

# Professional and Amateur Choral Performance in the Soviet Union (1922-1991)

*By Boris Tarakanov, conductor and writer and Anton Fedorov, composer, conductor and writer*

## **The Choir as a Symbol of a Strong State**

The Soviet leadership was well aware that a strong country is a singing country. It is sufficient to say that in the years of the Great Patriotic War (Eastern Front of World War II) the government focused not only on the military build-up, but also on the development of professional choral performance. In 1942, shortly after the Germans were pushed back from Moscow with enormous difficulty, decisions were taken at state level on the reorganization of several choral groups – the creation of the State Academic Choir of Russian song, the Russian Republican Cappella Choir and the Russian State Folk Choir. The Germans bombed Stalingrad and Leningrad and the Ural Russian Folk Choir, the Siberian Russian Folk Choir and other choirs appeared. In 1943, in devastated Stalingrad, the first thing that was restored was not a steel company or a housing complex... an *a cappella* choir was founded.



*Concert of the State Academic  
Russian Choir of the USSR*

Many of the Soviet authorities felt that there was a great need to create the 'perfect choir' – the one which would be a benchmark for the professional and amateur groups of the country. The choice, oddly enough, did not fall on an existing choir of a large organization, but on the vocal ensemble at the All-Union Radio. The group's task was, first of all, the propaganda of Soviet music, actively produced during those years in a variety of genres – from cantatas and oratorios to songs and choral miniatures. However, a significant place in the repertoire of the choir was given to Russian and foreign choral classics, which gave the repertoire an extra dimension and made this group almost universal.

### **Sveshnikov State Academic Russian Choir**

The founding date of the Academic State Choir of the USSR is considered to be 1936. Choir leadership was entrusted to two outstanding musicians – Alexander Sveshnikov (1890-1980) and Nikolai Danilin (1878-1945). On February 26 1937 in Moscow, in the House of Unions, the first concert of the State Choir of the USSR was held with exceptional success, according to witnesses.

It is said that Sveshnikov had only one wish – to make his choir unique. And he succeeded. According to the famous Russian choral conductor, Claudiy Ptitsa, “if other choirs were seen as old wine in new bottles, the State Choir was like a whole new variety of wine, with a very complex bouquet”. The State Choir was the first performer of many works by Georgy Sviridov and Dmitri Shostakovich. Vissarion Shabalin and Rodion Shchedrin devoted many works to this choir and to Sveshnikov personally.



*State Academic Russian Choir, named after Sveshnikov. Conductor: Boris Tevlin*

After the death of Alexander Sveshnikov, there were wonderful choral conductors at the head of the legendary Russian choir: Igor Agafonnikov, Vladimir Minin, Eugene Tytyanko, Igor Raevskii and Boris Tevlin. Since August 2012, the choir has been led by Tevlin's student Evgeny Volkov, who has tried to continue in Tevlin's style, keeping alive the choir's traditions. Website of the choir: [www.goschorus.ru](http://www.goschorus.ru)

### **Yurlov Russian State Academic Choir**

When speaking of professional choral singing of the Soviet period, we must not forget the Republican State Academic

Russian Choir, at one time considered a direct competitor of the State Choir, despite the fact that it was subordinate to republican authorities, and not to the Union.



*Capella Choir concert under the baton of Alexander Yurlov*

The history of this group has its roots at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – in a small choral ensemble formed by Ivan Yukhov (1871-1943). He successfully overcame the social cataclysms of the beginning of the century and, during the Soviet era, he held a prominent position in the cultural life of the country. A momentous event in the life of the collective was the appointment of Alexander Yurlov (1927-1973) in 1958 to the leading position. A graduate of the Moscow Choral College, a friend and apprentice of Sveshnikov, Yurlov quickly took the “sacred cow” by the horns, called it the Republican Choir Cappella, and raised its level in a matter of months. Under the leadership of Yurlov the choir became one of the country’s leading choral collectives, successfully competing with the State Choir and the Leningrad State Academic Choir named by M.I. Glinka. The choir toured the Soviet Union frequently and amateur groups took part in its concerts – the union of professional and amateur choral singing was a bold innovation of Yurlov. Another outstanding service to the domestic art of the musician was the return of Russian spiritual music of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries from the Cappella to the concert stage. In the years

of atheistic propaganda, this undertaking was a real civic achievement by Yurlov.

