

From Russia with Love, Part 3

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IN THIS FINAL INSTALLMENT of Russian vocal music the songs of Rachmaninov will be presented along with vocal music from the 20th century, the Communist era. A word regarding spelling is in order. Since the Russian alphabet consists of 30 letters (20 consonants, 10 vowels), spelling from Cyrillic to English cannot be specific. The spellings of both Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky are two excellent examples. In Cyrillic, Rachmaninov is spelled Рахманинов. The final letter is the sound of /v/, and I have chosen in writing to honor the sound of that Cyrillic letter. However, final /v/ sounds almost always migrate to /f/. German musicologists in the 19th century were the first to transliterate Russian into the Western alphabet we share, and they chose the double-f spelling, which stuck. Rachmaninov himself signed his name “Rachmaninoff” when in the West. I have also seen it spelled Rakhmaninov. Similarly, Tchaikovsky is spelled Чайковский. The initial single letter represents /tʃ/, or the “ch” sound in English. German musicologists chose “tch” to represent this sound more than a century ago, and it has stuck. Current musicological practice (i.e., *Oxford Dictionary* et al.) spells the name Chaikovsky or Chaykovsky, which changes the alphabetical placement and to my mind is unsatisfactory for common usage. There is no “right” or “wrong,” only a difference in transliteration.

RACHMANINOV

The early years of Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninov (1873–1943) were not unlike those of Tchaikovsky: born to the landed gentry through his mother’s side, within the first ten years of her marriage the five estates of her dowry had been lost by her husband through bad business decisions and a somewhat profligate life. Both Sergei’s parents played the piano, as was customary for this social class at this time; his mother, the daughter of a general, was his first piano teacher. His father had no aptitude for the cataclysmic changes wrought by the emancipation of the serfs; he simply had no idea how to economically guide the family through these difficult times of industrialization. Although the emancipation of the serfs had occurred twelve years before Sergei’s birth, and while “that 1861 act clearly served to expand individual freedom in Russia, the Emancipation also greatly contracted the economic position of the class into which Rachmaninoff was born, Russia’s landed gentry.”¹ Now landless, the family moved to St. Petersburg in 1881, and within a year Sergei was offered a scholarship to the St. Petersburg Conservatory to study piano. His younger sister Sofiya died of diphtheria shortly after the move.²

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His parents separated and divorced soon thereafter, leaving his mother destitute. Sergei was not a good student during those tumultuous late childhood years; his grades were so poor in general academic studies that he almost lost his scholarship. Consequently, following the death of another sister, Yelena, he was sent that same autumn to Moscow to live with and study piano under the musical disciplinarian Nikolai Zverev. Sergei's older cousin Aleksandr Ziloti had studied with Zverev and later with Franz Liszt; it was he who suggested that "discipline and unavoidable hard work" would be good for the 12 year old.³ These were very difficult years indeed, but through Zverev's Sunday afternoon musicales Rachmaninov was introduced to Anton Rubinstein, Vasily Safonov (soon to become the new Moscow Conservatory head), Sergei Taneyev (with whom he studied counterpoint), Anton Arensky (harmony), and Pyotr Tchaikovsky, whom the young Rachmaninov idolized and who was to become "the most influential composer of [his] formative years."⁴ It is no surprise that Rachmaninov thrived under these circumstances, despite the very heavy hand employed by Zverev.

Rachmaninov's "fascination with the voice" probably went back to his early years in Oneg, the last of the family estates to be sold. By the age of 16 his sister Yelena "had developed a beautiful contralto voice and introduced him to Tchaikovsky's music," which was very popular at the time. She had been engaged to sing at the Bolshoi in the coming season, but suddenly died of pernicious anemia in the late summer of 1885.⁵ All of these early personal tragedies resulted in a depressive personality with which Sergei struggled during his life, a melancholy that is shown in his songs. For some years Dr. Nikolai Dahl treated the adult Rachmaninov "for severe melancholia and bouts of depression."⁶ Summers in the country, the solitude and joys of nature, and loving female relatives (grandmother, aunt, wife, and two daughters) were to aid greatly in easing this heaviness of spirit for the remainder of his life.

After a break with Zverev in 1889 he moved in with his paternal aunt Varvara Satina. She opened her summer estate in Ivanovka to the teen-aged Sergei, some 375 miles southeast of Moscow and 60 miles from the nearest large town. This loving act had far-reaching consequences. Ivanovka would become the place "where tranquility and the companionship of family and friends combined to make it a prime source of his creative inspiration."

