

*"we would have been much poorer without the Polovtsian Dances and Overture from that work"*

*"a most natural and pure stereo sound which brings to life this exciting and wonderful music"*

#### **(Borodin (choral adaptations))**

**A** useful trick question for music quizzes is: what was Borodin's first published work? Answer: a treatise on chemistry! He was not alone among his Russian contemporaries in having two professions: Tchaikovsky started out in the civil service, Mussorgsky was a soldier and Rimsky-Korsakov was a naval officer. However he alone managed to achieve pre-eminence in both careers: more to the point, his scientific work still allowed him time for a substantial musical output. Only his opera Prince Igor remained unfinished, to be completed by others; we would have been much poorer without the Polovtsian Dances and Overture from that work.

These choral adaptations are set to his most memorable melodies: the Magnificat to sections of the Polovtsian Dances, the Nunc Dimittis to the Nocturne from his 2nd String Quartet and Psalm 121 to In the Steppes of Central Asia. The orchestration is broadly as original – in the case of the Magnificat, as completed by Rimsky-Korsakov.

**Anton Arensky** was an important link in the progress of Russian music: following in the footsteps of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, he was himself a significant influence in the development of Scriabin and Rachmaninov, having taught them both at the Moscow Conservatory. He is best remembered for his Variations on a Theme of Tchaikovsky for string orchestra, and for this tiny anthem, in which an atmosphere of intense supplication is achieved by the simplest possible means.

#### **Sacred music of Tchaikovsky**

One of the most gifted melodists ever, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is most widely known for his ballet scores, the 1st Piano Concerto and the 1812 Overture. Closer acquaintance reveals the richness of his six symphonies, the Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture, the Violin Concerto and other delights such as Capriccio Italien and Marche Slave. Then there are the operas – epic works which include some off-played excerpts such as the Waltz and Polonaise from Eugene Onegin.

His church music is much less known: if it seems less remarkable on first hearing, one must bear in mind the considerable restrictions imposed by the Orthodox Church regarding the setting of sacred texts. There could be no instrumental accompaniment, and harmonies had to be simple and always subservient to the text. However, Tchaikovsky's genius allowed him still to create works of art, though in a totally different style to his secular music.

Although not a declared atheist like Brahms, he was nevertheless probably agnostic, but like many other composers found inspiration in the words themselves plus the traditional melodies. These pieces were written partly as a relaxation from his larger and more complicated works, partly at request of the Czar for him to add to the repertoire of the Church. A major sequence is the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, a 5th-century Archbishop of Constantinople, whose writing became central to the rites of the Orthodox Church.

**Alexandr Gretchaninov** studied first with Arensky at the Moscow Conservatory and then with Rimsky-Korsakov in St. Petersburg: the latter's influence can be heard in his early instrumental works.

Returning to Moscow around the turn of the century, his writing for the theatre and the Orthodox Church earned him much acclaim, plus a pension from the Tsar. He subsequently followed Rachmaninov in emigrating, first to France and then to the USA.

Although a contemporary of Rachmaninov, his sacred choral writing – as evidenced by this example – sounds more like that of Tchaikovsky. No doubt constrained – as they all were – by the strict rules of the Church, his style is harmonically straightforward yet undoubtedly beautiful, and his setting of The Cherubic Hymn compares favorably with those of his better-known colleagues.

**Pavel Chesnokov** was primarily a composer of choral music, and founded the school of choral conducting at the Moscow Conservatory. As a pupil there he was taught by – among others – the orchestral composer Ippolitov-Ivanov, best remembered for his Caucasian Sketches.

His output of choral music, most of it to sacred texts, was brought to a standstill under the communists. They also demolished the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, whose last choirmaster he was: happily this has since been rebuilt, and serves as the cover picture for this recording.

**Andrei Labinski** was a leading tenor with the Mariinsky Opera in St. Petersburg, where he created important roles in new operas. He subsequently went to the Bolshoi in Moscow, and was a professor of singing at the Moscow Conservatory. This short, hymn-like anthem suggests the potential for more elaborate choral writing, had there been time in what was obviously a very full performing schedule.

**Serhiy Rachmaninov** found success while still a student, with his darkly dramatic Piano Prelude in C# minor. A decade later his fame was assured with his 2nd Piano Concerto, immortalised as the theme for the film Brief Encounter. As a virtuoso pianist-composer in the tradition of Liszt, he built on this success with the 3rd Piano Concerto and – many years later – the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. By this time he had settled permanently in the United States, following the Russian revolution, but he remained a true Russian at heart and was the last of the great romantic composers.

Like Tchaikovsky, he was drawn to the texts and traditional chants of the Russian Orthodox Church, and composed first a setting of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (see above, under Tchaikovsky) and then the Vespers, or All-night Vigil. The latter was produced during the First World War, in support of the Russian war effort: it was more adventurous than Tchaikovsky's settings, so wasn't considered suitable for liturgical performance. This, coupled with the communists' rejection of all church music, meant that it fell into comparative obscurity, but it has been revived recently and is now very popular with choirs.

The **Maida Vale Singers** was formed in 1999 to provide a chorus for Covent Garden Festival's performance of Side by Side by Jerome Kern. Since then they have performed with the BBC Concert Orchestra, LSO, London Pops Orchestra, RPO, Royal Ballet Sinfonia, English National Ballet Orchestra, Fine Arts Sinfonia, and The John Wilson Orchestra.

They have backed Frank Sinatra at The Waldorf Hotel (to launch the musical Sinatra); Elaine Paige and John Barrowman at Birmingham Symphony Hall; and on the debut albums of Opera Babes (SONY) and Nicky Spence (UNIVERSAL). Other recordings include: Menna (BBC), Napoleon, Man Of La Mancha, (TER), Trevor Nunn's Porgy & Bess, That's Entertainment (EMI), and the new musicals Nelson, and The Kitchen.

BBC Proms include: HMS Pinafore, OKLAHOMA! 60 Years of British Film Music, and the three highly successful proms with the John Wilson Orchestra; A Celebration of Classic MGM Film Musicals, A Celebration of Rodgers & Hammerstein, and Hooray For Hollywood.

A collection of Russian sacred music, featuring new choral settings of well-known themes by Borodin. In the manner of Lux Aeterna (from Elgar's Nimrod) and Barber's Agnus Dei (his own original version of the Adagio for Strings), Robin White has set the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, plus verses from Psalm 101, to three of Borodin's best tunes, in a way that sounds wholly natural and convincing.

These are coupled with a selection of the best original anthems by Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and some lesser-known but very worthy contemporaries.

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