

Feature

Russian Duo: a melding of cultures and musical genres

by Mike Telin



I first had the pleasure of meeting Russian Duo — **Oleg Kruglyakov**, balalaika and **Terry Boyarsky**, piano — at the Performing Arts Exchange conference in Atlanta three years ago while wandering aimlessly through the exhibition hall. In the midst of hundreds of agents representing thousands of musical and entertainment groups, discovering a duo comprising balalaika and piano

stood out as unique. Upon introducing myself to Oleg and Terry, I found them to be engaging people, who were truly passionate about their music. I also discovered that they, like myself, were from Cleveland.

Since that time I have been following the numerous successes the duo has had in a relatively short period of time, given that their unique combination of instruments is not what one might expect to find on the stage of traditional classical chamber music venues.

The story of Russian Duo is a fascinating one. Oleg Kruglyakov says “Something like this would have been impossible ten twenty years ago. Also twenty year ago I could not have made a project with an American pianist because of political reasons. And without the Internet all of this would have been impossible. But the world is changing”.

We spoke to Oleg Kruglyakov and Terry Boyarsky by telephone and asked them to share their musical story with us. We began by asking Oleg when he began playing the balalaika, and why he chose it. We also had an extremely enlightening discussion about

his musical education in Russia where it is common for students of “folk” instruments to receive the same training as the students of “classical” instruments at the conservatories.

Mike Telin: At what age did you begin playing the balalaika?

Oleg Kruglyakov: I was eight years old. I remember hearing it on radio and television, and I liked the sound. Because it was practically free for me to go to the music school under the Soviet system, when they tested me for musical abilities, they said that I could choose any instrument, violin, or piano, whatever, and I chose balalaika.

MT: And you can study the instrument all the way through the conservatory system?

Oleg: Yes, that is what I did; you can get the complete musical education. Of course they also teach you how to make arrangements for a Russian Folk Orchestra, and how to conduct them. But you do specialize on a particular instrument as a performer, and prove yourself on a final exam. I don't know how it is now, but when I was there you could receive a few different qualifications, like Russian Folk Orchestra conductor, or music school teacher, as well as a concert performer, and for that you must be able to perform well.

MT: And concert performer is the qualification that you have?

Oleg: Yes it is.

MT: Did you think about getting any of the others, like Russian Folk Orchestra conductor?

Oleg: Not while I was in school because I was already traveling so much performing with many different groups. And to get that qualification you need to spend a lot of time working with [and conducting] orchestras. Although I was pretty good at conducting, and the school administration told me that I could also try for [the conducting degree], but as I said, I was already playing so much that I said no.

MT: Who were your primary teachers?

Oleg: I studied with Yuri Klepalov, who was a unique balalaika performer. He was the first one to play a two-set solo concert, and he composed music for that purpose as well. At the conservatory I also studied with Yevgeny Blinov, who is an [extremely famous] teacher. He is now retired and living in Kiev, but we still stay in touch with each other by Skype. Terry has also met him on Skype, and he is helping us, especially by sending us all sorts of music. Back in the mid 1940's, he created a guide for composers to [attract them] to writing for the balalaika and he has helped us to create one for today.

MT: Oleg, before you began collaborating with Terry, did you play solo balalaika with piano?

Oleg: Yes I did, in fact, when you are at conservatory, you have a person who is called concertmaster, who is usually a woman, but who is also a pianist.

Terry Boyarsky: Oleg explained to me that at conservatory, you go to your weekly lessons, and you go for your weekly rehearsal with your concertmaster. For me, the concept of concertmaster is fascinating, because here in the US, you could say we call this the collaborative pianist, but in Russia, the concertmaster is given a high status, because she is considered a duo partner, conductor, and orchestra. Serving all of these roles lays the groundwork, provides support, and even the musical direction for the students. This person is also doing part of the teaching, because she does know, in this case, balalaika repertoire, and has a lot of experience.

Oleg: There were not many concertmasters who were really good, so the students were always fighting for the best ones. And when performing, a good concertmaster can really save you.