Nearly every year until 1917, when the Rachmaninovs left Russia, summers were spent there. Ivanovka became "synonymous with composition" for Sergei.⁷

During his Moscow Conservatory years Rachmaninov in 1881 composed two songs for high voice that are without opus number: "C'était en avril," and "Twilight Has Fallen"/*Smerkalos/Смеркалось*. The French text was written by Edouard Pailleron and was also set by Cecile Chaminade in 1900; the Russian poem was written by Count Tolstoy. For his conservatory graduation exam in 1892, which is not unlike an honors thesis in today's universities, he composed the opera *Aleko*, written to a libretto by Danchenko from Pushkin's poem *The Gypsies*. He was 19 years old at the time, and he was awarded the highly coveted Great Gold Medal for his efforts. During these conservatory years he had begun work on his Op. 4 songs, as well as an Op. 2 cello and piano piece. Immediately after graduation he was approached by the publisher Karl Gutheil, who paid him 500 rubles for *Aleko* and the Opuses 2 and 4. This was an enormous fee, but the money was slow in coming, which forced Rachmaninov to take on a few piano pupils that first summer after graduation. Quoted by Richard Sylvester from Sergei's own memoirs, Rachmaninov "did not like having to teach in order to support himself."⁸

Most musicologists regard the 24 years 1893–1917 as Rachmaninov's creative years; the 25 years 1918 to his death in 1943 were his performing years. After the family left Russia in December 1917, sneaking out in the middle of the night through Finland, the family's gracious lifestyle was torn asunder. Their possessions and most of their wealth remained behind. After leaving Russia, Rachmaninov was forced at the age of 44 to start a new life, first in Paris, and later in the United States. He was never again inspired to put poetry to music and never wrote another song.

As one might suspect, not nearly as much has been written about his 80 songs as has been written about the piano compositions, five operas, liturgical music, chamber music, and orchestral compositions. I believe this is because his songs were so highly personal; they were the sincerest expressions of his own inner heart, and at the same time served as his compositional release from the pressures of everyday life. Rachmaninov was also one of Russia's first truly professional musicians: he conducted, composed, and on occasion, performed.

He was well known, well respected, and lionized for his talent. He made his living solely from his musical endeavors, never having to take a public service “day job,” as so many of his musical predecessors (even Tchaikovsky) had done. If on the one hand there was the music Rachmaninov composed for his *career*, on the other hand there was the music he composed for his *soul*—and these were his songs. He was widely read, as most cultured 19th century people were; yet he had a difficult time choosing poems to set, and often asked those closest to him to make suggestions. Most, if not all, his songs were dedicated to someone from his inner circle: his wife (who was also his first cousin, Natalya Satina), his great friend basso Feodor Chaliapin (to whom he dedicated five songs), his first piano teacher, the wife of Karl Gutheil, even popular singers of gypsy songs!⁹ Had he wanted to influence people with his songs, he surely would’ve dedicated them to those he wanted to impress, but that is not the case.

The complaint has also been made that his songs are too “pianistic,” that the singer’s line is secondary to the piano. I don’t agree with that assessment, and in this age of collaborative piano, are we really complaining? Rachmaninov “sang” through all his works with “romantic passions, long melodic lines, sensuous harmonies, Russian melancholy, dark sentiments and nostalgia.” For his autobiography Chaliapin told Gorky, “I shall remember him accompanying me. The singer has no reason whatever for anxiety. When he plays for me I can truly say not that ‘I’m singing’ but that ‘We are singing.’ I remember that. And I owe him much.”¹⁰

Rachmaninov’s later songs (Ops. 26–38) are extremely musically sophisticated; they require advanced Russian proficiency and well established vocal skills, and are not appropriate for beginning Russian singers. The same is true for the songs he wrote specifically for the bass voice; they were conceived with Chaliapin in mind, who by all accounts was an incredible performer, as well as being a native Russian speaker. Written for soprano in 1916, his Op. 38 includes shorter songs to more contemporary lyrics written by Symbolist poets. These turned out to be the last songs he composed. His songs have a distinct leaning to minor keys and “frequent undercurrents of turbulent triplets.”¹¹ The composer almost always put a designated voice type on his compositions, but seemed not to mind their being transposed within reason.

Among Rachmaninov’s best known works must be included “Do Not Sing for Me, Fair Maiden” (Op. 4, no. 4); “I Wait for Thee” (Op. 14, no. 1); “Spring Waters” (Op. 14, no. 11); “How Fair This Spot” (Op. 21, no. 7), and “Before My Window” (Op. 26, no. 10). These are fairly advanced songs and should normally not be attempted unless the Russian diction is very, very good. They also require a vocal finesse and range that many younger singers simply have not yet developed.

First-time Russian singers would do well with a number of lesser known but equally beautiful songs. With fewer different Russian words and a generally easier melodic line and range, these would include the following:

Op. 4, no. 3 (mezzo or baritone)—“In the Silence of the Night”/V molchani nochi tainai/В молчании ночи тайной—Poetry by A. Fyets. Range is C[#]₄–F[#]₅. Tessitura is middle range with one intense high note.

