

Liudmyla Larikova Людмила Ларікова

Senior lecturer, Department of Bandura, Ukrainian National  
Tchaikovsky Academy of MusicСтарший викладач кафедри бандури, Національна музична  
академія України імені П. І. Чайковськогоe-mail: larikova.ludmula2020@gmail.com | [orcid.org/0000-0003-1231-9855](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1231-9855)

# Women's Bandura Ensembles

## Aspects of Working with Small Vocal Ensembles

## Ансамблі бандуристок

### Особливості роботи з малими вокальними складами

**Abstract.** The paper describes the specific features in the functioning of women's bandura ensembles. In particular, it gives a historiographical picture of vocal-instrumental bandura performance, describes the stages of academisation of women's singing in bandura ensembles, and overviews the main methodological approaches of work with women's vocal-instrumental bandura ensembles. Women's bandura ensembles as an academic genre trend of Ukrainian musical culture have three fields of study: vocal and instrumental (performers), genre and stylistic (composers), and social and educational (cultural). Also, it is important to pay due attention to the widening of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, and to serious work on the methods of improving the performing and expressing components of singing and playing bandura in the ensemble.

**Keywords:** bandura, vocal-instrumental bandura performance, women's bandura ensembles, methods of work, bandura singer-performer, performing-expressive features of bandura.

**Problem statement.** Among the varieties of contemporary music content, vocal and instrumental bandura performance is one of the vibrantly evolving fields. Popularity of the genre, as well as the enrichment of the stylistic field of original vocal works accompanied by the bandura produces, reproduces, and enhances systematic ideas and principles of academic bandura art. It outlines the field of the banduristics, a phenomenon that describes the “existence of the bandura at the present stage of evolvement and establishes the field of its expressive capabilities, enhancing of the instrument construction, transforming the view of the role of the bandura in the socio-cultural environment” (Druzgha, 2021, p. 1). The formation of systematic ideas about the origin and functioning of small vocal-instrumental ensembles, as well as the problem of methodological support of bandura vocal ensembles in the art of bandura, form the relevance of this research.

The study aims to trace the historical dynamics of the evolvement of women's vocal bandura performance and to conceptualize important methodological approaches in the functioning of the bandura vocal ensemble.

Accordingly, the research sets to accomplish the following objectives: to give a historiographical account of the vocal-instrumental banduristics, to trace the stages in which the academization of women's ensemble singing accompanied by a bandura took place, to describe the main methodological

approaches that are important for working with small women's vocal-instrumental bandura ensembles.

The research methodology is based on the principle of historicism that allows considering the evolvement of the phenomenon of vocal banduristics at a particular historical stage. The comparative-historical method made it possible to analyze women's ensemble performing with the accompaniment of bandura. Inductive and typological methods allowed to classify the methods of work in the bandura vocal ensemble. The analytical method was used in theoretical and performing analyzes of modern vocal and instrumental works with the bandura parts.

**Results and discussion.** Polyphonic songs—sung in several equivalent melodies, each having an independent artistic value—are marked with particular musical beauty. Performed by an ensemble, they capture the attention with the unique mode, artfulness, and autonomy of horizontal movement. Mostly women created and popularized such songs. Women expressed their feelings and emotions or sympathized with the grief of their fellow sisters or friends. Also, an important role in the evolvement of the traditions of women's ensemble singing was played by ancient folk customs, according to which many song genres were performed in everyday life exclusively by women (e.g. circle dance songs, spring songs, harvest songs, wedding songs, Kupala songs, lullabies, and others).

The oldest surviving evidence of singing to the accompaniment of kobza dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century frescoes at St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. The word *kobza* probably is of Eastern origin. Mentions of the instruments with this name could be found in historical sources of various European nations. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, vocal performance on the bandura was mostly solo. It was only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the first artistic experiments in ensemble singing with the accompaniment of a bandura took place.

In 1902, at the XII Archaeological Congress in Kharkiv, kobzars and lyre players played and sang together. Bandura ensembles existed in Kyiv in 1907 and in Moscow from 1912 to 1913. The joint performances of kobzars, which started spontaneously, the appearance of the bandura on stage, and the emergence of a new type of kobzar concert performers, such as Hnat Khotkevych, Terentiy Parkhomenko, Ivan Kuchura-Kucherenko, and others, have formed the ground for the evolvement of academic ensembles and bandura choirs. This new phenomenon in the art of kobza has become a kind of continuation of traditional forms of music on a modern professional basis. As a result, there was a powerful pool of bandura ensemble vocal performers in Ukraine during the early 1920s.

