



The Russian Garden Gazette

The digital journal of the Russian Cultural Garden, Cleveland

ISSUE #19 · OCTOBER 2026

🇺🇸 English | 🇷🇺 Русский

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A Woman of Many Russias

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A Woman of Many Russias

Anna Safonova-Timiryova-Knipper: a childhood in the Safonov home, Kolchak, the camps — and War and Peace.

February 1917. The icebreaker *Yermak* is making its way from Revel to Helsingfors. A crossing meant to take four hours will take more than twelve: the frost is severe and the ice is heavy.

The day before, on her name day, Anna Timiryova had received a basket of lilies of the valley. Kolchak, then commanding the Black Sea Fleet, had ordered them by telegram. She cut the flowers and packed them in her suitcase.

The frost got to them. When she opened the suitcase in Helsingfors, she found fragile, lifeless flowers — a keepsake of a meeting that history would soon cut off from her former life by an impassable border. That evening there was a reception at the Naval Assembly.

It was the last evening before the revolution.

ANNA TIMIRYOVA, MEMOIRS



Basket of lilies of the valley. Fabergé, workmaster Mikhail Perkhin. St. Petersburg, 1895–1898. Gold, pearls, nephrite. A similar basket, a gift to Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, stood on her desk in the Alexander Palace until the revolution of 1917. Fabergé Museum, St. Petersburg.

Safonov's Daughter

Anna Vasilyevna was born in 1893 in Kislovodsk, into the family of Vasily Safonov — pianist, conductor, director of the Moscow Conservatory, and one of the most prominent figures in Russian music at the turn of the twentieth century. Her childhood belonged to a world in which art was not an ornament of life but its natural language.

The Safonov home was full of music and of musicians whose names now fill encyclopedias. Her father built the Conservatory's Great Hall, and he stood on the podium when the young Rachmaninoff first played his First Concerto. The daughter grew up among people for whom talent was a duty.



Vasily Safonov as a lyceum student. St. Petersburg, 1866.

At eighteen she married her second cousin, the naval officer Sergei Timiryov. Their son Volodya was born in 1914. The family lived in Helsingfors, the base of the Baltic Fleet.



Anna Timiryova. Photographer unknown. Reproduced from A. S. Kruchinin, Admiral Kolchak: Life, Feat, Memory (Moscow: AST, 2010).

Helsingfors

There, in 1915, at an officers' evening, she fell into conversation with her husband's friend, Captain Alexander Kolchak. He was nineteen years older, famous as a polar explorer, and known in the navy as one of its most gifted officers.

*Wherever we met, it always turned out that we
were side by side and could not stop talking.*

ANNA TIMIRYOVA

Letters followed — long, restrained and tender. Neither of them was free, and both understood what it might cost.

Then came the revolution. Kolchak left, first for America, then for the Far East. In 1918 Anna Vasilyevna divorced her husband and went to Kolchak in Siberia. In Omsk, where he became Supreme Ruler, she worked as a translator.

Anna Timiryova's story is often reduced to a single formula: Admiral Kolchak's beloved. But her life was much larger than that formula.



*Admiral Alexander Kolchak (seated on the bench) and Anna Timiryova (to his left, in a hat) with officers of the British Military Mission. Omsk, 1919. Behind Kolchak, smoking a pipe, is the head of the mission, General Alfred Knox. Photograph by Lieutenant Turner.
© IWM (Q 81123)*

Irkutsk

In January 1920 Kolchak was handed over to the Bolsheviks in Irkutsk. Anna Vasilyevna did not try to save herself. She followed him into prison of her own accord; she was twenty-six. On February 7, 1920, Kolchak was shot. She was held in the same prison.

That was only her first arrest. Then came the Omsk camp, more prisons, more exile: 1920, 1922, 1925, 1935, 1938, 1949. For almost four decades her past kept bringing new persecution.

Between arrests she tried to live an ordinary life. In 1922 she married the civil engineer Vsevolod Knipper and became Anna Knipper. Many years later her memoirs were published under that name.

In 1938 her son Volodya, a young artist, was arrested and shot. He was twenty-four.

