

Spellbound by immersion in Russian sacred music

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Posted: 09/26/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT

The works of Handel and Haydn never grow old, but sometimes it is rewarding to set aside the familiar and venture into the musical unknown. And that's exactly what happened Friday evening at St. John's Episcopal Cathedral.

With artistic director and conductor Timothy Krueger as guide, the St. Martin's Chamber Choir took listeners on an extraordinary journey into the little-known sacred choral history of Russia.

In his clear, helpful program notes, Krueger confessed his own limited knowledge of this music before he launched a one-year research project that included the study of hundreds of scores.

What he discovered is surprising: Russia didn't really have its own distinctive sacred music before the mid-19th century. After the country became Christian in the ninth century, it adopted Greek chant and then later looked almost entirely to the West for inspiration.

But in the 19th century, composers set about defining an intrinsically Russian sound, reaching back to the Greek and Ukrainian chants and borrowing folk idioms, a process that reached its culmination in works such as Sergei Rachmaninoff's "The Theotokos, Ever Vigilant in Prayer."

The choir ended the first half with an ardent, transfixing version of this mystical piece, with its suspended harmonies and dramatic interplay of soaring, almost piercing high notes and a powerful, prototypically Russian bass line.

The program as a whole was an enlightening overview of Krueger's stunning discoveries, beginning with an entrance procession featuring the simple and moving 12th-century Russian chant, "Sticheron for St. Mary of Egypt."

It culminated with five works by the virtually unknown composer Victor Kalinnikov (1870-1927). Krueger believes he represents the zenith of Russian sacred music, and after hearing these stellar pieces, especially the sublimely haunting "Blessed Is the Man," it is hard to disagree.

Throughout this spellbinding evening, a high point for this fine choir, it demonstrated its usual technical exactitude. But perhaps more important, it communicated the depth and meaning of the repertoire.

The program will be repeated at 4 p.m. Sunday at St. Augustine Orthodox Church, 55 W. Third Ave.