

# An Artistic Contest of Choral Conductors in the Name of Boris Tevlin

*By Nelly Souslova, Administration for Educational and Creative Programs of the Moscow Conservatory Office for Festivals, Competitions and Special Events*

Every year, all over the world, there are many choral festivals and competitions at different levels: for children and adults, for professional and amateur choirs. The best vocal groups get well-deserved recognition within these events, led by their conductors. The heights of the choral art can only be achieved through the daily hard work of the conductor and his choir over many, many years. While listening to the choir performances, the Jury evaluates the leaders' work; as in any competitive program, the skills of the choirmaster and the choristers appear as an indissoluble union.

Besides this, there are several other very important factors – financial, social and cultural. Let us ask ourselves a question; how often does fate offer a novice choirmaster the ideal circumstances in which to develop his talent? The answer is hardly positive. It is extremely difficult for a young conductor to organize a new choir when there are so many famous choirs with years of experience, traditions and awards. Although conductors change from generation to generation, waiting in the wings can nevertheless be quite long. And to achieve audience recognition for their talent, it is vitally important for young conductors to get an opportunity for professional self-development at the very beginning of their career.

It is this contradiction that led the Moscow Conservatory to

establish a new competitive format. In March 2014 the First International Boris Tevlin Competition of Choral Conductors was organized. Among the participants were young choirmasters – graduates and students of conservatories from many different countries. The competition was structured to reflect traditional classroom teaching of choral conducting. The contestants had to show their knowledge of choral scores with a piano accompaniment, as well as to demonstrate a choir rehearsal, with the participation of the Chamber Choir of the Moscow Conservatory. Thus, working with the same choir (one of the best in Moscow) all the contestants were on equal footing.

This choir needs a special mention. The Chamber Choir of the Moscow Conservatory was founded in 1995 by Boris Tevlin. Under his leadership the choir achieved worldwide recognition, received many prestigious awards and performed many premières. In 2012, when the great master passed away, his disciples and followers decided to name the competition after the Professor. It was his lifetime dream to establish such a professional contest for young conductors, and it was his creative ideas that formed the basis for the competition.



Boris Tevlin always had a very careful attitude to the classics, but he consistently and fearlessly promoted contemporary music as well. “I would prefer to avoid well-

trodden paths, and also, musical and composition techniques have changed substantially in the last sixty years and we must be able to perform the piece” – thus he explained his strong interest in the new repertoire. Many modern choral works were first performed under his leadership, and several of them were written especially for his choirs.

The contest organizers tried to introduce this organic synthesis of tradition and innovation into the competition program. Participants were required to submit both classic works by Brahms, Verdi, Taneyev, and Stravinsky and choral works by composers such as Agafonnikov, Barkauskas, Gubaidulina, Evgrafov, Kikta, Schnittke, Miskinis and Shchedrin. These last are contemporary composers, and many of them were able to attend the competition.

Being unable to lead the jury for health reasons, the composer Rodion Shchedrin sent his warm regards. At his request, the chairman of the jury was Russian choirmaster Lev Kontorovich, the Artistic Director and chief conductor of the Grand Academic Choir “Masters of Choral Singing”, also known as one of the best choirs in Russia.

The Lithuanian composer and choral conductor Vytautas Miskinis was one of the jury members along with representatives from other countries – Angela Morales (Costa Rica), Theodora Pavlovitch (Bulgaria), Cao Tongyi (China) and Gulmira Kuttybadamova (Kazakhstan). It is symbolic that many of these musicians studied with Professor Tevlin and are the direct heirs and successors of his school.

At the dawn of Boris Tevlin’s career the subtleties of choral conducting were revealed to him by Alexander Sveshnikov, during his postgraduate studies. Later Tevlin headed the Sveshnikov State Academic Choir. He continued to learn, as he would say, with his students. Boris Tevlin demanded the utmost precision and severe discipline from the future choirmasters. Perhaps that is why his disciples are renowned and employed

all over the world. He kept in touch with many of them and never denied them his help. He loved to say that the young are those who bear the inspiration and impetus for art. And it is these graduates of yesterday – now mature, wise and professionally experienced – who have taken up well-deserved places in the competition jury.