She survived. In 1960 she was rehabilitated. Anna Vasilyevna returned to Moscow — an elderly woman who remembered the Safonov home at the Moscow Conservatory, Helsingfors, Omsk and Irkutsk.

On Screen

And yet her memory turned out to be needed. She took small parts in films. In Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* she can be seen at Natasha Rostova's first ball, as an elderly lady of rank. She did not have to learn how people carried themselves in pre-revolutionary drawing rooms: she had come from them. In Leonid Gaidai's *The Diamond Arm* she appears briefly as a cleaning woman.

Audiences saw her on screen without suspecting what lay behind the image of this elderly woman.

The title “A Woman of Many Russias” is almost literal here. The Russia of her childhood, Kolchak's Russia, the Russia of the camps, the Russia of Soviet cinema were not simply eras that followed one another. Each demanded a different way to live, to remember and to keep silent.

Anna Vasilyevna Timiryova died in Moscow on January 31, 1975. She outlived everyone else in this story. All her life she wrote poems — and nearly all of them were addressed to one man.



From Moscow to Cleveland: A Musical Story 134 Years Long

In March 1892, in Moscow, the young Sergei Rachmaninoff played the first movement of his First Piano Concerto. On the podium stood Vasily Safonov — a musician whose life linked the musical cultures of Russia and America.

From 1906 to 1909 Vasily Ilyich Safonov led the New York Philharmonic and the National Conservatory of Music of America in New York. But his influence did not end with his years in the United States: it continued through his students and his principles of teaching.

Just recently, in July 2026, 134 years after that first performance, the same concerto — now in the composer's later revision — was heard in Cleveland. Garrick Ohlsson was the soloist, and Semyon Bychkov conducted The Cleveland Orchestra.

At first glance these are simply two concerts, separated by an ocean and more than a century. But a living human thread runs between them.

Safonov's student Rosina Lhévinne (1880–1976), a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, became one of the most influential teachers at the Juilliard School in New York. Her

students included Van Cliburn, John Browning, Garrick Ohlsson and Misha Dichter.



Vasily Safonov (seated, second from left) with students of the Moscow Conservatory. Left to right: Rosina Lhévinne, V. I. Safonov, Alexander Goedicke, Elena Beckman-Shcherbina, Olimpiada Kartasheva, Aglaida Fridman. Late nineteenth century. From E. Beckman-Shcherbina, My Memoirs (Moscow: Muzyka, 1982). Public domain.

Rosina was a brilliant pianist and won the Moscow Conservatory's gold medal. After her marriage she chose to support the performing career of her husband, the pianist Josef Lhévinne. That did not mean leaving the stage: she kept performing, including in duo, and gradually won fame of her own as a teacher.

Rosina Lhévinne. Franz Schubert, Fantasy in D minor. Recorded in 1951. (on YouTube: youtube.com/watch?v=EcCNymOg2SM)

In 1958 her student Van Cliburn won the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. At the height of the Cold War, an American pianist became the darling of the

Soviet public. The tradition of the pre-revolutionary Moscow Conservatory, handed down by Safonov's student, returned to the Conservatory's Great Hall — thanks to an American musician.



Monument to Pyotr Tchaikovsky outside the Moscow Conservatory (sculptor Vera Mukhina). October 2024, when a sudden snowfall covered Moscow. Photo: The Russian Garden Gazette.

Of course, Cliburn's artistry cannot be reduced to a single line of teachers. But the link Safonov — Lhévinne — Cliburn is documented, and that is exactly what makes it so striking.



Rosina Lhévinne and her student Van Cliburn in her studio at the Juilliard School, c. 1952.

The story has one more symmetry. In 1891 Pyotr Tchaikovsky took part in the celebrations for the opening of Carnegie Hall in New York. In 1958 the competition bearing his name became one of the brightest moments of musical exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Now back to Cleveland. Garrick Ohlsson, another of Rosina Lhévinne's students, played Rachmaninoff's First Concerto here in the summer of 2026. A work Safonov once conducted was heard 134 years later through a pianist from the next generation of his teaching family.

