

East meets West, and VAN meets with Nikolai Kachanov

Composer, and Artistic Director,
Russian Chamber Chorus of New York

By Larry Weller for Vocal Area Network

In May of 2003 the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York (RCCNY) presented its program "Mystical Journey," encompassing music from Gregorian and Znamenny chant through new compositions by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov. The sold-out concerts were met with significant acclaim and many requests for CDs, so much so that RCCNY arranged its 2003 – 2004 season to permit studio recording and a repeat performance of the highlights of the program with an expanded section of early music, on Sunday March 14, 2004.

Vocal Area Network (VAN) caught up with Nikolai Kachanov (NK) for an update on this project.

VAN: First of all, congratulations on the success of your compositions and the success of your program. Although New York City retains a number of staunch supporters of new music, it is still a great relief and inspiration for all of us when new music is warmly and enthusiastically received by a wide audience resulting in repeat performances.

NK: Thank you. I have to say that performing new music always brings a new and unique musical and emotional experience to both the performers and the audience. This process always calls for a special responsibility for its future – in a way it's like giving life to a new creature. Its future destiny often depends on the quality of the interpretation at the first performance. Sometimes its success is achieved because the audience recognizes in the new composition premiere, because I did not try to be a "unique innovator," nor did I construct new super-complex already familiar genres or themes. In part this may be the reason for the success of my sound models, or get especially involved in intellectual spheres. I tried to speak about complex subjects in a simple musical and emotional language, not the other way around. Nevertheless, some moments appeared to be difficult for the performers and apparently for the audience, as well.

VAN: Could you elaborate on these moments?

NK: I'd be happy to because I believe that by explaining some of the peculiarities of the musical language or extraordinary idea, the composer is attempting to share with the audiences (especially so in contemporary music), and by doing so the composer can help the audience to tune in and consequently understand better the non-traditional musical elements in a new composition. This can create a more favorable atmosphere for the audience to actively participate and consciously cooperate with the new work and help them to avoid passively "floating" behind the music during the performance.

VAN: Looking first at your Reflections on Stanzas in H.P. Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine: The chorus has no actual text, and only uses different vowel sounds. For this piece you have also incorporated two synthesizers, piano and two trumpets. What were your objectives for this combination?

NK: I tried to use my imagination to find the timbres to communicate the sense of wonder that I experienced reading Blavatsky's extraordinary "Secret Doctrine." The Stanzas from the Book of Dzyan describe different stages in the creation of the Universe, one of the concepts of which is that the birth of the entire Universe, with its infinite variety of forms, stems from a single source. The rhythmic and eternal disappearance and birth of the Universe is, symbolically speaking, the breathing in and breathing out of the incomprehensible act of the Creator. I use the overtone series which contains infinite possibilities for different sound combinations, all of which are born from the single fundamental sound. To explain further, I've developed this sound by adding overtones (harmonics) which occur as this matter is being developed, beginning from the note C. (The overtone system in general, is my favorite area.) For this reason, I simultaneously use harmonic singing with its overtones (imitation of Tuva throat singing) and the Tibetan technique of sound production, which acoustically accents the bright major sounds due to the manifestation of the basic low tone. I generally love the major chord, especially enriched by the bright natural upper overtones. For me such a chord symbolizes the formula of the Universe. My intention was to symbolically illustrate this process of creation: silence, then the C pitch (already present in the silence

but hidden before its time to appear), then the development of the whole “musical painting,” which appears from the overtones of this C pitch. The conclusion of this musical poem *Reflections on Stanzas in H.P. Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine* is a hymn to Creation. As though, symbolically, everything returns to C Major.

Those who have studied the works of Blavatsky will particularly understand my musical idea in which, by the way, there is not even a shadow of my fantasy, but only the use of the well-known principles of the natural overtone system. This system has endless possibilities of sound combination.

Now, for my choices of these endless possibilities.

They are very modest and are intellectually and emotionally accessible to everyone, because I tried very hard to keep the musical material within the boundaries of comprehension, vision and so on. I tried not to “fly off” too far. However, even though I remained grounded, I anticipate that my music will not always correspond to each individual's experience.

VAN: Did the program for your Mystical Journey in music originate as a complete entity from the start, or did the program itself, spanning as it does from chant to new music, evolve?

NK: The program did evolve. The first component was actually the new music. It is very challenging to formulate the right concert setting for presenting new music. An entire concert of new music can be too tiring for the audience, which generally appreciates at least something familiar. But traditional Russian Romantic music does not provide the best companion for new sounds. And so the idea of setting the scene by illustrating parallels in the development of Russian and western European musical traditions took shape. Also I wanted to present Russian spiritual music culture in a way not expected by most audiences — not in bright, emotional and romantic sounds, but in a more “inner,” spiritual, if you wish, ascetic way. We felt we had to take a journey, for the audience to be ready to hear these new compositions. So we decided to begin with the simplest unison chants, then music for three voices, still within the same basic tradition of chant; and then we reach the level of Palestrina and Lassus. We will end the first part of the program with an as yet little-known piece of choral music by Alexei Haieff. In my opinion, his *Holy Week* is a unique musical document in the sense that this large composition is not an “original” work of the composer, but practically the first occurrence in the history of Russian music when the author uses Znamenny chant for his *cantus firmus* without any kind of changes to the original as it is documented and available to us today. We will perform the eighth movement from *Holy Week*, “Come let us sing.” Alexei Haieff found a musical language that wholly opens up the ascetic beauty of ancient Russian sacred music while carefully saving the original and extremely modest intonational nature of the Znamenny chant.

