AN INTERVIEW WITH RODION SHCHEDRIN

by John Stuhr-Rommereim

BORN IN MOSCOW, SHCHEDRIN GREW up in a musical family; his father was a composer and teacher of music theory. Shchedrin studied at the Moscow Choral School and graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1955 where he studied composition and piano. He began composing large works while in his early 20s, often using traditional Russian tales as his subject. Shchedrin has taken many classics from Russian literature and given them life on the musical stage: his opera, *The Dead Souls*, is taken from Gogol; his ballet, *Anna Karenina*, is from the well-known novel by Tolstoy; and he used the writings of Chekhov for his ballets *The Seagull* and *The Lady with the Lapdog*. Shchedrin's wife, the ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, has danced the lead in many of his ballets.

Shchedrin's choral output is extensive and distinguished. Nonetheless, his reputation is not built primarily on his choral music, but upon a diverse body of works for virtually every musical medium — especially for orchestra. His *oeuvre* includes two operas (*Not Love Alone* – 1961, and *Dead Souls* – 1976), two symphonies, four concertos for orchestra, four piano concertos, five ballets, miscellaneous orchestral works and transcriptions, music for 10 films, incidental music for eight plays, various chamber works, songs, works for solo piano, four oratorios, and numerous choral works. During his long career, he has had contact with an impressive array of international artists and musicians, including Picasso, Chagall, Bernstein, Barber, Orff, Penderecki, Berio, and many others. He has received many prestigious commissions, including a request from the New York Philharmonic in 1968 in honor of the orchestra's 125th anniversary. He continues to receive frequent commissions from all over the globe.

Shchedrin succeeded Dmitri Shostakovich as head of the Union of Russian Composers. Shostakovich founded the union in 1948 as an alternative to the official Union of Soviet Composers. Shchedrin resigned in 1988, believing that it was no longer necessary to have the two unions. "We needed to do away with them. The whole structure was thought up under Stalin, and it was basically a way to make sure everybody stayed within the approved limits . . . . We don't need that anymore."

The career of composer Rodion Shchedrin reflects the recent changes in the Soviet Union. Although Shchedrin has had a successful career there, it is only in the last few years that he has seen the Soviet performances of many of his pieces; his works have often been premiered outside of his own country. Shchedrin refused to join the Communist party, yet remained an "official" composer throughout the reign of Stalin. During those oppressive years, Shchedrin saw many of his contemporaries exiled for creating works which did not fall within the narrow boundaries of what Stalin deemed appropriate. Despite these warnings, he continued to compose, returning again and again to the *chastuchka*, a form of urban folklore, for inspiration. The use of Russian folklore combined with contemporary techniques and instruments has become a distinguishing trait of Shchedrin's music.

STUHR-ROMMEREIM: What role has choral music played in your career?

SHCHEDRIN: It has been very important to me because my musical beginning was in choral music, at the Moscow Choral School. I sang in the alto section of the choir there. Also, I received a diploma in choral conducting first; it was only after that that I moved to the Moscow Conservatory.

I think choral training is fantastic. It is the best way to learn, because when you study the violin or cello, for instance, you usually do not see results immediately. In choral music, you get immediate feedback. It is also excellent ear training. I really think it is the best form of musical education for someone who wishes to become *musical*, a real musician. Of course, one must be able to play various instruments, but choral training is the surest guarantee that one will have all the skills necessary. If you are an instrumentalist, you tend to focus on the sound and role of your own instrument, and when you practice, you hear only one part. In the choir, however, you're part of the "zvuchaniye," part of the overall choral sound.

I must tell you that last winter, in January, we had a reunion of students from the Moscow Choral School. We sang all our old repertoire. Everyone was in tears! It was touching — not because of nostalgia, but simply because of the experience of singing in a choir. Singing in a choir is a very special experience.

STUHR-ROMMEREIM: Tell us about your education at the Moscow Choral School.

SHCHEDRIN: We were lucky because some of the very best teachers were working there. Sveshnikov was there, and we saw a great deal of Pavel Chesnokov. He was great!

Also, we sang a wide variety of choral music, including much church music — but without the text — with solfége, or with some substitute text such as "the day is beautiful" or "what a lovely day." It was a neutral experience, but we got to sing the great masterworks of the Russian choral tradition — Rachmaninov, Chesnokov, Tchaikovsky, Kastalsky. Consequently, this, my new second choral work [pointing to a copy of *The Sealed Angel*, 1989] is very important. I hope that it will not be a piece just for this year.

