

Tour, New Albums For Terem Quartet

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ST. PETERSBURG — They adapt classical jewels such as Chopin’s nocturnes and Schubert’s “Ave Maria” for a quartet of Russian folk instruments.

They mix J.S. Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor with Russian folk tunes and make audiences’ jaws drop. And then the audience applauds deafeningly.

They are the Terem Quartet, who celebrate their 25th anniversary this year and release two new CDs — “MyBach” and “Russian Schubert” — as they start on a marathon of concerts across the country.

Despite the fact that the group has been performing for nearly 25 years, its music has still not been properly classified. The usual descriptions — “world music,” “fusion,” “postmodernism” — are all reasonable enough, but do not entirely ring true. The four are most happy with the term coined by composer Alexander Chaikovsky, who described them as “instrumental theater.”

Bach is a key composer for the Terem Quartet. The group's biggest-ever hit was the "Russian Sufferings on J.S. Bach's Toccata and Fugue" that also served as the title for their best-selling CD recording "Russkiye Stradania" ("Russian Sufferings").

The Bach toccata arrangement was born out of a spontaneous and casual gathering between the quartet's members with baritone Vladimir Chernov.

"We were just joking and fooling around," said Andrei Smirnov, the group's bayan, or Russian accordion, player. "One of us wondered if Bach, or anyone from his family, had ever been to Russia, and then we started fantasizing about what would have happened if Bach had discovered Russian folk tunes."

The Russian folk tunes that the quartet uses on the CD are signposts to historical Russian figures who have suffered.

"Dostoevsky wrote about these people. ... They seek the truth, and every one of them has a dramatic background," said the quartet's Andrei Konstantinov, who plays the domra, a mandolin-like instrument. "Some of them are happy, some sad and some desperate — but all of them seek universal happiness."

The musicians' performance style has always been highly interactive, involving the audience as much as possible. They strut the stage, puff out their cheeks, wink at the audience, snap their fingers, jump and twist, and never fail to make an impression.

Throughout the quartet's impressive history, the group has traveled widely, performing for the Pope, Mother Theresa and Queen Elizabeth II. At one stage, the restless "truth seekers" even made appearances in maternity wards, playing to pregnant women in performances sponsored by the Health and Social Development Ministry, which expressed an interest in studying the effects of music on pregnancy and embryo development.

See www.terem-quartet.ru for concert dates.

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