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## 'SACRED SPACES' IN SINGLETON – SUNDAY, 13 OCTOBER 2019

It was Sunday 13th of October and once more the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra (SBO) gave a concert at the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Singleton as part of their 'Sacred Spaces' musical programme. "It was our third concert here, and one of our best," said musical director Victor Serghie.



*Sisters of Mercy Convent in Singleton*

"Unfortunately our cimbalom soloist Lucy Voronov was unwell, but the orchestra stepped up to the mark and played really well, as did our other soloists," he said.

The orchestra started off with 'Legend of Lake Baikal', a symphonic piece by the famous Soviet composer Nicolai Budashkin (see separate article). Dmitry Kuevda sang the well-known Russian romances: 'Only Once', 'White Cranes and 'Oh, the Roads'; his rich baritone voice reverberating magnificently off the marble interior, definitely taking full advantage of the chapel's sacred acoustics.

Other soloists were Tanya Jephtha and Oliver Rathje, on their prima domras and Richard She on his accordion. "All played magnificently," said Victor.

But there was one relatively newcomer to the SBO, the instrument from which the orchestra takes its name: the balalaika. We do have two XXL balalaikas in the orchestra, huge contra-bass instruments. But prima balalaika players are between rare to non-existent in Sydney.

However Patrick O'Neill and Matt Morgan do play them. So they put their domras aside and took up their normal-sized prima balalaikas, to kick off the second half of the concert with a rendition of 'Venture Outside'.

The balalaika, like the domra, is derived from an ancient Kazakh instrument. It has a steel string tuned to A, and two nylon strings both tuned to E maintaining the original Kazakh tuning.

The SBO is happy to hear from any prima balalaika players who would like to join us. We are also interested to hear from any balalaika 'wanabees' who might like to learn how to play this most iconic of Russian instruments. "It is not a hard instrument to learn," said Patrick O'Neill. "Particularly for guitarists. You just have to get used to holding it in a different way," he said.



*Balalaika Duo: Patrick O'Neill and Matt Morgan*



*The Chapel in the Sisters of Mercy Convent, Singleton*

For more details please refer to our website  
[www.balalaika.com.au](http://www.balalaika.com.au)



School of Arts and Poster

Not far from Sydney in the Southern Highlands, near Fitzroy Falls, is the enchanting little village of Burrawang. On the 19th of October the SBO gave its first concert there in the School of Arts. We often find that some of the orchestra's most appreciative audiences are in the countryside, and so it was in Burrawang.

The School of Arts is not a large building and the stage was even smaller. Fortunately not the whole orchestra was able to attend otherwise there would not have been room for them on the stage.

"Space is often a problem," said musical director Victor Serghie. "We have played in smaller places than Burrawang, but we managed to fit in – somehow!"



Improvised Stage



The organisers had done a great job of publicising the event, with many posters around the town, and graciously prepared a fantastic lunch and superb supper for the performers after the concert.

Being a Southern Highlands resident, orchestra mezzo-soprano, Sophia Markovtzev, found herself singing on home territory. She started off with an old favourite, 'The Slender Rowan Tree,' followed by 'Kadri,' 'Field Grasses,' 'From Russia with Love' and others.

Lucy Voronov, as always, delighted the audience with her virtuoso cimbalom playing, but even during the interval she attracted a crowd of onlookers as she tried to tune her instrument. With over 70 strings, it takes quite a time! Indeed, many members of the audience had never heard the orchestra before, or seen what to them, must have been strange instruments. "I had no idea some of these instruments existed," said Eva, who had come all the way from Canberra.

"As a young girl, I was brought up in Burrawang where my father was the local School Teacher. It was so great to see the School of Arts again. Even better knowing it is still being put to good use. A fantastic sound and a fantastic afternoon. Thank you SBO," she said.



## N. BUDASHKIN THE GREAT ORCHESTRATOR



*N. Budashkin*

Nicolai Pavlovich Budashkin  
1910-1988 was a famous Soviet  
composer who wrote some of the  
most enduring arrangements of  
Russian folk music for balalaika and  
domra orchestras, and many of his  
arrangements are played by the  
Sydney Balalaika Orchestra.

During WW2, his music was used to inspire patriotic feeling. After the war he became one of the musical directors for the state Ossipov Balalaika Orchestra. He also wrote music for plays and film scores.

The SBO is fortunate indeed to play some of his arrangements, noted for their magnificent orchestration like: 'Russian Fantasy,' 'Fantasy on Russian Folk Songs,' 'Russian Overture' and 'Legend of Lake Baikal.'

Budashkin had huge orchestras with 80 trained musicians at his disposal. The SBO's musical director Victor Serghie has not been so fortunate.

"Transforming these Budashkin scores to make them playable for a smaller orchestra with fewer than 30 musicians, has been a major challenge," said Victor. "And somehow we have been able to achieve it."

"I have to work with the musicians I can attract (and I'm always on the look-out for more). I also have to arrange music for the instruments we can source, while still preserving the magnificent symphonic sounds created by Budashkin," he said.

At this, Victor has been outstandingly successful, so much so that in Russia, the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra has acquired an excellent reputation. Victor spends weeks adjusting the scores, rewriting them for smaller ensembles. For instance, Budashkin had prima, alto & tenor balalaikas. Victor has to make do with guitars.

"We are noted for our ability to interpret these massive symphonic scores very well," said Victor. "Russia may have brilliant virtuoso musicians. But we have the dynamic discipline, and the ability to play 'tightly' together. And that is why we are able to achieve those wonderful symphonic sounds," said Victor.

## US TOUR DEFERRED



**For logistical reasons, the SBO, together with the Washington Balalaika Society and University of Wisconsin Russian Folk Orchestra, have postponed our joint concerts planned for November this year. We hope to make this tour happen in the near future.**

## SAVE THE DATE IN 2020! UPCOMING EVENTS

**Friday 14 Feb 2020 | SUTHERLAND, NSW | 7.30pm Start**  
Sutherland Uniting Church, Cnr Flora and Eton St **NEW VENUE**

**Sunday 8 Nov 2020 | GERRINGONG, NSW | 2.00pm Start**  
Gerringong Town Hall, 106 Fern St.

### 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 Secretary, **Richard She on 0402 179 098.**



**Our heartfelt thanks go to all of our supporters who have made 2019 such a wonderful year. From all the members of the Orchestra, we wish you a very happy Christmas, and a safe and joyful New Year!**

