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Tchaikovsky: Secular choruses

Booklet notes & sung text

1. Le Soir / *Evening* 2'37
2. L'Automne / *Autumn* 3'39
3. Mon Lison / *Child's song* 1'53
4. Heureux celui qui sourit / *Blessed is he who smiles* 2'08
5. Pourquoi cesse-t-il, le bruit de la fête? / *Why does the sound of the revels grow silent?* 2'07
6. Bien trop tôt dans la saison / *Much too soon in the season* 2'26
7. Ancienne chansons française / *Old French air* 2'25
8. L'aube / *Dawn* 3'42
9. Nature et amour / *Nature and Love* 5'50
10. Avant le sommeil / *Before sleep* 4'00
11. Un nuage doré a sommeillé / *A golden cloud slumbered* 2'13
12. Hommage à Anton Rubinstein / *A greeting to Anton Rubinstein* 2'40
13. Le Rossignol / *The nightingale* 3'40
14. Ce n'est pas le coucou / *It is not the cuckoo* 2'30
15. La Nuit / *Night* 4'10
16. Hymne à Cyrille et Méthode / *Hymn to Cyril and Methodius* 2'27
17. Légende / *A Legend* 2'31
18. Chanson napolitaine / *Neapolitan Air* 2'11
(arrangement pour chorur de Klimov / adaption for chorus by Klimov)

Académie de chant choral de Moscou

The Moskow academy of choral singing

Chef de chorur / Choirmaster **Victor POPOV**

Solistes / Soloists **Andreï AZOVSKI** (2), **Dimitri KORTCHAK** (3), **Véra TRIFONOVA** soprano

Natalia SAVELIEVA soprano, **Anetta MICHINA** mezzo-soprano (9),

Tamara KRAVCHENKO piano (8, 9, 15)

Booklet Notes

In the field of choral music *Tchaikovsky* is known above all as the first Russian composer to have composed a complete cycles of the *Liturgy* and the *Vespers*. But as a composer who mastered every musical genre of the time, he also left a considerable output of secular choral music, a genre that had been curiously neglected by professional Russian composers and which Serge Taneyev, a pupil of Tchaikovsky's, was to raise to a peak of perfection in the succeeding decades. Tchaikovsky's secular choral works were written for various types of choir, male, female, and mixed (in which order they figure on this recording), sometimes with one or more soloists, usually *a cappella*, but in some cases with piano accompaniment. Several of the works to be heard here were originally written for a solo voice or for a vocal duet, but Tchaikovsky himself realised that they worked better as choruses. This is the case in *Autumn*, *Child's song* and *A Legend*, taken from the *16 Children's songs*, Op.54 (1881), and in *Dawn*, a duo for soprano and mezzo, and *Night*, a vocal quartet with piano. *Evening*, dated 1881, was written at the request of Karl Albrecht for a volume of choruses for male voices. It is a three-part choral fugato (two tenors and a bass), filled with nobility and peace. The anonymous text might be by the composer himself. *Autumn* and *Child's Song*, both of which introduce a tenor solo, are in marked contrast to each other: a misty autumnal poem of a lethargic melancholy and a comical, playful little ditty.

It was a poem by Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov that Tchaikovsky wrote the four-part chorus *Blessed is he who smiles* in 1887, the same year as the *6 Songs*, Op.63 to words by the same poet, "K.R.", as he signed his collections of verse, was the most talented and cultivated member of the Imperial family and Tchaikovsky was on particularly cordial terms with him. The poem in question is of a rather naive and banal philosophical-moral cast and its musical setting is of an appropriately serene ingeniousness.

Why does the merry voice grow silent? (Pushkin) forms a little triptych with the female chorus. *Much too soon in the season* and the mixed chorus *It is not the cuckoo*. The three choruses were written in 1891 in response to a commission from the singer Ivan Meinikov (who created the role of *Boris Godunov*) for his vocal ensemble class. The first is vigorously optimistic with a more meditative middle episode. The second (Tzyganov) is an elegy that grows progressively more animated and ends on a *fortissimo* chorale. The third (Tzyganov) could belong to the type of urban folk song much used by many Russian composers, great and small, during the 19th century. *The Old French Air* is a melody of melancholy and timeless charm which, after having been one of the piano pieces in the *Children's Album* (1878), passed into the opera *The Maid of Orléans* (1879), where it became a minstrels' song. This is the version heard here.

