

## Twenty Years Later at VDNKh

*An international exhibition was recently held at the All-Russia Exhibition Centre (formerly VDNKh) in Moscow. A special guest was the Sydney orchestra of Russian national instruments “Balalaika”.*

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The Cultural Festival of national traditions of the countries of CIS ran for six days and featured appearances by folk groups of CIS nations - about 700 dancers and musicians in all. It concluded with a celebratory gala concert. A special guest of the Festival was the Sydney orchestra of Russian national instruments “Balalaika”, which came to Moscow at the invitation of the management of the All-Russia Exhibition Centre.

### **Ovation by Muscovites**

Moscow public received the Australian ensemble very warmly. And with good reason! One could only marvel how foreign artists, only four of whom speak any Russian, could so sensitively render the sound of Russian folk instruments. “Balalaika” has 28 members, among them several of our compatriots, including descendants of émigrés, who no longer speak Russian themselves, but have not lost interest in the country of their forefathers. The ensemble was formed in the 1960s by Vladimir Savitsky. Today, the musicians are led by Victor Serghie.

The ensemble had its first tour in 2005, when it went to the Far East – Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Habarovsk and the Chinese city of Harbin. The artists had been very worried at that time: how would they be received in Russia? Serghie joked that they had to be prepared for rotten tomatoes. However, they were rewarded with flowers and enthusiastic applause. Two years later, when the ensemble returned to the Far East, they were met with full venues, and the public was waiting excitedly for these performers of Russian music from Australia. “The hall in Habarovsk was filled to capacity, a thousand people”, - says Victor Serghie. “Already after the second number everyone stood applauding, thanking us. It was wonderful”...

Incidentally, “Balalaika” owes a lot of its success to the personality of its artistic director. A jokester and an incredibly charming person, he has the knack of creating, in a few minutes, such a warm and relaxed atmosphere that you begin to feel that you are among good friends, whom you have known for a long time. The tradition of communicating with the audience, questions and answers, light teasing of the musicians by one another, introducing individual members of the ensemble to the public, and the performance by each of them of his or her own number – all contribute to this perception of “Balalaika” orchestra,

Members of the ensemble had long dreamed of visiting the capital of the country of their roots. And this year their dream came true. Thanks to the support of various Russian organisations – particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the All-Russia Exhibition Centre – a tour to Moscow and St Petersburg was organised. Although “tour” may be too grand a word, as the musicians receive no fee and pay for their own fares. Russia helped out with accommodation, transport and concert venues. In all, the ensemble gave eight concerts in the two cities.

Sofia Markovtseva-Cece – a soloist with the ensemble, who has a wonderful voice and is an admirer of the work of Ludmila Zykina – was glad of a chance to visit the Novodevichy Cemetery to pay her respects to the memory of her beloved singer, whom she had dreamed of meeting while she was alive, but it was not to be... When we spoke with Sofia, we could hear a slight accent in her voice, but – here is an amazing thing – when she sang, the accent disappeared without a trace.

Victor Serghie and his chargés insist that they are only amateurs, but you would never say that to listen to them. Moreover, Victor Serghie himself and, for example, Ludmila Voronova – a virtuoso performer and arranger – are real professionals. Lyusya, as her colleagues call her, arrived in Australia from Belarus and brought with her a unique instrument – a cimbalom, which merged beautifully into the sound of the ensemble.

To find Russian national instruments in Australia is a problem. “Sometimes we manage to find something through contacts in Russia”, says Serghie. “Sometimes someone brings or sends something from Moscow”.

For a long time there was only one balalaika in the orchestra. Now there are several, as well as domras, bayans, a clarinet and, of course, a cimbalom, which, organically render the sound of Russian folk melodies, thanks to the skill of the performers and the conductor. The ensemble has a rich repertoire: works by Russian composers, as well as compositions by some members of the group. “There’s enough for more than one concert!”, boast the musicians.

An important part of the performances are the sumptuous costumes, which are made by the performers themselves. Their author – Victor Serghie’s wife Mila – has looked through more than one magazine to create the designs. As Lyusya Voronova has admitted, in the seven years that she has been with the group, the artists have worn out five or six sets of costumes. One can imagine from this how full “Balalaika”’s creative life is.

Members of the orchestra meet regularly – once a week in the evenings, after work. Some of them have to travel more than two hours to get to these meetings, and then the same time to get home. But no-one is worried about that: “Balalaika”’s rehearsals are sacred.

“What is touching is the loyalty of the people, who, while they are not Russian themselves, have picked up our folk instruments and have given years to learning to play them so beautifully”, says Lyusya Voronova. “They have dedicated a significant part of their lives to the ensemble. Some of them have been with the orchestra for about 30 years. And I’m also going to play with “Balalaika” as long as I can”.