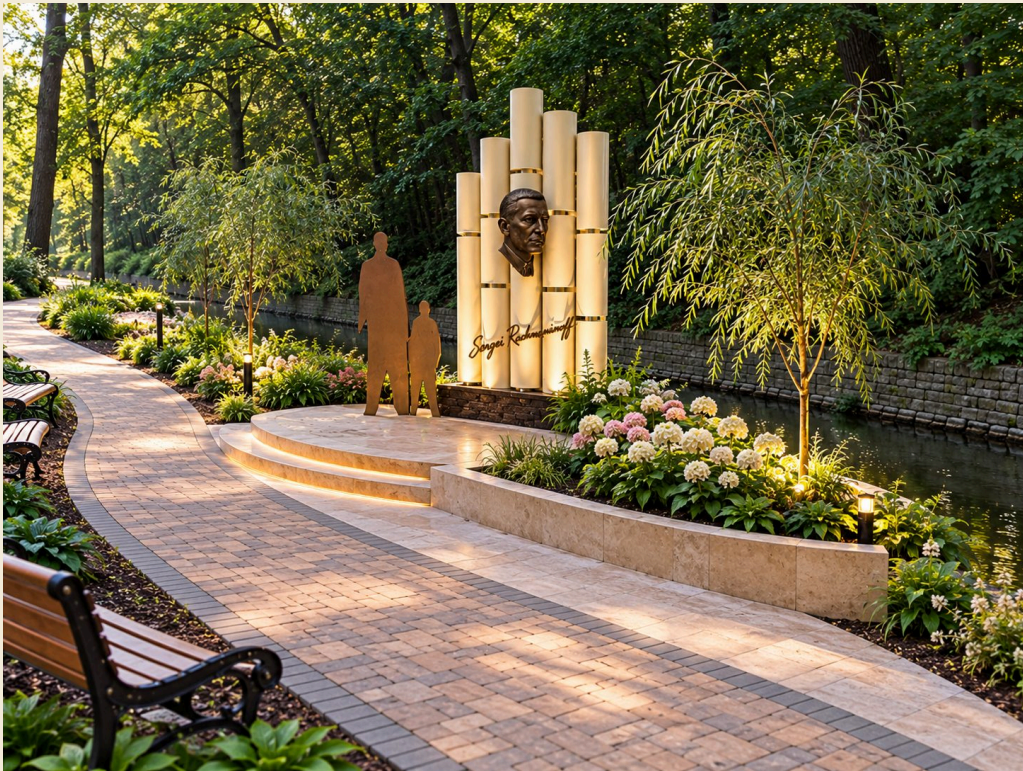
Rachmaninoff substantially revised the First Concerto in 1917, so this is not, of course, the same score. But that only makes the story of musical continuity more interesting: the text changes, the manner of playing changes, and the bond between people remains.

This is how the Russian piano school lived on in America — not only through the tours of great performers, but through the students of their students.



The Rachmaninoff Music Corner

The Russian Cultural Garden in Cleveland is preparing a Sergei Rachmaninoff Music Corner. The proposed design beside the creek includes a bronze portrait of the composer set against organ pipes, his signature, a flower bed, a small stepped stage, and benches framing a space for chamber performances.



The Rachmaninoff Music Corner. Preliminary design by Sergei Namdykov. AI-assisted rendering; the final design may differ.

A separate presentation of the project — with a musical program, the story behind it, and a chance to meet the sculptor — will be announced later.



Sergei Rachmaninoff at a Steinway grand, c. 1936. Public domain.

Seeking the Descendants of Vasily Safonov

For Vasily Safonov's 175th Anniversary

Ahead of the 175th anniversary of Vasily Ilyich Safonov's birth in February 2027, we hope to reach his descendants — in particular his great-grandson and namesake, Vasily Ilyich Safonov, who we believe lives in New York.

If you can pass our invitation on to him, please write to us. We ask that no private contact details be posted publicly.

