**The Compass of Folk Singing Culture**

Shortly before his 80th anniversary, Victor Zacharchenko known as the artistic director and the chief conductor the State Academic Kuban Cossack Choir, the People's Artist of Russia and Ukraine, the Republics of Adygea, Abkhazia and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, the winner of a state prize, the hero of labor of Kuban, a professor and a composer reflects upon his life and the notions of faith, culture and patriotism that brightly intertwine in the art of folk singing and dancing.

**Steeling the Character of a Black Sea Cossack**

Our hero, who is at once a composer, a choir director and a scientist, was born on May 22, 1938 into a Cossack family in the village of Dyatkovskaya in Krasnodar Region.

“At the age of three, I lost my father who had left for the front. My mother, although officially notified of his death, did not accept the loss and kept waiting for him through the long terrible years of war, remembers Mr. Zakharchenko. “Her strong character and her incredible love for life helped her endure the difficulties and troubles caused by the necessity to raise her seven children, three of which were unfortunate to die later. She found consolation in songs, melodious and vibrant, lyrical and playful… That is why I knew from my early childhood what I would become when I grew up”.

When I was in the fifth form, I wrote a letter to Stalin: “I want to be an artist and make music but we have no accordion at school…” However, my childhood dream never came true. A committee, which came from Moscow to make an inspection, had the school headmaster fired and returned back to the capital leaving me behind and never inviting me to Moscow to continue my studies. My school mates and teachers started to mock me saying, “Look, here comes the artist!” each time they saw me. This kind of psychological pressure forced me to quit school. After several months of almost total desolation, the new school headmaster persuaded me to return to school. He had talked to my mother and promised her to stop any mockery and to buy an accordion. That is how I got the chance to learn how to play not only this instrument but also the balalaika. After finishing school, I took my little accordion to Krasnodar to test my luck at the auditions held at Rimsky-Korsakov Music School. However, the members of the admission board were stubbornly conservative; they thought the knowledge of solfeggio was more important than anything else. As a boy from a village, I did not even know this word. I was so disappointed that I nearly jumped from a bridge. The God himself stopped me from taking this fatal step. I was hailed by a man who turned out to be a teacher at a music school. He was kind and helped me become a student and I started to learn the fundamentals of music.

Later, I was the chief conductor of the State Academic Siberian Russian Folk Choir for 10 years. I continued my studies as a postgraduate at Gnesin Institute. I was lucky to meet Mr. Yevgeny Gippius, a born intellectual and a relative of writer Zinaida Gippius.

Hard to imagine but back in 1974 when Victor Zakharchenko became the director of the Kuban Cossack Choir the troupe, a precious treasure of the Russian culture and the pride of Krasnodar Region, was close to dismissing. It was supposed to be replaced by one of cheap variety shows, which were coming into fashion at the time. Due to his great efforts and undefeatable spirit, the country’s brightest genius Victor Zakharchenko managed to avoid the tragedy.

In order to share the experience and knowledge he had gathered piece by piece everywhere including Siberia the maître has formed a special educational system comprising school education and academic training in the field of folk culture. Dozens of graduates from the institutions he had founded have become famous and joined the choir.

Mr. Zakharchenko has initiated a lot of popular regional and national folklore festivals giving an excellent chance both to young people just starting their careers and successful professionals to show what they are capable of. Written descriptions of rites and recordings made at those festivals and during regular trips to towns and villages of Krasnodar Region are stored at the Center of Traditional Folk Culture founded almost 30 years ago. Old songs and rites are waiting to re-arise in all their glory; they remain unforgotten and are eternized on paper and in recordings. Through time and space, one day they will precisely recreate the spirit of the homeland for generations yet unborn.

In celebration of Victor Zakharchenko’s 70th anniversary his family’s house, which had been in possession of several owners and is now municipal property, was given the status of a museum and the street where it stands was renamed after him. On that memorable day, the local community center was re-opened after renovation and a big folk art festival was arranged. It means the connection between the generations in Victor Zakharchenko’s home village will never be interrupted. It will keep growing stronger thanks to fostering the traditional Kuban culture, i.e. decorative and applied folk arts, choral singing, dancing, artfully playing wind and folk instruments.

**Narrating a Story about the Enigmatic Soul of Russian Folklore**

All researchers and admirers of the maître’s works speak of the astounding polyphony of folk-related images carefully woven into a picturesque canvass of songs, words, and motions. The tension of compositions inevitably draws the spectator into the multidimensional creative interpretation. On the one hand, in each work by Victor Zakharchenko one can notice the solemnity like the one in the symphonic music by such composers as Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, and Schubert. On the other hand, one is fascinated by masterpieces of the Russian literature like verses by Pushkin, Lermontov, Polonsky, Nekrasov, Delvig, Blok, Tyutchev, Yesenin, Tsvetaeva, Severyanin, and Tolstoy. The folkloric way of presentation so skillfully used by Mr. Zakharchenko is a unique interpretation which at the same time is deeply rooted to the consciousness of the Russian nation.

Mr. Zakharchenko belongs to the masters who are well informed about the issues of today’s art. He feels people’s anxiety and craving for a reviving source of folk spirit. He keeps himself aloof from the distorting mirrors reflecting ugly grimaces of present-day pop culture. His oeuvre stands against the destructive run-of-the-mill trends of today. Delicately but confidently he sets to music the topical verses by Nikolay Zinoviev, Nikolay Rubtsov, Yuri Kuznetsov. By bringing up the topical issues in the society’s life Victor Zakharchenko sometimes demonstrates the uncomfortable truth.

“I can’t be silent about the political tragedy of the two siblings – Russia and Ukraine. People in these countries have not yet fully recovered from the terrible historical injustice”, stresses Mr. Zakharchenko. Songs based on verses by the Ukrainian writers Lesia Ukrainka and Taras Shevchenko play a special part in the repertoire of the Kuban Cossack Choir.

**Creating the unforgettable musical and poetic masterpieces of Cossack Art**

The great Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov wrote in his treatise on the history of the Slavs that “a nation that does not know their past has no future”. These words written almost three centuries ago remain of vital importance today, too. Victor Zakharchenko’s dedicated and creative work demonstrates the grandeur and the strong morality of Cossacks’ culture.

“Kirill Rossinsky, an archpriest, the spiritual mentor and educator of Black Sea Cossacks, is justly considered to be the inspirer and the founder of the Ensemble. He was the one to unite several dozens of choristers into a group”, says Mr. Zakharchenko narrating the history of the legendary choir. “Their everyday life was modest. Making money was not their primary goal; their priority was to serve the high ideals and the truth. Despite severe circumstances, they accomplished their mission with dignity”.

Hardships began in 1920. Twenty-seven of the choir members had to leave the country for Serbia after the dekulakization campaign had begun and the destruction on churches and monasteries had broken out changing the normal course of life forever. They were like the apostles of Jesus Christ who spread throughout the world after the Crucifixion. Derived of their homes Kuban Cossacks founded their headquarters to protect what that thought to be the most valuable things – the Orthodox faith and the symbols of the integrity of the Cossack Host, i.e. regalia and banners.

Mr. Zakharchenko not only analyzes the history of the country as a chronological sequence of events, regimes and rulers but also shows by his own work the importance of supporting the traditions previously started by outstanding artists of the past.

It is with unconcealed admiration and pride that the maître speaks about the life of the first artistic director of the Kuban Host Choir Grigori Kontsevich, a musician, a composer and a choir conductor. Mr. Zakharchenko only considers himself to be Kontsevich’s humble successor and the heritor of his poetic and musical legacy. However, the lives of both men are very much alike.

“Grigori Kontsevich was born in a village in Krasnodar Region. His musical talents manifested themselves when was still a child. First, he studied at a seminary and then he took singing courses in St. Petersburg where he obtained a unique vocal technique”, says Mr. Zakharchenko. “He skillfully combined his work as a teacher and his career as a choir singer. He was eagerly looking for talented people in the country. Most of them were illiterate and anything but professional singers. Grigori Kontsevich spent long hours teaching them the art of singing. The best of his students later became members of the choir. However, his main achievement is the careful collecting of folkloric masterpieces that remain unchanged until our days and now constitute a part of the Kuban Cossack Choir’s repertoire. He was the first to set to music traditional Adygean and Cossack songs. He also paid great attention to classic works by Rimski-Korsakov, Bortnyansky, Tchaikovsky, etc. Take, for example, his interpretation of 1812 Overture by Tchaikovsky”.

Grigori Kontsevich died tragically during the mass and ruthless repressions under Stalin’s rule. This irreparable loss remains bitter even today. A big concert was organized to commemorate the 70th anniversary since his tragic demise and as a token of appreciation of his many great talents in the field of folk singing.

Thanks to Mr. Zakharchenko’s efforts the connection between the oldest Cossack Ensemble founded in 1811 in the city of Yekaterinodar and the Kuban Cossack Choir is now officially recognized.

**“The true art, like everything beautiful and pure, is perceived by heart”**

Moscow Conservatory, St. Petersburg Chapel Choir, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the Grand Kremlin Palace, the G8 Summit, meetings and events at the highest political level represent an incomplete list of venues of the choir’s bright and colorful performances. Award boards and spectators at different prestigious international folklore festivals held throughout the globe were amazed every time by the energy and the freedom-loving spirit of the choir’s performances.

“The true art, like everything beautiful and pure, is perceived by heart, so it knows no cultural or linguistic barriers”, reasons Mr. Zakharchenko. The emotionally tense communication between artists and the audience excites and thrills because each performance is done at the verge of sensations and physical abilities.

That explains why every concert of the choir is attended by thousands of devoted fans who listen to the choir’s performances standing for hours with tears in their eyes and often ask to sing their favorite songs as an encore.

After all failures and successes, Russia’s oldest national choir, the nation’s spiritual pillar and the symbol of all Russian Cossacks, is proud to begin its 207th concert season with an inspiring and cheerful song.

Svetlana Telnova