

TANEYEV

At the Reading of a Psalm



At the Reading of a Psalm
LEON BOTSTEIN, Conductor

MANÉ GALOYAN, Soprano
EVE GIGLIOTTI, Mezzo-soprano
TERRENCE CHIN-LOY, Tenor
CHRISTIAN ZAREMBA, Bass

BARD FESTIVAL CHORALE
JAMES BAGWELL, Director

Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915)
At the Reading of a Psalm (1915)

First Movement

- i. Chorus (Allegro tempestoso)
- ii. Double Chorus (Andante sostenuto)
- iii. Chorus. Triple Fugue (Fuga a tre soggetti, Andante – Allegro molto)

Second Movement

- iv. Chorus (Allegro moderato) – Fuga. (Allegro tenebroso)
- v. Quartet (Andante)
- vi. Quartet and Chorus (Adagio ma non troppo)

Third Movement

- vii. Interlude (Allegro appassionato)
- viii. Aria (Alto Solo) (Adagio piu tosto largo)
- ix. Double Chorus (Finale) (Adagio pietoso e molto cantabile – Allegro moderato – Allegro molto)

FROM THE Music Director

Sergei Taneyev, *At the Reading of a Psalm*

by Leon Botstein

This first United States performance of Taneyev's masterpiece *At the Reading of a Psalm* is not only part of the American Symphony Orchestra's longstanding mission to revive neglected or unknown works of music that merit public performance and rediscovery, but it is taking place several weeks before the opening of the 2022 Bard Music Festival, which this year is dedicated to the life and career of Sergei Rachmaninoff, one of Taneyev's students. The author of the Program Note for this concert is Phillip Ross Bullock, who is also the editor of the scholarly volume *Rachmaninoff and His World*, published by the University of Chicago Press, this year's annual volume designed to accompany the Bard Music Festival.

Furthermore, this performance could not have happened at a more sensitive moment in history, owing to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's imperialist ambitions to conquer Ukraine and deny its legitimacy as a distinct nation seek to justify themselves by associating the unjustified aggression and brutality of the war with the long history of the Russian Empire, particularly before the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent years of the Soviet Union, to whose memory Putin has remained loyal. Russia, which included Ukraine, was ruled under the Romanov dynasty, especially from the reign of Nicholas I on to the fall of the monarchy, in accordance with an ideology based on three vital pillars. These were autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality, and together they defined the Russian state. The absolute power of the monarch, unchecked by the parliamentary and legal practices of liberal democracy, was justified in turn by loyalty to a construct of a distinctive national character shaped by true Russians. This, in turn, demanded the exclusive allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church. The church was an indispensable ally of autocracy and national identity, as it remains today. However, the question of what ought to pass for a culture that was authentically Russian was never settled to anyone's satisfaction. Was Russia part of Europe, or was its true character shaped by cultures from the East? Theories of a middle ground between Occident and Orient—the Eurasian—flourished amidst the competing claims of links to Europe and decisive roots in Asia.

As the literary, musical, and aesthetic culture of Russia blossomed during the nineteenth century among the few who were literate and wealthy—mostly aristocratic landowners, urban merchants, and professionals—the tensions around how Russia

should be defined and expressed in a unique manner mounted. In music, two distinct camps emerged. First, there was the brashly nationalist group based in St. Petersburg, often known as the “Mighty Handful”, that included Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky, Balakirev, Cui, and Borodin. Then there was an opposing school centered in Moscow, a more European-oriented group that included Anton Rubinstein and Taneyev. Since Taneyev was one of the leaders of the Moscow group and was probably Tchaikovsky’s closest musical confidant, Tchaikovsky was more closely identified with those for whom Western musical culture was a source of admiration and influence. But Tchaikovsky was nineteenth-century Russia’s most famous composer, and he was admired by both groups. He kept good relations with all of his contemporaries. He found a way to assert his Russian identity and integrate the elements from the Western European compositional tradition he admired. The fact that he was invited to open Carnegie Hall suggests the extent of his fame. And his music never failed to communicate something distinctively Russian.

