

A Celebration of Russian Folk Song

Notes on the Program

by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

The origin of the Russian folk song is twofold. The “lyrical song” was composed by city-dwellers to the texts of Russian writers or famous poets, and was usually sung solo, with a guitar. The earliest recordings of lyrical songs date from the 18th century and their primary theme is love. Some of these songs gained such popularity that they were appropriated by the masses and became “folk” or choral songs, with the names of their original composers forgotten.

The second major source of Russian musical folklore is the village song which was always created by the villagers themselves. As Nikolai Gogol put, “A Russian is diapered, married, and buried to the song of peasant women.” The great variety of Russian village song genres reflects the lives of those who sang them. There are songs for harvesting, game songs, songs for ceremonies and special occasions, songs sung for a traditional Russian dance, soldiers’ songs, lyrical, epic, humorous and others. The oldest ones are related to seasonal events, wedding ceremonies, and the women’s circle dance. These folk songs, unlike other genres, are improvised in such a manner that they rarely repeat themselves. The multiple variations of each song also reflect the variety of choral traditions in different parts of Russia. Village songs span a large spectrum of moods, from slow, melancholy chants to animated, joyous, spirited dance rhythms. Amid this amazing variety, some of the most beautiful and poignant songs are women’s so-called “sustained songs”. In our program these are Valery Kalistratov’s “By the Little Spring,” the folk songs “Seleznyushka” and “Oy, Po Dorojchke,” and Zakhar Blyaher’s “I Dropped the Little Ring” from his *Four Russian Songs*.

One of the specificities of Russian folk singing is its “open” manner of sound production that corresponds to the natural registers of the human voice, as opposed to classical-sounding academic choruses that are based on mixed registers and covered vowels.

The renowned Moscow composer Valery Kalistratov is famous for his interpretations of Russian folk music. His historical, lyrical and circle-dance songs performed in the beginning of our program are infused with the style of the folk sound. Kalistratov uses original texts and intonations of folk songs in his compositions.

One of the best loved folk songs is "Down the Mother-Volga River." It is known to have inspired the famous Russian painter Ilya Repin to paint his famous painting, "Volga Boatmen." In Kolovsky's arrangement of the playful, joking folk song "Chastushki" he uses voices to imitate the sound of the balalaika which reflects the existing folk tradition to imitate different instruments with voices.

The second half of the program begins with unarranged songs in their original versions. These songs received the highest recognition around the 1960s-1980s, especially owing to the appearance of tape recordings of folklore. The scores of folk songs began to come out in printed editions and relayed for the first time the full extent of authentic folk song polyphony. These discoveries went counter to the established view of folk songs present in professional musical circles from the time of Rimsky-Korsakov. It is likely that at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries some Russian composers arranged folk melodies found in various compilations, lacking the knowledge of traditional Russian folk polyphony. These composers then added harmony to the melodies they arranged according to western standards. Unconventional vocal intertwining seen in folk songs often results in dissonance when viewed through the prism of classical harmony. Thanks to folk song enthusiasts and experts like Dmitry Pokrovsky, authentic folk songs received the highest recognition. The songs you will hear in the beginning of the second half have not been arranged, and will sound the way they did when sung away from the public eye. When sung by ordinary folk they are performed in a particular "Slavic," "open" manner of singing based on "natural" registers.

The concert ends with a remarkable composition of the contemporary composer, Zakhar Blyaher. His *Four Russian Songs* is well-acknowledged in Russia as a masterpiece of composition on folk themes. Blyaher uses original folk texts and melodies, and as the name *Four Russian Songs* suggests, the pieces are not arrangements. The songs are picked in such a way as to form a lyrical love theme.

1. "The Path in the Damp Wood" - the initial meeting/rendezvous.
2. "I Dropped the Little Ring" - the pining of a young woman for her beloved.
3. "The Bells Were Ringing" - a wedding theme.
4. "Droll Sayings" - village merriment.

Blyaher masterfully develops the bell theme in the third song, using the piano. Of importance is the special place the sound of the bell holds in Russian musical imagery, from the "silver bell" of the famous Russian troika as heard in many folk songs ("Here Three Daring Horses Rushing," "Monotonously Rings the Little Bell") to the imitation of church-bells ringing that old Russia is famous for. This theme is often found in Russian classical music, reaching its culmination in the famous choral symphony *The Bells* by Sergei Rachmaninoff.