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INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE PROJECT OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE – *SUPRAŚL CANTICLES*

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The aim of this work is to save from oblivion one of the most important achievements of the Republic of Poland. Additionally, I intend to introduce a broader audience to the international cultural heritage initiative of Central and Eastern Europe titled the *Supraśl Canticles* [*Kantyki Supraskie*].
- ▶ *Research methodology* – In this study I primarily employed a reconstructive method, which, when applied to archival sources, facilitated the reconstruction of historical events, the identification of cause-and-effect relationships and the exploration of social, political and religious connections.
- ▶ *Score/results* – The EU Cross-Border Cooperation Project Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2014–2020, titled “Shared History – Same Future. Supraśl–Synkowicze–Lviv”, led to a thorough evaluation, development and promotion of the *Supraśl Canticles* as a remarkable global treasure of musical heritage shared by Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – the *Supraśl Canticles*, a collection of 49 musical pieces composed for six male voices, were created between 1667 and 1693 at the then-Uniate Monastery of the Annunciation of the Theotokos in Supraśl. It should be acknowledged that this is one of the few – if not the only – extensive ecclesiastical collections of concert pieces from this era in the world.

| **Keywords:** Supraśl, canticles, Orthodox Church, Uniates, litany, song, culture, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania.

1. Introduction

Supraśl is a small Polish town with a population of over 4,000 residents. It is located in the Podlaskie Voivodeship, surrounded by the protected areas of the Knyszyn Primaeval Forest. Its historical development was significantly influenced by the affiliation with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), during which, between 1667 and 1693, 49 musical works known today as the *Supraśl Canticles* were created at the Uniate Monastery of the Annunciation of the Theotokos in Supraśl.

The aim of this work is to save from oblivion one of the most important achievements of the Republic of Poland. Additionally, I intend to introduce a broader audience to the international cultural heritage initiative of Central and Eastern Europe titled the *Supraśl Canticles (Kantyki Supraskie)*.

In this article, I primarily relied on the reconstruction method, which, when applied to archival sources, helped to recreate the course of events, identify cause-and-effect relationships and capture social, political and religious connections.

The popularisation of the *Supraśl Canticles* was significantly supported by a cross-border project involving Poland, Ukraine and initially Belarus. I intend to discuss the project in greater detail in the following sections of the article.

2. The Monastery and *Supraśl Canticles* – A Historical Overview

The history of this place begins in the year 1500, when the first inhabitants, Orthodox monks under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, settled here. Owing to the permission granted by ktetor (founder) Aleksander Chodkiewicz and metropolitan Józef Bułharynowicz, the first church was consecrated on 8 May 1500. This church served the newly settled monks who came from other monastic centres, including the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and Mount Athos. Fleeing northwest from Kyiv, these monks found a safe haven in the Chodkiewicz family's estates, offering them refuge from the Tatar hordes that plagued their original monastery in Kyiv. This single historical fact highlights the significant ties between Supraśl and the former Ruthenian capital, as well as its extensive connections with other centres. Evidence of these connections can even be seen in the walls of the Supraśl church, which were adorned in the second half of the 16th century with Byzantine frescoes created by artists from Serbia.

Over time, the monastery grew into one of the most important monastic centres in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. From 1511 until the 19th century (1839),

despite changing its religious affiliation from Orthodox to Greek Catholic (Uniate), the monastery retained its function and significance for the Kyiv Archdiocese and, above all, for the population practising the Eastern rite in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Throughout much of its history, the Supraśl Monastery was a *stauropegial* monastery – autonomous and directly subordinate to the Patriarchs of Constantinople. However, several years after the Union with the Catholics was accepted, beginning in 1621, the monastery fell under the direct authority of the Pope, mediated by the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome. This was just a few years after the first congregation of the Order of Saint Basil the Great was established in 1617, though the Supraśl Monastery ultimately did not join this congregation. Meanwhile, in Supraśl – a repository of liturgical tradition and Christian culture for the Eastern Slavs and Lithuanians of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – a collection of the Kyiv Metropolitanate’s musical repertoire, known as *the Supraśl Irmologion* (circa 1601), was written by Bohdan Onisimowicz. Later, in 1695, the metropolitan printing house was relocated from Vilnius to Supraśl. Finally, and most relevant to this article, most of the Baroque musical works known as the *Supraśl Canticles* were copied and likely composed here.

