

# Dmitry Bortniansky at 250: His Legacy as a Choral Symphonist

by Marika C. Kuzma



Великий русский композитор Дмитрий Бортнянский 1751-1825

Woodcut by S. Hnizdovsky, 1985, after the nineteenth-century drawing by Afanas'ev. Copyright permission granted.

The effect of [his choral music] on sensitive people is overwhelming. Upon its unusual entrances, one feels seized in spasmodic, almost painful movements that one cannot control. . . . There was an entanglement of voice-parts that seemed impossible—sighs, vague murmurs as one sometimes hears in dreams, and from time to time attacks that, in their intensity, resembled outcries, seizing the heart all of the sudden, pressing against one's breast, and stopping all breathing.

—Hector Berlioz<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation from Berlioz calls to mind several possible composers known to him: Beethoven? Cherubini? One of the Baroque masters?

It might come as a surprise that in this rhapsodic commentary Berlioz is referring to the Slavic composer Dmitry Bortniansky, whose music he heard during a trip to Russia in the 1840s. He became so enamored of Bortniansky's music, he programmed some of the choral music in his Paris concertos.<sup>2</sup>

The year 2001 marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of Dmitry Bortniansky (1751–1825), perhaps the foremost Slavic composer of his day. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries he was known internationally, his music performed in Vienna and Rome, as well as his native court, St. Petersburg. Now at the beginning of the twenty-first century, his choral music is once again reemerging as central to the Western choral tradition.

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Admittedly, Bortniansky's name<sup>3</sup> does not come to mind (or roll off the tongue) as easily as that of Mozart, Beethoven, or Berlioz. Although American directors may be familiar with his *Cherubic Hymn*<sup>4</sup> and several pieces occasionally found in Protestant hymnals (i.e., *The Vespers Song*), his choral legacy is not nearly as well known as that of his Slavic compatriots Grechaninov, Rakhmaninov, or Stravinsky. The reason for our lack of familiarity with Bortniansky may be largely political. His choral music is almost exclusively sacred; during the Soviet era, when many churches were either closed or converted into museums, his choral music fell into relative obscurity.

Even earlier, in the nationalist era of the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century, Slavic composers and music critics shunned Bortniansky's music, considering it too Italianate, not sufficiently Russian-sounding. The noted Russian music critic Alexander Serov denigrated Bortniansky's choral music as a mere "weak echo of the Italians under the Venetian master Baldassare Galuppi in the 1770s."<sup>5</sup> In faulting him for his style, however, they overlooked the cultural context of his music. Bortniansky studied composition under the Venetian master Baldassare Galuppi during the Mozartean era. In Bortniansky's day, a European international style dominated the aesthetic of the Russian court, and the Russian aristocracy was most concerned about *not* appearing or sounding Russian. Catherine the Great spoke French with her countrymen, and the musicians she hired were largely from Italy and Germany. Russian nationalism as a political, cultural, and musical movement was still decades away.

Politics and aesthetic prejudices aside, Slavs nevertheless have always recognized Bortniansky as their principal composer of the late Classical era. At least in Eastern Europe, his has always been a household name among church musicians.

The enduring value of his music lies—if not in the folksy Glinkaesque melodies or unusual Musorgskian harmonies we have come to associate with Russian music—in its virtuosic manipulation of choral textures and consummate melodic vocality.

Bortniansky grew up singing, first as a boy soprano in the town where he was born, Hlukhiv, Ukraine, and later at the Imperial Court Chapel in St. Petersburg. Reportedly, Bortniansky's voice was so outstanding, the Empress Elizabeth would have him sit on her lap after performances, a singular privilege. In his teen years, he sang leading roles in court opera productions as well. His understanding of the voice is obvious in his choral music. It never exceeds a comfortable range, the voice leading is fluid, and the phrasing moves easily on the breath. Choirs generally love to sing Bortniansky's music.<sup>6</sup>

Although the vocal ease of his music is perhaps not immediately discernible to the listener, his masterful manipulation of choral texture does catch the ear.

*Reportedly, Bortniansky's voice was so outstanding, the Empress Elizabeth would have him sit on her lap after performances, a singular privilege.*

Bortniansky's treatment of the unaccompanied chorus is remarkable. Western European choral works usually generate stark changes of texture and sonority through changes in instrumental accompaniment. Audiences perk up when trumpets enter into the orchestra of Bach cantatas or Haydn masses. They are stunned when Brahms removes the orchestra altogether, leaving the chorus bare, in portions of his

*Requiem*. Bortniansky's music achieves comparable dramatic variety of texture and striking dynamic contrast strictly in an unaccompanied medium.

