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American Throat Singer Takes Tyvans to Moscow

By Jonathan Earle

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The Tuvan National Orchestra gives a rare concert at the Korolevsky Hall in Moscow on Friday of the traditional music of the southern Siberian republic.

Sean Quirk was a college student in Minnesota when he first heard Tyvan throat singing, the hypnotic, multipitch singing technique native to the southern Siberian region of Tyva.

The experience changed his life.

"It opened this whole world for me," he said. "[Throat singing] isn't just a vocal trick. It's an entire art that has extremely deep roots and tons of amazing musical possibilities. I totally just flipped."

Quirk became obsessed with imitating the sound, which has been compared to bagpipe music.

"I pissed off my roommates; my girlfriend broke up with me. Listening to me try to imitate it was just hell," he said.

More than a decade later, Quirk, now a Distinguished Artist of Tyva, is behind the Tyvan National Orchestra's rare performance of traditional Tyvan music, including throat singing in Moscow.

"There's no other group like our orchestra in the world," he said.

The ensemble will perform one show Friday at Korolevsky Hall.

"You've got 25 people playing all kinds of music on traditional instruments, starting from real, traditional Tyvan music reworked for the orchestra to new compositions and other genres," he said.

Certain songs feature 13 men throat-singing at the same time while also playing instruments as diverse as the two-stringed igil and the bass guitar.

One song mixes Johnny Cash's "Ghost Riders in the Sky" with a Tyvan cowboy song.

"They're both in a D-minor pentatonic, so the melodies and the keys work really well," Quirk said.

Unlike Western music, Tyvan music is based on an untempered scale and overtone scales, which Quirk described as the pure intervals that emerge from nature.

Quirk, 34, was shocked by the quality of the musicianship he encountered when he first arrived in Tyva on a Fulbright Scholarship in 2003 to study traditional music.

"The musicians are freaking virtuosos!" he said. "Our drummer is this little girl. She's 25, and she kicks [expletive]. She's like the female Tyvan Buddy Rich back there."

The orchestra has played throughout Russia, and a four-person group called Alash, which Quirk manages, has toured around the world, three times as support for instrumental group Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, which mix bluegrass, fusion and post-bop.

Alash was a guest artist on Bela Fleck and the Flecktones' Grammy Award-winning holiday album, "Jingle All the Way." The group is set to play at Carnegie Hall in New York in February.

Quirk has lived in Tyva more or less continuously for almost a decade. He speaks fluent Tyvan. His wife, with whom he has three children, is also Tyvan.

And after all those years, the music still inspires him.

"I'm not sick of it yet, and that's a pretty good sign because I've been there for so damn long," he said.

The Tyvan National Orchestra will perform Friday at 6 p.m. at Korolevsky Hall, 15 Ulitsa Akademika Koroleva, bldg. 2. Metro VDNKh, Marina Roshcha. Tickets available at the door or by calling (499) 236-4801. www.alashensemble.com, www.tuvannationalorchestra.com

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