

# The Cycle *Songs of Bukovina* by Leonid Desyatnikov as an Example of Palimpsest

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## Abstract

*The Songs of Bukovina* by Leonid Desyatnikov, composed in 2017 and inspired by folk tunes, continue the tradition of piano prelude cycles, which originated in the Romantic era and were actively developed thereafter. This article attempts to interpret the composition as an example of neoromanticism, acknowledging its inseparable connection to the past while simultaneously exploring the stylistic features of the composer's method. Significant attention is devoted to the romantic idea of synthesis: "The Songs of Bukovina" exhibit a fusion of incongruous elements, seamlessly combining disparate and diverse materials.

## Keywords

Allusion, Leonid Desyatnikov, Polystylism, *The Songs of Bukovina*, Ukrainian Folk Music

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## 1. Folklore Basis of the Chamber Opus *Songs of Bukovina*

*The Songs of Bukovina* by Ukrainian composer Leonid Desyatnikov, a native of Kharkiv, are inspired by Ukrainian folklore, drawn from the collection *Bukovinian Folk Songs*. The composer turned to Ukrainian folklore because it is close to him, as he was born and raised in Ukraine, and he emphasises that the years spent there were happy for him.

According to Desyatnikov, the songs of Bukovina are "Ukrainian music, but traces of migrations are distinctly audible in them. There are melodies with augmented seconds, clearly of Jewish origin, Romanian, Moldavian, Balkan influences, even something reminiscent of Tyrolean yodels". The composer has a special relationship with time—in his cycle *Songs of Bukovina*, there is no past or future, but the chronotype is present here and now. Memory in Desyatnikov's music is almost tangible, as if there is a trace beneath every layer.

The folklore culture of Bukovina was shaped by its historical belonging to various foreign states: the Principality of Moldavia, Turkey, Austria-Hungary, and Romania. Today, this region includes Romanian villages whose folklore undoubtedly influenced and continues to influence traditional Bukovinian customs and art. In the imagery of ritual and ceremonial actions, in decorative and applied arts, in painting and architecture, and in folk songs, the residents of Bukovina asserted their distinctiveness, high talent, and national unity with the entire Ukrainian people (Kotsur, 2020).

Desyatnikov handles the material—Moldavian, Jewish, Ukrainian, Romanian—with care, extending its scope, creating a universal sound world where the local becomes part of the global. The music of the Bukovinian cycle combines the intonation sharpness of Western Ukrainian modes with techniques from the arsenal of contemporary compositional methods. The predominance of the minor mode is evident in the *Songs of Bukovina*, with very few major preludes in the cycle.

An integral part of the calendar rituals of Ukrainians and Moldovans in Bukovina was the veneration of ancestors, ritual rounds, entertainment, and songs. Holidays and rituals served as levers for satisfying spiritual and aesthetic needs, and expressing people's beliefs and emotions. In Desyatnikov's works, folklore retains its cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic value. Bukovina is a region where Ukrainian, Bessarabian, Hutsul, Moldovan, and Romanian cultural traditions converge; dance music (kolomyika) of Bukovina and Hungarian shepherd songs are identical. Great attention is devoted to the romantic idea of synthesis: *The Songs of Bukovina* are characterised by a combination of the incongruous, an organic fusion of dissimilar and diverse elements. According to the composer, the main source of inspiration was Bukovinian folklore: "Each of the 24 preludes is based on a genuine folk melody. Sometimes highly prepared, and sometimes sounding almost pure".

The music of the final prelude of the *Songs of Bukovina* leaves an effect of bewilderment: it resembles open postmodernist endings that can be interpreted from different perspectives. This prelude, perhaps, is the least tonally defined in the entire cycle, the most discreet and fragmentary. It is not an answer but an endless question, in essence, the question itself, hanging in the air. This fragment is a significant ellipsis, giving freedom of choice. For this prelude, Desyatnikov chose the melody of a Bukovinian folk song called *Sopilochka Yavorova*.

Sopilochka is a flute that becomes a recognisable symbol not due to its external qualities but because of the function it performs in the general context of the plot (see **Figure 1**). The flute, while emphasising realities, reveals the true meaning of the artistic image. Musical instruments that both Ukrainians and Romanians consider traditional due to their use, not their creation, include tilinka, flute, and violin. The largest group in this area consists of wind instruments, among which the trembita occupies a special place (Cherkaskyi, 2003). The image created by Desyatnikov in the final prelude is fragile and vulnerable: instead of a flute, he uses a swirly. This episode captivates with its poignant tragedy.



