

MESSAGE FROM RICHARD SHE, PRESIDENT

For our Orchestra members and each of our wonderful supporters, I know times are tough. Although I would have liked to share some good news, it is with a heavy heart that I inform you all that Bruce Barker, our long-standing contrabass musician and my predecessor as President, has passed on. A dear friend to many and a pillar of the Orchestra, both musically and personally, he will be missed.

Bruce Barker died peacefully at the age of 81 with his daughters by his side. An energetic, intelligent and talented musician with a great sense of adventure, Bruce knew how to live life well. He was a member of the Orchestra for 36 years which, on its own, speaks to the legacy he leaves behind.

In this Spring edition we include articles featuring the Orchestra's next generation of musicians, George and Elena Sheslow, and our newest member, oboist Neil Simpson. And of course we pay tribute to Bruce, whose spirit and contribution we will continue to celebrate, a giant of the Orchestra.

VALE, BRUCE BARKER



Bruce Barker who died on the 4th of August, was very much a father-figure to the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra. For 36 years he was seen prominently in the back row with his huge contrabass balalaika.

But it was also his wise counsel, rock-like stability and leadership that made him so valuable to the orchestra. He continuously held the positions of secretary, treasurer or president of the orchestra.

Born in Australia into a musical family in 1940 Bruce took up playing the guitar at the age of 14. Later he moved to electric bass, playing in rock, folk and jazz groups around Sydney. So it is hardly surprising he taught himself to play the contrabass. And having sung in and conducted various choirs, he took to Russian music very quickly.

In a way it is amazing he didn't retire earlier. Of recent years, it was clear to many of us that his strength was failing. But that would have been to underestimate his profound sense of determination and self-discipline.

We shall miss that tall figure in the back row, with his dominant contra-bass from which he delivered those steady, booming notes, so fundamental to our rhythm and timing. We shall miss the calmness he brought to meetings, chairing them in an authoritative, but never authoritarian style. He always gave praise when needed, while a raised eyebrow could tactfully tell us that maybe our bum notes had been noticed.

His gentlemanly smile never failed to deliver courtesy and respect. We shall miss that dry sense of humour so skilfully used to defuse tensions or bring laughter when needed.

But what we'll miss most is that the Covid-19 lockdown deprived us of the chance to drive out to Bargo and wish him goodbye.

Vale Bruce! We're proud to have known you. We're not sure where you're going, but if you see any angels along the way, Victor asked if you could tell them to tune their bloody harps!

Bruce Barker - **Rest in Peace.**

Patrick O'Neill (bass domra)



Bruce asked for a recording of his favourite tune "On the Hills of Manchuria" to be played at his funeral. Written as a tribute to the bravery of Russian soldiers in battle, it is also a fitting tribute to this outstanding and much respected member of our Orchestra.

Bruce's funeral was held on 13 August at Bowral. When Covid restrictions lift, a separate memorial will be held for family and friends.

Bruce grew up in the northern suburbs of Sydney playing piano and guitar. His mother's cousin Miriam Hyde OBE was a celebrated composer, pianist and poet, and Bruce's mother, too, played the piano. His late brother, Roger, played guitar, piano and cello and it was Roger who introduced Bruce to the Orchestra some 36 years ago. Bruce and Victor Serghie, the Orchestra's artistic director, have been friends in life and music ever since.



SBO 36 yrs ago with Roger & Bruce in back row



Young Bruce

There was always a piano in Bruce's home wherever he lived, and there was always music playing – mostly classical but with occasional Pink Floyd or Elton John. Bruce himself played Chopin and Bach preludes on the piano. He was musical mentor to his daughter Belinda from a young age, and Belinda is now an accomplished pianist. Of all his favourite pieces, Bruce most loved hearing Alfred

Rendel playing Schubert's Four Impromptus, Opus 90, which held particular significance because the third work was one that his mother would play. Bruce said that Alfred Rendel playing Schubert was all that one needed to balance and nourish the soul.



Bruce with his daughters

Bruce served in the army after his schooling then left for the outback in his twenties, where he worked as a drover and boundary rider on the red earth he so loved. He later qualified as an electrician, worked as a draughtsman in telecommunications. He married Norma in 1967, mother to his beloved daughters Alex and Belinda, and built a house in Berowra. Bruce bought a property, *Doradilla*, upstream from Kangaroo Valley, a place he loved, where he kept horses and sheep. With the girls,

Bruce would often camp under a tapestry of stars. He was also a capable sailor and bought a very fast 29 foot, 12 tonne yacht, *Checkmate*, which he would sail around Pittwater, and sometimes to Port Stephens. When he sailed at night, he would say that to see the coastline from a distance, beneath the stars, was magic.

Bruce was hard-working and intelligent, serving for many years as a highly regarded logistics manager. At the same time, he surrounded himself with art and music, family and friends, his life infused with adventure and a freedom of spirit. He travelled throughout the UK, US and Europe.

In 2000 he met Christina whom he married in 2007, and Bruce restored the beautiful but dilapidated house in Bowral that became the Bundaroo Centre for Natural Health, a project which provided the platform for Christina to create the Metavision Institute in Bowral. Bruce became a qualified counsellor himself, through the Institute.



A free spirit, Bruce was a pragmatic, philosophical and down-to-earth person with a modest smile, dry, ready humour and many varied talents – including a green thumb. He tended magnificent roses, camellias, tree ferns and fruit trees at his final home in Bargo. Incredibly, given what a large and varied group the Orchestra represents, he organised and managed complex, smoothly-run tours for the Orchestra to China, Russia and New Zealand.



