

MOSCOW NIGHTS

Art Form: Music
Style: Traditional
Culture: Russia

MEET THE ARTIST:

Moscow Nights is a versatile ensemble of world-recognized, prize-winning musicians from Russia. They have established themselves as one of the fastest rising folk groups in the United States. Led by *Vitaliy Bezrodnov* (*Bayan* Accordion), the group includes *Sergei Pudov* (*Balalaika*), and *Dima Busov* (contra-bass *balalaika*). The group was initially formed in Kaluga, Russia in the late 1980's where Mr. Bezrodnov attended Kaluga Music Conservatory. After completing his conservatory studies, he successfully reorganized the group in the United States in 1996. Initially touring the Western states and the Hawaiian Islands, the ensemble met with great acclaim due to their considerable talents and natural exuberance. Their venues have been as varied as First Night New Year's Eve Celebrations to the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. They also initiated a charity program entitled Music in Mission and Rotary Children's Fund, which raises money for Russian orphans.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Russia is a large and culturally diverse country with many ethnic groups, each with their own form of folk music. The program of *Moscow Nights* is centered on masterpieces of Russian folklore and represents the diversity of the culture, ranging from humorous songs and elaborate lyrical suites, to pulsating dance numbers. It includes such well-known songs as *Kalinka* and *Volga Boatman* but focuses on pieces lesser known to Western audiences including Cossack war melodies and Siberian love chants. Russian folk music expresses the national character – outwardly reserved and cool but brimming with vigor, mischievousness and vibrancy inside. The concerts have the air of a spontaneous impromptu performance, as if they just happened to have come together to make music. This is one of the hallmarks of folk music. But don't be fooled by the apparent ease – these musicians work hard behind the scenes, researching, rehearsing and arranging music in order to preserve the rich traditions of a culture that was almost lost. *Moscow Night's* lively program presents an authentic picture of Russian folk traditions and culture.

PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The music of *Moscow Nights* is predominantly authentic, traditional Russian folk music. During his conservatory years, Mr. Bezrodnov spent considerable time traveling deep into the Russian countryside, interviewing the eldest members of each village in an effort to preserve and resurrect pre-revolution Russian culture. Their current program incorporates obscure folk instruments such as unusual percussion and birch-bark whistles in addition to the more common *balalaika* and *bayan*. Thus, *Moscow Nights* is able to bring to audiences a unique program of a culture that had almost lost its original identity.

The *balalaika* is a 3- to 6-string guitar-like instrument with a triangular body. These were played by peasants and *skomorokhs* (medieval Russian troubadours). There are many theories about the origin of this strikingly shaped instrument. One is that the three sides and strings of the *balalaika* are supposed to represent the Holy Trinity. Peasants made *balalaikas* out of a pumpkin. If you quarter a pumpkin, you are left with a *balalaika* shape. Another theory is that before Tsar Peter The Great, instruments were not allowed in Russia. So, when Peter allowed them, only the boat builders knew how to work with wood. The *balalaika* looks like the prow of a boat, if held horizontally.

Balalaika are made in many sizes: from the tiny *piccolo* and the slightly larger *prima*, to the massive *contra bass* (see picture).



The *bayan* is a type of chromatic button accordion that was developed in Russia. There are some differences in construction from other accordions that give the *bayan* a deeper bass sound, large pitch range and consistent tone color. For this reason, bayans are often the instrument of choice for accordion virtuosi (be they

Russian or not) who perform classical and contemporary art music.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Did any part of the performance delight you? Inspire you? Confuse you? Surprise you? Seem familiar to you? Seem unusual? Explain what and why.
- What are some of the historical or cultural facts that you remember?
- Think of the costumes and describe them. What colors, patterns or other details did you notice?
- Which piece most gave you the spirit of Russian culture? Explain what it was that gave you this idea.
- Why do you think people created, and continue to create, folk music? What purpose does it serve in a community?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - HISTORY/SOC STUDIES:

As the world connects more through the internet, movies, CDs and video, traditional cultures are impacted by modern influences. For example, Rock 'n Roll has made its way to all parts of the globe. Composers in every country are creating popular music in this style, often abandoning their musical traditions. Sometimes the music becomes a fusion of traditional and popular music. However, Moscow Nights centers their performance on the purer forms of traditional Russian music. The early ancestors of the Russians were Pagan East Slavic tribes. Among these groups were bards who composed poetic lyrical songs about hero's and their brave deeds. Peasants also composed and sung a large number of folk songs, passing them on through the oral tradition. Define the word "Hero" and list some of the traits. Then, as a class, identify

modern-day heroes or heroines and a specific thing they are known for. Working in small groups, select one hero or heroine to discuss. Write a four to eight line poem or rap that captures their traits and their story. Then, practice together to perform the poem or rap, rhythmically and in unison. Share as a class, giving background on your hero before performing the poem or rap. Discuss choices and poems.

- Legend:
- 🌀 Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - ▶ Historical & cultural context
 - 🗉 Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications



ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- 🗉 Be a news reporter and give a report on the concert. Divide students into pairs. Write questions out ahead of time. One asks the questions and the other gives information about the concert. This also can be changed to writing a report of the concert for their families.
- ❖ Learn one of the most well-known Russia folk songs, *Volga Boatman*. Then, using basic percussion instruments, create one or two rhythm patterns that can accompany the song as it is sung. You may also work with a recording.
- ▶ Russian is the largest country in the world in terms of landmass or area. However, much of it is not populated because it lacks proper soil or climate (too hot or too cold). Find Russia on a map or globe. Notice which continents it is on (Europe and Asia) They are joined (Eurasia), but the artificial boundary between the continents of Europe and Asia lies along the Ural Mountains, south to the Ural River and the Caspian Sea and along the Caucasus Mountains to the Black Sea. See if you can identify all of these landmarks.
- * Think about the traditions in your family. What traditions are American? What traditions are from another culture that represents your family. What are these traditions associated with: celebrations (wedding, birthday, etc.), religious holidays, eating, dress, beliefs or legends? Discuss the advantages of having traditions that are passed on in your family. Are there any disadvantages? If so, discuss them as well.

- 🌀 Select a specific folk song from any culture you know, are learning about, or find interesting. Learn the song in English or another language. Find a recording of the song, if possible, and learn to sing it with the correct rhythm, pronunciation, dynamics (loud and soft), and in the correct tempo (fast or slow). Determine the mood of the song. Does it express strength, protest, romance, fun, sorrow, happiness or worship? Perhaps it is a hero's tale. Sing the song the way it was intended. Then sing it again exaggerating elements of music (tempo - faster, slower; dynamics - louder, softer, etc.) to make the mood even more obvious.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Cavalier, Debbie. *Folk Dances from Around the World*. Alfred Publishing, 1997.

Maes, Francis, translated by Arnold and Erica Pomerans (2001). *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*. University of California Press.

<http://www.russianfolk.com/> - Click on 'Downloads' for downloadable music.