Vadim Nikolayevich Salmanov (1912–77)

Rus, Lyrical Choruses on Verses by Russian Poets for female voices (1968)
1. I. Rus (Mother Russia) 2:50
2. II. Swallow’s Song 1:35
3. III. Night 2:55
4. IV. Spring Well 1:46
5. V. Sunrise 1:26
6. VI. In Autumn 1:58
7. VII. House-Warming 1:54

Five Choruses to Words by Czech Poets for mixed voices (1976)
8. I. Bayonets and Helmets to Re-melting 2:55
9. II. Autumn 2:45
10. III. Poetry 2:00
11. IV. The Blues of Her Tears 3:05
12. V. Guitar 2:46

Three choruses on words by Nikolai Rubtsov for male voices (1977)
13. I. The Old Road 2:55
14. II. The First Snow 1:09
15. III. My Soul will Cherish 2:14

Three Russian Songs on traditional texts for mixed voices (1968)
16. I. White and Rosy 3:26
17. II. Shall I Go, Out of Grief 4:03
18. III. Sidor Polikarpovich 2:27

Eight-Line Stanzas on words by Rasul Gamzatov for mixed voices (1962)
19. I. The Book of Life 1:40
20. II. You Want to Know 2:04
21. III. Old Friend of Mine 3:01
22. IV. How Goes it? 1:25
23. V. Where To? 2:04
24. VI. The Summit 2:51

Swan Ladylove, concerto on traditional texts for mixed choir (1966) 4:09
25. I. Is it High, Yea, is it High 4:09
26. II. Wild Winds 2:07
27. III. O My Hazes 3:30
28. IV. They've Taken Our Sister Away 2:01
29. V. The She-Swan Drank Water by the Sea 4:26

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Vadim Salmanov

Leningrad Radio and TV Choir
Grigori Sandler, conductor


Vadim Nikolaevich Salmanov, outstanding Russian composer, is among the representatives of the Petersburg/Leningrad school of composing who made a material contribution to the development of Russian music of the Soviet period. Yevgeny Mravinsky wrote about him, "A remarkable composer, sensitive teacher, a man of outstanding scholarship, he left a bright trace in Soviet musical art... Evaluating, from the height of my years, the landmarks where my destiny brought me close to the composer’s music born in my sight, I can say confidently that Salmanov’s heritage is vibrant evidence of the epoch that brought him forth. Organically combined in him are definite features of up-to-date musical language – and freshness, simplicity of utterance, caprice, multi-layered concepts– and a true harmony in the use of the instruments to implement the concept... Salmanov’s music is absolutely free of speculation or schematism. Sincerity of live emotion is always heard in it, and an inspired flight of fantasy. It is filled with high glow of struggle, and many of its pages breathe with passionate excitement. And still another quality of this music deserves special mention: It’s nobleness of utterance... Salmanov’s music is truly Russian both in its spirit and ethical focus. It has rigour and manliness. And I think, I must mention Salmanov’s innovative interpretation of Russian classical traditions. In this respect, I would mention the names of Taneyev, Glazunov, Prokofiev, and of course Shostakovich."

Salmanov addressed many genres, except for musical theatre. His heritage includes symphonies and symphonic suites, chamber instrumental ensembles, vocal cycles and choruses, piano pieces, and pieces for other instruments. His Fair Swan, concerto for choir a cappella to folk lyrics, and The Twelve, oratorio poem for choir and symphony orchestra (NFPMA99116) to verses by Blok, are real pearls of Russian music.

Vadim Nikolaevich Salmanov was born in St. Petersburg, into an intellectual and well-to-do family, on October 22 (November 4) 1912. His father Nikolai Germanovich Salmanov, a metals engineer by education, was a fairly good pianist, a pupil of the famous Yesipova. The information on his mother Yelena Alexandrovna, nee von Fricken, is very scarce; she left the family soon, and little Vadim was taken into care by her younger sister Olga who devoted herself to her nephew.