Bruce was a rare individual in our midst and a true creative who understood how to live life to the full.

NEIL SIMPSON BRINGS THE SOUND OF THE OBOE TO THE SBO

"Music has always been in my life," said Neil Simpson, the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra's new oboe player. "I suppose I'm a natural musician. As a child I started with the piano and guitar. That was when I realised that stringed instruments were not for me. So I switched to woodwind and the oboe."



Neil met prima domra player Matt Morgan of the SBO at various gigs while playing in assorted folk groups, and it wasn't long before they were talking about him giving the SBO a go. While he has no Russian ancestry, he looks the part with his shock of red hair, particularly when dressed in the Orchestra's red costume.

"I have never been to Russia," said Neil, "but I don't think that matters. There are no national barriers in music." So where did it all begin?

"After studying the piano I tried playing the piano-accordion," he said, "so I suppose there was a reed connection there. That was when I took up the oboe and saxophone." Neil is from Newcastle and when studying music at the University of Newcastle, he found a wide range of folk music opening up to him.

"I played in Gypsy folk bands and other groups, with instruments from all over the world. We played German alpine music and Jewish Klezmer," he said. "I found Balkan folk music really interesting: Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian and so on. I loved the rhythms, tempo and sounds they created, and its dynamism."

"What amazed me when trying Slovenian folk music was that

it was rather like being in a Mariachi band from Mexico! I later found out that during the Cold War when the Balkans were so isolated, if they couldn't travel they made up for it by playing Mexican music. But of course, there was a lot of Slovenian in it," he said.

Neil has also played with Early Music ensembles, using the Baroque forerunners of modern orchestral instruments. Neil has played early versions of the oboe alongside several musicians of the Sydney Brandenburg Orchestra.

"These early forerunners may have seemed like oboes – sort of," he said, "but they looked more like thick four-poster bed posts, with finger holes only – very hard to play." The name 'oboe' is a corruption of the French hautbois (literally 'high wood'), and is derived from the many reed instruments from Central European and Asian folk music – traditions which, of course, include Russia.

"Russian music and the oboe are a natural fit," said Neil. "Think of that haunting opening theme to Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. The oboe produces a lovely sharp, reedy tone and complements the more rounded sounds of Michael Rynn, on his clarinet."

Neil has played in varied orchestras ranging from the orchestra for the musical *Wicked* to a production of the St John Passion with a Sydney Philharmonia Choir. His playing has taken him to the Adelaide Festival's Fringe and Cabaret festivals.

"Given my eclectic tastes, I suppose the SBO is a natural progression for me," he said. From the very first day that Neil joined weekly practice, SBO members have loved hearing this new, evocative sound mingling with the strains of our other instruments, the domra, balalaika, bayan, flutes and clarinet, and more. And his presence in the SBO is certainly keeping Musical Director Victor Serghie busy, happily writing Neil's oboe into all of the scores.



CAN YOU HELP?

The SBO is always seeking to perform at new venues. Maybe you know a venue where we can introduce our beautiful Russian folk music to a new audience. We also need additional musicians, so if you come up with any ideas please contact our Musical Director,

Victor Serghie on 0409 058 895 or our President, **Richard She on 0402 179 098.**



GEORGE AND ELENA SHESLOW

Time can drag under lockdown. But for musical brother-and-sister duo George and Elena Sheslow, there are not enough hours in the day.

SBO Bayanist George is studying full-time at university. George is in his fourth year, studying Engineering (Hons) – Mechatronics and Bachelor of Science – Nanotechnology. His teenaged sister, Elena, plays second flute in the Orchestra and is in Year 8, hard at work with online schooling. George also works at Bunnings, tutors in two subjects at UTS and is trying to build an electric race car for a university project.



"My bayan is a *Jupiter*, from Moscow," George explains. "It has a unique sound and a large range. The basses are my favourite. Compared with a bayan, the accordion doesn't offer the same sound quality; the reed blocks are manufactured differently."

Elena and George's grandparents were born in Harbin, China, moving to Australia when they were young, and both parents are of Russian descent. Elena and George speak Russian.

"I like playing in the Orchestra," Elena says, "because when I was a young child I would listen to Russian folk music all the time."

"I play in the band at school, but the Orchestra has been a step up. I have learnt a lot playing with Geoff," she explains, referring to first flautist, Geoff Brain. "I get a lot out of going to SBO practices every week and performing, and especially from listening to other instruments in the Orchestra."

"I'm proud of Lena joining," George adds. "I have a practice buddy now, and it's fun to be with my sister in rehearsals and concerts. Since joining, she has improved her confidence and skills and I hope to see her continue this into the future." George would love to see a return to touring, too. The highlight for him, so far, has been the Orchestra's 2016 tour to Russia, his first time overseas.

"Travelling to the different cities and performing was amazing. I managed to meet with some distant relatives as well." And Elena smiles, dreaming perhaps of future tours and travel. One thing is for sure – these two bright sparks have exciting futures ahead.



The siblings' family background combines Russian heritage and music so it's no surprise they joined the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra. Elena chose the flute as her instrument because it was small! And anyone who knows how heavy George's bayan is to lug around can understand the wisdom of her choice. George plays first bayan in the Orchestra. One fateful day, he found his Grandpa's small three-row bayan and fell in love with the sound. He'd previously played clarinet, trumpet and guitar – but a few weeks after discovering his *dedushka's* three-row bayan, George started taking lessons and has never looked back.

