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St. Pete's Arts Square Fest Highlights the French

By Galina Stolyarova

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Yury Temirkanov, the festival's founder and Philharmonic's artistic director

ST. PETERSBURG — The French connection is key to this year's international Arts Square Festival, St. Petersburg's premier classical arts winter event. L'Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Trio Chausson and pianist Francois Weigel will represent France at this year's event, which is packed with performances of French composers' work, from Ravel and Debussy to Boulez and Faure, as well as contemporary masters such as Philippe Fenelon.

The music fest kicked off on Tuesday at the Shostakovich Philharmonia with a performance by the St. Petersburg Philharmonic orchestra under the baton of Yury Temirkanov, the festival's founder and Philharmonic's artistic director, with a program comprised of several works by Maurice Ravel, including "La Valse" and the "Mother Goose Suite."

"The festival will strike the final chord of the Year of France in Russia and the Year of Russia in France," Temirkanov said at a news conference last week. "In this respect, our main 'treat'

is a concert by the superb Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France under the baton of the fantastic Korean conductor Myung Whun Chung on Dec. 17."

The world-renowned French orchestra will perform Ravel's "Le tombeau de Couperin," Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique," and the opus "Metaboles" by Henri Dutilleux. Born in 1916, Dutilleux is one of the most important French composers of the second half of the 20th century, whose work continues the tradition of Ravel.

On Dec. 22, the Shostakovich hall of the Philharmonic will see French composer Philippe Fenelon's opera "The Cherry Orchard" performed in a concert version by soloists from Moscow's Bolshoi Theater symphony orchestra under the baton of Tito Ceccherini. The opera, which is loosely based on Anton Chekhov's classic play of the same name and is dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the writer's birth, saw its premiere in Moscow on Dec. 3. The opera was born out of a joint initiative between the Paris Opera and the Bolshoi Theater. Fenelon was commissioned to write the score, and the libretto was written by the Russian poet and novelist Alexei Parin. A stage version is slated to take place next year in Paris and then in Moscow.

Temirkanov founded the Arts Square Festival in 1999 with the aim of restoring the pre-revolutionary tradition of a "winter season," with concerts, balls, masquerades and parties sweeping the city during the New Year's holiday.

Originally, the festival encompassed celebrations of "Western" Christmas (Dec. 25), New Year's, Orthodox Christmas (Jan. 7) and Russian Old New Year (celebrated on Jan. 14, as a result of the adoption of a new calendar after the Revolution). The festival originally featured an extravagant ball held on New Year's Eve at Yusupov Palace. In recent years, the festival's dates have moved toward mid-December and the ball tradition was suspended due to financial restrictions.

Arts Square, at the center of which stands a statue of Russia's national poet Alexander Pushkin, is surrounded by some of the city's finest cultural assets. Most of them — the State Russian Museum, the Shostakovich Philharmonic Hall, the Mikhailovsky Theater and the Musical Comedy Theater — are at the heart of the Arts Square Festival. But this year, the festival has reached out to a new venue: On Dec. 21, a concert of Russian sacred choral music performed by the Smolny Cathedral Chamber Choir under the baton of Vladimir Begletsov will take place at the Church of Our Savior on Spilled Blood.

For the first time in its history, the Arts Square festival this year features an opera premiere. On Dec. 18, the Mikhailovsky Theater will stage a new production of Czech composer Leos Janacek's "Katya Kabanova."

Inspired by Nikolai Ostrovsky's drama "The Storm," which tells the story of a married woman who becomes desperate after falling in love with another man and finding herself unable to live with the overwhelming sense of guilt, the opera has never been staged locally until now and is rare in the repertoires of Russian opera theaters.

"Musically, 'Katya Kabanova' fuses Slavic folk tunes and the Viennese classical musical culture, while celebrating Janacek's own unique musical language," said Peter Feranec, the musical director and principal conductor of the Mikhailovsky Theater. "This opera is one of

the composer's finest operas, a jewel of expression."

The Arts Square Festival runs from Dec. 14 to Dec. 24 at venues around St. Petersburg. For a full program, check out www.philharmonia.spb.ru.

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