

## The Russians are coming

By Kevin Shopland

WHEN I was a kid back in the Cold War days of the early '60s, a Russian invasion was about as welcome as an invasion from outer space.

Nowadays, a Russian invasion could hardly be more welcome. Well, at least when it comes to music.

The Russians are coming in a big way to the Palace of Arts on Sunday (Nov 6), when Filharmónia Budapest Kht presents the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra, pianist Boris Bloch, singer Antonela Malis and conductor Pavel Kogan in a program of Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky and Scriabin.

Now, that's what I call Russian, and it should send you all rushin' to the ticket office to get tix, if you'll pardon a stupid pun from the Cold War. Prokofiev will be represented by the first and second suites from his 1938 ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, music pulling apart at the seams from the opposing poles of aggression and romantic love. Prokofiev's precocious First Piano Concerto, written as a showcase for his own extraordinary pianistic talents while still a conservatory student in 1911, will feature the soloist Boris Bloch. Bloch was born in Odessa in 1951 and won many competitions in the Soviet Union and Europe before moving to the US in 1974.

His debut there two years later was a great success, and he won the Arthur Rubinstein Piano Masters Competition in 1977.

In addition to appearing in major festivals, he gives master classes, especially at the Salzburg Mozarteum.

You'd be hard pressed to find a composer more Russian than Tchaikovsky (an early critic of the Violin Concerto said, rather indecorously, that it was "odorously Russian"), so you can be sure that he figures into the program, too. His opera *Eugene Onyegin*, based on Pushkin's poem, has as its centerpiece the famous scene of Tatiana reading the letter from Onyegin. This will be sung by Antonela Maris.

The concert will close with the Second Symphony by mystic visionary composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915). Though the Second (1902) betrays the influence of Wagner, Liszt and Tchaikovsky, it also suggests Scriabin's later, very individual style of complex, rich, hedonistic harmonies and philosophical thinking. It winds up with a grandiose march that makes you feel as though you yourself have triumphed in some great victory. Pavel Kogan, conductor and violinist, has been the director of the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra since 1990. He has performed extensively in North America, as well, and is principal guest conductor of the Utah Symphony. You might think that's enough of Russia for a while, but you'd be wrong. Two more concerts of note present Russian artists, if more than just Russian music.

On Thursday Nov 10, Alan Buribayev leads the Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra, the National Chorus, the Hungarian Radio Children's Chorus and vocal soloists István Rozsos and István Rác (yes, more of the grandiose) in Shostakovich's rarely performed *Song of the Forests*.

This 1949 oratorio praises the Soviet government's post-war reforestation program (typical theme for an oratorio, wouldn't you say?) and is notorious for praising comrade Stalin as the "great gardener," lines normally omitted today.

The orchestra will also play Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 3*, rather more standard stuff, to be sure. The Kazakh conductor Alan Buribayev (born 1979) has won many European conducting competitions and has appeared with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Scottish Symphony, the Lyon Opera and others. He is the Principal Conductor of the Astana Symphony Orchestra.

Finally, on Saturday Nov 12, Strém Koncert Kft presents Russian pianist Elizaveta Leonskaya in a program of late Schubert sonatas. She will play the sonatas in C minor D958, A major D959, and B-flat major D960. Make

no mistake: this is the music of an ailing man, a body being eaten up by the syphilis that would claim his life within months.

Though Schubert's lyricism and harmonic inventiveness are at their height in this last music, a grim mood of desolate pessimism and loneliness always lurks in the corner.

So, if you're in the mood for a taste of our big neighbor to the east, these concerts will surely satisfy.

#### INFORMATION

Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin

Moscow State Symphony, Kogan

Sunday Nov 6, 7.30pm

Palace of Arts

Shostakovich: Song of the Forests

National Philharmonic, Buribayev

Thursday Nov 10, 7.30pm

Palace of Arts

Schubert: late piano sonatas

Elizaveta Leonskaya

Saturday Nov 12, 7.30pm

Academy of Music