Dawn is one of the six vocal duets with piano. Op.46 written in 1880. As has been mentioned above, it may be performed just as affectively by two soloists as by two-part women's choir. Short vocal phrases are interspersed with psalmodies recited on one note. Its essentially contemplative character is that of a pastoral.

The relatively large scale *Nature and Love* was composed in 1870 for Bertha Walseck's singing class at the Moscow Conservatory. It is a trio for soprano, mezzo and contralto, three-part female chorus and piano. Tchaikovsky himself wrote the somewhat exalted and sentimental words of his pantheistic credo. The form is that of two alternating *Andantes* an *Allegros*, with the choir entering in the latter. The music, in keeping with the text, radiates unclouded happiness.

Before Sleep is one of the youthful works Tchaikovsky composed in 1863-64 during his student years at the Conservatory. It is a kind of peaceful, meditative nocturne comparable to a canticle. It exists in two versions: *a cappella* and with orchestra.

In *The golden cloud has slept*, the famous poem by Lermontov (*The Rock*) there takes the form of a meditation, once again imprinted with a religious cast, although this is not what the poem is about. The writing, very simple and vertical, is that of a chorale. It is dated 5 July 1887.

The *Greeting to Anton Rubinstein* is a piece written especially for the 50th anniversary of Rubinstein's musical career, celebrated on 18 November 1889. There are passages in which the choral parts are doubles to as many as seven, which affectively enhances the brilliance of the panegyric.

Both the words and the music of *The Nightingale*, without a doubt Tchaikovsky's finest achievement in choral music, were written in 1889. It is a magnificent reconstitution of a folk song scrupulously observing all of its musical properties: the solo singer introducing the chorus, the modal and melodic turns, the fullness and the density in the treatment of the vocal parts, here, too, as many seven real parts.

The vocal quartet with piano accompaniment, *Night*, written in March 1893, is Tchaikovsky's final tribute to Mozart, whom he had always idolised. It is an arrangement of the middle section of *Mozart's Fantasy in C minor* for piano. The words, written by Tchaikovsky himself, are once again serenely contemplative and this time are clearly determined by the original music. It is a composition that belongs in the same category as the *Prayer (Ave, verum corpus)* of the *Mozartiana* Suite.

The next two choruses have a religious connotation. *The Hymn to St Cyril and St Methodius* is a harmonisation of an old Slav melody: the words originally in Czech, brothers, masters of the Slavonic language in the 9th century, and was written in 1887 on the occasion of the millennium of the death of St Methodius.

A Legend ('The infant Jesus had a garden') belongs to the cycle of *Children's Songs*, Op.54 already mentioned. Tchaikovsky's choral arrangement became extremely popular as a 'spiritual song' and was absorbed into the repertoire of the sacred folk songs so widespread in Russia.

And finally, this programme concludes with a little choral divertissement in the form of the *Neapolitan Air* whose tune was derived from *Swan Lake*. It is a later adaptation for chorus without words that is sung here, in the guise of an encore after a concert.

André LISCHKE

Translated by Derek Yeld

THE MOSKOW ACADEMY OF CHORAL SINGING

Choirmaster **Viktor Popov**

This choir, founded during the Second World War by Alexander Sveshnikov, has the peculiarity to revive early Russian religious works in their original form (women's voices were not introduced in church choirs until the end of the 19th century). Like all great choral ensembles, the Academy is equally at home in the national and the Western repertoires, in singing a cappella or with an orchestra. Viktor Popov has been the rector and the artistic director since 1970.

Sung text

1. **Evening** (anonymous, possibly Tchaikovsky)

The sunbeams are rosy and the hilltops grow bright. Once more the flowers are sprinkled with diamonds and the streams are clothed in purple. Coming from the sea the fishermen's song resounds on the air, perfumed by the mown grass of the fields. The time for sleep approaches, the song of the birds is stilled. Everywhere peace and silence. How magnificent is all of creation.

