



Spring 3-27-2001

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Recommended Citation

Weber, Kate, "East Meets West: Volgograd Chamber Orchestra to perform with IWU Civic Orchestra" (2001). *News and Events*. 1063.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1063>

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East Meets West: Volgograd Chamber Orchestra to perform with IWU Civic Orchestra

"It is truly a unique experience to be able to transcend the limitations of spoken language and share in the joy that comes from music. We have come together to create a work of art and we have found a common language to achieve our goal."

Erica Joncich, IWU class of 1997

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. --The Illinois Wesleyan Civic Orchestra (IWCO) will have a unique opportunity to perform in a joint concert with the Volgograd Chamber Orchestra, a part of the Volgograd Philharmonic Orchestra Friday, April 6 at 7:30 p.m. at the Scottish Rite Temple, 110 E. Mulberry St., Bloomington.

While at IWU, the members of the Volgograd Chamber Orchestra also will lead master classes for IWU students.

Founded in 1987, the Volgograd Philharmonic performs 25 concert programs a year. In addition, the orchestra performs with soloists of the International Youth Competition Symphony, held every three years since 1995 and the P. Serebriakov International Youth Competition of Pianists, held every two years since 1989. Both competitions were initiated by the Volgograd Philharmonic. The orchestra actively performs in Russia and abroad, performing in concerts and concert studies, international festivals, Christmas tours and musical projects with western orchestras.

IWU recently developed a connection with the Volgograd Philharmonic Orchestra through Erica Joncich, a 1997 IWU graduate who has traveled across oceans in order to fulfill her dreams. Joncich, an international studies and Russian language and literature major and music minor, played violin in the IWCO and Camerata ensembles as a student and is a member of the Kappa Delta sorority, one of four social sororities at IWU.

Two years after graduating from IWU, Joncich joined the Peace Corps with the hope that she would be given an assignment in Russia. Her wish came true and she will complete her 24 months of service in July 2001.

"I was always intrigued by the opportunities the Peace Corps had to offer," Joncich said. "It was always in the back of mind, even after I accepted my first job out of college [at an immigration law firm and Rotary International]. I thought the Peace Corps was a great chance to gain some experience related to my long-term goals. It was calling my name, and when I learned I was going to Russia, I figured that it was fate."

As part of her Peace Corps assignment, Joncich was assigned to teach English at the Volgograd Academy for Public Service to students in the fields of management, finance, law and government. She also is responsible for starting a weekly English club, for which she organizes games incorporating the English language and American holidays, culture and tradition.

Through Joncich's experience with the Peace Corps, she forged a relationship with the Volgograd Philharmonic Orchestra, where she plays the violin.

Joncich attributes the opportunity to perform with the Volgograd Philharmonic as another act of fate.

"It was by chance that I was introduced to the conductor of the orchestra. I met him through a contact with my boss from the Academy," Joncich said. "I told the conductor I was interested in playing with a musical group while living in Volgograd, never expecting he would invite me to play with them. How could I not agree?"

The conductor of the Volgograd Philharmonic Orchestra later approached Joncich about the possibility of a U.S. tour and asked for her help in researching grant opportunities for art endeavors.

"I approached [IWU President] Minor Myers, jr. and Steven Eggleston, [Professor of Music and conductor of the IWCO], to see if they were interested in hosting the orchestra," Joncich said. "They were so responsive and supportive of the tour idea. Things just seemed to take off from there, and I began securing other venues for concerts."

"There is a lot to be gained in this joint orchestra concert," Eggleston said. "It gives IWCO members the opportunity to play with professional musicians from another country. I hope the Volgograd Chamber Orchestra will lend a helping hand. We can learn from listening to their sounds, rhythm and technique, and hopefully it will heighten our awareness of playing."

The two ensembles will perform Igor Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite" and Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky's "Marche Slave" together.

"The two combined pieces are Russian-oriented, and I expect that the Volgograd Philharmonic will have a greater understanding and sense of the music that they will be able to share with us," Eggleston said.

The complete tour includes five concerts in Illinois: Chicago, Skokie, Bloomington, Urbana and Carbondale. All concerts will be performed with local civic and student orchestras. The orchestra members will stay with local host families and plan to take "non-musical" excursions to a Chicago Cubs baseball game and visit the state capital in Springfield.

Joncich's father, David, played an important role in making the tour possible for the Volgograd Philharmonic.

"He did most of the legwork in the states, communicating with all of the participating conductors to organize rehearsal and concert time, securing contacts with local businesses to gain support and working with our budget to stretch the funds as far as possible," Joncich said.

It will take \$50,000, partially funded by the Illinois Art Council, to send 20 musicians on a two-week, five city tour.

Besides funding, several other barriers have been hurdled in order to make the tour possible. All members of the symphony have had to submit applications for INS and visa approval.

"But beyond that, it takes the cooperation of all parties involved as well as the generosity of those people and businesses we have approached for subsidization," Joncich said.

Joncich also acknowledges Myers, Eggleston and Marina Balina, IWU professor of German and Russian and chair of the modern and classical languages and literature department, for providing the assistance to make this trip possible.

"All of the help I have received is making it possible for 20 Russian musicians to travel to the United States and play with their American counterparts," Joncich said.

"As a Peace Corps volunteer living and working in Volgograd, Russia, I am constantly struggling to communicate as I work to master the Russian language," Joncich said. "The place I find myself most comfortable and most understood is in the company of the musicians who make up the Volgograd Philharmonic Orchestra. It is truly a unique experience, to be able to transcend the limitations of spoken language and share in the joy that comes from music. We have come together to create a work of art and we have found a common language to achieve our goal."

"After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan, I always knew I would come back in some capacity," Joncich said. "But I never imagined it would be with an orchestra tour of Russian musicians, where I will sit on the same stage with them as I did with my friends and colleagues while a student at IWU."