

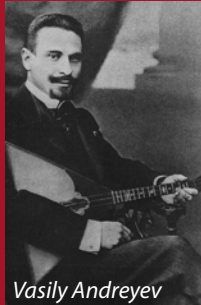
# Novosti

## Balalaika NEWS

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### ACCORDIONS – HISTORICALLY, THE SBO'S OLDEST INSTRUMENTS



Vasily Andreyev



Dancer with Garmoshka



Boy by a pile  
of Old Russian  
Garmoshkas



Two Garmoshka players

I know a thing or two about the history of the SBO's musical instruments. I have previously written in these pages about how the domras and balalaikas we play are descended from old Khazak and Tartar instruments of the steppes, dombras and topshurs.

While these instruments were largely inspired by ancient Asian instruments, they were actually reconstructions made and designed by a Russian aristocrat, Vasily Andreyev, who lived at the time of the Russian cultural revival and Pan-Slavic movement of the 19th century. Indeed, they only became popular at the beginning of the last century as a romantic celebration of Russian folklore.

So it was with some surprise that I discovered that the oldest instruments played in the SBO are actually accordions. Invented in Germany and Russia in the 1820s and 1830s, the accordion's ancestors were the instruments that really became popular with Russian folk musicians.

The popular name for an accordion in Russia is garmon' or its diminutive, garmoshka (гармошка). They came in all shapes and sizes. The Russian garmoshki were mostly button accordions. By 1870s there were many Russian accordion brands, mostly manufactured in Tula. By 1883 they had become so popular in Russia that Tchaikovsky wrote four accordions into his Suite No 2 in C major. Every village had its singers and folk musicians – mostly garmoshka players accompanying singers and dancers.

So how it is that at the turn of the 20th century, the popular garmoshka, this 'people's instrument', never seemed to feature in this great Russian folk revival, or in published photos of Russian folk instruments? Probably snobbery! It took long enough for balalaikas and domras to be accepted by Russia's aristocracy – and then, only because they were accepted by the royal family. In the 1960s I used to play in the London Balalaika Ensemble, which had been founded

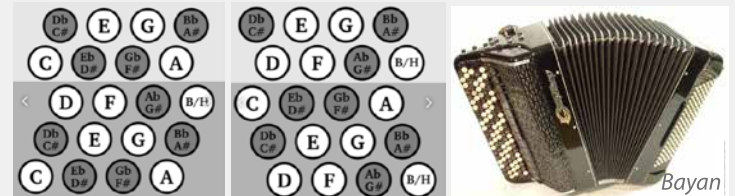


GD Xenia Aleksandrovna, GD Alexander Michailovitch, their children Irina and Andrei and others playing the balalaikas.

by Russian émigrés as the Medvedev Balalaika Orchestra. They would never allow any 'low-class' accordions (or garmoshki) into their ensemble!

But in Russia after the revolution, snobbery was effectively outlawed. Soon the big balalaika orchestras, like the Ossipov, would include everything from shepherd's horns to accordions, and by now there was a very special Russian accordion with a rich, mellow tone – named the bayan. Created by St Petersburg master instrument-maker Peter Sterligov in 1907, the bayan is a button accordion named after a singer-poet of the 11th Century by the name of Boyan, a famous bard who recited at the court of Yaroslav the Wise.

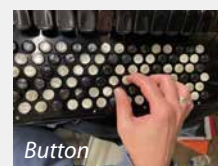
Needless to say there is a shortage of bayans and bayan players in Sydney. Today, the orchestra has three piano-accordionists. Richard



Bayan

She, Alex Chao and Lana Nadj. However, the SBO has had a number of players who have coped with a button system, different from most European accordions. The button layout allows for much faster virtuoso playing. Milica Vijatovic plays a European button accordion, popular in south Europe, particularly Italy. "The button accordion is trickier to learn," Milica told me. "But once you've learned, it's much easier to play quick passages. You don't have protruding sharps and flats for your fingers to trip over."

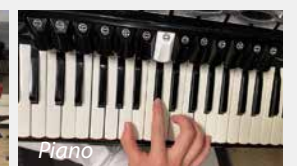
The accordion is versatile and as some players say, it's like having an orchestra hanging from your shoulders. And it is still one of the most popular instruments in the world.



Button



Mitzi and Alex



Piano

by Patrick O'Neill

For more details please refer to our website

[www.balalaika.com.au](http://www.balalaika.com.au)

## A CHAT WITH ALEX CHAO, SBO SECRETARY AND ACCORDIONIST

Alex juggles a flourishing practice in design, approvals and construction with a full-time job with a firm of architects. Just ten years ago, he emigrated from Yancheng, north of Shanghai, after sitting an international English language test on a whim and passing with flying colours. It takes an enlightened spirit to see and to seize opportunities, and Alex is one such creative yet humble spirit.

**Novosti:** What made you first pick up the piano-accordion, Alex?

When I was 4 years old, my mum (then a school volleyball coach) asked the school's music teacher to 'baby-sit' me. Afterward, the teacher told her I'd learnt Jingle Bells on the classroom piano during the older students' lesson.

My mum was greatly surprised – my parents were not musical. It was only when the teacher let me play the piano that she was convinced!

One of my mum's friends was an accordion teacher. After just 2 years I stopped taking lessons due to the heavy study load of the 9-year Compulsory Education Program in China.

When I first came to Australia, I left my accordion sitting quietly in its case. In 2016, I decided to give it a second life after many years of not playing and brought it with me to Sydney. The accordion was made in China, a gift from my parents. It has accompanied me throughout my music journey. Until I brought it to Australia, I could barely play new songs and had difficulties reading sheet music. My skills developed during rehearsals with two orchestras here.

**Novosti:** What is this second orchestra?

As well as the SBO, I play with the Accordion Society of Australia,



where I first started playing in Australia. It's very different to the SBO. We play Australian medleys, polkas, French waltzes, South American music, even Beatles. And we are all accordionists.



**Novosti:** That sounds like fun! So what do you like most about playing with the SBO?

The best part is playing with talented musicians/ vocalists on a great variety of instruments. It's so good to listen to the unique sound of each instrument. I also feel blessed to be able to play so many well-arranged pieces and under Victor's professional direction.

**Novosti:** Alex, what do you do at the beautiful Nan Tien Temple?

Nan Tien is the largest temple in the southern hemisphere. I volunteer in the temple simply out of the "joy of giving", having read a book about Buddhism on the international flight between Australia and China. Volunteers assist the temple with various tasks for it to operate smoothly, especially for dharma services.

The importance of the practice of generosity is the foundation of higher-level practices, including ethics, and calming and stabilising the mind. That's why I consider "giving" is a powerful source of merit with long-term benefits and I give regularly as a volunteer. These days work keeps me busy. Yet every time I step into the temple, I reach my inner peace, as though after a deep meditation.

## FORTHCOMING CONCERTS 2023

### Putty

Join us for a Sunday out in May, in picturesque Putty.

**When:** Sunday 20 May, at 2pm, at the Putty Community Hall

**Where:** 408 Putty Valley Rd, Hunter Valley.

**Enquiries:** 0409 058 895

### Strathfield Russian Club

**When:** Sunday 25 June, at 2pm, at the Strathfield Russian Club

**Where:** 7 Albert Road Strathfield NSW 2135

**Enquiries:** 8850 3623

### Wyong Art House

**When:** Sunday, 5 November, at 2pm, at the The Art House, Wyong

**Where:** 19/21 Margaret Street, Wyong NSW 2259

**Enquiries:** TBA

### 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.**

