

Mazeppa brings down the house

U of M's CUCS marks 25th anniversary

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A crowd of 300 (including both chancellor William Norrie and president Eموke Szathmary of the University of Manitoba) filled the St. John's College Chapel on the campus for a special performance March 26. First, the event marked 25 years of the Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies (CUCS) as a unit of the U of M. Second, the program proved to be a significant exploration of the influence of Ukrainian music on world culture.

Since its inception in 1981 the CUCS has used many of its resources to examine cultural interaction as an important aspect of Canada's Ukrainian heritage. In keeping with this facet of the Centre's profile, this program of choral music showcased the confluence of different musical cultures. The talents of two choirs — one community-based, the other university-based, — demonstrated this phenomenon in a performance of rarities that underlines the Centre's commitment to exploring the frontiers of Ukrainian life and culture in Canada. To mark its first quarter of a century, the U of M's Centre for CUCS mined the treasure trove of archives in search of this music.

Divided into two parts, the concert was emceed by CBC's amiable broadcaster Andrea Ratuski, host of *Northern Lights*, who provided continuity through her narrative.

Dubbed "The Unknown Koshetz" in the printed program, the first part featured Winnipeg's esteemed Oleksander Koshetz Choir under the able direction of Tetyana Rodionova. Drawing on the works of its namesake, the choir performed eleven a cappella choral arrangements by Koshetz (1875-1944) to underline the intersection of different musical traditions: French Canadian, Indian, Scottish, Afro-American, and Ukrainian. For added interest, some works were sung in Ukrainian, others in English, some in translation (Ukrainian or English), and two works were sung alternating between Ukrainian and English.

As an academic and ethnomusicologist who was ahead of his time, Koshetz believed that it was imperative to explore the music of all nations. He believed that the way to understand the cultures of the world was not only through literature and politics and customs, but also through music. So he produced several volumes of international music. This program focused on this unknown and mostly forgotten dimension of

Oleksander Koshetz.

Of the many highlights, *Honolulu Hula Hey*, a Koshetz arrangement sung in Ukrainian, set the stage for the unique music to follow. *Old Folks at Home* by Stephen Foster was presented in an absolutely wonderful Koshetz arrangement featuring the choir humming in harmony, a technique for which Koshetz was famous. The second verse, sung in Ukrainian, brought tears to some in the audience. In *O Susannah* the voices of the choir imitated the sounds of a banjo. After the final number, *Hrychanyky*, the choir received an instant standing ovation and vigorous applause.

The second half of the program featured a campus-based choir — the University of Manitoba Women's Choir conducted by Professor Henry Engbrecht from the University's Faculty of Music. This choir presented the North American premiere of a forgotten cantata, *The Page*, about one of the most noted figures in Ukrainian history, Ivan Mazeppa (1645-1709). His phoenix-like career grabbed the imagination of noted Irish composer, Michael Balfe (1808-1870), who composed this work in a style reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan.

During the last half of the 19th century, Balfe was considered one of the two preeminent British composers, the other being Sir Arthur Sullivan. The online website "People Play UK" writes that "The first performance of Balfe's *Mazeppa* was sung at Exeter Hall London England, in June 1862. The episode with the horse was represented instrumentally, accompanied by the 'suffering accents' of Mazeppa."

The Balfe *Mazeppa* stands in sharp contrast to the Tchaikovsky opera *Mazeppa* which only two weeks earlier was given its Metropolitan Opera premiere in New York. In Tchaikovsky's opera, Mazeppa is the villain; in the Balfe cantata, he is the romantic hero.

Conductor Henry Engbrecht was so taken with this forgotten work that he programmed it for a second performance which was held one week later, at St. Mary's Cathedral in downtown Winnipeg to an audience of choral music aficionados...and to a second full house!

In this North American premiere of Balfe's cantata, Mazeppa is a youthful attendant (the "page") in the court of a Polish nobleman whose wrath is unleashed when he learns of Mazeppa's affair with his beautiful daughter ("Teresa"). In keeping with legend, Mazeppa is made to suffer for his transgression: he is stripped and tied face-up onto the back of a wild horse. Both man and beast are sent out into the wild steppes of

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Ukraine to meet a cruel fate. Luckily, Mazeppa is rescued by a band of passing cossacks. And the rest, as they say, is history. Mazeppa recovers from his ordeal. He rises through the ranks, and ultimately becomes hetman (ruler) of Ukraine.

Once again, the audience seemed

entranced by the uniqueness of the work. The finale, "Long Live Mazeppa" brought down the house, received a standing ovation and an encore.

In keeping with the Centre's ongoing research into cultural interaction, this was a concert filled to the

brim with international, multicultural nuances. The acoustics were superior, both choirs were well-rehearsed and looked great, and the Chapel's intimate setting added to the ambiance of warmth and celebration — an atmosphere which permeated the celebration.

The anniversary concert was followed by a reception hosted at St. Andrew's College only a short walk away, not hard to take on a glorious sunny afternoon. And the University President was smiling.