The boy’s early impressions were related to his father’s piano playing, to the sounds of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, and Rachmaninoff. There was a fine music library in the home, and musical parties attracted remarkable performers, in particular Medea Figner, the famous prima donna of the Mariinsky Theater. Wishing to turn his son to music, his father became his first piano teacher. However, his demands on the five-year-old boy, excessive in other relatives’ opinion, resulted in the boy’s hatred of piano; he even attempted to set it on fire once. To show his protest to a father who schooled him in the best examples of classical music, he tinkled pop foxtrots, and that made father furious. He used to say to his loving aunt, “Wait, I’ll grow old, I’ll sell this piano and get married!”

When the time came for school, Vadim was sent to one of the best in town, the former Tenishev School, which had excellent teachers and high level of education. Although those were the post-Revolution times, with anarchy ruling in education and the so-called unified labour school unable to provide real knowledge, Salmanov gained brilliant diversified knowledge in there, in particular flawless French and knowledge of English and German. Apart from studying at the Tenishev School, Salmanov had a full course of music theory and harmony read by F. Akimenko, and then by S. Barmotn who were alumni of Rimsky-Korsakov and Lyadov. He continued his piano lessons with Professor O. Kalantarova, a pupil of Yesipova. The boy was preparing to enter the conservatory, but Nikolai Germanovich who had long been ill, died the year he finished school. In 1930 Salmanov moved from the city’s prestigious district to Gorokhovaya Street, to live with aunt and mother, and found a job of mechanic’s apprentice in a factory. One year later he found a job related to hydro-geology, and entered the evening school of the geological prospecting college. He spent a few years in field traveling, mostly to the north. It was then that his passion for photography began, to last throughout his life. This passion was so strong that Salmanov later said jokingly that photography was his occupation, and music was just a hobby.

The decision to change his life came in 1933, after a concert by Emil Gilels that made a colossal impression on the young man. Salmanov resumed his studies of music, and in 1936 he entered the Leningrad Conservatory to study in the composition class with Professor M. F. Gnessin, a talented teacher who kept the traditions of Rimsky-Korsakov. He had to combine studying at the conservatory with work, for his scholarship was not enough to live on. Luckily, he found a job to suit his vocation; a second-year student, he was so good at instrument knowledge that they let him teach this subject at the school of the Conservatory. Besides, he became a concert master in the choral and vocal amateur section of the Leningrad Institute of Railway Engineers. It’s likely that continuous work with vocalists and choir singers, albeit not professional, promoted his love for choral singing and vocal genres, thus inspiring future beautiful opuses.

Salmanov was passing the graduation exams when the Great Patriotic War broke out. Right after receiving the diploma, he was enlisted to the army. Fortunately, his activity in the war was reduced to service in the musicians’ platoon of the Birsk military college near Ufa, where he played helicon according to a preserved photo, but probably also taught music to other students. Gnessin who took ardent care of his talented student did his best to get him out of service, but the professor only succeeded in 1945 when the war was near its end. Gnessin called
Salmanov to Moscow and employed him as teacher in his (named after the Gnessins) Institute of Music. Salmanov taught there until 1949.

At that time, an event happened to determine the rest of his life. As early as in the pre-war years, he liked the company of his relatives on the mother’s side, his male and female cousins. In the summer of 1939, a large company spent time in Baranovo village, on the shore of Lake Seliger. Once, in a storm during a boat ride, the young people went ashore and found a shelter in an old boarded-up church. Abandoned sacred articles were scattered there in disarray. They got naughty and decided to “play a wedding.” Vadim was the groom, and his 14-year-old cousin Svetlana was the bride. They held the bridal crowns over the newlyweds, and made an entry in the book of records. Probably that instant sank into her heart, or maybe she agreed to the wedding because she had long been in love with her grown-up cousin in a childish way. Anyway, they met again in Moscow, where Svetlana studied in an institute. As to Salmanov, he was not free: in the wartime he had gotten married, thoughtlessly and rapidly. Some time was needed to get the consent to divorce from his wife. Meanwhile, Svetlana obtained a transfer to the Institute of Cinema Engineers in Leningrad, and Salmanov followed her to Leningrad in 1949. He managed to get a job of teacher in the school of the conservatory where he taught when still a student. Two years later, in 1951, he became a Conservatory teacher. The long-awaited divorce was obtained too. The Union of Composers, which he joined in 1953, managed to grant him a personal apartment. And soon he wrote his first large works: First Symphony, Lyrical Pages for violin with piano, Slavic Merry-Go-Round for symphony orchestra, symphonic suite Poetical Pictures after Andersen’s tales, and songs to Yesenin’s verses. The Twelve (NFPMA99116), an oratorio poem after Blok, was the acme of those years.

