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# **University of Southampton**

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Music

## **Russian Musicians in Exile: the United Kingdom, 1900-1950**

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by

**David William Alcock**

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# University of Southampton

## Abstract

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### **Russian Musicians in Exile: the United Kingdom, 1900-1950**

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The dissertation examines the contributions of Russian exiled/refugee musicians to the British Light Music industry between 1900 and 1950 and seeks to assess how displacement affected their musical activities. Focus rests on their engagement with social, political and artistic institutions within the country; their involvement with the formation of English balalaika/domra ensembles; their participation in Variety Theatre entertainment, opera performance and concerts; music-making within provincial communities; their encounters with the Musicians' Union and Variety Artistes' Federation; and their employment within institutions such as the BBC and ENSA. The first-wave Russian diaspora in Britain is considered as a small but distinctive community which presented challenges not encountered in other Russian diasporas but which contributed significantly to the cultural life of Britain.

Research engages with music and displacement, music and social/political developments in Wales, music and gender (ladies' orchestras), music and nationalism, Russian folk music, exoticism, nostalgia, and longing in music, theatre studies (Variety Theatre), and formal and informal concert performance. Research aims to retrieve a number of 'lost histories', case studies of a selected number of musicians in the Light Music industry; Edward Soermus, Vasily Andreeff, Alice Gardiner, Nikolai Medvedeff, the Wolkowsky family troupe and Vladimir Rosing. The reception of Russian performers, balalaika/domra ensembles and their repertoire (predominantly Russian folk music) in British press reporting provides perspectives on British perceptions of Russian folk music, its musicians and their instruments.

Newspaper reviews and reporting; advertising and programmes; contemporary journals and reports; *Hansard* and government policy documents; accounts of immigrant life; BBC correspondence, contracts and listings; private letters (unpublished); memoirs; scores and music manuscripts; personal interviews; rare film footage and sound recordings provide the principal primary sources.

Research findings are interpreted within the theoretical discourse of Nostalgia, Memory, Longing, Displacement and the Exotic. The outcome of the research is to affirm the positive interventions made by Russian exile musicians in British cultural life, to reach for a better understanding of how displacement affected their professional lives, to understand how nostalgia, longing and affirmations of cultural identity operated in their musical choices, and to restore these musicians to British music historiography.

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## Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: David William Alcock

Title of thesis: Russian Musicians in Exile: the United Kingdom, 1900-1950.

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signature: .....Date:.....



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## Definitions and Abbreviations

AMU.....	Amalgamated Musicians' Union established in 1893.
Art Music.....	Serious music claiming high aesthetic value (classical music) as opposed to popular light music.
BBC .....	British Broadcasting Corporation. First established in 1922 as the British Broadcasting Company. It became the British Broadcasting Corporation on 1 January 1927.
BBC WAC .....	British Broadcasting Corporation, Written Archives Centre (Caversham).
B.M.G. Magazine .....	The Banjo, Mandolin, Guitar Magazine.
Bolshevik.....	Left-wing faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). Upon seizing power after the 1917 Revolution and the split with the Mensheviks it was renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Ideology is based on Marxist-Leninist principles.
Displacement .....	A condition or process where people are moved from their normal place of abode.
Émigré.....	Displaced persons usually relocating to a foreign country for political and/or ideological reasons.
ENSA.....	Entertainments National Service Association. An organisation formed in 1939 to provide entertainment to the British armed forces during World War Two.
Exile.....	A state of banishment. Banished and/or expelled persons, usually as a punitive action for political and ideological reasons.
Folk Music .....	Music of the people, transmitted orally over extended time, usually unknown composers, sung or played on traditional instruments, usually affirming a national identity.
Great Britain/UK.....	1707-1800 known as Great Britain. 1801–1922 United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland – incorporating England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Following Irish partition (1922), United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom (UK) presently incorporates Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland (and the isles).

## Definitions and Abbreviations

I.L.P. ....	Independent Labour Party.
Light Music .....	Music claiming lower levels of aesthetic achievement, popular tunes, jazz and easily accessible classical works.
Pogrom .....	The organised massacre of a community – usually of a particular ethnicity.
Refugee.....	Displaced persons forced to leave their country because of persecution, war, and threats to their well-being.
Russia Abroad.....	Dispersed communities (diasporas) of Russians living in countries other than Greater Russia.
Russian .....	<i>Russkiy</i> refers to ethnic Russians. <i>Rossiiskiy</i> refers to Russian citizens of any ethnicity.
U.S.S.R.....	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1922-1991.
VAF .....	Variety Artistes' Federation (Union) – precursor of British Actors' Equity Association. Established 1906.
Variety Theatre.....	Variety Theatre is a format of entertainment - a series of Acts or Turns. There is no through-line plot but consists of a variety of independent acts, usually displaying some particular ability.
Waves of Emigration .....	“Minus One” mainly Jewish emigration 1880–1917. First-Wave - after the 1917 Revolution, First World War and Russian Civil War. Second-Wave – during and after the Second World War. Third-Wave – mainly Jewish Zionists, dissidents and defectors after 1967. Fourth-Wave emigration after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fifth-Wave – during Putin’s regime. <sup>1</sup>
White Russians .....	Russians who emigrated from Imperialist Russia after the Russian Revolution (1917) and Russian Civil War (1917–1923), chiefly those who supported the Imperialist White Army in opposition to the Red Army (Bolsheviks).

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), pp. 171-184. Dubinets provides this useful orientation to the different waves of Russian emigration.

## Transliteration

- All quotations retain their grammar and spelling – including incorrect spelling.
- Composer's names are those conventionally used in English, thus Tchaikovsky rather than Chaikovsky or Tschaikovsky.
- Personal name spelling is retained where the individual uses a specific spelling in English; most commonly Andreeff (rather than Andreyev), Tchagadaeff (rather than Chagodaev or Chegodaev), Medvedeff (rather than Medvedev), Troyanovsky (rather than Trojanowsky), Soermus (rather than Sörmus).
- Document titles retain their language.
- Russian music titles are translated and generally accepted English titles are retained.
- A great variety of personal name spelling is encountered in publications, letters and unpublished texts. I have taken the advice of my Russian translators and note variations of spelling in footnotes when appropriate.

## Chapter 1 Musicians and the Russian Diaspora in Britain, 1900-1950

Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,  
Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,  
Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation...  
... would you be pleased  
To find a nation of such barbarous temper,  
That, breaking out in hideous violence,  
Would not afford you an abode on earth,  
Whet their detested knives against your throats,  
Spurn you like dogs, ... what would you think  
To be thus used? This is the strangers' case...

*The Book of Sir Thomas More*, Act 2, Scene 4.<sup>2</sup>

Exile, banishment and displacement have been with us since Adam and Eve. We still witness the desperate plight of refugees arriving in the UK every day. At times of world social and political instability the movement of huge migrations of people can find millions of people displaced into alien environments. The Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and two World Wars were just such upheavals which led to the dispersal of Russians across the world. These refugees gathered into Russian communities abroad – Russian diasporas. Russian émigré/refugee/exile musicians continued to arrive in Britain between 1900-1950 and used their ability to make music as a means to earning a living, to ‘getting on’ in Russia Abroad. Ian Bild discusses the notion of ‘getting on’ within immigrant Jewish communities in the East End of London but whether ‘getting on’ amounts to acculturation is questionable. Nevertheless, efforts were certainly made by Russian musicians to engage with the English artistic community,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, British Museum. MS: Harley 7368. Sir Thomas More's address to the mob is a speech attributed to William Shakespeare. See Walter Wilson Greg, ed., *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, Malone Society Reprint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911). Also, Alfred William Pollard, ed., *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923).

especially in London where opportunities for employment were more plentiful.<sup>3</sup> Marc Raeff offers a now widely accepted definition of Russia Abroad:

Russia Abroad was geographically neither homogenous nor a self-contained unit. Its members were dispersed in many countries and continents. Centres formed wherever a significant number of scholarly and artistically productive émigrés found more or less stable circumstances where they could engage in creative work. Transcending physical distances and the barriers of national frontiers, the Russian exiles retained close contact among themselves, strengthening their cultural identity and unity as Russia Abroad.<sup>4</sup>

