

Shakespeare and Pushkin in Choral Music

Notes on the Program

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

In the beginning, there was the word. This is true in choral music too! Our program, "Shakespeare and Pushkin in Choral Music," is dedicated to settings of works by two legendary poets who were born far apart in time and space, but whose all-encompassing spirits make them brothers of the soul.

Culture is a broad and subjective idea, and it is difficult to come to agreement on how to summarize a whole culture. However, the impact of literature can be judged more objectively. We could posit that a nation can be summed up by its literature. In that case, we might say that Shakespeare is Britain, Homer is Greece, Goethe is Germany, Shevchenko is Ukraine, and Pushkin is Russia.

Shakespeare and Pushkin are, respectively, the creators of the English and Russian literary languages. The works of these two great poets have inspired an incredible variety of choral music, which our program seeks to reflect.

The Russian term "Shakespeareanism" was coined to describe the Bard's special influence on Russia's arts and culture, where his works in turn were infused with flavors of the Russian national tradition. Although far fewer of Shakespeare's aphorisms are used in the Russian language compared to English, Shakespeare's authority in Russia's enlightened cultural spheres was equal to Pushkin's, who said of the English genius, "He was the creator of an entire humanity. After God, Shakespeare is the greatest creator of living beings." Of course, Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet, was also one of humanity's most profound creators, and his influence continues to this day.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The madrigal, a popular musical style in Elizabethan England, stems from the influence of such varied genres as folk singing, polyphonic church music, and the Renaissance-era Italian madrigal. "Wedding Is Great Juno's Crown," composed by Frank Lewin as incidental music for a staging of "As You Like It," is a bright, contemporary example of the madrigal style, capturing the musical environment that surrounded Shakespeare.

"Sonnet 30" was commissioned for this program by Siberian composer Yuri Yukechev, and you are hearing its world premiere. The composer used the style of classical Russian Romanticism to create this musical poem. The piece reflects a prevalent view in Russian culture that Shakespeare's sheer genius can be conveyed musically only in an elevated, classical style. Improvisation on the organ contributes to the emotional space of this work, a musical expression of the human yearning for loved ones who have passed into the realm of memory.

In "Sonnet 53", composer Evelin Seppar selected the first four lines, the most enigmatic part of this sonnet. In the composer's own words:

"In music it matters how to apply the text to it. I'm interested in words as such - their structure. I read a lot, especially poetry. The way writers build sentences out of units of ordinary, even banal words. One could draw a parallel to music: There are small repetitive units that form

sentences, and compositions. The composer doesn't create sound, the sound is there already. The amount of sounds is limited, but it's what composer do with sound.

"When I read text, it might happen that some of the best poetry or some sentence or a pair of words form a musical image in my head - an image of the music. This abstract figure is why texts are important to me. They give me the impulse to create. My approach to music is thus in a way an approach to text."

The mystical side of Shakespeare's art is illustrated in the dazzlingly vivid piece "Three Shakespeare Songs" by Ralph Vaughn Williams. These choral "moving pictures" conjure Shakespeare's sea-nymphs with their ringing in the ocean's depths, the enchanted formation and dissolution of dreamed worlds, and the flitting of elves and fairies.

Secular choral music is often inspired by poetry. In Russia, the flourishing of poetry prompted a similar rise in musical composition, bringing together artists in their aspiration to beauty. Pushkin's poetry was perhaps the greatest source of inspiration for most Russian composers. With his amazing ability to capture the sentiments and ideas of his time, Pushkin came closest to articulating one of the most mysterious aspects of the Russian soul: Russian melancholy.

In Pushkin's poem "Winter Road," out of 55 words, expressions referring to sorrow, melancholy, and dejection are used 16 times! Such melancholy is not an equivalent to our modern concept of depression, but rather a longing for transcendence, a magnificent mode of being, captured only partially by the language of art. The composer Shebalin was able to express musically the subtlest shades of one of Russian poetry's most precious gems in his work by the same title.

Alexander Pushkin has always been one of the main sources of Georgy Sviridov's inspiration. When Sviridov composed "Three Poems by Pushkin," he was inspired by their lyricism, humor, and philosophy. These "singing poems" immerse the listener in the unique atmosphere of Pushkin's poetic genius. Sviridov was only 19 years old when he wrote this cycle of romances set to Pushkin's verses, which has been recognized as one of the best compositions ever written to Pushkin's lyrics. Still, Sviridov's connection to Pushkin's poetry grew stronger. After "Three Poems," Sviridov went on to compose a series of musical illustrations to Pushkin's story "The Blizzard," followed in 1970 by his most notable composition on Pushkin's poetry, "Pushkin's Garland," a choral concerto. "Pushkin's Garland" was described by William Zagorski in FANFARE magazine: "Pushkin's Garland is a large-scale work in which 10 highly contrasted poems of the Russian Shakespeare (!) are masterfully set using a synergistic combination of traditional and modernistic harmonies, now and then a percussion ensemble with piano, and occasionally haunting offstage voices."

Translated by Maria Bromberg, edited by Laura Schlachtmeyer

The concert ends with Michael Zeiger's Poet- Prophet for choir, organ, and piano, with the composer himself as pianist. The composition was commissioned by RCCNY and received its world premiere in 2002.

The piece is based on a textual dialogue between a fragment from the Book of Isaiah (Is. 6:6-10) and Alexander Pushkin's famous poem, "The Prophet," a poetic meditation on the same passage (here, in the English translation by Babette Deutsch). The composer has chosen an exalted, declamatory tone for his musical interpretation of these texts, using sharp dissonances, jagged melodic lines in the choral parts, and an intricate interplay between organ and piano to convey the dramatic contours of the text. According to the composer, the solemnity of the Biblical prophecy forms the core of the artistic concept behind the piece.

Anna Laskova