2014), Ukraine's submission to the 2015 Academy Awards. In 2021, Julian Kytasty received the "Honored Artist of Ukraine" [Заслужений Артист України] award from Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, in a ceremony in New York City.



Julian Kytasty as the Epic Singer in the Yara Arts Group theater piece *Captain John Smith Goes to Ukraine*. Photo by Waldemart Klyuzko, 2013

TRACK NOTES

Julian Kytasty

I. Ангел-хранитель / Guardian Angel

Scholars and amateurs who collected the repertoire of the blind singers tended to focus on historical songs and especially on the epic *dumy*. They prioritized the collection of these rarities over the religious and moralistic songs that were much more prominent in the wandering singers' repertoire until the imposition of Bolshevik rule led to the abandonment of the religious material. Folklorist Porfiry Demutsky's (1860–1927) collection of 50 songs is one of the few publications of chants and psalms sourced directly from the *lirnyk* tradition; the *lirnyky* were traveling musicians who performed music to the accompaniment of the *lira* or hurdy-gurdy.

Orthodox tradition forbade the use of instruments in church services. Because these songs are not liturgical texts, they would never have been performed in church. Very noticeable in some of the songs is a strong emphasis on morality and social justice—with lyrics advising “a wealthy man's riches will not help him on Judgement Day.” Many *kobzari* and *lirnyky* sang versions of a song about a guardian angel delivering a last warning to a sleeping sinner. My performance is based primarily on Demutsky, though I do remember hearing a choral arrangement of the song in my childhood.

2. Святий Боже / O Holy God

I learned this song from my father, Petro Kytasty (b. 1928), in the late 1970s, and have sung it ever since. My great-uncle Hryhory Kytasty (1907-1984) originally collected the song from Vasyl Eliiv, one of the few *lirnyky* to come to Canada.

3. Потоп / The Flood

The *kobzar* and especially *lirnyk* repertoire also included songs on Biblical themes. Hryhory Kytasty introduced “The Flood” into the repertoire of North American bandura students and he frequently taught it in a group setting. He used a choral arrangement by Mykola Leontovych (1879–1920), a composer best known for “Shchedryk” (Carol of the Bells). Leontovych’s arrangement of “The Flood” is very similar to the version found in Demutsky’s collection, which was the original source. Hryhory Kytasty added simple bandura parts. I created my solo version 30 years later, mostly from memory, adapting the accompaniment to the possibilities of the *kobzar*-style bandura.

As with many of the songs recorded here, it contains only a few representative verses of a much longer text. In 1988, two friends and I sang through the complete text of “The Flood” as it appears in Demutsky while riding in a tour van through a drought-stricken Saskatchewan summer. By the time we got to verse 20 or so, a deluge of Biblical proportions had descended. We did not repeat the experiment.

4. Саврадим / Savradym

“Savradym” belongs to a repertoire the *kobzari* called *shtuchky* (“little pieces”), dance tunes that they performed either as a song or as an instrumental version. Here I play “Savradym” as a straightforward instrumental piece, without straying far from the licks I would use in a song accompaniment to this melody.

5. Невільницький Плач / Captive’s Lament

“Captive’s Lament” is the sole epic song (*duma*) on this recording. It is one of a cycle of songs dating to the 16th and early 17th centuries that focuses on the plight of Christians in Turkish captivity. A few *dumy* from this cycle remained in the *kobzar* repertoire as late as the 1920s. By this time, the historical epics had mostly been supplanted by religious and moralistic songs, but “Captive’s Lament” continued to resonate. Perhaps it served as an allegory for the plight of the villagers who formed the *kobzar*’s audience—enslaved under the tsars, economically marginalized in the new urbanizing world, and brutally repressed and eventually subjected to a genocide-induced famine under the Bolsheviks. When I recorded this song in early December 2013, images of student protesters being brutally beaten by President Viktor Yanukovych’s riot police on Maidan Square certainly counterpointed images of the turncoat overseer ordering the janissaries to whip the slaves at their oars “to the yellow bone.” Revisiting this text in 2025, toward the rerelease of the album on the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings label, images of millions of people held hostage in occupied territories, and thousands of prisoners of war subjected to torture, in the current Russian invasion, again augment the original meaning.

