

Preview

Tenebrae Choir from U.K. to sing Russian program at St. John's Cathedral on November 7

by Daniel Hathaway



The great British choral tradition, cultivated for centuries in cathedrals, college chapels and prominent parish churches, has spawned a number of superb, mixed choral ensembles who regularly tour in North America. Tenebrae, a chamber choir founded and directed by Nigel Short, which will perform on the free Helen D. Schubert concert series at St. John's Cathedral in downtown Cleveland on Wednesday, November 7, offers

something a bit different. In Latin, the name means “shadows” (it's also the name of a trio of dramatic services during Holy Week). Tenebrae chamber choir performances usually invoke a spiritual ambiance through the use of candlelight and special lighting effects, and singers move around ecclesiastical buildings, treating them as real performance spaces.

Short launched Tenebrae in 2001 with concerts in London and Switzerland, after a singing career at both Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral, with the Tallis Scholars, the King's Consort and the King's Singers as well as in opera productions with the English National Opera and Opera North. He was so committed to the idea of performing by candlelight that he commissioned ten medieval-style iron candle stands from a Swiss ironmonger, each to hold twenty-five candles.

As stunning as a 250-candlepower concert would be, those candelabra will *not* figure in Tenebrae's current North American tour, which began on November 1 in Utah and will end on November 9 in Philadelphia, with stops in Cincinnati, St. Louis, Durham, NC, Cleveland and Princeton, NJ along the way. “We took the candelabra along once when we went to Bermuda,” Nigel Short told us by telephone from his home in London. “We had a very wealthy sponsor so we flew the whole lot out there. But they're such heavy old things — they weigh 40 kg each and we have ten of them. They're OK to go in the back of a van, but not across the U.S. by air! Creating the special ambiance for these performances will be up to the ingenuity of the promoters.”

Whatever the lighting turns out to be, the spiritual ambiance Tenebrae creates through its repertoire is completely portable. This tour will offer U.S. audiences a program largely devoted to Russian liturgical music by Rachmaninoff, Chesnokov, Kalinnikov, Tchaikovsky and Kedrov. “We have a reputation in the U.K. as the British choir for this kind of repertoire,” Short noted, whose choir is strong on the kind of bass voices Russian music requires. “Low basses are fairly rare beasts, so once we’ve got them we may as well use them!”



But there will also be a set of works by Welsh composer Paul Mealor which don't fall far away from the Russian theme. “Paul has Russian ancestry and he likes writing such low bass parts,” Short told us. The Mealor pieces, which include *Now sleeps the crimson petal*, *Salvator mundi*, *Locus iste* and *Ubi caritas*, have recently earned Tenebrae high marks in the British record industry. “Our recording, *Tender Light*, set a new record as No. 1 on the choral charts for five or six weeks,” Short said. Mealor's *Ubi caritas* also received a lot of attention when it was commissioned and performed for the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton at Westminster Abbey in April, 2011.

While the program is heavily Russian in origin, some works will be sung in English, and besides the Mealor pieces, Arvo Pärt's *The Beatitudes* will provide contrast. “I sang many of the Russian pieces in English as a boy chorister,” Short told us. “A whole program in Russian can lose an audience. An occasional change in language and texture is sort of a palate-cleanser.” For example, Tenebrae will perform Tchaikovsky's *Legend (The Crown of Roses)* in English. “It's a very sweet little piece I used to sing as a boy. It's so clear and effective in English.” Short pointed out that while the choir has had extensive coaching in Old Church Slavonic, “there's a danger when you stop really knowing what you're singing about — you start to lose communication.”

Another change in texture is the Pärt work, which features block chordal writing and is underpinned with a low organ note and crowned with an organ flourish at the end. “I was going to play the organ part myself,” Short said, “but in summer I broke my finger just before we were going on tour — you don't want to know how!” Of course we did, and the conductor went on to confess, “I was playing table tennis with my young daughter. She was playing so well that I was either valiantly or stupidly trying to keep a rally together when I fell.” Bad luck there, and it seemed as if the upcoming U.S. Tour might be ill-fated as well: we talked the night before the choir were scheduled to fly to Boston — arriving about the same time as Hurricane Sally. “The airline has been totally useless; they told us just to go to the airport tomorrow,” Short said, rather gloomily. “We'll just pretend it's all going to work out perfectly.” Perhaps not perfectly, but Tenebrae arrived on time for its first engagements and at least one storm-threatened group made it through during a tumultuous week.

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