

Taking Tchaikovsky to Small Towns in the Urals

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Classical concerts by the Yekaterinburg Philharmonic are broadcast throughout the region in villages and towns.

ST. PETERSBURG — Tatyana Oshivalova, a resident from the small town of Kamyshlov in the Sverdlovsk region, spent most of the night without sleep, crying from excitement after one of her long-term dreams came true — she was able to finally listen to a live performance of Gustav Mahler for the first time and in her own town. To be precise, the concert was a live online broadcast of the opening of the Third Russian Symphonic Forum from the Sverdlovsk Philharmonic in Yekaterinburg. Mahler's First Symphony was played by the Urals Academic Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Israeli conductor Eliahu Inbal.

"I had read a lot about Mahler, and I had been looking forward to that concert for many months," Oshivalova, director of the Kamyshlov Library Center, recalled in an interview with Yekaterinburg Philharmonic TV.

The Kamyshlov library played host as one of the venues in a network of virtual concert halls established by the Philharmonic. The Philharmonic's virtual halls are mainly located in public libraries in small or very distant towns, where local audiences can watch live or pre-recorded broadcasts of the Philharmonic's concerts free of charge.

Every year, between five and seven new venues are added to the club, while the villages and towns hosting them range from very small, with only a few hundred residents, to relatively large with a population of about 100,000.

The Symphonic Forum, which was held from Sept. 11 through 18 this year, is an important project for the Yekaterinburg Philharmonic, as it brings together symphonic orchestras from very different regions of Russia and allows the audiences to get a fuller picture of what kind of environment exists for classical music in the Russian regions well beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The vast majority of small Russian towns can only dream about hosting or seeing live performances of symphony orchestras. According to official statistics, only 60 percent of Russia's cities in the federation boast their own symphony orchestras — and not all of them are enthusiastic about touring to remote or small provinces.

One of the biggest supporters in this project is the Sverdlovsk Philharmonic in Yekaterinburg, which has been vigorously setting up connections with concert venues in small towns across its region. In 2000, the Philharmonic established a system of regional branches that currently incorporates seven concert halls in the towns of Alapayevsk, Asbest, Verkhnyaya Pyshma, Zarechny, Irbit, Kamensk-Uralsky and Revda in the Urals region. In 2013, these concert halls hosted a total of 100 performances.

Located 160 kilometers away from Yekaterinburg, Alapayevsk boasts a population of about 44,000. The city's cultural life revolves around the local concert hall, which has established a connection with Yekaterinburg's Sverdlovsk Philharmonic.

"The city of Alapayevsk has a complicated and somewhat heavy history. In 1639 it was built essentially by prisoners from nearby colonies, and it does make a lot of difference to know that the town belongs to something very meaningful culturally," said Stanislav Shangin, the mayor of Alapayevsk.

Alapayevsk is home to the Tchaikovsky Museum Estate, a house where one of Russia's most celebrated composers spent 15 months from 1849 to 1850 and composed the score to the iconic Russian ballet "The Nutcracker" and the opera "The Queen of Spades."

"When you have a difficult day and you are walking through the town's old streets, exhausted or lacking energy, the very thought that Tchaikovsky may have had the same walk many years ago does help revive your spirits," said Galina Kanakhina, the chairwoman of the Alapayevsk City Duma.

"Local residents in different towns where the Sverdlovsk Philharmonic tours regularly emphasize that visits from the orchestra give them a much needed sense of unity with the capital cities that they refer to as 'the mainland.' It shows that they feel like they're living on an island and indicates how isolated they are," she said.

Many of these people live in detached and economically very poor areas, where the nearest hospital — and the nearest theaters — may be located hundreds of kilometers away, a distance typically connected by bad roads.

Some people in the Urals describe the regions as being alienated from the center. They consider themselves to be neglected in many different ways, including culturally, and this is what upsets a lot of them.

"The more concerts there are, the more it happens that the uninitiated listeners eventually turn into real admirers, which grows into a knowledgeable and appreciating audience," Kanakhina said.

Alexander Kolotursky, the director of the Yekaterinburg's Philharmonic who dreamed up the initiative, admits that the regional expansion was almost laughed at and he was called a "dreamer" and "wishful thinker."

"It is a grave mistake to think that people living in distant villages are incapable of understanding fine art and classical music, and that they have no appetite for it at all," said Lyudmila SamoiloVA, one of the visitors to an open-air concert in the village of Verkhnyaya Sinyachikha in July. "I was born and grew up in Pyshma, which is essentially a small town or even a village, and I still feel that my soul and my set of humane values were formed there — my heart still belongs to my home village. Truly, my great admiration for the arts and my love for music are rooted in the culture, in that rural environment that I was raised in. So we in the villages do appreciate the arts, we absolutely do."

The Philharmonic's efforts appear to be working. Not only is there a distinct growing interest in the villages in the virtual concert halls, but live concerts during the regional tours are selling better. Yulia Anikeyeva, the director of the Alapayevsk Concert Hall, said that local entrepreneurs have become keen to purchase tickets as rewards for their workers or as a special treat for their business partners. "I have developed a circle of dedicated customers [for tickets], and I am very pleased to see that they are socially very different, from a young businessman in his early 20s who is buying tickets for his employees to a local priest, and even the leadership of the town's branch of the Communist Party of Russia."

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