In their musical structure, *dumy* are very different from strophic ballads. The texts are grouped not into verses, but into tirades of varying lengths, and the line length and rhyme scheme are also irregular. As in other oral epic traditions, texts collected even from the same singer could vary considerably in length and might omit or include different episodes. *Kobzari* would sing all the *dumy* they knew to roughly the same melody, which was actually a collection of melodic cells that could be strung together to fit a constantly varying text—an “epic song construction kit.”

I first heard this *duma* performed by my great-uncle Hryhory Kytasty in a version adapted for the concert stage. Later, I also studied the recorded performance of Heorhiy Tkachenko (1898–1993), who learned it from the blind *kobzari*, but I learned neither of these texts verbatim. My performance combines text as I remember it from both versions, and is influenced by my study of other versions as well. The melody I use for my *dumy* is patterned after Tkachenko’s, but incorporates some elements, especially ornamentation, from Ostap Veresai.

6. Кисіль /Waiting for the Porridge

Ostap Veresai (1803–1890) was one of the best-known *kobzari* of the late 19th century. One of the first blind singers to make a mark in the urban world, Veresai often appeared in concert halls and on one occasion even traveled to St. Petersburg for a series of performances. During his stay, a member of the tsar’s family presented him with an engraved silver snuffbox, which helped him get out of trouble several times with the tsarist police once he returned to his usual circuit of country roads and small-town fairs. Much studied and written about, Veresai met Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861), who seems to have used him as a model for a *kobzar* in several of his poems and art works. The composer Mykola Lysenko (1842–1912) transcribed and analyzed a selection of Veresai’s repertoire.

The blind brethren of the *kobzar* guild did not regard Veresai highly, despite his success in the world of the sighted. They felt he was poorly trained and an inferior performer. At one point, they expelled him from the guild entirely. He also played an unusual instrument with only 12 strings—6 *basy* and 6 *prystrunky*—in which the strings along the (unfretted) neck were stopped with the left hand, as on a lute. In recent years, a number of players in Ukraine—including Volodymyr Kushpet (b. 1948), Taras Kompanichenko (b. 1968), and Jurij Fedynsky (b. 1975)—have used the excellent Lysenko transcriptions to recreate this instrument and the implied technique and playing style.

I play this *shtuchka* on a 21-string *kobzarska* bandura, requiring retuning F to F# and C to C#. I was fortunate to hear it first in the unsurpassed recorded performance by Zinovii Shtokalko. The tune has been a touchstone to which I have returned frequently over the years. I have performed it as a solo piece and created instrumental compositions on it for the Experimental Bandura Trio and the Paris to Kyiv ensemble.

7. Про Хому і Ярему / Khoma and Yarema

The *kobzar* repertoire included longer humorous and satirical songs characterized by a rapid-fire delivery and a loose verse structure that is closer to the tirades of a *duma* than to a strophic song. “Khoma and Yarema,” the story of two brothers who fail spectacularly at every possible trade, is one of several examples of this genre and is included in Lysenko’s Veresai transcriptions.

Like “Waiting for the Porridge,” I first encountered “Khoma and Yarema” on a recording by Zinovii Shtokalko, in this case on an unpublished rehearsal tape preserved by one of his friends. This song is particularly difficult for contemporary concert performance; the texts are long even in an abridged version, and jokes that were uproariously funny to villagers in Veresai’s time may escape urban listeners today. Accordingly, few modern performers have attempted these songs. For me, the opportunity to get Khoma and Yarema’s misadventures onto CD was one of the great attractions of the *Songs of Truth* project.

8. Всякому Городу Нрав і Права [Сковородинська] / To Every City Its Customs and Laws [Skovorodyns’ka]

The philosopher, writer, teacher, and musician Hryhory Skovoroda (1722–1794) wandered the length and breadth of the same territory—today’s Chernihiv, Poltava, Sumy, and Kharkiv oblasts (regions)—as the

kobzari. This satirical song found its way into the *kobzar* repertoire and was very popular, known among the blind singers as “*Skovorodynska*” (the Skovoroda song). My version draws on a recorded performance by Andriy Bobyr (1915–1994) and a notated version by Andrij Hornjatkevych. Both incorporate the instrumental introduction and basic musical arrangement from a version collected from a blind bandurist and published in *Hryhory Skovoroda: Muzykant* (Kyiv: Muzychna Ukraina, 1972). However, both return to Skovoroda’s text rather than following the *kobzar* version, which is so corrupted by generations of oral transmission as to be almost unintelligible.

