

AUSTRALIAN FOLK ORCHESTRA TOURS SIBERIA & FAR EAST RUSSIA

THE SBO ON THEIR FOURTH TOUR OF RUSSIA

On the 25 September 2016 after travelling 9,290 km for 2 days a group of 27 tired musicians assembled outside Khabarovsk railway station in Far East Russia. We have come to perform concerts at Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk and far off Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on Sakhalin Island just north of Japan. This was the beginning of the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra's fourth concert tour of Russia.

The Orchestra was heading by train for Blagoveshchensk, population 220,000 and 800 km West of Khabarovsk. Their first problem was getting 282 Kgs of instruments and 598Kgs of personal luggage to the furthest platform. Three porters and a lot of haggling later the SBO climbed aboard and soon found itself westward bound on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Trans-Siberian Railway. Those words have a romantic ring to them. One musician at least, had

always wanted to strike it off his bucket list. "All my life I have wanted to do this journey" said bass domra player Patrick O'Neill. "But I wasn't expecting a milk train! This was like train travel 40 years ago", he said.

"I was hoping to catch up on some sleep" said SBO contra-bass player Bruce Barker. "But there was nowhere to store the instruments & luggage; there was no freight car and a contra-bass balalaika does not make a very good bed companion."

While we were trying to settle in, word got round the train that there was a balalaika orchestra on the train & soon we received an invitation to give an impromptu concert in the restaurant car.

Elena Kravchenko, SBO's guest singer picked up a guitar and set herself up along with domras, clarinet, bayan and other instruments - and it was on. No event could better demonstrate people's love for their

own folk music. The Railway staff and other travellers joined in the singing as the vodka flowed. We had agreed to play until midnight. Suddenly on the midnight hour, the brakes squealed.



We had stopped somewhere in Siberia. We grabbed our opportunity to pack our instruments and prepare for sleep. "Oh no" said the bar manager. "You said you would play until midnight but we have just crossed one of Russia's seven time zones and we just put our clocks back an hour. So it's now only 11.00 pm. You can't go to bed yet!" "Oh yes we can" was the reply. This was one encore the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra did decline!

It was about 8.00 AM next morning our small train lumbered into a deserted railway station in Russia's Far East. We had arrived at a remote city somewhere along the Trans-Siberian railway, which most of us had never heard of let alone, could pronounce.

Welcome to Blagoveshchensk!

We had come all this way to perform at the annual "Amur Autumn" Festival in this remote corner of Siberia & it had been our understanding that we had a day to recover from the 2 day journey from Sydney & orientate ourselves.



As we gathered our instruments and baggage, this was probably not a good time to be told that within a few hours, we would have to give an unscheduled concert that very afternoon. Furthermore, it was to be held at the local Music Institute. No matter how remote Blagoveshchensk may be from the rest of the world, it would still be a discerning & critical audience sitting in judgement on our performance.

Later we were informed that our role at the "Amur Autumn" festival was to be the opening act at the Hollywood-style awards night. This is the third biggest Cinema and Theatre Festival in Russia and we, along with some of Russia's more notable film stars and performers, would be televised live throughout this vast country.



View from Blagoveshchensk across Amur River to the Chinese city of Hei He

At this point it should be said that the SBO has earned an excellent reputation from previous visits throughout Russia. So it was rewarding to see the posters throughout the towns we were due to play in, advertising our concerts.

Russian audiences are an unforgiving lot, and if they think a performance is poor or mediocre, they will applaud it in like fashion. So we were delighted with their steady clapping, the shouts of 'bravo', and to see so many standing ovations.

City Officials giving 'thank you' speeches were moved to tears. Indeed both orchestra musical director Victor Serghie, and our soloists Lucy Voronov and Elena Kravchenko were so bombarded with bouquets that they were never short of flowers to bedeck



THE BALALAIKA FAMILY

their hotel rooms. From the moment of our arrival the Russian media caught up with us. They couldn't believe that a group of musicians from 'the bottom of the world' were not only good, but only five spoke Russian and able to interpret Russian folk music so well. They were also amazed that we had all paid our own fares to come from so far to entertain them. Fortunately it would seem that our already excellent reputation in Russia is now in even better shape.

### "Amur Autumn" Festival

Every year since 2002, the city of Blagoveshchensk hosts "Amur Autumn", an Open Russian Cinema & Theatre Festival, which brings many of Russia's actors, artists & film stars together in this remote corner of the Russian far east.



Community Cultural Centre - Blagoveshchensk

The closing ceremony is a very important night during this festival, as it is the occasion when, like the Hollywood Oscar, awards are handed out to the actors, producers and other artists for the various films and dramas featured during the festival. The award categories are interspersed with entertainment and in

September of 2016, SBO found itself playing along side some of Russia's well-known artists.

So it was quite a feather in our cap to be invited to perform there. The official closure of the "Amur Autumn" award presentations was followed by a sumptuous, Hollywood style dinner hosted by the City



The PANORAMA RESTAURANT, Blagoveshchensk

Governor at "Panorama" restaurant, seating between 400 – 500 people with all the festival participants in attendance.

What a posh evening that was!!!

