



Conductor makes superb Seraphic Fire debut with Russian program

By David Fleshler



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Elena Sharkova led Seraphic Fire Wednesday night in Miami.

From the carved stone pulpit of St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Miami, bass Charles Evans intoned an early Russian chant over solemn tones in male voices.

Female singers, clad in black, walked slowly down the aisle. When they reached the front of the church, solo soprano voices ascended in figures that sounded almost Middle Eastern in their inflections. It was a spellbinding, hypnotic opening to what would be a rewarding evening of Russian choral music by the choir Seraphic Fire.

The title of the concert, "Rachmaninoff & Tchaikovsky: Russian Choral Treasures," was an exaggeration bordering on a scam. Of the 18 short works on the program, just three were by Russia's two most popular composers. While it may sell more tickets to frame the concert in terms of Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky, much of the appeal of the program lay in the works by lesser-known composers like Georgy Sviridov, a Soviet-era choral specialist.

Conducting the choir was Elena Sharkova, a graduate of the Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatory in St. Petersburg, who is now artistic director of the Symphony Silicon Valley Chorale. An expert on Russian choral music, she proved a genial, witty and informed guide to works she clearly loves. She drew supple, nuanced performances from the singers, with a lively sense of dynamics. As she noted and was evident throughout, Russian choral music gives extra emphasis to bass voices, and the

singers responded with rich, lustrous sounds.

The gorgeous interior of the Miami church provided an atmospheric setting, the walls crowded with images of gold crosses and Byzantine-style portraits of Christ, Mary, angels and the apostles.

A highlight was Sviridov's "Reveille," as the solo voices of soprano Sarah Moyer and tenor David McFerrin rose above processional harmonies in the chorus, building to a climax of solemn grandeur. In Pavel Chesnokov's *The Eternal Counsel*, mezzo-soprano Lexa Ferrill sang with dark-hued urgency over rumbling chords in men's voices. The slow-moving, yearning harmonies of Sviridov's *Inexpressible Wonder*, were rendered in soft-edged, glowing tones.

From Dmitry Bortniansky, a Classical era composer, came *Let God Arise*, a work that didn't sound a bit Russian. In its light gladness, it sounded more like a Baroque work from a disciple of Bach, Handel or Vivaldi. According to Sharkova, the tango has long been popular in Russia. And so we had the 20th-century composer Yuri Falik's *The Stranger*, lilting, suggestive and sensual, then vanishing like wisp of cigarette smoke in a nightclub.

The short Tchaikovsky work, "Blessed Are They," from *Ten Sacred Choruses*, was formal and stately, with the chorus drawing out the aching harmonies that could have come from his orchestral works.

The two Rachmaninoff works came from the *All-Night Vigil*, also known as the *Vespers*, and differed harmonically and stylistically from the composer's well-known orchestral and piano works. "Rejoice O Virgin" was devotional in tone, with Sharkova leading the chorus through a stirring crescendo. "To You the Victorious Leader" was an upbeat and joyful rush of tones.

Some of the most Russian-sounding works came at the end, in arrangements of the traditional folk songs "In the Dark Forest" and "Oh, How Full, How Full's My Bundle," both performed with earthy vigor.

As an encore, they performed *Beatitudes* by the contemporary composer Vladimir Martynov. Three soprano soloists sang in turn, then joined together for soaring, ecstatic harmonies before the music faded away.

The program will be repeated 7 p.m. Thursday at Naples United Church of Christ; 7:30 p.m. Friday at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Coral Gables; 7:30 p.m. Saturday at All Saints Episcopal Church in Fort Lauderdale; and 4 p.m. Sunday at All Souls Episcopal Church in Miami Beach. seraphicfire.org; 305-285-9060.

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