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RODION SHCHEDRIN'S CHORAL WORKS

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Abstract

This article discusses the Rodion Shchedrin's choral compositions created between 1968 and 2021. This overview of choral works traces the evolution of style and highlights the genre diversity of the composer's choral works. The issue of performing the Rodion Shchedrin's compositions in Uzbekistan is also addressed.

Objective: To give a generalized and systematized picture of Rodion Shchedrin's choral works, its genre and thematic diversity, and the main stages of its development.

Methods: historical, systemic review, and diachronic methods.

Results: The genre structure of Rodion Shchedrin's choral works is revealed, and the main stages and stylistic features of the works are outlined.

Scientific novelty: The comprehensive examination of a large number of choral works created over an extended chronological period spanning more than half a century. Among the works, special attention is given to his late compositions, which have received little attention in the modern musicology. The issue of the performance of Rodion Shchedrin's compositions in Uzbekistan is also addressed.

Practical application: the key points of the article can be used in teaching practice.

Keywords: *Rodion Shchedrin, composer's works, musical style, choir, choral works, choral opera, collection of choral works*

Introduction

*When horses die, they breathe;
when grass dies, they dry up;
when suns die, they go out;
when people die, they sing songs.*

These famous lines by the poet Velimir Khlebnikov became the basis for one of the last choruses by Rodion Shchedrin, the great composer and one of the iconic figures of 20th and 21st century musical culture. The inno-

vator who became a classic, he wrote in all genres, surprising us both with his embrace of tradition and with compositional inventions that were ahead of their time. With his death on 29 August 2025, the entire era of music, not only Russian but also worldwide, came to the end.

Choral music plays a vital role in Rodion Shchedrin's multi-genre work. It was close to the composer's heart from his youth, when he was still studying at the Moscow Choral

School. Shchedrin repeatedly reminisced about that time, noting the importance of the choir and choral music in his life: “I experienced the first moments of inspiration in my life while singing in the choir, and of course, my first compositions were also for the choir...” (Komarova, 2002, p. 453; Ore, 2024, p. 23).

Main Content

The composer wrote numerous a cappella choruses with various texts (primarily by Russian poets), and also worked in such genres as the oratorio, cantata, choral poem, a cappella cycle, and even created a new genre, “Russian choral opera” (the opera *“Boyarynya Morozova”*).

O. Sinelnikova, in her study of the constants and metamorphoses in R. Shchedrin’s style, characterizes his style as follows: “Combining the elements of avant-garde sophistication with simple folk themes and jazz rhythms, complicated timbre effects with lyrical melodies, he creates his own unique compositional signature, a style of sharp contrasts and unexpected juxtapositions. Most important, Shchedrin never forgets the listeners, striving to speak to them in a modern, yet accessible and understandable language” (Sinelnikova, 2013, p. 25). As in all his creative works, Shchedrin’s choral works demonstrate the influence and interpenetration of a wide variety of styles, as well as an appeal to a wide range of themes – from humorous sketches to funeral chants.

Among the most famous and significant works for choir written in the 20th century are “Poetoria” (1968), “Four Choruses on the Verses of Andrei Voznesensky” (1971), “Stanzas from ‘Eugene Onegin’” (1981), and “The Sealed Angel” (1988).

Four Choruses on the Verses of Andrei Voznesensky emphasizes poetic content. It is based on the poems of Andrei Voznesensky (1933–2010), the poet and writer recognized and highly valued by many of his contemporaries, including, for example, Robert Lowell (1917–1977). *Poetoria* is also written to the words of A. Voznesensky. It is a concerto for the poet, accompanied by female voice, orchestra, and mixed choir. Stylistically, the work continues the tradition of the passions

of I. S. Bach, with a prominent role for choral elements.

Stanzas of ‘Eugene Onegin’ (1981) consists of six choruses based on Pushkin’s poems, which convey not so much the plot but the mood of the novel, along with individual landscape and background scenes. The famous researcher V. Kholopova, in her monograph *The Path Through the Center. Composer Rodion Shchedrin*, notes of this work: “The range of images encompassed what could form the basis of a symphonic cycle – effectiveness, landscape, lyricism, scherzo-like quality, and hymnal quality; yet it was realized in Shchedrin’s concentrated manner” (Kholopova, 2000, p. 109).

The Sealed Angel is one of R. Shchedrin’s most frequently performed choral works. It features interesting timbral combinations of a cappella choir and reed pipes, which, however, as Shchedrin himself noted, “it may be substituted by a Western concert flute” (Duffie B., 1990). The composition is based on church and folk intonations, emphasizing the semantics of the text, based on N. Leskov’s story *The Sealed Angel*.

In 2021, the Moscow Conservatory hosted the presentation of a new collection of the composer’s choral works, entitled *“The Twenty-First Century...”* The title was chosen deliberately – on the one hand, it clearly defines the chronology of the compositions included, and on the other, it is the title of a poem by Voznesensky and Shchedrin’s chorus written to his words, which opens the collection. The collection includes 22 works by the composer, written over 18 years – from 2003 to 2021. Let’s consider the most striking ones, in our opinion.