Vocal genres accompanied by bandura were kant and psalms. *Kant* is a three-part, secular song of verse construction, which originated at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was evolving for two hundred years. Similar works of spiritual content named *psalms* were always present in the repertoire of kobzars. The genre of monophonic songs accompanied by clavichord, bandura, bagpipe, and later piano also became widespread at the city performances. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this genre supplanted kant from musical practice, evolving into the so-called romance song.

Numerous historical accounts testify to the popularity of Ukrainian musicians and their outstanding role in the musical life of the Russian Empire. Bandura players and singers served at the royal courts of Petr I, Anna Ioannovna, and Elizaveta Petrovna, at the courts of many rich nobles and senators. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Catherine II Western European musical instruments start to displace bandura, when the fashion for everything foreign evolved. The enslavement of the rural population during the reign of Catherine II was the reason why only blind people, so-called "God's people", who were free from serfdom, could play bandura. Having no political rights, traveling kobzar singers and lyre players united in so-called fraternities, copying the style of medieval work guilds. There were also private schools of kobza art, headed by a prominent kobza performer, which were attended by young, musically gifted young men.

Kobzars were mostly men but there were female kobzars also. Usually, these women came from kobzars families. Hnat Khotkevych mentions them in "The materials about kobzars and bandura players":

"...for example, the daughter of the late Tereshko Terentiy Parkhomenko plays ... in Chernihiv region, 35 versts

from Sosnytsia, a married woman also sings and plays the bandura, but does not go to ask for alms—the mistress of the house" (Khotkevich, 1914, p. 12).

Also, in Moscow in 1912–1914, there was an ensemble of bandura players "Kobzar" directed by V. Shevchenko that included four women performers.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, when the State Kyiv Bandura Band remained, probably, the only male ensemble of its kind, women's ensembles began to gain popularity. At the same time, bandura classes were opened in music schools, music colleges in Kyiv, Lviv, Lutsk, Rivne, and other cities, at the Kyiv and Lviv State Conservatories, with the vast majority of bandura students being women.

Volodymyr Kabachok<sup>1</sup> organized the first professional bandura trio at the conservatory. His legacy in the history of Ukrainian kobzarism is significant, as he was the founder of a bandura performing school where he tried to combine the achievements of Kyiv and Kharkiv schools of bandura performance. His disciples were Valentina Tretyakova, Nina Pavlenko, Tamara Polishchuk, People's Artists of the Ukrainian SSR, winners of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Youth and Students Festival in Warsaw (1955); Nelly Booth, Yulia Koval, and Halyna Yeremenko (Dnipro Trio), People's Artists of the Ukrainian SSR; Serhiy Bashtan<sup>2</sup> and many others.

Most often, the women's bandura trio consists of voices with good vocals and different tessitura—first and second soprano and alto. This combination of voices expands and enriches the performance capabilities in comparison with a solo performance. The ensemble's volume increases, and its range expands. The solo performer is limited to only one melodic line, the use of three voices opens up much wider possibilities. In particular, a solo of one voice can be supplemented by a canon in other voices, using a variety of polyphonic means for developing the musical fabric. Instrumental support plays a significant role. Bandura has a rich timbre-expressive palette that is successfully combined with female voices. The use of three banduras makes it possible to reinforce the accompaniment, makes its intonation expressive and dynamics rich.

The women's bandura trio owes its popularity to the variety of themes and characteristics in their repertoire. High performing skills of small ensembles, and in particular, the vocal trio of the Baiko sisters (Lviv), the Kyiv State Philharmonic Bandura Trio, and the Ukrainian Radio and Television Committee's Bandura Trio, have helped Ukrainian composers to produce a significant amount of music for such ensembles. In particular, these are the works by V. Lobko, A. Bobyr, Y. Nezovybatko, V. Voit, A. Omelchenko, S. Bashtan, and many others<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Volodymyr Kabachok (1892–1958) was an outstanding Ukrainian bandura player, singer, conductor and teacher.

<sup>2</sup> Serhiy Bashtan (1927–2017), Ukrainian bandura player, teacher, and composer, a Merited Artist of the Ukrainian SSR, now a professor of the Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music.

