

# INTERPRETERS ON SHOSTAKOVICH III

## AN INTERVIEW WITH NIKOLAI KACHANOV

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, RUSSIAN CHAMBER CHORUS OF NEW YORK



by Rebecca Stanton,  
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"Music and Dictatorship: Russia Under Stalin" was a three-concert series and symposium presented by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra under Vladimir Ashkenazy at Carnegie Hall in February. This series, of quintessentially Russian magnitude, required the assembling of a powerful chorus for several of the programmed works. Maestro Ashkenazy invited The Russian Chamber Chorus of New York, directed by Nikolai Kachanov, and the Desoff Choirs, directed by Kent Tritle.

Rebecca Stanton, writing for New York's Vocal Area Network spoke with Nikolai Kachanov, Artistic Director of the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York, on this extraordinary (not to mention chillingly timely) series of concerts.

Rebecca Stanton: Tell us about the repertoire chosen by Maestro Ashkenazy for this series, and the special challenges associated with preparing the chorus for this material.

Nikolai Kachanov: First of all, the entire plan for the four-day, three-concert and symposium cycle was masterful. Beginning with Prokofiev's *Ivan the Terrible* providing a historical perspective, building up to the intensity of Shostakovich's *Babi Yar*, followed by his Violin Concerto No. 1, the series of concerts taken as a whole showed the possibilities and role of music and artists working in conditions of oppression. The cumulative impact of the series went beyond the individual presentation of several great pieces of music.

The specific repertoire involving the chorus presents many challenges because it combines a wide variety of topics and styles. First is the genre of film music, represented by Prokofiev's *Ivan the Terrible* and the *Fall of Berlin* by Shostakovich. These pieces partake of the cantata-oratorio genre, which in the Russian tradition is close to the genre of

operatic scenes - all the more so in this case, since we are talking about film music. It means the vocal sound must be particularly expressive; the singers must be trained to give the supported, mixed, even sound known as *bel canto*. The challenges for the chorus include the variety of roles they must play to convey the different scenes and situations associated with the music: from the boyars in the time of Ivan the Terrible to party officials of the 20th century. Speaking about how close this music is to opera, I have to stress that an element of acting is very important to the performance. In Russian repertoire, the choir typically plays an expressive, rather than a decorative, role.

RS: With such multiple challenges facing the chorus, what objectives did you prioritize?

NK: The first priority must be to obtain a true Russian legato singing. This topic can be quite challenging for western singers who have grown up with a more baroque, slightly separated style of singing. The basis of Russian choral sound is an absolutely sustained legato sound.



Nikolai Kachanov

The second priority is that everything must be based on a big well-supported sound. In western music the sound frequently becomes lighter in the higher range. In Russian music it is just the opposite: the sound must become broader, more expansive, in the upper range.

These two items - legato and a big sound - are fundamental to a correct performance of this repertoire.

Enunciation is also an element of expression - the words are very important. We train non-Russian singers in correct pronunciation and pay special attention to accents and marcato passages.

RS: I understand that you are originally from the Altai region of Siberia, and are now an American citizen and a New Yorker. I imagine that many members of the chorus, if not originally from Russia, are also of Russian extraction. It must be especially difficult for you and your singers to perform works such as Prokofiev's *Hail to Stalin* and Shostakovich's *Fall of Berlin* music, evoking memories of such tragic times?

NK: Now you come to the crux of the matter. I absolutely respect differing opinions on this subject, but I believe that art is healing, and in this concrete instance it is important that we understand what Shostakovich, the artist, is talking about, and how. To me the *Fall of Berlin* music is like a photograph: Shostakovich does not express a personal opinion about Stalin, but presents something like the "objective" product of the camera's lens. It is a historical document not about Stalin, but about a historical event to which Shostakovich was a witness. At that time, it's true, a majority of Soviet people were reckoned to see in Stalin a great leader and went to die for him in battle. The *Fall of Berlin* was the culmination of a great drama; this long-awaited victory was personified in the minds of the people by the image of their victorious leader. The whole history of Stalin is a story about the creation of a cult, created not so much by Stalin himself as by those around him, in which part of the general population also participated, fanatically. The brilliant film *Ivan the Terrible*, with Prokofiev's



extraordinary music, exemplifies one occasion when history was used as propaganda, whereby an explicit parallel was drawn between Ivan - one of the great creators and defenders of ancient Russia - and Stalin.

