

The Kirov Academy, founded by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon to Close in May

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A winter recital performance of "The Nutcracker," in 2019, at the Kirov Academy of Ballet. The future of the Kirov Academy's building remains uncertain. Credit...Josh Jeong/Kirov Academy of Ballet

The school, founded by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon more than three decades ago, told parents that the closing was related to financial issues.

The Kirov Academy in Washington D.C., an elite ballet school founded by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, leader of the Unification Church, plans to close in May after serving as an important dance training ground for three decades.

Parents were informed by email in November that the school was winding down its operations.

"As much as we love the Kirov Academy, we cannot ignore the financial reality," the Kirov's executive director Pamela Gonzales de Cordova wrote in the email.

School officials declined to detail those financial realities of the academy, which offered academic and music programs in addition to its lauded Russian-style ballet training.

Thomas Walsh, the president of the academy and the Universal Peace Federation, founded by Rev. Moon, said in an email: "Last year, it became clear that we could no longer rely on the necessary funding we had received in the past. We made great effort to acquire adequate funds to remain open for one more year so that we could help assure a smooth, dignified transition for our students, as well as faculty and staff."

"Our decision was not taken lightly," Walsh said. "We love the school. We are very proud of all that has been accomplished."

The school said it had hired counselors to aid in the transition, and its artistic director, Joan Boada, who joined the academy in September, will take several students with him when he moves to Boston Ballet in June. The Rock School, San Francisco Ballet and the Washington Ballet are among the dance organizations that have invited Kirov students to audition.

The Kirov operated as a private school but some of its top leaders were affiliated with the Unification Church and it had long received financial support from a church-affiliated nonprofit, the Universal Cultural Foundation.

Tatiana Moon, Rev. Moon's oldest daughter, had led the academy as president from 2018 until last July.

Tuition for returning students for the dance program was \$56,000 a year, including room and board, the school said. (New students paid higher tuition.)

Kirov students have gone on to become leading dancers at top companies around the world. At American Ballet Theater, Kirov-trained dancers have included Melanie Hamrick, Sascha Radetsky and Hee Seo.



The future of the Kirov Academy's building remains uncertain. Credit...Erin Scott for The New York Times

"It's unprecedented how many extraordinary careers that school produced in such a relatively short period of time," said Evan McKie, a 1999 graduate who danced with Stuttgart Ballet for 13 years and has been a principal dancer at the National Ballet of Canada since 2014.

Brooklyn Mack, a 2004 graduate of the school who has danced leading roles with English National Ballet and American Ballet Theater, called the closing a sad situation. He recalled how in the academy's early years, guest artists from the Kirov Ballet in St. Petersburg, Russia, now known as the Mariinsky, performed alongside the students in recitals. The school and company no longer have a relationship, but when they did, Mack said, the school was a jewel: "There was no other place like it in the country."

Rev. Moon opened the Kirov in 1990, 36 years after he founded the Unification Church. The religious movement is best known for its mass weddings, business ventures, conservative politics and longtime devotion to Rev. Moon, a self-proclaimed messiah who died in 2012.

His interest in ballet was fueled by his friendship with Hoon Sook Pak, a ballerina and the daughter of a close aide, Bo Hi Pak, who led The Washington Times as its president. In 1984, Hoon Sook Pak was on tour with the Washington Ballet and preparing for the lead role in "Giselle," when Rev. Moon's 17-year-old son ran his car off the road. Having died single, he was not eligible to enter heaven under the church's teachings, so Hoon Sook Pak agreed to marry the dead teen's spirit in a lavish ceremony in which she carried his portrait.

Later that year, Rev. Moon created the Universal Ballet company, in which Hoon Sook, who took the name Julia Moon, became a principal dancer. Six years later, a palatial-looking former monastery near Catholic University reopened as the Kirov Academy.

The Kirov Ballet's artistic director Oleg Vinogradov agreed to serve as the school's first artistic director, although his wife, Yelena Vinogradova, handled day-to-day artistic operations, which aimed to replicate those at the famed [Vaganova Academy](#) in St. Petersburg. The Unification Church and its related nonprofits heavily subsidized the school and offered scholarships; teachers were provided with housing in a gated community nearby, allowing the academy to attract top faculty.

After Vinogradova died in 2008, church subsidies dwindled. In Seoul, the Moon and Pak families opened

the Universal Ballet School, lessening the need to send dancers to Washington.

"Over the years, they stopped putting money into the Kirov and stopped caring about it," said Martin Fredmann, who served as artistic director from 2011 to 2013.

The closure comes less than a year after Sophia Kim, a former bookkeeper at the Kirov, was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in federal prison for bank fraud after being charged with embezzling more than \$1.5 million from academy coffers. In a recent court filing, however, Marc G. Hall, a new attorney for Kim argues that the amount she stole was overstated by as much as \$600,000.

Kim had previously served prison time for tax fraud after embezzling money from another Unification Church-related nonprofit. Julia Moon and her father both asked the judge for leniency at Kim's first sentencing and, for reasons that remain unclear, [she was hired back at the Kirov](#) after being released from prison in 2017.

The school's one-acre site is zoned to allow residential apartments, although local and federal nonprofit laws could complicate selling the building to developers

The building's future remains unclear. A spokeswoman for the Washington Ballet said the Kirov approached the company last fall to discuss some sort of acquisition or merger, but talks did not move forward. Karna Lozoya, a vice president at Catholic University, said the university looked at the building recently, but "determined there is no compelling need to acquire the property."

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