

Efrem Podgaitis: "I never wrote for occasions"

Interviewed by Natalie SHADRIN

The world premiere of Ephrem Podgaitis' "New York Mass" was held in the spring of 2002 in the city to which it was dedicated, almost six months after the September 11 attacks in Manhattan and, naturally, invoked in the listening audience a direct association of the recently experienced tragedy. However, surprisingly, the composition was written not "after" but "before". This is nothing new: sometimes unwittingly, artists are able to forebode.

- Efrem, as I understand it, the story of the creation of this work started very prosaically?

- Quite absolutely. A year ago, the Russian Chamber Choir of New York, under Nikolai Kachanov (graduate of the Novosibirsk State Conservatory living in America for 20 years) commissioned six choral miniatures, for his project "Moscow, New York, Jerusalem: the wish for peace from three cities." The idea was to perform a concert of specially written compositions by three composers who live in those cities. In the August of 2001, resting in Sortavala, I pondered the future work, and suddenly, I do not know why, without thinking who could perform it, began writing the mass: in six parts, with the traditional Latin text. The musical image, in truth, had come out not as traditional – more tragic rather than light. And I felt that the music went against the text that I worked with. After I returned to Moscow, I finished the score - almost on the eve of September 11th. When what happened, happened, I then realized that I had taken up this "Mass" not by accident. Actually, I would not just write a composition, especially to mark an event; I never liked works written "on the occasion of." The finished score, of course, forced me to think about possible performers. I showed it to both Boris Tevlin, and Viktor Popov [Moscow Choir conductors] - the idea to perform "Mass" at the Great Hall on the anniversary came soon enough - but they refused: yes, interesting but very difficult, almost impossible to perform. I decided to consult Kachanov, to whom I had already sent the commissioned miniatures, to see if anybody would be interested in performing the work in New York City. To my great surprise, after getting the score, he expressed an interest. This is a good choir, but it seemed to me that for him it would be difficult. In spite of that– they took just a month to learn the piece and sang it May 10 and 11 in two major New York cathedrals. I was not present, so I cannot share my impressions but they say that it sounded good and was a great success. An interesting detail: in the first part, as I was told, many heard the rumble of aircraft. The New York premiere, of course, did not make me abandon the search for potential performers in Moscow. In the end I realized that I needed to tap my friendly "Spring" [children's choir]. And I made a version for children's choir and string orchestra, which replaced the basses and baritones, and organ.

- So, as it turned out what frightened the adults was handled by children? Or did they learn the "lite" version?

- I did not make it easier for them. After all it is a chorus that can perform everything. This choir does not need additional advertising...Though maybe that's just what it needs. Of course, we know it well [[here in Russia]], but ... it is known only to us. But abroad, this choir is both greeted and sent off as a winner. There are a huge amount of choral competitions in the world. Most of them are there, just for show, they bring neither fame, nor bonuses, only a certificate. But there are six really high-level major competitions. At every one of these competitions there are many choruses who aim for first prize and then all the winners "fight" for the Grand Prix. So Alexander Ponomarev's "Spring" has a few Grand Prix prizes. More so, in Spain there is a contest among the owners of this Grand Prix. The winner receives a so-called "Grand Prix of Europe." "Spring" has won that in 2000.

- What were your thoughts and feelings, when on 11 September last year, you watched on TV the Manhattan skyscrapers collapse?

- First and foremost, of course, the feelings were those shared by the majority of people. But there was one thought, a deeply personal one. The fact, that history repeats itself. This is already the second such case in my lifetime. Sixteen years ago I had a recital in the newly restored church of Kiev. Especially for this concert a great conductor Roman Kofman, performed in Kiev with his orchestra. He asked that I write a piece for string orchestra, organ, percussion and solo soprano. The name of the piece was left the same as that of the short story by Ray Bradbury, who said - "It will be tender sweet rain." Let me remind you that the action in the book takes place in the world after a terrible cataclysm. The concert was held in January, the 1986. Three months later, the Chernobyl disaster happened. And my music was absolutely about that. So, watching television on September 11, I could not believe my eyes. By the way, it is hard to believe this event happened even if I had not written a Mass beforehand.

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