

# The Capella of St. Petersburg

*By Irina Roganova, conductor and teacher*

The Capella of St. Petersburg is a magnificent monument to Russian culture, not simply a museum where time stands still, but a spring to quench the thirst, with the beautiful sound of the immortal creations of human genius.

In November 2014 the State Capella of St. Petersburg held a concert dedicated to the 40th anniversary of creative activity of its artistic director and chief conductor Vladislav Chernushenko.

Every anniversary is important, but for Chernushenko the autumn of 2014 is indeed a significant milestone. He first crossed the threshold of the Capella 70 years ago after returning to Leningrad from evacuation, when the institution was trying to overcome the consequences of the Nazi blockade of the city. Throughout his years of service Chernushenko's work was observed and admired by the great Georgy Sviridov: "We should be grateful to Chernushenko for the fact that he restored the St. Petersburg Cappella, like the restoration of an old icon. This endeavour has made him one of the greatest figures in Russian music".

Vladislav Chernushenko is one of the great modern Russian musicians. His conducting talent is multi-faceted and manifests itself vividly in opera, symphonic music and choral performance. Under his leadership he has revived world-wide fame for the Russian choir.

Vladislav Chernushenko was the driving force behind lifting the ban and heralding the return of Russian sacred music to the concert sphere of Russia. In 1981 he organised a traditional festival "Neva Choral Assemblies" with a series of

historical concerts and academic conferences “Five Centuries of Russian Choral Music”. And in 1982, after a 54-year absence, the *All-Night Vigil* by Sergei Rachmaninov was heard in the Capella concert hall once again. Under the direction of Vladislav Chernushenko the repertoire of the choir is regaining its traditional richness and diversity. It includes the works of major vocal and instrumental forms – oratorios, cantatas, masses, operas in concert performance, a cappella works by both Western and Russian composers of different eras – and it has been granted the highest national and international awards and titles: Vladislav Chernushenko is certainly one of the leaders of the modern musical arts in Russia.

Today the Capella comprises a beautiful concert hall, a choir and a symphony orchestra as well as the magnificent organ, to the restoration of which the President of Russia has allocated the equivalent of one million euros. Today the Capella is a multicultural complex including a virtual concert hall.



*(from an interview with Vladislav Chernushenko)*

***But for many years no one thought about the forgotten Capella of St. Petersburg ...***

The Capella was founded on 12 August 1479. It was on this day

that the Illumination of the Assumption Cathedral in the grounds of the Kremlin (the first stone church in Moscow) established a choir of state clerk choristers. This was to be the personal choir of Grand Prince Ivan Vasilyevich and thus the first professional choir in Russia. The history books tell us that Tsar Ivan the Terrible would often compose his own canticles, and also conduct soloists. We often play one of his hymns, written on the day of glorification of Peter the Metropolitan of Moscow. After over two centuries this choir of state clerk choristers was relocated to St Petersburg on the banks of the river Neva. During this time, the reign of Peter the Great, the first ever choir tour began: the Emperor left for Western Europe with his choristers. I was amazed when I was told in Paris that the young Tsar was nicknamed Peter the Bass and that in France it was well known that he loved to conduct church services and sing the prayers. In the eighteenth century, the choir adopted a new manner and style. In 1738, in the Ukrainian city of Glukov, in the reign of the Empress Anna Ioannovna, the first professional school of music was established, where she trained twenty boys for eventual service in the court choir. In the years immediately following, the court was also obliged to instruct young singers in the playing of orchestral instruments. For several decades the singing instructors and precentors of the choir were well-known Italian composers: Galuppi, Traetta, Paisiello, Sarti, Cimarosa. Later the choir attracted native composers who brought glory to Russian music, with pupils such as Maksym Berezovsky and Dmytro Bortniansky.

The institution not only fostered outstanding achievement in its musicians but it also nurtured all aspects of the school including its instrumentalists, composers, and conductors.

Glinka's "Ivan Susanin" was written for the Capella, and it is credited with establishing "The Mighty Handful", otherwise known as: Balakirev and his assistant Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Cui, Borodin and Tchaikovsky.

There are competing opinions by both Russian and international musicians as to the development of the “dithyrambic calm”. Robert Schumann stated in his diary notes: “The Capella is the most beautiful choir that we have ever heard, the bass is at times reminiscent of the sound of the organ, and the treble sounds almost magical ...”.

**How do you maintain the glory of the Capella? After all, choral music is not the most popular musical genre.**

Popularity is transient. By contrast, in many countries choral singing has become the new national obsession. In the US. almost every university has so vibrant an amateur choral scene that it is the envy of professionals the world over. We now also host a barber shop festival, attracting everything from male vocal ensembles to large choirs.

