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BY OLIVIA GIOVETTI

Russian classical vocal music is becoming more and more mainstream, but the difficult Cyrillic alphabet and challenging language are often a stumbling block for singers. A new summer program is helping singers make sense of the Russian language in just four short weeks.

Moscow's St. Basil's Cathedral

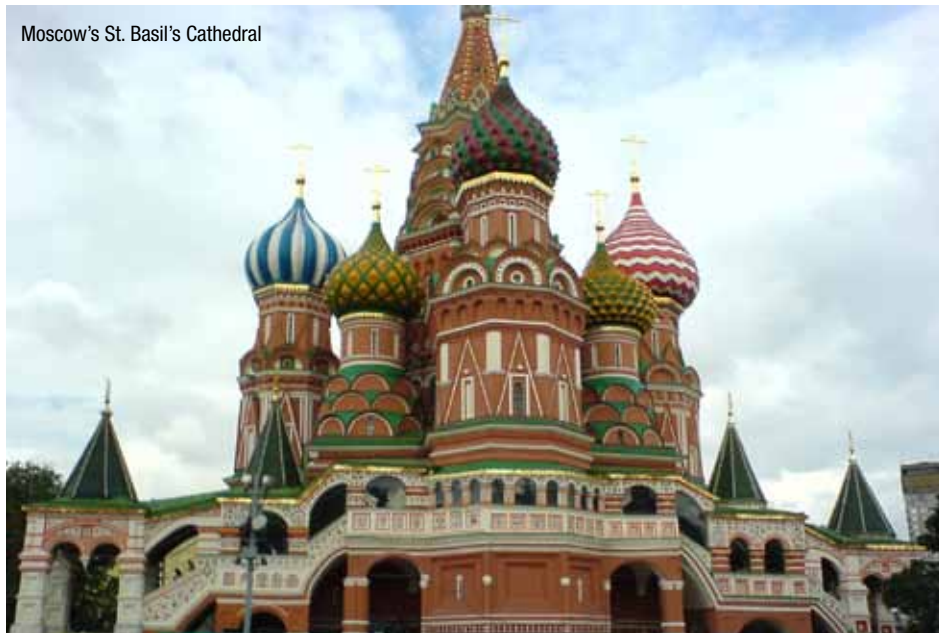


photo by Alexander Evstyugov-Babaev

Simulcast to a global audience via their YouTube account, last October's much ballyhooed reopening of Moscow's famed Bolshoi Theatre reaffirmed the increasing prominence of Russia on the operatic and art song stages. This season's opera calendar in the U.S. and Canada includes *Eugene Onegin* in Los Angeles, Charlotte, and Madison; Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* at New York's Dicapo Opera Theatre; and *Boris Godunov* and Shostakovich's *Moscow, Cherry Town* in Chicago. And opening next month is Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* at the Metropolitan Opera, part of the company's ongoing commitment to at least one Russian-language opera each year thanks to its partnership with Mariinsky maestro Valery Gergiev.

"There was a real insurgence of Russian singers and also Russian repertoire," says baritone William Stone of the era of classical music after the fall of the Iron Curtain. "There is also with singers like Dmitri Hvorostovsky a lot more Russian art song in the repertoire today. I'm delighted because it's wonderful music. Singers love to sing it. It has great lines and harmony."

The music has the power to move and captivate—think of the heady ardor in *Eugene Onegin's* Letter Scene, the booming chimes of *Boris Godunov's*

Coronation Scene, or the triumph of humanity in the final chorus of Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. But what does tend to get lost in translation is the language itself. For most native English speakers, Latin-rooted languages like French, Spanish, and Italian and the English-linked German trip off the tongue more easily than the hieroglyphics of the Cyrillic alphabet.

Shedding light onto the linguistics is Ghenady Meirson, the founder and principal coach of Russian Opera Workshop. A member of the faculty for both Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts and Curtis Institute, Meirson went from studying in Odessa to Rome's Santa Cecilia Conservatory to finishing up his own studies at Curtis, learning under Seymour Lipkin, Mieczyslaw Horszowski, and Vladimir Sokoloff.

After writing a handbook, *Do Sing in Russian*, in 1982, Meirson focused his attention on the repertoire of his mother tongue, conducting with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Opera Company of Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia Singers. Last year, he gave the inaugural sessions of Russian Opera Workshop, a residency program at AVA, offering a chance for singers to get the language into their voices and perform repertoire standards, plus art songs and romances, in concert—accompanied by



The reopening of Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre in the fall of 2011

photo by Damir Yusupov / Bolshoi Theatre



Eugene Onegin in concert at Russian Opera Workshop

photo courtesy of Russian Opera Workshop

Meirson himself at the piano—one in June and one in July (offered as separate sessions at \$2,250 per session).

“Not everybody has experience with singing in Russian,” Meirson explains of the process. “And if they get these transliterations, they’re just gibberish, they’re basically empty words. They don’t know what it means, what’s going on. So we have to bring it all into focus and have them fill those shells of the words with a lot of meaning.”

It’s a tall order for a month-long workshop, especially one that requires no prior experience with the Russian language and results in the performance of a role. Some of the pressure is lessened by the nature of the performance being a concert and one that does not carry the burden of memorizing the role. Understandably, it’s not for the weak of heart and substantial preparation goes into the process long before singers arrive in Pennsylvania. As master coach Danielle Orlando, who offers a masterclass in the workshop, describes it, the program “addresses as much as maybe one can address during [an entire] school year.”