We sang a wide variety of choral music, including much church music — but without the text — with solfége, or with some substitute text such as "the day is beautiful" or "what a lovely day."

[The text of *The Sealed Angel* is taken from an archaic version of portions of the rite of the Russian Orthodox Church. The title is derived from a novella by Nicolai Leskov, a nineteenth-century Russian author. Leskov's *Sealed Angel* is a Christmas story about a group of Old Believers (a traditionalist group suppressed by the Russian Orthodox Church) whose sacred icon of an angel is disfigured (translated as "sealed" or "imprinted") and stolen by the local state-supported church. The plot revolves around an elaborate scheme to retrieve and restore the icon. Shchedrin's choral work does not refer directly to the story, but attempts to evoke the pure, fervent faith of the Old Believers as Leskov portrays them.

Shchedrin attaches particular significance to this piece and views it as an important landmark in his career. Much of it is chant based and reminiscent of Rachmaninov in its rich lyricism. The words and melody of a 17th-century znamenny chant, the Troparion for Great Friday, figure prominently in the work. This znamenny chant focuses on the deceit and avarice of Judas: "Behold, O lover of money, this man who because of money hanged himself. Flee, O greedy soul, from the man who committed such things against the master." Other portions of the work reminded me of Poulenc's motets (especially "Vinea mea electa"), with their piquant dissonances, prevailing homophony, and emotional intensity. Shchedrin objected when I compared his music to Poulenc, saying "I've never heard a note of his choral music!" There is apparently no conscious influence or direct connection between the two composers; nonetheless, passages sounded strikingly similar to me. I asked Shchedrin whether this was the first sacred work he had written, and he replied, "Yes, the first open work." In other words, he has presumably written other sacred works "for his desk," without showing them to the public. It is very likely that since glasnost, many sacred choral works written in more repressive times will surface as composers now feel it is safe to show them to the public. I have heard a rumor that Sviridov, one of Russia's most prolific choral composers, will soon be releasing sacred works that he previously had kept hidden.]

Stuhr-Rommereim is Assistant Professor of Music at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa.

STUHR-ROMMEREIM: In *The Execution of Pugachev*, the *Choral Concertino, Zvony*, and several other works, you make use of bell sounds. Can you comment on the significance of this?

SHCHEDRIN: Bells have been very important to the people of Russia. For example, in the Kremlin, you will see the "Tsar Kokokol," that is, the King of Bells — a huge, gigantic bell. And, Ivan the Terrible, when he tried to bring Novgorod into his empire, sent soldiers to capture all of the *bells* of Novgorod. He took them to Siberia. Just the bells! Because of the climate in Russia, and the landscape, it is very good acoustically for bells. Bell sounds were a means of communication for Russians, and each bell in each church would have its own human name. Three bells might be named Vasilii, Vladimir, and Ivan, just like human beings. The bells then spoke to each other from one village to another — sometimes over 20 or 30 kilometers apart. They sent various pieces of information. For example, during the three centuries of the Tatar Yoke, the churches sent information telling each other that the Tatars had come. They were able to say how many soldiers, with horses or without, etc. They had a code worked out. Also, for instance, bells communicated important events. A high pitched bell followed by a long pause, then a lower pitched bell followed by another long pause, then finally all the bells sounding together, meant that someone had died.

I don't use bells in my works to convey any specific information, but to provide a coloristic element of the Russian culture. A Russian person listening to the music would understand — *feel* — the significance of the bells. A Westerner would only note the effect of the timbre.

As with music of any culture, the more one understands the culture's traditions and history, the more one is able to understand relevances to its artistic creations. In my *The Execution of Pugachev*, for example, I focused on a single event in Pushkin's narration — just the climactic moment of Pugachev's execution. There is a lot "behind" this for Russians. However, it is probably difficult for Westerners to grasp the significance of it without some explanation of its background. In the West, no one knows who Pugachev was. In our country, every child — even a four-year-old like your daughter here — knows the name of Pugachev. He is a legend. He is one of the most legendary figures in Russian history. He wanted

. . . . . .