Taneyev was more resolutely tied to the ambition to make Russia a major cultural voice within Europe and more persuaded of the indispensable legacy of Western European compositional craftsmanship and its universal validity. His textbook on counterpoint is astonishing in its breadth and depth. He kept his distance from the reductive and essentialist markers of Russian identity that distinguish much of the music of the Mighty Handful. The composition dearest to his heart was his opera *Oresteia*, written in the 1890s, which Bard SummerScape produced in 2013. It is no accident that the subject Taneyev chose for his opera was unlike that of most other Russian operas. It is not based on Russian literature or folklore but is drawn from Greek antiquity. And although the music, like Tchaikovsky’s, does not fail to signal that it is unmistakably Russian, it avoids the exoticism and stereotyped musical rhetoric that most Western audiences expect to encounter in music by Russian composers. Rather, it foregrounds the beauties of the Russian language in a libretto that is an adaptation of Aeschylus, the Greek tragedian, and delivers music that is indebted to late European Romanticism. Taneyev’s last great work—the one on tonight’s program—is even more remarkable as evidence of his ideals. Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky too wrote liturgical music closely allied to the official state religion, Russian Orthodoxy. And they used chants taken from sacred rites. The faith and religiosity in Taneyev’s cantata, in contrast, are not reminiscent of the official orthodox liturgy. Its Russian literary text is set in a distinctly European manner without imitation of Orthodox ritual. Its contrapuntal virtuosity is stunning and an homage to Western practice. The polyphonic complexity and sonorities are reminiscent of a massive cathedral, whose interior integrates lyricism and drama.

Taneyev, like his friend Tchaikovsky and his protégé Rachmaninoff, was nonetheless a patriot, but one who defied the dominant exclusionary and nativist nationalism. He shunned any manner of fundamentalist allegiance to the tenets and practices of the Orthodox Church. What this work suggests is an affinity with the radical Christianity espoused by Leo Tolstoy in his later years that challenged the practices and traditions of the organized church. Indeed, Taneyev can be thought of as the composer most comparable to Tolstoy, whom he knew and with whose wife he had a particularly close relationship. Tolstoy's contribution to world culture was not only through literature. The way he reimagined Christianity and assumed the role of moral prophet and critic of modernity was not lost on Taneyev, and exercised a powerful influence, in Europe, America, and throughout the world. It profoundly affected readers at the turn of the century, including Mahatma Gandhi, Max Weber, and later Martin Luther King Jr. As this towering achievement of music and faith demonstrates, Taneyev's music deserves an enthusiastic response, as an antidote to today's unholy alliance of church and state in Russia, but also throughout the world as a tribute to how an artistic tradition dating back hundreds of years and shared by multiple linguistic and ethnic groups can inspire new music written by subsequent generations of composers, music that makes a claim for a shared, universal world defined by respect for human dignity, love, compassion, and tolerance.

THE Program

by Philip Ross Bullock

Sergei Taneyev

Born November 25, 1856, in Vladimir, Russia

Died June 19, 1915 in Zvenigorod, Russia

At the Reading of a Psalm

Composed in 1915 Premiered on March 11, 1915 in Saint Petersburg, Russia

conducted by Serge Koussevitzky

Performance Time: Approximately 70 minutes

Instruments for this performance: 3 flutes, 1 piccolo, 3 oboes, 2 English horns, 3 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet, 4 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 5 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, snare drum, piatti, suspended cymbals, triangle, tam tam), 1 harp, 18 violins, 6 violas, 6 cellos, and 5 double-basses

The cantata is not a genre often associated with Russian composers, who are perhaps most famous – at least in the West – for their operas, symphonies, concertos, and tone poems. Who, for instance, knows Tchaikovsky's graduation piece from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, a setting of Schiller's *Ode to Joy* (1865), his *Cantata for the Opening of the Polytechnic Exhibition* (1872), or his *Moscow* (1883)? Later on, the cantata became a bombastic vehicle for Soviet propaganda, as in the case of Prokofiev's *Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of the October Revolution* (1937), *Hail to Stalin* (1939), and *On Guard for Peace* (1950), or Shostakovich's *Poem of the Motherland* (1947), *Song of the Forests* (1949), and *The Sun Shines over our Motherland* (1952). It was, though, the early twentieth century when the cantata reached its zenith in Russia. Rachmaninoff composed two – a short setting of Nikolay Nekrasov's *Spring* (1902) and an ambitious version of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Bells* (1913), in a Russian translation by Konstantin Balmont.