Op. 8, no. 1 (No voice specified, but lyric soprano, mezzo, or tenor would fit)—“The Water Lily”/Ryech-naya lileya/Речная лилея—Poetry by Pleshcheyev after Heine. Range is B₃–G₅. There are contrasting low and high sections, but both must be sung very lightly making it suitable for younger voices. Pretty, lyric song.

Op. 8, no. 4 (mezzo or soprano)—“I Have Grown Fond of Sorrow” (The Soldier’s Wife)/Palubila ya na ryechal svayu/ Полюбила я на печаль свою—Poetry by Pleshcheyev. Range is F[#]₄–G₅. Tessitura is moderate, but placed high. Dramatic lament of a woman left alone after her husband was forcibly “recruited” into the military.

Op. 8, no. 5 (soprano/mezzo or tenor)—“A Dream”/Sone/Сонь—Poetry by Pleshcheyev. Range is E^b₄–G₅. Tessitura is moderate, placed slightly lower than previous song. Lovely lyric song, very short.

Op. 14, no. 2 (soprano or tenor)—“The Little Island”/Astravok/Островок—Poetry by Konstantin Balmont after Shelley. Range is E^b₄–G₅. Tessitura is very high, and must be sung lyrically.

Op. 21, no. 3 (soprano or tenor)—“Twilight”/Sumerki/Сумерки—Poetry by Tkhorzhevsky. Range is C₄–G₅. Tessitura is moderate; low section is only touched upon lightly and easily.

Op. 21, no. 5 (soprano or lyric mezzo)—“Lilacs”/Sirehn/Сирень—Poetry by Beketova. Range is

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E^b₄–G₅. Tessitura is moderate for a soprano, a touch on the high side for a mezzo. Beautiful lyric piece with a gorgeous high G₅ near the end.

Op. 26, no. 2 (mezzo soprano)—“All Once I Gladly Owned”/Vsyо otnal u menya/Всѣ отнял у меня—Poetry by Tyutchev. Range is F₄–E₅. Tessitura is very middle range for a mezzo. A powerful, dramatic song, but still appropriate for a maturing young singer.

Rachmaninov—along with Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky, presented in Part 2—represent the very best Russia had to offer in the 19th century. Each was born to landed gentry, and each underwent major social change in his life due to the serf’s emancipation. Mussorgsky’s compositional life began under the rule of Imperial Russia. Tchaikovsky was able to accept the coming Industrial Revolution with elegance and restraint, yet his personal life was chaotic. Rachmaninov was born into the Silver Age of music, but fled Russia just as her cultural lights were dimmed during the Russian Revolution and Communism began its reign for the majority of the 20th century. These events are reflected in their compositional styles, especially in their songs. Mussorgsky showed his life-on-the-edge grittiness by use of an almost ugly melodic line, intense chromaticism, and a nonlyric approach to uniting words with music. Tchaikovsky sought to keep European stylistic devices in the forefront and was a crowd pleaser, compositionally speaking, even as his beautifully written melodies sang his own heart’s anguish. Rachmaninov matured in song writing through his mastery of the piano and brought this to bear upon his songs by allowing the piano to “sing” equally with the singer.

OTHER 20TH CENTURY RUSSIAN COMPOSERS

The advent of Communism after the October Revolution of 1917 greatly changed all cultural aspects in Russia. When the Bolsheviks seized power in the proletarian uprising Karl Marx had predicted, total anarchy reigned. In November 1917, the Bolsheviks signed a truce with Germany, effectively releasing them from any further involvement in World War I, and paving the way for Lenin’s rise to power. A devastating civil war ensued until 1921, during which acts of extreme violence and political suppression were commonplace.¹² As a result,

a wave of musical giants left Russia. Some of those joining Rachmaninov included Medtner, Tcherepnin, Stravinsky, and Prokofiev. Prokofiev returned in 1936 after deciding he could “toe the line,” so to speak, and went on to compose the score for the Sergei Eisenstein 1938 film *Aleksander Nevsky*, which Prokofiev remolded into a nationalistic cantata in 1939. Prokofiev wrote several vocal compositions, but the most appropriate ones for beginning repertoire are to be found in the Op. 104 *Russian Folksongs/Ruskikh narodnykh pyesen/Русских народных песен*. These are a set of 12 arrangements Prokofiev made during his so-called “Soviet” years, and are unique in that no other Russian composer had set these particular songs to music. Prokofiev unfortunately died on the same day as Josef Stalin (March 5, 1953), and his death went virtually unnoticed, overshadowed by the larger event.

