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Russian Chamber Chorus to Bridge Celebrated Poets Shakespeare and Pushkin in Concert

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NEW YORK—What do Shakespeare and Pushkin have in common?

Despite the fact that they were writing in places far from each other and centuries apart, both were poets who have tremendously impacted their respective languages and cultures. They were some of the great creators of humanity and brothers in spirit, says choral conductor Nikolai Kachanov, artistic director and founder of the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York (RCCNY).

Words take center stage in choral music, as they do in the work of poets—and Pushkin and Shakespeare have greatly shaped the use of words in their respective languages.

Alexander Pushkin was a poet in the Romantic era (two centuries after Shakespeare's death) and considered by many to be the greatest Russian poet and founder of modern Russian literature. He, like many Russians, adored Shakespeare, Kachanov said. Pushkin famously wrote, "[Shakespeare] was the creator of an entire humanity. After God, Shakespeare is the greatest creator of living beings."

On Jan. 12 and 14, at the Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, RCCNY will bridge the works of Shakespeare and Pushkin in concert. Kachanov has created a program including a Shakespeare sonnet set to music by a Russian composer and another set by an Estonian composer; "Three Shakespeare Songs" by English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams; and poems by Pushkin set to music by Russian and American composers alike. Kachanov feels it will be at once familiar and new.

Kachanov wanted to show how the genius of these two poets and the variety of responses artists from different cultures and backgrounds could have to their work.

Kachanov's wife, Tamara, who co-founded RCCNY, has been a singer with the choir from the beginning. Learning these poems and understanding them through the music has been a kaleidoscopic and enriching experience, she said.

"You feel this connection with the poets," she said. "You understand how the word gets its life from sound."

Connecting Cultures Through Music

The Kachanovs formed RCCNY in 1984 at a time when the Iron Curtain was still intact and no choirs toured from the Soviet Union to the United States.

When the family came to New York in 1981, Kachanov had a mission for musical freedom on his mind. He'd studied voice and choral conducting and earned a doctorate in the Soviet Union, throughout that time, sacred music was prohibited by the state, Kachanov explained. Huge portions of his culture, this beautiful sacred music, were banned, but he believed it should be shared.

At that time, Kachanov realized only a very narrow portion of the Russian choral music repertoire was being performed, and only in churches, so with RCCNY he sought to expand the choral listener's idea of Russian music.

RCCNY became the first to perform the entirety of the liturgies written by the great Russian composers Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. The group branched out and performed sacred and secular music alike, with the mission of sharing Russia's rich heritage through underexposed works, and it became known for its interesting repertoire and praised for its musicianship.

But seeing Russia's relations with its neighboring countries, Kachanov felt he needed to branch out even more in order to bridge cultures. He started creating programs pairing the music of Russia with that of Ukraine, Estonia, Israel, the Balkans, India, and so on. Kachanov said he wanted to show that all cultures have value and a sense of togetherness through music, and that there are parallels and crossings between different cultures.

The concert of works by Shakespeare and Pushkin seeks to do the same. By putting side by side the works of these brothers in spirit, Kachanov says he wants to illuminate how similar our values are around the world.

Music is a language that communicates straight from the hearts and minds of people, Kachanov said.

Program

Settings of poems by Shakespeare:

Frank Lewin, "Wedding Is Great Juno's Crown"

Evelin Seppar, Sonnet No. 53

Yuri Yukechev, Sonnet No. 30 (World Premiere)

Ralph Vaughan Williams, "Three Shakespeare Songs"

Settings of poems by Pushkin:

Vissarion Shebalin, "Winter Road"

Georgy Sviridov, "Three Poems by Pushkin"

Mikhail Zeiger, "Poet-Prophet"