Robert H. Johnston makes the further observation, ‘Many of the pre-October political and cultural leaders who got away tended to see themselves, in the early years at least, as constituting a “Russia Abroad” (*zarubezhnaia Rossiia*), the temporary guardians of their country’s interests until the Bolshevik perversion had run its brief, murderous course.’<sup>5</sup>

In Britain, Russian émigré musicians within the small Russian diaspora found employment in the entertainment industry, in theatres, concert halls, public spaces and occasions for music-making. Documentation of these performing musicians, given the ephemeral nature of their work, is elusive. Their contributions to music-making within regional communities and more generally to British Light Music are ‘lost histories’ as very little about them has been formally documented and synthesised.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for this are varied; these musicians fall outside the pantheon of great Russian composers, composers of works of high aesthetic value (Art Music). Russian immigrant musicians in Britain, particularly those playing folk instruments such as the balalaika and domra, appeared to operate on the fringes of musical activity and, while they became popular and sought-after performers, their contributions were not accorded the same significance as those Russian composers of Art Music whose works were increasingly performed at the Queen’s Hall and the newly instituted Promenade Concerts organised by Henry Wood and Robert Newman.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Bild, *The Jews in Britain*, (London: Batsford Academic and Education, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration 1919-1939*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Johnston, *New Mecca New Babylon: Paris and the Russian Exiles: 1920-1945*, (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> See Definitions and Abbreviations for Light Music and Art Music.

<sup>7</sup> (Sir) Henry Wood, together with impresario Robert Newman, founded a series of concerts at the Queen’s Hall; first concert performance conducted by Henry Wood on 10 August, 1895. Now popularly known as the BBC Proms. Sir Henry Wood championed Russian composers such as Tchaikovsky and Glinka. In 1898 Wood married his first wife, Olga Michailoff (a divorcee), who was Russian. She was a singing pupil of Wood’s. Wood refers to her as Princess Olga Ouroussoff but according to Jacobs she was not entitled to the rank or the surname. Her mother was Princess Sofiya Urusova. See Arthur Jacobs, *Henry J. Wood: Maker of the Proms*, (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 59.

These musicians were to a large extent amateur or semi-amateur performers. Some had had previous connections with military bands and community ensembles in Russia. In their new environment with no reliable musical pedigree they relied solely on their ability to play the balalaika and domra. The distinction between professional and amateur status was blurred and many of these musicians could not read music but played by ear. They turned to the music with which they were familiar – Russian folk music. A number of these musicians boldly sought opportunities to perform and earn a living on the professional Light Music circuit but for the most part they played in Russian environments such as Russian restaurants, gatherings, fetes and days celebrating Russian culture, music making at a community level. In this regard it is mindful to take heed of Ruth Finnegan's persuasive study of local music making in Milton Keynes; the capture of musical activity amongst local amateur musicians contributing to a vibrant musical life within a provincial town. This arena for enquiry, she advocates, has been largely neglected in music studies. Her deliberate avoidance of focussing on *works* (and their composers) from the Art-Music canon and focussing on *practice* (by her own admission a more ephemeral pursuit), is instructive for this dissertation. Her discussion of the varied contexts in which music is performed, the local institutions in which it is found, the music genres and styles played, and the instruments played by musicians, resonate with this dissertation's study of Russian musicians and their musical activities in British musical life.<sup>8</sup>

The management of artistic and specifically musical strategies by these Russian musicians was affected fundamentally by their status as immigrants (émigrés). Their desire to perpetuate and preserve artistic (musical) forms in displacement in the face of the dissolution of Imperialist Russia is considered alongside their pragmatic exploitation of their 'otherness' (the exotic) in pursuit of forging a successful music career in their host society. The desire to bring music to the service of social and political change within the UK, most notably the advocacy of Bolshevism and socialism, is also considered as a corrective to a general notion that all Russian refugees were imperialist White Russians reaving the Red Russians in Russia.<sup>9</sup> Displacement in a foreign environment, a place that was not home, is considered as the underlying pervasive factor affecting their lives, artistic and otherwise. The final assessment is to consider whether these Russian exiled musicians made any significant and lasting contribution to the musical life of Britain in the first half of the twentieth-century.

