

NOTES FROM THE CONDUCTOR

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translated by Rebecca Stanton

The musical culture of St. Petersburg is inseparable from the unique history of that great city. The unusual destiny of St. Petersburg (and of its aliases, Petrograd, Leningrad, and “Piter”) has exerted its influence not only over Russia, but over the rest of humanity as well.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represented a break in Russia’s history: new aesthetic and social ideas jostled with old modes of thinking. Deep transformations were taking place in religion and church singing, as well; the influence of Western European culture was making itself increasingly felt. Via Ukraine, the *partesny* style of singing (choral singing in parts) came to Russia, supplanting the monodic chant style known as *znamenny* (i.e., singing by *znaki*, or signs). The reforms of Peter I (“the Great”) and the “window to Europe” that he opened led to the expansion of Russia’s borders and the creation of the Empire. The creative spirit introduced by this unusual Tsar, amplified into a previously unheard-of appetite for knowledge and enlightenment, created the atmosphere of a great national and spiritual ascent, which naturally led to a rush of development in the arts, including music.

A popular form of music-making at that epoch consisted of part-songs, sacred or secular in content, known as *kanty*. This genre, born in Poland in the sixteenth century, spread to Belarus, Ukraine and Russia over the next two hundred years, reaching its peak in the mid-eighteenth century. At first chiefly a vehicle for sacred, but non-liturgical songs, it gradually won a wider audience. In the texts and melodies one can discern Ukrainian and Belarusian influences, along with elements of the Russian *znamenny* chant and the folk song. The thematic content also evolved, with Biblical texts such as the Song of Songs and the Psalms the first to inspire unknown composers, and later the appearance of patriotic *kanty*, which were sometimes performed with wind instruments and formed an official part of the court ceremonies marking important state events or military victories. Some were especially composed in honor of Peter I; the first two pieces on today’s program are examples of this subgenre.

In 1711, Peter issued a special *ukaz* concerning the formation of military orchestras. These orchestras were also to be responsible for performing at court festivals, playing dance music in the streets of Petersburg, and accompanying balls and masquerades. Performances atop the towers of the Admiralty and the Peter and Paul Fortress were especially successful. At the same time, domestic music-making was on the rise. Members of the Russian aristocracy learned to play the flute, violin, and harpsichord. Military and maritime songs grew popular among a broad swath of the populace. Dance genres, especially the minuet, became favorite musical forms for the creation of *kanty* on the theme of love. (Curious to note, even the military and patriotic *kanty* were largely composed in triple meter.) Historical, elegiac, lyric, satirical and comic *kanty* grew very popular, in part because their authors were also famous poets, such as Trediakovsky, Lomonosov and Sumarokov. The lofty philosophical poetry of **Mikhail Lomonosov** exerted a great influence over the style of *kanty* of the 1750s. We can conjecture that many of these were the work of a single composer, since they appear to be united by a common musical style. The third piece on today’s program, *The Day Hides Its Face*, is one of these, and the especial inner beauty of its style is still accessible to us today.

As if attracted by new possibilities, gifted individuals possessed by the idea of cultural creation and the striving for moral perfection appeared on the scene, often mixing state service with art and enlightenment. (This Russian tradition continued right up until the 1917 Revolution.) Among the many, we must single out **Alexander Sumarokov**, whose works helped to define the subsequent direction of Russian professional art. Deeply affected by the moral imperfection of his contemporaries, this poet is still relevant today. The patriotic theme, love lyrics, satire and humor were his main spheres of production. A particular feature of his poetic world was the striving toward and summons to Beauty: “Drink your fill, ye sons of Russia, of those sweet streams/From which Greece drank.” This phrase strikes us as surprisingly contemporary in the setting of **Yuri Shibanov’s** *Ode* on texts by Sumarokov (1967). As a prism reveals the spectrum in a beam of light, Shibanov’s composition, small in size but profound in content, reveals the full brilliance of Sumarokov’s poetry in all its “multicoloredness,” and hence captures the inimitable color-scheme of thoughts and feelings characteristic of his contemporaries. The acoustic palette of this score represents a stylization of the music of the eighteenth century, not only in the sense of melody, harmony and rhythm, but also in the orchestration – an ensemble of wind instruments and percussion (symbolizing the military, triumphal and patriotic spirit of the Petrine epoch), heard together with the “aristocratic” sound of the harpsichord.