The *Supraśl Canticles* were composed in the last quarter of the 17th century by Teodor Szewerowski [Dalmatov, 1892: 428–436; Gierasimowa, 2013: 202–204; Dobrowolski, 2017: 125; Szewerowski, 2019: 7–12; Dobrowolski, 2020: 139, 144–145] and Nikolay Diletsky from Kyiv [Wołoskiuk, 2005: 78–90; Walicki, 2003: 37]. The first, Szewerowski, was born in the current capital of Belarus, Minsk. In his obituary, written upon his death in 1699 in Biała Podlaska, Szewerowski was described as the “king” of musical science in Vilnius. Many of his students later worked in the Tsardom of Russia. In this sense, Szewerowski, along with Diletsky, played a role in transmitting the Baroque musical culture of Western Europe to Russian lands. Thus, both the historical international connections of Supraśl and the colourful personalities of its composers justified the cross-border collaboration between Poland, Belarus and Ukraine.

3. EU Cross-Border Cooperation Project Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2014–2020

The project “Shared History – Same Future: Supraśl–Synkivtsi–Lviv”, which contributed to the popularisation of the *Supraśl Canticles*, was implemented under the

EU Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2014–2020. The activities carried out as part of this project were ultimately completed in 2022.

On 31 October 2018, the Commune of Supraśl submitted an application for funding under the aforementioned EU programme to the Technical Secretariat. Earlier, on 14 September 2018, in Grodno, Belarus, the Chairman of the Zelva Regional Executive Committee, Denis Olszewski, signed an agreement with the Mayor of Supraśl, Radosław Dobrowolski, to cooperate on the “development and implementation of project ideas within the framework of the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland–Belarus–Ukraine 2014–2020”. The parties were officially informed of the grant approval on 24 April 2019.

On 19 November 2019, the Commune of Supraśl formally requested the Joint Technical Secretariat of the Poland-Belarus-Ukraine Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014–2020 in Warsaw to prepare the financial agreement. In this request, they also asked for approval to include a partner from Ukraine – the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) in Lviv – in the project “Shared History – Same Future”. The inclusion of the Ukrainian partner was justified on the grounds of providing substantive support for the project, with the statement: “Without the involvement of this partner, the implementation of the project in its planned form may prove impossible”. Approval for the inclusion of UCU was granted by email on 24 June 2019 by UCU’s Vice-Rector for Research, Prof. Ihor Skoczylas (1967–2020). The Vice-Rector’s decision was confirmed in writing by UCU’s Senior Pro-Rector, Dr. Taras Dobko.

The inclusion of the Ukrainian partner was made possible after consulting the authorities in Zelva, which proceeded without any obstacles. An email regarding this matter was sent to the Belarusian project coordinator, Elena Kazyro, on 27 June 2019 by Marek Skrypko, then the Head of the Projects Department at the Supraśl Town Office.

On 18 December 2019, Tomasz Jędrzejewski, the Head of the Joint Technical Secretariat of the Programme, sent the grant agreements for signature, which formally approved the inclusion of the Ukrainian partner. In this way, the project encompassed not only the Commune of Supraśl but also the Zelva Region in Belarus and the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) in Lviv.

As part of the project, artistic activities were planned for the Zelva Region Executive Committee (Synkivtsi), including a plein air painting event and sculpting workshop, as well as a choir concert in the Gothic church in Synkivtsi, which, like the Supraśl temple, dates back to the 16th century. This church boasts a unique architectural style in Europe, remnants of polychrome artwork and a miraculous icon.

The project objectives emphasised strengthening international cooperation and developing new products rooted in the shared historical and cultural context. The project aimed to establish a foundation for future cross-border collaboration, primarily through cooperation between the two communities.

The Belarusian committed to attending concerts featuring Orthodox and Catholic compositions in Supraśl and participating in the plein air painting event. The plans included a visit to Supraśl by 20 choir members from Synkivtsi, associated with the local church. During a concert, they were to perform selected pieces from the reconstructed *Supraśl Canticles* created as part of the project. Meanwhile, artists from the Choir of the Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic were to organise a major concert in Synkivtsi, summarising all the project's activities with performances of the reconstructed works. All these activities were designed to achieve the project's goals. As stated in the application documents, "Through its activities, the project will have an impact on the culture and history of both regions. The developed products will remain in the memory of the inhabitants and will be made available to tourists visiting the regions included in the project".