**Figure 1.** Ukrainian sopilochka.

*The songs of Bukovina* are fundamentally monodic, and their modes are effective. If a song has several voices, then it is a combination of monodic tuning with polyphonic texture, where the combination of voices creates polyphony of monodies. Restraint and tonality here depend largely on three factors: the placement of the tone, its duration, and repeatability. The tone is not bound by strict functional logic and, when placed in a different context, can behave according to that context. Desyatnikov handles the tonal organisation of the *Songs of Bukovina* with care, preserving the intonational pattern entirely. If a melody suggests polyphonic presentation, the composer retains it.

## 2. Desyatnikov as a Continuator of the Traditions of Romanticism

Desyatnikov avoids direct references to the *Songs of Bukovina*, giving the listener room for contemplation, discreetly leaving the first lines of the songs in brackets after the preludes, as if paying another tribute to Debussy. Like the French composer, each landscape sketch by Desyatnikov has a specific emotional hue: sometimes tranquil, dreamy contemplation, other times majestic meditation; stern, sometimes dark moods can instantly give way to intoxicating joy (Phillips, 2018).

Debussy's twenty-four preludes are a cycle of miniature musical pictures, each containing a completely independent artistic image. For Debussy, this genre marks the culmination of his creative path and serves as a kind of encyclopaedia of everything characteristic and typical in the realm of musical content, poetic imagery, and the composer's style (Phillips, 2018). The preludes' ability to embody distinct and changing impressions, the absence of obligatory structures in composition, and the improvisational freedom of expression all closely align with the aesthetic views and artistic method of the impressionist composer.

Both Debussy and Desyatnikov avoid flashy development of images in their miniatures, instead revealing them with colourful nuances that rapidly shift and sometimes create a sense of "kaleidoscopic" motion.

Leonid Desyatnikov is a master of palimpsest: typically, in his music, a new image is merely the other side of the found one, examined from a different angle. The synthesis of various forms is a typically romantic trait. In the light of constant dialogue with the past, it is noteworthy that form, for Desyatnikov, is “processed” in his compositions as the musical text itself, either authorial or non-authorial. Like the music of Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, or the *Songs of Bukovina*, the reference to folklore also falls within the framework of the tradition of Romanticism—the distant and beautiful past resonates in the monodies of oral creativity. The influence of Rachmaninoff is clearly manifested twice in the 12th prelude—in allusions to the G minor prelude and the cantata *Three Russian Songs*. Everything is included in the work and reinterpreted in the spirit of the multilayered poly-stylistics of the 21st century (see **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**).



**Figure 2.** Leonid Desyatnikov, *Songs of Bukovina*, Prelude XII (Saint Petersburg: Composer, 2019).

**Figure 3.** Sergei Rachmaninoff, Prelude in G Minor, op. 23 No. 5 (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1948).

In the *Songs of Bukovina*, besides the conventionally slow framing, there is an interesting *Prelude No. 11*, “A cuckoo cuckooed in the house on the corner”. The cuckoo’s voice was considered a bad omen, and its cooing, alternating with pauses, is associated with transitional moments in the natural and human life cycle. The most famous example of sustained melodic lines imitating bird calls can be found in Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *The Snow Maiden*, and Messiaen extensively used bird song imitations in his compositions (Kraft, 2000).

Desyatnikov’s piece reflects the principle of restraint. The closer to the end, the greater restraint the composer’s notes demand from the performer. The slow pieces in the *Songs of Bukovina* are more diverse than the motoric ones, and within the cycle, in some ego-pieces, a tendency toward deceleration is barely noticeable. The inclination towards slowness, therefore, manifests at a local level.

The transformation of the original image is a characteristic phenomenon of the Romantic era, firmly rooted in Liszt’s works with his affinity for monothe-matic development in chamber and large-scale genres. The desire for the most adequate embodiment of poetic subjects in music, the development of which often did not correspond to traditional schemes of constructing a large-scale musical work, led Liszt to the idea of building an entire programmatic piece based on the same theme undergoing figurative transformations and assuming various forms corresponding to different stages of the narrative (Saffle & Dalmonte, 1998).

Mendelssohn, who found a name for the genre of instrumental music gravitating towards vocal nature, also deserves mention here—the *Song without words*. However, Mendelssohn did not strive for cyclicity; his songs without words are a collection from which one can freely choose any miniature for performance. Many of his miniatures have a genre basis, such as lullabies or barcarolles (Botstein, 1993).

Also, in the *Songs of Bukovina*, there are several examples with a “rocking” texture, reminiscent of a lullaby-barcarolle type. They evoke associations with the songs from both of Schubert’s cycles, where the lullaby is clearly discernible (either as a whole or in separate sections): “Des Baches Wiegenlied”, concluding the cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* “Der Lindenbaum”; “Frühlingstraum” and lulling songs-sarabands: “Der Müller und der Bach”, “Die Nebensonnen”.