9. Про Правду / Song of Truth

This song is at the very heart of the *kobzar* tradition. It likely originated in the late 17th century, a time of widespread turmoil and social upheaval in Ukraine, but its message is universal and as fresh as the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper in any country on the planet. I first encountered this song in Munich on a photocopy of a manuscript by Zinovii Shtokalko of the Ostap Veresai version. I immediately hand-copied it into my notebook. A few years later, after learning to play a *kobzars’ka* (old-style) bandura made for me by my friend Ken Bloom, I added it to my repertoire, recorded it on my first LP (*Julian Kytasty: Ukrainian Bandurist*, Yevshan Records, 1986), and have performed it ever since. The version on this recording draws on both the transcription of Ostap Veresai (who was arrested by the tsar’s police for singing it at the marketplace in Pryluky on his way home after performing for the tsar’s family in St. Petersburg), and on the performance of Heorhiy Tkachenko (1898–1993).

10. Про Бондарівну / Bondarivna

“Bondarivna” is an example of a popular strophic ballad that entered the *kobzar* repertoire. Folk performers from all over Ukraine have recorded many versions of the song. I learned it from Hryhory Kytasty in 1979, but rarely performed it until I relearned it on the *kobzars’ka* bandura. The musical treatment derives from the version of Heorhiy Tkachenko, who sang and played it with the mixolydian lowered seventh step. In this song, a wealthy landowner propositions a beautiful young village girl, Bondarivna. She turns him down even at gunpoint, and so he kills her. Incidents like the one at the heart of this story were unfortunately all too common in the small towns and villages of Ukraine in the 18th and 19th centuries, when there were few checks on the behavior of the landowners.

II. Козачок / Kozachok

Comparatively few instrumental pieces from the *kobzar* repertoire were recorded and transcribed, partly because of the bias among collectors towards the epic material and partly because of the difficulty of capturing the instrument’s sound on early recording equipment. This *kozachok* is one of a group of dance tunes recorded on wax cylinders in 1908 by *kobzar* Hnat Honcharenko (ca. 1835–ca. 1917) and transcribed by folklorist Filaret Kolessa (1871–1947). The recording session took place in Yalta, and the recording engineer on the occasion was the poet Lesia Ukrainka (1871–1913).

12. Про Дворянку / The Noblewoman

In the early 20th century, some *kobzar* songs made their way into the repertoire of the first generation of sighted urban players. The version of the humorous song “The Noblewoman” recorded here belongs to this category. Although it retains the storyline of the young village wife putting on airs and living beyond her husband’s means and the characteristic performance style of the long, humorous *kobzar* songs, the text has been shortened and polished for stage performance.

“The Noblewoman” was one of the first pieces in my repertoire. I learned it from my father, Petro Kytasty, who, while still a teenager, had himself learned it from Oleksiy Dziubenko (1890–1968), an older bandurist who had been in the first professional bandura ensemble in Kyiv.

13. Метелиця / Metelytsia

“Metelytsia” is a popular dance tune in the minor mode. This version of the melody is from my father, Petro Kytasty. I recorded it here with variations that have suggested themselves over many years of playing the piece and added an ending from a similar *lirnyk* (hurdy-gurdy) tune in the Demutsky collection.

14. Про Страшний Суд / The Last Judgement

Ultimately, the *kobzar* repertoire focuses on the great essential things: death, judgement, truth and falsehood, heaven and hell. The apocalyptic imagery of the Last Judgement was a favorite theme among the *kobzari*. The version recorded here, which I learned from my great-uncle, Hryhory Kytasty, combines musical themes and verses from three songs in the Demutsky collection. Later, I added a few final verses from a recording by Shtokalko.

15. Множество аз Согреших / The Sinner at the Gates of Heaven

A sinner laments at the gates of Paradise. This song appears in *kobzari* repertoire lists compiled by folklorists. I learned it from my father and performed it with him and the remarkable tenor Pavlo Pysarenko (b. 1953). Later, I reworked it as a solo piece accompanied on *kobzars'ka* bandura.

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