

For A Good Cause: A Cantorial Concert

By LEAH HOCHBAUM

Judging by rapper Matisyahu's 2005 record sales, the popularity of even non-traditional Jewish music is on the rise with mainstream U.S. audiences. And Chabad's Children of Chernobyl (CCOC) charity is hoping it can bank on that by putting on a cantorial concert in Lincoln Center in late March.

"We have a serious mission," said Ilana Kats, director of CCOC's special events, of her organization's efforts to improve the health of children affected by the Chernobyl disaster by bringing them to Israel and providing medical care. "But this will be a light-hearted evening."

Indeed, the concert, which aims to celebrate the younger cantorial voices of the world, will feature the glorious singing of Yaakov Stark of New York's Orach Chaim, Netanel Hershtik of the Hamptons Synagogue, David Weinbach of Tel Aviv and Tzadok Greenwald of Jerusalem – all of whom are young cantors looking to make their respective marks on the music world.

"The concert will be beautiful and spiritual," said Haim Wiener of the American Society for the Advancement of Cantorial Arts (ASACA), which is underwriting the event.

"Music speaks to everybody. When you listen to cantorial music, it's not any different from listening to opera. This evening will be a Jewish opera, with performers dressed with all the dignity of opera singers. It will appeal everyone – not just Jews."

And since every dime of the proceeds is going to charity, he hopes that people all over New York will open their minds, hearts and most importantly, their wallets, and come enjoy a night of cantorial compositions.

In addition to performances by the cantors of the new generation, the Moscow Male Jewish Hasidic Capella Choir, the New York Synagogue Choir and the Tel Aviv Cantorial Institute Choir will also lend their voices to this worthy cause.

"This troika mirrors the CCOC mission statement," said New York Synagogue and Hamptons Synagogue, Rabbi Marc Schneier, who made the *shidduch* between Wiener and CCOC.

"CCOC is based in New York and we have the New York choir coming. The charity rescues kids from Eastern Europe and we have the Moscow choir coming. It then brings the kids to Israel for medical care, and we have the choir from Tel Aviv. It all came together perfectly."

So much so that everyone involved is confident that this one-night only event will be a gold mine for the aid group.

Since 1990, CCOC has airlifted more than 2,000 children, poisoned by the radiation of the Chernobyl catastrophe, to Israel to receive treatment for ailments ranging from collapsed immune systems to thyroid cancer to giant, irrepressible tumors.

After arriving in the Holy Land, the kids receive housing, clothing, education and medical care at CCOC facilities. They are provided with wholesome diets, vitamin supplements, psychological counseling, and even summer camp.

And although it sometimes takes years to bring their families over from the Chernobyl region, CCOC makes it easy to communicate with those family members the children left behind, by ensuring that telephone conversations and email contact are available to the youths at all times.

"Clothing, shelter, education – it's all covered," said Kats. "The kids grow up with us. Years after they've left us, we're invited to their weddings, their family affairs. Because we become their family."

Since CCOC is funded solely by donations, the organization is optimistic that people will make it their business to buy tickets to an event as rare as a cantorial concert at New York's prestigious Lincoln Center.

And if not, she just hopes people remember that "something like Chernobyl could have happened anywhere. The people there shouldn't have to suffer because of geographical happenstance."

Check out www.ccoc.net for more information. ■

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