In Russian church music, the tradition of *a cappella* singing goes back to the earliest centuries of Russian Christendom. It would be mistaken to suppose, however, that any prohibition attaches to mixed choruses or that the authentic Russian choir is a male choir. As a matter of fact, the unmistakably "Russian" sound depends on a fusion of opposites in which the angelic quality of sopranos and lightness of tenors are pitted against the sonorous richness of contraltos and extraordinary deep resonances of the basses.

The program presented on this recording consists of choral works set within the framework of the Great Vespers (Nos. 1-9) and the Divine Liturgy (Nos. 10-19), in all their mysterious and majestic beauty. Fuller details on Russian sacred music are given in Monitor albums *The Divine Easter Liturgy*, and *Christmas Vespers*. Notes by Nicholas Spassky and Beatrice Stillman

THE ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL CHOIR OF PARIS, which sings in the beautiful old cathedral on Rue Daru, became the most important center for the preservation of the Russian liturgical tradition after the Revolution of 1917. It is generally acknowledged to be the outstanding choral group of its type. Since 1948, its conductor has been PIOTR VASSILIEVICH SPASSKY, who has devoted a fruitful lifetime to music. Born in 1896 in the Don region, Mr. Spassky became choir conductor of the Don Ecclesiastical Seminary at the age of 16. He continued to work in Bulgaria, Italy and finally, in France. His choir has performed with great success there and abroad, notably in Rimini, Italy, in 1962. Very recently he was invited to give a series of concerts for the millennial celebration of the famous Mont St. Michel monastery in France. The choir under Mr. Spassky’s direction has recorded for Monitor an album of Russian Hymns and Carols, the Christmas Eve Service, Easter Liturgy, and the Russian Orthodox Requiem and Hymns.

Recorded in the Cathedral on Rue Daru under the personal supervision of Michael Stillman who took the cover photo.

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Russian church music, with its astonishing richness of purely vocal sound unsupported by instruments, is a musical phenomenon which had its beginnings in the 10th century. In 988, Prince Vladimir, Grand Duke of Kiev, accepted Christianity in the name of the Russian people. According to the account in the Chronicles, he selected the Eastern faith in preference to Mohammedanism, Judaism and Roman Catholicism after the report of his emissaries, who returned from their visit to the great Cathedral of St. Sophia in Constantinople, saying “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it... For we cannot forget that beauty.”

A major turning point in the history of Russian church music came about in the 17th century, connected with the church reforms of the Patriarch Nikon, who was bitterly fought by the fanatically conservative Old Believers. With Russia’s annexation of Belorussia and the Ukraine during the same period, Western influences began to penetrate to Moscow. Western musical notation became standard. Polyphonic music in the form of part-singing was introduced. Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek chants in Church Slavonic translation were admitted into the service. Concertos with many vocal parts were composed; canticles and psalms were sung.

With the advent of Peter the Great and even more with Catherine II, foreign influences threatened to wipe out every vestige of national character in Russian music. The country’s capital was transferred to Peter’s new city of St. Petersburg, whose musical life was dominated by Italian musicians. Traditional Russian melodies were changed and distorted in the attempt to confine them within the conventional harmonic and rhythmic framework of Western art forms.

It was Russia’s first professional composer of sacred music, Dmitry Bortniansky (1751-1825), who saved Russian music from being swept away before the Western wave. Despite his mastery of Western musical technique, Bortniansky retained his sensitivity to the style of the ancient chants. He arranged them in simple harmonic settings and gave them a logical structure. For thirty years, Bortniansky was director of the Imperial Court Cappella and succeeded in raising its musical standards to a very high level. His became the classic liturgical style, and later composers followed in the direction he had marked out.

Bortniansky’s successor, Peter Turchaninov (1779-1856) further developed his work, striving to have the melodic line and vocal cantilena dominate the harmonic treatment. Alexei Lvov (1790-1870) was director of the Court Cappella from 1837 until his death. He is perhaps best known as composer of the national anthem, God Save the Tsar.