A distinction should be made regarding the status of these immigrant musicians – a subtle but distinct definition of terms - whether they were refugees, émigrés or exiles. Simpson provides a

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Finnegan. *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> See Definitions for White Russians.



contemporary perception of the refugee; ‘... an involuntary immigrant. He would rather remain where he is, but conditions religious, economic, political, or social have rendered his life there so uncomfortable or, indeed, so unbearable, that he is forced to migrate from his home and to search for more tolerable conditions of life elsewhere.... an unwanted inhabitant of the world, unwanted in the country of his origin, unwanted in any other country.’<sup>10</sup> Simpson further specifies the definition of a Russian refugee as ‘Any person of Russian origin who does not enjoy or who no longer enjoys the protection of the government of the U.S.S.R. and who has not acquired another nationality.’<sup>11</sup> Refugees became ‘denationalised’, lost their rights of nationality and protection, forced to relocate frequently without travel documents, and had to rely on the goodwill of nations.

Émigrés exercised some control over their displacement and usually moved to another country for political reasons. Russian émigrés arriving in Britain were typically those in opposition to the rising Bolshevik party after the 1917 Revolution and the Russian Civil War. Russian émigrés were predominantly supporters of the White Russian movement and used the term *first-wave émigrés* to describe themselves. Many of the Russian aristocratic émigrés had their lands and money confiscated and found themselves destitute in foreign countries.<sup>12</sup>

Russian exiles were typically those who had been banished and expelled from their homeland, usually as a punitive action, for political and ideological reasons. The overriding characteristic is that they all found themselves displaced in a foreign environment. Johnston suggests that Russians in emigration preferred to be called émigrés as it was reminiscent of the émigrés of the French Revolution. But Johnston states further, in concurrence with Michael Marrus, that ‘they were in reality *refugees*.’ (Johnston italics).<sup>13</sup>

The displaced condition of these musicians bore consequences for the preservation, successful performance and reception of their music within the communities of their host nation. The general perception suggests displacement to be a disadvantaged condition, one which engenders psychological and emotional suffering as well as practical difficulties for the

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<sup>10</sup> John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Question*, Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs, No. 13 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> John Hope Simpson, *Refugees: Preliminary Report of a Survey*, (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1938), pp. 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> See Definitions and Abbreviations: A term used to describe Russians who emigrated from Imperialist Russia after the Russian Revolution (1917) and Russian Civil War (1917–1923), chiefly those who supported the imperialist White Army in opposition to the revolutionary Red Army (Bolsheviks).

<sup>13</sup> Johnston, *New Mecca, New Babylon: Paris and the Russian Exiles, 1920-1945*, p. 7. See also Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted. European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 10.

individual as well as whole communities. These facets of displacement are extensively examined in contributions to Erik Levi and Florian Scheduling's *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*.<sup>14</sup> The disadvantages of displacement are undeniable and in most cases unlooked for; but displacement nevertheless proved to be the spur to surpassing endeavours and attainments and encouraged a determination to forge a life through music. Their engagement as musicians was not a passive, victimized one, despite the many disadvantages they encountered, but an energized, creative contribution to British arts. They engaged successfully as professional musicians and were able, in some measure, to influence British society politically, socially and artistically. It is these considerations that bring my musicians together in this dissertation.

The interest in music from other nations and cultures, particularly those within the British Empire, was particularly strong at the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, as Bennett Zon explores in his assessment of the performance of non-Western music in nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>15</sup> This was a context in which Russian music and its instruments was similarly to find public favour. Folk musicians such as Nikolai Medvedeff (1891-1963) and Alexander Wolkowsky (1869-1959) performed balalaika and domra music and were popular on the Light Music circuit. Avid public and critical interest in the balalaika and domra, and Russian folk music in general, intensified during the first half of the twentieth century, a fascination which fluctuated according to Britain's volatile political relationship with Imperial Russia and the emerging Soviet State after the Russian Revolution. Interest was further fuelled with the sporadic arrival and artistic impact of sensational Russian artists performing in theatres and concert halls. Pianists Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) and Alexander Siloti (1863-1945), bass Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938), and composers featured in the *Ballets Russes* seasons in London such as Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), Vernon Dukelsky (1903-1969),<sup>16</sup> Nikolai Tcherepnin (1873-1945), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), Alexander Borodin (1833-1887) and Nicolai Nabokov (1903-1978). As mentioned, Russian composers were also increasingly performed at the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Erik Levi and Florian Scheduling, eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, (Lanham, Maryland; Toronto; Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2010). This will be discussed in the Literary Review.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett Zon, *Representing Non-Western Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Eastman Studies in Music, (New York: University of Rochester Press; Boydell & Brewer, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> George Gershwin suggested Dukelsky truncate and Americanise his name to Vernon Duke.