Everyone [in Russia] is preoccupied with things outside the realm of music. They have problems — real problems — buying bread, milk, or fruit.

. . . . . .

something new. He was against the prevailing social order and he strove for freedom. He claimed to be Peter III [the Tsar who in 1762 was murdered by agents of Catherine the Great]. If he had just said "I am your leader," the people would have killed him. By claiming to be Peter III, he gained the confidence of the masses. Nonetheless, he was an uneducated person, and was not, of course, a saint! In attempting to create a new relationship between social groups, he killed indiscriminately! He was horrible! But, he became a legend, and Russians understand his character.

STUHR-ROMMEREIM: How would you describe the present state of choral music in Russia?

SHCHEDRIN: I must tell you that the whole situation now [June 1991] is really very tragic. The ship has sunk, so to speak, and all the people are trying their hardest just to survive. It is like the years before the civil war. Everybody, including me and my wife, is tired of this. Over the course of one's entire life there is not one day of stability. One year Stalin is in power, the next year Khrushchev changes things; we take one step forward and then one step back. And now, with Perestroika, yesterday it was black and now it's white — the next day will be red and then maybe green! Everyone is tired of this. As life goes on and as we grow older, we grow tired of this total absence of stability. I am not talking about some abstract economic problem, but about the inability to buy a bottle of milk or a piece of cheese.

This is not the only thing that bothers us, however. I must tell you this short anecdote to illustrate the situation: In February [1991], there was a concert conducted by Yehudi Menuhin. He commissioned a piece from me for this occasion. He wrote the words himself. I asked that the text be printed in Russian because the Polyanski Choir would be singing in English. This was the Moscow Philharmonic, at the large hall of the Moscow Conservatory, yet, incredibly, the program was not printed because there was no paper available. How is such a thing possible? If I were 20 years old, I might not care about this. But at this point in my life, this sort of thing is exasperating. They sang the premiere in English, and no one knew what they were singing!

With these sorts of problems, people are anxious and unable to concentrate on artistic activities. Also, they don't have the energy to be attentive in rehearsal. They just ask "What time is it? When will we be done?" They are thinking to themselves "How is it possible to buy this or that? Where do I have to go after this rehearsal?" Everyone is preoccupied with things outside the realm of music. They have problems — real problems — buying bread, milk, or fruit. In order to buy one apple or one orange, you must show your passport and show the stamp that indicates that you live in Moscow. If you do not have the passport, you can't buy a single apple. We are tired of it. Nobody knows what will happen next.

Everyone is trying to line up foreign contracts. Recently, when the Moscow Philharmonic was in Spain, 28 or 29 of the players took their families and decided to leave Russia for a year or two just to wait and see what would happen. The situation is such a pity because Russia is a great country; it has a great culture, a great language, and a great musical tradition.

[In 1973, Shchedrin became the President of the Russian Union of Composers — a position previously held by Shostakovich. According to Shchedrin, Shostakovich saw the Russian Union as a sort of bulwark against the repressive actions of the larger Union of Soviet Composers. Shchedrin has thus played a very active role in Russian musical life — not just as a composer, but also as a public official. Our understanding of Shostakovich's political stance has recently been significantly transformed due to the publication of *Testimony* and the increasing credence given to that document. Anyone who has read *Testimony*, or any of the recent books and articles about Shostakovich, will attest to the great subtlety and complexity of Shostakovich's dealings with the political forces at work in his country. Shchedrin seems to have walked a similar tightrope. He has composed works like the oratorio, *Lenin in the Heart of the People*, just as Shostakovich composed his share of music with a clear communist ideology. Yet Shchedrin, especially in the middle part of his career, explored more abstract, dissonant expressive means in works like his *Third Piano Concerto* and took dramatic steps out of his nation's musical mainstream. At times, he has shown considerable artistic and political independence. In short, the situation is, as he so frequently says, "not black and white." It would be very unfair to categorize Shchedrin as a dutiful *apparatchik*, a cog in the wheel of the Soviet musical establishment. Given the circumstances, it would also have been impossible for Shchedrin to act as a heroic rebel, constantly fighting against totalitarian repression, just as such a stance was not possible for Shostakovich.]

I think we must return to natural means of expression. I am not a conservative, but I think atonality and excessive experimentation was an illness *that we had. It was a disease that one must get as a child in order to become immune. Now, we are immune.*

STUHR-ROMMEREIM: You've played such an important role in Russian musical life. What sort of relationship do you see developing between the state and musicians in the future?