<sup>3</sup> In the postwar period, the publishing house "Music Ukraine" actively published collections of songs from the repertoire of famous

However, the repertoire of such ensembles is based on Ukrainian folk songs of different genres and different characters: lyrical, every day, and humorous. Arrangements of folk songs were made mainly by the members of the trio<sup>1</sup>.

These songs are characterized by a one-voice intro at the beginning (mostly soprano), and then the continuation of the song in three voices ("Rain drips", "Four oxen graze I", "Chumarochka ryabesenka", "Oh in the field, there are three wells"). For some songs, different versions were written to perform each subsequent verse ("The Rain Drops", "And Noises, and Buzzes", "Chumarochka Ryabesenka").

Instrumental accompaniment is characterized by the presence of a small intro, written mainly on the material of the chorus, or the second sentence of the melody of the verse. The intro is performed by one bandura, or it is often written for two bandura parts: the first one duplicates the melody, and the second creates a rhythm (harmonic chords for a weak part of the beat at the main bass line).

The aforementioned collections of music for the bandura trio contain songs written by composers for the vocal trio accompanied by piano, and the translation for the banduras was made by the members of the ensembles. These are such works as "Nightingales Do Not Let Us Sleep" by E. Kozak, "Willows Bend Over the Pond" by O. Bilash, "Cuckoo" by I. Shamo, and many others. In addition, the bandura players include popular songs written for the choir in their repertoire, a soloist accompanied by piano. Such works as "Ukraine, my love" by I. Shamo, "Song about Ukraine" by V. Vermych, "White Chestnuts" by P. Mayboroda, and "Hutsulka Ksenia" by R. Savitsky, "Sons" by A. Pashkevych, "Son, ducks fly" by O. Bilash. Arrangements of these songs are characterized by richer instrumental accompaniment, which may be observed in the works of O. Bilash "White Swans", O. Novitsky "Oh, do not blink, girls", I. Shamo "Cuckoo", M. Lysenko "Sailing boat" and many others.

The popularity of the bandura trio, as well as the revitalization of the repertoire for small ensembles with a large number of original compositions, contributed to its widespread following. As a result, many regional ensembles appeared: duets, trios, quartets. Such ensembles exist in almost every regional philharmonics: Lviv, Zhytomyr, Donetsk, Rivne, Lutsk, Ivano-Frankivsk, and other municipal culture

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trios of bandura players: *Singing blondes* (1970) from the repertoire of People's Artists of the USSR Yu. Gamova, V. Parkhomenko, E. Myronyuk; *Evenings and My Songs* (1973) from the repertoire of Honored Artists of the USSR, winners of the Shevchenko Prize M. Golenko, N. Pisarenko and T. Grishchenko; *Blue Cornflowers Bloomed* (1976) from the repertoire of People's Artists of the USSR V. Tret'yakova, N. Pavlenko, N. Moskvina; *Bandura with you!* (1982) from the repertoire of Honored Artists of the USSR A. Mamchenko, S. Petrova, and A. Shutko.

<sup>1</sup> For example, "I go to the garden", "My mother beat me", "The man loved me" are arrangements by Y. Gamova. Romances "Blue Eyes, Blue" are the arrangement by T. Gritsenko. "The rain is dripping", "The Cossack went secretly", "It is and buzzes" are the arrangements by M. Golenko.

centers. Bandura teachers often take part in these ensembles, forming a trio in educational institutions. In music schools and conservatories, study courses in small ensembles were introduced. All of this creates the preconditions to turn into a more complex repertoire<sup>2</sup>.

As for the methodical generalizations, they serve an important condition for the functioning of the women's vocal bandura ensemble and promote its professional development. An ensemble is an organic group, where feelings, desires, and attention of individuals are united into a single emotional entity. Therefore, the psychological attitude of the ensemble members is important. This is yet more true regarding the purpose of the ensemble, a common understanding of a repertoire policy, musical and hierarchical roles, etc. When selecting members of the ensemble, it is necessary to take into account the timbre resemblance of voices, to make sure that the voices are equal in strength, and at the same time produce one characteristic timbre, which will later be recognized by listeners as ensemble's vocal brand.

Expressive, clear, and correct pronunciation during singing is one of the most important tasks of the ensemble. The leader of the group should take care of keeping participants' articulators flexible and mobile, striving for their activity, ease and freedom during singing. All members of the ensemble must work to form their vowels similarly.

