

The Atlanta Balalaika Society Celebrates 30 Years of Russian Folk Music in Atlanta

by Irene Perloff McCullough

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Back in 1981, when there were considerably fewer Russian Atlantans than there are today, a small group of American musicians decided to start an orchestra of Russian folk instruments. Jimmy Fitzpatrick, an Irishman, had fallen in love with balalaika music while in Russia during World War II, and Charley Rappaport, a mandolin and domra player, had grown up playing Russian and Eastern European folk music in the cabarets of New York City. Charley and Jimmy had just returned from a national Russian folk music convention (BDAA) in New Jersey where they had met balalaika players from orchestras all over the U.S. and Canada.

Some of these groups were founded in the early 1900's by émigrés who wanted to keep the music of their homeland alive. In fact, Americans have always been fascinated by the balalaika, and today there are balalaika orchestras in many American cities, including Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Houston and Tucson.

Inspired by their experience in New Jersey, this small group of musical friends started purchasing instruments, collecting orchestral arrangements, and formed the Atlanta Balalaika Society Orchestra. Today that same orchestra is celebrating its 30th anniversary and has members from Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Moldova and Sweden. With the opening of the former Soviet Union, émigrés who had played in balalaika orchestras back home were amazed to find Russian folk music played in Atlanta and quickly joined the orchestra.

At the same time that Charley Rappaport was forming the Atlanta Balalaika Society, Angelina Galashenkova-Reed was a ten-year-old in St. Petersburg, Russia, winning her first junior domra competition. Angelina remembers the competition's final concert at the fabulous St. Petersburg Capella, and her television interview that followed the concert. She had just won the first of many competitions that would earn her numerous prizes including "Laureate of International Competition among Professional Domra Players." Today, she is the Atlanta Balalaika Society's domra soloist and concertmistress.

Many people don't realize that Russian folk instruments (balalaikas, domras, bayans) are studied at Russia's top music academies at the same high level as classical instruments, and that a life-time of hard work goes into making a professional Russian folk musician. Angelina, who studied at the Mussorgsky Music College in St. Petersburg and Moscow's prestigious Gnessin Music Institute, is one of Russia's few domra virtuosos. Touring the world as a domra soloist with the renowned Andreyev Russian Folk Orchestra of St. Petersburg, Russia, she never imagined that she would move to Atlanta and join the Atlanta Balalaika Society.

At a recent Wednesday night rehearsal, David C. Cooper, the orchestra's American-born director and one of its founders, goes over the details of the music to be performed at the 30th anniversary concert on September 24. The orchestra is hypno-



The Cooper family -- Dave, Zhanna, Davey and Laura

tized by the last note of Emanuil Sheynkman's masterpiece, "Suite of World War II Themes." Remembering how World War II veterans loved the piece at a spring concert, the orchestra can't wait to perform it on the big stage at the Roswell Cultural Arts Center.

David Cooper starts the first note of the balalaika solo "Kamarinskaya" as his wife Zhanna simultaneously plucks the string of her gusli, the most ancient of Russian folk instruments. Back in the percussion section, their five-year old son Davey Vladimir Cooper proudly waits to play his notes.

One of several "orchestra families," Dave and Zhanna Cooper met in 1996 during the Atlanta Olympics when Zhanna came from Kiev, Ukraine to work as a translator. When the Olympics translating job evaporated, she decided to stay in Atlanta through the summer, and began waiting tables at the Moscow Restaurant where Dave played balalaika. One thing led to another, and Dave, who had studied balalaika at the Gliere Institute in Kiev, convinced Zhanna to stay in Atlanta. Zhanna says "I had to come to America and marry an American balalaika player to rediscover the music of my home country!"



Bayanist Alla Melnyk and domrist Julia Gladish

When Alla Melnyk gets in her car on Wednesday afternoons, her neighbors in Trafford, Alabama don't realize she's driving 3 ½ hours to Atlanta to play her bayan in a Russian folk orchestra. Alla, a native of Vinnytsa, Ukraine, has studied the Russian bayan since she was eight, and has an advanced music degree from Kiev University of Arts and Culture. "It's nothing," she says of her long commute to Atlanta. "I love playing bayan and I love playing in the orchestra." Interestingly, the orchestra has three bayan players, and they are all from Ukraine. Naum Koyfman went to college in Moldova, but studied bayan in his hometown of Odessa. Naum plays a very interesting digital bayan that can create special sounds of other instruments. And Sergey Fen is from Kiev, where he studied bayan and piano at music school. Sergey taught languages for seven years at a public school, and taught bayan to private students.

People join the Atlanta Balalaika Society Orchestra for the music and the fun they have playing together. Fima Pin was the first émigrés from the former Soviet Union to join the orchestra. Fima, a food and beverage consultant, joined the Atlanta Balalaika Society in 1980. In his home town of Riga, Latvia, he had played domra in an amateur Russian folk orchestra made up of music-lovers. "The Atlanta Balalaika Society is actually very similar to my old orchestra," Fima says, "because people play because they really love the music."

Julia Gladish, director of Atlanta's Russian School # 1, played domra as a teenager at her music school in Kursk, Russia, and enjoys bringing her two-year old son Gary to orchestra rehearsals. "Gary loves to watch what everybody's doing," Julia says, "and he wants to touch all the instruments!" Julia feels the children are the future of Russian folk music, and is very proud of the Russian School's children's folk chorus, "Kalinka" that is preparing a special piece to help the orchestra celebrate their 30th anniversary.

Gulia Gadberry, a native of Almaty, Kazakhstan, played domra in an elementary school orchestra and then a large Young Pioneers orchestra, and was a national film promoter before immigrating to the U.S. Among other things, Gulia currently promotes and sells the jewelry of the award-winning artist from Kazakhstan, Serzhan Bashirov, setting up displays at festivals, art fairs and orchestra concerts. Gulia is especially fond of Russian romances, and loved it when the orchestra invited Russian basso Anatoly Panchoshny to perform as a guest artist.

As is the tradition with balalaika orchestras in Russia, the Atlanta Balalaika Society collaborates with well-known Russian vocalists and virtuoso instrumentalists such as Alexander Tsygankov (domra) and Vyacheslav Semyonov (*bayan*). The orchestra also enjoys working with professional Russian folk dancers, and wishes there was a professional group here in Atlanta. For their September 24th thirtieth anniversary concert in Roswell, the

orchestra has invited the acclaimed Russian ensemble Barynya as its guest artists. This will be the biggest concert the orchestra has ever presented, and Barynya will perform Russian, Cossack, Gypsy and Jewish folk dances, songs and music.

As the Atlanta Balalaika Society has become better known, the orchestra's audiences have grown, and as more Russians move to Atlanta, more of the audience is Russian-speaking. The orchestra's concerts are especially popular with families who have adopted Russian children and want their children to keep in touch with their native culture.

But the Russian folk music, the Russian romances and Gypsy music has a universal appeal that speaks to people from different cultures. At the orchestra's 2009 concert in Roswell, an Indian family was in the audience, and introduced themselves to the musicians. "We heard a Russian folk orchestra once in India," they said, "and fell in love with the sound of the balalaika!"

To learn more about the Atlanta Balalaika Society Orchestra, visit www.atlantabalalaika.com or call Zhanna Cooper at 404-288-9512.

