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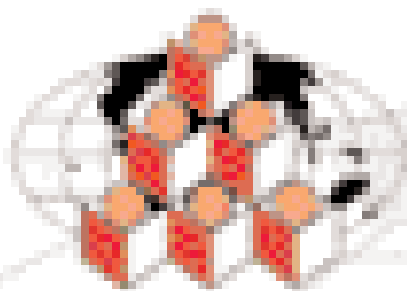
International Choral Bulletin

ICB

Dossier

Choral Music in Belarus Choral Music in Poland





International Federation for Choral Music

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International Krakow Choral Festival, Poland

Choral Music in Belarus

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Maciej Przerwa

Aspects of Choral Education in Belarus

Svetlana Gerasimovich

Choral Director and Teacher



The phenomenon of Belarusian musical culture represents an extensive stratum of the spiritual life of the Belarusian nation. One of its important components is the training of choral conductors which, at all stages of its development, has been closely connected with choral singing.

Choral education originated in the 10th century, in the Middle Ages. At that time, the first singing schools were established within Orthodox churches and monasteries, the most famous of which were the schools of Polotsk, Turov and Vitebsk. We can look upon the time when the Grand Principality of Lithuania was formed on Belarusian territories, before the Renaissance and Baroque epochs (second half of the 16th century to the beginnings of the 17th century), as the “golden age of choral education. The traditions of Western European music and musical education became firmly established here as a result of the union between the Grand Principality of Lithuania and the Polish Kingdom. Church singing was included into “the Seven Liberal Arts”, studied at educational establishments of various religions, and thus, musical education became an inalienable part of forming an individual of high culture. Choral singers – choristers and precentors for serving in churches, and professional musicians, again for the church but also for choirs at royal and noble courts– were trained in Jesuit educational establishments (the Academy of Vilna, colleges, musical seminaries) and Orthodox brethren schools situated in Vilno, Mogilev, Brest, Grodno, Minsk and other cities. The training of choral singers reached a high standard and was conducted systematically on the basis of manuals and methodical guidelines. Each educational establishment had a choir that performed a large repertoire of religious compositions, ranging from monody to polyphony. Singing groups took part in

church services and theatrical performances at schools which included panegyrical and ecclesiastical hymns, vocal dialogues and ballet choirs. Major advancements in the sphere of choral education on Belarusian territories are connected with the activity of such prominent musicians as N. Diletskiy and S. Lauxmin, the authors of treatises on music theory “An Idea of Musical Grammar” and “The Theory and Practice of Music”.



A picture of N. Diletskiy's book “An Idea of Musical Grammar”

Another interesting period in the development of choral education was the second half of the 18th century. This era saw the intensive growth of the music culture of the aristocracy, characterized by performances of large-scale works and a great diversity of repertoire. Peasant theatres became widespread. Wealthy patrons of the arts like the Radzivil, the Sapieha and the Zoricz families would order the establishment of opera and ballet groups and various orchestras within their theatres, and would also open theatrical and musical schools which, in contrast to church schools, trained actors and musicians for performing secular music. Such schools were founded in Nesvizh, Grodno, and Slutsk. Their curriculum included choral lessons,

instrumental tuition and studies of theory and composition. Students took part in theatrical performances as choristers.

The turn from the 19th to the 20th century was marked by active development of choral education. The incorporation of Belarusian territories into the Russian Empire and the beginning of the democratization of public and concert musical activity entailed substantial changes in choral education. Alongside universal singing training, realized in all general and specialized musical educational establishments, the professional training of choral conductors was initiated. The teachers of church singing for “ordinary” schools, grammar schools and other educational establishments, and precentors of amateur and church choirs, were trained at secular colleges (five for teachers at secondary schools, three for future teachers in higher education) and clerical educational establishments (eleven specialized schools, four seminaries), as well as in summer courses for teachers and precentors.

The process of training choir singers and teachers of religious singing was strongly influenced by the popular education reform, aimed at strengthening the religious, moral and patriotic education of youth, as well as by Russian methodological techniques and singing traditions.

The training of precentors was oriented towards the development of musical abilities and skills that students would need in their future profession, and the formation of an active and conscious attitude to their future vocation: the study of elementary theory of music, harmony and of methods of primary vocal and choral education; the mastery of a certain range of religious chants; oral training for “vocal” purposes, the formation of choral and conducting skills; learning to play musical instruments – all these were integral parts of choral singers’ training.

...Aspects of Choral Education in Belarus

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Choral conductors' education was based on the principle of an inseparable connection with choral practice. Students' choral singing was represented by varied choral groups: homogeneous – female (in female church-run schools and grammar schools), children's (in schools run by local parishes and "exemplary" schools – the schools in which student teachers did their teaching practice under supervision, which were thus particularly good and advanced schools), male (at theological seminaries and specialized schools), and mixed – at teachers' and preceptors' courses. Students' choirs performed regularly. Important participants in Sunday church services, choirs also engaged in many other types of performing activity, taking part in concerts held to mark anniversaries, patronal feasts, visits of high-ranking personalities and associated school events, and literary and musical evenings. The repertoire of students' choirs was formed as a direct outcome of performing practice and included religious music, works by Russian and foreign composers, and folk songs. On the basis of choral performing practice, it became possible to single out general principles of the dramatic structure of choral performances (programmes were arranged according to topical, chronological, stylistic or genre subjects) and main criteria for evaluating the level of performing skills.