**But is it possible that choral music is outdated? If we consider the great works of Lasso, Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, Bortniansky, Haydn, Mozart, Glinka, Mussorgsky, Brahms, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Britten, Stravinsky, Shostakovich? ... Is it really possible that mankind no longer has a need for this?**

We hope that the history of the Capella will be elevated to the throne of the Russian musical arts and reign unchallenged for many years, accumulating from one generation to the next even more glory to the Russian choral art. But this continuity cannot be taken for granted: each generation needs to produce its own “honour and glory”, and however remarkable the past, a burden that is often heavy falls on the shoulders of the present, demanding new corroboration.

So let us think, what is the basis of culture? And the answer: those who carry on the tradition of the people.

To summarise briefly, we have inherited a legacy, which looks something like this:

- high performing culture;
- outstanding singing skill of the artists of the choir and ensemble as a whole;
- the widest range of repertoire encompassing all periods and styles of Western European and Russian music;
- monumental foundations in the genre of cantata-oratorio as the main focus of creative direction;
- attention to the performance of contemporary music, primarily of Russian music, as the key creative development;
- close cooperation with composers;
- regular contact with the audience;
- viewing the choir as an effective tool for awareness and education of the people.

We must agree, it's not an light burden. Let others judge what we are achieving collectively.

On the other hand, discussions regarding choral singers are rare. As a rule, we write in detail about the conductor, mentioning the choir only casually. These artists are unknown to the general public, they live on stage and on the posters under the catch-all phrase "choir", and their fate lies in that special moment on stage when they integrate themselves into the greater ensemble. Many of them are extremely talented, but nobody will ever know that if the chorus sounds bad. They can be totally incompetent or utterly talented. Their failure is always personal, their success is always shared. Singing in a choir requires selfless love and dedication. This amazing creative altruism is inherent in many music groups and is worthy to be noted.

We utter the names of the conductors with reverence, whose talent and selfless service to their beloved art determined the fate of the choir in the difficult formative years of the

Soviet Union, in times of troubles and the trials of the great patriotic war, in the days of the triumph of victory and the postwar revival years: Mikhail Klimov, Palladium Bogdanov, Georgi Dmitrevsky and Elizabeth Kudryavtseva respectively.



**Vladislav Aleksandrovich, you had a chance to work with great Russian composers – George Sviridov and Valery Gavrilin. What are your memories?**

Sviridov and Gavrilin follow the general line of Russian music coming from Glinka and Dargomyzhsky to Borodin, Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky and further through Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Taneyev, Glazunov to Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich and their modern heirs.

Musically, Gavrilin will always be like Russia, incorporating the centuries of pain, all the joy and tears, turmoil and great accomplishments along with the desecration of sacred places, betrayal, ruin and rising from the ashes, similar to the resurrection of Christ, while being infused with love and by healing faith, sometimes recklessly trusting the future, something which in times of tribulation remains incomprehensibly but persistently a priority of the people. Actually, Sviridov is much the same. It is no coincidence that these two names are often found side by side.

For more than three decades, we have been in direct contact with Georgy Vasilyevich Sviridov. During joint rehearsals and concerts, we discussed many different things, mainly about the problems of education and culture.

**You are currently on tour in Europe. According to your observations: who now has a greater influence (in the performing arts) – Europe on Russia or vice versa?**

In Europe as well as overseas, Russian art in all its myriad varieties is still as coveted today as it has ever been: Russian theatre, Russian ballet and opera, symphony orchestras, choirs and the fine arts. You must forgive me, but I find that television is bursting at the seams with pop culture, corrupting the minds and morals of the people. They have this in excess. But at the same time in many countries there is concern regarding the preservation of national culture, language and traditions from the pressure of globalisation and the fear of appearing different to the faceless herd.

**How do you keep the Russian song, the tradition of choral music alive in this current urbanised, consumer-led society, when people are no longer singing and don't feel the need? What is the solution?**

Russia has always been singing, the land filled with the sound of the human voice. This deeply rooted singing culture is the origin of all Russian music in all its richness and originality. Gratefully accepting European science, Russia showed that she was not only of equal strength and talents as the great sons of Western Europe, but also made huge waves and advances towards the development of world music: Bortnyansky, Glinka, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich.

Our Capella is restored after years of great trials and tribulations, part of the world-wide glory of the Russian art of singing. The current Capella is glory bequeathed. It is the bond of time and the continuity of traditions, its

multiplication is our duty and our life.