In addition to the two above-mentioned choirs, Tevlin headed a number of other groups over the years, including the Moscow Youth and Student Choir, the Mixed Choir of Conductors and Choirmasters and the Russian-American choir. People's Artist of Russia, the composer Alexander Tchaikovsky said: "All of his choirs, which he led and leads, have an absolute tonal accuracy, just perfect! Very clean! Probably, it is one of the most important bases of the choral art for him"... This absolutely focussed attention to choral intonation, which is critical in the performance of very complex modern music, was one of the criteria in the evaluation of the performances of the contestants. And, of course, the expressiveness of the conductors' gestures, the depth of artistic image disclosure and the ability to achieve the desired sound from the singers – the participants of the First International Boris Tevlin Competition of choral conductors were required to show all these skills.

Despite the fact that the competition was being held for the first time, the organizing committee received over fifty applications from Russia, China, Vietnam, Poland, Sweden, Belarus, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Only twenty-nine of them were selected to participate in the First Round, thirteen participants went through to the Second Round and only eight made it to the Finals. There were representatives from different national schools, and the friendly rivalry between the contestants of the two largest Russian cultural centres – Moscow and St. Petersburg – was very exciting. The winner was a participant from St. Petersburg – Alexandra Makarova, and the jury's decision coincided with audience

opinion. Her conducting was generally considered the most compelling, profound and professional.

The second prize was awarded to a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory – Gleb Kardasevich. The third place was shared by the Muscovite Maria Chelmakina and Chinese Wang Chao. Diplomas were awarded to three more Russian participants and to Justina Helminska from Poland.

The program in the Finals had a special feature. Each participant had to conduct one composition, selected after the Second Round by drawing lots from a number of contemporary works announced in advance. The choir rehearsed them all in advance, of course. However, the participants had to implement their own interpretation and to achieve a sound matching this concept, and all this within just a short fifteen-minute rehearsal.

At the end of the Third Round, these works were included in the Final Gala concert program where the Chamber Choir of the Moscow Conservatory sang for the finalists on the stage of the famous Great Hall of the Conservatory.

This event was a real celebration of choral art. The Russian media amply covered the contest. The journalists were interested in the opinion of the participants and their demanding audience and they practically attacked the members of the jury at the press conferences.

Such interest in a chormaster competition is not accidental. Issues relating to the development of choral art in modern Russia are controlled by the Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets herself. The country's driving forces are gathered under her patronage and the All-Russian Choral Society (ARCS) has also been recreated. This organization had a long and successful activity in Soviet times but then ceased to exist. The ARCS has now revived its activities thanks to the interest at the highest government level.

The All-Russian Choral Society was headed by the renowned

conductor Valery Gergiev. Russian society hopes that the revival of the ARCS will start a new epoch of national interest in choral singing.

The choral conducting profession has gained special importance under these conditions and the Moscow Conservatory possesses a unique experience and tradition in the education of young choirmasters. The chairman of the organizing committee of the First International Boris Tevlin Competition of Choral Conductors – the Rector of the Moscow Conservatory Alexander Sokolov – expressed his hope that the competition would gain regular status. Currently, a three year period is being taken into consideration. The Moscow Conservatory has the potential to do this. The organization of competitions is managed by the Administration for Educational and Creative Programs, led by Ksenia Bonduryanskaya. The choral traditions established by Professor Tevlin are carefully preserved by his colleagues in the Department of Modern Choral Art. Boris Tevlin's school continues to live in the sound of the Chamber Choir that he created. This choir is now led by his disciple and successor, the Dean of the Foreign Students Faculty, Alexander Solovyev. It was this man's organizational talent that combined so many people's efforts to make Professor Tevlin's dream of an international choirmaster competition a reality.

*Translated from the Russian by Vitali Gavrouc*

*Edited by Theresa Trisolino, UK*