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THE VOICE OF RUSSIA IN AMERICA (excerpts)
The Russian Chamber Chorus of New York

By Irina Medvedeva

The Russian Chamber Chorus of New York, under the direction of Nikolai Pavlovich Kachanov, has been in existence for more than twenty years. The chorus performs in the best concert halls in the United States, has earned love and recognition from audiences and the international music elite, and has received high praise in the country's musical circles. Through its creative work, the chorus popularizes Russian choral arts in America and owes much to the Russian singing tradition.

Nikolai Pavlovich Kachanov was born in Barnaul, Siberia. He graduated from Novosibirsk Conservatory and sang in the Novosibirsk Chamber Choir under the direction of Boris Pevsner. In 1981 Kachanov began living and working in the United States, where he founded the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York. Kachanov is also a composer, having written the a capella choral cycle *Benevolence*, a setting of the poetry of Nicholas Roerich, and the musical poem *Reflections on Stanzas from the Book of Dzyan*, for chorus, piano, two trumpets, and synthesizers. In 2003 he produced a compact disc, *The Call*.

The Museum of Musical Culture [in Moscow] received a gift of three recordings of sacred music from Nikolai Pavlovich. We were captivated by the group's high artistic achievement and very much wanted the chorus to be known in Russia. The recordings included compositions by Tchaikovsky: *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* and *All-Night Vigil*, and two cantatas by Yuri Yukechev: *My Heart is Ready* and *By Candlelight*, dedicated to Boris Pevsner.

The conductor recalls: "From the time the chorus was founded, the singers have come from all faiths and have been genuinely interested in Russian music. In the last few years, immigrants from Russia have begun to join the chorus. In an administrative sense the chorus is semiprofessional, because some of the singers are fully professional musicians. We accept only amateur singers who are musically trained, can sight-read music, and are experienced in ensemble singing. Currently the chorus is made up of about thirty singers, but if we perform pieces that require a larger chorus, like a cantata or an opera, we invite additional singers."

The beginning was not easy: the chorus was unknown, experienced singers were not happy about singing next to beginners, and often music scores were not available. "We couldn't bring along our music library from the Soviet Union, and at that time even staying connected with our friends and colleagues in the Soviet Union was difficult. Despite the many obstacles, I dreamed of creating a Russian choir out of concern that the authentic Russian choral tradition was not known here. And thanks to the support of friends and lovers of Russian choral singing, and especially my wife Tamara, who devoted herself to managing the choir and participated as a singer all these years, my dream came true. And the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York was born!"

He continues: "In those early years I was distraught that I could not find compositions of my contemporaries, especially music by Georgy Sviridov. Imagine how I felt, working for a few years with

the Russian choir in New York and not being able to share with the singers the choral musical treasures that my culture prides itself on. Then, once, I appeared on a Voice of America radio broadcast where I expressed passionately my deep regret that these scores were not available to me and how happy I would be to perform Sviridov's music if I had them. By a miraculous concurrence of circumstances, both Vladimir Minin [conductor of the Moscow Chamber Chorus], who was somewhere in the south of Russia at that time, and Georgy Sviridov in Moscow listened to that broadcast from Washington, DC! Later, Georgy Vasilievich [Sviridov] sent the scores for his choral pieces through Vladimir Nikolayevich Minin, among them the score for his *Kursk Songs*. In this unique score the composer arranged with great care and love the folk music of the Kursk region, which is marvelous."

The New York Times has emphasized more than once that the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York was the first group to introduce Russian sacred music to American audiences. Listeners were astonished to hear ancient chants, early linear polyphony, and sacred works by Tchaikovsky (the chorus was the first to perform his *Vespers* in New York in 1991) and Rachmaninoff, whose sacred compositions were re-introduced to the American audiences through their performances.

"It's hard to believe that about twenty years ago, when our choir first performed Rachmaninoff's choral pieces, he was widely known as a great concert pianist, yet Sergey Vasilievich's choral pieces were practically unheard of in New York. Today his *All-Night Vigil* and *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* enhance the programs of the best choirs in our city. I hope a similar fate awaits the liturgical compositions of other Russian composers that our choir continues to bring to New York audiences."