2. **Autumn** (words by Pleshcheyev)

Cheerless sight! Clouds as fast as one can see, the rain teems down making pools around the doorsteps. A withered, rain-drenched ash-tree before the window, and a village looking like a grey smudge. Why have you come to us so soon, autumn? The heart still longs for light and warmth! You bring joy to no one! Your gloomy look forebodes calamities and trials to the poor. It already seems to hear the cries and sobs of children and to see them spending sleepless nights shivering with cold. No warm clothes, no wood in the fireplace. Who was it called you, autumn? Thin and plane, the sick man stoops. How he loved the sun, how strong he was in the spring! And now the rustling of yellowed leaves inspires despondent thoughts in his sick soul. You have come too soon, autumn. Many as one will never again see the light and the warmth.

3. **Child's Song** (words by Aksakov)

My Lizzy is so tiny, so tiny, that with a mosquito's wing she has cut herself a tunic and starched it!

My Lizzy is so tiny, so tiny, that from a nutshell she has made herself a chair to listen to the echo, and she called!

My Lizzy is so tiny, so tiny, that from an eggshell she has ordered herself a splendid coach!

My Lizzy is so tiny, so tiny, that from a crayfish shell she has made herself some slippers to go to the ball.

My Lizzy is so tiny, so tiny, that from a little leaf she has made herself a parasol and gone out walking.

My Lizzy is so tiny, so tiny, that having blown upon a dandelion she has made herself a bed and fallen asleep.

My Lizzy is so tiny, so tiny, that she has even had a sheet woven out of a cobweb.

4. Blessed is he who smiles (words by Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov)

Blessed is he who smiles and who with a happy face bears without a murmur his cross beneath his crown of thorns. Blessed is he who will not be cast down by misfortune, who is long-suffering in affliction and sparing with his tears which he keeps stored up in his heart. Blessed is he who rarely complains and who, with an untroubled soul humbly blesses his cruel fate. Blessed is he who in tribulation does not importune his neighbour with his anguish, and who, never forgetting the goal that he pursues, goes forward on his way with a joyous and sure step.

5. Why does the sound of the revels grow silent? (words by Pushkin)

Why does the sound of the revels go silent? Come, resound, ye Bacchic refrains! Long live the fair virgins and the young brides we have loved. Fill the glasses to the Brim! Cast the betrothal rings into the wine. Raise our glasses, let us unite them. Long live the muses and reason! Shine, you holy sun! Like this lamp, that pales before the glow of dawn, false wisdom fades before the immortal sun of knowledge. Let the sun live and the shadows vanish.

6. Much too soon in the season (words by Tzyganov)

Much too soon in the season the grass has dried. Ah, my grass, my little sward. The brook no longer murmurs in the fields, the nightingale no longer sings in the bushes. Ah, my bird, my little golden-voiced bird. I did not notice the summer passing. I did not gather berries. Ah, my alburnum, my raspberries! I did not leave the house, chilling myself with my old husband. Ah, my misfortune, my sad lot! The jealous husband allows his young wife no freedom, he does not let her go gathering hazelnuts in the woods with her companions, or to enjoy herself and dance in the rounds. Ah, my freedom, my life as a free bird!

7. Old French Air (words by Tchaikovsky)

As soon as darkness falls on the earth, the bright evening star appears in the sky. The brook hardly murmurs the bushes exchange their whispers. Night will set millions of stars alight and all the vault of the firmament will shimmer with sparks. But you alone, star of evening, you are always bright and sad.

8. Dawn (words by Surikov)

The dawn flames up, the sun will soon rise. Hear the nightingale's full-throated song! The rays of the dawn are always brightest+ see the mist rising over the river. The meadow flowers cast their fragrance abroad, the dew glistens on the grass like silver. The dawn flames up, the sun will soon rise. Hear the nightingale's full-throated song! The rays of the dawn are always the brightest; see the mist rising over the river. The reeds whisper, bent over the water, while the fields around are sunk in silence. What a sensation of well-being and of lightness when one fills one's breast with breath. Come, let us hurry to say a prayer, and then away! The reeds whisper, bent over the water, while the fields are sunk in silence.

9. Nature and Love (words by Tchaikovsky)

Look at the moon rising in the blue haven! How full night is with the fresh fragrances of spring! How brightly the stars shine, reflected in the murmuring ripples of the brook! And listen, in the distance the song of the nightingale. I hear it! Tell me, what can there be sweeter than the pure joys of nature, the only place we find peace after the storms and the agitation of life? Can one find anything better? Oh, No! Tell me... I love the spell of the night, I love the full moon. What a night! And those stars that shine like so many eyes, and this peace and this silence. But in the midst of the silence of the night, I love even more the emotions of the secret encounter, and the passionate impulses of love. No. Tell me... Undoubtedly she is right. Tell me... Love! Ah, Love! Wonder of Wonders'.