After the triumph of the Great October Socialist Revolution, the establishment of the forms and methods of choral conductors' education in Belarus became closely connected to the formation of Soviet art as a whole. For the first time ever, the children of workers and peasants got free access to educational establishments, and the state became responsible for managing the educational system. Music schools, technical secondary schools, conservatories were opened in various provinces of Belarus. The process of training choral conductors there

was characterized by a combination of teaching, performing and general education. These establishments had their own choral groups whose repertoire included quite difficult 4- to 8-part compositions.

A lot of interesting aspects of musical education in Belarus are connected to the activity of such prominent conductors as N. Malko and M. Antsev. Their ideas on the contents of lessons in conducting, on the correlation between performing and pedagogical training in the process of educating choral conductors, had a positive effect on music pedagogics in Belarus.

A significant role in the training of national music professionals was played by the State Conservatory (founded in 1932) which has a special department of choral conducting.

At different times, the department was headed by famous performers and conductors, among them I. Bari, I. Gitgartz and V. Rovdo. The entire activity of the department was closely linked to Belarusian choral performance and the development of choral amateur activity. Many conservatory students combined lessons with engagement in professional choral groups. This was not only authorized, but even encouraged, because it favored the consolidation of theoretical knowledge through practice. To this end, the students of all years were also expected to conduct the choir of the conservatory. A special feature of the department of choral conducting at the Belarusian State Conservatory was the close connection of choral class activity with other specialized disciplines, among them solfeggio, harmony, choral score-reading, musical and choral literature and piano.

Every new period in the social, economic and cultural life of society posed new corresponding challenges, including those in the sphere of musical education. The modern system of choral conductors'



The Belarusian State Conservatory named after Lunacharsky, since 1992 Belarusian Academy of Music

education represents a chain of interacting links: primary – secondary – higher – postgraduate. Primary conductors' training performs the double function of providing general musical education to the young generation as well as supplying a professional orientation to the most talented children, cultivating primary professional knowledge and skills in them. Educational establishments at this level include music schools for children, choral schools and schools of art. In the Republic, there function a number of specialized schools for gifted children offering a 12-year period of study that encompasses the primary and secondary stages of musical education. Primary education is characterized by different study plans and the creation of advanced systems of assessment.

Specialized secondary choral conductors' education is the stage of professional self-determination of a creative individual; it is also the time for acquiring professional knowledge and skills. In Belarus, the foundations for this level of development are provided by the choral departments of specialized musical schools and colleges that function according to standardized study plans and curricula. Their 10-point grading system is the most precise way to determine the level of students' competence.

Tertiary education (for students continuing their training beyond the age of compulsory schooling) is the period of professional establishment of a person and of the achievement of mastery in the sphere of choral art. This stage of education is provided for by the Academy of Music (up to 1992 the Belarusian State Conservatory), the University of Culture and the Pedagogical University, which are notable for their wide and varied approaches to the contents of studies at choral conducting departments. Among the important features of modern choral conductors' training are

diversification, the retention of traditions and the continuity of the educational process.

An integral quality of the process of choral performers' training is the unity of theory and practice – the choral class being one of the major parts of study activity. Students' choirs functioning at all educational establishments actively engage in a variety of concerts and other activities that serve to extend their experience.

Nowadays, domestic choral conducting education faces the challenge of preserving and developing the national music culture: the artistic works of folklore and the national composing school; performing traditions manifested in a range of methods of transmitting the performer's message; and vocal choral techniques, established in the Republic.

Educational establishments solve this task in a number of ways: examples of folklore and works by Belarusians are included into the repertoire of students' choirs and into specialization and singing curricula – they are exploited according to the current singing tradition; and students' groups take part in artistic presentations of the Union of Belarusian Composers.

Another challenge of the present day is the integration of the educational system into the European community. There are a number of extensive ways in which this is achieved:

- students and choirs take part in international festivals, competitions and creative projects;
- educational establishments invite prominent professionals from the sphere of choral singing to deliver lectures on the issues of Western European choral singing;
- international contests, seminars, scientific and methodological conferences, workshops are put on by educational establishments.

An important aim of all the ramifications of the educational system remains the enhancement of the professional training of choral art experts. An active application of modern computer technologies in class, turning the monologue of lectures into a dialogue, the arrangement of new forms of students' out-of-class activities, the implementation of role play and problem-oriented methods into the educational process, the involvement of talented young people into scientific research activity, graduates' internship in amateur and professional choral groups – these are the leading means by which the efficiency of studies is increased.