Rachmaninoff's teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, Sergey Taneyev, was just as fascinated by the creative potential of the cantata. He made his debut as a composer in 1880 with a work designed to celebrate the unveiling of a monument to the poet, Alexander Pushkin, and his first numbered opus took a poem about the early Christian theologian, John of Damascus, with words by Alexey Tolstoy. His final composition – and according to some, his masterpiece – was *At the Reading of a Psalm*, a vast work for soloists, chorus, and orchestra based on a poem by the nineteenth-century poet

and religious philosopher, Alexey Khomyakov. Taneyev began work on the score in 1912 or 1914 and completed the orchestration on 3 January 1915. The premiere took place in wartime Petrograd on 11 March that year, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. Taneyev's death in June 1915 – and the October Revolution of 1917 – meant that the work was soon forgotten, although in recent decades, its significance has been recognized more and more, whether in Russia, or in Europe and the United States. As a young man, Taneyev made a profound study of the music of J. S. Bach, as well as of the Renaissance counterpoint of Ockeghem, Josquin, and Lassus. The influence of these composers can be felt in many of his compositions, and as a teacher, he insisted that his students should have a full command of form and counterpoint. Tchaikovsky famously described him as “the finest contrapuntist in Russia,” even wondering “whether his like is to be found in the West.” The Russian musicologist Boris Asafyev claimed that “no other Russian composer lived and worked immersed in the world of ideas, in the development of abstract concepts.” Certainly, his music is very different from the colorful, exotic, and sometimes unruly canvases of the Russian nationalist composers.

This risks portraying Taneyev's music as premeditated and overly cerebral, and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov was not alone in finding some of his scores “most dry and labored in character.” On paper, *At the Reading of a Psalm* certainly attests to its composer's formidable erudition. Its formal structure is almost religious in its symbolism: it comprises three main movements, each further subdivided into three sections. The recurrence of certain melodic motifs, as well as a sophisticated set of harmonic relationships between the individual sections, invest the cantata with a profound sense of musical architecture. Various configurations of the relationship between the chorus, soloists, and orchestra provide for variations in timbre, and Taneyev's command of counterpoint can be heard throughout, especially in the triple fugue that brings the first movement to its monumental conclusion.

At the Reading of a Psalm reveals Taneyev's commitment to putting his profound intellectual talents at the service of his art. At the same time, it is also a profoundly human document, dedicated to the memory of his late mother, who had often read the poetry of Khomyakov to him. In Khomyakov's biblical paraphrase, God rejects the extravagant sacrificial gifts of humanity, preferring instead the simplicity of a pure heart and the selfless pursuit of brotherly love. As well as moments of grandeur and exaltation, Taneyev's score contains passages of introspective contemplation, inviting us to love – as well as admire – its composer's genius.

Philip Ross Bullock is Professor of Russian Literature and Music at the University of Oxford.

Text AND TRANSLATION

SERGEI TANEYEV (1856–1915)

At the Reading of a Psalm (1915)

First Movement

I.

...Zemlya trepeshchet.
Po efiru katitsya grom iz kraya v kray.
To Bozhiy glas: on sudit miry
“Izrail,” moy narod, vnimay!

The earth is trembling
Thunder rolls through the heavens from
edge to edge.
It is the voice of God: He judges the world.
Israel, my people, listen to me!

II.

Izrail’! Ti mne stroish’ khramy,
I khramy zolotom blestyat.
I v nikh kuryatsya fimiamy,
I den’, i noch’ogni goryat.
Izrail’! Ti mne stroish’ khramy,
I khramy zolotom blestyat.

Israel! You build temples for me,
And the temples shine with gold.
Incense burns therein,
Day and night the lights are shining.
Israel! You build temples for me,
And the temples shine with gold.