The Russian Chamber Chorus participated in the American premiere of Tchaikovsky's *Ode to Joy* and premiered his cantata *Nature and Love*. The chorus premiered Gretchaninoff's *Liturgia Domestica* in America. Among its American premieres have been works by Bortnyansky, Mussorgsky, Taneev, Chesnokov, Kastalsky, Nikolsky, Sviridov, Murov, Kalistratov, Yukechev and Shibanov. It presented world premieres of choral music by Aleksey Haieff, Feliksas Bayoras, Efrem Podgaitz, Zachar Blyakher, Vladimir Ryabov, Viktor Kopitsko and Michael Zeiger.

Kachanov writes program notes for every concert, including historical musical references for the works being performed. This information allows the listeners to acquaint themselves better with the unfamiliar music—making the booklets, in effect, into educational brochures.

One of the concert programs, entitled "Mystical Journey" (2003), which was sold out as are many of the chorus's performances, was like a musical trip from ancient chants to harmonic singing, allowing the listener to follow a unique connection between different eras and cultures. The artistic director created the "journey" to take the listener from znameny and Gregorian chants to contemporary compositions. Ancient chants of Russia and Western Europe, znameny and Gregorian chants, and examples of Russian linear polyphony took their places beside the polyphonic compositions of Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso. The chorus also performed world premieres of music by Nikolai Kachanov.

The following year's concert program, "Mystical Journey II," included music of Aleksey Vasilievich Haieff (1914-1994), who was born in Russia, in Blagoveshchensk, and whose fate epitomizes that of many Russian ÈmigrÈs. After the revolution his family ended up in Harbin [China], and in 1931 Aleksey came to the States. The young Haieff met Rachmaninoff and took lessons from Konstantin Shvedov, rounding out his education at the Juilliard Conservatory in piano and composition, at the Paris Conservatory, and at the Music Academy in Rome. He was a student and a friend of Nadia

Boulanger and a close friend of Igor Stravinsky.

“In my meeting with Aleksey Vasilievich, we felt mutual trust and sympathy toward one another. The composer was very glad that I immediately valued his *Holy Week*, which is based on znameny chant. I remember how surprised I was and asked him, ‘How is it possible that nobody has performed this highly remarkable work?’ He answered that he had not yet come across a musician who could appreciate the peculiarities of this piece.

“You know that in those years the American listener’s perception of Russian choral music was based on the popular Soviet recordings of the songs and dances of the Red Army and in part on the performances by the Cossack Choir under the direction of Sergey Jaroff; not to mention the ever-popular song “Dark Eyes,” what some might call the epitome of Russian vocal music! All of this is fine and good, but how would you find a place in this for znameny chant, which in those years had a hard time being heard even in Russia! Aleksey Vasilievich gave me the score, and the chorus performed parts of it at our first opportunity. He was very satisfied, and as we planned to prepare the premiere of the second part, *Easter*, the composer unexpectedly passed away. My research into *Easter* and the restoration of the score took me several years. But that is a story for another time. The premiere of the piece took place after the composer’s death—a typical Russian tale!

“The Russian Chamber Chorus took part in the American premiere of Sergei Taneev’s operatic trilogy *Oresteia*. On June 16, 2004 we performed the first part, *Agamemnon*, at Carnegie Hall. This project was championed by Peter Tiboris, general and artistic director of MidAmerica Productions, who since the founding of this company has presented some 150 concerts in New York, Washington DC, Vienna, London, Prague, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Warsaw. More than 50 concerts were performed in Carnegie Hall. In June 2000 the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York took part in the American premiere of the concert version of the opera *Elektra* by Mikis Theodorakis, conducted by Tiboris in Carnegie Hall.”

In speaking about Tiboris, Kachanov emphasizes: “He loves Russian music very much and considers Taneev a genius. He pays special attention to bringing to light unknown works or undeservedly forgotten works. When he invited me to take part in *Agamemnon*, which is the first part of *Oresteia*, I realized that with all my love for Taneev I was not familiar with the opera. Very few musicians have had the opportunity to open the score and realize they are dealing with the work of a genius, and it’s an even greater opportunity to get to prepare such a piece for performance. Taneev remains a mysterious figure in the history of Russian music. It looks like the time has come for Taneev’s greatest work, the full *Oresteia* trilogy, finally to be performed. According to the insightful remarks by the prominent musicologist Vladimir Zak, this work is the Russian *Ring of the Nibelung*.”

