

Russia and its Neighbors III: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

Notes on the Program

by Artistic Director Nikolai Kachanov

Today's program is the third in RCCNY's concert series dedicated to Russia and its neighbors. In the first part of the program, we explore Baltic choral music, represented by Arvo Pärt, from Estonia; Peteris Vasks, from Latvia; and Feliksas Bajoras, from Lithuania. The second part is devoted to music by Yuri Yukechev, from Russia. In the Baltic countries, choral music reflects many aspects of the nation's history and daily life. It is an important mode of expression, as well as a crowning accomplishment of national identity. The complexity, depth, and stylistic diversity of contemporary choral compositions in Baltic states have grown out of rich singing traditions, which flourished in spite of oppression under decades of Soviet rule.

According to Latvian composer Peteris Vasks, political struggles motivated composers to construct distinct musical identities. Exciting discoveries and groundbreaking compositional ideas drove an ongoing evolution that sustained their remarkable musical culture.

Arvo Pärt: *Salve Regina*

In this work, the composer demonstrates his impressive gift for musical development that bypasses "horizontal movement" and lifts us up to a higher sphere, where our own thoughts and feelings give way to heightened images, our sense of time disappears, and sounds reverberate with silence. We become a part of Pärt's inner world, a source of inspiration for both composer and audience. As Pärt once said, "Silence is always more perfect than music. We must learn to listen to silence."

Peteris Vasks: *Madrigal*

Latvian history and culture, as well as the natural beauty of his homeland, are important sources of inspiration for this composer. Distressed by the darkness and struggles in the world, he seeks to remind us in his music of the immortal soul. In *Madrigal*, Vasks combines elements of Western polyphony with modern compositional techniques, achieving exceptional expressiveness and depth.

Feliksas Bajoras: *The Great Mystery*

Lithuanian folk song has a significant influence on this composer's work. "The Great Mystery" is set to a poem by Jonas Zukauskas, a Lithuanian priest. In this composition, melody and phrasing are the equivalent of inflections in speech. Despite its outwardly minimalistic restraint, the composition is saturated with powerful spiritual meaning. The composer expresses the awestruck

trembling of a soul on the brink between life and death and the yearning for a higher sphere to bring the spirit to triumph “and the resurrection resounds in all the universe.”

Yuri Yukechev: *By Candlelight; O, Beauty*

The significance of Yukechev’s work in Russia’s contemporary musical landscape can hardly be overstated – he is a master of choral music. The cantata “*By Candlelight*” was composed in 1975 and given its American premiere by RCCNY in 1995. Its texts are united by a central idea: the stages of life correspond to the seasons of the year. The movements progress from childhood (Winter), through youth (Spring), adulthood (Summer), to old age (Autumn). The four sections are framed by a Prologue and Epilogue. It remains one of the preeminent examples of the development of Russian Romanticism in the 20th century in choral music. In this piece, deep philosophical significance is masterfully combined with vivid colors and a rich emotional palette.

"O, Beauty" from Yukechev’s cantata "Rubaiyat", is a setting of verses by Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), who was a Persian mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and poet. It is amazing how the composer uses exquisite musical means to express the Middle Eastern poetic flavor of Omar Khayyam’s poem about Beauty.