WRITE TO THE RUSSIAN GARDEN

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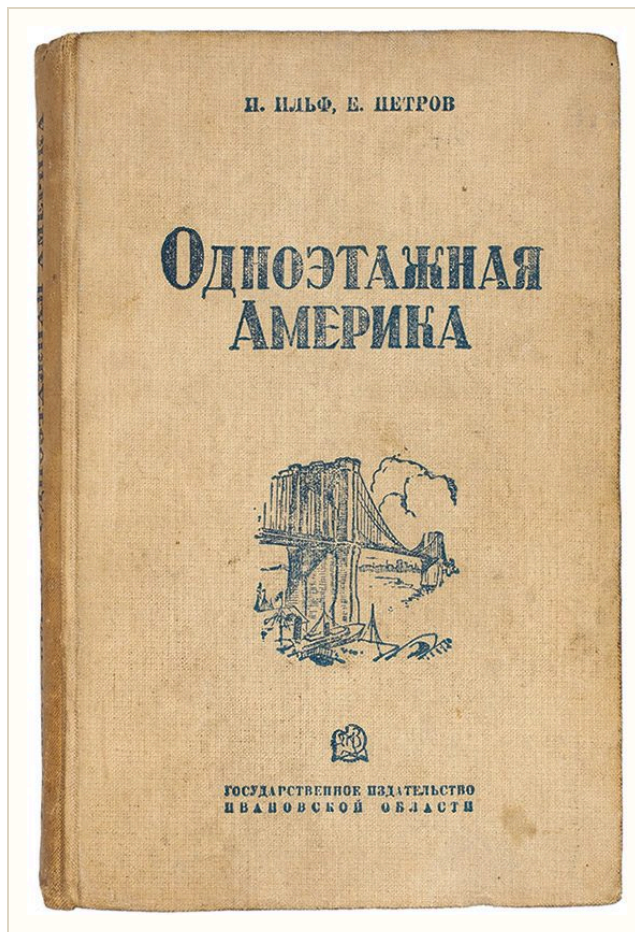


The Road to Cleveland!

October 15 is Ilya Ilf's birthday.

In 1935 Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov — his co-author of the celebrated novels *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf* — set off on a road trip across the United States. The journey produced *One-Storied America*, a book in which Cleveland appears in a way you might not expect.

For most of the trip the writers were accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Adams — Americans who knew the country well and became their Soviet guests' guides to its roads and everyday life.



Cover of One-Story America. State Publishing House of the Ivanovo Region, 1937. On the cover is the Brooklyn Bridge, the subject of Hart Crane's The Bridge, which we wrote about in our last issue. Public domain.

One evening, leaving Niagara, the travelers stopped to ask the way to Cleveland. Mrs. Adams pulled the car up to the curb, and her husband called out to two elderly men standing under a street lamp.

Both rushed to the car and started talking at once. At last one of them elbowed his friend aside and exclaimed with delight:

Good Lord! The road to Cleveland!

ILF AND PETROV, *ONE-STORIED AMERICA*

It turned out that he had been born in Cleveland himself. Now he was eagerly explaining where to turn right, where to turn left, and where to get a cheap dinner. His friend nearly wept with envy, trying in vain to get a word in.

The Clevelander was so carried away that he would not let even Mr. Adams speak. And when the travelers finally drove off, he was genuinely upset: it seemed he would gladly have escorted them all the way to the city, just to make sure they did not get lost.

The drive through Cleveland itself proved far less romantic. On November 11, 1935, Ilf wrote to his wife from Toledo:

*It took us a whole hour to make our way through
Cleveland.*

ILYA ILF, LETTER TO HIS WIFE, NOVEMBER 11, 1935

The city was huge, the streets were packed with cars, and the travelers were hurrying on to Detroit and Henry Ford's automobile plants.

In our last issue we remembered the Cleveland of 1922 — Isadora Duncan, Sergei Yesenin and Hart Crane. Now we have the Cleveland of 1935, seen through the eyes of two Soviet satirists.

One city. Two journeys. Two completely different tones.

And still, it is nice to know that somewhere in the America of 1935 there lived a man for whom giving directions to Cleveland was almost a point of honor.

Sources: Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov, [*One-Storied America*, part two, chapter 14](#) (in Russian); Ilya Ilf, letter to his wife from Toledo, November 11, 1935. Quotations translated by the Gazette.



Anne Carson and The Forum of Minds



Anne Carson.

The 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature has gone to Anne Carson, the Canadian poet, translator and classicist.

Her books are hard to fit on a single library shelf: poetry meets philosophy, Greek tragedy meets contemporary theater, and classical myths find unexpected new voices.

