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CLASSICAL 1990

By Joseph McLellan

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In classical music, at least for Washington, 1990 was the Year of the Russians. Its highlight was the restoration to Mstislav Rostropovich and Galina Vishnevskaya of the Soviet citizenship that had been taken from them in 1978, followed by the National Symphony Orchestra's tour of the Soviet Union.

But these were only two examples of the post-perestroika escalation of Slavic presence in the capital of the free world. Equally impressive, in its own way, was the debut of the Russian baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky, who was brought to Washington by Marta Istomin in one of her last major presentations before she resigned as artistic director of the Kennedy Center. Some connoisseurs were calling it the most spectacular debut since Luciano Pavarotti's.

One of the most controversial programs given by the National Symphony this year was the world premiere of Soviet composer Vyacheslav Artyomov's symphony "On the Threshold of a Bright World." It provoked mixed reactions in the NSO audience, and those who disliked it tended to dislike it intensely. But it did show that Soviet music, mired for more than half a century in an old-fashioned style pretentiously called "Socialist Realism," had moved on to post-avant-garde styles now abandoned by most American composers.

One of the best-received guest conductors the National Symphony engaged during the year was another visitor from the Soviet Union, Yuri Temirkanov -- a conductor whose great sense of spontaneity tends to generate a lot of excitement. Meanwhile, at Catholic University, Soviet pianist Paul Ostrovsky became artist in residence and gave an impressive all-Prokofiev concert with violinist Oleh Krysa, another Soviet citizen now living in New York. On the grass-roots level, one of the year's most interesting vocal recitals was a program of arias from Russian opera given at the University of Maryland by a Washington resident, Vladimir Ekzarkhov, a son of Russian emigres.

The Russian phenomenon in Washington is part of a trend that can be traced from coast to coast. In Washington state, the Seattle Opera produced Prokofiev's massive opera "War and Peace," which has been around for nearly half a century, but has had only one previous U.S. production (Sarah Caldwell's, which was seen at Wolf Trap).

In New York, the former CBS record label (now acquired by Sony) launched an ambitious program of Russian opera recording, beginning with Borodin's "Prince Igor." The National Symphony, one of the first American institutions to get on the Russian opera bandwagon, recorded Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" for Erato in the composer's long-ignored original orchestration. At Wolf Trap, where the NSO's "1812" Overture has long been an annual bestseller, the orchestra deepened its Russian accent in 1989 by playing Prokofiev's soundtrack

music for "Alexander Nevsky" while the Eisenstein movie showed on a big screen -- an event that looks as if it may become a hardy perennial. This year, the Eisenstein-Prokofiev "Ivan the Terrible" was added -- not quite as good as "Nevsky," but still a remarkable experience.

Sony sent its recording technicians to Moscow and Leningrad to catch high points of the NSO's Russian tour, and the company's young Affiliate Artists conductor, Randall Craig Fleischer, made his recording debut somewhere near the summit, conducting the NSO in the Dvorak Cello Concerto with Rostropovich as soloist. That recording has not been released yet, but a repeat performance at the Kennedy Center after the tour inspires high expectations.

Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya had not been back to their native land since they went into exile in 1974, and Vishnevskaya had planned not to go with the orchestra until her citizenship was restored shortly before the tour began. Their homecoming is the subject of a 90-minute documentary that will be shown on PBS on New Year's Day.

Hvorostovsky's program of songs by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff provoked critical superlatives both in Washington and in New York, where he made his debut at Lincoln Center a few days before his Washington appearance. The same kind of kudos greeted his first recording (on the Philips label), and opera fans on this continent are awaiting his first appearance in a staged production. Two American opera companies, San Francisco and Chicago, have been negotiating with him; Chicago will probably get him first, but no firm dates have been announced. There seems to be no prospect of seeing him in opera in Washington in the near future, but the Washington Performing Arts Society has been trying to arrange a recital at the Kennedy Center, possibly next fall.

