

ARTS & LEISURE

By Alex Browne

Staff Reporter

How many times can one say "perfection"?

I was challenged with that by a keen concert-goer following last Friday's White Rock Concerts' presentation of the Little Eagles of Siberia choir. And there was no real answer to her comment.

The fact is that this ensemble of 28 singers, plus their director, accompanist and translator, walked into White Rock Baptist Church, opened their mouths in angelic song and walked off with the hearts of just about everyone privileged to hear them.

The concert in White Rock was the Canadian debut for the group from Krasnoyarsk in Central Siberia. It marked the first step in a three-month, 71 performance tour organized by George Zukerman of Overture Concerts, and if the standing ovation they received from the White Rock audience is any indication, this will be a successful tour indeed.

Sadly, the performance could not include the four dancers also travelling with the group, but in this White Rock Concerts was respecting the wishes of the church, which has provided a sympathetic home for the society's most recent seasons.

Setting aside the inevitable emotional tug offered by these young and eager faces from the former Soviet Union, and their obvious delight at being here, there was much to impress the listener.

Choir founder, arranger and conductor Ludmila Stebenkova clearly drills her singers well: it's a thoroughly disciplined, technically accomplished group



Submitted photo

White Rock pier provided a first glimpse of a new country last week for Little Eagles of Siberia choir members (left to right) Larissa Stebenkova, Yelena Tichomirova, Irena Barkova, Tatyana Zaraskayeva, Natalya Kurbatchova and Varvara Chernova.

LITTLE EAGLES SOAR

Siberian choir came, saw and conquered

with an excellent command of dynamics.

The soprano (or treble) tones have the clear purity of a mountain stream; the lower registers are well balanced and full, particularly for such young singers (the current crop is largely in the early to mid-teens and includes only two boys).

The choir has also perfected the art of staggered breathing throughout the ensemble, allowing for seamless sustained notes and other color effects.

Their program was broad-reaching, encompassing

everything from Russian and Baroque classics to a second half that focused on lighter music.

On the classical side, the choir well handled excerpts from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and Borodin's *Prince Igor*, particularly the overlapping harmonies of the latter in a theme "lifted" for the song *Stranger In Paradise*.

The technical skill of the group was evident in the crisp precision of Telemann's contrapuntal *We Will Praise the Lord and Alleluia*; a delightfully airy *Exultate, Jubilate!* by Mozart, and a

superbly articulated *Viva, Viva* by Salieri.

Another highlight was a charming version of *Poem* by the Czech composer Fibich; well utilizing both the lower register blend and high tonalities to weave a 3/4-time spell over the audience.

Spellbinding, too, were two descriptive pieces, *The Wind* and *The Clouds*, which demonstrated the choir's tremendous control, blend and accurate pitch over wide intervals, and a mastery of subtle dynamics; painting an almost tangible tone picture of an ever-changing sky.

Also in this class was their version of an Evenk folk song, *A Reindeer*, in which the choir, accompanied only by bells and a jaws harp, evoked the sound and feel of the far north; a reminder of a common heritage shared with Canada's Inuit population.

Tremendous crowd pleasers, of course, were the choir's songs in English — Lennon and McCartney's *Because*, with its classically-inspired moving harmonies, was not a huge stretch from their other material; but there's something endearing about a Russian pronunciation of *Jingle Bells* or the dated minstrel-show lyrics of Gershwin's 1926 *Clap Yo' Hands* or Lennon and McCartney's *When I'm Sixty-Four* that transcends a purely musical judgment.

The latter piece, incidentally, highlighted the ragtime piano accompaniment of the group's accompanist (also their physician) Yuri Krushinskii, who also demonstrated his concert flair in a solo; *The Skylark*.

But probably the most heartfelt and touching moments were when the choir sang Russian folk songs, particularly several from their own Krasnoyarsk Territory. Maybe it's just the way it sounds to relatively uneducated Western ears but there's that bred-in-the-bone bond between performers and material (the same bond evident in Welsh and African choirs) that outside groups simply can't touch.

Those who missed this extraordinary concert have a second chance: the choir will perform at Vancouver's Christchurch Cathedral at 8 p.m. on March 4 and March 5. For tickets, call 280-2801.