The proficiency level of graduates at all stages is fairly high. Students' choral groups

are frequently to be found as participants and winners of domestic and international choral festivals and contests. Singing groups play a leading role in the organization of choral festivals at local and nationwide level.

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ESTONIAN CHORAL ASSOCIATION

The History of Belarusian Opera Art

And the Role of the Chorus in Operas by Belarusian Composers

Yury Karaev

History of Music Student,
Choral Conducting Diploma



8 In the eighteenth century the development of music education and professionalism caused the appearance of numerous private music theaters on the territory of present-day Belarus, which invited conductors, composers, teachers and performers to work there. In the first instance, researchers attribute this period of musical and theatrical flourishing to the fact that the aristocracy started to take more interest in musical and theatrical genres which required a considerable amount of financing.

The opera “Agatka” by J. D. Goland (1746-1827) is considered to be the first national Belarusian opera created by a professional composer. It was staged on 17 September 1784 in Nesvizh in honor of the arrival of the king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Stanislaw August. The opera was a great success and was staged several times in Warsaw (1785, 1788, 1791, 1799, 1820), Lvov (1796-1799), Lublin (1786), Krakov (1815) and Poznan (1826). The music of the opera displays the main features of J. D. Goland’s style as a follower of the Viennese and Berlin schools. At the same time the melodic patterns of the music performed by the lyric characters and employed for dancing were also influenced by Slavic folklore.

Unfortunately, numerous opera scores by famous composers who worked on the territory of Belarus in the 18th and 19th centuries disappeared without trace, or only their fragments have been preserved. These include the operas “The changed philosopher” by M. K. Oginsky (staged in 1771), “Ill-gotten gains never prosper” by J. D. Goland (1780-1782), “Voit of the Village in Alba”, also by J. D. Goland (staged in 1785-1786) and “The Competition of

Musicians” and “Village Girl” by S. Moniuschko. Moreover, it is difficult to study the manuscripts of those works which have come down to us because many of them currently are held in musical archives beyond the borders of the modern Republic of Belarus. In the first instance this refers to the works of S. Moniuschko: “Recruit Conscription” (staged on 10 October 1841) and “Miraculous Water” (staged in the 1840s in Vilnius). The fragments of these works are currently kept by the Warsaw Musical Society.

A new phase of the development of the art of national opera is connected with the opening in 1938 of the State Theater for Opera and Ballet of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Numerous stagings of foreign operatic masterpieces as well as of Belarusian national operas took place there from 1938 to 1940: “Mikhas' Padgorny” by E. K. Tsikotsky, “In the Woods of Palesse” by A. V. Bogatyryov and “The Flower of Happiness” by A. E. Turenkov are among these.

During World War II the staff of the theatre were evacuated from Minsk, and the building of the theater was seriously damaged. The opening of the reconstructed theater was marked by the première of one of the best national operas, “Kastus' Kalinouski” by D. A. Lukas. The pre-war repertoire was fully restored only by the year 1949. Operas staged in the late 1940s and 1950s represented the very best of Belarusian opera theatre. Among them were operas by E. K. Tsikotsky and A. E. Turenkov as well as works by A. V. Bogatyryov: “Nadezhda Durova” (1947), Yu. V. Semeniako: “Thorny Rose” (1960), “When the leaves fall” (1968), “Star Venus” (1970) and “Your Spring” (1962) by E. A. Glebov and “Song about Fate” by V. G. Muliavin.

The distinguishing features of the national operas of this period are their use of the people's liberation as subject matter and their tense dramatic plots, closely connected with the events of World War II. It is also worth mentioning that the choral episodes that supply the background for the action have an everyday (genre) nature, which adds a certain national coloring to the operas. Composers often use quotations from popular songs and dances, various types of popular lyric and stylized war songs. The national and historic foundation of operatic works of that period contributed to the establishment of the chorus as one of the main acting characters.

The modern period of the development of operatic art is connected to the flourishing of composers' activity and starts in the 1970s. During the first half of the 20th century the national school of composing was developing under the strong influence of the Russian school (both in stylistic and artistic aspects). Only by the middle of the 1970s did the impact of postmodernism and the active synchronization of the national musical and theatrical process with the European one enable the artistic system of contemporary opera art to renew itself.

The beginning of this most recent phase of the development of Belarusian operatic art is often linked to the staging of the opera “Giordano Bruno” by S. Cortes (1977), which touched upon the burning problems of modern society and its outlook on the world. The author's original interpretation of Giordano Bruno's life shaped to fit the genre of “philosophic and journalistic action with oratorical features and traits of hagiographical drama” raised much interest from audiences as well as from musical specialists. The dominating role of the chorus consists in building plotlines, in vivid structural and compositional orientation,



S. A. Cortes

which is expressed in the function of uniting and framing of certain episodes, as well as permeating the opera as a whole. The fact should also be highlighted that the text of the chorus's part is symbolic, which is displayed through metaphorical perspectives in the text that allow us to perceive the action beyond the boundaries of time and place.