SHCHEDRIN: The Union of Russian Composers was founded by Shostakovich. He created it so that an alternative to the larger Union of Soviet Composers might exist. I don't need to tell you that his position in art was much farther to the left than that of the Union of Soviet Composers. He led the Russian Union for 10 years. I had a very good relationship with him. For a period of several years, my father was his secretary, and I became President of the Russian Union as a result of a personal request from Shostakovich. He wanted to be sure that an alternative to the Union of Soviet Composers continued to exist. For example, Alfred Schnittke will remember how we helped him during those years. The Union of Soviet Composers was against him *so strongly*, but we helped him. There is a very big difference between the two unions.

The office of the Union of Russian Composers was two floors down in the same building as Shostakovich's flat, so that it would be convenient for him. It's still there. During my presidency, some suggested that we move the office, but I insisted that it should stay where it is. It is too small, but I insisted that this is a tradition. Shostakovich wanted it there, and so it will stay there. Shostakovich's flat is now being made into a museum. This story is also discussed in very primitive, simplistic terms by various musicologists — black and white, black and white. Real life is not black and white. We need time, and then everything will clear up. At present, we just have chaos.

STUHR-ROMMEREIM: Do you see the Soviet Union of Composers continuing to play an active role in musical life?

SHCHEDRIN: Now we have much more freedom than before. Much more. I am able to travel to the United States now without asking anyone. Two years ago such a thing would have been impossible. I would have had to explain why.

STUHR-ROMMEREIM: What do you feel are the special challenges facing choral composers in the latter part of the twentieth century?

SHCHEDRIN: I think we must return to natural means of expression. I am not a conservative, but I think atonality and excessive experimentation was an *illness* that we had. It was a disease that one must get as a child in order to become immune. Now, we are immune. In a book by Gogol that was forbidden during the Stalin era, *Some Excerpts from Correspondences with my Friends* — one of the greatest books ever written in Russia — there is a chapter entitled "How Beautiful Illness Is." Why is illness beautiful? Because afterward you know the real value of everything! I think with the twelve-tone system — with the avant garde in general — it's very good that we "had it," but it was bound to come to an end because it was unnatural. This instrument, these ears, this brain — they haven't changed for thousands of years. The human body has not changed. Humans have the same capabilities, the same limitations. Our ears have not changed, our voices have not changed, our throats have not changed. Nonetheless, we have acted as if everything has changed. It is artificial. I said this 10, 15, 20 years ago, but no one listened. Now, everyone comes back and says, "Ah, C major, how beautiful! Just the C major tonic — it's great, it's fantastic!" Everyone has just recovered from an illness, and the world is now coming back to a normal relationship between composer, listener, and performer.

I have had a variety of experiences, and in writing various works for chorus, I know how some things are impossible to sing exactly; it is physically impossible for the human body to do so. In my composition, I always trust my intuition. If I change, it is because my intuition has told me to do so, or some occasion has instigated the change. However, I am sure that from some distance, all my music will bear some distinctive stamp. It is only when one is close to it that it seems as if each piece is very different. My body remains the same, but sometimes I dress differently. Sometimes I wear a suit, sometimes a tuxedo, sometimes a tie, and so on. This is completely normal, I think. Differences can be seen from the outside, but a unique identity exists underneath.

Choral Music by Rodion Shchedrin (selected list)

The following works are listed in the 1991 G. Schirmer Catalog:

Eva, Weep with Me (#50232240)
Four Choruses on Poems of Alexander Twardovsky
1. Another Road (#51232480)
2. After the War (#50232490)
3. I Was Slain (#50232500)
4. You Who Have Died (#50232510)

Four Choruses on Poems by Andrei Voznesensky (#50232190)
Lullaby (#50232180)
Two Pushkin Poems (#50319660)
Russian Villages (#50232230)

The following works are listed in the 1991 Ricordi Catalog:

Vocal-Symphonic Music

Bureaucratiade (1963)
Satirical cantata for soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass), chorus, and small symphony orchestra, to texts of the *Rules for Those Staying at the "Kurpaty" Boardinghouse.*
2.2.1.1.-2.1.1.0.-Timp., Perc. (Triangle, Wood block, Whip, Comb, Drum, Cymbal, Bells, Xylophone) Piano-Strings. Duration: 15'. Score: Moscow, Muzyka, 1967. Vocal score: Moscow, Muzyka, 1967.

