

Eternal Flame: A Choral Memorial

Notes on the Program

by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

In these notes, I would like to share my thoughts about the theme of memory.

Memory takes many forms: personal, familial, national, and collective. In every form, it lies at the foundation of culture and preserves our significant events and images. History preserves the memory of heroes and victims who gave up their lives for the benefit of others. Similar to the memories of great spiritual toilers and saints, fallen heroes are immortalized in countless legends and their stories are celebrated in a variety of art forms and genres. The Russian Chamber Chorus of New York upholds this tradition of commemoration with “Eternal Flame: A Choral Memorial,” in which every piece reflects a part of the spectrum of human remembrance.

Today we also remember all those who have sung with RCCNY. It's our way of being grateful to those who gave us their moral and material support, and those whose friendship sustained us in our creative work. Many of these people have passed into eternity, and they will always remain in our hearts and memories. Names of the RCCNY singers and supporters we remember and honor: Irina Brynner, John Burriak, Maria Copytsko, Louis Flaim, Slava Goldberg, Nina and Vladimir Grigoriev, Alexei Haieff, Alexandra Malozemoff, Janet Rogers, Gregory Salmon, David Shillieto, Lydia and Alexis Skidan, David Smith, Leny Spencer, Fr. Igor Tkachuk, Vladimir Ussachevsky, and Vladimir Zak.

Yuri Yukechev, *Chant*

This vocalise is a polyphonic masterpiece. Full of profound drama, it breaks through grief and sorrow and comes to a climax of hope. Created during the years when sacred texts were prohibited, it is unmistakably linked to sacred tradition. I asked the composer how he was able to create a composition of such powerful force, and he answered, “It came straight from my heart.”

Alexander Kastalsky, *Eternal Memory to the Heroes* (selections)

The first half of the 19th century saw the rise of a Romantic nationalism in Russia, a new movement in art that revived and transformed Russia's ancient and medieval cultural legacies. The renewed interest in Russia's history was especially prevalent in Moscow. Architects sought to revive traditional Russian designs. Tsar Nicholas I endorsed a new style of formal dress “in the Russian spirit” for women. In visual art, Romantic nationalism was championed by many Russian artists, including the Vasnetsov brothers, Nesterov, Vrubel, Roerich, and others. Kastalsky came into his prime during this time.

Kastalsky's choral music, especially his arrangements of ancient church hymns and melodies, was consistent with the popular idea to revive Russia's traditional sacred music. This was a marked departure from preceding centuries' obsession with the European way of harmonizing ancient church tunes, particularly in St. Petersburg.

Kastalsky was the first to show that fusing ancient Russian chants and folk singing techniques made a very natural combination. His work was a major influence on his contemporaries, inspiring Rachmaninoff to compose his *Liturgy* and *Vespers*. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote: “While Alexander Dmitrievich lives, Russian music lives also: he perfected the Russian style of linear polyphony and will develop his skill to full mastery.”

The first edition of Kastalsky’s cantata-requiem *Eternal Memory to the Heroes*, for chorus, orchestra, and solo voices, was published in 1916. The piece is dedicated to the soldiers who died fighting in WWI and includes Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican ecclesiastical texts. In the spring of 1916, Kastalsky added two orchestral interludes to the piece, employing Eastern musical styles to commemorate the Indian and Japanese soldiers who fought in the war; he wrote in a letter to a friend, “It’s important to me to show that the Asian soldiers are not forgotten.” In 1917, Kastalsky published three additional movements, one of which was inspired by the composer’s meeting with American diplomats, to mark “the entrance of the Americans into the [Allied] union against Germany”. A second edition of the work, for a capella choir, was published in 1917, employing Church Slavonic texts and prayers for the departed, including texts from the memorial service for soldiers killed in battle for their country.

Our concert features three movements from the second edition of *Eternal Memory to the Heroes* – the *Litany*, *Give Rest, O Christ* and *Memory Eternal*. For Kastalsky, a deeply religious man, death was not the tragic, inevitable end of existence, but a transition to eternal life.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky, *Blessed Are They, Whom Thou Hast Chosen*

This choral concerto is considered one of Tchaikovsky’s finest sacred compositions. While it is based on Russian clerical texts, the highly lyrical musical expressions transcend the Russian styles of sacred music known during Tchaikovsky’s times. The work marked the emergence of an independent and self-sufficient new style, which might be termed the sacred-Romantic choral concerto. This innovation in Russian choral music paved the way for a new generation of composers – and among them was Nikolai Golovanov.

Nikolai Golovanov, *Flame of Love*

The former director of Moscow’s Bolshoi Theater, Golovanov kept his sacred compositions hidden; they were first discovered after the Soviet Union’s fall and published in 2004. Golovanov’s sacred compositions astound us with their subtlety, expressiveness, and depth of feeling.

Sir John Tavener, *Svyati*

Sir John Tavener, one of the most important classical composers of our time, burst onto the scene in 1989 with *The Protecting Veil*, for cello and string orchestra. According to Tavener, *The Protecting Veil* is a sort of icon in sound, inspired by a Mother of God icon. Throughout Tavener’s life, spirituality became an increasingly important part of his music. The composer joined the Russian Orthodox church in 1977. The ancient church style of singing called *znamenny* chant inspired his choral works, and *Svyati* is a prime example.

In Tavener's own words: “I began to write *Svyati* in early 1995: while sketching it, I learned that John Williams, father of Jane, my dear friend and publisher, was dying. I could not refrain from

dedicating it to Jane and to the memory of her father. The text is in Church Slavonic, and it is used at almost every Russian Orthodox service... The cello represents the Priest or Ikon of Christ... As in Greek drama, choir and priest are in dialogue with each other. Since the cello represents the Ikon of Christ, it must be played without any sentiment of a Western character, but should derive from the chanting of the Eastern Orthodox Church.”

Sergei Taneyev, *John of Damascus*

Sergei Taneyev dedicated the cantata *John of Damascus* to the memory of Nikolai Rubinstein. Rubinstein was the founder and first director of the Moscow Conservatory, which opened in 1866. A prominent public figure, brilliant pianist, conductor, and composer, Rubinstein became a recognized leader in Moscow’s classical music scene at just 24 years old. Tchaikovsky described him as “honest in the highest sense of the word, exceedingly sincere and incorruptibly rigorous in his approach to the arts.” The premature, sudden death of Nikolai Rubinstein in the spring of 1881 was a severe blow to all who knew and loved him, especially the musicians who revered him. Tchaikovsky dedicated his *Piano Trio in A Minor* (for piano, violin, and cello) to Rubinstein with the subtitle, “In memory of a great artist.” For both Tchaikovsky and Taneyev, the tragic death of their friend and mentor was a great personal calamity.

The three part cantata *John of Damascus*, composed in 1883-84, is also known as *A Russian Requiem*. The cantata weaves a dense musical tapestry around an ancient Russian church chant, *Give Rest, O Christ*. It serves as the introduction and is also repeated in the third movement's fugue. This cantata became not only one of Taneyev’s most notable works but also one of the pinnacles of Russian classical choral music. The composer’s masterful use of counterpoint led many musicologists to compare him to J.S. Bach himself.

Translated by Maria Bromberg