

Russian Christmas: Old and New

Notes on the Program

by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

A few words about today's program. The first part of the program is a collection of gems of Russian liturgical music of the "New Direction," which arose in the late 19th century, stemming from the work of Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky. At the heart of this new movement was the desire to revive the traditions of old Orthodox singing, which were lost in the middle of the 17th century. The blending of intonations of the early church chants with Russian folk songs, fresh harmonies of Russian romantic music, with its vibrant coloring and deep emotional expressiveness, created a new and original national sound of Russian sacred music. Representatives of the "New Direction" were Sergei Rachmaninoff, Aleksandr Kastalsky, Aleksander Grechaninov, Nikolai Golovanov, among others. #

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The Troparion of the Nativity by the contemporary Moscow composer Vladimir Belyaev opens our program today. It represents a vivid illustration of the idea of incorporating a genuine old church ascetic chant, which can be heard in the tenor solo with the surrounding voices, which are written with subtle romantic expression, reminiscent of fitting an old precious stone into a modern frame. #

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One of the brightest representatives of the "New Direction" movement was also the famous Pavel Chesnokov. You will hear the low bass (basso profundo) sound in his works. It is very interesting to note that Chesnokov divided the bass section into six separate groups, while traditional divisions are only two groups: baritones and basses. Those six divisions were: 1) baritones, 2) light basses, 3) strong basses 4) strong basses with good low register, 5) *oktavists* with medium range, power and soft sound, and 6) strong and deep *oktavists*. Groups 5 and 6 are considered basso profundos. #

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Alfred Schnittke - Three Sacred Hymns. Schnittke wrote this choral piece in the Russian Orthodox Church tradition, uncommon for this famous contemporary Russian composer. Schnittke's understanding of Russian sacred music allowed him to create a composition so in tune with the essence of the Russian Orthodox liturgy that it seems to transport the listener inside a Russian Orthodox cathedral. #

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The second part of the program comprises songs about Christmas festivities of the Slavic people. Such festivities included three elements: 1) church service, 2) singing of kolyadi (caroling) on Christmas Eve, and 3) fortune-telling. #

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Valery Kalistratov- three movements from the "Russian Concerto." #

Old East Slavic celebrations were similar to Ukrainian traditions. People sang kolyady on *Generous Eve* – or New Year's Eve, when the participants visited nearby houses, performing special congratulatory or praiseful repetitive incantations and in return received refreshments. Young girls visited only those houses where young men lived - potential suitors. Approaching the house, they stood under the window and "sang into him," to the one who lived in this house, a potential groom. Usually it was the girl this young man was fond of and to whom he would like to be married. #

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Four Ukrainian Carols (kolyadki).#

A Kolyadka is a traditional song sung in Eastern Slavic countries during Christmas holidays. In pre-Christian times, kolyadkas reflected people's notion about creation, natural phenomena and the structure of the world. With the advent of Christianity, the content of kolyadkas began to acquire the relevant religious meaning and features. Thus, now kolyadkas are now mostly Christmas carols which describe the birth of Jesus Christ.

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Four Peasant Songs#

Stravinsky said that these songs "were sung by the peasants while fortune-tellers read their fingerprints on the smoke-blackened bottoms of saucers." This fortunetelling could be performed by each girl alone or by a group of fortune-tellers. The folkloric genre of all fortunetelling has always been carefully guarded in the culture of the people, as a beautiful ritual connected to history, and having the ability to predict the future and filling the winter festivities with a special, mysterious and magical meaning that carries hope for a better future life.#