

PROGRAM NOTES

by Nikolai Kachanov

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In the first half of today's program, RCCNY explores the parallels and contrasts between early sacred music of Russia and Western Europe. Despite the dissimilarities between the two traditions -- for example, they were based in different tonalities, written in different notation systems, and designed for different vocal styles -- they share a common source and influence, the musical culture of Byzantium. In Russia, the process of creating a distinctive national style of church singing got underway in the 12th to 16th centuries, producing a style of liturgical chant that was notated with a system of special signs known as *znamia*, from which we get the term "Znamenny chant." This style of chant is represented by the first two pieces on the program: *To Thee I Call, O Lord* and *I Cry to the Lord, Hear Me!* in Tone 8, which are juxtaposed with the Gregorian chant *Rorate caeli desuper* ("Drop Dew, You Heavens, From Above") in Dorian mode.

The Western equivalent of the monophonic Znamenny chant appeared in the Roman repertory of the 5th and 6th centuries (it should be remembered that Russia did not adopt Christianity until the 10th century, hence the discrepancy in timing), and was named "Gregorian" after Pope Gregory I, to whom its development was credited. Like the Slavic Znamenny chant, Gregorian chant seems to have begun as aural music, i.e. transmitted by ear and committed to memory. Both styles underwent changes and revisions, especially after methods for writing them down were adopted; official musicologists "corrected" the melodies recorded in the manuscripts.

The *Great Litany* and *Today Hath the Grace of the Holy Spirit* are little-known examples of the early Russian linear polyphony of the 16th-17th centuries. Their original, and to a modern ear unusual and unexpected, dissonances have roots in the Russian folk tradition. Characteristic of this style is the complete independence of the respective vocal lines, each of which retains its own melodic individuality. That is because these chants were not "composed" in the modern sense of the word, but were created by putting together independent melodic lines resulting in the unusual polyphonic sound effect. The style of performing was very different from the Western vocal tradition; the unique Slavic so-called "continuous style" was sung in a "gliding" manner in which traditionally, singers were able to create variations to the melodic line in live performing. In comparison, the individual notes in Gregorian chant are separated slightly from each other when sung. I call this effect "digitalization."

Although this style of singing eventually disappeared from church practice, giving place to new traditions, it continues to interest contemporary scholars and performers such as RCCNY.

Who Shall Separate Us from the Love of God? represents the genre of Russian sacred music known as the Partesny Concerto, which appeared in the late 17th-early 18th century. In contrast to Russian linear polyphony, the Partesny Concerto is constructed on the Western European diatonic scale. It arrived in Russia via Ukraine and Poland during the era of reforms by Peter the Great and Patriarch Tikhon, and was destined to play an important role in the development of Russian professional music. The most important thing about this music is the completely new principle of creating a polyphonic work of art—real musical *composition*, as opposed to a layering of pre-existing church melodies.

Palestrina, Lassus, and Victoria, whose lives were roughly contemporaneous with the early Russian linear polyphony profiled above, were the chief representatives of Renaissance polyphony in the West. The motets we have selected to perform today represent the most prized features of the vocal music of this era: sincerity of expression and a perfect equilibrium among their various melodic elements.

To conclude the first part of our concert we will perform Alexei Haieff's "Come Let Us Sing Praise," a movement from his choral cycle *Holy Week*, based on Znamenny chants from traditional Russian Orthodox Easter services. The meaning and ingenuity of these pieces lie in Haieff's rejection of the attempts made in the 18th and 19th centuries to harmonize the ancient Russian church chants in "poor arrangements," thus denying the unique nature of Znamenny chant. Haieff is the first composer, in or outside Russia, to attempt to resurrect the original chants and texts and to set them for a choir without, in his words, "squaring the rhythm, fattening the harmony where it never belongs." In contrast to Romantic composers, and to Haieff's credit, he did not allow his individual style to dominate the pieces. Haieff's method is strong and simple, and entirely subordinated to bringing out the textual, structural, tonal, and rhythmical peculiarities of Znamenny chant.

The second half of the concert opens with *Benevolence*, a five-part choral cycle I composed on texts by Russian painter/writer/poet Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947). Roerich's cycle of verses, *Flame in Chalice* (1929), like most of his diverse body of work, was inspired by Eastern wisdom, and reflects a universal spirituality.

For *Benevolence*, I developed a special 5-tone progression, designed to express an Eastern, meditative quality. The entire composition -- especially the third movement, "Trails"--rests on the elements of that scale. The main musical idea of the cycle is the attempt to interweave some elements of Eastern and Western musical techniques, including improvisation, minimalism, polyphony, instrumental imitation, and harmonic singing using overtones and undertones.

"Reflections on Stanzas in H.P. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*" is a musical poem for chorus, piano, and synthesizers, which I wrote in response to reading the "Seven Stanzas from the Book of Dzyan" included in the first volume of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's monumental book, *The Secret Doctrine*. Through Blavatsky's writings, I was able to glimpse some global knowledge about the

creation of the Universe. "Reflections..." is performed as a single movement, but within it are discernible sections, reflecting the different stages of creation described in Blavatsky's *Cosmogony*. Of course, I in no way pretend to have created an "objective" musical incarnation of this awe-inspiring and enigmatic document -- but I have tried to use my musical imagination to communicate the sense of wonder that I experienced when I read it. The introductory section of the piece is built on the overtone series, which contains infinite possibilities for different sound combinations, all of which, however, are "born" from a single fundamental sound. It is a perfect illustration of the main concept of the *Cosmogony* -- the birth of the entire universe, with its infinite variety of forms, from a single source. This Source, imperceptible and ungraspable by the human intellect, may be compared to the silence from which are born all audible sounds.