



1ST London Festival of Bulgarian Culture www.lfbc.eu

Programme

Friday, 12 November 2010, 7.30pm

St. John's, Smith Square, London

THE LONDON BULGARIAN CHOIR



Presented and organised by
Classical Concerts Productions
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A DECADE

In November 2000, Dessi gathered a handful of friends and Bulgarian music enthusiasts in the Islington Arts Factory. On that night, the London Bulgarian Choir was born – but never renamed. Now, forty-strong and thoroughly international, we have brought the traditional folk music of Bulgaria not only to concert halls and churches, but also to nightclubs, festivals, rock concerts and even a barge on the Thames.

The Choir's notable achievements include winning the title of BBC Radio 3 Open Choir of the Year in 2006, featuring as one of Joan Armatrading's Favourite Choirs on BBC Radio 4 and performing at Westminster Abbey in 2010. We have collaborated with numerous rock, jazz and classical musicians, most prominently with rock band Doves at the BBC Electric Proms, broadcast live on BBC 2 in October 2009. Members of our choir sang on the award-winning soundtrack of the BBC's Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. We are very proud of our beautiful album, Alyana Galyana and our Christmas Concert DVD.

A BRAND NEW SOUND

Tonight, we mark the Choir's ten-year journey by launching six spine-tingling, newly commissioned songs by acclaimed Bulgarian composer Kiril Todorov.

Kiril's arrangements of traditional songs and original compositions are already a vital part of the Choir's repertoire. His new songs have taken us on an electrifying musical journey – both metaphorical and real. Less than three months ago, the Choir travelled to Bulgaria and performed the songs to the composer's friends and colleagues. This discerning audience was amazed and moved: from the joyous Sabrali Sa Se Nabrali, featuring the unsuspected talents of the singers on a variety of instruments, to the haunting resonance of Razbolyal Se E Mlad Stoyan – a dying hero's last words to his mother.



The Choir would like to thank the BBC's Performing Arts Fund for the award which made the commission possible and the Bulgarian Embassy in London for its vital support and hospitality.

www.londonbulgarianchoir.co.uk



KIRIL TODOROV

Kiril started his professional life as concertmaster for the Stara Zagora Opera. In his late twenties, his love of folk music led him to abandon the violin and start writing choral arrangements of traditional songs he had learnt as a child from his mother. During his 50-year career as a composer, he has written for hundreds of theatre productions and directed some of the leading folk choirs. With his pioneering vocal ensembles Trayana and Folk Scat, he was the first composer in Bulgaria to blend folk and jazz into a new, sublime a cappella genre. In March 2010, he was made Emeritus Professor by the Bulgarian Academy of Science in recognition of his contribution to music.

DESSLAVA STEFANOVA

Dessi grew up singing the songs of her native Bulgaria. An experienced international performer by age 18, she went on to become a professional singer and assistant conductor with the renowned Philip Koutev Bulgarian National Folk Ensemble. Since 2000, she has been working in the UK performing in various art forms, recording film soundtracks and delivering workshops. Her voice can be heard lending drama to key moments in Troy, The Brothers Grimm, Elizabeth the Virgin Queen, Ghost Ship, Atlantis and Borat.





THE SINGERS MEET THE NEW SONGS

“It has been an immense pleasure and a great honour to learn songs directly from the composer. Kiril Todorov is such a humble man with such a big heart who conveys his songs with great passion, the most poetic nuances and a delicious helping of humour.”

Ulrike, choir member since 2001

“Kiril’s writing has brought out the glorious, muscular, soulful sound of our men, as well as the heart and sense of humour that are such a trademark of our choir. Barely speaking a word of English, Kiril communicates so beautifully through mime, through his expressions and his brightly glowing eyes. He has frequently had us in stitches, and yet always encourages us to aim higher as musicians.”

Veronica, choir member since 2004

“Singing one of the solos that Kiril has written is so humbling and a bit scary! He flew over to London in March. At one point, during rehearsals for Razbolyal Se E Mlad Stoyan, he eased himself out of his chair with a civilised

cry of dissatisfaction and began to wave his arms about like some wild and windy embodiment of his music. And as if by magic we began to sing like we were in the lonely woods, the lightening-battered mountains. It was amazing. Bernard whispered to me, ‘He’s like a wizard! It’s like he’s casting spells or something!’.