Today we know that certain politically motivated "artists" vied with one another in "high cultural spheres" to be first in service to "the great" Stalin. To the credit of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, they never took part in this competition, but they too lived under the pressure of fearsome and mortally dangerous circumstances. (It is known, for example, what a malicious role Stalin played in Prokofiev's personal and family life.) These artists could not avoid coming under the scrutiny of Stalin himself, because they were such bright and well-known composers of their time. Did Stalin expect glorification of himself from these composers? Of course he did. The study of such works as Shostakovich's *Fall of Berlin* and Prokofiev's *Hail to Stalin* allows us to apprehend the human, social psychology of the past, in the hope that we might overcome the scary aspects of human nature that produced this blind generation, the uncritical acceptance of Soviet leaders, and so on. That's why it is important for us to study the past not just through the distancing lens of history, but through art as well, which gives us a deeper, more psychological understanding.

By studying these scores, we gain access to the inner "kitchen" of their creation: for example, the funny disproportion of Prokofiev's *Hail to Stalin*; the mechanically repeated scales that remind us of a piano student's exercises; the inconceivably uninspired, unpoetic text (was it obtuseness or audacity?) - all these hint at a carefully masked irony.

You know, Stalin and Prokofiev died on the same day - March 5, 1953. The composer's death went practically unnoticed - the country mourned Stalin so! Today we celebrate the genius of Sergey Prokofiev; this is how history restores justice, and again, it is through art that we recognize the truth.

So I don't think that anyone today can seriously glorify Stalin and achieve poli-

tical success that way; on the contrary, I think it is healthy that we can today look the events of the past straight in the eye. For me it symbolizes liberation from the hypnotic nightmare of that personality.

On the other hand, I must point out that the program is very successfully balanced by two other very special pieces for chorus and orchestra by Shostakovich: the Symphony No. 13 (*Babi Yar*), and the satirical one-act opera, *Antiformalist Rayok*.



The appearance of Symphony No. 13 was like an explosion; the men's chorus is set to a poem, by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, which was very daring for that time because he shouted about something everyone else preferred to forget, suppress or ignore: the murder of tens of thousands of Jews in the place called Babi Yar, near Kiev, during the fascist occupation of Ukraine in World War II. It is said that on September 28, 1941, leaflets in three languages - Russian, Ukrainian and German - and without a date or signature were plastered about the whole city. They were issued by the printing office of the 6th German Army. All Jews of Kiev and its surroundings were ordered to gather early September 29 on the corner of Melnikov and Degtyarevskaya Streets with their documents, valuables, clothes and so on. Absence was punishable by death. But those who gathered were made to take off their clothes and walk, in groups of two or three, into the complex of ravines called Babi Yar, where they were shot.

Between September 1941 and October 1943, at least 100, 000 people were killed at Babi Yar.

In a composition of such dramatic power, we do not expect charming melodies and refined harmonies; it is painted in hues of black and gray, and belongs in a special wing of the art gallery. We meet the exact opposite of this composition in *Antiformalist Rayok*, a one-act opera which is an extraordinarily daring musical satire on the absurd structures of the Soviet bureaucracy. The word "rayok" in Russian means "little paradise," used ironically here in reference to the "heaven" attained by these buffoonish Party officials for their service to Stalin. It also evokes the title of an earlier Russian musical satire, written in 1870: Musorgsky's *Rayok* (or *The Puppet Show*), which ridiculed members of the musical establishment ("puppets") who had criticized Musorgsky and the "Mighty Handful" composers. Musorgsky's *Rayok* satirizes the relationship between the artist and the authorities, using direct musical and verbal quotations. Shostakovich's *Antiformalist Rayok* continues this tradition but on a much bigger scale: here it becomes a political satire. [Translator's note: In English, "Rayok" is often translated as "the gods," meaning both something heavenly and the cheap seats at the theater in which hecklers used to sit.]

One of the "inspirations" for Shostakovich's *Rayok* was the 1948 meeting of the musical establishment of the Communist Party, at which Zhdanov denounced Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Khachaturian as being too "cosmopolitan" and "formalist." Zhdanov was a member of the Politburo and the architect of a wave of government denunciations, censorship, and terror leveled against any artist who struck him as too "Western" or "un-Soviet." You could be annihilated just for creating a work that did not suit the tastes of Stalin and his infernal party apparatus.

