

rUSSiAn chamber choRUS of new york

25 YEARS



program notes by nikolai kachanov

Today we are celebrating 25 years of dedicated service to building a bridge between Russian and American choral cultures. Composers old and new, famous and undiscovered, separated by space and time—all have found the warmest welcome in our programs, through decades of creative work.

Over those years, our versatile chorus has performed all the choral music genres ever created in Russia, from the oldest sacred chants to contemporary compositions. Our followers will remember that we have also performed choral music by American composers, such as Billings and Barber, as well as world premieres of American music. Our repertoire also includes music from Italy, France, Germany, England, and Hungary, not to mention contemporary music from former Soviet republics: Ukraine, Belorussia, Estonia, and Lithuania. We're fortunate to have many composers dedicate their compositions to RCCNY.

Our jubilee program reflects our ongoing mission to introduce the best selections of Russian choral culture to American audiences. I usually reflect on the concert program for a long time, giving it my careful consideration, and today's program is no exception. So many Russian choral gems are still unknown to American audiences, and we do our best to bring them to life.

For this concert, I've selected a variety of choral music genres: sacred music, cantatas, choral miniatures, and arrangements of Russian folk songs. Together, they represent the core of Russian historic and contemporary choral tradition.

It's not always easy to express in words the sphere of musical images. Nevertheless, I would like to share with you the artistic reasons for the programming choices I've made. My intent is to create a dynamic, colorful program filled with inward reflections and tributes to the natural beauty around us.

In the first half of the program, you will hear sacred compositions by Russian composers of the 20th century who were forced to leave their homeland, like Rachmaninoff and Grechaninov, or whose sacred compositions were forbidden in the Soviet Union, such as Tolstiaikov, Yegorov, Golovanov, and

Schnittke. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a large number of Russian sacred musical masterpieces were discovered.

Tolstiakov – *Bless the Lord, O My Soul*. The composer created a vast picture of the world around us being constantly transformed, showing a feeling of awe for the Creator, using the text of Psalm 103. The foundation of this composition is an ancient *znamenny* melody.

Yegorov – *Gladsome Light*. As with many other Russian sacred compositions written around the turn of the 19th century, this piece is greatly influenced by Russian Romanticism. This composition is especially profound and evocative, thanks to the elegant blend of colorful harmonies and austere melodies.

Grechaninov – *Cherubic Hymn*. This composer is famous for his vivid, Romantic musical language. In this composition he achieves great emotional power, freely using elements of polyphonic imitation. He contributed greatly to the development of liturgical music.

Golovanov – *Three Christmas Songs*. The former director of Moscow's Bolshoi Theater, Golovanov kept his sacred compositions hidden; they were first discovered after the Soviet Union's fall and published in 2004. Golovanov's sacred compositions astound us with their subtlety, expressiveness, and depth of feeling. In comparison with the traditional luster of Christmas church compositions, the palette of the first two pieces, *Troparion of the Nativity* and *Wonderful Mystery*, is more transparent, almost like a watercolor. Created secretly behind closed doors, they were hidden from the world, as if saying a prayer to oneself, not out loud in church.

Schnittke – *Three Sacred Hymns*. Schnittke wrote this choral piece in the style of the Russian Orthodox Church tradition, uncommon for this famous contemporary Russian composer. Schnittke's understanding of Russian sacred music allowed him to create a composition so in tune with the essence of Russian Orthodox liturgy that it seems to transport the listener inside a Russian Orthodox cathedral.

Rachmaninoff – *Theotokos, Ever-Vigilant in Prayer*. In the heartfelt melodies of this very early composition, we can unmistakably hear the voice of his future genius. With quite simple means he achieves great emotional strength and dramatic tension, effectively using the expressive potential of the human voice.

Rachmaninoff – *We Hymn Thee*. “Very slow. Practically silently. Almost no dynamics.” Unusual directions for Rachmaninoff to give for the performance of one of his most moving sacred compositions. According to the composer, the essence of grace is profound, intimate, and private, which leaves the performers to complete this task almost mutely.

In the second half we perform much admired compositions by Tchaikovsky, Taneyev, Sviridov, Krylov, Yukechev, and Blyakher. Now, musical energy is born through the tension of contrasting images of nature with passionate internal dialogues.

Tchaikovsky – *Nature and Love*. The name itself reveals the essence of this composer's creative genius. This cantata, with its internal conflict between “Oh, no!” and “Oh, yes!” is based on his own words, and may be is one of the most moving and beautiful discoveries of this Russian Romantic genius.

Yukechev – *Chant*. This vocalise is a polyphonic masterpiece. Full of profound drama, it breaks through grief and sorrow and comes to a climax of hope. Created during the years when sacred texts were prohibited, it is certainly linked to sacred tradition. I asked the composer how he was able to create a composition of such a powerful force, and he answered, “It came straight from my heart.” We dedicate this performance of *Chant* to all those who sang in our chorus and helped our artistic pursuits, and today have passed beyond the threshold of earthly life.

Sviridov – *Three Poems by Pushkin*. The composer was inspired by the lyricism, humor, and philosophy of Pushkin’s poems. These “singing poems” immerse the listener in the unique atmosphere of Pushkin’s poetic genius.

Krylov – *Little Dawn* and Taneyev – *Sunrise*. These two pieces are interlocked by the theme of nature. An extraordinarily beautiful nocturne transforms into dawn, where the sun fully rises at the last chord. And with this, the part of the program devoted to the Russian cantata and choral miniature comes to an end.

Zahar Blyacher – *Four Russian Folk Songs*. This song cycle has long been an RCCNY audience favorite. Its bright colors and themes remind us of a traditional Russian *lubok* (folk painting). The composer connected four different folk songs in one cycle, using a storyline that ties them together. In the first song, two lovers meet. In the second, they are separated. The third song is a wedding song, and the fourth joins us all in laughter at a funny story.