Other operatic works of S. Cortes include "Mother Courage" (1980) and "Visit of a Lady" (1989). In both, the importance of the part of the chorus part in building basic plotlines of the operas, defining the time and place of action, cannot be underestimated. The introduction of the chorus contributes to the vivid representation of the culminating phases of the opera. With the help of choral sonority the composer manages to produce cinematographic effects of "stopframe", "montage" and "dissolve view", using choral scenes to highlight such inherent traits of the parable genre as allusiveness, semantic duality, and also the introduction of character-commentators.

Other composers, too, enlist the help of the chorus to supply similar dramaturgic devices, for example Yu. V. Semeniako in "New Land" (1978), D. B. Smolsky in "Ancient Legend" (1978) and "Francisk Skoryna" (1988), V. E. Soltan in "King Stach's Wild Hunt" (1988) and "Lady



A. V. Bondarenko

Yadviga" (1990) and E. A. Glebov in "Master and Margarita" (1992). Thus it can be stated that one of the distinguishing features of the style of the Belarusian national musical theatre is the exceptional importance of the opera chorus. The most recent "big" national opera was composed comparatively long ago. In 1992 the Belarusian National Theater of Opera and Ballet decided to stage the opera "The Prince of Novogrudok" by A. V. Bondarenko. The plot tells us about historic events during the formation of the Great Lithuanian Principality in the middle of the 13th century. The historic foundation and vivid spiritual and religious coloring of the plot determined the genre of this opera, in which choral scenes are undoubtedly the dominant part of the musical and dramaturgic action as a whole. This can be proved by the way opera specialists categorize "The Prince of Novogrudok": "opera-oratory", "epic choral opera", "historical drama", "choral opera".

In the operas by Belarusian composers choral scenes often play the main role in the development of the musical and dramaturgic action, but in this context "The Prince of Novogrudok" is almost unique. Large-scale choral scenes draw up the Christian and pagan plotlines of the opera, and it's the epic aspect represented by the chorus that

performs the unifying function within the opera. The choral part, as well as dialogues and ensembles, allows the immediate action of the opera to develop, and the chorus is an active participant in this, taking part in the action and commenting on it on behalf of the author; the voice of the chorus has both general and subjective meaning. The chorus sympathizes with the characters and "rises above" the action, generalizing what is going on on-stage from the point of view of modern time and history.

The opera "The Prince of Novogrudok" was not only a landmark in the history of national opera art, but also embraced the tendency of returning to a spiritual and Christian outlook in musical and theatrical genres. Religious music, which was prohibited during the Soviet period (1917–1980s), again began to penetrate into secular genres such as cantata, oratory, symphony with chorus and opera. This is probably connected to the fact that such works embrace numerous topics and ideas which are highly significant to the composers and lie at the core of their spiritual and creative activity.

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Belarusian Choral Singing

Nadezhda Buntsevich
Musicologist



10 Belarusian professional choral art is highly developed. There are seven large choral groups in the country which are financed by the state. All of them frequently perform abroad, each time praised and getting new offers for concert touring and creative cooperation, winning prizes at prestigious foreign festivals and competitions.

Each of these choirs has its own character, its original sound and its own favorite pieces of repertoire. In fact, such specialization is not a matter of principle for the choral groups – rather, it has been brought about by the concert and theatrical institutions to which they are affiliated. At the same time, each choir strives to widen its genre and, as much as possible, its stylistic palette. Therefore there is a tendency which can be considered common for all of them: universality of performance and the ability to interpret professionally works of different genres and styles. The classics of the 19th century are still the most popular pieces in their programmes.



The chorus of the National Academic Bolshoi Theatre of Opera and Ballet of the Republic of Belarus

The chorus of the National Academic Bolshoi Theatre of Opera and Ballet of the Republic of Belarus (www.belarusopera.by) specializes, naturally, in theatrical repertoire, which embraces about 30 works with well-developed choral parts. They include such recognized choral operas as “Prince Igor” by A. Borodin, “Boris Godunov” and “Khovanshchina” by M. Musorgsky, “Nabucco” and “Aida” by G. Verdi and a

ballet staging of the stage cantata “Carmina Burana” by C. Orff. Starting from 1993, the choir was led by Nina Lomanovich. Its membership has been renewed significantly by graduates from the Belarusian State Academy of Music, many of which already underwent practical training in the theater during their studies. Concert performances by the choir also are a success – both a capella and with orchestra. A good choice of repertoire, including complex choral pieces, concert performances of operas which are not in the theater’s repertoire – all these factors contribute to the constant improvement of an already highly professional choir. The large size of the group (it consists of 70 singers) doesn’t prevent the choir from enjoying a well-blended sound and perfect rhythmic ensemble, and it contributes to colorful timbre. It also enables it to perform in a large diversity of size of combinations of choral and ensemble groups, as required by various opera scores.