The story of how Terry Boyarsky and Oleg Kruglyakov came together to form Russian Duo is truly a 21st century internet tale:

Oleg: I was [living in Cleveland], and looking for a collaborator. At first I was looking for someone in the Russian community, and I began to work with a rock musician in Austin, Texas. He was very talented and interested in playing the balalaika. He was a great multi-instrumentalist, with improvisational and compositional skills, but things simply didn't work out. I think it was because of the distance.

At the same time, I was trying to create a project with a Russian accordion player who is probably the best player in all of North America, Alexander Sevastian, and he also works with Quartetto Gelato. We worked together for about two years, but in the end he became so busy with the quartet that we could not continue.

Then I decided that I should try to find somebody locally, and not necessarily Russian. So I began to do some research on the Internet, and I found Terry's Web page on the Ohio Arts Council Web site. I saw that she was a collaborative pianist, and an ethnomusicologist, so I thought she might be interested in the balalaika, so I sent her an e-mail with a sample of my music. And she answered and we met at her house and tried to play some things together.

Terry: I would say that it took about five minutes to realize that there was something musical between the two of us. I remember him placing a stack of music on the piano, and I just sight-read everything, and he played it all by heart. But also when we first met, his English was not as good as it is today.

Oleg: No, not good at all because I was working only with Russians for about eight years, and I didn't actually have any American friends. I had no conversational skills. I was able to read and translate, especially if it was something to do with music.

MT: So Terry, what did you think when you received an e-mail from this person who played the balalaika?

Terry: My first thought was that I had played chamber music with every instrument that I know of, including double bass, harp, and trombone. But the balalaika? While it sounded intriguing, I wondered what could possibly be there, repertoire-wise, for piano and balalaika? So I thought I would do it for fun. I did go to his YouTube videos and listened to him, and I was very impressed with his virtuosity.

But when he arrived and explained exactly how much music was written for piano and balalaika, I was blown away because I had no idea there was so much. As an ethnomusicologist I was happy to find this out, and I would say this has been a whole other university education; learning about the music, the culture, and the attitude towards music and musicians. It has been a great learning experience.

Oleg: also her name, Boyarsky, is Russian.

MT: The duo has been together how many years?

Terry: Three and a half, because it was October 1st when he sent me the e-mail.

Oleg: I guess we are a living example of cultural collaboration. I think this is very important as the world becomes more and more global. I think this is forcing different cultures to collaborate.

Terry: But just because Oleg has learned to speak English and I am learning to speak Russian does not mean we are always communicating, because everything about us is so different, because the cultures in which we grew up were so different.

MT: Terry, prior to meeting Oleg were you familiar with the balalaika?

Terry: I was. Because I come from a Russian-Jewish background, and as a kid I was involved in folk dancing, and I listened to Theodore Bikel, who used a lot of balalaikas in

his music, so I was familiar with the sound. I would say that I was more familiar with the sound of the Russian Folk orchestra, and its passionate, soulful musical quality.

MT: Russian Folk Orchestras have been mentioned a few times now; what is the typical compliment of instruments?

Oleg: There is a group of balalaikas, prima, secunda, alto, bass, double-bass, sometimes piccolo sizes, domra in three sizes, gusli, a concert sized table harp, bayan, a button accordion, jaleika, a wind instrument, treschotki a percussion instrument, and a birch bark whistle for certain effects. And sometimes they include some instruments from the symphony orchestra.

MT: Are there different sizes to the orchestras?

Oleg: Yes they come in different sizes; usually there are thirty to forty members, but it can go up to one hundred or more members.

In addition to creating their own arrangements of pieces, such as the Russian Rag, the Russian Duo is also interested in creating commissioning projects with US composers to continue the advancement of the balalaika cause.

MT: I understand that Yevgeny Blinov continues to send music via the internet from Kiev, and you mentioned earlier that back in the mid 1940's, he created a guide for composers writing for the balalaika; Tell me more about the guide?

Oleg: It contains information about the tuning, and range of the instrument; what keys are the most comfortable to play in, and basic playing techniques. There are other things like which intervals are the easiest to play, and which range can play the intervals. Then how melody is created, and which chords fit which register, technical things like that.

Terry: We have taken the document and put it into Finale so that composers can see it on the staff.

