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Class of 2018
Durham, NC

As a classical singer, I am strongly encouraged to develop fluency in at least one other language as a way to create a more authentic performance. Most people tend to focus on Italian, French, and German, but given my background in Slavic languages I decided to further my cultural understanding and language abilities through my Burch Fellowship. During my fellowship I spent three months in Russia, Estonia, and Belarus studying the effects of migration and occupation on song traditions of ethnic minorities within the former Soviet Union.

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JOINED BY TRADITION: BELARUSIAN FOLKLORE AND SONG IN SIBERIA AND BELARUS

When I first arrived in Russia, I immediately hopped on a train to Kem', a port-town on the White Sea that served as a deportation center for political prisoners headed



to Stalin's gulag on the Solovetsky Islands. Kem' has also established a center for Pomor culture within the last decade, where people can learn the Pomorian dialect and other significant aspects of Pomorian culture.

I also traveled to Estonia. My stay overlapped with the Estonian Youth Festival of Song and Dance, which is part of UNSECO's "Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." The festival



dates back to 1869, but when Estonia was under Soviet control, the festival was forced to include songs of foreign origin beginning in 1947. As the Soviet regime began to fail, the Singing Revolution (1987-1991) led to a series of events and demonstrations that eventually brought independence to the Baltic States. Being at the festival was quite an indescribable experience. In the singing grounds there were over 140,000 people (approximately 15% of the entire Estonian population) with the vast majority of schoolchildren in the country

performing. Although I do not speak Estonian, it was enjoyable to see a positive expression of nationalism and regionalism. The festival was also filled with heads of state, and the first female Estonian president lit the ceremonial torch.

Afterwards I traveled back to Russia where I began working as an assistant on two folklore expeditions with Dr. Yelena Minyonok from the Russian Academy of Sciences. The two villages we studied separated over a century ago under the Stolypin

Agrarian Reforms of 1907-1917, when fourteen families from Lyadovichi and Opal', Belarus moved to Irkutsk Oblast'. The mother village experienced several waves of emigration between the transition to Soviet period, WWII, and modern day, and the villages have fallen out of correspondence.

Throughout the expeditions,

we interviewed family members asking about traditions, songs, embroidery, and other cultural materials to see what cultural aspects remain and what has changed. Our average day consisted of interviewing two to three people, mostly elderly women, and spending

the evenings translating magic spells, song texts, or being guests with ensembles, other families in the village, or even the mayor. When I first started working on interviews with Lena, I found myself constantly asking for repetitions of certain parts of stories or translations from local dialects into

Russian because the local dialect reflected Western Slavic languages as well as Northern dialects of Russian. Yet around the halfway point in the first expedition, I was able to understand the majority of what people were saying in the local dialect, which was useful as I was responsible for conducting interviews on my own with the men in the village once we were in Belarus.

I found the stories and songs I documented incredibly interesting, and I learned a tremendous amount about history, language, and customs that cannot be described in a book. I plan on using what I learned from my Burch



Fellowship to pursue a career in opera performance and teaching. Despite the fact I am not pursuing folklore, the traditions I learned about are paramount to the classical tradition in these countries. Several composers draw on folk motifs (songs, stories, etc.), and singers are expected to know several folk song arrangements. After I earn my master's degree, I plan to use my language skills by relocating to Eastern or Central Europe to join a young artist program and pursue other opportunities to study Slavic

repertoire. Eventually, I would like to pursue a doctorate, develop resources for singing in Slavic languages, and work with young singers on performing this rich repertoire.

