

**“Russia and Beyond: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Tuva”
May 11 and 15, 2011**

Notes on the Program

For most of the twentieth century, many in the West equated the Soviet Union with Russia. Books and articles about “Soviet music” at the time could be almost entirely about Russian music, denying the wealth of musical cultures in other areas. With this concert RCCNY inaugurates the series, “Russia and Beyond,” and highlights the diversity of those cultures.

We invite you to ignore the political map of the former USSR. Imagine, instead, a musical map. It's beautiful, because the country of art is without borders, and we are all its citizens. In this country, each unique national musical tradition is precious to us, and when we look at the map we want to exclaim: “How rich in diversity we are !”

In “Russia and Beyond,” the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, and Tuvan choral traditions are represented by the talented composers Tormis, Dambis, Bajoras, Kholminov, and Chyrgalool. Alive with expression, depth, and power, these choral compositions reveal music's ability to recreate pages that can be always read, where past events can be repeatedly experienced. Through this music, we can enjoy the beauty of a landscape, experience a spiritual vision, and plunge into the boundless ocean of harmony, with its infinite variety of forms and colors, created by the inspiration of the musical painter.

The works of Feliksas Bajoras constitute a world of marvels, synthesizing sincere feeling and high professionalism. Beauty and originality permeate his compositions, drawn from the roots of the ancient Lithuanian musical culture. *The Great Mystery*, a powerful and haunting piece, was inspired by the spiritual poem written by the aging Lithuanian priest J. Zukauskas. It consists of two parts: “Unfinished Sacrifice” and “Breaking Wave.” The composition expresses the eternal spiritual theme of life, death, and resurrection. The music is saturated with the spiritual trembling and deep inner disquiet of a person who addresses God with a sincere heart. The brokenness of the sound and the asymmetry of the rhythms convey this state with great expressiveness. The composer says of this composition: “Pauses are very important: phrases, words, even syllables should be sung separately, in order to give greater significance to the word.”

The polyphony in *The Great Mystery* layers one motif on another. The score reveals a hierarchy of musical elements, starting with supple and rapid broken lines in the soprano, then gradually deepening, losing its mobility, through the alto and tenor, reaching completion in the low, still wave of the bass line. The piece ends with a dramatic finale that symbolizes an inevitable stroke of fate. The last few bars are very quiet: the person does not struggle anymore.

Pauls Dambis is a remarkable modern Latvian composer, to whom we are obliged for his original perspective on his nation's musical heritage, and for his bold search for innovative ways of expression that have considerably enriched modern choral writing. In *Three Songs of the Sea*, these innovations appear in choral recitatives: from loud screams to whispers. Striking choral

improvisations create effects of timbre that express natural conditions. As the first song begins, voices create a groaning wind effect, where lamentations intertwine with the storm.

Three Songs of the Sea is an almost visible reenactment of a chapter in history, where anxious bells ring and wives and mothers groan in powerlessness before ruthless nature. Their echoes rush over the sea and grow quiet, on a gray, damp day, hung with heavy clouds. Dambis's writing breaks through the limits of conventional choral genres, and thus this cycle is a distinctive, living picture from the history of the Latvian people.

The Estonian composer Veljo Tormis (b. 1930) is considered by many to be one of the most important composers of choral music in the last half of the 20th century. Setting traditional texts and melodies of six different Finno-Ugric peoples, his magnum opus, *Forgotten Peoples*, is Tormis's attempt to rescue these cultures from extinction. RCCNY performs the first of these cycles, *Liivlaste pärandus* [Livonian Heritage]. Its songs portray Livonian village scenes: the waking of the birds, the call of the herdsboy, the dancing of mummers visiting homes at Shrovetide (the days preceding Ash Wednesday), a lullaby about a tiny mouse, and a drinking song for father and son.

The shamanistic tendency of much of Tormis's writing comes through directly in some of these songs. For example, in the second song, the person milking the cows sings "ririi, ririi" as an incantation to make the milk flow. And the onomatopoeic sound of the first song's refrain, "tšitšor, tšitšor," is the call of the birds and an invocation to awaken them and bring daybreak. The final song of this cycle evokes the overall theme of *Forgotten Peoples*. Starting as a rollicking drinking song (Latvian in origin) the music fades away as the Livonian people disappear from the earth.

Alexander Kholminov is a prolific contemporary Moscow composer who works in a wide variety of musical genres, especially noted for his contributions to the contemporary chamber opera. Among other compositions, he has written numerous operas, symphonies and concertos for various instruments. Kholminov is known for his interest in innovations, but still I was personally surprised by his *Concerto for Cello and Chamber Chorus*. This composition sets absolutely unique expectations for the chorus, asking for orchestra-like flexibility in accompanying the soloist, and also places a demanding level of virtuosity on the soloist.

Alexey Chyrgal-ool is a contemporary composer and an important figure among Tuvan professional musicians. The School of Arts in Kyzyl, the capital of Tuva, is named after him. The geographical center of Asia, Tuva is one of the main centers of the ancient art of throat singing. Throat singing was common among Tuvan natives, who were traditionally hunters and cattle breeders. At the heart of this ancient art lies the imitation of sounds in the surrounding nature. It reflects a living dialogue with nature, still part of Tuvan life today. Throat singing encompasses many styles and individual techniques. One of the most impressive is the ability to improvise a melody in the flute register, while the lower tone sounds constantly, without change. The interval between these sounds can reach two or more octaves! Some singers can produce as many as four tones simultaneously. The lowest-pitch styles are used by shamans for healing. Folk singers assert that throat singing assists with the expansion of the consciousness in space and connectedness with cosmos.

Handagaity is a Tuvan folk song arranged for chorus. Choral singing is not a typical part of the Tuvan musical tradition, but this fine arrangement by Chyrgal-ool has preserved the unique flavor of the Tuvan folk sound. To enhance this song with more of the Asian sound palette we are using the *chomus*, (also called *temir komuz* or jaw harp), as well as elements of throat (harmonic) singing technique.

The first paragraph, and notes about Tormis contributed by Mimi Daitz.

Other notes contributed by Nikolai Kachanov.