MT: Are there still composers in Russia who are writing for the instrument?

Oleg: Yes, although now there are fewer because writing for the balalaika is not very profitable.

MT: If you can, could you tell me why it is difficult to write for the balalaika?

Oleg: It is difficult because it has a limited range, only two and a half octaves. And because it is tricky to play, you need to know the instrument really well in order to compose for it.

Terry: I think it is difficult to write for the balalaika because there are many different qualities of sound, pizzicato, tremolo, tremolo-vibrato, and even some flamenco guitar techniques. If you think of writing for the mandolin, you think of strumming and pizzicato, but the balalaika has a huge range of timbres, and moods in its tone quality. And I think to explore all of this you need to know the instrument very well.

Oleg: And to make good music, you have to combine all if these things really well.

The combination of balalaika and piano, intriguing as it sounds, does present some challenges for Russian Duo to convince traditional presenters of chamber music to book them on their series along with piano trios and string quartets.

Terry: I think that most people don't know about the balalaika and the fact that it is a serious instrument, and when we say that we play classical chamber music, we mean it. When presenters do come to our concerts, even if they are skeptical, when they see that many times our concerts are standing room only, we do get ovations and people buy our CD's they are blown away. Yes, there is some education that needs to be done, because the duo is unique. We also like to talk to our audiences, and Oleg is very funny.

Oleg: I would say that our best selling point is our music. [Laughing] Maybe I am funny, but that is not our selling point.

Mike Telin: Do you find that most audiences are receptive to your performances?

Oleg Kruglyakov: Yes, they are very enthusiastic, and interested.

MT: What do you think interests them?

Oleg: I think it is because the combination of balalaika and piano is probably something new to them. And the balalaika sounds funny; I mean I became attracted to the balalaika because of how it sounds. It does sound funny, but you can also play serious music.

MT: You recently had the honor of being chosen to showcase at the 2011 Chamber Music America conference this past January in New York. Did you find the delegates to be receptive, as I am fairly certain you were the only balalaika – piano duo showcasing?

Terry: [after a lot of laughter] Really we are the only balalaika – piano duo in North America.

Oleg: I would say the experience was great. The people were very warm, and everything was very high class. I felt very much at home.

Terry: People always come up to us after concerts, mostly to Oleg, because the instrument fascinates them, but we did not leave for about a half an hour after the performance because so many people were talking to us.

MT: And I seem to remember that Bobby McFerrin was a bit taken with Oleg and the balalaika as well?

Oleg: Yeah, and he was trying to sing in Russian, while I was singing a Russian song.

Terry: Yes, that was at the Keynote address, and his topic was improvisation, and it was such a perfect example of spontaneity; Oleg going up and breaking into song, and Bobby McFerrin breaking into fake Russian, singing in canon and harmony with Oleg. It was an amazing happening. And I think that all of the musicians really got it. And the one who did it was the “folk” musician, who was trained as a classical musician.

MT: Oleg, do you consider yourself to be a classical musician?

Oleg: Classical musician, hmm, well I am classically trained, and I do play classical music, so probably for part of me, yes I do. But also I am a folk musician as well. For me it is an interesting integration.

Terry: One of the things we do during our concerts is to show both sides of the balalaika. We show how it started as a peasant instrument, and later made its way to the concert stage. We do kind of a lecture demonstration to show how it is played in the village, then why someone had the idea to turn it into a concert instrument. This is how it sounded in the [Russian] court back in 1880, and this is how it sounds when performing classical music. It’s great that we can play both sides of the instrument historically and this makes it interesting musically. I think people are engaged by how this curious instrument can be both a folk and classical instrument.

Oleg: I think it is a very good experiment done by Russians, because the whole balalaika project started before the Revolution. If you look at every other folk instrumental tradition, it is something that grows in the wild, and what the Russians did was to take something wild and combine it with something more [structured] like classical music, and it is a very interesting marriage that created something unique. You don’t teach banjo players in the US conservatories. So it was it was an attempt to put a folk instrument with the structure of classical music, which is why it is unique.

Click [here](#) to visit the Russian Duo Web site and [here](#) to read an essay on the Russian folk music orchestra.

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