

“Tanec Pid Werbamy / Dance Under the Willows”-- Pawlo Humeniuk (1926)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Maria Sonevtsky (guest post)*



Pawlo Humeniuk

The first sound one hears on “Tanec Pid Werbamy/Dance Under the Willows” is that of an ocarina--in Ukrainian, *zozul’ka*, which is also the name for a cuckoo bird. The ocarina cuckoos four times before the sound of Pawlo Humeniuk’s fiddle leaps in with a propulsive melody, over the bright tick-tock pulse set by the *tsymbaly* (hammered dulcimer) and string bass. Over the next three minutes and 20 seconds, Humeniuk restlessly stitches together a medley of dance tunes characteristic of Western Ukraine and neighboring regions, elaborated with ornaments and slides which sometimes recall the chirping introduction. In the invaluable reissue of these early recordings by Arhoolie Records in 1977, the producers remarked that “Dance Under the Willows,” in particular, captures Humeniuk at his best. The recording is, in the words of the Arhoolie producers, “an exercise in verve and virtuosity” by the “king of Ukrainian fiddlers.”

This “king of Ukrainian fiddlers” ascended from humble origins. Humeniuk was born in 1884 in Pidvolochys’k, a small town in the Ternopil region of Western Ukraine, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He began violin lessons at the age of six; and, after emigrating to the US around 1902, continued his studies with a graduate of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Eventually, Humeniuk became known in local Eastern European immigrant communities as a musician-for-hire for weddings and parties. With his brother, he also worked (until his retirement in 1960) as an instrument-maker and repairer at the Homenick Brothers Violin Shop.

Though he is now remembered and celebrated as an exemplary fiddler, were it not for a serendipitous encounter on a slow day in the East Village of Manhattan in 1925, the world may have never known of Pawlo Humeniuk. The story is recounted in various places with

mismatched details, but the broad strokes seem to be as follows: Humeniuk visited his friend, Myron Surmach, at his Ukrainian shop in the East Village of Manhattan. There, Surmach stocked books, clothing, sheet music, and, starting in the mid-1920s, recordings of “ethnic music” produced by the Victor, Columbia, and Okeh companies. Serendipitously, a scout from one of the companies stopped into the shop and Surmach brokered an introduction and a recording tryout for his friend Pawlo. Following the production of a successful demo, Myron Surmach helped him get a contract with Columbia Records and Humeniuk went on to make over one hundred records for Columbia and various other labels.

Humeniuk’s recordings of village tunes quickly eclipsed the sales of similar releases catering to Ukrainian, Polish, and Jewish communities. What was Humeniuk’s unique appeal? In Victor Greene’s “A Passion for Polka: Old-Time Ethnic Music in America,” Surmach offered a partial answer:

He made it like [a] village song, just folk, really what they play...in the villages...without looking [at] notes. He [would] usually close his eyes [as he played]. And when he Made...records, I put [them] on the phonograph and people [said], “Oh, that’s exactly how they play[ed] in my village.” And they [would] stop to buy. And I couldn’t get enough of those records (quoted in Greene 1992, 87)

In contrast to the more polished or stylized “ethnic” recordings that preceded him, Humeniuk’s approach signaled a familiar, unpretentious rural authenticity for immigrant listeners. His ability to capture the mood and style of village music tapped into the nostalgia of recently arrived immigrant groups and set him up to become one of the best-selling artists of the peak of the “ethnic music” boom.

While “Tanec Pid Werbamy/Dance Under the Willows” weaves together a number of dance melodies associated with Western Ukraine, the *kolomyika* and *kozachok* melodies, in particular, often bleed across ethnic and national lines, popping up in klezmer and Polish repertoires--a testament to the multi-ethnic character of the time and place from which Humeniuk emerged. While no one group can definitively claim ownership over most of these tunes, it is also true that Humeniuk’s branding primarily as a “Ukrainian fiddler” contributed to the elevation of national consciousness among many immigrants from that region who may not otherwise have identified as Ukrainian before their arrival in the United States. As folk musician and ethnomusicologist Brian Cherwick has written, Humeniuk’s recordings helped to form a “canon” of Ukrainian music, which, in turn, allowed individuals to own a Ukrainian identity by affiliating with that music.

Today, we might hear “Tanec Pid Werbamy/Dance Under the Willows” as a characteristic mash-up in the spirit of a *vechernytsia*: a convivial rural community party where local musicians played while others danced, drank, and socialized. Perhaps a contemporary listener can imagine how comforting it might have been for newly transplanted immigrants to hear, in the spirited fiddling of Pawlo Humeniuk, the possibility that these forms of communal sociality might endure in their new American home, and the possibility of bridging what must sometimes have seemed to be incompatible worlds.

Maria Sonevytsky is the author of “Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine” (Wesleyan University Press Music/Culture Series, 2019) and producer of the Chornobyl Songs Project (Smithsonian Folkways, 2015). She is an Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of California, Berkeley.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.