

Russian Chamber Chorus of New York

30th Anniversary Jubilee January 15 and 18, 2015

Notes on the Program
by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

Thirty years ago I had a dream to build a cultural bridge between the United States and Russia. This season our chorus celebrates its 30th anniversary. Together, we have been on a quest for harmony, which is just what the world needs today. With 30 years behind us, the chorus has much to celebrate -- each year has been filled with exciting musical adventures. Through our concerts, New Yorkers have rediscovered forgotten works and listened to sacred choral music the composers themselves never heard performed publicly. RCCNY has been referred to as one of the world's greatest ambassadors of the Russian creative spirit.

I always devote a lot of time and painstaking care to developing RCCNY's concert programs, and planning for this, our jubilee concert season, turned out to be challenging. This was not only because it's impossible to do justice in one program to the multitude of musical masterpieces that comprise our vast, 30-year repertoire, but also because our jubilee year coincided with devastating events that have shaken the world. For this reason I felt it would not be right to conclude our concert program with fanfare. Instead, I chose to end it with the extraordinary and timely work by Georgian composer Giya Kancheli, *Amao Omi (Senseless War)*. For the program's opening, you'll hear one of the origins of the Russian sacred concerto, composed by the Ukrainian-born Dmitry Bortnyansky. And, at the heart of our program is Sergei Rachmaninoff's beloved *Liturgy*, representing the best elements of Russia's culture and spirit. Since we could not perform this monumental work in its entirety, I decided to include selected parts. Each of the selections in itself is a finished work in the genre of the Russian sacred concerto and can be performed as a stand-alone concert piece.

RCCNY's jubilee season, 2014-2015, also happens to coincide with two important anniversaries. First, the 140th birthday of the Russian painter, philosopher, archaeologist, writer, traveler, and international public figure Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), whose jubilee we celebrate by performing my work "Benevolence," based on poems by Roerich. Second, 2015 marks the anniversary of another event related to Roerich—it is eighty years since the signing of the Roerich Pact and the Banner of Peace, also known as the Pax Cultura, the treaty on the protection of the world's cultural heritage, signed in 1935 in the White House by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and all members of the Pan-American Union.

There are no words adequate to express our deep gratitude to all those who have supported RCCNY throughout the years, and especially to the Nicholas Roerich Museum and its director Daniel Entin.

About Glory to God in the Highest:

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. He was first 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.

About the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom:

Ahead of his time, Rachmaninoff created his monumental sacred composition for choir, the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, in 1910. It suffered the same fate as Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy* (1880): Its performance was banned. Also like Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy*, Rachmaninoff's music was a wholly original creation—departing from the musical tradition of arranging ancient chants that were a kind of “sonorous” icon in antiquity.

As compared with the religious fine arts, Rachmaninoff's *Liturgy* is rather like the frescoes of Michelangelo or the paintings by such Russian artists as Nesterov, Vereshchagin, Repin, Vasnetsov, Kramskoi, Surikov, and Roerich.

Rachmaninoff's mighty genius lets his creative vision transcend the confines of the church service, turning the gospel stories into vivid, almost operatic scenes, with complex, sometimes symphonic elements of musical development. Because of this extraordinary, nontraditional expressiveness—and because it includes the full scope of the canonical church service—today the *Liturgy* is usually performed only in concert form.

About Benevolence:

The second half of the concert opens with *Benevolence*, a five-part choral cycle I composed on texts by Nicholas Roerich's cycle of verses, *Flame in Chalice* (1929). Like most of his diverse body of work, it was inspired by Eastern wisdom, and reflects a universal spirituality. For *Benevolence*, I developed a special five-tone progression, designed to express an Eastern, meditative quality. The entire composition—especially the third movement, *Trails*—rests on the elements of that scale. The main musical idea of the cycle is the attempt to interweave some elements of Eastern and Western musical techniques, including improvisation, minimalism, polyphony, instrumental imitation, and harmonic singing using overtones and undertones.

About Amao Omi:

Kancheli's music is difficult to discuss within the framework of traditional musical genres and forms. It may belong to Romanticism, though not the branch of Romanticism that borders on sentimentality. We can sometimes hear in it the momentary sketches of images that arise in the composer's consciousness, as though it is an immediate transfer from the mind to the page. At other times, we experience his musical moments as pictures with no frames—fragments of infinity, full of unexpected forms and emotions. One impression is that the composer copies these images as literally as he can, without trying to constrict them into a traditional musical genre. His pauses are full of sound, as though the composer is listening to Silence. Perhaps these fragments of silence are the main element, and the composer uses music to attract us to the silence?

Kancheli's approach to the text in *Amao Omi (Senseless War)* is also interesting. He uses fragments of phrases and words that don't always bear literal information. Instead, they float in a world that's primordial and pre-verbal, connecting us to primal sources.

Kancheli's protest against war is realized not through poster-like appeals to powerful vengeance or pleas for peace. It's reached by contrasting musical constructions—for example, when silence is interrupted by sharp *tutti* sections, resonating as shockingly as rifle shots, in ugly discord with the universal harmony.

Listening attentively to these fragments of universal silence—framed by musical passages that are sometimes touching and poetical, sometimes powerful and threatening—brings us nearer to hearing the composer's inspiration. *Amao Omi* is born from silence, and into silence it departs.