How and why did Bortniansky develop his colorful and dramatic approach to the unaccompanied chorus? Bortniansky heard and composed all manner of concerted music (vocal-instrumental and instrumental) during his studies with Galuppi in St. Petersburg and later in Venice (1769–79). In addition to vocal-instrumental motets, he composed symphonies, chamber music, and operas. His three Italian operas, *Alcide*, *Creonte*, and *Quinto Fabio*, were successfully staged in Venice and Modena. Upon returning to Russia in 1779, he composed sacred music for Catherine and continued to compose secular vocal-instrumental music at the country estate of her son Paul. In 1796, when Paul became Czar, he appointed Bortniansky director of the Imperial Court Chapel; Bortniansky thus became the first native Slav accorded this prestigious position.<sup>7</sup>

In his music for the Imperial Court Chapel, however, Bortniansky had to limit himself to strictly vocal resources. No instruments are allowed in the Orthodox Church. Thus, after his extensive experience with instrumental music, Bortniansky had to adapt his musical imagination to the unaccompanied choral medium when composing sacred music. Necessity was the mother of Bortniansky's choral invention.

No doubt it was Bortniansky's innovative, symphonic approach to the unaccompanied choral music that so arrested Berlioz's attention. Bortniansky treated his chorus as an orchestra of variable timbres and sonorities.

In all of [Bortniansky's choral concertos], one finds . . . a rare skill in the grouping of vocal masses, a wondrous sense of nuance, a resonance of harmony and, above all, an incredible freedom in the handling of the parts—a reigning disdain for the rules respected by both his predecessors and his contemporaries. . . .

H. Berlioz<sup>8</sup>

The principal genre for Bortniansky's exploration was the choral concerto. His

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*oeuvre* includes ten concertos for eight-voice chorus and thirty-five concertos for four-voice chorus. Sung at the moment of the consecration, choral concertos are the musical centerpiece of the orthodox liturgy.<sup>9</sup> They are usually settings of Psalm verses and are comprised of three or four movements of contrasting tempo often ending with a fugal section. Manuscripts and editions of Bortniansky's concertos term his concertos "na 4 golosa" [for four voices] or "na 8 golasa" [for eight voices], but this designation is misleading. Bortniansky's concertos never limit themselves to a single voicing. Rather, the score might shift from four-voice chorus to SSA, to TBB, to SSB, etc. The opening of his Concerto 6 exemplifies a dialogue of textures (Figure 1).

Moreover, Bortniansky's scores shift not only from one combination of voice parts to another, but also from *solo* to *tutti* designations. After an opening for full chorus, the score might turn to a pair or trio of soloists. Several of his concertos begin with soloists (Figures 2 and 3).

His scores sometimes include rapid fluctuations of texture (Figure 4). Bortniansky also combines dynamics and textures in unpredictable ways. A phrase marked *forte* for *tutti* chorus might lead to a phrase in *piano* for soloists. Alternatively, after a solo section, the *tutti* chorus might respond in a hushed silence (Figure 5).

Bortniansky's choices of texture and dynamics often underscore the meaning of the text. In the above excerpt, the soloists sing "he was crucified" in an impassioned manner, while the *tutti* chorus responds *piano* and grief-stricken "and was buried." The chromaticism at the words for crucifixion are significant also, and the simpler cadential harmonies at the burial express an appropriate resignation.

The Ukrainian conductor Volodymyr Kolesnyk (1928–97) compared Bortniansky's concertos to late Mozart and early Beethoven symphonies;<sup>10</sup> indeed, Bortniansky's concertos date from the same period. As in Beethoven's symphonies, where the score might shift from *tutti* orchestra to solo winds then return to *forte* full orchestra, much of the excitement of Bortniansky's music lies in dramatic textural and timbral shifts. Further, just as Beethoven's symphonies demon-

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strate the virtuosity of the orchestra, Bortniansky's concertos afford the choir the opportunity to demonstrate the skill of both the chorus *en masse* and of its constituent singers.<sup>11</sup> They also challenge and build an ensemble's listening skills and sense of interdependence. Given the acrobatic shifts of texture and dynamic in the music, particularly without instrumental support, the singers must keep their ears very open at all times.