A special section regarding the creative activity of the Cappella is connected with the name of the great Russian composer, Georgy Sviridov. Yurlov became the first interpreter of many Sviridov works: the vocal-symphonic poem 'In memory of Sergei Yesenin', *Oratorio Pathétique* and *Kursk Songs*, among others.

After the death of Yurlov, the Cappella was led by his pupils and followers – Jury Ukhov (1937-2007) and Stanislav Gusev (1937-2012). Since 2004, the head of the Cappella has been the well-known Russian choral and symphonic conductor Gennady Dmitryak (b. 1947), a student of Alexander Yurlov. The choir has a website: [www.choir-capella.ru](http://www.choir-capella.ru)



*Capella of Russia, named after Yurlov. Conductor: Gennady Dmitryak*

## **Chamber Choirs**

In 1970s, something new appeared in Soviet choral art – chamber choirs. The start of the mass enthusiasm for chamber choirs was inspired by the American Chamber Choir's 1962 visit to the Soviet Union, under the direction of Robert Shaw. The subsequent 'boom' of chamber choir performances almost ruined the very notion of the "great Russian choir". In addition, the creation of large groups soon became economically inefficient. Across Russia choirs began to shrink to chamber ensembles of about thirty participants.

The first professional chamber choir in the Soviet Union to achieve official recognition was the Moscow State Chamber

Choir ([www.choir.ru](http://www.choir.ru)), created in 1972 by Vladimir Minin (b. 1929). To this day, it remains one of the most famous Russian choirs of 'chamber format' – both at home and abroad.

In 1980 the State Chamber Choir of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR was founded, under the direction of Valery Polyansky (b. 1949), and in the 1981st – Chamber Choir of the Novosibirsk Regional Philharmonic, conducted by Boris Pevzner (b. 1940). Valery Polyansky's Chamber Choir eventually evolved into the State Symphony Cappella of Russia ([www.gaskros.ru](http://www.gaskros.ru)), and in 1991, Boris Pevzner headed the Moscow Choral Theatre ([www.bpct.ru](http://www.bpct.ru)).

Significant contributions to the history of the chamber area were made by the Chamber Choir of the Moscow Conservatory, created by an outstanding conductor and pedagogue, Boris Tevlin (1931-2012). The main focus of this collective creative activity became the performance of contemporary music.

## **Amateur Choirs**

Choral art takes the leading place in amateur activities. This is an axiom that does not require proof. In 1936, Moscow hosted the much-publicized First All-Union Choral Competition, which drew public attention to choral singing as one of the most democratic forms of art. Some of the groups taking part in the competition were amateurs.

When a number of amateur choirs began to appear spontaneously across the country, the idea of the All-Russian Coordination Resource Center of choral performance was formed, and in 1958, it was decided to establish the All-Russian Choral Society. The first chairman of the All-Russian Choral Society (ACS) was Alexander Sveshnikov – by that time Hero of Socialist Labor, National Artist of the USSR and Laureate of the State Prize of the USSR and the RSFSR... The main task of the society was to promote the development of vocal and choral amateur activity

in every way, to improve the singing culture of the people. ACS coped with this perfectly. Similar music and choral societies were soon established in other Soviet republics.



*Alexander  
Sveshnikov*

According to the 'Regulations on the amateur choral and musical groups', approved by the Ministry of Culture of the USSR, amateur choirs received considerable financial support for their development. In particular, the team awarded the national title had a right to employ staff, including an artistic director, a choirmaster, an accompanist and even a choreographer. Thus, the status of the amateur choir was formalized at state level. This has contributed to the formation of amateur choirs in various professional communities and social spheres. At that time, among the Russian choirs, amateur groups began to appear, seen for example in the Male Choir of Moscow taxi drivers 'Green Light', which even had its own icon-logo, or the choir of employees of Irkutsk airport, where the pilots and flight attendants sang together...