Perhaps the most compelling thing in her work is the conviction that the conversation with the thinkers and poets of the past never ends.

That idea is close to our hearts at [The Forum of Minds](#) — a space for curiosity, reflection and open intellectual dialogue.

*After all, Socrates is still asking questions.
And we are still looking for answers.*

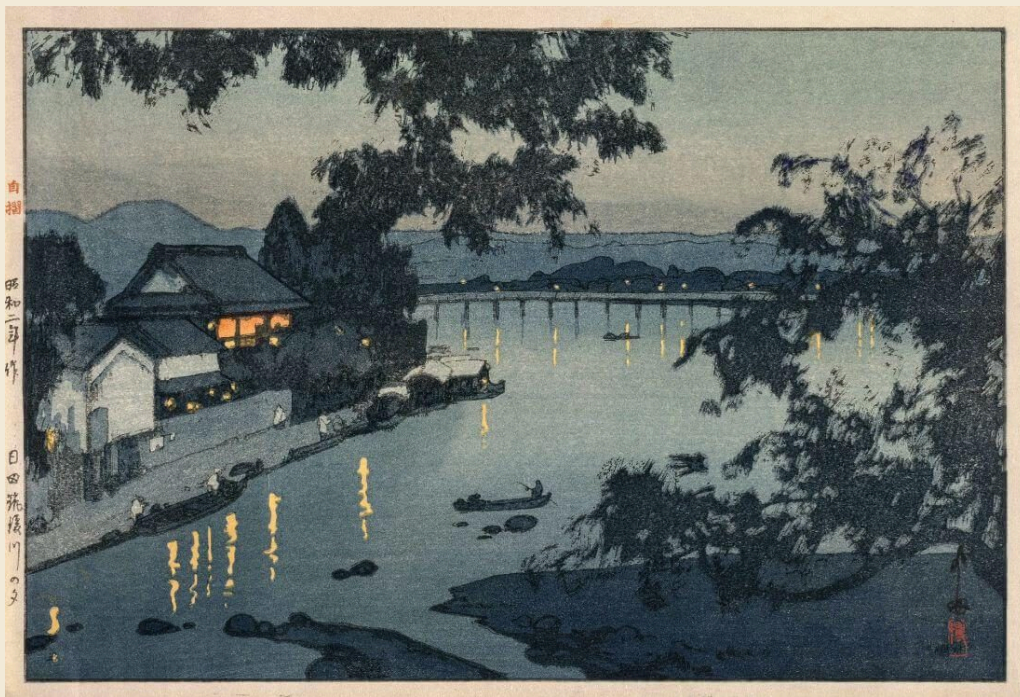


The Forum of Minds
A community of open dialogue



SocratesQ
A dialogue with Socrates — socratesq.app

AUTUMN REFLECTIONS



Yoshida Hiroshi. Evening on the Chikugo River at Hita. 1927. Color woodblock print. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Artist (1930.95). Public domain (CC0).

Down this road
no one is walking —
an autumn evening.

Matsuo Bashō, 1694. Translated by the Gazette



Kolchak — Zworykin — the Arctic — America

What do Admiral Alexander Kolchak, the television pioneer Vladimir Zworykin and the Russian Cultural Garden in Cleveland have in common?

Far more than you might think!

As part of the celebration of the 250th anniversary of American independence, the Russian Cultural Garden presented three outstanding Russian Americans: Vladimir Zworykin, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Vladimir Nabokov.

But behind Zworykin's name lies another remarkable story, one that takes us back to the events described in this issue.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE RUSSIAN GARDEN GAZETTE.

Support the Russian Cultural Garden

The Garden lives thanks to its friends. Your donation helps us care for the Garden, continue the Walk of Fame, build the Rachmaninoff Music Corner and publish the Gazette. Any amount matters: \$10, \$25 or \$100 — every gift helps the Garden grow.

