

Novosti

Balalaika
NEWS

December
2020

Issue No 34/2020

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND BEST NEW YEAR WISHES!

Strong lungs for air to flow through a flute; a healthy voicebox to sing sweet Russian tunes, a safe, airy space where our music can meld into one rich sound as we practice together again each Wednesday.... As Christmas draws near, we give thanks for the foundations of our music: your support; our wonderful rehearsal venue; our leadership team; and the joy we all feel in music together.

Wishing you the best for a bright and healthy 2021 and a happy Christmas spent with those you love, from all of us in the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra.



A TANGLED TALE OF RUSSIAN FOLK MUSIC



In September's Novosti we read how by order of the Russian Orthodox Church and Tsar Alexis I (the Quiet), Russia's traditional instruments – the forerunners of our balalaikas and domras – were confiscated and broken up. Just owning an instrument in 17th century Russia could get you flogged! And when Peter the Great (right) showed western music to medieval Russia, it was played on violins, cellos and brass. So domras, balalaikas and folk songs were driven back to the hinterland, and there, kept alive: unwritten, unrecorded and carefully taught.



their compositions. Once more, Russians were listening to their own folk music and soon the world was listening too. But all this music was composed for western instruments. It was going to be hard to achieve an authentic Russian 'folk' sound with violins and brass.

That was until a young nobleman, Vasily Andreyev (right), heard



a local peasant (left) playing a balalaika on his mother's country estate. *'I was struck by the rhythm and the original way of playing the balalaika,' he wrote. 'And I could not work out how such a poor looking, imperfect instrument, with only three strings, could give so many sounds.'*



Andreyev was determined to modernise these folk instruments and to bring them back into Russia's mainstream. The original balalaikas and domras came in many forms. Some were round. Some triangular. Some had long necks, others short. The stringing and tuning also varied.

If he was going to reintroduce Russia to its traditional instruments



and find craftsmen to construct them, he had to standardise them. The result was the sort of instruments played by balalaika orchestras today. The balalaika evolved into a family of instruments: *piccolo, prima, secunda, tenor, bass and contra-bass*, all in the triangular shape of Antip's instrument.



But a pan-Slavic movement eventually swept through Russia. The intellectuals of the mid 19th century returned to their roots. A group of rebel composers – all amateurs – united to write Russian music with Russian themes in Russian modes. They were called

Могучая кучка (Moguchaya Kuchka), the 'Mighty handful' or 'The Five'. Balakirev, Cui, Mussorgsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov (above) toured Russia. They listened to the folk musicians and singers and, inspired by what they heard, incorporated it into

For more details please refer to our website
www.balalaika.com.au



Next to be standardised were the domras. Again Andreyev created a family of instruments, but this time they were round. These are mostly the instruments you see played by the SBO. They, too, like balalaikas, were inspired by a Kazakh

instrument of Russia's steppes. And Andreyev's timing was perfect.



In Europe and the US, there was a craze for reviving folk instruments like mandolins and guitars and forming orchestras – even banjo orchestras (left). It was into this milieu that Andreyev's new orchestra was pitched. Tsar Nicholas II fell in love with it and funded the 'Imperial Russian

Orchestra'. He also saw in the balalaika an opportunity to sell Russia to the world. And the world loved it.

By 1909 there was a craze for balalaikas in London. By 1914 there were almost as many balalaika orchestras in Britain as there were in Russia. Even the band of the Coldstream Guards had a balalaika orchestra. Unfortunately the craze would die off after the First World War, but not in Russia.

Under the new Soviet regime, folk music prospered – an ideological fit in a post-tsarist world. Ensembles like the Osipov Orchestra were funded. Other instruments were added, like bayans (Russian accordions), Vladimir shepherd's horns, zhaleikas and more. And for vocals, there was always the Red Army Choir.

But something else was happening. Russian classical music, which had been so greatly influenced by the Могучая кучка or the Mighty handful, had changed. Russia's twentieth century composers, like Stravinsky and Prokofiev, immersed themselves in international, modernist styles. The connection with traditional Russian folk music was obscured.

And neither did it sit well with socialist realism, while folk music sat very well with the Stalinist cultural turn. To the masses, the sounds of balalaikas and domras evoked Russian folk traditions as western instruments could not. And soon the USSR would take its version of Russia's folk music to the world.

Folk music by definition is not written down. But the Mighty handful had given the world Russian folk inspiration – in writing. And folk music is – traditional, often ancient! So can Andreyev's late 19th century domra and balalaika recreations be classed as authentic folk instruments? Maybe not! But does it matter? Both



Tsar and Soviet state helped preserve this complex legacy, which the SBO is proud to play and celebrate. Whether pure 'folk' or not, we play it nonetheless, mindful of its origins, but more importantly, because we love it!



BABIES..... AND BAYANS

An interview with Milica Vijatovic

By day Milica Vijatovic is an electronic medical records professional with the Sydney Children's Hospitals Network. By night she is SBO's talented bayanist 'Mitzi'.

Novosti: How did you first come across the Orchestra?

Milica: I joined the Orchestra when I was 16, almost twenty years ago! I was preparing for

my AMEB 8th grade, and my accordion teacher Tania Lukic-Marx encouraged me to play with a big group to polish my skills.

Six years later, I decided to go on a holiday, after which I got married and pregnant with my first baby. I kept trying to come back to the Orchestra but I had two more children – those bayans are heavy enough as they are let alone with a baby in your belly! I was juggling family and work, but I finally came back in May 2018. After a full day of work having to come back and 'feed' my children before I come to rehearsal can get quite tiring. But once I walk through those doors, I feel energised.

Novosti: You grew up in Serbia. Is that where your musical journey began?

Milica: That's right. I started playing the xylophone in year 1. My dad realised that I could memorise music, so he asked my cousin, who played button accordion, to teach me a few tunes. Within a couple of months I performed in front of my school at a concert, which is what kicked off my career. My father enrolled me at a Music School in my home town in Serbia, Smederevo, and I chose the button accordion. It was a government school and I went there twice a week on top of primary school. There was a shortage of button accordions at the Music School (only piano accordions were popular back then), so my mum had to travel with me from our village to the city every week, carrying the instrument. I completed Grade 4, and my accordion teacher gave me details for his former classmate, Tania Lukic in Sydney, when he found out we were moving to Australia.



Lina, Nika and Mitzi on tour

Novosti: What have been your SBO highlights so far?

Milica: I have fond memories of our Russia/China trip in 2005 when we performed in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Harbin. It was definitely a great experience and one that I will cherish forever. There were a lot of funny moments and I enjoyed the hospitality and culture of Russian people – including our welcoming vodka shots everywhere we went!

Ever since joining the Orchestra I have always liked the atmosphere and the way Victor has led the group for so many years. I considered it my second family back when I joined, and once I had my own family I still missed it. We have good relationship with Victor and we have a laugh, which is what keeps this group together, I think. With full-time work and family, being in the Orchestra is a sanity break!

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