Steve, soloist in Razbolyal Se E Mlad Stoyan and choir member since 2005

“Kiril generously invited the whole choir, plus our entourage of friends, partners and children, to what was modestly called ‘breakfast’. This garden feast lasted all morning, and if we hadn’t needed to pile back onto the tour bus for our next gig, we might still be there. We met Kiril’s family and friends at their breakfast extravaganza. His cousin sang for us, and we discovered she’d also made all 89 pancakes. I told Kiril that I love singing his songs and that I enjoy the challenge. He replied ‘You’ve got many more to look forward to!’”

Deanna, founder member



BULGARIAN TOUR 2010

Meeting the locals

In the misty mountains of Koprivshtitsa, the tour bus stopped at the train station to pick up some extra passengers: Dessi's mother, Juliana, and the Choir's friend and composer, Kiril Todorov. We decided to greet the pair with a song, and lined up on the platform for a warm-up in anticipation of the delayed arrival of the train. A couple of songs later, we were thrilled to hear claps and shouts of 'Bravo!' from the stationary train across the platform. To our amusement, Plamen, a choir guest, seized the opportunity to collect a few sneaky coins from the train. And a local policeman seized the opportunity to enforce the "no begging" rule, while putting a coin or two into the hat.

Diana and Jordan, both Bulgarian, began our first cultural exchange at the world-famous festival of Bulgarian music Koprivshtitsa, with a group of grannies in the woods backstage. The women sat singing their beautiful songs and our Bulgarians could close their eyes and be transported to a childhood filled with tradition. We replied

with choir songs, starting a musical conversation that crossed forests and rivers, villages and cities.

Later that night, in a restaurant, the Choir met another group of women. They were celebrating their performance with a long meal and plenty to drink, and burst into the sort of song you'd normally expect to hear from a Geordie truck driver. As the women belted out their colourful message about personal hygiene, to shrieks of embarrassment from anybody who understood, the restaurateurs decided enough was enough and told them to leave. But they carried on dancing and singing with us until the early hours of the morning, and some of us croaked for the next three days.

Hospitality

There really is nothing like Slavic hospitality. Stoianka, granny of our sixteen-year old host singer Yanna, had been baking all day. We were treated to a feast of Bulgarian food: shopska salad, made with the juiciest, most flavoursome



cucumbers and tomatoes I have ever eaten; home-baked banitsa (filo pastry layered with whisked egg and sheep's cheese), with and without sugar; moussaka, homemade breads, cured meats and, in the tradition of every Bulgarian home that has a grapevine on the premises, home-brewed rakiya (brandy). Our gift of a Fortnum and Mason caddy of teabags with stem ginger biscuits seemed utterly inadequate. I asked Jordan what we could possibly buy this Bulgarian family to say thank you. His reply was, "My grandfather always said, 'I can't drink gratitude!'" So with his guidance, we bought them the best bottle of rakiya we could find. Of course, this was immediately countered by their gift of a bottle of exquisite home-brew to take away with us.

From the audience

The central concert of our tour was in Dessi and Kiril's home city of Stara Zagora, the unofficial debut for four of Kiril's newly commissioned works. The atmosphere was

electric – 300 people had squashed themselves into the theatre seats and the aisles, sat on the floor at the front and squeezed onto the steps at either side of the stage. As the choir walked in single file onto the stage, the audience settled down, stopped squabbling, and clapped. After the first song, the applause was rapturous. There. That wasn't so bad! As the performers found their feet, they won the hearts of everyone there, and 40 voices sang as one.

After the last song, a procession of well-wishers formed to present endless huge bouquets of flowers to Dessi, and indeed her mother. Dessi's childhood choir, the Zagorche Ensemble, gave the Choir 12 traditional costumes in honour of their achievements in disseminating Bulgarian music in the UK. This was an extraordinarily generous gift, and a precious moment for the Choir.

Tanya Jackson, future choir member, 2010

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