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Choir, cantors are reviving lost Jewish music from Russia's past

By Marci Shatzman
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The Russian Revolution not only killed thousands of Jews, it threatened to silence the music of the ones who survived.

So when boxes of Eastern European religious music, which the KGB had locked away, were discovered during Glasnost, Alexander "Sasha" Tsaliuk was inspired to bring it back to life.

"Gorbechev gave us permission to re-establish the Jewish community in 1989," said Tsaliuk, who was 19 at the time.

Now artistic director and conductor of the Moscow Male Jewish Choir, formed that year with the help of Master Cantor Joseph Malovany, Tsaliuk is bringing 20 of his singers to Boca Raton, Aventura and Palm Beach during their second U.S. tour.

Malovany and the Florida Jewish Philharmonic, based in Fort Myers, will join them and other internationally known and local cantors at two of the stops.

The music found in the cellars of the Russian secret police was hand-written sheet music from the Ukraine, Romania, Odessa and Moldavia for choir and cantor, and some just for cantors to sing during Shabbat and High Holy Days services.

"[The Russian government] wanted to keep it, but we took quite a few and arranged them, and some of it is sung by the chorus," Malovany said.

"It was very emotional," he said of going through the boxes, and made him feel he was linked to the cantors of the past. Later, he was the first Western cantor to perform the music in Moscow and St. Petersburg, he said.

The music the choir rescued from oblivion has been the backbone of the repertoire it has performed in more than 300 concerts, largely a cappella. They also sing familiar Jewish and Israeli folk songs most American Jews grew up singing in synagogue.

For instance, the rousing *Heveinu Shalom Aleyhem* is set to a bossa nova beat, and there are two versions of *Bei Mir Bist Du Sheyn* on their Web site, www.hasidic-cappella.com.

"They have a varied repertoire, but what makes them unique is restoring part of Jewish history that has been lost and to perform it in such high quality we get to love it again," said Bill Yellin, of San Diego, one of the choir's volunteer handlers while they're in the United States. "Their quality is so exceptional, we have never heard this music sung so well before."

The choir is usually the main attraction at its concerts, but this trip it will perform at two religious services at the Palm

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3/29/2005

Beach Orthodox Synagogue. In Boca Raton and Aventura, the singers will accompany cantors and a 35-piece orchestra, under the direction of philharmonic director Andrew Kurtz.

"We're totally in sync with what they're doing," Kurtz said about the chorus. "They're exactly what we need to be doing as an orchestra, absolutely to be using a Jewish chorus that performs this type of music. They're very professional."

The hour and 40-minute concerts will include music for cantors, choruses and orchestra that stretches over centuries with new and old arrangements, Kurtz said.

"The music we are doing was composed during the last 100 years and performed in synagogues all over Europe," Malovany said from New York, where he has been cantor of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan for 31 years. "It's a classical repertoire on a very high level, yet the melodies are so known and beautiful."

What sets the concerts apart is having an orchestra.

"This will be impressive. These concerts locally usually are with a piano player, and here you will find the orchestra, choir and world-class cantors," said Bill Forster, who has run B'nai Torah's cultural and concert series for a dozen seasons and has arranged the Florida performances.

"In America it doesn't happen too often," confirmed Malovany, who sings all over the world and credits Forster with bringing them all together to help preserve Jewish music.

Although cantorial music may like seem an esoteric genre to outsiders, Forster said people are literally standing in line to hear it, and all the reserved seats were sold out well in advance in Boca Raton. General admission seats are still available.

A self-professed "cantor groupie," Forster puts together three cantorial concerts a season and has started a local circuit with other synagogues, there's so much interest in the music.

Earlier this month, he invited his two adult daughters to another concert at B'nai Torah and "both of them were in shock. They had no idea 1,300 people would come to hear cantorial music," he said.

"It penetrates your soul."

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If You Go

>The Grand Cantorial Concert, with the Florida Jewish Philharmonic Orchestra, the Moscow Male Jewish Choir, Master Cantors Joseph Malovany of New York City and Avi Albrecht of Baltimore, and Cantor Benjamin Warschawski of Congregation B'nai Torah of Boca Raton: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Congregation B'nai Torah of Boca Raton, 6262 S. 18th St., Boca Raton. Admission by donation \$20; call 561-392-8566.

>The Florida Jewish Philharmonic, Moscow Male Jewish Choir, Malovany, Albrecht and Cantors Netanel Herstik and Moshe Schulhof: 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Aventura Turnberry Jewish Center, 20400 NE 30th Ave., North Miami Beach. Admission by donation \$20-\$75; call 305-935-0666.

>Moscow Male Jewish Choir and Malovany: 6:30 p.m. Friday (Shabbat services; free but dinner following \$30), reservations required by calling 561-838-9002; also 9 a.m. services Saturday at the Palm Beach Orthodox Synagogue,