

Program Notes

by Nikolai Kachanov

Today's program continues a concert series we began last year, featuring Russia and its neighbors. In last year's program, we performed music of composers from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Tuva, and Russia. Today we dedicate our concert to Russia and its neighbors in the Caucasus: Armenia and Georgia. As we said in last year's program, the country of music is without borders, and we all are its citizens. In this country, each unique national musical tradition is precious to us, and when we look at the map we want to exclaim: "How rich in diversity we are!"

In any discussion of Armenian music, immediately one of its main figures comes up: Komitas. His creativity and tragic fate mirror the destiny of the long-suffering Armenian people and their creative spirit. After a concert of Armenian music in Paris, Claude Debussy said: "Had Komitas only composed the one song, "Homeless," even then he would have been a great artist." A gifted singer, teacher, researcher, choral conductor, and public figure, Komitas had deep expertise in Armenian folklore and collected secular and sacred music. He was the first musicologist of Armenian folklore and founded Armenian scientific ethnography. He also managed to decipher *khazy*, an ancient Armenian musical notation system.

Unfortunately, almost all his research materials on *khazy* have disappeared, but thanks to the publication of *The Divine Liturgy (Patarag)* in a Parisian edition in 1933, today we have the opportunity to encounter this unique work. In it, Komitas restores many features of ancient liturgical Armenian chants, and finds the subtlest ways to arrange the chants into contrapuntal style for four male voice parts—so that we retain the impression of antiquity speaking to us.

Sviridov is one of the most highly esteemed composers in Russia today. His choral music has received well-deserved recognition and profound national gratitude. His unique musical language is so steeped in folk song traditions that he has been rightly accepted as the patriarch of Russian choral music of the 20th century.

We present a composition by Sviridov dedicated to the memory of his friend and collaborator, Alexander Yurlov (1927–1973), who was himself a well-known Russian choral conductor. The tragic loss shook the composer and brought to life this choral composition without words, so emotionally powerful that it has become one of the most-performed choral favorites in Russia today.

Amazingly deep and expressive, his choral compositions are musical poetry, transferring the subtlest nuances of the poetic word. Patriotic and lyrical themes, the wonders of nature—all have found sincere embodiment in his music. In *Vesnyanka (Spring Tune)*, Sviridov creates a picture of the awakening springtime, intertwined with the feelings of a young girl dreaming of love.

Kancheli's music is difficult to discuss within the framework of traditional musical genres and forms. His music 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 the 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.