

Concert Review: DakhaBrakha takes audience across borders

By Steve Feeney
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The news from Ukraine has too often been negative in recent years. But something very positive came to Portland from that part of the world on Saturday night. The folk/punk/world quartet named DakhaBrakha performed at the Port City Music Hall in a combined State Theatre/Ovations event.

To say their music is based in Ukrainian folk music is correct but limiting. Their tastes and talents cross multiple borders, ethnic sources and eras to create a richly diverse sound that uniquely coheres to draw the listener in.

Lyrics in English were a rarity but some in the audience seemed to have knowledge of the other language(s) being employed. In any event, the tone of the songs and the spirit with which they were performed was enough to inspire many in the multigenerational crowd to shout encouragement and sway or dance with abandon as the rhythms suggested.

Beginning the evening with a shout-out for a “free Ukraine” and ending the evening waving a flag and shouting, “Peace and love and stop Putin,” Marko Halanevych, who handled most of the spokesman duties, manned large and small accordion-related instruments and showed vocal gifts in both a soulful falsetto and guttural baritone range. He also imitated instrument sounds and led the others in wordless exclamations of celebration and sorrow.

For the seated performance, the three women group members were dressed in festive traditional dresses and wore high fur hats. Halanevych, in a long tunic, added to the theatricality of the presentation but the focus of all four remained fixed on the music. Percussion was a key element. All four performers wielded a variety of small and midsized drums at one time or another, sometimes to accompany dirge-like laments and other times to punctuate spiky, spoken word passages. The interplay among the members, on both an instrumental and vocal level, was fascinating throughout.

Nina Garenetska provided the important bottom line with cello work that was resonant, sometimes delicately bowed, more often given over to insistent ostinatos to which she occasionally offered a rock-tinged fuzz tone. Her sweet vocal on what she announced was a Crimea-based love song in the “Tatar language” was a highlight.

Iryna Kovalenko was a force on multiple instruments and presented many of her vocals with a facial deadpan, only partially masking the intensity of feeling in her work. Percussionist Olena Tsibulska, while also contributing spirited vocals, likewise left most of the visual expressiveness to the often smiling Garenetska.

A song said to be of Carpathian origins was sung by Garenetska in a rap style that grounded this unusual group in the present even as they reached deep into a long tradition. Another striking piece felt Middle Eastern in origin. Another had a touch of reggae in it.

One of the most amusing pieces in the 90-minute program began with the band members imitating bird calls while gradually establishing a train-like chugging rhythm underneath. Tightly woven call-and-response vocal passages during this selection had the crowd joining in until the quieter avian sounds returned for a peaceful close. This quartet, whose name translates as “give-take,” certainly gave an entertaining and enriching performance on Saturday night. And, it would appear, they took on some new fans in the process.

Source: <https://www.pressherald.com/2016/02/07/concert-review-ukranian-performers-cross-musical-borders/>