The text of *Rayok* (which Shostakovich also wrote) is an assemblage of intentionally fatuous platitudes, which these politicians recite in their



conference speeches. The accompaniment is built from musical symbols through which can easily be perceived the caricatures of the main party figures of the time (including Stalin). It is a work of absolute genius, which rewards detailed study. Obviously, during Shostakovich's lifetime it could not be published, and we must marvel at his bravery even in daring to keep a copy for himself.



There is one more thing I would like to say, though perhaps it will seem a bit of a tangent. The works on the "Music and Dictatorship" program document the very worst period of the Soviet Union, a time when freedom of expression was utterly suppressed and even being suspected of incorrect thoughts could mean imprisonment and death. And yet, for many of us, there was still one avenue through which we could express ourselves: music. Music was our salvation.

NIKOLAI KACHANOV, founder and Artistic Director of the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York, was born in Barnaul, Siberia, the capital of the Altai region of Russia. He holds a Ph.D. in choral conducting from the Novosibirsk Conservatory and completed post-doctoral studies at the Moscow Conservatory. In 1981, Maestro Kachanov moved to the USA where he founded the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York in 1985 and the Early Russian Music Ensemble, groups praised in the *New York Times* for their "invaluable service" in bringing long-neglected Russian choral masterpieces to American audiences. Among the works Kachanov has premiered in New York are the *Vespers* by Peter Tchaikovsky, *Kursk Songs* by Georgy Sviridov, *Holy Week* by Alexei Haieff, *The Symbols and Mass for the Feast of St. Francis* by Victor Copsytko, *Six Liturgical Chants and Ordinis dei Constantia* by Vladimir Ryabov, *My Heart is Ready* by Yuri Yukechev and *Great Mystery* by Feliksas Bajoras. In addition to conducting, Kachanov is a composer and voice teacher.

With thanks to Vocal Area Network,  
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## ARE YOU A SHOSTAKOHOLOGIC?

From the Film Score Monthly magazine, December 1994

An FSM agent found the following solicitation on the control room coffee table of a Los Angeles scoring stage. It was reportedly addressed "Attn: J. Horner[1] or Current Resident, Malibu, California":

To answer this question ask yourself the following and answer yes/no as honestly as you can:

1. Do you lose time from work due to stealing from Shostakovich?
2. Is stealing from Shostakovich making your home life unhappy?
3. Do you steal from Shostakovich because you are shy with other people?
4. Is stealing from Shostakovich affecting your reputation?
5. Have you ever felt remorse after stealing from Shostakovich?
6. Have you gotten into financial difficulties as a result of stealing from Shostakovich?
7. Have you ever been arrested for scoring under the influence of Shostakovich?
8. Does your stealing from Shostakovich make you careless of your family's welfare?
9. Has your ambition decreased since you've stolen from Shostakovich?
10. Do you crave Shostakovich at a definite time daily?
11. Do you still hear Shostakovich's 5th Symphony the next morning?
12. Do you have a dog named Apostolov?
13. Do you steal from Shostakovich to escape worries or trouble?
14. Do you ever find yourself stealing from Shostakovich alone?
15. Have you ever had a complete loss of memory as a result of stealing from Shostakovich?
16. Has your physician ever treated you for stealing from Shostakovich?
17. Do you steal from Shostakovich to build up your self-confidence?
18. Have you ever been to a hospital or mental institution due to stealing from Shostakovich?
19. Did you begin stealing from less intoxicating composers (Khachaturian, Prokofiev), later "graduating" to the more lethal Shostakovich?
20. Does your wife call you "Dmitri"?

If you have answered YES to any one of the questions, there is a possibility that you may be a Shostakoholic.

If you have answered YES to any two, the chances are that you are a Shostakoholic.

If you have answered YES to any three or more, you are definitely a Shostakoholic.

We have admitted we were powerless over Shostakovich, that our lives had become unmanageable, and that a power greater than ourselves (Stravinsky) could restore us to sanity. If you have a Shostakovich abuse problem, come to a Shostakovich Anonymous meeting where you can benefit from the support of all walks of life who share your addiction.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to write my own damn music.

[1] Referring to James Horner, who scored *Titanic*, *Ransom*, *Apollo 13* etc.