

From: *St. Petersburg Musical Bulletin*, No. 39, July 2007
AMBASSADORS OF MUSIC
by Iosif Raiskin

A DELEGATION FROM MUSIC ROYALTY

At the end of the season, Petersburg welcomed a delegation from MUSIC ROYALTY consisting of 110 musicians aged 12 to 18. The El Camino Youth Symphony Orchestra from California—as the American group bills itself in its concert program—might better be called a *children's orchestra*. The program it performed was all the more amazing, since it included works that only a seasoned professional outfit would normally undertake.

But let's start from the beginning. The orchestra's press release reads: "'El Camino' in Spanish means 'highway' and comes from the name of the El Camino Real (the Royal Highway), which the Spanish missionaries built along the Pacific coast. The orchestra association was founded in 1963 and offers one of the best musical education programs in California. The students practice in five orchestras and four chamber ensembles. The association's board of directors consists of parents and residents of California. The El Camino Orchestra has participated in international music festivals in the US, France, Italy, Austria, and England, and it has performed in Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center in New York, the Liszt Academy in Budapest and the Dvorak Hall in Prague..."

Here I interrupt my quotation of the official document in order to tell my readers that yet another important step has been taken toward the rebirth of "Russian" California: since 1994, the El Camino Orchestra has been led by one of our own—Professor Camilla Kolchinskaya. This Russian musician, violinist and conductor has been guiding children of 12 nationalities to the world of music. After studying violin and music theory at the Moscow Conservatory, Kolchinskaya attended the Leningrad Conservatory, studying under a legendary trainer of conductors, Professor Ilya Aleksandrovich Musin. In the USSR, Camilla Kolchinskaya performed with the Bol'shoi Theater orchestra, the State Orchestra, and the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra, and was rivaled only by Veronika Dudarova. In the West, where Kolchinskaya has worked since 1976, she has conducted the London Philharmonic, Hamburg Radio Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the symphonic orchestras of Oslo, Brussels, and Liege, and has made numerous recordings with them.

But she discovered her main vocation as a teacher. In America, Professor Kolchinsky (as she spells her name in English) teaches in conservatories and music schools, as well as in universities; she gives violin and viola lessons, and she conducts and plays in chamber ensembles. Here is the opinion of another of our former countrymen, Rostislav Dubinsky (one of the founders of the well-known Borodin Quartet): "Camilla Kolchinsky possesses the special ability to make any orchestra perfect, especially student orchestras. Under her leadership, young musicians quickly develop their feeling for tonal quality, musicality, versatility, and the habit of striving for artistic perfection."

A packed Capella Hall greeted the orchestra with applause, startled to see the concertmaster's stand occupied by such young violinists: Timothy Yu, who had just turned 13, and the 12-year-old Alexi Kenney. I learned their names after the concert, as well as the names of several of the soloists who had particularly stood out. But I admit that I didn't expect that I would hear an artistically mature performance of such a difficult piece as Antonin Dvorak's Ninth, "From the New World." I was pleasantly surprised by the purity of the intonation in the strings and woodwinds, and by the precise "enunciation" of the musical text even in the rapid passages; the English horn solo in the slow

section of the symphony (performed by Joey Cox) was especially memorable. The main thing was that the children were playing not memorized notes, but meaningful, deeply felt music, responding to the severe demands of a conductor who made no allowances for their youth!

The second part opened with the American composer Samuel Barber's overture to Sheridan's comedy *School for Scandal*—a very complex “showpiece” and staple of performance competitions, in which even philharmonic orchestras can go astray. The ease with which these young musicians played both the dazzling virtuoso passages reminiscent of Mendelssohn's famous scherzo, and the lyric theme accentuating the fussy “scandal,” was something to hear. The American program continued with George Gershwin's “Rhapsody in Blue” for piano and orchestra, which featured the 15-year-old Chloe Pang. And again I was amazed by her precocious performance of music that is well-known in various interpretations. I was struck not only by her well-honed technique and the superlative jazz swing, which is seldom captured by academic musicians (in Americans, it is probably in the blood!), but most of all, by the excellent sense of musical form, which prevented the Rhapsody from degenerating—as often happens—into a series of striking but disconnected episodes (the credit for this, naturally, belongs to both the young pianist and the conductor). Prompted by the applause of the appreciative hall, Chloe Pang performed an intermezzo by Brahms. And the orchestra gave an encore of Shostakovich's “National Holiday” from the film score of *The Gadfly*, and the altogether American *Bugler's Holiday* by Leroy Anderson, in which soloists Natasha Feier, Esther Hood, and Nathan Wong all shone.

Joseph Raiskin