Next to Marta Istomin's leaving the Kennedy Center, the most spectacular resignations of the year were those of Hugh Southern as general manager of the Metropolitan Opera in June, only eight months after his appointment, and Gian Carlo Menotti's resignation as artistic director of the Spoleto Festival U.S.A., which he had founded in 1977 in Charleston, S.C.

Menotti and the Spoleto board of directors, who had fallen out over an art exhibit that had been scheduled without his approval, were later quietly reconciled. No formal announcement was made, but the festival did announce that next year's event will feature a celebration of his 80th birthday. Questioned about this, a festival official said there could be no such celebration without Menotti's participation.

There was nothing unexpected about Zubin Mehta's plan to leave the New York Philharmonic on the expiration of his contract, but Philadelphia was shocked when Riccardo Muti announced that he would not renew his contract with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Mehta and Muti were both replaced by Germans, Kurt Masur in New York and Wolfgang Sawallisch in Philadelphia, leaving music lovers wondering when either of these great American orchestras would have an American music director.

The first (and so far the only) American-born music director of the Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein,

announced his retirement from conducting in October and died a short time later of pulmonary problems. He had been a lifelong heavy smoker, as dedicated to taking risks in life as in music. He was well known and deeply loved in Washington, where he conducted the National Symphony frequently (he had once been considered and rejected for the position of its music director), and his "Mass" had been commissioned for the opening of the Kennedy Center. A recent article that said classical music will not survive his death was overstated, but it is not likely that we will soon see another musician like him.

His longtime friend Aaron Copland died soon after Bernstein, though he lived long enough for the nationwide celebration of his 90th birthday in November. Long hailed as the standard-bearer of American music, Copland was the first and most important composer in this century to call international attention to the vitality and color of American folk idioms. Two other American musicians who died this year were not exactly classical but certainly classics: Sarah Vaughan and Pearl Bailey.

Highlights of the Washington Opera's programming this season were Dominick Argento's "The Aspern Papers," an instant classic; Verdi's "Aida," presented for the first time in the company's history; and a spectacular production of Richard Strauss's "Salome" brought in from Los Angeles. Aprile Millo sang the title role of "Aida" powerfully on opening night but was unfortunately indisposed for most of the remaining performances. Maria Ewing sang all performances in "Salome," which is as strenuous as "Aida" and (involving a breathless moment of full nudity) exposes the singer to danger from drafts.

The Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore -- a major musical resource to the whole region -- raised \$15 million between April and September, apparently guaranteeing its survival for the foreseeable future.

A major new performing arts center at George Mason University, which opened in October and is scheduled to show many performers of international star quality, could in the long run transform the performing arts scene in Northern Virginia as the Kennedy Center has done in Washington. Another performing arts facility, the acoustically splendid Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress, was reopened briefly in June for the library's annual summer festival of chamber music. It had been closed all season for renovations on the building, and the bad news of its reopening was that the renovations had not yet really begun. Work has been delayed at the library so long that nobody there is willing to hazard a guess as to when the auditorium will next be available.

Other highlights of 1990:

A Pulitzer Prize for Mel Powell, a California composer as adept in jazz as in classical 12-tone and electronic styles.

Two world premieres: in Baltimore, the Cello Concerto of Stephen Albert, who won a Pulitzer a few years ago; in St. Paul, the high-tech opera "Frankenstein" by Libby Larsen, who should win one soon. Also ran: Philip Glass's vocal cycle "Hydrogen Jukebox," which owed much of its interest to the text by Allen Ginsberg. Glass's masterpiece is still "Koyaanisquatsi," where the visuals are perfectly adapted to the music.

The marathon telecast of the Metropolitan Opera's complete "Ring" Cycle in June on PBS. This got mixed reviews, and some parts were clearly unsatisfactory, but its scope was breathtaking.

The first prize given to Christopher Taylor, a pianist who sounded suspiciously like an intellectual, in the William Kapell Competition. Could this start a trend toward favoring brains over brawn in such events? Tune in next year.

"The Magic Flute" at Wolf Trap -- the first of two major productions of this opera in Washington this year and not an easy act to follow.

Music From Marlboro celebrated its 40th anniversary in an environment where (thanks largely to Music From Marlboro) chamber music has become a hot item.