

Toronto Jewish Folk Choir Benefit Concert – Way to Go!

Written by Nergis Canefe

Soprano Miriam Eskin, a vivacious star of Russian and Israeli musical theatre before her arrival in Canada in the early 1990s as part of the Russian Jewish influx to the country, made headlines singing at the successful Toronto Jewish Folk Choir Benefit Concert “Yiddish and Broadway Songs”, held at the Winchevsky Centre on January 24, 2009. It was attended by more than 100 people and the full house enjoyed moments of precious socializing, as well as delightful musical numbers.

The evening featured traditional Yiddish songs – some of which were delivered in a very tasty jazz format – and a collection of best-loved Broadway songs in English. Versatile pianist-arranger Nina Shapilsky provided spirited accompaniment, and guest soloist Herman Rombouts added compelling bass vocal selections. Also featured were a silent auction and artwork displays.

This was the first ever such fundraising event for the Choir, which dates back to 1925 when a few Jewish immigrant factory workers got together and founded the “Freiheit Gezangs Farein” (Freedom Choral Society), the predecessor of the UJPO’s Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, and gave their first spring concert in 1926 under the baton of Hyman Riegelhaupt.

The turning point in the Choir’s history came in 1939, when Emil Gartner took the Choir to its greatest heights, and established its reputation for memorable annual concerts with a 140-strong chorus. Back in the 1950s, the Choir performed on the stage of Toronto’s Massey Hall, accompanied by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Over the years, the Choir continued to achieve a high level of musicality and interpretation of the Yiddish repertoire.

Today, with about 35 members, it is more the size of a chamber choir. It continues to perform a wonderfully rich repertoire under reputable and talented conductor Alexander Veprinsky, with world-class accompanist Lina Zemelman, regular soloists such as Eskin and Rombouts, as well as orchestral backing as required. It manages an audible feat in a world where Yiddish is no longer regularly spoken, Jewish folk traditions are increasingly overshadowed by religious ceremonial music, and modern Hebrew reigns supreme at the expense of Yiddish and Ladino.

The latest group of singers to join the Choir’s cohorts, as well as its current conductor and accompanist, are all Russian Jews who migrated to Canada during the 1990s. During the last decade, Canadian Jewry grew by 14%, making it one of the fastest-growing communities in the Diaspora. Of all the Jews who immigrated to Canada over the past ten years, 25% were born in the Soviet Union, or its successor states. Benefit Concert’s soloist Eskin is one such known talent in this newly-forming niche in Toronto’s Jewish community.

Currently, Canada’s largest Jewish communities can be found in Toronto (175,000), Montreal (100,000) and Vancouver (30,000). The majority of the community is of Ashkenazi descent, but there is also a growing population of French-speaking Moroccan Jews in Montreal. Among our Choir members there are also a number of middle-eastern Sephardic Jews who speak French, Turkish, Arabic and Ladino.

The Choir thus proudly continues to be home to members of various communities within the Canadian Jewish diaspora, and thrives on reflecting the richness of Jewish culture and folklore in its myriad colours. It also performs works on Jewish themes by classical composers and strives to enhance contemporary Jewish culture through the commissioning of new works by Jewish-Canadian composers.

Among the well-known composers who have written works for the Choir over the years include John Weinzwieg, Louis Applebaum, Milton Barnes, Srul Irving Glick, Ben Steinberg and Leon Zuckert.

We have a busy performing schedule, with regular concerts at Baycrest and for Jewish Music Month. We have also participated in the “Zimriya” Choral Festival, Holocaust Education Week, Festival Canada 1997 (sponsored by the National Arts Centre), and the Ashkenaz Festival, not to mention at numerous Winchevsky Centre events, including this year’s upcoming Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Commemoration, being held on Sunday April 19th, and of course, our Annual Spring Concert on Sunday May 31, 2009.