In my opinion, Haieff is the first Russian composer who found the most appropriate method to translate Znamenny chant into a polyphonic score. He created a system in which there is not even a shadow of “baroque-ism” or romanticism, which is so foreign to the nature of Znamenny chant. It's remarkable that this idea saw the light of day only in 1983 in New York, when Haieff composed his music.

In addition to what I've said, I want to quote the words of the composer himself, who wrote: “In compiling this music for Holy Week I have selected those hymns and prayers which appealed to me most from the remarkably rich and varied musical heritage of the Orthodox Church, of which the music connected with the liturgy for Easter and Holy Week is particularly fresh. Most of the chants I used are already very well known to congregations in the Orthodox Church. I have, however, sought to restore these to the purity and vigor that they have in many cases lost over the years, particularly in the settings of nineteenth-century composers. My aim throughout has been to preserve the original melodic and rhythmic line of the chant, and to add contrapuntal lines of equal clarity. The rhythm of all the chants is exceptionally varied, and the execution of this music must be very precise in order to avoid a blurred, over-emotional effect which would obscure the intrinsic beauty of their musical construction.”

VAN: For your a cappella choral cycle *Benevolence* you have chosen texts from poems by Russian artist Nicholas Roerich. Although New York's beautiful Nicholas Roerich Museum on West 107th Street maintains an active legacy of Roerich's art, still the name of Nicholas Roerich and his many accomplishments are perhaps not that well known among the current generation of Americans. For example, Roerich's contribution as the artist of the sets for Diaghilev's premier production of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* is overshadowed by the legendary impact of Stravinsky's music. And although most Americans are familiar with Neil Armstrong's words upon stepping to and from the moon, it is less well known that Yuri Gagarin — the first man to orbit the earth in space, and first to look back at our

planet — remarked that “it looked like a painting by Nicholas Roerich.” What led you to select Roerich’s poetry for your compositions?

NK: Nicholas Roerich was an artistic genius and extraordinary human being. A philosopher, scientist, traveler — he was a great humanist and dedicated his whole extraordinary life to serving truth, beauty and humanity. He is still so revered that originally I would not have dreamed to dare to put my music to his brilliant words. But I always believed that *someone* should set his poems to music. About 22 years ago I shared this thought with the first director of the Roerich museum in New York, Sina Fosdik, and she said, “Well, why don’t you do it yourself?” Today, after many years studying these extraordinary words, the deep meaning of some of them started opening up to me and the result of that is the choral cycle *Benevolence*. Today this consists of five parts; however, I have musical material for more. Initially I did not feel that I could attempt this, but with great encouragement from my wife, Tamara, I decided to do this.

VAN: Although the poems provide the immediate text for your cycle, would you say that your music was also influenced by Roerich’s many exceptional paintings of scenes in the Himalayas and northern India?

NK: Yes, that is true. I tried to paint with a musical palette by bringing in elements of colors like the pictures of Roerich, and also to bring into the sound some elements of Eastern ornamentation. I hope very much that I was at least partially successful in this. When reading Nicholas Roerich’s poems one is often reminded of many of his canvasses that provide the setting referred to in the poetry. His paintings have colors and atmospheres that absolutely translate into the sounds appropriate for the text. The main musical idea for *Benevolence* is to interweave elements of the Eastern and Western musical traditions.

VAN: One of the unique features of both *Benevolence* and *Reflections* is the use of Tuvan and Tibetan throat singing. Tell us about your experience with this sound.

NK: From the end of the 1970s until 1981, I was a faculty member at the Department of Choral Conducting at the Novosibirsk Conservatory, the largest music school in Siberia, which includes the Tuva Republic. At that time my colleague Professor Boris Chernov was just beginning the scientific research into the throat singing of Tuva. He carried out research with Dr. Valentin Maslov, a laryngologist, who was also a professional singer and a soloist with the Novosibirsk Philharmonic; and I was also experimenting with this style. In 1978, Zakhar Blyakher, a well-known Siberian composer, wrote a throat singing solo in his *Canto Bizarro* for me to perform, and with this piece the Novosibirsk Chamber Chorus, under the direction of Boris Pevzner, earned a gold medal for the best contemporary piece at the International Choral Competition in Hungary. I also invited Tanispai Shinzhin, a native of the Altai region of Siberia and a skillful throat singer, to participate in the original composition *Panorama* written by my friend and colleague, composer Yuri Ashchepov. Tanispai accompanied himself on the tapshur, an ancient two-stringed instrument from Altai.

In my opinion, true throat singing is an authentic folk style of singing that can only be produced by the people of Tuva and Altai. In my compositions I use the style that would more appropriately be called “harmonic singing”. Harmonic singing can be described as a resonance and sensitivity to the acoustical effects generated while the singer gradually transforms vocal vowels one into another. This process generates upper harmonics which are harmonically related to a fundamental tone. This technique is not very difficult and can be learned quickly; I remember teaching the basic technique to The Starscape Singers, a group from Canada directed by Kenneth Mills, in just one session.

VAN: What are the new directions you would like to explore in choral composition and performance?

NK: I’m excited to see a relatively new interest in different systems of tuning, outside the conventional well-tempered system, which was established by Bach and is now applied to everything. I believe older societies were actually more aware of other tuning systems and more creative in using them. Some outstanding ensembles today, such as the Hilliard Ensemble, use such refined tuning that they are bringing these options to light. Their work is a source of great inspiration to me. In my work with the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York, whenever a composition allows, I prefer to use the Pythagorean tuning system for the melody line. To achieve the best vertical tuning, I always prefer the natural scale. For me, the musical process is not about equalizing these two tuning systems, as in a well-tempered system, but the acoustical process of their interaction.

VAN: It is all quite fascinating. Good luck with your recording and performance!

NK: Thank you.