III.

K chemu mne pyshnykh khramov svody,
Bezdushniy kamen’, prakh zemnoy?
Ya sozdal zemlyu, sozdal vody,
Ya nebo ochertil rukoy.
Khochu i slovom rasshiryayu
Predel bezvestnykh vam chudes.
I beskonechnost’ sozidayu
Za beskonechnost’yu nebes.
Ya sozdal zemlyu,
- Khochu i slovom rasshiryayu
Predel bezvestnykh vam chudes.
- Sozdal vody, ya nebo ochertil rukoy

What good are magnificent temple vaults,
Stone without soul, dust of the earth?
I created the earth, I created the waters,
I outlined the sky with my hand.
With a word, I will expand the boundary
of unknown wonders to you.
I create infinity beyond the infinity of
heaven.

- I beskonechnost’ sozidayu
Za beskonechnost’yu nebes
Ya sozdal zemlyu, sozdal vody,
Ya nebo ochertil rukoy.
Khochu i slovom rasshiryayu
Predel bezvestnykh vam chudes.
I beskonechnost’ sozidayu
Za beskonechnost’yu nebes.
Ya sozdal zemlyu, sozdal vody,

I created the earth!
-With a word, I will expand the
boundary of unknown wonders.
-I created the waters, outlined the sky
with my hand.
-I create infinity beyond the infinity of
heaven.
I created the earth, I created the waters, I
outlined the sky with my hand.
With a word, I will expand the boundary
of unknown wonders to you.
I create infinity beyond the infinity of
heaven.
I created the earth, I created the waters, I

Ya nebo ochertil rukoy.

outlined the sky with my hand!

Second Movement

IV.

K chemu mne zlato? V glub'zemnuyu
V utrobu vekovechnykh skal
Ya vlil, kak vodu dozhdevuyu.
Ognyom rasplavlenniy metall.
On tam kipit i rvyotsya szhatiy
V okovakh tyomnoy glubiny,
A vashi srebro i zlato –
Lish' vsplek toy plamennoy volny

What good is gold to me? Into the depths
of the earth, into the womb of the
eternal rocks,
I poured the fiery molten metal like
rainwater.
It boils and breaks there, compressed in
the shackles of the dark depths.
Your silver and gold are but a splash of
that molten wave.

V.

K chemu kurennya? Predo mnoyu
Zemlya so vsekh svoikh kontsov
Kadit dykhanem pod rosoyu
Blagoukhayushchikh tsvetov.

Wherefore the incense? Before me, every
end of the earth pours breath under the
dew of fragrant flowers.
Before me, every end of the earth pours
breath under the dew of fragrant
flowers.

VI.

K chemu ogni? Ne ya l' svetila
Zazhyog nad vashey golovoy?
Ne ya l', kak iskri iz gornila
Brosayu zvyozdi v mrak nochnoy?

Wherefore the lights? Did I not kindle
the lights above your head?
Do I not hurl the stars like sparks from
the forge, into the darkness of the night?

Third Movement

VII.

Tvoy skuden dar...

Your gift is meager.

VIII.

...Yest' dar bestsenniy.
Dar, nuzhniy Bogu tvoyemu,
Ti s nim yavis'. I, primirenniy,
Ya vse dary tvoji primu.
Mne nuzhno serdtse chishche zlata.
I volya krepkaya v trude;
Mne nuzhen brat, lyubyashchiy brata,
Nuzhna mne pravda na sude!

There is a priceless gift that thy God
needs.
Come with me, and reconciled, I will
accept all your gifts.
I need a heart purer than gold,
And a will that is strong in labor.
I need a brother that loves his brother,
I need truth in judgment!

To dar bestsenniy
Dar, nuzhniy Bogu tvoyemu

IX.

Mne nuzhno serdtse chishche zlata,
I volya krepkaya v trude;
Mne nuzhen brat, lyubyashchiy brata.
Nuzhna mne pravda na sude!

Translation by Michael Chadwick

There is a priceless gift that thy God
needs.

I need a heart purer than gold, and a will that
is strong in labor.
I need a brother that loves his brother, I
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