

KITKA WOMEN'S VOCAL ENSEMBLE

ON A SONG SHARING MISSION

[Kitka](#) is an American women's vocal arts ensemble inspired by traditional songs and vocal techniques from Eastern Europe. Dedicated to developing new audiences for music rooted in Balkan, Slavic, and Caucasian women's vocal traditions, Kitka also strives to expand the boundaries of folk song as a living and evolving expressive art form. Kitka's activities include an Oakland-based home series of concerts and vocal workshops; regional, national, and international touring; programs in the schools; recording, publication, and broadcast projects; master artist residencies; commissioning; community service work; and adventuresome collaborations. [Kitka on KOED Spark](#)

A frequently occurring symbolic word in Balkan women's folksong lyrics, *Kitka* means "bouquet" in Bulgarian and Macedonian.

THE BOUQUET



Founded in 1979, Kitka began as a grassroots group of amateur singers from diverse backgrounds who met regularly to share their passion for the stunning dissonances, asymmetric rhythms, intricate ornamentation, lush harmonies, and resonant strength of Eastern European women's vocal music. Vocalist Briget Boyle joined the ensemble in 2004, and became part of Kitka's leadership team as Ensemble Manager in 2007. Boyle remarks, "Kitka

is an ever-growing and changing ensemble, comprised of a variety of women who have one thing in common—a love of singing. Over the past 31 years, more than 50 women have offered their voices to the bouquet. While some of Kitka's singers have Eastern European family heritage, the majority of us have been drawn to this music because of its unusual beauty and emotional impact. We all have internalized the power of these singing traditions, and devote ourselves to bringing these melodies to life in a way that is respectful, honest, and loving."

SONGCATCHERS

Kitka has deep ties to Eastern Europe and has traveled there to perform, collect repertoire, and engage in cultural exchange work many times. In 2002, Kitka joined the world-famous Women's Choir Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares as "international guests of honor" at the choir's 50th Anniversary Gala at the National Palace of Culture in Sofia, Bulgaria. In 2005, 2009, and 2010, supported by generous grants from the Trust for Mutual Understanding, Kitka journeyed to Ukraine, Poland, Georgia, and Armenia for performances, international artist-exchange meetings, radio and television broadcasts, and research expeditions in rural villages.

Many of Kitka's singers are also talented composers and arrangers who create original settings of songs they have gathered in the field. "As Kitka singers, our activity has two faces. We are respected professional performers, teachers, and polyphonic song-makers, but we are also always eager students who are thirsty for knowledge and cultural understanding." Briget Boyle elaborates, "I think this is part of what sets Kitka apart from other professional vocal ensembles—such a large part of our repertoire is gathered and developed in the songcatcher style, where tunes and vocal techniques are passed directly from singer to singer in the oral tradition."



In 2006, Kitka launched the Song Routes in a New Land project, an initiative that enables the ensemble to hone their performance practice and reach more deeply into California's East European ethnic and immigrant communities through folk song master artist residencies. To date, Kitka has hosted residencies with master folk singers representing Albanian, Armenian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Romani, Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish traditions. Boyle explains, "With these great folk singers, we develop new repertoire, host community singing workshops, expose children to unfamiliar ethnic traditions in classrooms, and produce in-depth artist profiles in cooperation with local community radio stations. At the end of the residency periods, we produce public performances that showcase the fruits of these collaborations."

TRADITION TO TRANSFORMATION

Kitka regularly engages in the creation of collaborative new works that incorporate the ensemble's unique sound — a sound that explores a vast palette of ancient, yet contemporary-sounding vocal effects evocative of a range of subtle to extreme inner states, instincts, and emotions.

In 2000, Kitka received major grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the MAP Fund to launch the *New Folksongs Commissioning Project*, engaging some of the most exciting voices in contemporary music to write new works that utilize Kitka's wide-ranging sonic vocabulary. To date Kitka has premiered new works by more than 40 composers.

In 2002, Kitka began work on its most ambitious and successful commissioning project to date: *The Rusalka Cycle: Songs Between the Worlds*, a new vocal-theater project directed by Ellen Sebastian Chang and Andre Erlen, with original music by Ukrainian composer and folk singer Mariana Sadovska. Weaving old Slavic mythology together with contemporary themes, *The Rusalka Cycle's* 2005 premiere performances took place to extraordinary public acclaim at Oakland's Malonga Center. *The Rusalka Cycle* was revived in San Francisco in January 2008 and has subsequently toured to the Revolutions International Theater Festival in Albuquerque, NM, The Globalize: Cologne and Stimmen Festivals in Germany, The Giving Voice Festival in Wrocław, Poland, and the Kiev Mohylanka Theater Academy in Ukraine.

In Slavic folklore, *Rusalki* are the restless spirits of women who have died unjust or untimely deaths. Fierce protectors and regulators of nature's cycles, they inhabit the waters, forests, and fields, luring people to them with their mesmerizing songs and wild laughter. To develop the project, Kitka traveled to rural Ukraine with composer and performance artist Mariana Sadovska to gather *Rusalka* songs and oral histories from survivors of the Chernobyl disaster. In the cultural centers of Lviv and Kiev, the singers honed their physical theater skills working in collaboration with prominent Ukrainian and Polish actors and theater artists.



“We wanted to make a piece that really stretched us as performers, something theatrical and risk-taking that took our audiences on a total sensory and emotional journey,” explains Kitka vocalist and Executive Director Shira Cion. “We realized that these entities were more than just characters in fairy tales, but very real forces in the collective consciousness of many rural Slavic villages. There was such rich folklore and imagery surrounding the *Rusalki*, and there were powerful songs that refused to leave our minds’ ears. There is something really magical and resonant about this piece, and much like the Rusalian rituals that are reenacted by a few grandmothers in Ukrainian villages every spring, this piece seems to have taken on a ritual life of its own with repeat performances taking place almost every year in unexpected places.”

KITKA’S COMMUNITY: A 21ST-CENTURY VILLAGE



As Kitka celebrates its 32nd season of creating community through song, the organization is exploring new ways to face the economic and cultural challenges of our times. Kitka is keenly aware of shifts that are affecting the ways people experience and participate in culture. Briget Boyle speaks to this, “With the advancement of technology, we are very aware of the importance of connecting people with real, living art forms—with the music of “the folk”. Technology has also given us new ways of building a community that is global. In order to ensure that people remain connected to the power of the human voice, we are actively seeking avenues by which we can give people a long-lasting relationship to the music that we make. We are building a 21st-century “village” where we

can band together the energy of our supporters, fellow musicians, and fellow humans to create sustenance in uncertain times. We have faith that the music that we make has the power to uncover and nourish the strength of the human spirit.”

Photo subjects and credits (in order presented): Kitka in 2009I by Sarah Small; Kitka and Tzvetanka Varimezova at Koprivstica Festival in Bulgaria by Andrew Otto; Rusalka Cycle from Kiev by UKMA; Ukrainian Ritual Song Workshop by Shira Cion.

Briget Boyle’s Ensemble Manager position was preserved in 2009-2010 through the California Arts Council and the [Western States Arts Federation’s](#) (WESTAF) [Arts Recovery/American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009](#) (ARRA), managed by [John Seto](#).