The initiator of the project was Radosław Dobrowolski, the Mayor of Supraśl. Even before 2010, as president of *Collegium Suprasliense*, he sought funding from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in Warsaw to produce a single volume of music notes for the so-called "*Supraśl Descant*". This name was popularised by Professor Józef Maroszek, who, while preparing a monograph on Supraśl, discovered the manuscript during archival research conducted around 1996 at the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius and made a copy of it. For years, this copy was stored in the archives of the *Collegium Suprasliense* Association, managed by the editor of the local newspaper "Supraśl-Nazukos", Wojciech Załęski. At the time, there was no indication that this was part of a larger collection of manuscripts ("descant a") and that additional volumes of these manuscripts would later come to light.

The remaining three folios were discovered in Vilnius by Radosław Dobrowolski while he was conducting research for his doctoral thesis. In the Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius, he located three scores of additional voices from the *Supraśl Canticles* collection: "*Bass A*" (BLAN, f.19, no. 135/2), "*Bass B*" (BLAN, F.22, No. 72) and "*Descant B*" (BLAN, F.22, No. 72). Two of these folios, as well as the one previously discovered by Józef Maroszek, had their original covers. In addition to indicating the choral voice, the covers bore the title of the collection: "*Supraśl Canticles*".

These materials formed the basis for a project aimed at their interdisciplinary analysis, musical reconstruction and eventual digital recording of choral singing. Only one score (in the *Descant B* folio) identifies the composer: Tomasz Szewerowski (BLAN, F.22, No. 72, Fol. 23). His name appears in the upper-right corner alongside the description of the work: *Alt a. Litany for Six Voices*.

A stroke of luck played a decisive role in the project's success. While awaiting the positive evaluation of the project proposal, submitted to the review body on 31 October 2018, a delegation from the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) in Lviv visited Supraśl on 18 December 2018. The delegation was led by UCU Rector, Rev. Dr. Bohdan Prach, accompanied by Pro-Rector Prof. Ihor Skoczylas and his wife Iryna, as well as Prof. Jurij Jasinowski. The visit coincided with the promotion of Volume XI of the *Kyiv Christianity* series, titled *Irmosy of the Kyiv Church. A Critical Edition of the Manuscript Based on the Supraśl Irmologion 1598–1601* in two volumes [Dobrowolski, 2022: 837; Dobrowolski, 2001: 146–155], edited by Prof. Jurij Jasinowski, a renowned expert in musical manuscripts.

The publication from Lviv was presented at the People's Hall. On this special occasion, an invitation was extended to UCU's Pro-Rector to participate in the *Supraśl Canticles* project. Prof. Józef Maroszek (1950–2024) also attended the meeting. During the event, a "Letter of Intent Regarding the *Supraśl Canticles* – a musical and concert work created in the 17th Century at the Monastery of the Basilian Fathers in Supraśl" was signed. Both parties, represented by the author of this text on behalf of the Commune of Supraśl and Pro-Rector Ihor Skoczylas, declared: "We commit to cooperating on the scholarly analysis of the 17th-century polyphonic musical manuscript known as the *Supraśl Canticles*, the four original folios of which are preserved in the Manuscripts Department of the Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius. Both parties will make every effort to restore the *Supraśl Canticles*, as part of the forgotten musical heritage of the Kyiv Church tradition from the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, to life by publishing a musical score that will enable its performance by musicians".

The international research project collaboration commenced in 2019. A significant milestone was a study visit to Lviv in October 2019, attended by Marek Skrypko, the project manager from the Supraśl Town Office and Mayor Radosław Dobrowolski. It was agreed at the time that the musical materials would be edited and the manuscript prepared in Lviv, while the CD would be released in Poland. Shortly after this meeting, Prof. Olha Shumilina intensified her ongoing work on deciphering and transcribing the manuscripts. On 24 October 2019, during the visit to the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU) in Lviv, a scholarly seminar was

organised featuring a lecture by Dr. Olga Shumilina from the Mykola Lysenko Lviv National Academy of Music. *The lecture, titled **Supraśl Canticles of the Late 17th Century: A Testament to Basilian Church Music**, provided insight into the project.* The UCU Pro-Rector appointed his assistant, Dr. Ivan Almes, as the project coordinator. Dr. Almes diligently oversaw the implementation of the project on behalf of the Ukrainian side and served as a liaison with the Polish side in Supraśl. The scholarly and editorial aspects of the project were managed by Prof. Jurij Jasinowski, the world's leading expert on Ruthenian musical manuscripts.