During its 70-year history the State Academic Choir (Capella) of the Republic of Belarus named after G. Schirma (www.philharmonic.by) has changed its creative path several times. It was founded in 1939 as an amateur choir which sang Belarusian folk songs collected and arranged by folklorist and chorus master Grigory Schirma. Having obtained the status of a state choir, the group enlarged its repertoire. Alongside its purely vocal activities, it started to use a choreographic ensemble and instrumental accompaniment. Today the choir still consists exclusively of choral singers, but it successfully performs with the best orchestras of the world. The repertoire of the group includes not only secular choral classics, but also religious works of different epochs and modern works by Belarusian composers. In the last decade the singers have mastered the opera genre, participating in opera performances in other countries; such performances have included “Aida”, “La

Traviata” and “Nabucco” by G. Verdi, “Tosca” and “Sister Angelica” by G. Puccini, “The Sleepwalker” by V. Bellini, “Fidelio” by L. van Beethoven and “The Mastersingers of Nuremberg” and the “Ring Cycle” by R. Wagner. Since 1987, the choir has been directed by a representative of the St. Petersburg choral school, Liudmila Efimova. The group’s manner of performing is characterized by using “large strokes of the paint brush” and vivid contrasts in order to underline the structure of the pieces they perform.



The Academic Choir of the Belarusian National State Television and Radio Company

The Academic Choir of the Belarusian National State Television and Radio Company

(www.tvr.by/rus/musiccol.asp?pr=choir) was created in 1931 and during the pre-war era it worked exclusively on air. From the 1960s to the 1980s its primary task was to continuously add to the audio archives with recordings of Belarusian academic music and arrangements of folksongs. However, in the 1990s this group also started touring. For more than 40 years the choir was led by the famous Victor Rovdo; since 2008, after his death, it has been headed by Olga Yanum, a graduate of the Belarusian State Academy of Music specializing in choral conducting and singing. Nowadays the choir is involved in a new creative search, turning to the most recent Belarusian scores. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the kaleidoscopic nature of the repertoire of the choir, the group’s performances of religious music of different denominations remain their unclipped achievement.



The National Academic Folk Choir named after G. Tsitovich

Belarusian folk songs are within the repertoire of most choral groups in the country, but the **National Academic Folk Choir named after G. Tsitovich** (<http://belhor.org/>), founded in 1952, really specializes in this sphere. This group was created by the famous folklorist and chorus master G. Tsitovich (the 100th anniversary of his birth was celebrated recently). As far back as in the pre-war period he headed an amateur village chorus which sang in a folk manner – using the so-called “open” sound, a kind of singing in which vowels are sung as they sound in speech, in contrast to the rounded, reduced sound of academically trained voices. This group, for the most part, became the creative laboratory for the further development of the country’s choral folk singing which, as time went by, began to progress not only spontaneously, but also in an organized and professional manner. G. Tsitovich also prepared his successor: Mikhail Drinevsky became the chorus-master straight after graduating from the Belarusian State Conservatory. Nowadays, many members of the choir are graduates of the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts, where students study folk singing. Apart from the choir, the group includes a choreographic company as well as an orchestral company in which folk instruments are present. This makes possible not only the performance of separate pieces, but also of complete theatrical compositions.

Recently the choral group’s repertoire has been enriched by academic *a cappella* works and arrangements of original songs. But the top achievement of the group is the reconstruction of the ritual of the Belarusian wedding which was made on the basis of true folksongs in collaboration with folk music specialist Zinaida Mozheiko and composer Vyacheslav Kuznetsov. Folk choirs are among the most popular Belarusian groups abroad. Annually this group makes more than 70 guest performances, touring over Europe, as well as Turkey, Canada, China and other countries.

The Belarusian State Chamber Choir (www.philharmonic.by) was founded in 1988 as the result of a so-called “creative competition” between two amateur groups, but its rival didn’t lose out either: today it’s another philharmonic group – the vocal ensemble “Camerata”. Whereas the priorities of the organizer and first director of the Chamber Choir, Igor Matiukhov, lay primarily with very early music on the one hand and very recent works on the other, Natalia Mikhailova, who became the head of the group in 2000, strives to further widen its stylistic and genre palette. Brilliantly performing religious works, the choir even sings jazz pieces, with other repertoire ranging from staged concert performances, including some involving other groups and invited soloists, right to opera scenes by Belarusian composers.

The Musical Capella “Sonorus” (<http://sonorus.by>) started in 1992, when in Molodechno, a town not far from Minsk, a regional chamber choir of the same name appeared, consisting of graduates and teachers of the Molodechno musical college as well as of leaders of independent choirs. The initiative of the organizer and director Alexey Schut allowed the new group to make a rapid and successful career. “Sonorus”, which appeared at the dawn of Belarusian statehood (Belarus, previously part of the

USSR, became independent in 1991), aspires to renew the best traditions of musical capellas, which were wide-spread in the 18th century, when the Belarusian lands were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Today the capella includes a choir, soloists and an orchestra, which allows it to include large-scale vocal and symphonic pieces in its repertoire. The group often goes on tour all over Belarus, performing its educational functions. Works of Belarusian composers of different periods are a significant part of its repertoire. Lately the choir has also frequently taken part in events where music alternates with literary contributions, and even in musical performances based on works of musical and poetic classics, fairytale operas and ballets. Last but not least, two years ago the group came to stage the chamber opera “The Little Prince”, which was written at its request by the Belarusian composer Andrey Mdivani.

