

Romantic song about white swallow touches jury and audiences

By Viktor Korbut

For quite a long time, our country has failed to win the International Vitebsk Pop Song Contest at the Slavonic Bazaar Festival. In the past, there were successes every year. In 2003, Maxim Sapatkov won the Grand Prix — a triumphal start for Belarus. In 2004, Piotr Yelfimov captured the major award and, in 2005, it went to Polina Smolova. Alena Lanskaya is this year's winner, having received 179 points (of 180 possible) for *Sky Knows* and *White Swallow* (performed in Belarusian). Her win confers special status. Mr. Yelfimov and Ms. Smolova tried to conquer Eurovision after their success at the Slavonic Bazaar and Alena has similar plan, hoping to try her luck in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, which is to host the next European musical festival. Symbolically, Eurovision-2011 winners Ell and Nikki especially attended the Vitebsk event, to sing their *Running Scared* — the song which brought them luck at German Düsseldorf this year.

Ms. Lanskaya was much excited before the contest, viewing it as the most important in her artistic biography. "The Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk is a very strong international contest — being among the most popular both in our country

and other post-Soviet states," she says. This year, first place went to Ukrainian Vladimir Kvasnitsa, while second place was shared by Lithuania's Ruta and David Deyl of the Czech Republic. Alisher Karimov of Kazakhstan and Cristina Skarlat of Moldova shared third place.

The 20th International Vitebsk-2011 Pop Song Contest's Grand Prix awards \$15,000, with those holding 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes receive \$9,000, \$6,000 and \$3,000 respectively. Alena Lanskaya plans to spend hers on paying those who've helped her to achieve success: her director, stylist, music teacher and the song's author. "I have a complicated character. It's not easy to work with me but it's necessary to reward people for their job," she is convinced.

Interestingly, this year's Slavonic Bazaar gathered almost all the former Grand Prix holders for the first time (of the young performers' contests). Popular stars performed on the Summer Amphitheatre's stage; among them were Polina Smolova and Piotr Yelfimov of Belarus, Ziki of Serbia, Damir Kedzo of Croatia, Donatas Montvidas of Lithuania and Ukraine's Natalia Krasnyanskaya.

Belarus' Culture Minister, Pavel Latushko, views the Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk Festival as hardly

imaginable without its Pop Song Contest. He stresses the high level of contestants' performance, saying, "This proves that the contest is in demand, being popular. It has a high status and prestige in the musical world — which is important for Belarus." People's Artist of the USSR, composer Igor Luchenok, agrees, "It's vital for countries not only from the former USSR to be friends, but also those from around the globe." This year, Mr. Luchenok was awarded the Belarusian President's special award: "Through Art to Peace and Mutual Understanding," gaining a place on Star Avenue, which is situated close to the main singing ground of the Festival — the Summer Amphitheatre.

No doubt, the Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk has become a festival not only of music and friendship, but also of love. Serbia's Svetlana Slavković, who won the 1997 Grand Prix, tells us that the event helped her to find her husband — singer Ziki, who won the Vitebsk Festival in 2002. The couple met in this Belarusian city, falling in love and living happily together ever since. Ukrainian Natalia Krasnyanskaya also found her love at the Festival. She won at the age of 17, in 2007. "I then fell in love for the first time. Now, I'm walking along the places I remember, crying. Vitebsk is a very romantic city."

Belarusian Alena Lanskaya wins Grand Prix at International Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk Arts Festival's Pop Song Contest



Everything began with a blank sheet

By Svetlana Ivanisheva

Maestro Mikhail Finberg tells us about the history of the Slavonic Bazaar and of the major criteria for judging contestants

The National Academic Concert Orchestra of Belarus is deservedly thought of as a calling card of the Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk. For the twenty years of the Festival's existence, the Honoured Orchestra — headed by maestro Mikhail Finberg — has never missed this international forum of arts. Many times, its musicians have performed their unique concert programmes on the Summer Amphitheatre's stage, working jointly with the most outstanding pop stars from all over the globe.

Mr. Finberg is among those who founded the Festival and knows well its history. With this in mind, our interview with the maestro begins with recollections:

Our orchestra was set up in 1987 and, as its Director and Artistic Head, I was ordered to prepare a



Maestro Mikhail Finberg and his orchestra

large festival. I did not understand then what an event this would be. Later, it became clear that this was the Polish Song Festival — held in the USSR for the first time. The Belarusian leadership decided to organise it in 1988 in Vitebsk, which was twinned with Polish Zielona Góra (as a reply to its hosting of festivals of Soviet songs).

Initially, the culture minister of the time, Yuri Mikhnevich, doubted that Vitebsk would host the new festival. I remember him saying that 'probably, everything will be held in

Minsk'. Actually, we needed to build an amphitheatre in a short period of time in Vitebsk, ready for the festival. Surprisingly, it took just eight months. Construction works were conducted 'from paper', with Vitebsk architect Vyacheslav Babashkin drawing sketches and immediately giving them to builders.

The first All-Union Polish Song Festival was held at the highest possible level, with many Polish guests arriving in Vitebsk. Wojciech Jaruzelski and Mikhail Gorbachev sent their greetings. Everything was held on a

very serious level. It took place for the second time in 1990... and then disappeared, as the USSR split.

Discussing what a Vitebsk festival should look like, the idea of a 'Slavonic Bazaar' emerged. It was held for the first time in 1992 and, since then, Vitebsk has annually hosted the International 'Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk' Arts Festival. Even today, it is one of the best European festivals.

I know you have a special attitude to the Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk...

I believe that the artistic birth of our orchestra took place at this very festival and I'm proud of the huge experience it has given me. There was a time when no backing tracks were used; concerts enjoyed the live accompaniment of our orchestra. The 'Slavonic Bazaar in Vitebsk' is not just a holiday of good music; it is a true professional school.

I must stress that the Festival has given me a wonderful opportunity to meet and work with many prominent musicians and artistes. Sadly, I'm unable to name them all but they include Belarusian, Russian, Polish,

Bulgarian, Yugoslavian, Turkish and American stars.

This year, the National Academic Concert Orchestra accompanied performances by laureates and winners of former international pop song contests (since 1992) at the Summer Amphitheatre. In addition, it played for contestants of the Vitebsk-2011 competition.

This huge festival burden has pushed you to refuse chairing the contest's international jury. However, it's interesting to know your major criteria for judging young performers.

It's very simple. It's not how a contestant sings but who they might become after the curtain falls. In my view, this is of major importance. It's quite often happens that a young artiste brings home numerous awards and titles from various competitions but, within just a few months, we hear nothing further of them; this happens when they are not an artiste but a singer of a single song.

Nevertheless, I always urge young singers to enjoy a successful contest performance.