There is an allusion to Tchaikovsky’s *Lullaby* in E-flat minor on Maykov’s lyrics, where a complex piano accompaniment is present: alongside the harmonic background created by alternating movements of both hands in even semi-quavers, the middle voice occasionally features deeply expressive intonations that wholly arise from the harmonic background, yet at the same time intensify the lyrical richness of the sound. Prevalent are “sighing” intonations that arise in the accompaniment, in the piano introduction, in interludes, and in the final piece. One variant includes a chain of such “sighs”, forming a characteristic chromatic sequence that draws exceptional attention in the mentioned solo piano episodes. Some relative autonomy of the accompanying melody in the piano is expressed in frequent syncopation (Figure 4 and Figure 5).



**Figure 4.** Leonid Desyatnikov, *Songs of Bukovina*, Prelude XI (Saint Petersburg: Composer, 2019).

**Figure 5.** Pyotr Tchaikovsky, *Lullaby in A flat Major* (Moscow: Music, 1987).

### 3. Chopin's Tradition in *Songs of Bukovina*

The cycle *Songs of Bukovina* consists of 24 piano preludes, a form born in the creative work of Frederic Chopin, inspired by the music of Bach but departing from fugues. The cyclical form of Chopin proved to be so productive and far from exhaustion that even today, following Scriabin and Shostakovich, composers turn to it. The author chose a form that was born in Chopin's work, which was inspired by Bach's music. For Desyatnikov, the Chopinian form became a

historical impulse, and he follows this impulse not literally.

Desyatnikov seems to peer into the past, presenting himself as a romantic artist of the 19th century (Bederova, 2005). Desyatnikov's prelude, like Chopin's prelude, is a miniature, capturing a moment in sound, a fixation of the movement of the soul and mood. The tradition of prelude cycles for the piano, which originated in the Romantic era, continues. This tradition, stemming from Bach and adapted by Romanticism into a "cycle of miniatures", from Chopin, Scriabin, elevated to the rank of an "intimate diary of the artist", intersects with Desyatnikov's incorporation of Transcarpathian folklore. The mere fact of turning to the genre and form of the prelude references Chopin, who consciously separated the prelude from the fugue, making it an independent work and imbuing it with new meaning. Thus, the Chopinian cycle becomes an archetype for Desyatnikov.

Desyatnikov follows Chopin's tonal principle, using the movement of the 24 preludes in a circle of fourths and fifths and juxtaposing preludes in parallel keys. In the Jewish tradition, the primary task of a person and humanity is the repair of the old, clearly damaged world, and, it seems, this needs to be done from the very beginning, again and again.

After Chopin, Desyatnikov adheres to one key image in each piece. In the *Songs of Bukovina*, there is no tragedy, but the sadness, regret, and a sense of "lostness" in the finale are palpable. The true romantic meaning of the last of the *Songs of Bukovina* remains unanswered.

The miniatures in the *Songs of Bukovina* contrast with each other, first of all, in tempo, with the number of slow preludes being comparable to the fast, motoric ones. Desyatnikov often relies on paired contrasts, but, unlike Chopin, everything happens the other way around: if the Polish composer juxtaposes contrasting pairs in the order of "fast - slow", then the Ukrainian composer shows a tendency toward "slow - fast". The concept of "reversibility" is also evident in the tempo resolution of the cycle's extreme preludes: in Chopin's case, both are in fast tempo (*agitato*, *allegro appassionato*), while Desyatnikov begins and ends with a slow tempo.

Typically, Desyatnikov's new image is the second facet of what has been found, viewed from a different angle. This happens with the theme of the 1st prelude: the contemplative initial image, floating in the upper voices, emerges in the second part of the form with a march. This duality is inseparable from the romantic artistic self-consciousness. The repetition of the F-sharp-G-G motive turns it into a dominant predicate, and the concluding tonic third in D major follows as a logical, long-awaited resolution. Both layers exist independently in the 1st prelude, have different foundations, their own logic of development, but do not hinder each other's development. In the end, both themes come together in the tonic major chord, "gathered" according to all the canons of classical major-minor functionality. It is worth noting that Desyatnikov methodically observes the "law of the tonic", clearly indicating it at the beginning of each piece and especially at the end.