The Chorus of the State Academic Musical Theater (www.musicaltheatre.by) doesn’t usually perform outside the State Academy, except in gala concerts. Nevertheless its work in performances and particularly in musicals arouses admiration. The members of the choir, mainly young graduates of the Belarusian State Academy of Music, learned to move so delightfully that their agility sometimes reaches the standard of professional dancers. The management of the theater, which has recently changed, has not refused to continue staging musical comedies, classical operettas and musicals, but also begun to lay emphasis on the singers’ concert activity, including in the academic sphere. This tendency also applies to the theatre chorus lead by Svetlana Petrova.

One of the paradoxes of Belarusian culture is its sharp discrepancy between supply and demand. The level of professional choral singing is very high, but the interest of the public for it has dropped dramatically.

...Belarusian Choral Singing

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During Soviet times choral lessons were a compulsory part of general secondary education, and amateur choral groups were regularly financed. The educational reform led to a reduction not only of singing lessons, but also of all subjects in the humanities. Apart from that, new financial circumstances led to the dissolution of numerous amateur groups, although many professional groups were able to survive. Today amateur choral singing, having gone through a range of difficulties, is beginning to recover. Orthodox and Catholic choruses

appear, competitions are held – more often of religious music. But the opportunities for displaying the best amateur groups, especially abroad, are still limited.

Nadezhda Burtsevich is a music specialist, a member of the Belarusian Union of Composers, senior teacher of the Belarusian State Academy of Music, Head of the Department of Music and Musical Theater, member of the editorial board of the newspaper "Culture", laureate of the national prize "For spiritual revival" (1999) and holder of a diploma of the Commission of the Republic of Belarus on

UNESCO Affairs (2004). She is a graduate of the Belarusian State Conservatory (1985) and undertook postgraduate studies there (1996). She has worked on the musical editorial board of Belarusian Radio (1994–2002) and cooperated with Belarusian TV and the editorial boards of national newspapers and magazines. The author has about ten scripts for documentaries to her name as well as more than a thousand radio and TV programs, about three thousand publications.

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To the Peak of Mastery

Inessa Bodyako

Associate Professor,
National Music Academy of Bielorrussia



Are you fond of fame?

- Of course, I am an artist indeed. My sphere is the concert hall, stage, audience.



Victor Victorovich Rovdo (1921 – 2007)

Victor Victorovich Rovdo (1921 – 2007) was a People's Artist of the USSR. He began the Belarusian phase of his creative work in August 1956 after he had graduated from classes led by the People's Artist of the Republic of Lithuania K. Kavyatskas at Vilnius music conservatory and had finished postgraduate studies under the direction of the People's Artist of the USSR Professor Sveshnikov at the Moscow State conservatory named after P. I. Tchaikovsky. For over four decades he was the immortal leader of two choirs – the students' choir of the Belarusian State Academy of Music and the choir of Belarusian radio and television. He was a true leader of the Belarusian school of choral conducting and a "patriarch" of national choral art.

His short biography will show how the amazing sequence and purposefulness of one man's life can present an epoch of choral celebration to the whole country.



Victor Victorovich Rovdo with his family

Victor's father priest Vladimir Rovdo settled down with his family in Smorgon which was part of Poland from 1920 to 1939. The Orthodox Church in Smorgon was destroyed during the war 1917–1918, so Father Vladimir equipped one of the rooms of his house as a domestic church¹. In the other room Father's Vladimir's second son was born in November 1921. He was called Victor in honor of the holy martyr Victor. As a result of this, Victor Vladimirovich often said that he "was born in a temple". In 1926 a primary school teacher in Smorgon discovered the boy's extraordinary abilities for music, and in autumn 1929, together with his older brother Anatoly, Victor Rovdo entered Vilnius seminary. The Vilnius phase² (1929–1951) in the biography of Victor Rovdo is connected with studying Latin, Greek, German, Polish and Belarusian, learning mathematics, physics, chemistry, natural science, logic, rhetoric and, of course, training in vocal skills, how to be a good precentor and learning music-theoretical subjects. In autumn 1936, when Victor Rovdo was almost 15 years old, the rector of the seminary presented him with a tuning-fork and appointed him the precentor of the seminary



A choir of amateurs (Victor Rovdo is in the middle of the first row)

chorus for weekday divine services. This is when the activity of the young conductor Rovdo began. At the end of the 1930s small vocal groups were especially popular in Vilnius. Some seminary students together with Victor organized a vocal ensemble that often performed during church and secular celebrations³. In the autumn of 1938 some seminary students received an invitation from Grigory Romanovich Shirma to join his chorus in which progressive Belarusian young people came together, Belarusian folk songs were sung and the Belarusian language was spoken. As early as June 1940, after the beginning of the Second World War, Victor Rovdo, among other graduates, received the graduation certificate of Vilnius Divinity School, an institution which was not recognized by the Soviet government. The mother of the future conductor, Stefanida Rovdo, badly wanted her children to be doctors⁴, so during the war, in 1942 and 1943, Victor Rovdo, together with a group of other enthusiasts, attended lectures at a clandestine medical school. They succeeded in