A huge role in the development of amateur choral movement was that these groups gave frequent performances and festivals of amateur singing, at many levels: district, city, regional, zonal, national and all-Union.

The number of amateur choirs increased in *tempo allegro assai*, and soon grew so much that there was a serious shortage of personnel. In order to change the situation as soon as possible, at the initiative of the All-Russian Choral Society, new musical and pedagogical faculties and departments were opened, express courses by choral conductors were introduced in music schools, and even the structure of distance education by correspondence at the People's University of the Arts was developed. In the 1960s, higher education institutions also emerged in the USSR, which had no parallel in the world – institutions of culture. They provided training for managers of amateur groups, including choirs.

Amateur choirs in educational institutions are a separate and independent branch of choral art. Now let us mention briefly some of the student choirs, which played significant roles in the development of the choral tradition.

The oldest amateur university choir is considered to be the Academic Choir of the Moscow State University named after M. Lomonosov ([www.choir.msu.ru](http://www.choir.msu.ru)), created in the early 1870s. This wonderful group is considered today to be an amateur choir of professional level and it is directed by a talented musician; Mirza Askerov. Other Russian student choirs also have high levels of performance and a rich history: the Moscow State Technical University Gaudeamus Chamber Choir named by N.E. Bauman ([www.gaudeamus.bmstu.ru](http://www.gaudeamus.bmstu.ru)) under the leadership of Vladimir Zhivov; Male Choir of the National Research Nuclear University ([www.choirmephi.ru](http://www.choirmephi.ru)), which is now headed by Nadezhda Malyavina; and the Academic Great Chorus of the Russian State Humanitarian University ([www.hor.tarakanov.net](http://www.hor.tarakanov.net)), where Boris Tarakanov is the artistic director.

### **At the Turn of the Century...**

The creative life of Russian choirs in the 1990s became both a

return to the past and experimental projection into the future. On the one hand, the choirs turned to the 'roots' of the national singing culture – to Russian church music. On the other hand, they began to actively explore the variety of styles of contemporary choral music. This 'diversity' of aesthetic approaches, traditions and genres of choral performance demanded a conceptual approach to the formation of the creative profile of the choir from the head of each group, making certain that one philosophy and a unique microcosm spiritually unites all the performers. This was such a strengthening function in the creative life of the groups that they are now able to perform unique projects at leading concert halls, performing with leading orchestras and opera stars from around the world at the annual Easter service in different countries of the world and in choral camps also around the world.

Since the 1990s, church choirs have appeared everywhere in Russia. With the blessing of the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church, many of them implement missionary work not only within the walls of places of worship, but also beyond. Mass, vespers, prayer services, weddings, funerals and akathists, of course, remain, but performances on concert stages with programs that include Russian folk songs, choral classics, and single authors' musical projects can be added to this. The following groups became such universal church choirs: the Moscow Synodal Choir, precentor Alex Puzakov ([www.mossinodhor.ru](http://www.mossinodhor.ru)); Sretensky Monastery Male Choir, precentor Nikon Zhila ([www.bestchoir.ru](http://www.bestchoir.ru)); Festive Male Choir of St. Daniel Monastery, precentor George Safonov ([www.danilovchoir.ru](http://www.danilovchoir.ru)); Choir of the Temple of Christ the Savior, precentor Ilya Tolkachov ([www.xxc.ru/ru/choir](http://www.xxc.ru/ru/choir)) and many others.



*Moscow Sretensky Monastery  
Choir*

One should not be surprised by the professional skills of these groups, as many graduates of the conducting and choral departments of conservatories and other top music schools Russia are now working in church choirs. The Russian Orthodox Church to this day remains the largest employer of professional choral singers and conductors.

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