This uniformity in the articulation of the vowels contributes to a better timbre-coordinated sound of the ensemble. The pronunciation of consonants should be clear and short, so as not to disturb, if possible, the continuity of the vocal line, which should stay mainly on vowel sounds. Consonant sounds at the end of words should always be clearly and distinctly articulated. If the syllable ends in a consonant, it should be intoned with the following syllable, for example, *ni-ch-ka te-mnaya* [dark night], *si-lo so-ntse* [the sun went down]. Accumulation of consonants in one syllable should be pronounced quickly, easily, and clearly. In general, ensemble members must cultivate a conscious attitude towards the verbal text of the work and its artistic and figurative context. And a well-formed pronunciation contributes to the quality of the interpretation of a musical work.

Breathing is the basis for the formation of the vocal sound and it must be completely subjected to the will of the performer. Exhalation is more important for a vocalist than inhalation because it creates a vocal sound. The members of the ensemble must have good breathing skills and be able to save air during exhalation. Diaphragmatic breathing is the most

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<sup>2</sup> In October 1988, a republican competition of folk musicians was held in Ivano-Frankivsk. It was the first time that small ensembles took part in the competition. "Verbena," the bandura trio of the Cherkasy Regional Philharmonics (Lyudmyla Glotova, Lidia Zaynykivska, and Olga Kalyna, now People's Artists of Ukraine), took the 1<sup>st</sup> prize; bandura trios from Lviv (Olga Gerasimenko, Khrystyna Zalutska, and Olga Stashchyshyn) and Kyiv (Tetyana Vsevolodska, Lesya Repetska, and Lyudmyla Fedorova) were awarded 2<sup>nd</sup> prize; bandura trio of the Odesa Conservatory (Nina Morozevych, Natalia Budovska, and Kateryna Semenova) was awarded the 3<sup>d</sup> prize.

suitable for professional singing. It allows one to easily master the vocal sound of smooth tessitura and bright timbre. The duration and frequency of breathing are also influenced by the tessitura conditions of a musical phrase. The phrase in the upper register requires more air than one in the middle or low registers. The ability to maintain the so-called “breathing position” while singing is of great importance. After taking a breath, one needs to hold the air in one’s lungs for a while, and then exhale sparingly. This is achieved by maintaining the posture acquired during inhalation and allows the singer to feel the resistance of the sound.

Proper production of the sound depends primarily of the mastery of one’s voice. This, in turn, can be achieved by keeping the right singing posture and right breathing. When singing—whether standing or sitting, like in the case of bandura performers who hold the instrument—the posture should be free, straight, without stretching the neck, without tensing its muscles. Tongue and lips should be springy, not stiff. It is necessary not to produce the forced, loud sound, because it spoils the voice, and violates the purity of intonation and expressiveness of performance. The rounding of the sound and the uniform formation of vowels (as already mentioned above) blend voices into a single-tone sound, if a perfectly accurate intonation is achieved.

Ensemble singing requires its members to have the skills to correctly and purely intone the parts they perform. There are also special rules of pure intonation of a given chord in the ensemble sonority. For example, in the major triad and its inversions, the major third should always be intoned as if with an increase, as if pulling it to the higher pitch. There is a complete analogy with the way of intonation of this interval in its melodic form. The intonation of the minor third in the minor triad and its inversions also occurs by the rules of its melodic intonation. In addition, the pure intonation of the main tone and the fifth helps to feel the intonation of the minor third properly. In addition to working on the current repertoire, special exercises to improve the sense of melodic and harmonic systems play an important role in the formation of a stable ensemble system.

A vocal ensemble is the coordination of dynamics and timbre of voices. It requires each singer to find the right balance of strength and timbre in relation to other members of an ensemble. As a result, the impression of merging voices should be formed. The vocal ensemble may be divided into a set of complementary ensembles, consisting of intonation, melody, timbre, dynamic, meter-rhythmic, agogic, diction-orthoeptic, and tessitura components. If one of the components is ruined, the integrity of the vocal ensemble as a whole is destroyed. The purity of intonation in singing depends not only on the interval and modal components of melodic or harmonic inversions. There are several other reasons, the most important of which are:

- a) meter-rhythmic structures and their complexity (rich rhythmic pattern complicates intonation),
- b) full harmonic structure of performance (the clearer and simpler the harmonious language, the easier it is for the ensemble members to intone, and vice versa),

- c) smooth vocal facilitates intonation,
- d) moderate tempo promotes better intonation than its fast variants.

e) tessitura conditions (in extreme high and low registers it is harder to intone purely, unlike intoning within the working range).

