a Russian Christmas

The St. John's Russian Orthodox Choir
directed by Lawrence Havriluk
in a program of Russian-Ukrainian carols
Kolyadas

In 1898 the Imperial Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg published a volume by P. V. Shein, The Great Russian in his Songs, Rituals, Customs, Beliefs, Tales and Legends. In it 3,000 songs were set down, yet they reflect only in part the inexhaustible wealth of Russian folk material. Unlike the animated North Russian folk song full of life and color, the Little Russian or Ukrainian music of which this album takes part is slow and plaint. Profound melancholy pervades many of the melodies, often seasoned with a joyous wit. Particularly in their Kolyadas or Christmas songs with which every Russian is familiar, a sense of jest and humor is indelibly implanted in the Southern Russian.

Sacred Music

The preservation of ancient tradition and style in Russian sacred music was the work of those composers from Dimitry Bortniansky (1752-1825) to Alexander Kastalsky (1856-1926) who were primarily concerned with sacred choral music and the church choir. Through their efforts the following characteristics were perpetuated in choral work: the classic simple style of harmonization combined with ancient chants; a capella singing throughout Russia; polyphonic efforts brought to artistic perfection by Kastalsky, who detached himself from the unison tradition of chants. In polyphonic singing the Russians show a preference in harmonization for the regular major and original minor scales. The chief major chord combination is the of the dominant seventh in the minor scale.

The Language

About 50 years after the introduction of Christianity to Russia in the 11th century, the church literature begins. It was an offshoot of the "Church Slavonic" literature of the Balkans, a language created in the 9th century by St. Cyril and Methodius, and became the literary language of Russia. Although based on a Bulgarian dialect, it was from the first used almost exclusively for translations from the Greek, and is thus permeated with Greek syntax and vocabulary. The overwhelming majority of Russian-Slavonic writings consists of translations of Christian books from the Greek.

After the middle of the 13th century, northeastern Russia became politically and culturally separated from the south and west. From the end of the 14th century Moscow became the leading center of the north. Literature became exclusively ecclesiastical and more Byzantine in spirit.

To this day, the Church Slavonic language is used by the Russian Orthodox Church. The traditional ban on musical instruments is maintained, and only human voices are allowed to take part in the worship of the Lord. Russian church choirs therefore always sing a capella, and always in the Church Slavonic.