In February 2003 the Russian Chamber Chorus participated in a Carnegie Hall concert with the Czech Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Vladimir Ashkenazy. The theme of the two-concert series was *Music and Dictatorship: Russia under Stalin*. Nikolai Kachanov remembers: “The text in Dmitry Dmitriyevich Shostakovich’s 13th Symphony was performed with a small but substantively important change. Prior to the concert I received a telephone call from the author of the text, Evgeny Yevtushenko, who asked me to replace a few lines that he explained were written ‘under pressure’ and that have gnawed at him all his life. Dmitry Shostakovich knew about this, but hoped that there would come a time when the text could be corrected. One needs to point out that just a few lines can sometimes affect the meaning and change the tone of an entire section of a symphony, to such a degree that I immediately got in touch with Ashkenazy, who agreed to the changes, and the symphony was

performed with this new variation for the very first time. At the start of the performance Yevtushenko read his poem passionately and with great success, in Russian and in English. In the same concert we performed Sergei Prokofiev's *Zdravitsa* with the original text about Stalin, which of course attracted special interest from the listeners."

This was the fifth time that the Russian Chamber Chorus appeared at Carnegie Hall, following the chorus's appearance in the *Antiformalist Rayok* with the Moscow Virtuosi under the direction of Vladimir Spivakov; a jubilee gala concert commemorating the 850th anniversary of Moscow; and a performance with the American-Russian Youth Orchestra (ARYO), under the direction of Leon Botstein (Carnegie Hall and Tanglewood).

In 2001 the Russian Chamber Chorus took part in the Worldwide Festival of Sacred Music organized by American composer Philip Glass at the prompting of the Dalai Lama.

Nikolai Kachanov said: "In April 2005 the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York was invited to take part in a performance of Gustav Mahler's *Second Symphony*, under the direction of Valery Gergiev (soloists: Irina Mataeva and Olga Borodina) with the Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra and the Riverside Choral Society. I must say that for me this concert had special meaning. That is because when we started the chorus our main goal was to build a 'cultural bridge' between our nations and here at last we have a shining example of Russian-American artistic collaboration. I could not ask for a better gift! On top of that the concerts were a rousing success."

In September 2005 the chorus was invited to perform at the opening of the famous exhibition of Russian art at the Guggenheim Museum. Kachanov told us, "I tried to find a program that would match the paintings in the exhibition. We sang sacred music by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Gretchaninoff, and folk songs arranged by Kalistratov, Rubtsov, and Kachanov."

When we met with Nikolai Pavlovich in May of this year, he told me about the concert in March, *Russian and American Music: Parallels and Crossings*. "It's like a bouquet of bright spring flowers connecting Russian and American styles of music. With great joy and inspiration we sang compositions from different countries, what are called world classics. But Russia! There's an unforgettable sense of the homeland... In New York, I found my second home and I have grown both personally and musically. And for me, the ability to help an American composer to bring a piece of beauty into the world colors my life." The concert program included Tchaikovsky's *Let My Prayer Arise* and his cantata, *Nature and Love*; *Chorale* by Yukechev was performed next to *Adagio for Strings* by Barber (choral arrangement by Kachanov). "Choral music by Yukechev and Barber has a common source—the human heart," remarked the conductor. A choral cycle by Sarah Dawson, *Possibility*, was commissioned by Kachanov. The concert ended with *Antiformalist Rayok* by Shostakovich.

Those who live outside the United States must wait to get acquainted with compositions by Nikolai Pavlovich Kachanov: his choral cycle *Benevolence* and *Reflections on Stanzas from the Book of Dzyan*, the poem for chorus, piano, two trumpets, and synthesizers. Until then, we quote Anna Laskova, the chorus's chronicler and a graduate of the Novosibirsk and Moscow Conservatories: "The cycle *Benevolence* is based on a special scale that has an eastern, meditative timbre and color. The composer, who possesses an outstanding knowledge of the possibilities of choral interpretation, uses a slowly evolving, meditative melodic development and a constantly pulsing rhythm...[with] imitations and an intense choral tutti. You can hear the transparently colorful women's voices and the harmonic effects and unusual timbre of throat singing in the men's voices. To be specific, this singing means harmonics

are added to the fundamental throat sound. This unusual double-voice throat sound performed by one singer probably had its beginnings in ancient pagan rituals, and Nikolai, born in the Altai region, picked up the singing method from the people of Altai and Tuva.”

The Russian Chamber Chorus of New York has a large and friendly following in the American and Russian press. It is acclaimed highly by music critics and musicologists. But the primary goal of the chorus—to make Russian music known to American audiences and encourage its performance by American choirs—has a meaning beyond just the boundaries of the concert hall. The Russian Chamber Chorus of New York helps disseminate Russian culture and thought to the hearts of people who live far away from Russia. And this draws people closer to us, thus building goodwill.