...To the Peak of Mastery

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concealing these lessons from the Gestapo for quite a long time, but eventually the secret educational institution was discovered and students were surrounded by their enemies. Victor escaped by the skin of his teeth, hidden behind a bath-tub full of formalin in the cellar where the dissecting room was. After the war ended the question "What should I do?" came up seriously for Victor. He didn't want to give up his hobbies, so in summer 1945 he entered both the medical faculty of Vilnius University and Vilnius conservatory. He managed to get everywhere in time because of having a motorcycle. From 1946 he led a choir at the Monastery of the Sacred Spirit which consisted of conservatory students such as singers and composers of choral music. Many choristers came from priesthood families. This took place at an incredibly difficult time for religious denominations in the USSR. Somebody made a denunciation to the conservatory administration that Rovdo together with some other students had taken part in an Easter vigil. The day after Easter the leader of the choir, non-Komsomol (!) Rovdo, was dismissed from the conservatory by the decision of the administration. One year later Victor Rovdo was reinstated in the fifth course with a brilliant character reference from his place of employment (leading the choir of the officer's wives at the military airbase outside Vilnius), and after he had successfully passed his final examination at the Lithuanian State Conservatory, in late autumn 1951 he arrived in Moscow to take up a postgraduate studentship at the Moscow State Conservatory. In Moscow from 1951 to 1956, during these postgraduate studies, Victor Rovdo worked as a concertmaster (from March 1952), then as choirmaster (from December 1954) of the State Academic Russian Choir of the USSR, and also as chorus master of a boys' choir at the Moscow song-school (from March 1952) as well as a chorus master at the opera studio of the Moscow



V. Rovdo is conducting the USSR State Academic Russian chorus in Zagorsk, 1953

Conservatory named after Tchaikovsky (from March 1954). In Belarus professor V. Rovdo showed his intense creative vitality for the first time when working as a choirmaster with the State Choir of the BSSR (1956-1965). From September 1965 V. V. Rovdo was already working as chief conductor and artistic director of the choir of Belarusian radio and television. In August 1990 V. V. Rovdo was awarded the honorary title "Academic" for major achievements in the development of the art of choral music, and in September of that year he was awarded the honorary title "People's Artist of the USSR". Starting in 1956, the active pedagogical work of Victor Rovdo at the Belarusian State Academy of Music worked in three different 'threads' (for 50 years!): heading the Department of Choral Conducting, leading student choirs and teaching choral conducting. Over the years of work with student choirs (from 1961) more than 800 chorus masters went through his school, his pupils now lead church and professional choral groups, sing and teach music and singing to children.

V. Rovdo considered Alexander Sveshnikov to have been his chief teacher, an outstanding choral conductor in the Russian choral tradition, the greatest interpreter of Russian folk songs, and one of the last "Synodals" – members of the Moscow Synodal Choir

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moscow_Synodal_Choir

This man gave him a "start in life". In 1972 V. Rovdo organized the arrival of A. V. Sveshnikov in Minsk. The chief choirmaster of the National Opera House of the Republic of Belarus N. I. Lomanovich describes that meeting: "Alexander Vasil'evich Sveshnikov was quite old and worked with us sitting on a chair. I even have a photo of him. Then we sang a concert. Sveshnikov conducted some musical pieces. We were affected by the attitude of Victor Vladimirovich, maestro-musician, to his teacher – deep respect and absolute worship".



As a memento for Vitya Rovdo as a sign of deep attachment and friendship" - A. Sveshnikov, 4 February 1964

For Maestro Rovdo the concept of "exemplary tone quality" was connected first of all to the intensity and depth of sonority which was typical for choirs under the direction of A. V. Sveshnikov. The pride and joy of any choir – in the opinion of V. V. Rovdo – are the basses, "Russian", manly and high-souled, full and mellow, with the obligatory presence of octavists. The light and powerful sound of tenors was combined with the chesty and intensive tone quality of the altos. These two sections, like Romeo and Juliet, had to complement and enrich each other. The singing tone of the sopranos was to be mild, even, without the flickering silveriness which usually accompanies the sound of the top line of a choir. The blending and merging into one chord of all choral voices should make the impression of a perfectly tuned instrument – an instrument that happened to consist of voices.

Rovdo as a conductor had colossal power of influence on his choirs. He possessed a sort of magnetism, the strongest energy emanating from a conductor, from his whole figure, from his face, the movements of hands and fingers. The musicians hardly noticed that their conductor's gestures were reserved and restrained, even laconic, because choirs were an instrument which he played every day.

