



**Maria Sonevytsky**

*Wild Music Sound and  
Sovereignty in Ukraine*

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*Reviewed by Olga Zaitseva-Herz*

This work by Maria Sonevytsky is based on her extensive research, which began in 2004 in Ukraine and lasted for over a decade, culminating in a fieldwork trip in 2015 and research updates up to 2019. The author explores the topic not only from the academic perspective but also from the performing angle, as Sonevytsky is a practicing multidisciplinary professional with extensive professional training and significant performing experience. Sonevytsky's unique capacity to see connections between music and Ukrainian politics in the context of history already found its reflection in her earlier projects. "The Chernobyl Songs Project: Living Culture from a Lost World" was released in 2015 by Smithsonian Folkways and elaborated on the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the revival of rural musical repertoires.

Focusing on such key terms as "sovereignty" and "Wildness," Sonevytsky creates a unique blend of fields combining ethnomusicology, politics, feminist studies, and history. In the preface, Sonevytsky mentions that the key term "sovereignty" emerged from the acuteness of the political instability in Ukraine in the years when she was conducting her research. The second key-term "Wildness" was in her original focus when she studied the reflections of civilization and barbarism expressed in the sonic products of Crimean Tatars and Hutsuls.

The definition of freedom gained a new meaning for Ukraine and Ukrainians after the country proclaimed independence on August 24, 1991. This fact led to reflections in many music compositions, which appeared in the years after this date. Referring to Ruslana's performance during the Eurovision song contest in 2004 with her song "Wild Dances," the author speaks of a particular "watershed moment in post-Soviet Ukrainian pop music as a prominent instantiation" of what Sonevytsky calls "wild music," when tropes of exoticism are strategically integrated in musical performance in order to make political claims. Furthermore, the author argues that such "wild music" "draws upon a discursive (uppercased) Wildness that has long defined Ukraine's liminal position in the world" (p. 2).

The book consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, Sonevytsky explores her connection to Ukraine in a biographical context. This shows the author's ability to see the field both as out- and as an insider. Here it becomes clear that her deep connection to Ukraine is not only due to the Ukrainian origin of her parents but also to the in-depth knowledge of the country's history, culture, and social mentality.

The first part of the book provides a presentation of the term "Wildness" in the context of the Ukrainian singer Ruslana, whose career reached a new international level when she won first place at the international Eurovision Song Contest with her composition "Wild Dances." Ruslana's performance occurred in 2004, when Ukraine participated in the Eurovision Song Contest for the second time, and according to the author, symbolized the conglomeration of independent Ukraine with the international world of pop music. Sonevytsky explores the reactions of various segments of the audience to this performance, enabling us to see the relationship between Ruslana's representation of Ukraine in the context of this song during the contest in correspondence with the critical voices of Ukrainian audiences to it. Sonevytsky studies the transformation of the term "Wildness" in Ruslana's career and explores her work from a critical angle at various periods, with its blend of modern and ethnic elements.

The second chapter deals with the example of the female art project *Dakh Daughters*, which gained popular recognition not only in Ukraine but also beyond its borders. In particular, Sonevytsky explores the group's phenomenon by examining the composition "Rozy/Donbass." The piece was initially apolitical, but landed in the center of attention due to the Euromaidan context. The surrounding factually granted the composition new meaning, corresponding with the country's political situation.

In the third chapter, the author discusses the definition of the *avtentyka* vocal technique in relationship to folklore. Touching upon this term in the preface of the book, Sonevytsky has already mentioned that exploring the world of *avtentyka* contributed to her understanding of how "contemporary Ukrainian music reflects many varied internal discourses of Wildness" (p. xiii). Sonevytsky explores the approach used by a TV channel in representing singers in the context of their *avtentyka* vocal technique, and the media's failure in handling the genre in the TV format. Describing how participants were treated on the vocal reality show *The Voice*, she parallels the experiences of participants Oleksii Zaiats and Antonina Matviienko (daughter of renowned Ukrainian folk singer Nina Matviienko). Presenting how the TV channel positioned the participants in the context of comments given by the judges, Sonevytsky reveals how the Soviet-era music experience still impacts the aesthetic tastes and choices presented on this TV show in the times of independent Ukraine. These experiences also clearly show how a complex of diverse factors (many of which reach far beyond dealing with vocal qualities) impact judges' decisions in the distribution of privileges in such a TV contest.

The fourth chapter discusses the local Crimean radio station *Meydan* and explores its prominent role for different ethnic communities before, during, and after the annexation of Crimea. Sonevytsky shows how the choice of music repertoire on *Meydan* radio impacted the Crimean Tatar community. Jamala's participation in the

2016 Eurovision Song Contest with her song “1944” is also explored in this chapter. The performance brought Ukraine the first place in the contest and provoked multiple disagreements from pro-Russian activists who protested against the song’s political (historical) content in the context of the Eurovision Song Contest. Jamala, a Crimean Tatar singer, won the contest with a song based on the experiences of her own family in 1944, the year of Stalinist Crimean Tatar deportations. According to Sonevytsky, the performance by Jamala became a “game-changer” for the Eurovision Song Contest.

The band *Dakha Brakha* is the central focus of the fifth chapter. The author explores the meaning of the band’s mission as a “self-ambassador” to culturally represent Ukraine in the context of political events happening in the country. Projecting a Ukrainians political position onto the international stage through music allowed the band to carry its message directly to their audiences abroad without being filtered by the media. The “wild” and “ethnochaotic” nature of *Dakha Brakha’s* music enabled the artists to express their opinions on the country’s situation, not as political figures, but as artists who are honest and open with their audience.

This extensive multidisciplinary ethnographic research-based work by Maria Sonevytsky opens various possibilities for future studies. It reflects the dynamics of the development of the political situation in independent Ukraine and explores the role of music considering multiple factors. Offering music’s exploration in the context of current political events, Sonevytsky draws parallels with the historical roots of Ukrainian folkloric songs. Historical Ukrainian vernacular pieces historically reflected community life and crucial political events (*Spivanky-khroniky: Novyny* by O. Dei and S. Hrytsa published by *Naukova dumka* in 1972, contains some of the earliest pieces of such art). In Sonevytsky’s work, we can see how the contemporary extension of this tradition is projected in theatre, TV shows, song contests, and stages in the midst of revolutions. The author demonstrates how music opens up multiple domains for listeners, which go far beyond being only aesthetic.