Perhaps the most readily available recording of the Bortniansky choral concertos is by conductor Valery Poliansky and the Russian State Symphonic Choir, who recorded all thirty-five of them on

the Melodiya label.<sup>12</sup> Though vocally sumptuous, Poliansky's rendition reflects an unfortunate twentieth-century Russian practice of eliminating the *solo/tutti* alternation. In singing *tutti* throughout, Poliansky's choir obscures the symphonic nature of the concertos. Poliansky also favors rather protracted, romanticized phrasing. Bortniansky, however, constructs his vocal phrases mostly in classical four-bar phrases and sometimes enforces even more frequent punctuation with eighth rests (Figure 2).

Other recordings preserve the *solo/tutti* alternation and classical phrasing, but are somewhat flawed by their reliance on faulty editions. Choirs (in the West and Eastern Europe) generally perform the concertos from editions based on one produced by Tchaikovsky in the 1880s. Although his edition is not careless, Tchaikovsky openly criticized Bortniansky's melodies as overly florid, his harmonies as un-Slavic, and his form as too predictable. He consciously eliminated some of the ornamentation and



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phonic process that Bortniansky developed in the concertos had a lasting influence on Slavic composers who succeeded him.<sup>17</sup> Glinka, Tchaikovsky, and Rakhmaninov all knew Bortniansky's music intimately. Hence, the marvelous choral palette of Rakhmaninov's *Vsenoshchnoe bdenie* [*All-Night Vigil*]<sup>18</sup> was developed not overnight, but over the course of more than a century. Even Stravinsky's secular *Les Noces* [*The Wedding*], with its mercurial shifts of choral texture, seems—however distantly—related to Bortniansky's concertos and his colorful, adventurous choral tradition.<sup>19</sup>

When reconstructed with care and sung with a symphonic sensibility, the choral concertos of Dmitry Bortniansky that so arrested Berlioz's attention can continue to seize the hearts of sensitive singers, composers, and listeners in our own century.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "L'action qu'exerce ce chœur et la musique qu'il exécute, sur les personnes nerveuses, est irrésistible. A ces accents innouïs, on se sent pris de mouvements spasmodiques presque douloureux qu'on ne sait comment maîtriser. . . . Il y aviat des enchevêtrements de parties qui semblent impossibles, des soupirs, des vagues murmures comme on en entend parfois en rêve, et de temps en temps de ces accents qui, par leur intensité, ressemblent à des cris, saisissent le cœur à l'improviste, oppressent la poitrine et suspendent la respiration." Hector Berlioz, *Les soirées de l'orchestre* (Paris: Clamann-Levy, Editeurs, 1895), 271–2.

<sup>2</sup> A recent recording of the *Berlioz Requiem*,

directed by Charles Dutoit, includes several liturgical pieces by Bortniansky with Latin text that Berlioz had substituted for the original Church Slavic. Berlioz Requiem, Choeur de l'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, Orchestre

symphonique de Montréal, 289 458 921–2, Decca, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The spelling of Bortniansky's name, like the spelling of other Russian and Ukrainian composers (i.e., Rakhmaninov/Rachmaninoff), varies in Western

1 Adagio

Soprano (S): Solo *p*  
 Hlá - som mo - im ko Hós - po-du voz - váh, hlá - som mo-im  
 Гла - сомъ мо - имъ ко Гос - по-ду воз - вахъ, гла - сомъ мо-имъ

Alto (A): Solo *p*  
 Hlá - som mo - im ko Hós - po-du voz - váh, hlá - som mo-im  
 Гла - сомъ мо - имъ ко Гос - по-ду воз - вахъ, гла - сомъ мо-имъ

Tenor (T): Solo *p*  
 Hlá - som mo - im  
 Гла - сомъ мо - имъ

Bass (B): Solo *p*  
 Hlá - som mo - im  
 Гла - сомъ мо - имъ

Choir (Tutti):  
 k Bó - hu i vñfat mi. Hlá-som mo - im ko Hós-po-du voz - váh  
 къ Бо - гу и внятъ ми. Гла-сомъ мо - инъ ко Гос-по-ду вос - вахъ,  
 k Bó - hu i vñfat mi. Hlá-som mo - im ko Hós-po-du voz - váh  
 къ Бо - гу и внятъ ми. Гла-сомъ мо - инъ ко Гос-по-ду вос - вахъ,  
 k Bó - hu i vñfat mi. Hlá-som mo - im ko Hós-po-du voz - váh  
 къ Бо - гу и внятъ ми. Гла-сомъ мо - инъ ко Гос-по-ду вос - вахъ,  
 Hlá - som mo - im ko Hós-po-du voz - váh  
 Гла - сомъ мо - инъ ко Гос-по-ду вос - вахъ,