Meirson found it “critically important” to make sure his students are up for the challenge. Several months before the start of last year’s maiden run, he sent out PDF scores of the

program’s first two operas—*Eugene Onegin* and *Iolanta*—to participants with embedded audio clips of Meirson speaking the text. Moreover, he makes himself available to students either in Philadelphia or via Skype to accommodate additional prep time and offer guidance on how the sound should be.

However, it’s Meirson’s unique blend of a Russian background and musical profession that makes the program truly unique. “If people were to go into my torture chamber just for the language and there was no musical outcome, they wouldn’t do it,” he says. “The entire goal is to really go through this very difficult birthing process in order to have a great outcome, to have a great musical experience.”

In between Meirson’s daily classes, coachings, and rehearsals (which fill up weekdays from 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.), the intrepid coach and tour guide through the Russian language also boasts a compelling lineup of masterclasses thanks to his many connections at AVA, Curtis, and beyond. Last year’s students studied diction with the Washington National Opera’s coach Vera Danchenko-Stern, coached with Orlando, and gained further insight into the literature of Pushkin under Ivy League professor

Ilya Vinitsky. They also delved into the musical process with composer Daron Hagen; worked with conductors Rossen Milanov, David Hayes, and Danail Rachev; and trained vocally under Stone, Katerina Souvorova, and late bass Julian Rodescu. Orlando, Vinitsky, Stone, and Hagen all return this year, along with soprano Benita Valente and vocal coach Mikael Eliassen.

“Ghena is right on the cutting edge,” says Stone. “Everybody likes working with him because he’s such a positive person and a joy to be around. Sometimes you miss that; the goal is some other thing. When students are in a pleasant environment and a supporting environment, they learn very quickly and very well.”

Stone’s masterclass focuses on maximizing the singing that comes with the program, incorporating breathing exercises and diction with the pronunciation of the language. “It’s really wedded to how you sing and get the words out. I try to allow the music to come through them as freely as possible,” adds Stone, who himself coached with Met baritone George Cehanovsky, who was also a proponent of his native Russian diction in his later years.

“All of his students came to me with enormous improvement in their

Participants of the 2011 Russian Opera Workshop



singing,” says Meirson of Stone, whose students include grand prize winner of the 2011 Metropolitan Opera’s National Council Auditions, Michelle Johnson.

“The repertoire is so singer friendly; there are lots of roles that young singers can sing. So it not only provides an opportunity to sing in a Slavic language, but it’s music that’s useful for their development and experience,” adds Orlando, who brings her own singular musical expertise to the table.

Balancing out Meirson’s linguistics, Orlando seeks to help students make sense of the language and phrasing, focusing on the stress of the text and tempi indications. “Her masterclass went for two hours, and at the end I said, ‘What? It’s over?’” says Meirson. Additionally, Vinitsky’s lectures were essential for the dramaturgical aspects of the Russian rep and were valuable to both musicians and audience members (especially with *Onegin*, a role that, in

the opera, only scratches the tip of the iceberg that is Pushkin’s verse novel).

A full course—from borscht to paskha—of intensive study, however, is best measured by the success rates of its students. And even though the program is just entering its second year this June, its alumni have already added some prominent roles to their résumés. Korean-born soprano Youngjoo An went from Philadelphia to Opera Delaware, performing Tatyana’s Letter Scene from *Eugene Onegin* at the company’s Fall Studio series last September and is returning this spring to perform the same opera’s final duet.

Compared to other summer programs—ones that are devoted to fully staged, orchestrated, and costumed productions—Russian Opera Workshop isn’t about the performance. However, baritone Efrain Solis describes it as a “safer” environment in that sense, one that allows for an enviably concentrated amount of time to get a better grasp on what is slowly being revealed in the U.S. as a repertoire as vast as Siberia.

After noticing the workshop’s ubiquitous Facebook ads and with encouragement from his coach (and notable *Onegin*), Vladimir Chernov, Solis spent last summer in Philadelphia

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working on *Onegin* and getting it on its feet in the Russian Opera Workshop’s concert. Directly following his performance there, he was called to perform the same work in a semi-staged concert in Pasadena, California.

“Ghena just loves those operas so much, he could probably play them without the score,” says Solis. “The amount of detail that was taken into everything . . . not just the music but character and the language. They were really good about helping people with what they specifically needed and not just making it a kind of a general 100-level class.”

Solis was impressed by the specificities of the program (which last year also included students from Russia’s Rimsky-Korsakov St. Petersburg State Conservatory) tailored to his own individual experience with the language and career goals. “In the mornings you really went through diction and speaking Russian by itself and not touching music. That was the part that I really enjoyed the most, was that I got to really refine my Russian diction,” says Solis. “We got quite a bit of a Russian audience in the concert and they always walked up to me and said, ‘Your Russian is really good. We don’t even have to read the translations. We already understand you in Russian.’

So that was the great part, to be understood by native Russian speakers.”

“It’s really in order for them to learn the roles and then run with it,” adds Meirson. “And that’s why we have alumni success.”

*Russian Opera Workshop is accepting online video auditions for its 2012 programs—Rachmaninoff’s *Aleko* and Tchaikovsky’s *Pique Dame*, plus Russian song concerts in both sessions—through March 15. For more information, visit www.russianoperaworkshop.com.*

Olivia Giovetti’s bio can be found on p. 14. ©