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Moscow Jewish choir to make Canadian debut

By RITA POLIAKOV, Staff Reporter

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TORONTO — Alexander Tsaliuk was 18 years old when he first saw a box of old Jewish sheet music in Moscow's Leninskaya Library. When he opened the book, it was the first time anyone had seen the contents since 1917.

"[People in the Soviet Union] got special permission from [former Russian president Mikhail] Gorbachev to re-establish Jewish life and permission to come and open archives from the KGB," said Tsaliuk, the director and conductor of the Moscow Male Jewish Cappella. "I was there. I came to the Lenin Library in the middle of Moscow. They brought us these boxes... besides religious books... we found music."

Since then, Tsaliuk and the choir, made up of about 20 members, have spent 20 years performing this music around the world. On Dec. 13, the Moscow Male Jewish Cappella makes its Canadian debut at the Toronto Centre for the Arts.

"We've been travelling all around Europe, we've been [to] America, this is our first trip to Canada," Tsaliuk said.

"We know that the Jewish community in Toronto is very big... it was our dream to come one day to Canada."

Svetlana Dvoretkaia, the president of Show One Productions, is partly responsible for the choir's Canadian debut. While visiting Moscow several years ago, she met with Tsaliuk and has been working to bring the group to Toronto ever since.

"This choir is considered to be the most important and very unique Jewish choir in the world," she said. "They're the only ones who keep developing and working and keep singing traditional music and prayers."

The choir's concerts include Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian songs, as well as liturgical works and classical music, some of which was banned in Communist Russia.

For Tsaliuk, who graduated from Russia's Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, the choir isn't just about music, it's about culture.

"Personally, it's like my baby. I've dedicated 20 years of my life to this choir," he said. "I really like this music, I think it's very unique. It's a huge, very rich slice of the musical culture."

Tsaliuk hopes the music will survive, despite declining interest in it. "We are singing classical Jewish music, composed in the 19th century. This music must survive for future generations," he said.

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The choir doesn't have much competition, since there are only two or three professional groups dedicated to the same music in Europe, Tsaliuk said, adding that this isn't a good thing. Interest in the music is dwindling, not just in Moscow, but throughout the world, he said.

"We almost have no competition... this tradition is dying. In the world we have very big difficulties because of the pop culture," he added.

Tsaliuk said fewer musicians are studying classical Jewish music, and artists who perform it find it difficult to get funding.

"The government is absolutely not interested, private donors are not sure that this music is actually needed for the future," he said. "Now, because of [this] crisis, we're travelling less and less."

Dvoretzkaia is seeing the same trend in Canada, she said.

"It's the government's policies, not enough attention has been... paid to the arts in the country," she said. "[The arts] forms the nation and makes the nation develop."

For Dvoretzkaia, the choir's music is especially meaningful.

"If there's any music that means [something] to the Jewish community, it should be this music," she said of the choir's liturgical songs. "It's how we talk to God, that should be very close to every Jewish heart."

The Moscow Male Jewish Cappella performs at 7 p.m. on Dec. 13 at the Toronto Centre for the Arts. Ticket prices range from \$38 to \$68. To buy tickets, call

416-872-1111 or visit www.ticketmaster.ca.



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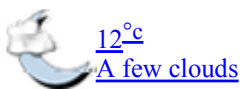
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