

BRUCE BOWS OUT

After forty years with the Orchestra, outgoing president Bruce Barker has decided to call it a day. For anyone who has attended an SBO concert, he is the bloke in the back row, playing the biggest of the balalaikas, the contra-bass.

He was born into a musical family in 1940. "My late brother was also a musician," Bruce says, "and he introduced me to the SBO." Bruce's cousin is the well-known Australian pianist and composer, Miriam Hyde; his daughter also plays piano. Bruce started his musical career by singing and conducting church choirs while learning the piano and guitar. After school, he joined the Citizen Military Forces before becoming a logistics manager for Marconi. Logistics, too, were in his genes. His great-grandfather was a mariner from Norway and the Harbour Master at Newcastle in the last century.

As SBO president, "moving a creative but independent group of thirty musicians around the world on tours had its challenges," Bruce recalls. "My contra-bass balalaika didn't help! How could something as big as that be lost in transit, as it was in New Zealand?" He remembers pacing up and down at Beijing airport. "My contra-bass wouldn't fit through their X-ray machine. To make it smaller, I offered to take it out of its



case. 'No no – don't do that!' they cried. I think they thought it might explode," he laughs.

Bruce Barker lives in the Southern Highlands, so getting to Wednesday night practices in Sydney has been a weekly marathon. He can be excused for deciding to hand the baton to another contra-bass balalaika player. "As for me, I think I'll go back to singing," he says.

The SBO wishes him the best



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of luck in his retirement. We will miss his dry sense of humour, his gravitas and his wise counsel. "Well done Bruce and thank you

from us all," said Musical Director and friend, Victor Serghie. "You have been a great ambassador over the years and we value your enormous contribution beyond words."

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Following the stepping down of SBO president Bruce Barker, there has been a generational change in the orchestra's leadership.

The new president is 25-year-old lead accordionist Richard She and the new secretary is Alex Chao, aged 31. Victor Serghie, of course, continues as musical director and Tanya Jephtha as treasurer. We wish the new team well!



President Richard She

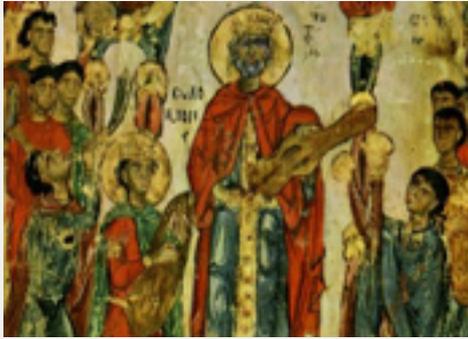


Secretary Alex Chao



Treasurer Tanya Jephtha

Who handed down the songs and dances on which the music of the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra is based? The SBO performs Russian folk music on authentic Russian folk instruments and Russian folk songs sung in Russian, arising from centuries of tradition. But who played these early Russian domras and balalaikas?



Icon depicting Psalm 41

You wouldn't know it from this icon, but in medieval Russia, the Orthodox Church made life hard for musicians. Grounded in tradition, in the 1530s in the reign of Ivan IV (the Terrible), the Church frowned on all musical instruments and singing.

Unlike the Catholic Church, which encouraged the use of musical instruments, Orthodoxy followed St Basil: "Leave the pipe to the shepherd, the flute to the men intent on idol-worshipping. Such instruments must be excluded."

The Russian Orthodox Church connected folk music with the pagan cults surviving deep in Russia's heartland. It felt threatened by Catholicism in the west and Islam in the east. At the same time, the Muscovy Grand Princes feared the Tartar khans, always intent on conquest and plunder. So a link was forged between Church and Tsar, leaving some Tsars under the control of the Patriarch of Moscow. In 1645, when the young Tsar Alexis 'The Quiet' acceded, he buckled to pressure from Patriarch Nikon to ban all musical instruments. He ordered that "all devilish instruments be confiscated and burned, and transgressors flogged."



"Tsar Alexis the Quiet"

And there was quite a bonfire. As the Holstein Ambassador in Moscow wrote: "the Patriarch forbade the existence of instruments, which if found were ordered to be broken and destroyed." But for the Tsar it was also personal. It was said

of him that he would be "quiet and friendly but the sound of instruments would provoke him." Clearly he wasn't called 'Alexis the Quiet' for nothing!

But despite house-to-house searches by the Oprichnina (forerunners of the secret police) seeking "cart loads of all manner of devilish instruments", many instruments, their makers and

players survived. So music, dances and folk songs were, as always, passed down by word of mouth, from generation to generation, in the villages, steppes and forests.

But Nikon's high-handedness caused a schism in the Church when a rebel group, the 'Old Believers', broke away. In 1658 Nikon was forced to retire to a monastery; in 1676, Alexis the Quiet died. Russia was about to be rocked by western influences. But her instruments were safe – for now!

A decade later, a Kremlin guard made an arrest. "Two commoners were stopped from playing a Balalaika while drunk," he recorded in his log-book. The offenders "chased and beat a coachman with a balalaika." It was the first mention of a balalaika in Russian literature and proof that Alexis' edict had failed.

Tradition labels the culprits as skomorokhi: travelling minstrels, noted for their satirical and bawdy songs. History doesn't relate what happened to them, but if they were sent to prison, they wouldn't have had to wait long for a pardon. The following



"SKOMOROKHI"

year, life for Russia's skomorokhi was to take a strange twist.

In 1689, Alexis the Quiet's son Peter (the Great) became effective ruler of Russia. For the skomorokhi, Peter was a natural friend. He

enjoyed drink, laughter and skomorokhi entertainment. He also founded a club of "All-joking All Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters" which mercilessly ridiculed the Church. It was also recorded that Peter "dressed them up as Kalmyks and made them play domra"!



"SKOMOROKHI" Entertainment

In 1705, Peter issued an edict that would have horrified his father: "To act comedies in Russian and German and let musicians play various instruments at

these comedies...and let the people of different ranks both among the Russian folk and the foreigners, visit them willingly and without any fear."



Peter (The Great)

So Russia's intelligentsia embraced western instruments and music: folk music would be again pushed aside. Once more it was left to the villages and steppes to preserve Russia's rich legacy of folk music. But now, at least, that much was legal.

TO BE CONTINUED IN NEXT ISSUE

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