Poetoria (1968)
Concerto for a narrator accompanied by a woman's voice, mixed chorus, and symphony orchestra, to works by A. Voznesensky (in three movements). 4.2.4.2.-4.3.3.1.-Timp., Perc. (Bells, Guiro, 3 Bongos, Susp. cym., Maracas, Hi-hat, 3 Cowbells, Choclo, Sleigh bells, Crot., Siren, 3 Tom-toms, Cym., Tam-tam, B. Dr., 4 Gongs, Russian bells) Cel., Harpsich., Harp, Organ-Strings. Duration: 40'. Score: Moscow: Muzyka, 1975. Vocal score: Moscow, Soviet Kompozitor, 1977.

Lenin Lives in the People's Heart (1969)
Oratorio for three soloists, mixed chorus, and symphony orchestra, traditional works. Dedicated to V. I. Lenin's centenary. 2.3.4.3.-4.3.3.1.-Timp., Perc. (Choclo, Small Bongo, 3 Sirens, B. Dr.) Harp, Cel.-Strings. Duration: 25'. Score: Moscow, Soviet Kompozitor, 1972. Vocal score: Moscow, Soviet Kompozitor, 1972.

Prayer (1991)
For mixed chorus and symphony orchestra, English text by Yehudi Menuhin (in one movement). 3.3.2.2.-4.3.3.1.-Timp., Perc. (1st: Susp. crot., Glass chimes; 2nd: Choclo; 3rd: Tam-tam [bass], Drum)-Strings. First performance: March 7, 1991, Moscow, Moscow Chamber choir, Orchestra of the USSR Ministry of Culture. Y. Menuhin, conductor. Duration: 18'-20'. Publishing rights: Hans Sikorski, Hamburg (Score in preparation).

Choral Chamber Works

Choruses Written Over a Number of Years (1950–1970)
For unaccompanied mixed chorus (text in Russian). Two Choruses to Lyrics by Alexander Pushkin (1. It's Time, My Friend, It's Time, 2. Ukranian Night is Quiet), Four Choruses to Lyrics by Alexander Tvardovsky (1. The value of Friendship, 2. The War Is Over, 3. I Was Killed Near Rzhev, 4. To Those Who Perished in the War) Five Choruses to Lyrics by Andrei Voznesensky (1. Tbilisi Bazaars, 2. First Ice, 3. Mountain-

spring, 4. Evening Song, 5. The Willow (vocalise)), Chorus to lyric by Ivan Kharabarov, Russian Villages.

The Execution of Pugachev (1981)
Poem for mixed choir, unaccompanied (text in Russian). Text from *The Story of Pougatchev*, by Alexander Pushkin 2 Sopranos, Alto; Children's choir; SATB chorus. First performance: March, 1983, Tallin, Moscow Conservatory Student Choir, B. Tevlin, conductor. Duration: 15'. MS.

Stanzas from Eugene Onegin (1981)
For mixed choir, unaccompanied. Text by Alexander Pushkin 1. That year the Autumn Season, 2. And her in Tverskaya street, 3. But now our roads are horrible, 4. My graces, 5. Then why be merciless, 6. Blessed the man who lives his youth. First performance: May, 1982, Moscow, Small Hall of the Conservatory, Conservatory Student Choir, B. Tevlin, conductor. Duration: 18'.

Concertino for Chorus A Cappella (1982)
In four sections. First performance: May, 1982, Cork (Ireland), Cork Choral Festifal, K. Litovian, choirmaster. Duration: 10'.

The Sealed Angel (1988)
For mixed chorus a cappella with shepherd's pipe (in nine movements). Shepherd's pipe: flute or oboe (ad libitum). 1 Soprano, 1 Alto, 1 Tenor (ad libitum), 2 boys' voices (Treble and Alto). First performance: Moscow, P. I. Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, Moscow Chamber Choir and USSR State Academic Russian Choir directed by V. Minin. Duration: 59'-62'. Score: Moscow, Soviet Compozitor, 1989. Piano score: Moscow, Soviet Kompozitor, 1989. CJ