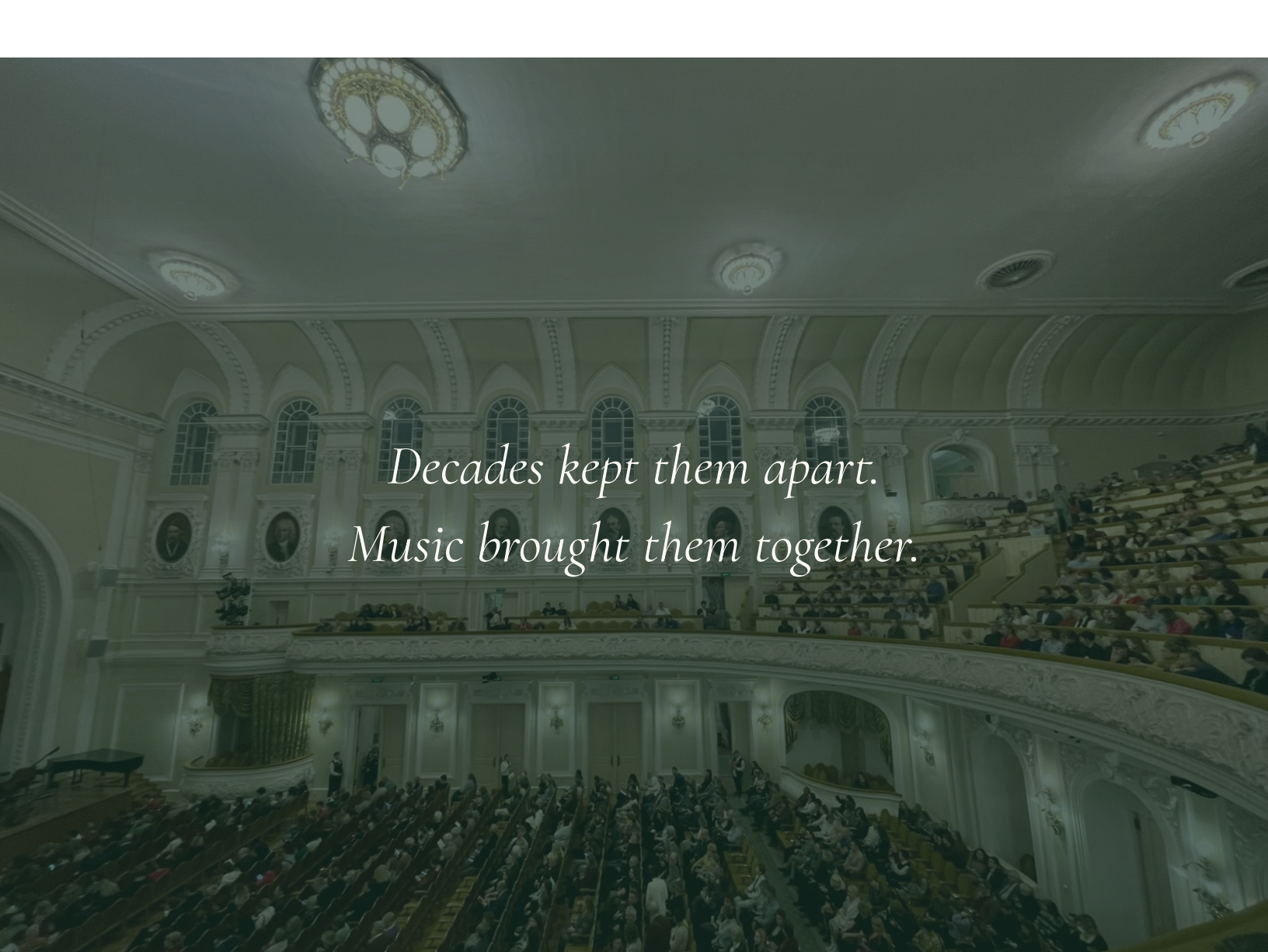
To add a name to the Walk of Fame, the suggested donation is **\$250**. Sponsors' names are published at RussianGarden.org. A donation can also be dedicated in honor or in memory of someone dear to you.



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Russian Cultural Gardens



*Decades kept them apart.
Music brought them together.*



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The Russian Garden Gazette · Issue #19 · October 15, 2026

This issue was edited by Svetlana Stolyarova.

Photographs on the cover, of the Great Hall and of the Tchaikovsky monument: The Russian Garden Gazette. Woodblock print by Yoshida Hiroshi: The Cleveland Museum of Art (Open Access, CC0).

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