His teacher A. V. Sveshnikov passed on to Victor Vladimirovich Rovdo the need for special attention and a solicitous attitude to the word in choral scores. On the one hand, he aimed to place semantic key points in the poetic text correctly, to put main words first, to estimate the rate of "relevant" and "irrelevant" syllables for singing, to assure clear word intelligibility for each element of verbal "clue". On the other hand, the final "reading" of a verbal text was carried out



V. V. Rovdo conducting a "Singing Holiday"

entirely according to a performing super-task – to open a deep sense of the content, to move the listeners deeply.

In 1968 the choir of the Belarusian State Conservatory, which was to be led by the same professor for 45 years, took part for the first time in student holiday courses called "Gaudeamus" in Vilnius. According to the committee of "Gaudeamus" leaders the students' chorus from Minsk took part in seven similar holidays which took place alternately in Vilnius, Riga, Tartu and Tallinn (1968, 1972, 1975, 1978, 1981, 1984 and 1987). Victor had to conduct a combined choir of five thousand, performing one or two pieces together. With such a huge choir it is very difficult to have all singers enter together, and no other conductor could do it as well as Rovdo did. The inspector of chorus of Belarusian radio and television A. Androsov (till 2008) remembered in his interview what a huge impression Victor Rovdo's conducting technique made on the participants of a singing holiday in Tallinn in July, 1985: "He always appeared in a white jacket and showed off before the public, as the madcap-hooligan. And then suddenly a finger would wave and all the people sang, as one. In rehearsal they even asked him to repeat this feat, because it seemed unbelievable that a choir of five thousand could enter on just the movement of a finger". A professor at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theater, P. Gilis, one of the regular organizers of singing holidays in Lithuania, shares his impression: "What can I tell about Victor Vladimirovich as the conductor on these holidays? He was so talented that he never had problems in communicating with big or small choirs. His gestures were always absolutely clear. His requirements of the choirs were always very high. He was never satisfied with the level reached, always set a

super-task, sometimes not quite feasible. The conductor's choral achievement in a hall is often impossible to repeat out of doors, on a singing field. But it is possible to aspire to it, of course. Professor Rovdo did aspire to it, and therefore he wasn't always satisfied. Professor Kavyatskas calmed him down: "Everything will be fine!" And the work was indeed performed really perfectly. Both at rehearsal and in a concert Professor Rovdo always proved himself to be a performer of the highest rank."

The students' concert choir of the Belarusian State Academy of Music (it was renamed in 1992) under the direction of V. Rovdo achieved powerful successes. In June 1995 this choral group won the Grand Prize at the first international choir festival in Chisinau (Moldova) in the category "Choirs from musical high schools in Europe and CIS". In March 1997 the choir was awarded two cups and three gold diplomas at the second international choral competition in Darmstadt (Germany), where it also received the highest award – the "Oskar". In May 1997 the concert choir of the Belarusian State Academy of Music received the grand prize at the sixteenth international festival of church music in Hajnovka (Poland). The son of a priest, former seminary student, surgeon, musician, People's Artist of the USSR, professor, academician of the Slavic International Academy, artistic director of the choirs of Belarusian radio and television and the Belarusian Academy of Music, excellent art critic, winner of two state awards and last but not least the beloved husband of the opera diva Sofia Voevodskaya, in her time a star on the stages of Vilnius and Minsk, and apart from all that an interesting conversationalist with no less interesting a life story, was the Teacher of our life.

In the American bibliographic encyclopedia "Who's Who in Classical Music

2002" we find that photography was a hobby of Professor Rovdo's. Many of the photos in this article come from V. Rovdo's personal archive.

Associate professor **Inessa Bodyako** is the artistic director of students' choirs and teaches choral conducting and the history of Russian choral music at the Belarusian State Academy of Music. She was chorus master of the Academic Chorus of the national television and radio broadcasting company of the Republic of Belarus and founder and conductor of the chamber choir "Cantemus" becoming the prize-winner of international choral competitions in Italy (Arezzo, Gorizia), Spain (Tolosa), Poland (Hajnovka) and Belarus (Minsk). Inessa has served on the juries of many national and international competitions, has given master classes in Germany, France, was responsible for a great number of choral projects in Belarus including the Open Conductors' competition named after V. Rovdo, Choral pages of the twentieth century, and the female chorus "Charouniya lilei".

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This article is based on an interview with Professor V. Rovdo for periodicals in the Republic of Belarus and on the graduation library-research paper "In memoriam of Maestro Victor Rovdo" by one of the professor's last pupils, Olga Korzh. Her professional work is connected with the temple of the blessed prince Alexander Nevsky in Minsk.

¹ Now the Church of the Transfiguration stands in the place of the former house of priest V. P. Rovdo.

² From 1920 to 1939 Vilnius was under Polish occupation; it was called officially Vilno.

³ The brother of Gennady Tsitovich, Alexander Tsitovich, directed this group. At the beginning of the 1940s he was arrested because of being falsely denounced and died in prison.

⁴ The older brother of Victor Rovdo, Anatoly Vladimirovich, arrived in Krakow after the war, completed his course at the medical faculty of the Jagellonian University and stayed in Poland, working as a doctor. He died in Poland in 2008.