

Winter Celebration of Sacred and Folk Music December 10 and 11, 2005

PROGRAM NOTES

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Our chorus has now entered its twenty-first season. Our loyal audience already knows it is our nature to unite compositions of various epochs and styles into a single, unique concert theme. Today's program is structured in three parts.

Part One: Early Russian Sacred Music

The first part of the concert is devoted to Russian sacred music of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the 20th-century composition, "God Is with Us (A Christmas Proclamation)" by John Tavener.

The concert begins with a song of Tsar Feodor Alekseyevich, "Hymn to the Mother of God", composed in the *znamenny* style of one-voice chanting, in which you can hear the faint intonations of its ancient Byzantine ancestors. From these ancestors, a thousand years ago, during the time of Prince Vladimir, the Slavs received Orthodoxy. As a result, the principles of Greek church singing are embedded in the foundation of Russian sacred singing. The next song, "Christ is Born," is a vivid example of early Russian linear polyphony of the 17th century. The first musicologists who successfully deciphered this ancient and forgotten notation system were struck by the strangely dissonant sphere of sounds created by the combined voices: it could be compared to nothing heard earlier. Years ago in Russia, when there was almost no legal way of studying these compositions, I remember my own endeavors to understand this unusual singing. These sounds are definitely uncommon, as we must expect when we delve into ancient or less-known realms. (Similar sounds are heard in the last song in the "Russian Concerto" by Valery Kalistratov, who reproduced genuine folk sounds from areas of Russia where dissonance is a natural occurrence.) The first third of the concert ends with the music of John Tavener, whose deep interest in Greek and Russian Orthodox traditions led him to convert to Orthodoxy. His conversion gave us a new series of sacred compositions, contemporary in nature, but archaic in sound. His style of polyphonic writing shows an interest in linearity and independent voice lines, and closely relates this composition to the polyphonic Russian church style of the 17th century.

Part Two: Slavic Sacred Concertos

The second part of the concert is related to the first in its sacred nature, but different in its musical presentation. In the second half of the 18th century, when Russian church music received Western (in particular, Italian) influences, it changed direction significantly. Composers such as Galuppi (1706-1785), Sarti (1729-1802), Bortniansky (1751-1825), and others helped prepare a new period of Russian music, not just in sacred music, but in the entire profession of musical culture. Without these composers, there would have been no Tchaikovsky, nor any of his student followers: Taneyev, Rachmaninoff, and all other Russian composers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Russian music moved further and further from Byzantium. But, one hastens to add, attempts were made to understand and recreate the distinctive ancient Slavic church singing.

The *Sacred Concerto* genre is the freest form of composition for sacred texts, because the composer's intent is not constrained by the rituals of the church service. Texts are usually chosen by the composers, depending on their inner directions. Examples of this genre form the second part of our program.

"In the prayers of the One Who does not sleep" was the young Rachmaninoff's first sacred composition for choir. Here you can rightly foresee his unique musical genius. He applies rather simple methods to achieve great emotional strength and dramatic tension, freely and effectively using the expressive possibilities of the human voice.

"Sing Him a New Song" by the Serbian composer Marko Tajcevic (1900-1984), uses the same Church Slavonic language that unites Orthodox Slavs. But his is a different Slavic culture, a different era, and he uses other principles to build and develop his music. The powerful choral *tutti* is set off by the delicate transparency of women's voices and the mysterious recitative for men's voices, adding a special archaic depth and meaning.

Our third example of the sacred concert genre is "Glory to the Father and the Son" by contemporary Ukrainian composer Lesya Dychko (b. 1939). Her composition is set in her native Ukrainian, which even in speech is richly musical. This singsong quality is the secret of the melodic beauty also heard in Ukrainian folk songs. *Kievan* chant distinguishes itself from its more northerly neighbors with an enhanced melody line. The composer not only achieves wonderfully bright and contrasting choral colors, but also creates an inimitable atmosphere with her sensitive interpretation of the text. This is especially noticeable in the middle section of the piece, in the words: "Do not place your hopes in princes, in sons of man, for in them there is no salvation." The melody gives us a basis for interpreting the text, rich in its surprising depth and powerful expression. The intonation of the melody not only reminds us of a medieval Church Slavonic motif, but also allows us to hear the more ancient Byzantine elements.

Part Three: Russian Folk Songs

The third part of our concert is devoted to the Russian folk song. Appreciation for the beauty and originality of Russian folklore came about in Russia in the early 1980s and was popularized by groups such as the Dmitri Pokrovsky Ensemble.

