

The Yale Russian Chorus
Sings for the Yeltsins and Clintons
The White House, Washington, D.C.
September 27, 1994

Recounted by Bob Anderson (YRC '87-94) on October 15, 1994

The Yale Russian Chorus always has a rousing kick-off concert each September in mammoth Woolsey Hall. After attending frequently over 15 years, I joined the group 7 years ago. The 40th anniversary concert last year was the most moving musical experience of my life. Denis Mickiewicz, the founding conductor, and over 120 alumni returned. We were 150 strong on stage, bathed in an extraordinary sound.

When I called David Marc Finley, our conductor, to tell him that I would not be able to sing in the annual fall concert because of a death in my family, I learned that the group had just been invited to sing at the White House the next Tuesday for Boris Yeltsin at a state dinner. There was still time to join in; David could submit my Social Security number for a security check. I was fortunate to sing with the chorus in December 1987 for the Gorbachovs at a State Department luncheon. Here was another chance of a lifetime.

The YRC rendezvous was to be 5:00 PM Tuesday at the Lincoln Memorial for a warm-up and 6:30 at the White House. When no one was at the Lincoln Memorial at the appointed hour, I hightailed it to the east wing entrance, finding Brett and Jamie at security check. Yes, security had our names and we were welcome to go inside, the first to arrive. A social coordinator anxiously came to meet us, asking where the rest were. Jamie had gotten a call that the bus from New Haven was late but in D.C. Some things never change. We are hardly ever punctual but miraculously always ready just before the curtain goes up.

From the doorway of the east wing, we spotted the bus pulling up at 6:55, to our relief as well. It would not have worked as a Yale Russian trio... no first tenor. Ushered into a side room for a briefing about protocol, we heard the plan for the evening. We would sing before and after the dinner, at 7:30 and 10:00 PM. A nervous warm-up and wave of witty comments filled our 20 minute waiting time. We were taken down a long corridor and up a staircase to the corner of the East Room, where risers had been put in place next to large portraits of Martha Washington and William McKinley.

We were to be background music when the reception began at 7:30; each guest and companion would be announced over us as they appeared at the door. In the other corner was the U.S. Marine orchestral ensemble who would share the air time with us. "We haven't come this far to be background music," said David. He told us to loosen up, look alive, don't gape, and look at him now and then. Before the first guest of the parade was announced, we began a folk song in full form. Pretty soon there was a raucous cocktail party of politicians, diplomats, celebrities and media personalities milling around in front of us. We were drawing attention and curious glances as we sang about love and adventure, having a great time competing with the loud conversations.

Barbara Walters accompanied by David Geffen was announced. In the growing sea of people Speaker of the House Tom Foley, Minority Leader Robert Michal, Senator Patrick Leahy, Rep. Lee Hamilton, Secy. Lloyd Bentsen, Secy. William Perry, and Secy. Christopher Warren were seen. Notable entrances included the Russian delegation that moved like a school of fish to our side and Vice Pres. and Mrs. Al Gore, a pathway opening for them. The Russian delegation was not mingling but nervously listening and commenting on our singing, responding with elbows in each other's ribs and sending out hearty applause. One Russian diplomat discovered a narrow horizontal mirror over the fireplace, put his glass on the mantel and proceeded to comb his hair. Working around the periphery were waiters with appetizers and drinks, making furtive glances at each other.

There were many famous and glamorous people. Kathleen Battle, the stunning opera star in full length red gown, stood before us with her escort and listened with intent and delight, ignoring guests around her until Van Cliburn came in. He made a beeline to her for a showy hug. Later, he and Lloyd Bentsen exchanged a hearty Texan embrace. John Williams weaved through the crowd and approached Battle. Steven Spielberg seemed to know everyone. Tom Brokaw came in the side door, relying upon his wife to generate conversation.

We were stopped in mid-song when the announcement of the arrival of The President, Mrs. Clinton and the Yeltsins was made. The ensemble immediately broke into, "Hail to the Chief." Everyone watched the door in anticipation. They never entered the room. After a temporary letdown, marked with curiously darting eyes, the cocktail party resumed.

Kathleen Battle had already captivated us with her attention and applause throughout the reception. David bowed and kissed her hand in gratitude, and we gave her a round of applause. She was to sing after the dinner when all would return to this room. Van Cliburn gave us signs of approval when he was by her side. As the reception ended and the baton handed back to the ensemble, guests began to line up to enter the dining room. When Gershwin's "Bess, You is My Woman Now" filled the emptying room, Kathleen Battle flowed over, stood behind the conductor and, without invitation, buoyantly sang lyrics she could fit into the arrangement.

