

Russian passion

By CATHERINE LAMBERT

THE cheery bowls of Russian lollies and soothing cups of tea on the conference table at the Red Army Choir's headquarters in Moscow belie the building's nefarious past.

These headquarters used to be KGB offices during the Stalin era. Thousands of citizens were tortured and killed in the basement below, and their ghosts are said to linger through the halls.

These days, though, it's not screams that resonate through the place but the strains of *I Still Call Australia Home* and even AC/DC's *Long Way to the Top*.

Where the brutal KGB leader Lavrentii Beria used to sit, Major-General Victor Eliseev, the head of the Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble, now has his office.

But Maj-General Eliseev, 54, is not bothered by ghosts. "It's OK," he said.

"Actually, a lot of people in Russia would like the KGB to be as strong as they were in Soviet times."

He once served in the Russian Army and every one of his choristers has a military background. His stepson, Oleg Kukhta, 33, was shot in the stomach during combat in Chechnya in 1996.

Post-traumatic stress

forced Kukhta to resign and he turned to the choir. He is now a soloist.

"I sing with the feelings from the bottom of my heart and emotions help me sing," he said.

"The person who is not emotional is not as good a singer but all Russian men are emotional."

Eliseev agrees. "You can make a military person do whatever you would like them to but you can't make them learn the feelings," he said. "I want them to feel the music in their souls. That is when it becomes music."

The Russian voice, Eliseev argues, is wide, deep, emotional and profound.

"Bass, and especially basso profundo, singers are prolific in Russia because we are built that way and we feel that way."

Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble plays Cairns Convention Centre on November 26; Townsville Civic Theatre, November 27; Mackay Entertainment Centre, November 28; Pilbeam Theatre, Rockhampton, November 30; QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane, December 3; Broilga Theatre, Maryborough, December 4; Caloundra Cultural Centre, December 5; Gold Coast Arts Centre, December 7.



Reds overhead: Denis Nikiforov leaps behind Elena Abashkina