Figure 2. Concerto No. 27, "Hlasom moim ko Hospodu vozvakh"  
 [With my voice I cried unto the Lord], mm. 1–11

1 Adagio

Soprano: Solo *p*  
 Voz - ve - dóh ó - chi mo - yi v hó - rí ot - ñtú - du zhe pri -  
 Вос - ве - дохъ о - чи мо - и въ го - ры от - нно - ду же при -

Alto: Solo *p*  
 Voz - ve - dóh ó - chi mo - yi v hó - rí ot - ñtú - du zhe pri -  
 Вос - ве - дохъ о - чи мо - и въ го - ры от - нно - ду же при -

Bass: Tutti *p* Solo  
 Voz - ve - dóh ó - chi mo - yi v hó - rí Voz - ve-dóh ó - chi mo - yi v hó - rí  
 Вос - ве - дохъ о - чи мо - и въ го - ры Вос - ве-дохъ о - чи мо - и въ го - ры

Figure 3. Concerto No. 24, "Vozvedokh ochi moyi v hori" [I lifted my eyes to the mountains], mm. 1–5



sources, depending on the transliteration system used.

<sup>4</sup> Bortniansky composed nine settings of the *Cherubic Hymn*. His setting No. 7 in D major is best known in the West. Transcribed into Latin by Berlioz under the title *Adoremus*, it is one of the pieces found on the Decca CD mentioned above.

<sup>5</sup> Comment published in later anthology of essays. A. N. Serov, "Музыка, музыка'наиа наука, музыка'наиа педагогика" [Music, music studies, and music pedagogy], in *Izbrannye stat'i*, vol. 2, ed. G. Khubov (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe muzykal'noe izdatel'stvo, 1957), 211.

<sup>6</sup> I have directed choirs at Indiana University, the University of Virginia, and the University of California in performances of his music. Despite the unfamiliar Church Slavonic language, his choral concertos are accessible to American singers. The music is relatively easy to sight-read, and singers respond immediately to the consonant sonorities. The vowels of Church Slavonic, as pronounced in Bortniansky's day, are very close to Italian vowels.

<sup>7</sup> Its previous directors, among them Galuppi,

Traetta, and Sarti, had been imported from Western Europe by the czars and czarinas. The Imperial Court Chapel is the longest continuously existing choral institution in Russia, now continuing under the name Glinka Cappella.

<sup>8</sup> "Dans toutes ces oeuvres, on trouve . . . une rare expérience du groupement des masses vocales, une prodigieuse entente des nuances, une harmonie sonore, et, chose surprenant, une incroyable liberté dans la disposition des parties, un mépris souverain des règles respectées par ses prédécesseurs comme par ses contemporains. . . ." Berlioz, *Les soirées*, 271–2.

<sup>9</sup> The concertos typically are six to ten minutes in length (depending upon the tempos observed). Perhaps the principal Slavic scholar of the choral concerto genre is Nina Herasymova-Persyds'ka (also found under the Russian name Gerasimova-Persidskaia). For English-language information on the genre, see Carol Bailey Hughes, "The Origin of the First Russian Patriotic Oratorio: Stepan Anikievich Degtiarev's *Minin i Pozharskii* (1811)" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1984). See also my "Dmitrii

Stepanovich Bortnianskii (1751–1825): An Introduction to the Composer Through an Edition of his Choral Concertos *Priidite, Vospoim and Glasom moim*" (D.M. diss., Indiana University, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Private conversation with Volodymyr Kolesnyk, then living in Toronto, July 1988. Some music scholars see the choral concerto as essentially a vocal translation of the *concerto grosso* genre. This comparison, however, breaks down upon closer examination. Whereas the configuration of soloists remains relatively constant in the *concerto grosso*, the disposition of soloists changes constantly in the course of the choral concerto genre.

<sup>11</sup> The concertos are particularly advantageous for student choirs whose individual singers may not yet be ready to sing full solo arias but would gain valuable experience in singing short solo passages.

<sup>12</sup> D. Bortniansky, *Concertos for Choir*, USSR Ministry of Culture Chamber Choir, SUCD 10-00030, Melodiya, 1987–90; recently re-released on the Chandos label under the name Russian State Symphonic Choir.

<sup>13</sup> In his preface to the edition, Tchaikovsky outlines the changes he made. For a discussion of Tchaikovsky's edition, see my article, "Bortniansky à la Bortniansky: An Examination of the Sources of Dmitry Bortniansky's Choral Concertos," *The Journal of Musicology* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 183–212.