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in 1906, 15 years later than Prokofiev’s 1891 birth, which made a huge difference in his ability to adapt to the new Communist régime. Shostakovich lived through the horrors of the civil war years as a young teen; his musical mark had not yet been made and he had little choice but to remain in the newly formed Soviet Union. He was swayed in his early 20s towards an unsatisfactory “extreme modernist” thrust, and in a few years counteracted that with “programme” music. Unfortunately, he decided to make a political statement with some of his early symphonic pieces, which were seen by the authorities as antirevolutionary.¹³ Shostakovich fell from grace several times during his life and did not join the Community Party until 1960, and then only after intense pressure following the death of his wife. He was ashamed of this capitulation, but it allowed several of his “banned” works to be performed.¹⁴ In addition to his operas, many vocal works were written throughout his career, but they are primarily intended for solo voice with choir or with chamber orchestra. Few of his songs are recommended for beginning Russian-language singers, with two notable exceptions: Op. 100, *Spanish Songs/Ispankiye Pyesni/Испанские Песни* for mezzo soprano and piano, and his Op. 79 *From Jewish Folk Poetry/Iz yevreiskai narodnai poezi/Из Еврейской Народной Поээй*. Both of these song sets are easily approached by the younger voice and the beginning Russian-language singer. The gorgeous Op. 127, *Seven Poems of A. Blok/*

Syem Stikhotvoreni A. Bloka/Семь Стихотворений А. Блока for soprano and piano trio are difficult for less than the most advanced singers.

Two late 20th century composers are Georgi Sviridov (1915–1998) and Rodion Shchedrin (b. 1932). Shchedrin had a choral music background, studying at the Moscow Choir School from 1945–1950, and graduating from the Moscow Conservatory in 1955, having studied composition. Most of his music for the voice is to be found within his many cantatas, oratorios, and other choral pieces. He is one of the better known Russian composers of the late 20th century, and since 1992 has divided his time between Munich and Moscow. Although he “expresses the traditions of Russian culture more directly than any other composer of the second half of the 20th century,”¹⁵ his prominence has been somewhat eclipsed in the West by Georgi Sviridov, thanks to the efforts of one famous singer.

Sviridov’s initial critical attention was achieved through a song cycle, written while a student at the Leningrad Central Music School (*not* the Conservatory). *Six Songs to the Verses of A. Pushkin/Shest’ romansov na stikhi A. Pushkina/Шесть романсов на стихи А. Пушкина* catapulted the 19 year old student to an unprecedented invitation to join the vaulted ranks of the Composers’ Union, as well as an opportunity to continue his education at the esteemed Leningrad Conservatory. His songs helped lead the country toward a new nationalism and culminated in his 1977 “philosophical, religious and visionary” song by the poet Sergei Esenin (1895–1925), “Russia Cast Adrift” (also translated as “Cast-Off Russia”)/*Otchalivshaya Rus/Otchalivshaya Rus*, for tenor and piano.¹⁶ In 1987, the composer set a cycle of 5 songs, with “Russia Cast Adrift” as the final song, for baritone and piano.¹⁶ Before Sviridov’s death of a heart attack on January 6, 1998, Russian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky and his pianist Mikhail Arkadiev worked with the composer and established a group of 12 Esenin poems by adding 7 to the original 5, which Hvorostovsky has recorded and sung in many performances around the world for the past 15 years or so. This version, so beautifully championed by Hvorostovsky, is the one most familiar to us. The music is lyric, sensitive, and poignant. The poems are fairly short, with accessible

language, and may be appropriate for strong, intelligent baritones. I cannot help but believe Hvorostovsky began this project in response to the end of the Communist era in 1989 out of a deep love for his native land when Russia found herself, once again, adrift.

NOTES

1. Charles A. Ruud, “Fin-de-siècle Culture and the Shaping of Rachmaninoff,” *Studies in Music from the University of Western Ontario* 15 (1995): 23.
2. Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninoff* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1st American edition, 1994), 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 3.
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. Robert Jacobson, “The Vocal Rachmaninoff,” *Opera News* 38, no. 8 (December 22, 1973): 25.
6. Anne Simpson, “Dear Re: A Glimpse into the Six Songs of Rachmaninoff’s Opus 38,” *College Music Symposium* 24, no. 1 (1984): 98.
7. Norris, 7.
8. Richard D. Sylvester, *Rachmaninoff’s Complete Songs: A Companion with Texts and Translations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 28.
9. *Ibid.*, 78.
10. Jacobson, 27.
11. Simpson, 102.
12. Frances Maes, *A History of Russian Music from Karmainskaya to Babi Yar* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002), 237.
13. Alfred J. Swan, *Russian Music and Its Sources in Chant and Folk-Song* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), 201.
14. David Fanning and Laurel Fay, “Shostakovich, Dmitry,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/52560pg4> (accessed July 21, 2014).
15. Valentina Kholopova, “Shchedrin, Rodion Konstantinovich,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25613> (accessed July 22, 2014).
16. Aleksandr Sergeevich Belonenko, “Sviridov, Georgy Vasil’yevich,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/27180> (accessed July 21, 2014).