Illustration 1. Study visit to Lviv – seminar and conceptual work on the project. In front of the Boim Chapel from the left: Prof. Jurij Jasinowski, Marek Skrypko – project manager, Supraśl City Hall, Dr. Radosław Dobrowolski – Mayor of Supraśl, Prof. Ihor Skoczylas, Vice-Rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv

The project's implementation, coordinated among all three parties (Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian), was conducted primarily via online communication. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this was the only effective way to continue the project remotely. One such meeting took place under challenging circumstances, as Prof. Ihor Skoczylas was too unwell to participate in the online session held on Friday, 11 December 2020. The last chat with the UCU Pro-Rector occurred on 17 November 2020. A month later, on 20 December 2020, after a long and severe illness, Prof. Ihor Skoczylas passed away.

Another significant challenge arose with the outbreak of war on 22 February 2022 and the engagement of the Lukashenka regime on the side of the Russian Federation. This led to the exclusion of Belarusian partners from EU-funded projects, including the Zelva partner in this case. Many activities had to be suspended, including the planned concert in the historic church in Synkivtsi and the participation of Belarusians in other project events in Supraśl. The plein air painting event took place with the participation of talented youth from the Fine Arts High School in Supraśl.

The circumstances of the war initiated by the Russian Federation added greater significance to the EU-funded project. the *Supraśl Canticles*, as part of Ukraine's national heritage (with roots in the shared history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), represent a vital form of cultural preservation, not only for Ukraine but also for Belarus, Lithuania and Poland. This underscores the importance and priority of the project's activities, carried out in a specific time and place, as a defence of cultural heritage.

Over the following years, the collaboration culminated in the recording of the first CD featuring the *Supraśl Canticles*. The chants from Supraśl were heard in their place of origin for the first time in approximately 350 years. Moreover, the recording was honoured with the "Fryderyk 2023" award.

4. Conclusions

The presence and work of composers in the Supraśl Monastery, such as Bohdan (16th century), Fiodor Siemionowicz of Berezhany (1638–1639), Tomasz Szewerowski (4th quarter of the 17th century – described by contemporaries as the *Bach of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania*), as well as the presumed presence of Nikolay Diletsky (2nd half of the 17th century) and local creators from the Supraśl Basilian community, including Fr. Teofil (1662) and Fr. Antoni Kiszczyców, confirm that the musical culture nurtured and developed in the Supraśl monastic house was

a significant aspect of the monastic community's activity by the Supraśl River. In this context, Supraśl emerges as a transfer point for both the traditional post-Byzantine chant and, during the period of the Union of Brest, Western polyphony with roots in Italy. The Supraśl Monastery, initially Orthodox and later Catholic (Uniate), incorporated certain Western elements into the Ruthenian Church. This began with the introduction of neumatic notation (as in *the Supraśl Irmologion*) and later evolved to include Baroque stylistic innovations in liturgy (such as the *Supraśl Canticles* and other compositions from the *partesny* repertoire). Through the work of composers associated with the Uniate metropolitans in Vilnius and Supraśl, Baroque choral singing reached Moscow, despite resistance from traditionalist circles (Old Believers and opponents of Patriarch Nikon's reforms). It became firmly established there and in the Uniate Kyiv Metropolis, from which it originally stemmed and to which it returned, facilitated by Jesuits from distant Italy.



Illustration 2. One of the pages of the manuscript "Supraskie Kantyki" (Supraśl Canticles) (Manuscript Department of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius)

The most significant outcome of the Polish-Ukrainian collaboration was the preparation and publication of three volumes in two books *within the Kyiv Christianity series*. The first book, titled *Супрасльські кантики кінця XVIII століття – пам'ятка василіянської церковної музики у трьох томах* [Supraśl Canticles of the Late 18th Century – A Testament to Basilian Church Music in Three Volumes], includes black-and-white facsimiles of preserved manuscript scores along with their transcription into modern five-line notation, complete with all key and clef markings. In addition to the musical materials from Vilnius, the book also includes scores from Novi Sad in Serbia, dating to the mid-18th century. These materials, due to their similarity to the *Supraśl Canticles*, served as comparative material and in this sense helped to supplement the two missing parts.

