

THE BUFFALO NEWS

COMMENTARY

Newcomer's idea is music to our ears

By MARY KUNZ GOLDMAN

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Last week, when the temperature hit zero, most of us pursued our favorite winter sport - complaining up a storm.

One Amherst man didn't. Roman Mekinulov, who grew up in Russia, smiled at the cold. It reminded him, he said, of his earliest memories of his father pulling him on a sled through the streets of St. Petersburg. "I remember his boots crunching in the snow," he said. "Yesterday, I heard the same sound."

Newcomers, you've got to love them. They haven't learned to get mad at our weather. They missed our Super Bowls. Their eyes shine. They dream.

That could be why, sometimes, they have the best ideas. The Mekinulovs are in their early 30s. Roman is tall and handsome and jokes about his perpetual 5 o'clock shadow. His wife, Sebnem, is from Turkey. With her cascading dark hair and lean build, she looks like a model. (Give our chicken wings a little more time.)

A few years ago, the couple was living in Brazil. Then the Juilliard-trained Mekinulov was hired by the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, where he's now principal cellist. So he and Sebnem, a soprano, moved to Buffalo. Let's take a moment to savor the thought of someone trading Brazil's bananas and beaches for our snow and winter depression. It happens.

They bought a pretty 1950s house in Eggertsville. One nasty January morning, with a traveler's advisory in effect, found them drinking coffee, trying to keep their toddler son, Ben, from shining a flashlight in everyone's eyes. Floor-to-ceiling glass doors let in the bright whiteness that is Buffalo winter.

Ask the Mekinulovs if they had any preconceptions about our town, and they look puzzled. "We heard it was cold," Sebnem Mekinulov shrugged. But, she added, "snow is like the jewel in Buffalo."

"And Amherst is the safest town!" her husband laughed.

The point is, they've been happy here. And now, they have an idea.

Roman Mekinulov has arranged for a weeklong music camp for outstanding high school and college string players to take place in July at Niagara University. He has enlisted top-notch musicians from the BPO to teach. "JoAnn Falletta has been extremely supportive," he said.

Called "Bravo: An International Music Workshop," the camp will focus on chamber music: trios, duos, quartets. The kids will live in dorms. "I want them to be surrounded by music," Mekinulov said.

He's looking for corporations and individuals to be sponsors. (Look for details on www.bravoworkshop.com. "We want to keep it affordable," he said. "I don't want anyone not to be able to come because of money.")

Any visitors are a plus for Western New York. As Ed Healy of the Buffalo Convention & Visitors Bureau says, "It's not the ticket to everything, but it's part of the puzzle. It's out-of-town money being brought to the area."

Right now, the smart money is on cultural tourism - playing up treasures such as the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the BPO and the Roycroft Campus. "Finding the right audience is the trick," Healy believes.

With that in mind, think back to a few weeks ago, when the Metropolitan Opera held auditions here. Those singers didn't crave casinos. They hit Elmwood restaurants and Frank Lloyd Wright houses.

Not only will Mekinulov's camp lend us considerable cachet, but it will bring approximately 40 students here to

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bask in our summer and in the beauty of NU, Artpark and the surrounding countryside. "This is the kind of momentum Buffalo needs," says teacher Mary Handley, who has worked extensively with the Greater Buffalo Youth Orchestra and is helping run Bravo.

Leave it to a Russian to remind us that our future's not about roulette.

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