Foreign performers exercised a strong influence over the development of the Russian musical tradition. For example, in the year 1721 an ensemble of German musicians performed a series of chamber music concerts in St. Petersburg, playing a program of music by Corelli, Telemann, and others. Works began to appear in which music was considered not just in the context of church singing, but as an independent, and indispensable, social and aesthetic phenomenon.

Another important sign of the new era was the development of the theater. For the first time in Russian history, drama became accessible to a wide circle of spectators. By special order of Peter I, young Russians received training in the troupe of the German entrepreneur Johann Kunst. Soon, domestic and scholastic theater were developing in Russia, and along with them, the genre of theatrical music. The first tiny steps towards what would become Russian opera were essayed.

Despite the sudden increase in the influence of Western culture at this time, the Russian Orthodox tradition continued to move in its own direction. Mixed choirs and singing in parts gradually replaced the all-male monodic chant, but because of the strict schedule of chants in eight “tones” that governed the weekly and yearly cycles of church singing, a special style of choral polyphony developed that was based on those chants. The **103rd Psalm (Greek chant, Tone I)** in the arrangement of **Nikolai Tcherepnin**, is an example in which the composer has not composed the melody, but rather reworked the traditional chant using the methods for developing musical material that were current in his time.

One of the greatest musical creators of the post-Petrine period was **Dmitry Bortnyansky**, a Ukrainian by birth, called by a poet “The Orpheus of the River Neva.” Bortnyansky was not only a uniquely talented composer but also one who deeply understood the vocal art. Thanks to his mastery, the Court Cappella, of which he became the director in 1779, reached such a high level that Berlioz named it one of the best choirs in the world. In the course of his efforts to advance church music, Berlioz created the genre of the “Sacred Concerto,” an *capella* choral form. The musical language of this genre does not exactly belong to traditional church singing. In these “concertos,” Bortnyansky continues the development of

the Western *partesny* style and the tradition of religious *kanty* in which the music was composed freely, not connected to the traditional chants used in the church. Despite their independence from the tradition, however, the “Sacred Concertos” gained enormous popularity within the Orthodox church and remain a beloved part of the Orthodox musical canon to this day.

The style of the “Sacred Concertos” is often referred to as “Russian Baroque,” but it is worth noting that the “Russian” part of the equation is chiefly palpable in the manner of singing, which differs from the Western choral style. The Italian *bel canto* style of singing permeated Russian performance practice to such an extent (particularly through the burgeoning of Russian opera in the 19th century) that it also affected the character of Russian church singing. The result is a “deeper” vocal position, a higher timbral contrast between “light” and “dark” voices (soprano vs. alto, tenor vs. bass), the use of vibrato, and a vivid emotional expressiveness.

Through the works of Russian composers, and especially of the so-called “Mighty Handful,” national principles of composition were developed: an elevated sphere; the striving toward a pure, spiritual love by overcoming one’s own imperfections (**Dargomyzhsky**, *Prayer*); the summons to enlightenment and the negation of vice and ignorance through humor and satire (**Stravinsky**, *Mushrooms* and **Musorgsky**, *The Flea*); artistic reflection on the personal and political dramas underlying Russian history (**Musorgsky**, *Boris Godunov*). The fairy-tale component of Russian folk culture, with its enchanting and beautiful imaginary realms, found expression in works such as **Rimsky-Korsakov’s** *The Snow Maiden* and **Glinka’s** *Ruslan and Ludmila*.

The entire *oeuvre* of the Petersburg composers is permeated by the spirit of Russian folk music, but Musorgsky and especially Stravinsky probably delved into this genre most deeply. The latter’s *Four Russian Peasant Songs* resemble a simple recording of the Slavic folk sound. This folk genre, the *podbliudnaia* or “saucer” song, was associated with the fortune-telling rituals and games performed by young girls at Yuletide. Items drawn from a saucer could help the young girl foretell her fate: riches or poverty, joy or hardship, an imminent wedding or a long spinsterhood, a young husband or an old one, and so on. The mythical characters of Koliada and Ovsen were supposed to bring the peasants a good harvest and domestic happiness. We perform these songs in the traditional Slavic folk style. — **N. KACHANOV**