The following day at Blagoveshchensk Philharmonia, we performed to a full house where the tickets were sold out three weeks prior. During our 4-day stay in this beautiful autumn-coloured city, media interviews and scores of photographers saturated SBO presence.

### Next stop - Sakhalin Island

Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk city is 1,200 km flight from Blagoveshchensk. Our five-star "Pacific Plaza" hotel was centrally located and it was amazing to see how much this city of 178,000 people had flourished and developed since our last visit.

Indeed one of our more memorable concerts was in the 'Chekhov Theatre', in the island's capital city, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk where our reputation had preceded us. "We knew you were



The Chekhov Theatre - Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk

coming" said Pavel, a young oil executive originally from Moscow in beautiful English. "We heard you on the Radio" said Anya. "It seems you have an excellent reputation in Russia" she said. "We just wanted to see you for ourselves. It isn't often that a Balalaika Orchestra from Australia comes to Russia, and you have very few Russian speakers." After the concert, Pavel & Anya came up to us, "Not only was your music excellent but you have such a wonderful sense of humour", they said. "It's so great to hear a Russian orchestra that doesn't take itself too seriously" Our second successful concert on Sakhalin Island was at the Cultural Centre, city of Nevelsk. It took two-three hours to reach there, driving through a very picturesque and winding road crossing the mountains to the west coast. In 2007, ninety percent of this port town, located 92 kilometres from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, was destroyed by



powerful earthquake, leaving 2,000 people homeless and since, the city has been completely re-built, now looking fresh and neat. No after shocks were felt by our musicians during performance!

### Khabarovsk

The last stop of our tour was the city of Khabarovsk, the administrative centre for Russia's far eastern provinces. Here we performed at Khabarovsk Philharmonia. This beautiful concert hall was replete with chandeliers & other sumptuous early 20<sup>th</sup> century fittings.

Following our first tour in 2005, it has become our "tradition" to visit and entertain residence and staff at one of Khabarovsk's veterans' homes. So on the way to the airport, the bus made a detour to call on our friends with a short concert. As always, we were greeted

with warm hospitality, gratifying smiles and a lovely lunch!



Veterans Home - Khabarovsk

And so, the instruments were packed for the last time ready for that last baggage check in at the airport and a long flight home.

It was only then that everyone had realized how exhausted they were, but what a rewarding experience it had been !

### Making the SBO sound good in Russia

SBO was fortunate to have Millie, Milojka & Misha join us for this tour of Far East Russia. Organising a tour like this is extremely difficult when Russian speakers are few on the ground. Millie Serghie, married to Musical Director Victor, was essential to translating, attending to costumes & generally dealing with inquiries.

Misha, Victor's son, was also essential in ensuring that the microphones & sound systems made us sound so good. Misha was always full of praise for the Russian sound engineers who seemed to know their job particularly well. Of course Russian balalaika orchestras would be nothing new to them. It was also remarkable how good the acoustics were in the halls we performed in. But it was Misha who pulled it all together with his fluent Russian and excellent knowledge of sound systems. In another life, Milojka, mother of our accordionist Danilo, is one of the senior site producers for a well-known Australian TV show. SBO was very fortunate to have her in the role of stage manager ensuring smooth running of all our performances as well as organising the group at airport and coach transits. We owe a great debt to all three of them for making this tour so successful.



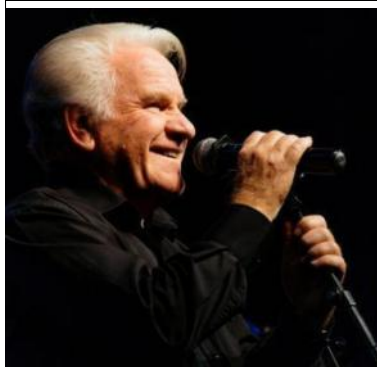
Chekhov Theatre



From right to left, Alex Yaroshenko, Lucy Voronov and husband Oleg Stusenko at the Panorama Restaurant in Blagoveshchensk

### In appreciation

We wish to convey our deep appreciation to the Russian Relief Organization of St Sergius of Rodonezh, Cabramatta NSW for providing financial assistance to the SBO for this tour of Siberia and Far East Russia in September and October this year.



### VICTOR SERGHIE

Musical Director and the inspiration for the members of the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra



### ALEX YAROSHENKO

This tour was made possible through the efforts' and generosity of Russian journalist, Alexander Yaroshenko from Moscow "Russian Gazette (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*) . Alex who is based in Blagoveshchensk discovered the SBO some years back when he visited Sydney with a film crew gathering information about Russians outside Russia. The members of the Sydney Balalaika Orchestra gratefully acknowledge his achievement in making this very special tour possible for the members of the orchestra. Bravo Sasha !

## SEASONS GREETINGS

The success of the SBO is due to the dedication of all the orchestra members, players, our musical director Victor Serghie and committee members as well as the many loyal family friends who volunteer their time. But an orchestra needs an audience and it is to you, our many faithful followers that we extend our sincere gratitude. To each and every one of you the members of the SBO wish you a safe and Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. We look forward to seeing you again in 2017.



In performance - Khabarovsk



Rehearsal break



Relaxing after a concert