Diptych on Poems by Voznesensky (2003) is a two-part composition for a cappella choir, addressing Voznesensky’s poetry on a new, more mature level. Two poems from the cycle, *The Twenty-First Century* and *The Refugee*, became stylistic and semantic benchmarks for many of Shchedrin’s subsequent choral works;

Boyarynya Morozova (2006) is a two-part opera with a libretto by the composer himself, telling the tragic story of the Lady of Morozova, a historical figure of the 17th century. This image of a strong woman inspired V. Surikov to create his famous paint-

ing of the same name in the late 19th century, and in the 21st century, R. Shchedrin to write a choral opera that became a new genre in the history of music. Due to the focus on choral performance, the researchers note the opera's similarities to ancient Greek tragedy and oratorio: "This use of the chorus aligns us with the traditions of ancient Greek tragedy and the European canon (Passion)... The primacy of the choral sound, its special role in the formation and development of drama, imbues the work with oratorio-like qualities" (Vladimirtseva, 2012, pp. 18–21; cit. ex: Sviridova, Oshchepkova & Nikolaeva, 2018, p. 148–154).

The Tsar's Cupbearer (2008) is a short fragment from the opera *Boyarynya Morozova*, a version of which R. Shchedrin created specifically for B. Tevlin, a world-renowned choral conductor. The music of the work reveals a subtle interplay between the intonations of the past and their contemporary interpretation. B. Tevlin, who performed this work with the choir on numerous occasions, described the full palette of colors as a "demonic scherzo" characterized by "genuine choral theater" (cit. ex: Krivitskaya, 2020).

Epigraph from Tolstoy to Anna Karenina (2008). In this work, R. Shchedrin once again turned to the great classics, transforming Tolstoy's short text into a musical miniature. One famous phrase, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," from the epigraph of the novel *Anna Karenina* becomes the basis for an entire musical reflection – full of melodiousness, as well as varied intonations and moods.

The Mass of Remembrance (2018), dedicated to the memory of R. Shchedrin's wife, Maya Plisetskaya. The text of the Mass is based on two phrases that were carved on the grave of the writer N. Gogol a century and a half earlier: 1) "They will laugh with my bitter words" from the Bible and 2) "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" taken from the Revelation of St. John. *The Mass of Remembrance* became the composer's personal confession, the music of which combines sorrow and radiant gratitude, transforming the work into a spiritual monument to love and memory.

Russian Folk Proverbs (2017–2020) – a cycle combining the wisdom and irony of oral folklore with a contemporary compos-

er's language, imbued with innovative techniques. Here, Shchedrin revealed the aphoristic nature of proverbs through rhythm, intonation, and contrasts, creating a vibrant musical kaleidoscope.

Triptych to the words by Khlebnikov (2020) features three choral miniatures – *I Need Few*, *Sing to Me About Girls*, and *When Horses Die* – with philosophical content and engaging musical solutions.

Thus, the composer has traveled a long path in the evolution of choral music – from his initial works which reveal characteristics of his early work, to his later works, many of which are characterized by aphorisms and philosophical depth. These qualities of Shchedrin's music, combined with its melodic richness and accessibility, even among a wide audience, have made his choral works frequently performed in many countries around the world.

In Uzbekistan, various genres of Rodion Shchedrin's music are studied at all stages of music education. In concert life, his work is known primarily for his *Carmen Suite* – a performance on the music by Georges Bizet and R. Shchedrin, with choreography by A. Alonso, is part of the repertoire of the Alisher Navoi State Academic Grand Theater and is also performed in concert versions. For example, this work was successfully performed in May 2024 in Tashkent at the charity concert by the Russian National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Spivakov.

The Shchedrin's piano works, and in particular his *Polyphonic Book* (1972), have become firmly established in the concert and especially pedagogical repertoire at the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan. However, it should be noted that the composer's choral works have not yet taken their rightful place in the country's concert life. Nevertheless, it contains the great potential for performance, as well as for study in choral conducting classes. Rodion Shchedrin himself repeated many times that it is through choral education where the path lies to a true understanding of music. In the preface to his choral collection *The Twenty-First Century*, he noted: "The choir is my beginning, my roots. The Moscow Choral School, the boarding school, discipline, reasonable drill, daily hour-and-

a-half singing in the choir, my first attempts at composing choral music. Finally, the great mentor, Alexander Vasilyevich Sveshnikov. This is my path to music. I believe, and still think that choral education is the surest path to the Art of Music” (Shchedrin, 2021).

Conclusions

The overview of the composer’s choral legacy reveals his enduring interest in various genres of choral music over more than 50 years of creative life. The verbal (textual) component – its semantics and expressiveness – is of great importance in all of Rodi-

on Shchedrin’s compositions, serving as the starting point for various musical expressions. However, in his later works, a more philosophical style and a restrained use of expressive means are clearly discernible.

The number and high artistic value of Rodion Shchedrin’s compositions written for choir have made them popular worldwide. In Uzbekistan, however, despite the composer’s instrumental and stage music being integrated into concert life and education, the choral portion of his legacy remains understudied, despite possessing all the necessary potential for research and performance.

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