A Russian symphony about Singapore will debut here with home-grown stars performing the piece

Veteran Singaporean singer Rahimah Rahim will be singing in Russian for the first time on Monday, and she’s nervous about it.

“I can’t just belt it out, I have to harmonise with others. It’s a very challenging experience,” said Rahimah, 51, who was famous in the 1980s for her passionate delivery of ballads in Malay, English, Mandarin, Japanese, French and Spanish.

She added: “I also have to wear my glasses for the first time on stage, to read the notes.”

Rahimah and five Singaporean artists will be part of a choir at the premiere of a symphony titled Singapore: A Geopolitical Utopia composed by avant-garde Russian composer Vladimir Martynov.

The celebrity line-up includes pop-jazz crooner Robert Fernando, rapper Sheikh Haikel, Chinese singer-songwriter Jimmy Ye and stage actor Gerald Chew. They will sing with students from the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory and the Singapore Management University.

The choir will share the stage with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, the Moscow Vasilyev Choir, famed Russian violinist Tatiana Grindenko and her string ensemble Opus Posth.

The orchestra and string ensemble will perform the hour-long symphony with both choirs singing mostly in Russian.

“It’s like learning lines for a play, I’m kind of used to the idea,” said actor Chew, 44, who sang in the Singapore Youth Choir in the 1980s.

The symphony was commissioned by Singapore’s ambassador to the Russian Federation, Mr Michael Tay, in 2004, and premiered in Moscow a year later to warm reviews.

Its debut here will launch the second Russia-Singapore Business Forum, a one-day event next Tuesday at the Shangri-La hotel.

The trade and diplomatic event, hosted by International Enterprise Singapore, the Singapore Embassy in Moscow and Troika Dialog, Russia’s largest private investment company, will be attended by business executives and politicians from both countries.

On the cultural front, Russia also has much to offer. Said Mr Tay: “Russia is a great musical civilisation with a history of great composers. It’s a great opportunity for Singapore, a young national culture, to tap on their expertise.”

Mr Tay, 47, chose the singers in the choir himself and they started rehearsing in December last year, when Grindenko was in town with her octet for a show.

Getting them to sing in Russian was no easy task as they had to learn how to work their tongues around the tricky language. Phonic translations were printed on the scores.

Some Singaporeans recalled the gruelling practices with a grimace.

“When I attended the first rehearsal, I thought, ‘Alamak, so hard, I want to surrender,’” said Rahimah with a laugh.

“But it’s something different, I’ll try my best, and it’s going to be a learning experience.”

They also had to get used to the unfamiliar mix of Russian folk song style and avant-garde music in the symphony.

“It’s an unfamiliar language in an unfamiliar tune, and much stranger than I thought,” said Fernando, who has been performing in the United States in recent years.

“Even if you have 20 or 30 years of singing experience, you are an infant to it,” he said.

Martynov, 61, who is also the husband of violinist Grindenko, composed Singapore after a two-week visit to the Republic in early 2005 at the invitation of Mr Tay.

It is inspired by the different musical styles and cultures of the country.

“The hardest thing was to avoid using an Oriental musical style, which is the easiest way to reflect an Asian country,” he said.

So he split the composition into two parts. The first expresses the dynamism of Singapore and the choir will sing – in Russian – facts about Singapore, such as its geography and people.

The second part will express the spiritual inner world of Singapore, and singers will sing – also in Russian – part of Tao Te Ching, a classic Chinese book of philosophical maxims by Lao Tzu.

As to whether he finds it strange that a symphony about Singapore is sung mostly in Russian, he said: “Symphonies, like operas, are usually sung in the language of the composer. People can read the translation on the screen or in the booklet.”

Singapore: A Geopolitical Utopia, conducted by Linn Yau, will be performed at the Esplanade Concert Hall on Monday at 7.30pm. Tickets at $20 are available from Sistic (www.sistic.com.sg; tel: 6348-5555).

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