

Novosti

Balalaika
NEWS

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GOODBYE TO COVID. WELCOME TO 2022

As 2021 morphs into 2022 and the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra contemplates life beyond Covid, it is nice to know that despite the lockdowns, we haven't forgotten how to play our instruments, or how to make music with them. We are still here!

'Many of us have been frustrated that we haven't been able to play,' said musical director Victor Serghie. 'We still have concerts to perform and we are still taking bookings, and we look forward to our first concert for 2022 (27th Feb) in Gerringong, which has been postponed and rebooked many, many times,' he said.

'Of course 2021 has taken its toll. We lost our Contrabass player Bruce Barker who sadly passed away. A few other players have had to rearrange their lives and may or may not be coming back. But there are always others who seem to want to join us,' said Victor. 'We are often approached by people who may not have seen some of our strange-looking instruments before. It is amazing



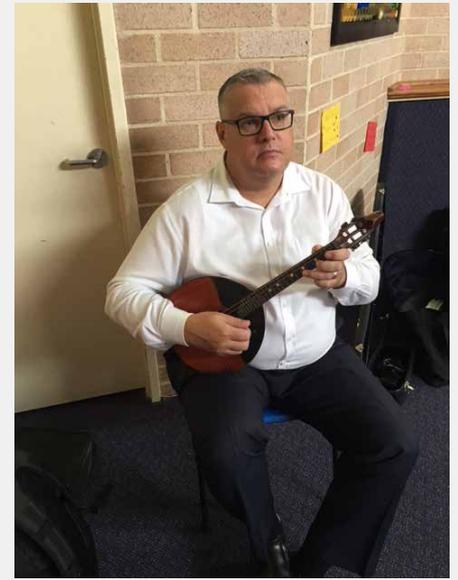
how quickly guitar and mandolin players adjust to domras or balalaikas, some becoming virtuosos. We also attract a lot of accordion players who quickly pick up the Russian playing style.'

For more details please refer to our website
www.balalaika.com.au



One young lady who seems keen to join us, is prima domra player Andrew Tatarinoff's daughter Natasha. Andrew (right) himself only recently joined the Orchestra and Natasha (left) has just completed her HSC in which she majored in music. 'Natasha plays the guitar and one of her HSC tasks was to sing "Those were the days"' said Victor. 'As she has the voice of a nightingale, we decided to give her a go. Unfortunately Natasha doesn't speak much Russian, but we may be able to fix that too,' he said.

This raises an important point. The orchestra needs to include more songs with English lyrics as our audience expands. Originally our audiences had a large Russian-speaking component, but today we need to appeal to a new generation, who may not understand Russian. 'This is why we need singers like Natasha,' said Victor.



'You don't have to know Italian to enjoy opera. Similarly you don't have to understand Russian to enjoy Russian music, but a little English helps make it relevant.'

Singers come and singers go, which means Victor has to cope with many a key change. This is necessary to match the pitch of the orchestra to the pitch of the voice. 'It means I have to rewrite a lot of scores,' said Victor. 'And some singers then find the pitch too high or too low for them so I have to rewrite again. This

means different versions of the same song flying around with the players which confuses them. It drives me crazy,' he said. 'You need patience in this game.'

The orchestra will have a short break over Christmas and New Year. In the New Year, our first concert will be in Gerringong's Town Hall on Sunday, 27 February 2022. We will be performing at the Russian Club Strathfield on 22 May 2022.

BEHIND THE NEWS(LETTER) AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK O'NEILL



Patrick O'Neill's writing fills the columns of Novosti. Patrick is the SBO's Irish-born bass domrist with a passion for history, Russian culture and music, and a long career as a TV reporter. He is also a seriously entertaining raconteur.



Bass domrists, Lazar Stojkov & Patrick O'Neill

who thrust a bass domra into my hands and said: 'Play!' Play I did, and soon found myself in the London Balalaika Ensemble. We made a few records and were in a movie, 'The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes'!

I loved gypsy music and in the sixties I played balalaika and guitar in the London basement restaurant, Borscht and Tears.

In Australia in the seventies, I worked on This Day Tonight Nationwide and then the 7:30 Report, and with long hours and travel it wasn't until I left journalism that I had an evening free. Eighteen years ago, Victor Serghe invited me to a practice session for the SBO. And it turned out that Alyosha Zolotuhin and Victor had known each other in Harbin.

Novosti: But it isn't just music that interests you about Russia...

Patrick: No. I admire the precision of the German language but for me, Russian has great poetry, a real musicality. Although having said that, when it came to my great-aunt, Alice Parsons who was married to the Naval Attaché posted to the British Embassy during the two revolutions of 1917, the first words that she spoke in Russian were not very poetic: 'Pozhaluysta, mne ne strelyat!' Please, don't shoot!

Novosti: How did you come to join the Orchestra?

Patrick: I always wanted to play in a Russian folk orchestra – and in London, I did. As a young man, I owned a mandolin and an electric guitar. I had set up a rock band in my army regiment. But I loved acoustic music. Being of a somewhat contrary nature (in the British Army, Russians were an 'enemy!'), when I saw a balalaika in a music shop, I promptly bought it. At Pushkin House, where I took the balalaika to find someone who would show me how to tune it, I met Alexei (Alyosha) Zolotuhin

Over the years I have slowly built up a collection of acoustic instruments, some Russian, including a semistrunka (a 'seven-stringer' guitar), an alto balalaika, a 'balatar', which is a six-string guitar shaped like a balalaika, and three bass domras. Some instruments that were mine are now in National Trust houses, including a chamber organ and a Broadwood square piano. I have a French and an Irish harp, which I play, and some guitars, the earliest of which is from the 1840s. I also enjoy playing my kobza, a lovely Ukrainian lute.

Warmest holiday wishes from the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra, for a safe and Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Сиднейский оркестр “Балалайка”
поздравляет всех с наступающим
Новым Годом и
Рождеством Христовым
и желает удачного 2022!



FORTHCOMING CONCERTS

Sunday 27 February 2022, 2pm - Gerringong Town Hall
Enquiries: 0413 967 385

Sunday 22 May 2022, 2pm - Russian Club Strathfield
Enquiries: 8850 3623

Sunday 29 May 2022, 2pm - Richmond Club.
Info to follow.

See balalaika.com.au about forthcoming events and the Orchestra.

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.