The second book, titled *Супрасльські кантики кінця XVIII століття – пам'ятка василіянської церковної музики у трьох томах* [Supraśl Canticles of the Late 18th Century – A Testament to Basilian Church Music in Three Volumes], contains texts in Ukrainian, English, Polish and Belarusian and serves as a summary of the team's scholarly work. From the perspective of restoring this Baroque musical monument, the publication of the six-voice score of 49 compositions comprising the *Supraśl Canticles* was the most crucial achievement. Both books were distributed to major libraries as well as musical and religious institutes worldwide.

The culmination of efforts led by the project's sub-leader, the Commune of Supraśl, was the release of a CD in 2022. Produced by DUX Recording Producers (engineered by Marcin Guz and Lech Tołwiński – sound director) from Warsaw, the CD featured 11 selected compositions from the *Supraśl Canticles*. The music was performed by artists from the Choir of the Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic, prepared and conducted by Professor Violetta Bielecka, the institution's director. As previously mentioned, the CD received the highest honour of the Polish phonographic industry – the Fryderyk 2023 award in the category Album of the Year – Early Music. In Supraśl, an open concert of the *Supraśl Canticles* was held, marking their first performance in approximately 350 years. The concert took place on 19 June 2022 in the former Evangelical, now Roman Catholic Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland, in Supraśl. Over the next two years, on 17 August 2023 and 14 August 2024, the compositions were performed at the same venue as part of the Metastasio Without Borders Festival.

According to the application data, the project had a total budget of €55,502.00, with €37,986.00 allocated to Supraśl and €17,516.00 to Zelva. Upon project

completion, the total expenditure by the Commune of Supraśl amounted to PLN 273,609.27, of which PLN 71,123.99 was an EU grant. Supraśl's own contribution was PLN 202,485.28.

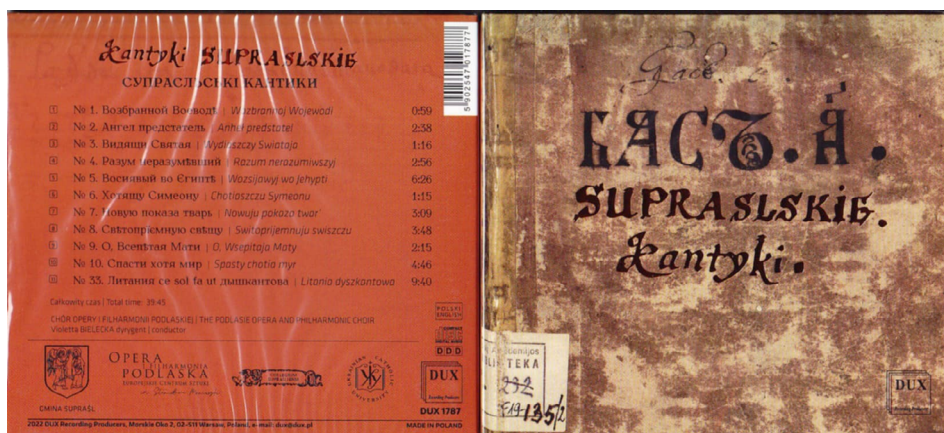


Illustration 3. The CD released as part of an EU project containing 11 selected pieces of the “Kantyki Supraskie” (Supraśl Canticles), for which the Podlasie Opera and the DUX music publishing house received the highest award of the phonographic industry in Poland in the form of the “Fryderyk Music Award” (in the early music category)

The EU Cross-Border Cooperation Programme, Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014–2020, “Shared History – Same Future: Supraśl–Synkivtsi–Lviv”, enabled a thorough evaluation, development and popularisation of the *Supraśl Canticles* as a remarkable treasure of the musical heritage shared by Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians. The greater significance of this European cultural achievement, rooted in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, has been underscored by the current unstable geopolitical climate. In light of the aggressive policies of the Russian Federation, which denies the national, cultural and state sovereignty of Ukraine and Belarus, this vital part of our shared Polish-Ukrainian-Belarusian-Lithuanian heritage faces potential threats of appropriation, rejection or marginalisation. The EU project described in this article not only recognises and promotes but also defends our shared legacy connected to the Basilian *Supraśl Canticles*. It is also noteworthy that the project facilitated collaboration between the Commune of Supraśl, the scholarly community centred around *Collegium Suprasliense* and prominent representatives of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. This partnership is likely to continue in new areas of our shared historical tradition.

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