

## Classical Music: Russia's top exports poised for season debut

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With its first concert of the season Sunday, the Russian Chamber Orchestra - a group of intrepid emigres from the former Soviet Union - begins its 15th year of performing in Marin. Music director Alexander Vereshagin started the group in 1992 and since then, it has performed not only in Marin but across the nation, with the mission of introducing audiences to works of music rarely heard live.

The talent and training of these musicians - many of them had professional music careers in Russia before coming to the Bay Area - allow them to perform equally well as soloists, in small ensembles, with vocalists and in the full 12-piece string orchestra. This versatility enables the Russian Chamber Orchestra to offer programs of exceptional diversity to audiences who might not otherwise have the opportunity to hear such music.

After all, as Vereshagin once said, "How often do you get 15 of your closest friends together to play chamber music?"

In keeping with this mission, the season's opening concert presents a selection of Russian music and includes works from two non-Russian composers, Schubert and Sibelius. This is the first time the orchestra has performed much of this music and, in fact, the first time most of this music has ever been offered to Marin audiences.

"People will hear a lot of things not often publicly performed," notes Vereshagin, his Russian accent still spicing his now-perfect English.

In one of those unusual pieces - the first movement of a piano concerto by Alexander Scriabin - Vereshagin plays the piano solo. He says that music lovers should attend to hear this piece, if for no other reason. "It's not very often performed," he says. "It's a chance to hear something new."

Scriabin is one of four Russian composers represented on this program, which also includes Mikhail Glinka, Alexander Borodin and Dmitri Shostakovich.

"We chose it because it was great music," Vereshagin explains. "But it happens that it gives you a taste of almost every stage of Russian romantic music."

Glinka, for example, whose "Fantasy Waltz" ends the program, is considered the father of Russian classical music. Following Glinka is Borodin, a medical doctor and chemist whose works were made popular by the musical "Kismet." Shostakovich bookends this overview of Russian music with his contemporary "Intermezzo," written in 1940.

"It's quite a good picture of Russian music," Vereshagin reiterates.

"I'm really excited about it and I'm sure it will please the audience."

Although chamber orchestras - including RCO - usually include Baroque pieces on their programs, that being the era when most music written was for small ensembles, Vereshagin chose an all-Romantic program because he wanted to introduce audiences to new music. He notes that people are not often familiar with Shostakovich's music, other than his large orchestral works.

"But very often he writes beautiful compositions like this one [the "Intermezzo"], which combines beauty and simplicity without going to the extreme measures of dissonance often heard in contemporary music."

This is reassuring for listeners who prefer the sonorities of melodic music and cringe at the sometimes violent harmonies of more recent compositions. But, Vereshagin soothes, "there's nothing scary about this." Quite the opposite, he insists. "It's wonderful music."

The venue for Sunday's performance - St. Stephens Church in Belvedere - enhances the beauty of the music with its incredible acoustics, providing the opportunity for an enlightening musical experience, beautiful in its variety, profound in its simplicity.

IF YOU GO

Who: Russian Chamber Orchestra

What: Season premiere

When: 5 p.m. Oct. 21

Where: St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, 3 Bay View Ave., Belvedere

Tickets: \$17 to \$20, free for children under 12

Information: [www.russianchamberorch.org](http://www.russianchamberorch.org)

Also: RCO plays a free concert at 12:30 p.m. Oct. 31 at St. Patrick's Church, 756 Mission St., San Francisco

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