Ensemble coherence also depends on the texture of the musical vocal work, as the role of individual voices in the performance may differ and depend on the importance of the performed musical material by a particular voice.

The degree of complexity of instrumental accompaniment depends on the professional expertise of the ensemble. The involvement of performing techniques contributes to the complication of the accompaniment. One of the typical features of the bandura sound (Chernihiv and Lviv types of the instrument) is the register gap between the bass sounds and the main timbre. In ensemble performance, this shortcoming is eliminated by the second and third parts of the accompaniment, which take on harmonical accompaniment. And if for the arrangement for one bandura the register method is widely used, then for two, three, or four bandura parts it is possible to avoid the timbre gap between the bass and the main sound range of the instrument, and use different instrumentation techniques within the same ensemble.

It is not necessary to assign instrumental parts in accordance with the vocal roles of the members of the ensemble (e.g. the first soprano plays the first instrumental part). The principle of musical-expressive expediency has to be the guide in this situation. If, for example, a member of the ensemble sings an alto part, but is a talented performer on bandura, then the more complex components of the bandura accompaniment should be entrusted to her.

On the other hand, to develop the mastery of the instrument, performers can exchange their parts every time, so all ensemble members develop the ability to perform both instrumental solos and rhythmic parts. The same rule should be applied while working on purely instrumental works.

The general rise in technical and performing skills of bandura singers makes it possible to solve rather complex repertoire problems. The availability of modern instruments creates necessary conditions for the inclusion of a variety of vocal and choral works—from arrangements of Ukrainian songs in their rich diversity to classical works—into the repertoire of women’s bandura ensembles

Translation of classical works for an ensemble consisting of two, three, or four banduras expands the performing and expressive range of the instrument, thanks to the coverage and expression of a complex melodic line in singing and rich texture of accompaniment. Particular features of the bandura ensemble require a meticulous approach in the choice of musical translations and arrangements. It is worth remembering that the sound of the bandura strings cannot be covered and the consistent reproduction of dissonant intervals forms phonic layers that are unpleasant to the ear. Therefore, the preference is given to works with a chord or chord-arpeggio texture. Works written for other string instruments, e.g. lutes, guitars, harps, zithers, harpsichords, and light-textured piano

compositions, and translated for bandura have an especially interesting sound, without a loss in their original stylistic quality.

**Conclusions.** The description of vocal-instrumental bandura music through the process of functioning of women's ensembles accompanied by bandura allowed to trace the historical and socio-cultural aspects of women's vocal ensembles, transformation of their expressive capabilities, and the expansion of the field of its stylistic and genre attributes. The phenomenon evolved from isolated instances of women's ensemble activities in the early twentieth century and is now transformed into a powerful academic genre-specific trend

in Ukrainian music culture, based on vocal-instrumental (performing), genre-style (composition), and socio-educational (cultural) planes.

Further development of the vocal-ensemble and instrumental culture of women's bandura ensembles is of great importance for the overall development of academic bandura art. Further research needs to be done on improving theoretical knowledge and practical skills, and on serious systematic methodological work that improves the performing and expressive components of singing and performing on the bandura in the ensemble.

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#### Ларікова Л.

##### Ансамблі бандуристок. Особливості роботи з малими вокальними складами

**Анотація.** Окреслено особливості функціонування жіночих ансамблів у супроводі бандури. Зокрема, складено історіографічну картину явища вокально-інструментальної бандуристики, простежено етапність академізації жіночого ансамблевого співу у супроводі бандури та охарактеризовано основні методичні підходи, важливі для роботи з малими жіночими вокально-інструментальними бандурними складами. Ансамблі бандуристок як академічний жанрово-видовий напрям української музичної культури має три основні сегменти вивчення — вокально-інструментальний (виконавський), жанрово-стильовий (композиторський) та соціально-просвітницький (культурницький). Також важливо приділяти належну увагу підвищенню теоретичних знань і практичних навичок, серйозній системній методичній роботі, спрямованій на вдосконалення виконавсько-виразальних компонентів співу та гри на бандурі в ансамблевому строї.

**Ключові слова:** бандура, вокально-інструментальна бандуристика, жіночі вокальні складки, методика роботи, бандурист-співак, виконавсько-виразальні можливості бандури.