<sup>14</sup> D. Bortniansky, *35 Sacred Choral Concertos*, Millennium Choir, Septima Recording Ltd., Toronto, 1988, re-released on compact disc in 1999. Another recording that includes several concertos performed from this edition is *Icons of Slavic Music*, Chamber Chorus of the University of California, Ameridisc, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Kolesnyk's choice of this edition reflects keen insight and perhaps serendipity. At the time of his recording, the 1830s edition was not yet fully authenticated. For a discussion of the sources of Bortniansky's concertos, including this 1830's edition, see Kuzma, *Journal of Musicology*.

<sup>16</sup> Among the concertos currently available are No. 6 *Glory to God in the Highest* (the best known of the concertos, appropriate for the Christmas season); No. 32 *Lord, make me to know my end* (Tchaikovsky's

The musical score is for four voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). It features various dynamics including Solo and Tutti. The lyrics are in Church Slavonic and Russian. The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

**Soprano (S):**  
 Solo: Ау Ііу - Іі, Ііу-Іі, Ііу - Іі, Іі-рѣи - кі, ау Ііу - Іі! ай Ііу - Іі!  
 Ай лю-ли, лю-ли, лю - ли, ли-пень - ки, ай лю - ли!  
 Tutti: ау Ііу - Іі, Ііу-Іі, Ііу - Іі, Іі-рѣи - кі, ау Ііу - Іі! ай Ііу - Іі!  
 Ай лю-ли, лю-ли, лю - ли, ли-пень - ки, ай лю - ли!

**Alto (A):**  
 Solo: Ау Ііу - Іі, Ііу-Іі, Ііу - Іі, Іі-рѣи - кі, ау Ііу - Іі! ай Ііу - Іі!  
 Ай лю-ли, лю-ли, лю - ли, ли-пень - ки, ай лю - ли!  
 Tutti: ау Ііу - Іі, Ііу-Іі, Ііу - Іі, Іі-рѣи - кі, ау Ііу - Іі! ай Ііу - Іі!  
 Ай лю-ли, лю-ли, лю - ли, ли-пень - ки, ай лю - ли!

**Tenor (T):**  
 Solo: Ау Ііу - Іі, Я - год-ка крас-на, крас-на!  
 Ай лю - ли, Я - год-ка крас-на, крас-на!  
 Tutti: Ау Ііу - Іі, Я - год-ка крас-на, крас-на!  
 Ай лю - ли, Я - год-ка крас-на, крас-на!

**Bass (B):**  
 Tutti: Ау Ііу - Іі, Я - год-ка крас-на, крас-на!  
 Ай лю - ли, Я - год-ка крас-на, крас-на!

**Continuation:**  
 Tutti: Іі! ли! Ау Ііу-шеи-кі, Ііу - Іі! Я-го-да уа - го-де  
 Ай лю-шень-ки, лю - ли! Я-го-да я - го-де  
 Іі! ли! Ау Ііу-шеи-кі, Ііу - Іі! Я-го-да уа - го-де  
 Ай лю-шень-ки, лю - ли! Я-го-да я - го-де  
 Solo: Зем-Ііа-пїчка, спѣ-ла, спѣ-ла! Ау Ііу-Іі! Я-го-да уа - го-де  
 Зем-ля-ничка, спе-ла, спе-ла! Ай лю-ли! Я-го-да я - го-де  
 Tutti: спѣ - ла! Ау Ііу - Іі!  
 спе - ла! Ай лю-ли!

Figure 6. *Les Noces*, excerpt from Tableau IV

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favorite); No. 33 *Why are you cast down, O my soul* (the concerto Bortniansky requested to be sung at his deathbed); and those from which the above musical examples are excerpted.

<sup>17</sup> Bortniansky's music also seems to have influenced Western composers who came in contact with his music. Berlioz's late sacred pieces, for example, are highly derivative of the choral concertos.

<sup>18</sup> The *All-Night Vigil* is commonly known in the West as the Rachmaninov *Vespers*.

<sup>19</sup> Granted, in these textural changes, Stravinsky is primarily imitating Russian folk practice. (See Margarita Mazo, "Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and Russian Village Wedding Ritual," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 43 (1990): 113. Nevertheless, in Bortniansky, we note that the phenomenon of rapidly shifting textures was not limited to Russian folk music, and his music might also have influenced Stravinsky's imagination.

—CJ—

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