10. Before Sleep (words by Ogarev)

The shades of night induce silence and have long since called me to rest. My soul is weary of the hustle of the day. Before sleep I pray thee. O God, grant peace to mankind, bless the infant's slumber, the poor man's pallet, and the tears of love. Forgive sins: shed thy assuaging breath upon grievous suffering, and bring at least the illusion of a dream to all sorrowful creatures. It is time: the body longs for peace and the soul is weary of the hustle of the day.

11. A golden cloud slumbered (words by Lermontov)

A golden cloud slumbered on the breast of a grant cock. In the morning it went its way joyfully gambolling in the azure heavens. But a moist trace remained in the folds of the old rock. Rearing upright in its solitude, pensively, it silently weeps in the desert.

12. A Greeting to Anton Rubinstein (words by Polonsky)

Homage to you, brother and friend, radiant genius. Homage to you from the young and the old generations for so many years of pure and holy happiness. Let Russia acknowledge you as hers; but can you be unknown to anyone, whoever it might be, in the sublunary world? The same star shines in the firmament for everyone, and the nightingale that sings from one garden to another belongs to no one. For all your god-like playing was a precious gift, the world of music knows no trade, and beyond all vanity you brought to all people thunderclaps of astonishment, tears and dreams. Homage to you, brother and friend, radiant genius. Homage to you from the young and the old generations for so many years of pure and holy happiness.

13. The nightingale (words by Tchaikovsky)

The nightingale has flown away, far away into warm and foreign lands. Farewell, good people, it is time for me to leave you, and for a long time. Thank you for your live, thank you for not having hunted me down, for letting me sing my songs and for not harming my children. I should have liked to stay with you, but I fear the cold, I do not like your white winter, I do not like the harsh squalls. But as soon as the golden spring returns, I shall return with him, bringing you new songs.

14. It is not the cuckoo (words by Tzyganov)

It is not the cuckoo that sadly cries in the damp forest. It is a young maiden who weeps quietly in her terem⁽¹⁾. It is not a valiant falcon that chases the swans in the sky, it is a fine young man who his heedlessness has gone to linger with the pretty girls! The valiant falcon will be trapped, they will clip his wings, they will coop him up. The fine young man will be made a soldier and will loose his head on the battle-field. And the cuckoo in the damp forest will go and cry in the nests of others. And the young maiden in her village will go sighing from pace to place.

¹ Upper part of the ancient Russian houses, where woman were living

15. Night (words by Tchaikovsky)

Oh, what a night! How clear it is! What vast space! In the sky the start launch their sparks. All is silent, only the distant brook murmurs mysteriously. Oh, what a night How clear it is! What vast space! Everything sleeps and peace, welcome guest, drops into the heart of the world. The tired soul finds peace. Oh, nocturnal hour, grant me forgetfulness and send me blessed sleep. Everything sleeps and peace, welcome guest, drops into the heart of the world. Oh, what a night! How clear it is! What vast space!

16. **Hymn to Cyril and Methodius** (old Slavonic text, Russian adaptation by Tchaikovsky)
Embrace me, brother Slav, with you I am happy to commemorate this day on which our master Saint Cyril departed from the earthy world. At the foot of the rock of Saint Peter, on the eve of his death, he asked his brother Saint Methodius: "Brother Methodius, comfort my last hour. Return to our Slav brethren in order that the sowings of Christ may flourish among them, that the fruit of faith may ripen there and that the Slav people may behold the truth. And I in heaven shall pray the Lord to help them to be affirmed in this faith. The Lord will bless our efforts and all the Slavs shall come unto Christ."

17. **A Legend** (words by Pleshcheyev)

Child Jesus had a garden in which he caused many roses to bloom. Thrice daily he watered them, hoping to make himself a wreath out of them. When the roses had flowered he called the children of Israel: each of them gathered a flower and the garden found itself bare. "How will you plait yourself your crown when there are no flowers in your garden?". "You forget that the thorns have been left me", Christ replied. And with these thorns they plaited a crown for him, and instead of roses, drops of blood adorned his brow.

18. **Neapolitan Air** (without text)