We returned to our room downstairs, took turns sharing the chairs and local newspapers and tried to absorb the wonder of it all. Some were getting hungry and a scouting party found vending machines nearby. Soon small packages of pretzels and chips appeared, washed down by communal cans of soda. Adrenaline sated the hunger and long wait. We were next to sing on risers from an alcove of the corridor between the dining room and the East Room where guests would move for a concert by Ms. Battle. The Clintons and Yeltsins would stop by us. The moment was arriving. I was excited but not suffering from wobbly knees like the time we sang for Gorbachev at the State Dept in 1987. Now I knew the music.

We were escorted upstairs to the bustling corridor. Young military officers in formal dress and White House social staff set an easy yet deliberate pace of preparation and well orchestrated activity. No one was out of place. Groups were ushered around, cues signaled. This was presidential formality, not rigid but comfortable. We moved in place to the risers, set center stage with a great view. The press and staff, ushered to the sidelines, clustered around columns. When a distance voice announced that the President was coming and we broke into song. From here the story deserves the present tense.

The Clintons and Yeltsins, chatting with each other, turn and stand before us just 15 feet away. Yeltsin is elated, pumping his hands up and down to the rhythm. Clinton is standing with a wide-eyed look, smiling broadly. Mrs. Clinton, in a stunning red satin dress, steps around from behind Yeltsin, watching him and glancing at Bill joyously. Mrs. Yeltsin remains lost in the second row behind her husband. By this time other guests have filled in creating a circle around the hosts and guests of honor. As we finish the first number Yeltsin breaks into hearty applause, puts his arm around Bill, and turns to show his delight to all gathered. He wants more.

After a second number, also a folk song, Yeltsin begins to sing a song for us to join, but it is not in our repertoire. He joins us when we sing the great soldier song of the War of 1812, Borodino. He puts his hands over his head in dramatic applause and turns to everyone to keep the cadence. He again puts his arm around Clinton, this time at his waist, and just about lifts him up on his hip. Clinton is momentarily taken back but keeps applauding and laughing. Together, they are two big bruisers, Yeltsin just a little broader and taller.

Our alum Drew Days, the US Solicitor General and guest at the dinner, joins us to sing, ankle in a cast aided by crutches. When we begin to sing the love song Kalinka, the rhythm adjusted to encourage traditional clapping, Drew, a first tenor, takes the first solo. David, our conductor, takes the second. After the raucous response, Clinton steps forward to congratulate and embrace Drew, fellow Yale Law School grad. Yeltsin steps forward to congratulate David, gives him a big hug, which David reciprocates with the traditional three kisses to the cheeks. We all are applauding and cheering in a wave of excitement.

At this point the social coordinator whispers into Clinton's ear. Yeltsin, sensing the shift insists upon another song, turning around animatedly for everyone to stay. We sing to a thunderous response. Farewells are said and the foursome moves to a private room across from the alcove. Now most of the 150 guests, still in the dining room, begin to move past us into the East Room as we continue to sing. Helen Thomas, senior correspondent, loudly exclaims her approval.

Once the 150 guests are in place, the private room doors open and the Clintons guide their guests to the formal entertainment. We get one last wave from Yeltsin and Clinton. It is 10:40 PM. As soon as they are out of sight, we are given the sign in midsong to stop. We will not be allowed to stay in the corridor to hear Ms. Battle. Our glorious moment has come and gone. We have been a big hit and everyone tells us so.

Within 10 minutes we were back out on the street, trying to name the notables we had seen, saying our goodbyes. The bus would proceed to a motel in Virginia for the night. I walked along Pennsylvania Avenue to my car past people holding onto the black iron fence looking for a glimpse of activity in the White House. I decided to drive as far north as I could before my adrenaline stopped. On the road by 11 PM, I joined a caravan of 18 wheelers on a clear starry night, pulling in home in New Haven at 4:15 AM. The adrenaline finally shut off at 5 AM and I fell asleep.

That's my recollection of how it happened, a glorious once-in-a-lifetime experience, singing at the White House for the Clintons and Yeltsins. The Yale Russian Chorus once again participated in a celebration of goodwill and peacemaking.

Bob Anderson,
October 15, 1994