

Winter Light

Notes on the Program from Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

Tonight's program traces the development of the Russian sacred choral concerto genre. Many Russian composers have worked in this liturgical genre. Historically, the sacred concerto took the place of communion hymns in the Sunday and holiday liturgy. Tonight's performance, like our previous concerts, will introduce you to new and recently discovered composers. As a special addition to our usual program, we will perform sacred compositions not only by Russian composers, but also by contemporary Western composers who used Church Slavonic in their compositions.

The dialogue between Russian and western musical cultures is several centuries old. The style of Russian sacred music known today was not formed in an instant, but developed gradually, evolving under the influence of western culture. The predecessor of the genre of sacred concerto" was the *partesny* concerto. The latter developed in the middle of the 17th century under the influence of western European music that reached Moscow by way of Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland. Our program begins with the *partesny* concerto of an unknown composer of the 17th century.

In the 18th century, Russian church singing came under the influence of the Italian school of composition and singing. Italian masters Baldassare Galuppi and Giuseppe Sarti were invited to St. Petersburg to instruct the singers of the Royal Cappella, who by this time had already begun branching out from church singing into secular song and even opera. The increasing visibility of Italian opera in Russia also contributed to the development of the style of church singing. As the style evolved, it incorporated itself into the elements of secular lyrical songs.

By the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, the *partesny* style disappeared and was replaced by the classical sacred concerto style. One of the most distinguished creators of this new genre was the head of the Royal Cappella, Dmitry Stepanovich Bortnyansky (1751-1825). Ukrainian by birth, Bortnyansky received his musical education in Italy, and made a profound influence on Russian church and professional music. Of particular renown are his *35 Volumes of Sacred Concertos*, which was carefully studied and edited by Tchaikovsky.

As time went by, the idea of a return of church art to its national roots gained ground. Attempts at a return to ancient Russian church singing occurred as early as Bortnyansky's time. Bortnyansky himself tried to revive this style in his arrangements. Following in his footsteps was a whole generation of Russian composers who worked on creating polyphonic arrangements of the old single-voice church songs, either through classical harmony, by trying to create a unique Russian counterpoint, or by using the rules of ancient polyphony from the epoch of Palestrina, as a counterweight to contemporary Italian or German music.

Russian composers were bursting with creativity and the development of church music might well have taken a different path, had Tsar Nicholas I (1796- 1855) not issued a decree ordering all harmonizations to be done in the style of the German Protestant chorale. Due to this interference, professional composers were deprived of an opportunity to participate in the creation of church music, and the development of a national musical art form bypassed the church.

The developmental plateau of church music was disturbed in the most unexpected manner. Despite prohibition, a public performance was held in 1878 of the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, written by one of the most famous composers, Tchaikovsky. He did not identify with church music written in the Italian style, and desired to recreate a Russian national church style. Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy* (1878), *Vespers* (1881), and *Ten Sacred Choruses* clearly illustrate an ever-increasing nationalization of the musical language. Tchaikovsky's sacred compositions not only played a decisive role in the development of church vocal music, but also determined the future development of Russian church music. Later generations of Russian composers continued this development, which, becoming increasingly nationally determined, reached its culmination in the music of Rachmaninoff.

Recent discoveries have been made of previously unknown composers who, during the Soviet regime, were forced to hide their work from the authorities and never had the opportunity to hear their music in live performance. One of these is Golovanov. Thanks to new publications based on materials from the archives of the Glinka Museum in Moscow, we can bring to you tonight Golovanov's choral church compositions that astound us with their subtlety, expressiveness, and depth of feeling. Most of these compositions are written in the genre of the sacred concerto. Golovanov's biography deserves particular attention. Until recently no one knew that this renowned opera conductor and sought-after composer worked in secret on composing church music. Along with Golovanov, another composer who despite persecution from authorities continued in secret the tradition of church music is Tolstiakov. His *Bless the Lord, O My Soul* is also written in the genre of the sacred

concerto and demands from the chorus a mastery of a vivid sound palette. According to an old Russian choral tradition, the performance of Russian church music, and of this composition in particular, calls for a section of ultra-low bases.

It's not the first time that we are proud to bring back to life pearls of Russian church music that were all but lost.

In the second part of tonight's concert we will present our listeners with the sacred concerto genre but in the works of contemporary composers. We will perform three compositions varied in character and style which will present three different takes on the Russian tradition of church music, revealing new musical techniques and colors used by these contemporary composers. These compositions were created with Church Slavonic texts, thus enriching the repertoire of the sacred concerto genre and offer new avenues for its future development.

Cherubic Hymn of Penderecki is an interplay of two elements: the free-flowing asymmetric melodic movement and the clear-cut, rhythmically organized sound of male voices. The former expands, diverging into vocal motifs reminiscent of dissonant church singing of the early Russian polyphonic period, and creating the feeling of a bygone era. The male voices, with their saturated sound, transport us into the realm of monastic style singing. The combination of these two elements leads to a powerful culmination.

Three Sacred Choruses by Alfred Schnittke, in their style and genre, are not typical for this famous contemporary Russian composer. However, Schnittke's understanding of Russian church music allowed him to create a composition so in tune with the essence of Russian Orthodox liturgy, that listening to it feels to one, as if being inside of a Russian Orthodox cathedral.

Holy by Tavener is a composition one always wants to come back to. Built on the simple singing intonations of the ancient Eastern tradition, it carries extraordinary power: the sound energy lifts us up, with the final chords symbolizing the attainment of the ultimate and dissolving in its light. Of particular note is the part of the cello. Tavener intended it to represent the priest. The priest's voice in prayer is unencumbered by words; it is stirred by pure feeling.

Since Tchaikovsky's time, musical language has developed, and sound energy has materialized in new forms. Today it is hardly possible to imagine a person who cannot understand Tchaikovsky's music. During his time, however, Tchaikovsky was met with a lot of resistance from his countrymen, who could not comprehend his ideas about church music. A segment from a letter written by the composer to the dean of the Kiev Church Academy in 1882 illustrates Tchaikovsky's experiences: "...the problem is that as a Russian musician who wants to contribute to Russian church singing, and who has given this subject a lot of thought, I feel that unfortunately, in my conception of what it should be, I remain, if I may say so, above the level of common understanding. My tastes are diametrically opposed to those the Russian Orthodox public as well to most of the church leaders." The publishing and public performance of the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* resulted in a court trial. Every creative genius is ahead of his time. That's why in performing and developing contemporary music, I believe, we build a bridge to the future.