

Baroque Debut for Moscow Expat Choir

By [Robert Lee](#)

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Jan Dismas Zelenka is a musical figure few people are immediately familiar with. A predecessor to Johann Sebastian Bach, Zelenka was a Czech-born composer in the Baroque style who spent his life ceaselessly trying to win favor in the Saxon court of the 17th and 18th centuries.

"They knew he had existed," said Alexander Tsaliuk, conductor of the Moscow Oratorio Society. "But they thought that the majority of his music and biography was lost forever. As far as I know from my research, Zelenka's music was discovered in about 1992 or 1993 in Dresden during the restoration of some old churches."

The Moscow Oratorio Society is a nonprofit international choir founded in the early '90s. Although started primarily as a platform for performing Handel's "Messiah" and traditional carols at Christmastime, the choir has evolved into a diverse group with a penchant for ambitious and complex pieces.

Their latest concert finds them rehearsing for the Russian premiere of several of Zelenka's

recently unearthed works, which they will perform June 2 at Orchestration Hall with the acclaimed Musica Viva and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra.

"Europe at the moment is experiencing a kind of boom of his music," Tsaliuk said. "Everybody is performing it. His music takes us back to a time just before Bach and is so inspiring and beautiful.

"I feel he is almost 200 years ahead of his time," he continued. "It almost sounds like contemporary cinematic scores or something written so well according to our rules of polyphony. It is simply a really unique event for Moscow and genuinely exclusive music."

Naturally, presenting the premiere of several pieces of unheard music has its challenges, not least for the choir members themselves.

"It keeps you on your toes, and you can't be complacent about it, but it is completely stunning. It is very rewarding music," said Thomas Washington, a British expat and member of the choir.

"It's fun for the choir members as well because we get to sing with professionals," said Betsy Engebretson, a fellow choir member from the United States. "I would never usually have this opportunity to sing in a choir with an orchestra. It is a wonderful opportunity for just the average expat in Moscow to be able to be part of this large-scale musical production and perform on stage."

The choir's main recruitment drive comes in wintertime, when it revives its tradition of performing choral arrangements of well-known Christmas carols. For performances, choir members are often joined by professional Russian singers and musicians.

"The people in the choir are ambitious, usually with some kind of musical training, either by playing an instrument or having singing lessons" said Carol Sorrenti, the group's administrative director. "But we also run special sessions for anyone who wants extra help learning pieces. We are an open society. Everybody who has some degree of musical experience from either singing in a choir or studying music is welcome anytime."

The Moscow Oratorio Society performs Zelenka's "Miserere" in C Minor, "Missa Votiva" and "Magnificat" in D Major at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. June 2 at Orchestration Hall, 19 Ulitsa Garibaldi. For tickets, go to www.parter.ru or call 495-258-0000. For more information on the choir and questions about membership, go to: www.moscoworatorio.com/eng.html.

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