

Yale Russian Chorus alumni uncover "Russian soul" at 92Y

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- By [Jim Bessman](#), Manhattan Local Music Examiner



Leave it to an "odd bunch" of aging Yale alumni to uncover the soul of Russia via its traditional church, folk, army and composed songs yesterday at 92nd Street Y (92Y).

Some 50 alumni of the [Yale Russian Chorus \(YRC\)](#), which formed in 1953 at the height of the Cold War, performed a cappella Russian songs in the sold-out Buttenweiser Hall as part of 92Y's *Russian Sundays!* program of Russian and Russian-Jewish culture events.

It was billed as a "remarkable event," and so it was. The YRC, noted former Yale Russian Club president and founding YRC president George Litton in his opening remarks, was a diverse group, very few of which spoke Russian, but all of them understood the "Russian soul in the music." That Russian soul had kept them together for over 50 years, he said, and Harald Hille, president of the YRC Alumni Assn., encapsulated its extraordinary story in his introduction of the group.

The "curious phenomenon" of the YRC, as Hille described its origins, came out of the early 1950s Cold War political climate of the communist "Red Scare," McCarthyism, the U.S.-U.S.S.R. arms race, and an overall "climate of fear" featuring "barriers to knowledge and communication" and the "demonization" of both sides by both sides.

But at the same time there was a fascination among Yale Russian students with Russian history and culture, even when it wasn't "politically correct" to sing Russian songs.

"We could only look at Russia through a telescope, since we couldn't go there," said Hille. "What could we do?"

The YRC, he said, presented a means to "present the human face of Russia to America" by way of initial performances at nearby YMCAs, churches and colleges, and when the Cultural Exchange Agreement was signed in 1958, it afforded an opportunity "to present the human face of America to Russians" by way of trips to Russia in 1958, 1959 and 1960.

"We were always accused of being spies," said Hille. "When some of the people we talked to weren't there the next year, we decided not to go back: We still wanted to talk to people, but we didn't want to hurt people."

But the YRC succeeded in fostering international understanding in pioneering person-to-person exchanges between Americans and Russians in the then Soviet Union. The chorus would return to Russia 13 times (its 17th Russian tour is slated this year), also touring Europe eight times and incorporating Georgian and Balkan songs to its repertoire.

The group has released 10 vinyl albums and eight CDs, and is the subject of a 2007 documentary *Khoristoria: The Story Of The [Yale Russian Chorus](#)*. It spawned the spin-off groups Slavyanka in San Francisco, the women's Slavic Chorus at Yale and the Iveria and Kartuli groups in Boston.

The chorus alumni now include successful professionals, academics and businessmen, and according to Hille number between 500 and 600--bound all this time by loyalty and comradeship. But Yale's current chorus is much smaller and has taken a different approach, he said, and has little contact with the alumni.

"So we're not getting new singers," he lamented. "We're like singing dinosaurs."

Still, alumni reunions in various cities have sustained the YRC since the 1980s (their last performance in New York was the 25th anniversary reunion at Carnegie Hall in 1978). The alumni yesterday, according to conductor Daniel Gsovski, ranged in age from 35 to 75 ("they were weighted to one side," he said, indicating the obvious), but hardly sang like dinosaurs.

Rather, the YRC members regaled the room with Russian Orthodox Church music like the 17th Century "Blessed Is The Man" ("Blazhen muzh"), and famous songs like the traditional 19th Century tunes "The Snowball Tree" ("Kalinka") and "It Is Not The Wind" ("To n'e veter") and the World War II song "Bleak Roads" ("Ekh, dorogi"). The singing was robust and stirring, so much so that members of the audience, who stood at the end, were left teary-eyed.

Vladimir Kikilo, the New York bureau chief for Russian news agency ITAR-TASS, was visibly moved.

"It's amazing for me that Americans can be so deeply in love with Russian music," he said, calling the concert a "lifetime experience." He added, "It makes me feel proud for my country and my culture."

At a vodka reception following the performance, Gsovski, a New York-based lawyer who followed Latvian-born YRC founder Denis Mickiewicz as conductor in 1964, joked that the alumni "spend most of our time now not learning notes but clearing our throats!" Still, the concert "went more or less according to plan," he added. "We got to the reception. That's the important thing!"

But Gsovski, whose Russian father left the country after the Russian Civil War, also noted that the YRC's repertoire is somewhat anachronistic now.

"Russian music has gotten away from the Soviet period," he explained, "but we still enjoy it. Even though most of the group can't speak one word of Russian, they know the meaning of the songs--which are still wonderful and have enormous power."

Litton agreed.

"It's an odd bunch of guys, because Yale wasn't receptive to anything Russian," said Litton. "But it's a brotherhood stronger than any friendship, created by the soul of Russian music. Here are men who are still together after almost 60 years--because of the music. There were people in the audience with tears in their eyes."

Added Kikilo: "It returned me to my roots. They loved the music so much I felt the emotion. It reminded me who I am."

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