

Novosti

Balalaika
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A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL!

A TALE OF TWO INSTRUMENTS, WITH THREE OR FOUR STRINGS

The Sydney Balalaika Orchestra takes its name from that legendary Russian musical instrument, the balalaika, which rather begs the question: why do we have so few balalaikas in it? True, there is a shortage of balalaika players in Sydney. But there is a shortage of Russian folk instrument players anyway, and we are 22 strong. In this article, Patrick O'Neill attempts to answer this perplexing question.

So what balalaikas do we have? A bass and contrabass balalaika, with occasional prima balalaikas performing ornamental passages. But we have no regular prima balalaikas. Novosti has written before about the history of the balalaika, how it was rediscovered by a Russian nobleman, Vasily Andreyev (right). After hearing a Russian



Vasily Andreyev

an ancient instrument of the steppes brought back to life giving voice to the music of old Russia.

This old post card (below) is of the Kruzhok or 'circle', in Andreyev's earliest balalaika ensemble in 1889. It had five prima balalaikas, a tenor and a bass clearly visible. So successful were they that the Kruzhok was sent to play



Postcard of 'Kruzhok'

1889#2092.



Nalimov Balalaika after Andreyev's reforms

peasant playing this ancient instrument he was amazed by its throbbing sound and sweetness. So he took it upon himself to modernise and develop it, preserving its iconic triangular shape and tuning while making it easier for regular musicians to learn.

He also turned the balalaika into an instrument family including prima, alto, tenor, bass and contrabass. As a result, the prima balalaika became the dominant instrument in Andreyev's orchestra. Audiences now saw

at the Paris Exhibition in that year. They quickly became a sensation. In time his orchestra got bigger as more musicians wanted to join and learn this new symbolic instrument. It became amazingly popular overseas with balalaika schools opening in London, Paris and New York.

Soon composers were writing for the balalaika, as it fed into the pan-Slavic movement and became a symbol of Russian culture. It was a time when other nations were forming ensembles of their traditional folk instruments, like banjo ensembles in America and mandolin ensembles in Italy. Indeed, Andreyev's orchestra became so popular throughout Russia that it caught the eye of the Russian royal family, gaining respectability with Russia's elite.

By the early 1900s a school for budding balalaika players was set up at Talashkino, an artists' colony in the countryside near Smolensk. In this photo of their ensemble (right), note

For more details please refer to our website

www.balalaika.com.au



Talashkino Group

the balalaikas with their tell-tale triangular shapes. But now a small round-shaped instrument has also appeared: the domra (far left in photo, above).

Something else had happened. As the balalaika gained popularity, its limitations also became apparent. Its tuning and traditional playing method made it hard for virtuoso musicians to learn quickly. To play it one uses fingers, not plectrums. Two strings are tuned to the same note. In short, this quirky instrument had become a challenge.



Domra, 4 string domra and domra 'family'

The domra on the other hand, with tuning similar to a mandolin or violin, is played with a plectrum, making it easier for mandolin and violin players to make the conversion. Like balalaikas, they too were developed into a family including piccolo, prima, alto, tenor and bass.

The next development was natural: the four-string domra. This made conversion even easier for mandolin or violin players well-accustomed as they were to four strings. This instrument is sometimes said to be a Ukrainian innovation, it was actually Russian. Developed in 1908 by Grigorii Lubimov, a musician who once played with Andreyev, he created this new family of four-stringed domras in Moscow.

Lubimov now saw himself in competition with Andreyev's orchestra, and is credited with starting a domra versus balalaika war! In his efforts to discredit the balalaika, Lubimov published articles deploring balalaika tuning and playing techniques. He even claimed balalaikas were



The Andreyev Full Orchestra:

a health hazard for players, causing twisted spines due to the awkward sitting position needed. Not a problem many balalaika players ever actually suffered from!



Modern Andreyev State Orchestra

But despite the domra-balalaika politics, today's Andreyev Academic Orchestra looks very different from the one dating from a century earlier. The domra is now the more common stringed instrument.

Also, with more complex scores appearing, there was a need for a more practical instrument for schools where this music could be taught. The string section in today's Andreyev orchestra is largely made up of domras, both three and four string – though the balalaika still has a strong niche role.

So when you listen to the shimmering, haunting sound of the balalaika orchestra, much of that sound is actually created by domras. But the SBO would still like to attract more prima balalaika players – if we could get them. Not forgetting the one at the back, the one that holds it all together. That is a balalaika – a huge, triangular, booming contra-bass balalaika!

FORTHCOMING CONCERTS - WRITE THE DATES IN YOUR 2024 DIARIES!

The SBO will be in concert in April and June, 2024:

Where: The Art House, Wyong

When: Sunday, 7 April 2024 at 2:30pm

Enquiries: (02) 4335 1485 thearthousewyong.com.au

Where: The Russian Club Strathfield

When: Sunday, 16 June 2024

Enquiries: 0404 058 895

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



FROM MOON RIVER TO SHINING MOON – A JOINT SBO & CHORELLA CONCERT

On 15 October, the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra gave another performance at the Richmond Club. But this one would be very different. The SBO joined forces with the Richmond Community Choir, or 'Chorella'. 'This was an ambitious undertaking,' said SBO musical director Victor Serghie. 'The orchestra normally performs with our two singers, Natasha Tatarinoff and Dmitry Kuevda, and we'd never performed with a choir before. But we had performed successfully in Richmond before, and so had Chorella. So we decided to get together!'



As it would have been a major undertaking to prepare a joint concert, both choir and orchestra decided to perform their repertoires separately, coming together for a joint grand finale. So a few weeks earlier there had been a joint rehearsal at the SBO's usual practice location in Marsfield.

'Ten singers and 20 musicians was quite a crowd in a small rehearsal room,' said Victor as we prepared our finale. It was the first time we had performed together but it was the first time Chorella had performed with so many musicians. 'Chorella is an a-cappella choir, that is to say they normally perform without any instrumental accompaniment,' said Victor. 'So we had to get used to making music together. And it didn't take long.' Our major joint performance was the romantic Georgian song Tbilisi. The lyrics conjure up images of the Georgian capital in the Tsarist days: 'Tbilisi, my native, beloved cultured home. The Kura's waters gleam amid the beauty of these sultry climes.' Sung in Russian by Natasha and Dmitry and rehearsed with the choir, it wasn't long before we knew it would be a success.

At the concert, SBO performed the orchestral favourite In the Village and the Russian Sailor's Dance featuring Richard She on accordion. We also performed Kalinka and Shining Moon, featuring the balalaikas. Chorella performed Moon River, Shenandoah and Billy Joel's Lullabye, and of course, Tbilisi. Victor as usual, entertained the audience with his 'show and tell', a tour around the SBO's strangely shaped instruments.

Chorella also joined in an old favourite duet, an old Russian folk song, turned popular hit: Those were the Days – in English, The Long Road – in Russian, popularised by Mary Hopkins in 1968.

The joint concert had attracted a full house at the Richmond Club. It had clearly been a success as the audience clamoured for an encore. As it had been a joint concert, that was a little hard to arrange!





Seasons Greetings!

As we move toward a busy time of the year, we stop to celebrate the daily joys of life: our family and our friends, and of course, the pleasures of music! With so many parts of the world in turmoil, we hope you will join with us to wish for peace and community for all. May you all have a Christmas and New Year filled with happiness and music as you spend time with your families and friends.

***A happy Christmas and New Year to each of you,
our treasured supporters!
We look forward to seeing you back on stage, in 2024.***

