

Holiday Splendor from Russia and Ukraine

Notes on the Program

by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

Our program is dedicated to the memory of our beloved singer Alexandra (Alya) Tregubov, who was among the most gifted and dedicated members of our choir. The concert program includes some of her favorite songs. We miss Alya very much, and the memory of her will always be deep in our hearts.

Part I

Many of the RCCNY's programs have been devoted to the history of Russian sacred music, and this program is no exception. We were among the first groups in the world to begin performing ancient Russian church music. Our first concert in December of 1984, when Russian sacred music was still banned in the Soviet Union, was devoted to this genre. For over 30 years, we have included such early styles as the *znamenny* chant and *partesny* concertos in our programs. Today's concert features works from some of the most fascinating turning points in the historical development of Russian sacred music. The first part of our program follows the trajectory of Russian musical culture from the earliest polyphonic works to the birth of the Russian classical sacred concerto, owing to the fruitful influence of Bortnyansky and Berezovsky, two brilliant Ukrainian composers who received their musical education in Italy.

Early Russian polyphony

The concert opens with a set of works showcasing the genre of Early Russian Polyphony from the 17th century, a form steeped in distinctly Slavic tonality that sets the stage for the concert. These pieces will sound quite unusual, yet together they illustrate the recognizable harmonic language shared by Russian music of that time. You will hear natural registers in the singers' voices, reminiscent of the style and sound of Russian folk singing. Early Russian polyphony later disappeared as a musical genre.

The birth of the choral concerto in Ukraine - historical context

The choral concerto genre emerged in the second half of the 17th century in Ukraine, where the influence of Western European art was prevalent due to Ukraine's historically close ties with Poland.

New styles of polyphony

The new style of polyphony that emerged in the 18th century is represented in our program by the work *Blessed Are They Whom Thou Hast Chosen*, by Maksym Berezovsky. You will hear a very different style of singing, typical of the classical Italian style of sound production. Maksym Berezovsky was the first Ukrainian composer to be recognized throughout Europe and the first of his countrymen to compose an opera, symphony, and a violin sonata. He was born in the city of Hlukhiv in 1754. The Ukrainian composer Dmitry Bortnyansky was born in the same city in 1751.

The miracle city of Hlukhiv

The Ukrainian city of Hlukhiv played a unique role in the country's cultural development, being a major center of Ukrainian culture, particularly with regard to music and the arts. Hlukhiv played a role of paramount importance in Russia's cultural development as well, not least because the city was located on the way between Kiev and Moscow. In 1730, Hlukhiv became the site of the first music school in Russia dedicated to training singers for the court chapel in St. Petersburg. A 1738 decree allowed for the creation of special choral music school. Students received training in disciplines such as 'Kievan' and 'partesny' singing styles, musical notation, four-part choral singing, and instruments including the violin, bandura and tymbaly (hammer dulcimer). Ten graduates were sent to St. Petersburg annually and in 1738, eleven of twelve graduates were posted in Moscow.

Berezovsky received his musical training in the Hlukhiv choral music school and continued his education in the Kiev Mohyla Academy. He was invited to join the imperial court chapel in St. Petersburg where in the late 1750s, he achieved success as a soloist with the Italian Capella in St. Petersburg (the palace chapel choir, which performed Italian operas, among other works). Berezovsky continued his musical education at the Bologna Philharmonic Academy in Italy, where he studied with the famous composer padre Giovanni Battista Martini. There, Berezovsky was recognized as an academic and composer and his name is recorded in the academy's honorary annals along with Mozart's, who studied with the same teacher and graduated from the same academy a year before Berezovsky. In 1774, Berezovsky returned to Russia and worked as a prolific composer in many styles of choral music. His highly professional compositional technique, combined with his inspired interpretation of Ukrainian folk music, produced extraordinary results.

The classical sacred concerto

Many 20th century works of Russian church music were composed in the Russian sacred concerto style as a complete musical form and are usually included in performances as individual musical movements. This genre reached its peak in the 20th century in works by such composers as Rachmaninoff, Grechaninov, Yaichkov, and Egorov who are represented in today's program. The compositions you will hear reflect the "golden days" of Russian church music, the time when many church choirs sang with a full-bodied sound ranging from light, high boys' voices to the lowest basso profundo.

We finish the first part of our program with two exceptional pieces by the celebrated Ukrainian composer Dmitri Bortnyansky who, together with Maksym Berezovsky, was a procreator of the classical Russian choral concerto genre: the *Cherubic Hymn No. 7* and the Christmas choral concerto *Coro per il Natale*, which we perform in its little-known original Italian version.

Part II

The second part of our program is dedicated to Ukrainian folk music, a central part of Ukraine's rich musical culture. Ukrainian folk music was a great source of inspiration for Ukrainian composers of the 18th and 19th centuries and continues to inspire modern composers. One such composer, Mykola Lysenko (1842-1912), laid the foundation for the development of a national classical style of musical composition in Ukraine. Lysenko composed operas and works for

symphony orchestra, piano and other instruments, as well as choral and vocal pieces based on Ukrainian texts. The famous title heroine's aria from the opera *Natalka Poltavka* by Lysenko is performed by Hanna Golodinskii, Ukrainian-American soprano, adding a unique Ukrainian national element to today's program.

Ukrainian Christmas carols occupy a special place in today's program. In my arrangements of these carols, I aimed to show that there are many beautiful folk melodies that deserve to be salvaged from obscurity. One of the most valuable modern works inspired by this style is *Two Carols* by the famous contemporary Ukrainian composer Lesia Dychko.

Today's concert is further enriched by the participation of the Russian Trio, an instrumental ensemble directed by Tamara Volskaya. The Trio will showcase the rich variety of Ukraine's beautiful folk genre with a performance of *Fantasia on Ukrainian Folk Songs* by the contemporary Russian composer Alexander Kholminov.

We are privileged to present the world premiere of *Christmas Song* by contemporary composer Mikhail Zeiger.

Our program will conclude with the traditional performance of the world-famous Ukrainian carol *Shchedryk*, otherwise known (in the West) as *Carol of the Bells*.