Russian songs with literary origins arose in the 18th century, featuring the works of many Russian poets. Among them were Sumarokov, Derzhavin, Davidov, Vyazemsky, Pushkin, Lermontov, Koljtzov, Nekrasov and many others. But Russian village songs came from the peasants' milieu and can be attributed to their ancient tradition of singing together. The life and work of the Russian peasant farmer depended on the year's natural cycles. Ancient pagan invocations for the fertility of the land and the farm animals, and for the well-being of the family, slowly mixed in with the calendar of Christian holy days. This led to the strange intertwining of pagan and Christian singing traditions. Here is a short summary of the agricultural calendar (December through April) and some of the subjects of peasant folk songs:

Winter feasts	Songs of the feasts
Winter Christmastide (December 25 to January 6)	Kolyadi, Saucers (<i>podblyudniye</i>)
Christmas (December 25)	Maslenitsa, Spring, Kupala, Harvest
St. Basil's day (January 1)	Songs of childhood
Epiphany (January 6)	Songs of youth: Choosing, Love, Infidelity
Forties (March 9)	Separation, Marriage imposed, Groom and bride
Maslenitsa (eight weeks before Easter)	Wedding songs: Match-making, the Agreement, Farewell to the family
Easter (first Sunday after the first spring new moon)	Girls' night, Unplaiting the braid (Wedding Shower)
Egor's day (April 23)	Songs of and about peasants, soldiers, barge-haulers, brigands, prison, etc.

The "Russian Choral Concerto" by Valery Kalistratov is a rare creative success, because Kalistratov is not only a well-educated and talented composer and choirmaster, but also a deeply knowledgeable folklorist. In his composition he quotes from folk songs and borrows from folk texts, then creates his own choral imagery, whose colors also have genuine folk origins. One of the measures of the Russian folk concert is the composer's ability to recreate the authentic sound of these song genres.

The "Russian Choral Concerto" comprises six songs.

1. "Below the Village of Lyskovo" is historical. Here the composer resurrects a picture of improvisational folk singing-storytelling. Folk-singing in a village was not concert singing; there was no audience, only participants. There were no composers: the songs were a result of common spontaneous creativity. You can hear quite well the solo groups that spontaneously appear and are then picked up by the rest.

2. "Tanya-Tanyusha." Another village scene portraying a dance for females, the *khoro vod*. The dancers follow one another in a line from house to house through the village. Tanya is the girl who leads the dancers to the house of the village elder, where his son is standing on the porch. The composer creates a lively image of the dance. Dances by young people were one of the rare forms of romantic play allowed by strict village ethics. The male voices symbolize the feelings of the elder's son, who is enraptured by Tanya's beauty. The punctuating rhythm of the percussion instrument that accompanies this vocal image represents the sound of women's heels.

3. "The New Moon Passed By." The text and its musical embodiment draw a picture of the Christmastide holidays, when young men and women walk through the village from house to house singing *koliadki* (carols). The words of the text: "We have no Ilya, we have Basil" and "The New Year cried: Good evening!" refers to December 31, the eve of St. Basil's Day. Small bells, heard against a background of voices, underlines the fantastical aspect of the images—that is, the personification of the coming New Year, promising plenty and happiness in love. The bells also heighten the feeling of the crystal clarity and transparency of the freezing cold air.

4. "Koliada." This genre of calendar songs belongs to the Christmastide days, which were begun by going on a *koliada*. The word denotes "fortunetelling," and the root *kolo* means to turn, to circle. (A vivid example of an ancient Slavic pagan *koliada* is the Ukrainian "Shedrik," or "Carol of the Bells.") The song personifies the imaginary Koliada, who must bring a rich harvest and happiness to families. The three brothers mentioned in the text, who are walking on a bridge, are Christmas, St. Basil's Day, and Epiphany. Unlike the other parts of the "Russian Concerto," where the music was taken from authentic folk sources, the music of "Koliada" is the composer's own, set to folk texts.

5. "By the Little Spring." This is a wedding song that features women singing in a slow-paced manner. This genre is probably one of the most touching and most beautiful in Russian folk music. Here, as in all Russian "slow" folk songs in general, the musical material flows not only from the story or words, but even more by the degree and depth of emotional expression. This synthesis, unusual in its artistic strength, is the real miracle not only of Russian, but probably of all human folk singing.

6. "Oy, Someone's Horse" is totally opposite in character. Its masculine nature, with resilient intonation and dissonant imitations, is a vivid example of a special genre of folk song, performed by two groups of singers standing opposite each other. The term for this was "wall against wall." Resembling a sports match, it portrays the integral element of any folk holiday: its joyous gaiety.