



The Russian Music Academy Meets an American Community Orchestra

Moscow's Gnessin Academy and Virginia's American Balalaika Symphony make beautiful music—and history—together

In a first-ever collaboration between an American community orchestra and a Russian music academy, eight international competition winners from the prestigious Gnessin Academy of Music in Moscow will join the American Balalaika Symphony (ABS) and Russian soloists for a special performance on Sunday afternoon February 25 in Alexandria, Virginia.

The partnership is the result of a trans-oceanic effort between ABS Artistic Director Peter Trofimenko and Professor Vyacheslav Kruglov, President of the Academy of Russian Music, and Moscow-based balalaika virtuoso Andrei Gorbechev to bring Russian artists to the US to learn the basics of a community-based orchestra—a concept still new to Russia, where orchestras are either state- or academy-supported.



“In Russia, there are plenty of professional orchestras” says Trofimenko, “carried away by the needs of immediate programming. But the idea of a volunteer orchestra driven by the commitment of its members doesn’t exist. The musicians from Gnessin are coming here not only to play but to see how we do it.”

Professor Kruglov, who has been named People's Artist of Russia—and who will be one of the featured soloists in the upcoming concert—was critical in coordinating the visit, making special arrangements with the Gnessin administration to pull the students from their regular curriculum. “This is a first for a Russian academy. I am so proud to be involved, and I hope for many more such efforts.”

Andrei Gorbachev, whose dazzling balalaika performances are known worldwide, visits the United States annually to play with the American Balalaika Symphony. His support on the Russian side of this alliance has also been central to its success.

“It has been a wonderful experience for me to meet and play with my friends from the American Balalaika Symphony,” he said. “I now want my students and my fellow musicians in Russia to learn about the community orchestra and about Americans who love to play Russian instruments.”

Spreading the community spirit

The Gnessin students, who play a variety of Russian instruments, including the balalaika, domra, and bayan, have recently toured in Europe and Asia but are visiting the United States for the first time. They hope to take the community orchestra spirit back to Russia when they return.

Meanwhile, the excitement generated by their collaboration with the American Balalaika Symphony has already sparked a steppe-fire across the Russian musical landscape.

“I was recently in Perm,” says Mr. Trofimenko, “a city near Russia’s Ural Mountains, to help judge a musical competition. Even though this city is very far from Moscow, people became very excited when they learned of my association with ABS. This was because the news of the collaboration with Gnessin was already a hot topic there and elsewhere. They pressed me for information... especially, on how they could participate in the future.”

Trofimenko hopes that this concert will start a trend that brings other Russian students to the United States to work with the Symphony, and to showcase their talent for American audiences.

“Unusual but spectacular”

The upcoming concert will feature the Gnessin musicians with virtuosi Russian soloists Elena Caldine and Viacheslav Kruglov playing what Peter Trofimenko describes as “an unusual but spectacular” program.

Among other Russian pieces, the concert will include the Concerto No. 3 in D major for piano and orchestra by Dimitri Kabalevsky (1904-1987) and the Symphony No. 2 by Vasily Sergeyevich Kalinnikov (1866-1901).

The American Balalaika Symphony was the first balalaika orchestra to play the Kabalevsky concerto in America in November 2004, with Natalia Bogdanova as soloist.

Now, with the Kalinnikov Symphony, ABS will again break ground as this piece is performed for the first time by a balalaika orchestra in America.

“Nobody from the balalaika world has ever played anything like this before,” says Mr. Trofimenko of the upcoming concert. “This program stands apart from that of any other balalaika orchestra except for the two or three leading state-owned Russian ones.”

A Russian tradition---in Virginia

The American Balalaika Symphony, founded in 2001 in northern Virginia, is a mid-sized symphony orchestra in which the traditional bowed string instruments of the violin family are replaced by their plucked counterparts from the Russian balalaika and domra families.



The ensemble continues the tradition of the great Russian balalaika orchestras of the late 19th century, but its repertoire includes Russian and Ukrainian folk music, Soviet-era compositions for balalaika symphony, and arrangements of well-known classical works. The ABS has grown to include 65 instrumentalists—ranging from novices to conservatory graduates—and is one of only about ten full-fledged balalaika orchestras in the United States.

Mr. Trofimenko, the founder, artistic director, and conductor of the American Balalaika Symphony, was classically trained in Kiev in balalaika performance, conducting, arrangement and composition. He says that ABS owes its success to its players:

“Without our orchestra members' commitment it would be impossible. Our members diligently learn their parts—even with the most difficult pieces, and make it happen. That is what we should celebrate and promote.”

Speaking of the Symphony's Virginia debut of the Kabalevsky concerto and the Kalinnikov symphony, Trofimenko said, “Our members should be proud of this wonderful achievement!”

For concert and other information, please visit www.balalaika.biz