<sup>17</sup> Russian composers and works at the Promenade concerts between 1895 and 1950 include: Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 6* (performed every year but three from 1896-1950), and *Symphony No. 5* (every year but five). *March Slav* and the *Piano Concerto No. 1* (every year but four) were similarly popular. Russian composers featured include: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), Henryk Wieniawski (1835-1880), Anton Rubinstein (1829-

These performances of Russian music and dance (and the consequent press reports and reviews) encouraged the general perception of Russia as a mythical, romanticised and exotic domain, a perception which these musicians and artists encouraged. Russian folk music, it can be argued, is redolent with nostalgia and longing. British newspaper reception of the early twentieth century generally views this characteristic as an authentic expression of Russian Soul, that the essence of Russianness (national character) can be expressed in music by its melancholy, its libidinous drive through exciting rhythms, its harmonic evocations of the exotic East, of Tartars and Cossacks, evocations of a landscape of snow and ice, of vast expansive Steppes. The performance of Russian music and dance in Britain allowed for a vicarious and exciting participation in an exotic aesthetic beyond the confines of a more mundane everyday existence.<sup>18</sup>

The core questions brought to this research ask whether a Russian diaspora of any significance took hold in Britain after the 1917 Revolution and to what extent Russian immigrant musicians were able to effectively participate in the musical culture of the country. Central to this consideration is to ascertain to what extent displacement affected their musical activities and how they negotiated their engagement with the music industry. Research examines these musicians' persistent pursuit of Russian music, particularly folk music, and seeks to ascertain to what extent they found favour in the reception of their music. Theoretical discourses on Memory, Nostalgia, and Longing for Home are applied to further understand how their attachments to revolutionary and pre-revolutionary Russia operated in their approach to music-making and in their drive to preserve Russian musical culture abroad. Research also seeks to assess to what extent a perceived willingness to exploit their exotic 'otherness' was a contributing factor to their success. The final assessment is to consider whether these musicians made any lasting contribution to the artistic, social and political life of the country.

A selected number of Russian exile/refugee/émigré musicians and ensembles are considered in a variety of contexts. Musicians did not act alone but were in dialogue with institutions such as

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1894), Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931), Alexander Serov (1820-1871), Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936), Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813-1869), Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), Anatoly Lyadov (1855-1914), Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859-1935), Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857), Cesar Cui (1835-1918), Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), Sergei Lyapunov (1859-1924), Karl Davydov (1838-1889), Julius Bleichmann (1868-1909), Alexander Borodin (1833-1887), Iosif Ivanovici (1845-1902), Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943), Anton Arensky (1861-1906), Sergei Vasilenko (1872-1956), Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975), Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978), Anatoly Alexandrov (1888-1982), Nikolai Budashkin (1910-1988), Vissarion Shebalin (1902-), Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), Reinhold Glière (1875-1956), Alexander Mosolov (1900-1973), Alexander Veprik (1899-1958), Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951), Nikolai Ivanov-Radkevich (1904-1962), Mikhail Starokadomsky 1901-1954).

<sup>18</sup> Russian Soul is discussed more extensively in Chapter Three.

the BBC and the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA). Musicians were also obliged to engage with The Musicians' Union and the Variety Artistes' Federation and were not unaffected by government policies which impacted on their creative lives. Theatre and concert hall managements, agents, producers and employers all exerted employment pressures and procedures which had to be negotiated.