The well-known sextuplet motive of Chopin's *Nocturne in E-flat major* is

hidden in the melody of the first song in the cycle “Steppe wind a-blowin”. The composer repeats the melody to slow down the musical time. Thanks to grace notes, the Ukrainian folk song acquires aristocratic refinement. Through diffuse repetitions and lengthened final notes of phrases, the stanzaic melody of “Steppe wind a-blowin” transforms into a rhythmic prosaic structure. The composer seems to dissect the song into its components and organically utilises each of them. He emphasises the ascending intervallic leap “on the beat”. The song begins with a crotchet note, then the leap expands to a seventh, and a new phrase of the melody opens with a wide-breathed sixth bar. Desyatnikov also adds an ascending fifth to the beat, and it becomes clear that this is the focal point of the melody highlighted by the composer (see **Figure 6** and **Figure 7**).

The pitch of A-flat in the first octave, the upper sound of this ninth chord, introduces ghostly romantic minor notes into the C major piece. Its entire fabric is perceived through the haze of the minor. In general, A-flat can be seen as an “improper overtone” of the “true tonic” sound of the minor octave. The distorted resonance, a false octave, is realised in this piece (**Figure 8**).

The image shows a musical score for Leonid Desyatnikov's Prelude I. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is in 3/4 time, marked with a tempo of quarter note = 69 (♩=69). The music is in C major and begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand plays a melody with grace notes and triplets, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The second system continues the piece, ending with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, grace notes, and dynamic markings.

**Figure 6.** Leonid Desyatnikov, *Songs of Bukovina*, Prelude I (Saint Petersburg: Composer, 2019).

The image shows a musical score for Frederic Chopin's Nocturne in E-flat major, op. 9 No. 2. It is marked "Nº 2" and "Andante" with a tempo of quarter note = 132 (♩=132). The piece is in 3/4 time and lasts 3 minutes and 25 seconds. The music is in E-flat major and begins with an "espress. dolce" marking. The right hand features a melodic line with grace notes and triplets, while the left hand provides a complex accompaniment of chords and eighth notes. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, grace notes, and dynamic markings like *f* and *p*.

**Figure 7.** Frederic Chopin, *Nocturne in E-flat major* op.9 Nº2 (Paris: Salabert, 1945).



**Figure 8.** Leonid Desyatnikov, *Songs of Bukovina*, “Steppe wind a-blowin” (Saint Petersburg: Composer, 2019).

Desyatnikov handles the pitch organisation of the *Songs of Bukovina* carefully, fully preserving the intonational pattern. If the melody implies polyphonic presentation, Desyatnikov retains it as well. In the process of developing the material, Desyatnikov, to some extent, deviates from the folkloric original: he breaks it down into motives and uses them as patterns, twice repeats individual motives, although such repetition was not present in the original version of the song. The author of *Songs of Bukovina* is precise regarding rhythm: he can change the meter or tempo decisions, give the melody an increase, or further “prolong” the last note of the motive, as if pausing on it in contemplation—just like Chopin in the *A major prelude* (Meier, 1993). Nevertheless, the contour of the folk melody in Desyatnikov’s miniatures is unmistakably recognisable, and even if the melody does not work, its core, the main thesis, the productive grain, is heard distinctly. If the tonal concept of preludes requires it, the composer takes the melody to a high position on the scale, implying that a particular prelude is in the circle of fifths rather than according to its source in the collection. However, talking about a fixed tonality in folk music is meaningless since the oral tradition does not have a unified temperament; each poet adjusts it according to their vocal capabilities.

Following Chopin and Desyatnikov, each piece adheres to one key image. If there is a sense of a change in mood or image within a particular prelude, it is worth taking a closer look at the main theme. The *Songs of Bukovina* work together. It is undoubtedly a cycle with a common idea, and at the same time, it is a suite—a form that the Ukrainian composer cherishes, so close to him that he often turns to similar contrast-compositional structures in genres of any scale.

In his composition, Desyatnikov follows Chopin’s tonal principle, using the circle of fifths and juxtaposing preludes in parallel keys. Whatever happens in the texture of a particular prelude, the tonic, legitimised by Chopin’s principle, will inevitably manifest itself. Following the tonal plan is embodied uniquely: the final tonics often represent phonetic complexes that, in terms of sound composition, could be equated with tertian chords with interspersed tones. Such, for example, are the final tonics in the 8th, 17th, 18th, and final preludes. Opening the cycle with a pair of major and minor preludes, he concludes it with F major and D minor preludes. However, talking about major and minor is equally justified and conditional since the major-minor key in Desyatnikov’s music appears not in a pure classical form, interwoven with monodic principles.

