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## **Conlon leads May Festival in compelling Russian journey**

The final concert of the May Festival season led by James Conlon riveted the audience, from the searing imagery of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13, "Babi Yar" to the grandeur of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture," with the chorus singing "God save the Tsar" in Russian.

And just as gripping were excerpts from Mussorgsky's opera, "Khovanshchina," which included magnificent choruses and trumpet fanfares from the balcony, forming the centerpiece of the program.

Unlike other Russian-themed nights at the May Festival, the concert provided a serious survey of Russian history. Conlon guided listeners through the journey with thoughtful comments before each work.

Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony, written in 1962, was a blistering critique of life in Soviet Russia. For his "vocal and symphonic poem" for male chorus and bass soloist, Shostakovich set five poems by Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko to music.

The symphony takes its name from the first and longest movement, a setting of "Babi Yar." The poem recounts the horror of the ravine near Kiev where Nazis murdered 70,000 Jewish citizens in 1941. The poet said that he wrote it 20 years later as an indictment of his country for its continuing anti-Semitism.

Russian bass-baritone Mikhail Kolelishvili was a solemn soloist, who barely moved as he sang his declamatory lines with a resonant, powerful voice. His delivery remained objective but forceful, and at times he clenched his fist. The men of the May Festival Chorus alternated as solemn storytellers, clearly communicating the Russian texts.

Conlon led the music with intensity and conviction, vividly bringing out the details of Shostakovich's lean score. The second movement, "Humor," a sardonic scherzo to a poem about a political prisoner who escapes death, was pointed and brutal. The third song, "In the store," was a lament for Russian women and their daily lives. Out of this bleak canvas, rose wisps of themes finally climaxed in the full power of the orchestra.

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra musicians played with crisp attack and wonderful color. The grim mood continued in the slow movement, "Fears," as the tuba performed a mournful solo and Kolelishvili sang "Fears slithered everywhere," awaiting that nocturnal knock on the door.

The finale emerged as more hopeful, the uneasy moods giving way to an ethereal solo for violin (played by Timothy Lees) and the glowing sound of a celesta. The effect of hearing this work was both moving and devastating, and the audience gave it an extended ovation.

After intermission, Kolelishvili and the full chorus returned for final scenes from Acts I, III and V of Mussorgsky's "Khovanshchina." Set in 1682 during the time of Peter the Great, the plot is one of political and religious opposition to the czar's reforms.

One of the evening's highlights was hearing the full chorus, prepared by Robert Porco, perform Mussorgsky's magnificent choruses. This year in particular, the chorus has sung with focus and wonderful expressive power.

And here, Kolelishvili sang with real operatic fervor. First in the role of Dosifey, leader of the Old Believers, he exhorted Russians to fight "for our ancient faith" with a big, effortless voice. Later, he was a commanding presence as Prince Ivan Khovansky, leader of officers known as "Streltsy."

Conlon, who conducted the opera earlier this month in St. Petersburg, Russia, knew exactly how to balance the atmospheric choruses against moments of high drama. The splendor of the choral sound against the brass and timpani in the final scene was unforgettable.

Nothing about Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" was routine, from the stunning prayer sung in Russian by the chorus at the start, to the familiar battle music, including recorded cannons. Leading with brisk tempos, Conlon energized the musicians, who responded with thrilling, precise playing.

Tchaikovsky's lyrical themes glowed, and the brass playing was electrifying. But nothing was as splendid as the chorus's final prayer of thanksgiving, against chimes, cannons and trumpet fanfares. Listeners were on their feet, cheering.

It seems impossible to follow the "1812 Overture." But, in keeping with tradition, the small children delivered their bouquets to the soloists, and the festival ended with an audience sing-along of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus."