

Seeking symphonic convergence

Firm aims to outfit an entire orchestra

BY DAVID TWIDDY | STAFF WRITER

In the near future, the world-renowned Moscow State Symphony Orchestra will take to the stage with something that hasn't been seen or heard in centuries — a section of stringed instruments crafted by the same manufacturer.

That manufacturer is Merriam-based KC Strings, which already has built six double basses for the orchestra and expects to complete the last four by early 2011. Assuming the orchestra can find the money, it next will ask KC Strings to outfit the 12-seat cello section.

For company co-founders Anton Krutz and Rick Williams, the purchase is a welcome sale and the first step in a decade-long dream of selling a complete 62-instrument orchestra.

"We've actually achieved something historic with the full section," Williams said. "That hasn't happened for a long time."

KC Strings has more than \$2 million in annual revenue and 30 employees. It repairs, restores and makes professional-quality violins, violas, cellos and basses for players ranging from beginning students to those in the New York Philharmonic



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KC Strings co-owner Anton Krutz planes a shaving of wood from one of 10 double basses the company is crafting for the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra.

and other professional ensembles.

For years, Krutz, whose father is retired Kansas City Symphony bassist Misha Krutz, has dreamed of hearing what a "symphonic set" would sound like and has worked hard to make it happen. Most orchestras use a melange of instruments from various makers, reflecting the idiosyncrasies of the musicians and whatever instruments are on hand.

Krutz and others have theorized that an entire orchestra using instruments made by the same people would achieve a richer, more resonant sound and reflect the acoustics generated in the 16th and 17th centuries, when royalty or the church outfitted

musicians from local instrument artisans.

"The uniqueness of the string instruments is that even though you have a wooden sound box and strings, the sound produced has the warmth of voice," Krutz said. "It's like the instrument is singing. ... There is a unity of sound in those voices. Instead of those sounds canceling each other out and dissonance (because of different makers), it amplifies. You have not only a louder sound but a stronger emotional effect."

Interlochen Center for the Arts, a Michigan-based academy for young musicians, already has said it would use the set for practice and concerts.

SYMPHONIC: KC Strings' dream lacks a paytin patron

But Krutz acknowledged that it has been hard finding a wealthy patron or corporate backer willing to pay the almost \$1 million price tag for a symphonic set, despite its potential historic value.

Most corporations, Krutz said, aren't willing to devote that much money to one cause and still are unsure what marketing or other goodwill benefit such a set of instruments would produce.

"For lack of a better word, there has to be a business concept behind it," he said.

That's why the MSSO is so significant, Krutz said, because he doesn't have to explain the musical benefits.

Pavel Kogan, the orchestra's musical director and conductor, said



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KC Strings co-owner Rick Williams plucks a four-string bass. Having an orchestra use string instruments all made by the same manufacturer could bring a "unity of sound."



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Logashov "Vlad" Vladimir marries the front of a violin to the rest of the instrument.

listeners will be able to tell the difference in music produced by the same brand of instruments. He is speaking with potential sponsors in Russia.

"When we play double basses made by one master, the sound ... becomes more homogenous, which is most valuable for an orchestral ensemble," Kogan said in an e-mail. "I am eager to continue this experiment since — in (the) case of double basses — all of our expectations have been satisfied, and I hope we will not stop here."

Kogan heard about KC Strings when he guest-conducted the Kansas City Symphony in 2005. There he met Krutz's father, and their shared Russian heritage — Misha Krutz immigrated with his family to the United States from the then-Soviet

Union more than 30 years ago — led to Kogan ordering a bass for the MSSO. After comparing it with instruments in Europe, the MSSO ordered a full set for its bass section.

Obviously, Anton Krutz said, it's thrilling to have a group like the MSSO order not only one instrument but possibly whole sections, a job KC Strings never has tackled before. However, he hopes the sonic results and MSSO's name recognition help make it easier to find a sponsor for the full set.

"The obvious benefit to KC Strings is we will achieve something that hasn't been done for several centuries," he said. "It's part of the American dream to do things that haven't been done before."