The advent of the nationalist movement in music in mid-century gave great impetus to the search for the authentic musical tradition. The impact of the movement on liturgical music was felt with the appointment of M.A. Balakirev in 1883 as director of the Court Cappella, with N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov as his assistant and A.K. Liadov as instructor of the choir school. An outstanding disciple of these composers was E.S. Aseev, who served as regent and instructor in the Court Cappella. From 1910, the Cappella was headed by Stepan Smolensky, a specialist in the chants of the Old Believers, who became an influential advocate for the return to old traditions.

At the end of the century, the great center for the study of the old Russian chant was the famous Moscow Synodal School, which strove to revitalize Russian music through a return to its ancient sources. One of its distinguished leaders was Alexander Kastalsky (1856-1926), who brought a radical reform in liturgical music by divorcing himself from European harmonic methods and developing a new polyphonic choral music of horizontal construction, based on the melodic peculiarities of the znamenny chant.

Alexander Arkhangelsky (1840-1925) founded his own choir in Petersburg in 1880, and with it toured Russia and Europe, doing much to popularize a cappella singing. He was the first choirmaster to use the mixed choir, replacing the boys’ voices, then in general use, with women’s voices.

It may not be generally known that such eminent composers as A.G. Gretchaninov (1864-1956), Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), M.M. Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859-1935) and S.V. Rachmaninov (1873-1943) were deeply involved in the composition of liturgical music. Rachmaninov, for example, wrote a complete Great Vespers and Liturgy in free style. They are melodically rich and full of sonorities, with a broad rhapsodic sweep. Tchaikovsky’s Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, written in 1879, marked the flowering of Russian liturgical music as an art form. It demonstrated that church music could and should set the same artistic standards as those required of any other form of musical art.
RUSSIAN SACRED CHORAL MASTERPIECES
THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL CHOIR OF PARIS
conducted by Piotr V. Spassy
Soloists: Veronica Mikheeff & Galina Grigorieff, sopranos; Vladimir Slastcheff, baritone;
Reverend Archdeacon Mikhail Storogenko, bass

GREAT VESPERS
1. Bless the Lord, O my Soul (Arkhangel'sky)
2. Blessed is the Man (Arkhangel'sky)
3. O Gladsome Light (Azeev)
4. Prokimenon: The Lord is King (znamenny chant, harmonized by Smolensky)
5. Lord, Now Let This Thy Servant Depart (Strokin)
6. Sacred Lord; Trisagion (znamenny chant, harmonized by Kastalsky)
7. Praise Ye the Name (Lisitsin)
8. My Soul Doth Magnify the Lord (Tchesnokov)
9. O Chosen Leader (Kochanovskiy)

LITURGY
10. From the East of the Sun to the West
11. Bless the Lord, O my Soul (Ippolitov-Ivanov)
12. O Come Let Us Worship; Trisagion (Tchaikovsky)
13. Hymn of the Cherubim (Bortniansky)
14. Kyrie Eleison (Lvov)
15. We Sing to You (Rachmaninov)
16. Meet It Is in Truth (Azeev)
17. Our Father (Kastalsky)
18. Lord, Hear my Prayer (Arkhangel'sky)
19. Many Years (Bortniansky-Gretchaninov)

ВСЕНОЧНАЯ
1. Благослови душе моя Господа (Архангельский)
2. Блажен муж (Архангельский)
3. Свете тихий (Azeev)
4. Прокимен: Господь воцарился (знаменный роспев, гарм. Смоленский)
5. Ныне отпущаешь (Строикин)
6. Святый Боже (знаменный роспев, гарм. Кастальский)
7. Хвалите Имя Господне (Лисицын)
8. Величит душа моя Господа (Чесноков)
9. Взятою Воеводе (Кочановский)

ЛИТУРГИЯ
10. От восток солнца и до запада
11. Благослови душе моя Господа (Ипполитов-Иванов)
12. Приниките поклонимся и Святый Боже (Чайковский)
13. Херувимская песнь (Бортнянский)
14. Кирие элесон (Lvov)
15. Тебе поем (Рахманинов)
16. Достойно есть (Azeev)
17. Отче наши (Кастальский)
18. Господи, услышь молитву мою (Архангельский)
19. Многолетие (Бортнянский-Гречанинов)

Total Playing Time: 49:30