His life went by steadily: Salmanov taught students, and spent summer vacations in a House of Creativity, usually in his beloved North, in Sortavala on the shore of Lake Onega. He brought rich harvests of mushrooms from there, and surely photographs. His wife shared his passion for photography, she selected frames together with him, and prepared reagents – Salmanov believed that absolutely everything should be done with own hands. He was preoccupied with photography not only in vacation time, though. When in Leningrad, Salmanov took advantage of every free sunny day to go “photo hunting.” There are hundreds of splendid views of the city in his archive, such as bridge gratings, but first and foremost St. Isaac’s Cathedral at every angle, in every detail, and variously illuminated.

In 1959 he completed the Second Symphony, then the choruses, and in 1962, the “Children’s Symphony” probably related to the birth of his only son. 1964 saw his only composition for musical theatre, the one-act Man after E. Miezelaïtis, and also, choruses to verses by Yesenin and the Violin Concerto. In 1965, Vadim Salmanov was awarded the title of Professor. Two years later, he wrote one of the best compositions, The Fair Swan, a choral concerto to folk lyrics, and new chamber vocal and instrumental compositions, to which the composer had a special disposition.

So the years went by. His Fourth Symphony, the last one, was written in 1976. By that time, the composer had been feeling more and more uneasy in the conservatory. Senior colleagues with whom he started his teaching career were leaving. He felt that his stringent requirements and his nonconformism were disliked by younger members of the faculty, with whom he was losing common ground. Salmanov, with his intellectual refinement, knowledge of languages, general wide education rather unusual for a musician, and above all his keen and extremely biting, sarcastic wit, felt a stranger among people of another generation.

Little by little, he was getting inclined to quit the conservatory. Vadim Nikolaevich did so in 1976. Friends tried in every way to mitigate the abrupt change in his life. His former student Igor Luchenok, chairman of the Belorussian Union of Composers, arranged for a tour in Minsk and other cities of Belorussia. Upon his return to Leningrad, he wrote new music, mainly to verses by Nikolai Rubtsov, a poet especially close to Salmanov in those years. It was a cycle of songs titled In Minutes of Music, Three Male Choruses, and cycle of songs My Russia. Besides, he wrote the Third Sonata for violin and piano in 1977. Vadim Salmanov died in Leningrad on February 27, 1978.

In all, Salmanov wrote seventy-one opuses for a capella choir, most of which are grouped into cycles. Both in terms of quantity and quality, it is the most sizeable contribution to Russian choral music of the 20th century. What then are the main “parameters” of Salmanov’s artistic image, features of his choral style? Salmanov belongs to composers who find “their own,” significant theme in art. The artistic, descriptive world of Salmanov’s choral music is mainly determined by his contemplating and lyrical (sometimes even elegiac) and poetic vision of the surrounding world, by his always attentive, and sensitive, attitude towards it. The strongest points of Salmanov’s gift as choral composer are delicate profciency in musical imagery for vocal ensembles, subtle and true intonation interpretations of verbal text, and flawlessly neat and smooth of voice-leading. Nothing in excess, and no overload in texture and harmonies.

