

## **THE BEST AMATEUR ORCHESTRA IN THE WORLD**

**The “Balalaika” folk instrument orchestra had an unusual performance tour this year. The well-known Sydney group, loved by many, set off for Moscow and St Petersburg.**

The orchestra is made up of Australian musicians of almost fifteen different nationalities. All of them love Russian music. Only four of them speak any Russian, but this does not prevent them from knowing how to reveal and beautifully convey the breadth and depth of the Russian soul in musical compositions.

We asked the conductor and musical director of the orchestra of many years’ standing, **Victor Serghie**, to tell us about the orchestra’s tour of the Russian capital and of the “City on the Neva”.

–This was the orchestra’s first visit to Moscow, as it was also for me personally. In 2005 and 2007 our group had already appeared in Harbin and in the Russian Far East. But we had a very special feeling about this tour of two of Russia’s greatest cities. After all, these cultural centres have many renowned folk ensembles. We were concerned how the listeners there would accept our amateur orchestra’s performances. At the same time, I was personally a little afraid – afraid of being disappointed, I suppose. You see, for us, born outside Russia, there is a certain ideal image of the country. And what we were going to see was everyday reality.

But the time came, and 26 people set off on tour. For us to be invited to Moscow was a great honour. The whole trip was to take two weeks, including travel time. The orchestra had, in addition to our experienced musicians, tested over many years of performances, many young kids, who have been playing with us for only a year or a year-and-a-half. For many, it was their first overseas trip of any kind. Our singer, Sonia Markovtseva-Cece had to travel with a 10-month old child. This time, the scale of the tour was far greater than before. When we went to Russia last time, there were only 13 of us.

**–Long-distance trips are not simple for musicians. How did you transport the instruments, some of them were very large, weren’t they?**

–Most of the instruments were checked in as luggage. But we were concerned about the bayans, and had to carry them on board, which led to some frictions with the cabin staff. But we had had a bad experience with luggage on the previous trip – our double bass arrived in Khabarovsk damaged. This time everything went more smoothly, though not without some adventures. After we boarded the plane in Korea, we had to wait on the ground for four hours until the flight was cleared. That’s why we were glad to arrive in Moscow eventually.

**–What were your impressions of the trip?**

–We were accommodated at first in a fashionable hotel “Country Club”, not far from Moscow. This was a gift to us from our ambassador V.N.Morozov. The hotel was in a beautiful, scenic spot. There was a wonderful forest all around – birch trees, little fairy-tale wooden huts. And there was an elite golf club nearby.

We gave one concert there for the guests of the club. Listeners came up to us to chat after the performance and said how wonderful it was to hear Russian folk music. This has become a rarity, even for Moscow. I wanted to buy some disks there of modern performances of folk orchestras, but could not find any.

Then we gave some performances at the All-Russia Exhibition Centre (V.V.Ts., formerly V.D.N.Kh.). We played for an hour and a half on an outdoor stage, as part of the 20-year celebrations of the V.V.Ts. It had originally been planned that we would appear for an hour, but the public would not let us go. When we started playing, people elsewhere at the Exhibition Centre heard us and wandered over and stayed until the end. By the time we finished playing, all the seats were full, and some people listened standing up.

There were many questions – where were we from, whom did we represent, and why did we play Russian music. We were filmed for TV. Altogether we gave 6 concerts in Moscow.

I should say that we were given a very good reception and were taken on excursions every day. We went to different museums and cathedrals. On the All-Russian Day of Family, Love and Faithfulness, we gave a performance in the Tsaritsino Park, where Catherine II's palace complex had been restored. There, about a thousand people gathered around the stage.

We also performed for war veterans, as well in a children's summer camp “Orlyonok” (“Little Eagle”). All the performances were very successful. We were pleasantly surprised by how our performances were received by young kids. You could tell that many of them had never seen folk instruments before, and they were looking at balalaikas and domras with interest.

In St. Petersburg we performed at the Geological Institute (VSEGEI), as well as at the Smolny Cathedral and in Pavlovsk. All the musicians gave of their best. Our singer Sonia Markovtseva-Cece sang beautifully, her voice went straight to the heart of the listeners.

Our young musicians loved Moscow, life there is in full swing, there are beautiful buildings and shops everywhere. After the concerts and excursions, they managed to slink away to dance in nightclubs. They said the young people there were just the same as here, they all love dancing and having a good time, except that they speak a different language. We liked the river cruises very much. The only thing we didn't like were the terrible traffic jams. Sometimes we got stuck for two hours while being taken on excursions by coach, it would have been much faster to use the Metro.

St Petersburg has matchless architecture, wide, straight streets, and the tempo of life there is slower than in Moscow. We liked the “white nights” – it was still light at 11 pm. We were taken around the city and to Peterhof Palace. All the kids were left with very positive impressions of the trip.

**–It couldn't have been simple to take such a large group overseas. Who helped organise the trip?**

–The biggest share of the work was done by Igor and Alla Savitsky, their organisational help was invaluable. In Moscow we were helped by our ambassador, Mr V.N.Morozov. The manager of V.V.Ts., Mr I.Malakhov, played a big role in ensuring our comfort and welfare in Moscow, and the manager of VSEGEI, Mr O.

Petrov – in St Petersburg. We are very grateful to them for it. I would also like to thank all the guides that went with us on excursions – without their stories we would have never learned so much of interest.

I should also mention that members of the orchestra have the status of amateurs and are not paid for their appearances. They even had to contribute a part of the travel costs. This is why it is particularly important that accommodation and food expenses were met by the receiving side.

**–Will this trip strengthen your orchestra?**

–When we came back to Australia, one of our musicians said to me: “This was the best time of my life. I will never part with ‘Balalaika”.

**–I hope that she is not the only one who thinks like that. I have also encountered many positive responses about your concerts in Russian newspapers and on Russian websites.**

Yes, the responses were positive, indeed. And the newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda” wrote that some critics have called the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra the best amateur orchestra in the world.

**We in Australia consider that you are only amateurs by your status, but by your standard of performance and talent you are true professionals.**

Interview by Vladimir Kuzmin, Sydney  
Translated from the Russian by C Zissermann