#### 4. Style Peculiarities of Composer's Thinking

The formation of such tonal construction is determined by the factor of intertextuality, characteristic of the *Songs of Bukovina*, and the polysystemity of this cycle. Desyatnikov creates his artistic universe based on a dialogue with an “alien text” (in a broad sense, the term “text” is used here). The composer constantly directs the listener’s inner gaze towards the past by “weaving” musical quotes and clichés into the narrative, playing with signs, and reflecting postmodern aesthetics. The composer’s working method can be compared to the concept of “playing with beads”, which serves not as an end in itself but as a means of accumulating ideas and meanings. Like a Ludi magister, Desyatnikov meticulously designs the principle of constructing the game and its dramaturgy, with the text always being the core (Zorina, 2022).

The refinement, melody, elegance and sometimes audacity of Desyatnikov’s music, which is not typical of contemporary academic music, evoke in the listener a rare sense of recognisability and clarity. However, this simplicity is deceptive. “In the case of Desyatnikov we are dealing with an amazing mimicry, when a very complex composer pretends to be salon-like and refined,” Desyatnikov’s simplest scores turn out to be complex, hermetic modernist labyrinths. Seemingly accessible and melodic, his music is very layered and intellectual, with numerous allusions and references. “It is difficult to label this composer’s work: he is neither avant-garde nor minimalist,” says violinist Roman Mints (Munipov, 2018).

Desyatnikov’s style is a balanced combination of skill, ability, sociability, and emotional profundity. In the musical world, he is known primarily as a composer-philosopher. His work is difficult to fit into any frameworks. The composer simply eliminates the opposition between “one’s own/foreign”, avoiding extreme detailing of individual elements of musical language and “plays” at the level of styles and genres, juxtaposing them to each other.

The Chopin form became for the author a historical impulse, an archetype (Meier, 1993). It is challenging to understand Desyatnikov’s works without associations with prototypes, bricolage objects, and sources of palimpsest. Perhaps, no one can compete with the author of *Songs of Bukovina*, where one can find a maximum of reminiscences and discover how, amidst their enormous diversity, the Ukrainian composer manages to remain himself in each prelude. The composer effortlessly combines models and styles of foreign music in his compositions, often without resorting to direct quotes. His poly-stylistic approach is characterised by unique authorial elegance and unobtrusiveness. The composer acts as a commentator, relying on the listener’s deep knowledge of the prototype. At the same time, what becomes significant is not only the fixation of the model but also the “unfolding” of the artist’s subjective allusion—the accompanying trace of the era, biography, context. The composer’s world appears as a text, and art enters the space of intertextuality—a total reference to tradition, the realm of reminiscences manifested in allusions, archetypal images, stereotypes, and his-

torical references.

Desyatnikov has a special relationship with time in his works; it seems to have neither past nor future but exists in a single moment, here and now. The composer easily combines models and styles of foreign music in his compositions, often without resorting to direct quotes. His poly-stylistic approach is characterised by a unique authorial elegance and unobtrusiveness. By revisiting, commenting, and re-evaluating different styles, Desyatnikov can “speak” the musical language of the Romantic era, express himself as a Baroque composer accidentally born in the 20th century, suddenly immerse himself in the realm of Slavic folklore or Astor Piazzolla’s tango, and nostalgically reflect on the Soviet pioneer and Komsomol past, albeit without sentimentality but with a light mockery and cool irony.

For example, his opera *Children of Rosenthal* ends with a perplexed and sad sounding of a simple Mozartian flute motif, reminiscent of a scale. The finale of *Children of Rosenthal* is also an open ending, as Mozart, lonely and abandoned by everyone, must learn to live again, seeking his melody, cautiously and shyly mastering the fallen flute (Bederova. 2005).

Desyatnikov genuinely believes in the carefully selected quotes and allusions, providing the audience with salvational sound-semantic “beacons” in the murky streams of contemporary academic polyphony. Working with Leonid Desyatnikov’s musical texts is bound to provoke the researcher’s enthusiasm: attempting to analyse his compositions always turns into a task that one is eager to solve. Regardless of whether the composer intended it or not, the listener gets drawn into a detective story with a polyphony of narrative lines. Each of Desyatnikov’s compositions is rich in references to the works of other authors, and these references can behave differently. Sometimes they are readily apparent: the composer takes someone else’s text in its entirety and uses it in its original form, imbuing it with new meaning.

During his creative evolution, Desyatnikov develops an authorial system of representing the issue of time and the ways of semantically encoding the musical text. The literary sources chosen by him for vocal compositions do not simplify the decryption of these semantic codes; on the contrary, they further polyphonise the semantic field of the composition. This multi-layered musical thinking of Leonid Desyatnikov stimulates the researcher’s interest in his works.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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