Focus rests on the following musicians:

Edward Soermus (1878-1940) – *Der Rote Geiger*.<sup>19</sup>

- Soermus was an Estonian concert violinist who married two English women, settled for a time in Wales, and was sponsored by the Labour movement to perform in Temperance Halls, churches, Town Halls and other community centres in Wales. He was a Bolshevik refugee after the 1905 uprising in Russia and fled to Finland and thereafter to various European countries. After the 1917 Revolution Soermus could have returned to Russia but chose to remain in the West and promote Bolshevik ideology (as well as generally educate) through the medium of music. Soermus provides an alternative case to the generalised notion that Russians fleeing the Revolution were aristocratic, educated, wealthy classes and military personnel (Imperialist White Russians).

Vasily Andreeff (1861-1918) and his Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra.<sup>20</sup>

- Andreeff visited England for extended periods in 1909, 1910 and 1912 appearing with his balalaika orchestra at the Coliseum in London as well as further short seasons and regional tours. His balalaika orchestra was a revelation and became immensely popular, sparking a craze for Russian folk music, learning to play the balalaika, and contributing to the avid interest in Russian arts in general. Members of his orchestra, Prince Tchagadaeff (1889-1949) and Boris Troyanovsky (1883-1951) became influential teachers of the balalaika. Tchagadaeff conducted, arranged music for balalaika ensemble, published balalaika Tutors, and performed with regional balalaika ensembles such as that formed by Alice Gardiner in Cheltenham. Gardiner's activities and her association with Tchagadaeff are examined as an example of the English engagement

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<sup>19</sup> There are various spellings of his name: Edward, Eduard, Edourd, Edvard. Soermus, Sõrmus, Surmus. I adopt Edward Soermus, the form he used to sign his name and most commonly found in English print. Alternative spellings in quotations are retained.

<sup>20</sup> There are spelling variations: W.W. Andreeff, Andraieff, Andreiv, V. Andreyev, Andree. I retain the form used by Andreeff in his programmes and publicity – Vasily Andreeff. *Grove Music Online* uses Vasily Vasil'yevich Andreyev. Alternative spellings used in quotations are retained.

with the balalaika and Russian folk music.<sup>21</sup> Andreeff's influence in community music-making was considerable and witnessed in the formation of balalaika ensembles, both professional and amateur, around the country.

### The Wolkowsky Family Troupe.

- Alexander Wolkowsky (1869-1959) and his family of performing artistes (singers, dancers and instrumentalists) arrived in Europe in the 1890s escaping the harsh realities of the Pale of Settlement and the increasing pogroms occurring in Russia, specifically in Ukraine from which they fled. The family was not overtly Jewish but had Jewish connections within the family. They visited England in 1903 and thereafter travelled to the United States where they appeared with various circuses. They returned to England and settled c.1907 but made further forays to the continent and the United States. They are examined in the context of Variety Theatre in which they appeared successfully around the country. They harnessed and exploited the Variety Theatre format, to which their performance style was suited, and in doing so introduced Russian folk music and dance to British audiences. Despite their success the practical realities of the entertainment industry reveal the insecurities and difficulties faced by immigrant performing ensembles.

### Nikolai Medvedeff (1891-1963) and his various ensembles.<sup>22</sup>

- Medvedeff arrived in England as a prisoner of war in 1920. He was not from an aristocratic or land-owning family and had joined the military academy as a young man. After the First World War (spent as a German Prisoner of War) he avoided conscription into the English forces fighting in the Russian Civil War. He remained in England after his release in 1921 and formed several popular balalaika ensembles. He performed in Variety Theatre, concert halls, cabaret and vaudeville, bandstands in public parks, charity events, as well as broadcasting for the BBC. He joined the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) during the Second World War entertaining the troops. He was instrumental in promoting Russian balalaika music performance and

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<sup>21</sup> Here, as in the whole dissertation, Britain or Great Britain, refers to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. 1900-1922 the country was referred to as Great Britain or the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. After Irish partition in 1922 the country became known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK). English (as a noun) refers to the inhabitants of England; English as an adjective relates to the people of England and its culture; English also refers to the language. See, Definitions and Abbreviations for Great Britain and United Kingdom.

