

A WELCOME FROM THE CHOIR

Welcome to tonight's concert! The Hermitage Ensemble from St Petersburg is a choir whose members each having a relevant wide musical education. In their homeland they are engaged as soloists in operas and in concert.

The vocal ensemble see it as their goal to maintain the Russian traditions of church music and bring motets of the Eastern Church closer to western people. Therefore, the programme consists of liturgical motets and psalms. It also includes various folk songs.

The music of the Russian Orthodox Church arose out of a blend of the Greek, Byzantine and Oriental influences during the early years of the Christian Church. From the 15th to the 18th century the plainsong of the original chants was beginning to be harmonized and was leading to a purely Russian church music. In the 18th century the music was further influenced by the Italian composers attached to the Russian court, in particular Sarti and Galuppi. Both the Russian composer Bortniansky and Berezovsky received musical training in Italy and they were to have a great impact on Orthodox music.

In the 19th century Balakirev, music director at the Court Chapel, and Rimsky-Korsakov produced a large collection of harmonized plainsong. Nearly all the leading Russian composers have written music for the rites of the Russian Orthodox Church and tonight there will be examples from many of them.

You will not hear an organ or any instruments in Orthodox services. This is because in the early Christian church they were viewed as being theatrical and had other undesirable associations, and therefore uncondusive to worship. Because of this the practice of unaccompanied singing and composing choral music led to a high standard of vocal presentation. The Russian bass voices are well known for their low register, which reaches well below that of basses in many other countries.

The folk and national songs, which form the second half of the concert, show a range of emotion and, with their rhythms and melodies, convey with their inimitable spirit all that is characteristic of the great "Russian Soul".

We hope that you will enjoy tonight's performance!

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Russian people have always possessed a particular musical sense and Russian choral music holds a unique place in the musical culture of the world and especially of Europe- due in no small measure to the special traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is a fact that during many centuries choir music was the most honourable genre in the musical culture of Russia. The most famous Russian composers of secular music, such as Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky, believed it was their duty also to write spiritual *a capella* music. Unfortunately, Russian spiritual music was censored in Soviet Russia after the 1917 Revolution. For almost 70 years it became inaccessible to a wide audience and, as the years passed, was almost forgotten.

In recent years the masterpieces of Russian choral spiritual music have sounded again in the great halls of Russia and Europe, thanks to professional musicians devoted to this wonderful genre. So today this music is experiencing a new birth, allowing everybody to re-open forgotten pages of world culture. Russian Choir music fascinates every honest listener with its beauty and strength. Even a small ensemble allows an audience to feel all the dramatic and melodic wealth which characterises this music. It leaves nobody indifferent. Hermitage have brought with them their CDs dedicated to this sacred music, which they recorded just before leaving St Petersburg for this UK tour.