

This Ukrainian American Life: A Benefit Concert

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By Natalie Korytnyk Forrester

On the sunny, warm evening of March 16th with the cherry blossoms about to pop in Washington, DC, a concert/cabaret to support the Ukrainian people was held at the French Embassy. As a dramatic start, Contralto Vira Slywotzky marched in from the back of the theatre down the aisle in a vibrant red dress powerfully singing "Chervona Kalyna (Red Viburnum)." With her rhythmic clapping, she immediately engaged the audience who began to clap along and even sing this popular early 20th century song of resistance to Russia's invasions. Walking on stage, she was joined by the award-winning composer and pianist Dina Pruzhansky. And from this gripping beginning, a compelling and creative program unfolded that was sponsored by The Washington Group Cultural Fund in collaboration with the Embassy of France.

To say that Ms. Slywotzky has incredible stage presence may even be an understatement. Through her rare and soulful contralto voice, her facial expressions and movements, and her conversational banter between songs, she delivered a captivating performance of 17 compositions ranging from art songs to opera and including deliciously saucy cabaret. Besides Ukrainian arrangements, she sang songs from French and American composers.

As a reviewer from the New York Times had previously written, pianist and composer Ms. Pruzhansky "brought forth the liveliest playing." Her composition, "AM New York," which she described as a love letter to New York, sprung to life Manhattan at the morning rush hour. She played this alone, humorously starting with her struggles with the alarm clock and then building evocatively all the sounds of the city's hustle and bustle – so that you not only felt it but could almost see it.

A stunning finish was a performance of "Contra Spem Spero" based on a poem by Lesia Ukrainka and beautifully set to music composed by Ms. Pruzhansky. The lyrics and composition, which begin in a dark space, move to resurrect hope, coincidentally in springtime. The packed audience gave a resounding standing ovation to the two outstanding performers. The encore, "Tyzh Mene Pidmanula," a funny Ukrainian song about a young man being continually stood up by a young woman, was sung faster and faster until it left everyone laughing hysterically. Humor, which was evident throughout the concert, is a form of resistance and strength in the Ukrainian people.

The concert was attended by representatives from the Embassies of France, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Spain and leaders of Ukrainian American organizations. The Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy, Aurelie Bonal, welcomed the audience to La Maison Française and expressed France's support of Ukraine. Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Ukraine, Minister Counsellor Yaroslav Brisiuck, eloquently voiced his appreciation for the support and

concert. Besides introducing the performers, Laryssa Courtney, the President of The Washington Group and Co-Director of The Washington Cultural Fund, presented Ms. Bonal and the French Embassy, as a token of appreciation for hosting this fundraiser, a beautifully framed copy of a map of Ukraine created by the famous 17th century French cartographer Guillaume Le Vasseur de Beauplan.

All proceeds and donations from this event went to Razom for Ukraine, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that is providing advocacy and humanitarian war relief.