<sup>22</sup> Medvedeff used this form of spelling rather than Medvedev in the English context.

keeping Russian folk music before the British public until the late 1950s. Medvedeff is the clearest case we have of a Russian musician performing in the Light Music and entertainment industry. Our knowledge of Medvedeff is made possible through a series of letters which detail his personal and professional life in music in the UK.<sup>23</sup>

Several Russian musicians having associations with the above are also examined in passing, particularly the composer Samuel Alman (1877-1947), the already mentioned balalaikists Prince Tchagadaeff and Boris Troyanovsky, composer and conductor Albert Coates (1882-1953), and tenor and opera producer Vladimir Rosing (1890-1963). All these Russian musicians were displaced artists within the small Russian diaspora in the UK. They were obliged to deal with British immigration laws, institutions such as the Musicians' Union and the Variety Artists' Federation, language differences, social mores, employment, business and management systems and the changing political landscape of English society. Their political and social beliefs, choice of repertoire, manner of performance and approach to the function of music in society, were all influenced to some extent by their pre-revolutionary lives in Imperialist Russia and are key to understanding their management of displacement as musicians in the United Kingdom.

### 1.1 Methodology

The research examines Russian musicians within the English musical context prompting a perspective based on English primary sources, particularly those dealing with the reception of these musicians and their music.<sup>24</sup> A German biography of Edward Soermus is exceptional as are a few Russian texts dealing with Russian performing musicians in the UK.<sup>25</sup> There is virtually no formal secondary discussion of these musicians in English. Biographical and professional data is found scattered in press reporting (regional and national): this includes articles discussing ensembles and musicians, descriptions of Russian musical instruments (balalaikas and domras in particular), supplements on how to play these instruments, noting and description of repertoire, reviews of performances, and biographical information. Newspaper

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<sup>23</sup> Most Russian immigrants lived in London but toured frequently to Scotland and Wales as well as to the English counties.

<sup>24</sup> Despite this decision it became necessary to consult several German and Russian texts, particularly a monograph on Edward Soermus and a collection of letters written by Nikolai Medvedeff detailing his career in music in the UK. Medvedeff's letters are hitherto undiscovered and important. Two translators, Bibs Ekkel and Trefor Thynne, to whom I extend my thanks, were engaged to provide translations from the Russian. Bibs Ekkel also assisted me with Russian references found in the literature. German translations are my own.

<sup>25</sup> Harri Kõrvits, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger, Eine Monographie*, trans. Christof Rüger (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1968).

reporting is analysed to identify the pervasive issues these musicians faced as displaced artists. In particular, reporting in the newspaper *The Pioneer* becomes central to assessing the extent to which Russian musicians such as Edward Soermus were able to influence political dialogue within the country. Newspaper reporting is also assessed to gauge the English reception of these musicians not only in terms of critical assessments of their music but also as an indicator of how Russian music was interpreted and enjoyed by British listeners and viewers. Trade journals such as the *Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar* magazine provide scores, technical instruction, general information on fretted instruments as well detailing the activities of Russian folk musicians in the country. Articles in the *B.M.G.* have an educative purpose in encouraging folk musicians to master the balalaika and domra and form regional ensembles.

The lived experience of these musicians is further examined through a variety of other primary sources: personal letters, contemporary letters of friends and family, interviews with and reminiscences of surviving family members, personal utterances in programmes, transcripts of interviews which reveal a musician's artistic views and intentions, and some biographical background. Contemporary journals and trade publications attest to the popularity of the balalaika and Russian folk music within the music industry. Self-promotional pamphlets, alongside a perceived manipulation of press reporting of personal details in some cases, provide an insight into how a number of these musicians sought to construct an artistic persona for public consumption.

Theatre and concert programmes and BBC radio listings provide a perspective on what genres of music were played; the composers, arrangers, conductors and performers of the music; the specific repertoire played, some of which reveal an assimilation and adaptation of British folk melodies for performance; and the structure of programmes and the manner of presentation. One further enhancing source, and a rare glimpse into the ephemeral world of performance, is found in Pathé film clips and BBC sound recordings - visual and aural sources which capture the nature of their music and performance style.

