

## Beloved Montreal Choral Conductor Remembered



On January 27<sup>th</sup> 2013 at Outremont's magnificent Église St-Viateur, the Russian Orthodox community of Montreal will be commemorating the musical legacy of Georgiy Michailovich Sayig, the conductor of St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral choir for nearly 5 decades starting in 1960. The concert marks the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mr. Sayig's passing. It will reunite the many talented choristers and conductors from all over Eastern Canada and the U.S. whom Mr Sayig inspired during his dedicated musical leadership for nearly a half a century in Montreal.

Featured soloist is Montreal born, Milan-based Mezzo soprano Annamaria Popescu, a protégée of Mr. Sayig and his regular soloist for 20 years during great feast day masses at St Nicholas Cathedral. She will perform the glorious signature works that she sang with Mr. Sayig accompanied a *cappella* by many of the same choristers.

Born and raised in Istanbul Turkey – of a Russian Orthodox mother and a Syrian Orthodox father who met in Russia before the revolution, Mr Sayig was steeped in the Byzantine Orthodox tradition. His Russian mother, an orphan, was very devout, instilling in her sons the faith and traditions of her forefathers.

A brilliant student, Mr. Sayig graduated in voice, violin and conducting from Istanbul conservatory. In addition he completed an Honours degree in Mathematics from Istanbul University. He put himself through university by his extraordinarily rapid and calligraphically perfect musical transcription skills for orchestra scores, a skill that would eventually serve to enrich the Russian sacred musical legacy in Canada.



His is the typical post- war immigrant success story, based on strong family values, hard work and integrity. Arriving in Canada in 1957, Mr Sayig distinguished himself as a builder and creator both in the Montreal business sphere and in choral conducting. With his wife Eleni, the young couple worked tirelessly to help their extended family to come to Canada and to raise their children Maria and Michael. After purchasing his first Volkswagen in 1959, Mr Sayig was offered a sales position by the dealer, rising to become the top salesman and 1973 establishing his own a VW franchise, Nord-Est VW, later another one on Bleury and finally building a new architecturally designed, state of the art VW dealership in Old Montreal with his wife Eleni and son Michael who manages it to this day.

Concurrently, he devoted himself to building and improving the St. Nicholas Cathedral choir. He challenged his singers to master the wide range of repertoire – from mediaeval chants to demanding Borntiansky concertos to contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> Century works. At its peak under his mandate, the choir could boast of 40 singers including 12 basses, half of whom were contra-basses or octavistes.



Over a thirty year period when computers did not exist, Mr. Sayig manually transcribed literally thousands of partitions of forgotten Russian Orthodox music for both Vespers and Liturgies and for all the feast days in his beautiful calligraphic script, and for each voice individually, to facilitate reading for some singers without musical training. At a time when open religious worship was thwarted in Russia, he retrieved rare and lost scores by writing to fellow musicians in Turkey, Greece and the United States. Apparently, he also had a clandestine conductor-contact in the Soviet Union who somehow managed to send out partitions of past and contemporary banned Orthodox composers in

Soviet Russia – these works he would transcribe and share with other Russian choirs in Canada.

Although admired for his exemplary discipline, Mr Sayig's attitude was warm and inclusive, his choir intergenerational, where every singer with able voice --- no matter what age, musical background or education felt welcomed. He considered that a good prayerful voice never grows old. He steadfastly refused to accept any payment for his work. Although suffering from severe arthritis, he rarely missed a Sunday, claiming that conducting was "good therapy". A distinguished gentleman of impeccable style, he spoke 6 languages flawlessly and did everything only one way – meticulously!



Mr Sayig`s, dynamic and elegant conducting style, his choir's excellence and rich choice of repertoire were show-cased during a memorable 1988 concert to celebrate the Millennium of Orthodoxy in Russia – a "standing-room-only" event held in McGill's Redpath Hall, with soloists Chantal Lambert, director of the Opera Lyrique de Montreal and Anna-Maria Popescu, now a regular soloist with Teatro La Scala in Milan, and also teaching at McGill University.

The present St Nicholas Cathedral chamber choir performing on January 27<sup>th</sup> is composed of many of Mr Sayig's seasoned Russian Orthodox singers. It has the distinctive mystical Russian orthodox sound, passed on through the generations and honed through decades of chanting and praying together. Included in its ranks are 3 members of the clergy who will incant the litanies, several true Russian basso profundos, rich Slavic contralto voices and silvery sopranos and tenors.



The choir will be directed by Michael Woinowsky-Krieger, its accomplished conductor since 2009, a gifted arranger and transcriber of forgotten works and "choir builder" in the same tradition as Mr. Sayig. Under Mr. Woinowsky –Krieger's musical direction, the choir has recently distinguished itself on the Quebec sacred music scene: as featured ensemble in the 2007 Festival des musiques sacrées In Quebec City where it performed to 900 music lovers in Église St-Roch ; at a Good Friday concert of Holy Week chants in Cathédrale St-Michel in Sherbrooke at the invitation of the catholic Archbishop; in the first Russian Christmas music concert in St- Viateur Church in December 2012: during

annual Great Lent candlelight concerts sung in St Nicholas Cathedral itself before the icons.



The January 27<sup>th</sup> concert will feature the masterpieces of Russian sacred chant which were Mr. Sayig's treasured transcriptions as well as mezzo-soprano's Annamaria Popescu's designated and long-awaited solos; the singers will have the nostalgic pleasure to sing from some of his hand written manuscript scores which will also be on display for the public to admire. The repertoire will span the breadth of what is one of the world's great sacred music traditions– the Russian Orthodox Vigil and the Liturgy of St John Chrysostome and will feature works by Rachmaninov, Chesnokov, Lvovsky, Bortniansky, Tourchaninov as well as ancient chants.

Proceeds from the concert will go towards a memorial fund in Mr Sayig's name to support the training of young orthodox conductors, and for workshops on Russian Orthodox music open to the wider choral community.

Tickets are 20\$ for this benefit concert for the George M. Sayig Choir Music Memorial Fund and may be reserved on line at [maria.ignatow@hec.ca](mailto:maria.ignatow@hec.ca)

### **Concert details**

Concert commemorative Georges Sayig  
Sunday January 27<sup>th</sup> 2013 at 2:00 pm  
Église St-Viateur  
Corner Boul. Laurier and Bloomfield in Outremont,  
Métro Laurier  
Info-reservations: [maria.ignatow@hec.ca](mailto:maria.ignatow@hec.ca)

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