

WE ARE BACK! GALSTON AND NORTH RICHMOND

On 23rd and 30th of May the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra gave its first concerts in nearly two years. We played to packed houses and appreciative audiences in two new venues.



Galston
Uniting
Church

The first took place within the Galston Uniting Church, with its modern, blue stained-glass window and magnificent, 19th century pipe organ.

The following Sunday we played at the North Richmond Panthers Club.

The relaxed atmosphere and lively program attracted a large audience from the local area and beyond.

"What was so pleasing was that after coming back from such long breaks and lock-downs, when we couldn't get together and rehearse, everyone just slipped back into their roles and we performed at our very best," said Musical Director Victor Serghie.



Galston
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"In fact the Orchestra sounds a little different now," he said. "There have been some changes since we last performed. While we lost a few players, we also gained some. And some former players came back to us." One change is the addition of Neil, our new oboe player. "This is a sound that has been lacking in the Orchestra," Victor said. We will introduce Neil in more detail in our next Newsletter issue.

"Also, Yuri Halay has returned from a break. This has been most welcome. Now he plays the bass balalaika in our bass domra section, which has strengthened the baritone 'voice' in the Orchestra," he explained.

While they didn't feature in these concerts, the Orchestra now has three prima balalaika players. Players of this legendary Russian instrument are notoriously hard to find in Sydney. "We will gradually work them into our scores, but it won't happen overnight," said Victor. "It has taken me months to add the oboe to our repertoire!"

Of the concert in North Richmond, Suzanne said: "It was a most professional and entertaining two hours of enchanting Russian folk music." Sophie, a visitor from Adelaide, told us, "I had learned a lot about the Orchestra from the SBO's website. But when I saw and heard it for first time live, I found myself tearing-up! Hearing a live performance is a vast improvement on YouTube!" she said.



Panthers, North Richmond

A number of regular audience members, who know the Orchestra well, said that the post-Covid SBO sounds more homogenous. More balanced. "This time you sounded more together and it was a much richer sound," said Angela. "And Dmitry rounded it off with his beautiful, rich voice. I loved it," she said.



"I think this is also due to a sense of community," said Victor, "and maybe it takes a break to remind us all of why we are here. We enjoy each others' company," he said. "During the lock-downs something was missing. We come from all walks of life, from many different cultural backgrounds. But somehow it is this Russian music that binds us together. After long periods of enforced separation we value that bond all the more, and you can hear it all the more now, when we make music."



Originally from Nagano, Japan, Midori Aoki works as a foreign correspondent for a Japanese broadcaster. Midori moved to Australia only last August and began by telling Novosti how she found the SBO.

Midori: Late last year as I was settling in to my new life in Sydney, I was wondering, maybe it's time to find some hobby, hoping to find local friends. The Russian element has always been with my life wherever I have lived so I sought a connection with Russian culture. I wanted to restart playing balalaika, my favourite musical instrument, which I used to learn when I lived in Russia more than ten years ago. I googled "Balalaika, Sydney" and found this great Orchestra.



In the Orchestra, I play the alto domra and the balalaika. I love the simple but deep sound both instruments make. Though I joined to play balalaika, I also now love the alto domra. I am honoured to learn it and I practise whenever I have free time at home. I'm still having difficulty, especially with tremolo, but isn't it great to have something to learn!

Novosti: Did you know that you are the first Japanese member of the SBO!

Midori: In both concerts recently, Victor introduced me to the audience as a "Russian-speaking Japanese girl", with an episode of how I first contacted the Orchestra. I didn't know that Russian-speaking Japanese were such a "rare existence" in this country. I'm so happy to be part of this multicultural society here in Sydney.

Novosti: This Russian element in your life, and the Japanese-Russian connection is fascinating...

Midori: Japanese people love Russian music very much, especially the older generations, and Russian folk songs were really popular in Japan after WWII. I think one of the reasons Japanese people are attracted to Russian music is that many songs are in a minor key, making a melody sad or plaintive - which is common to Japanese traditional music. I sometimes enjoy playing Japanese songs on the balalaika.

I majored in Russian at university in Tokyo, and while I was a student, I spent one year studying the language in Russia. While

many of my classmates went to Moscow or St Petersburg to study, I chose differently, for two reasons. I am from the small city of Nagano and I love being in the countryside, and I knew that if I studied in big cities I would make friends with international students who speak English or Japanese which would not help me to master the language. To know the country and its people better, I thought it's best to stay in smaller cities.

I decided to go to Yaroslavl - a beautiful ancient city 250 km northeast of Moscow. There, I lived the whole year with a Russian lady, a babushka, in her Soviet-era apartment. She used to cook me porridge, or kasha, for breakfast, ban me from eating McDonalds saying that it's bad for my health, and ring me every time I hung out with friends late. The life with her helped me acquire "living Russian language", which you never learn in the classroom.

Russian is a really beautiful language. I especially like how the form or ending of each word changes - it's of course complicated and many of my university classmates dropped out because of these grammatical problems, but I got along very well with it.

I also stayed in Sakhalin for half a year after I started working for a broadcaster. What I liked about Russian Far East is that they have great seafood, which Japanese people are always dying for in western or central parts of Russia, and that I could feel my home closer.

Novosti: Why did you choose the balalaika?

I was born to music loving parents, so music was always with me since childhood. And I have been learning Japanese traditional dance since the age of three, so I respect the traditional culture of people around the globe. I believe learning traditional culture is the best way to know its people's soul. So it was natural for me to learn balalaika in Yaroslavl.

Novosti: How are you fitting in TV production with rehearsals?

Midori (smiling): Didn't you notice I always bring my laptop with me to rehearsals and check my phone between songs?

Novosti: And how are your family and friends keeping, in Nagano?

Midori: My parents and grandfather (who will turn 96 in July) are all doing well. Nagano prefecture is famous among Australian tourists for the ski resorts of Hakuba and snow monkeys. Now people in Nagano miss Aussies so much. My country is still struggling with the pandemic, but I really hope the situation gets better soon, and once the international border opens, Australian people come back to Japan. And all my family are eager to come to my concerts in Australia!

Spasibo and Arigato to all the SBO members for welcoming me!

FORTHCOMING CONCERTS

Sunday, 1 August 2021 – Russian Club, Strathfield, Sydney

Bookings & enquiries: 8850 3623 or
www.trybooking.com/BRWIX

Sunday, 24th October 2021, 2pm - Gerringong Town Hall

106 Fern St Gerringong NSW
For enquiries: 0413 967 385



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 President,
Richard She on 0402 179 098.