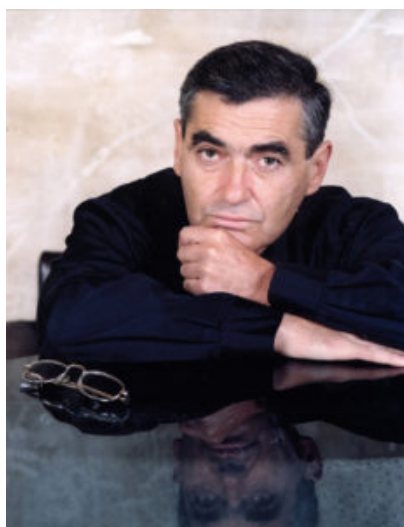


# An International Choral Project in St. Petersburg: Boris Abalyan's workshop

*Alexandra Makarova, choral conductor*

At the end of August 2016 in St. Petersburg, the Second International Workshop in choral conducting took place under the leadership of Honoured Artist of Russia and Professor of the St. Petersburg State Conservatory, Boris Abalyan. The organiser of the master class is the Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatoire of Music, in which Professor Abalyan taught for over 40 years, and the Chamber Choir Festino.

## Boris Abalyan



Russian choir conductor and teacher. The founder, Artistic Director and Conductor of the **Lege Artis** chamber choir. With Boris Abalyan as conductor the choir has recorded more than 20 CDs in collaboration with the recording labels **Sony Classical** and **Mazur Media GmbH**, and the musical alliance **Northern Flowers**. As a result of the collaboration with the medieval music researchers from the department of Medieval Russian Chant at the Saint

Petersburg State Conservatory the choir recorded two CDs of Ancient Russian music. Boris Abalyan is the chief conductor of the **Gracias choir**. Under the leadership of professor Abalyan, the **Gracias choir** took part in several international choir competitions in South Korea and abroad.

## Structure of the workshop

The workshop is a unique educational project that has no equal not only in St. Petersburg, but also in the Russian choral conducting scene in general. The first workshop was held in 2015 and it showed the effectiveness and relevance of this form of learning.

From the beginning, the workshop acquired international status. Over the past two years participants included young conductors from Japan, Poland, Belarus and Russia.

The workshop's programme includes theoretical and practical training over a period of one week. The theoretical course includes two days of training with the professor and two pianists and various educational lectures. The practical part of the programme is the work with the **Festino** chamber choir for four days and the performance at the final concert. The purpose is to improve professional skills in the field of interpretation and analysis of the score, rehearsing and concert practice, and a significant expansion of the repertoire.

*"As I have already said, the goal is to invite people who are really interested in this. Let me explain: conducting students and young choirmasters that have already started to work have different problems and questions. I think you will agree with me that a student who has graduated University already "knows everything". Only practice gives rise to the questions, and the master class can give the answers. A student, who graduated from a conservatory, has more answers and a young choirmaster has more questions. I am deeply convinced that the questions appear when you start to work, but during education in the classroom with the professor everything is usually clear."* (B. Abalyan)



Ilya Malafey, a participant to the workshop, at the final concert

## Repertoire

The variety of works presented in the master class programme is representative of the cultural space of St. Petersburg, as a platform where Russian and European performing trends are intertwining. The repertoire includes works from three stylistic periods: Russian medieval chant, the contemporary music of St. Petersburg's composers and the contemporary music of Western Europe.

St. Petersburg is a unique city in Russia, where the study of Russian medieval singing culture is maintained at a highly professional level. In collaboration with researchers from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, **Boris Abalyan** and **Lege artis** Chamber Choir recorded two CDs of ancient Russian chants. The painstaking work of a conductor and scientists specialised in the medieval period allowed an innovative way of performing to be created, uniting a deep understanding of the sacred liturgical sphere with the concert interpretation on the stage. Russian sacred music from the pre-Petrine period is still "terra incognita" not only for foreigners but also for many Russian artists. That is why the introduction to it and the guidelines for the choirmaster constitute a unique educational part of the workshop. Besides practical work with musical material, participants are given the opportunity to listen to lectures by leading experts from the St. Petersburg

State Conservatory about the history and style of Russian chant and Russian early polyphony.

The contemporary choral music by St. Petersburg's composers always was an essential part of the concert repertoire of many leading Russian choirs. Yuri Falik, Sergei Slonimsky, Anatoly Korolev, Alexander Knaifel and Dmitry Smirnov are all names that are now well-known worldwide. During the master class participants not only work on the best examples of contemporary choral music from St. Petersburg, but also have the opportunity to directly interact with the composers. There were two meetings-lectures in 2016: with Dmitry Smirnov and Anatoly Korolyov.

The inclusion in the programme of the course of modern choral music from Western Europe is very important for the expansion of the concert repertoire of Russian youth choirs. During the master class, participants have the opportunity to discover new names and works of interest which will allow them to continue to integrate more successfully into the Western choral community.



Chamber Choir Festino.  
Rehearsal before the final  
concert

## **Participants**

Young choirmasters under the age of 35, students and graduates of higher educational institutions with experience of working with the choir are all invited to take part in the workshop.

This year there were 6 active participants in the master class: Paweł Chojna from Warsaw; Elena Klimova from Minsk; Christina Pivovarovna from Novosibirsk; Ilya Malafey from Saint-Petersburg; Natalia Shelkovskaya and Daniil Zhurilov from Moscow. All of them were young conductors pre-selected from a video of their work with a choir or a concert. In addition to the 6 active participants in the master class, there were also choir conductors from Petrozavodsk, Saratov, Yaroslavl, Nizhny Novgorod and Moscow who participated in a passive way.

*"Of course, nobody can learn in a week what people learn over the years, but this week there have been significant changes, mainly in the sense of music and the methods of work with the singers. It is very difficult to express with a gesture the thing that a conductor hears in the music, so he has to explain with the words or demonstrate with the voice."* (B. Abalyan)

## **Composers**

An important aspect of the work of the master class is the interaction of conductors and composers, whose works are presented in the workshop. Joint rehearsals help more precisely understand the style and the idea of a composition, and unlock the author's creativity. In 2016, two composers, Dmitry Smirnov and Anatoly Korolev, attended the rehearsals of the workshop. In addition, composers held creative meetings and responded to all the questions of interest from the audience.

*"I can say that there was a very curious trend in the second half of the twentieth century, when there were tandems". (composer – performer) "For example, Shostakovich – Mravinsky, Sviridov – Chernushenko or Sviridov – Minin, Gavrilin – Minin or Gavrilin – Chernushenko. In those cases, the conductor has to understand not only what it says, but also what is not written. I was lucky to work frequently with Dmitry Smirnov,*

*Anatoly Korolev and Yuri Falik, and Sergei Slonimsky, and they helped me to decipher their style. Such co-creation cannot be overestimated."*

### **Future workshops**

The next workshop will take place at the end of August 2017. Applications can be sent in during March 2017. Organisers plan to expand the programme of practical and theoretical sessions and show students the unique diversity of the Russian choral culture. We hope that the international master-class of Professor Abalyan will become an important annual event that will bring together choral conductors from Russia and other countries.

*Edited by Mirella Biagi, UK/Italy*