

By Laryssa Courtney

On Sept. 21, The Washington Group Cultural Fund presented Ukrainian Music Initiative, a group which brilliantly performed a beautiful program of Ukrainian music to a full house at The Lyceum in Alexandria, Virginia.

Ukrainian Music Initiative (UMI), whose goal is to elevate Ukrainian classical music to its rightful place in the Western repertoire through performance and education, is a collaboration of four artists - contralto Vira Slywotzky, cellist Valeriya Sholokhova, and pianists Pavlo Gintov and Margarita Rovenskaya - all of whom have demonstrated a longtime commitment to performing music by Ukrainian composers. UMI also includes musicologist Leah Batstone and business entrepreneur Alex Gamota.

The program started with "Air Cosaque" by Beethoven, a piece which the composer wrote based on a popular Ukrainian song "Yikhav Kozak za Dunai." In 1808, it was loosely translated from Ukrainian to German by a poet friend of his, Cristoph August Tiedge, who named his version "Beautiful Minka, I Must Part." Ms. Slywotzky, Mr. Gintov, and Ms. Sholokhova gave this lively folk piece a spirited performance with Ms. Slywotzky singing both the German and Ukrainian versions.

Moving into the 20th century, UMI performed "In Winter" by Yakiv Stepovy and Oleksander Oles. A beautiful metaphor, it describes how the shining sun smiled on silver

branches, but they could not stand the smile, fainting, melting, and dropping tears one by one. Next came a song by Kyrylo Stetsenko and Vira Vovk about dancing with the fairy queen and seductress Morgana, about otherworldly love, and about drowning while trying to capture the goddess's image. "Insurmountable Wall," by Ihor Sonevsky and Ivan Franko, was about love and fate, about loss, and feeling lost and confused, surrounded by smoke. In these and other songs performed by Vira Slywotsky and Pavlo Gintov, we heard expressions of beautiful imagery that showcased Ms. Slywotsky's powerful and velvety contralto voice, as well as her significant dramatic skills. Her naturalness and ease on stage added to the audience's enjoyment, and Mr. Gintov's responsive accompaniment provided the necessary support.

Cellist Sholokhova's expressive and refined playing was on display in the melancholy and lyrical "Elegie La Tristesse," by Mykola Lysenko. Later, in "Postlude No.3" by Valentyn Silvestrov, a giant among Ukrainian contemporary composers, Ms. Sholokhova's recollection that she had performed this piece just days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine was followed by a moment of silence. Her very personal connection to this work became evident in her sensitive and delicate phrasing, as the music went from quiet to quieter.

The educator of this unique ensemble was pianist Pavlo Gintov. He recounted how in 2014, when searching for music about Crimea, he discovered "Crimean Sketches" by

Serhiy Bortkiewicz, a 20th century Ukrainian composer from Kharkiv, who during the war years (including both World Wars) spent much of his life living as a refugee.

Unfortunately, Bortkiewicz was persecuted, much of his work was destroyed, and for many years he and his music were forgotten. Gintov played one of these sketches, "The Rocks of Uch-Kosh," an ode to Crimea's beautiful nature. His sensitive yet powerful playing conjured visions of pine forests, mountains, and Black Sea waves crashing on the rocks of Crimea's shoreline.

"Village" by Olga Zaitseva-Herz, set to words by Ukraine's poet laureate Taras Shevchenko, is from the opera "Bakhmut Rhapsody," which premiered in 2024 at the Contemporary Ukrainian Music Festival in New York. "Village" is about the beauty of a Ukrainian village in the moment before the war begins. In the opera, "Village" is followed by Bakhmut in war time. Ms. Slywotzky expressed the hope and desire that another beautiful moment would come when the war ends.

The artists were feted at a reception following the performance, where the audience voiced congratulations and the desire to hear more from this extraordinary group.

The Washington Group, an all-volunteer, non-profit organization, was founded forty-one years ago, and its TWG Cultural Fund has organized over 150 events in the Washington metropolitan area.

