

# A Red Army show isn't torture now

Catherine Lambert  
in Moscow

Entering the conference room at the Red Army Choir's headquarters in Moscow, bowls of Russian sweets and cups of Russian tea on the table instantly mark the cultural distance from home Down Under.

Russians may like their sweets but they love their tea and the formality in their dealings is warm and cultured.

But it's the location of this meeting that really deepens the cultural divide.

The home of Russia's musical soul used to be the KGB's offices during the Stalin era and where the remains of thousands still lie in the basement, their ghosts said to drift between these austere marble walls.

The historic walls hold more than the remnants of bugs, torture and secrets.

This building is now filled with the sound of Carmina Burana, Kalinka and even I Still Call Australia Home.

It's the sweetest paradox of all that where the brutal head of the KGB, Lavrentii Beria, used to sit is now the office of Major-General Victor Eliseev, the head of the Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble.

General Eliseev doesn't feel any sense of the macabre even though he's surrounded by some of Beria's possessions.

"It's okay," General Eliseev says. "Actually a lot of people in Russia would like the KGB to be as strong as they were in Soviet times."

Eliseev, 54, may have once been a general in the Russian Army but now he is a musician first and a soldier second, along with the 70 members of his choir. They have all had some form of musical training and audition for the choir during military service.

The military life may seem

remote from the artistic world but it actually influences their music in many ways, from the discipline and dedication to the emotional tragedy of war.

Eliseev, known for his keen ear for each individual voice, masters his choir with a military-style precision and he clearly doesn't rest until unity is achieved.

"You can make a military person do whatever you would like them to but you can't make them learn feelings," he explains. "If there is too much of a military atmosphere, the choir is just a group of technicians, not musicians, I want them to feel the music in their souls and that is when it becomes music."

Taking the band through a recording of AC/DC's Long Way To The Top, he stops them again and again until they find the "soul" — which is difficult with AC/DC — and only when he's satisfied does this austere Russian general start to smile.

There's no doubt he heads one of the best choirs in the world, ranging in age from 18-54. The Russian voice, he argues, is distinctive, describing it as wide, deep, emotional and profound.

"The bass, and especially bass profound, singers are prolific in Russia because we are built that way and we feel that way."

It's easier for some choir members to tap very quickly into their emotional side.

Eliseev's stepson, Oleg Kukhta, 33, was a staff sergeant in the Russian Army when he was shot in the stomach at Grozny, Chechnya in 1996.

His eyes stay filled with tears as he recalls the circumstances that ended his military career.

"It was just an ordinary fight on a normal day for the Russian soldiers and I was the command of a group," Kukhta says.

"I had an order to fulfil and when fulfilling the task I was wounded. It's still difficult to speak about it."

The first bullet missed him,



Russia's soul: The Red Army Choir (top left); Veris Nikiforov and Elena Abashkina; and Nikiforov airborne

the second hit a tree he was sheltering behind but the third went through a hand grenade on his belt, which luckily did not explode, and into his body.

The incident forced Kukhta to resign three years later, suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. He decided to nurture his gifted tenor voice instead.

He sings three solos with the choir and has one of the most emotional and lyrical voices.

"I used to sing a lot even while I was serving and when I won a

television contest I was accepted into the choir," he said.

"A little bit of my soul comes through each time.

"I sing with the feelings from the bottom of my heart and emotions help me sing. The person who is not emotional is not as good a singer but all Russian men are emotional."

Kukhta discovered his voice as a child but it wasn't until he joined the choir and had professional classes that his voice became more polished.

It's with some relief that he is on a 40-town Australian tour with the choir.

"Every tour for me is a holiday because my way of life was so different before working with the company. It may not be like that for everyone else but for me it's a holiday."

**Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble, Oct 30 — Civic Theatre, Newcastle; Oct 31 — The Hills Centre, Castle Hill; Nov 1 — State Theatre 9266 4800.**