

# Spirit of Old Russia II

## Notes on the Program

by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

This is the second program in our Spirit of Old Russia concert series. The first program reflected the time of Peter the Great. This program traces the evolution of Russian musical expression over the last several centuries with emphasis on two ideas quintessential to Russian culture: infinite vastness and melancholy.

We begin with Dmitry Bortnyansky's sacred concerto for double choir, *Glory to God in the Highest*. Of Ukrainian origin, Bortnyansky was one of the most influential composers of his time in Russia. His mission was to bring western knowledge of music to Russia, at a professional level. His liturgical music we call Russian Baroque because it combines eastern and western European styles, incorporating the polyphony that he learned while studying in Italy.

A bit of history: Under the influence of Russian musical traditions, the baroque style gradually developed into more modern genres of church music. The sacred concerto emerged as an all-encompassing type of composition, in terms of dramatic and musical expression. This style incorporates many of the chants featured in the first part of our program, illustrating the evolution of the sacred concerto genre from the 18th to 20th century.

While the great composers Kastalsky, Gretchaninov, and Chesnokov have long been associated with 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian church music, Golovanov's sacred music is a recent discovery. The celebrated head conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre, a favorite of Stalin, secretly composed sacred music during the harshest years of the anti-clerical Soviet regime, without the slightest hope of ever hearing it performed.

Secular choral music in Russia is often based on poetry. Perhaps the greatest source of inspiration for many Russian composers is Pushkin, whose poems captured the spirit of his time with unparalleled vividness and depth. Pushkin was particularly successful at expressing one of the most elusive qualities of the proverbial Russian soul – Russian melancholy. It is important to distinguish this famed and mysterious phenomenon from our modern concept of depression; rather, Russian melancholy is often inspired by contemplation of the natural beauty of the landscape. Thus, there is nothing contradictory in Pushkin's famous verses: “Унылая пора! очей очарованье!” – “A melancholy time! So charming to the eye!” His poem *Winter Road* uses no fewer than 11 different words to express individual shades of melancholy.

(continued)

The Russian poet Karamzin expressed his notion of melancholy in this way:

Безмолвие любя, ты слушаешь унылый  
Шум листьев, горных вод, шум ветров и морей.  
Тебе приятен лес, тебе пустыни милы;  
В уединении ты более с собой.

Cherishing silence, you listen to the sad  
Rustle of leaves, mountain waters, the rush of winds and seas.  
The wood is pleasant to you, deserts are lovely to you;  
In solitude you are more with yourself.

Shebalin's *Winter Road* and Krylov's *Little Dawn* are prime examples of the Russian choral miniature style. In this genre of choral music, the crown jewel of Russian Romanticism, images and sensations of nature are so vivid that the songs can be considered choral sketches. Kastalsky found a way to arrange *znamenny* chant using harmony and inner movements of voice parts that are reminiscent of Russian folk songs. This can be heard in the piece *God Is With Us*.

Another of Kastalsky's works, *Boundless Fields*, is a setting of a text by Nikolai Gogol and is also built on the intonations of Russian folk song. The awe-inspiring vastness of the Russian landscape has always captivated the minds and souls of its inhabitants; for this reason, the concepts of nature and freedom are inextricably linked in the Russian language. In *Boundless Fields*, Kastalsky constructs scenes evoking the boundless expanse of the Russian landscape, with the aim of conveying the timeless, mysterious concept and place known as Rus' – the inspiration for a lot of Russian folklore and poetry, sometimes referred to as Holy Russia.