Salmanov’s chorus is far from chant; dominating in it is an arabesque of melodic lines, forming altogether a unique, purely Salmanovian heterophonic texture with supporting voices, with abundant monotonic and bi- tonic episodes, with occasional “splitting” of choral unisons into colorful harmonic complexes. Salmanov always was careful with texts, and sometimes even seemed to be too oriented at developing the poetic content. It is notable that free-form madrigal
traditions proved to be closer to his creative method than architecture of any
singing/dancing origin. This does not mean, however, that the composer strived
by all means for “unison” of music and text, that is, for musical illustration to
verbal content. His own voice, intonations, and his inner melody were too strong
for such stylistics. Alongside that, Salmanov was also far from the principle of the
musical declamations of Dargomyzhsky and Mussorgsky who extracted from
words their amazing “meaningful and justified” melodies. Salmanov always has
his own genuine tune, mostly of a lyrical, elegiac nature, but he carries it as if
parallel to the verse text, without getting too close but also without drifting away
too much. So a specific co-operation of poet and musician emerges, based on the
harmonious equality of text and music, which naturally implies “contrapuntal”
deviations to both sides. Such union of music and poetry predetermined
Salmanov’s special sentiment for variational/strophic formation in choral music.
However, the composer successfully overcame various risks of the strophic
approach. His choruses always have a strictly outlined thematic invariant, and
“punctuation marks,” breath marks and accents necessary for composition
symmetry; in other words, behind the strophic form of writing is some second
derivative structure – couplet, variation, or reprise. It is far from easy to perform
Salmanov’s choral music well enough in accordance with the composer’s concept.
This requires serious analytical training, skillful distribution of volume (between
main and side voices), true sensation of crescendo and diminuendo in the form of
his choral compositions, and finally an optimal balance in the synthesis of word
and musical sound. Salmanov should be performed not “in oil” but rather “in
watercolour.” Then his music, deep and serious in the Taneyev manner, will
appear in all its noble beauty and inner harmony. The Leningrad Radio & TV Choir
in its prime presented on this disc is the ideal performer of Salmanov’s music. The
composer had strong personal and artistic relationships with Grigori Sandler,
decades-long artistic director and conductor of the choir.

Such close cooperation was a great success in Vadim Salmanov’s life. The six
choral cycles presented on this disk fully reveal the composer’s artistic potential,
and were created in the period of his creative flourishing. The vocal cycle Rus for
female choir (Russia is known to have a woman’s face) in its poetic foundation
combines texts of Ivan Nikitin and Apollon Maikov, Russian poets of the 2nd half
of the 19th century, and Ivan Bunin, 1933 Nobel Prize winner for literature. The
theme of Mother Russia, dictates a special melodism of formulas based on
Russian folk song culture. In choruses to words by contemporary Czech poets
Salmanov seems to be trying to get out of his customary lyrical, elegiac role.
Here, he aims at musical embodiments of dynamic and dramatic plots. Three
choruses for male voices to words by Nikolai Rubtsov became Salmanov’s last
composition. The poetry of Rubtsov who tragically died in 1971 aged 34 combines
traits of romantic and philosophical lyricism, classical and folklore traditions, has
an amazing genuineness and inner amplitude. Salmanov’s choruses suit it well,
being gloomy in their mood, tragic in content, and powerful in their sound. The
three songs to traditional words are written in a traditional manner abundant in
typical and established in Soviet music folklore intonations. Salmanov masterfully
stylized his choruses simulating drawling Russian folk songs with their polyphonic
texture. The third song (Sidor Polikarpovich) is a formal sketch in a rustic strain
with lovely voice re-echoing. The eight-line stanzas to words by (Dagestan’s poet) Rasul Gamzatov are one of Salmanov’s most unexpected choral
compositions. It was in the stanzas that Gamzatov’s inimitable “manner to
perceive things” bearing the charm of genuine human wisdom is most evidently
manifested. The compact and precise versification enabled Salmanov to create
various and diversified choral miniatures, Oriental arabesques of a sort. The choir
soloists or choir groups act as the “narrator” of poetic lines. The choral concerto
Swan Ladylove is the composer’s top achievement, the ultimate culminating
opus in Salmanov’s choral music. The North Russian colour in intonations and
images, reserved but still hearty and cheerful, runs through the whole
composition. The “lace” of the many-voiced texture in the score of Swan
Ladylove is plaited from widely developing melodic lines (without restrictions
typical for chord constitution) with Salmanov’s trademark ornamentation and
pedal supporting voices. The intonation-laden two-voice texture constantly
alternates with polyphonic timbral/harmonic complexes, up to sonoric clusters.
Each movement of the concerto is designed for a particular line-up of voices. As
the composer himself wrote, “... the technique of ‘competition’ of solo parts and
different choir groups is maintained here...” In this opus to traditional words,
Salmanov revived the tradition of writing choral concertos (previously they only
used sacred subjects), thus making a great contribution to the history of Russian
choral art.

– Yuri Serov (English translation: Sergey Suslov)
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