These musicians encountered a number of political, institutional and professional factors, a contextual milieu, which affected their lives. The British Government's approach to immigrants and artists is reflected in *Hansard*, government bills, papers, minutes and reports, and the provisions laid out in various immigration laws (Aliens Acts). The professional working lives of immigrant musicians were further controlled by Musicians' Union and Variety Artistes' Federation rules. Minutes of the Musicians' Union are consulted to reveal how foreign musicians were treated by the industry and how attempts were made to encourage government

legislation to restrict the activities of these musicians within the profession.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, *The Performer* operated as an official trade journal and expressed the views of the Variety Artists' Federation. One further consideration is the shifting xenophobia towards, or acceptance of, Russians at a time when the British Empire was at its strongest and its relationship with Russia was undergoing a shift due to social upheavals in Russia.

I have been gifted a collection of unpublished letters (in Russian) written to friends in Russia by Nikolai Medvedeff between 1959 and 1962. These lengthy letters are retrospective in subject matter and provide a glimpse of Medvedeff's early life in music in pre-revolutionary Russia, his life as a prisoner of war during World War One, and extensively describes his working life as a Russian musician in the UK from 1921-1960.<sup>27</sup> Sources dealing with the activities of individual Russian musicians in the UK are rare making these letters a valuable contribution to our knowledge of Russian musicians in British arts and society. Appendix A provides a brief report and overview of Medvedeff's letters.<sup>28</sup>

The final assessment of this present research is to determine whether Russian music, and Russian folk music in particular, endured within the Russian diaspora in Britain; to make some assessment as what extent first-wave musicians acculturated into British society and arts; to affirm their undoubted contribution to the Light Music scene in the UK in the first half of the twentieth-century; to speculate why the balalaika and interest in Russian folk music appears to have faded in British musical taste; and to rehabilitate these 'lost histories' to music studies in Britain.

The broad interdisciplinary sweep of this present research is acknowledged and seeks to contribute to the disciplines of Music in Displacement, Music and Nationalism/Imperialism, Music and Politics, Folk Music, Light Music (Popular Music), Theatre Studies, and Gender Studies (ladies' orchestras). Research is also examined through the lens of Nostalgia, Memory, Longing and the Exotic in music.

## 1.2 Chapter Summary and Theoretical Context

The engagement of Russian exiled musicians with music-making in the UK and their professional activities within the music industry presupposes that a community of Russians was to be found in the UK and it is my view that such a diaspora did exist but with idiosyncratic

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<sup>26</sup> Minutes of the Musicians' Union are lodged at Stirling University.

<sup>27</sup> References to biographical detail relating to Medvedeff's life prior to his arrival in Britain is referred to only when it has some bearing on his professional music life in the UK.

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix A.



characteristics which did not align with received notions of what constitutes a diaspora.<sup>29</sup> In this regard Rogers Brubaker questions and charts early notions of the term 'diaspora' which provides a useful orientation to the idiosyncrasies of the Russian diaspora in the UK.

The chapters are constructed around selected musicians and the social context in which they operate. Chapter Two centres on Edward Soermus, 'The Greatest Russian Violinist' (*Der Rote Geiger*). He managed his own publicity (supported by the Labour press in Wales – chiefly *The Pioneer*) to construct a public persona, the genius violinist, the fiery revolutionary, the great reformer and friend of the people. In this regard Bennett Zon's discussion of Music Biography provides a useful examination of the concept of musical genius found in music biography of the late nineteenth-century.<sup>30</sup> Soermus brought social conscience to his music performances by establishing and financially supporting an orphanage (in Germany) and supporting various charitable causes (the children of English and Scottish miners). He engaged with the socialist movement in Wales and discussion focuses on the political and social forces which affected his activities within this movement.<sup>31</sup> His determination to remain in England (and Germany) as an outspoken Bolshevik ensured he remained a fish out of water, at odds with the governments of the day. His was not a passive acceptance of his lot but an energised engagement with community which sought to educate the Welsh (and German) working classes through the medium of music and challenge the political status quo in the country at a time when Britain was undergoing significant social upheavals witnessed in strikes, demonstrations and protest meetings. Newspaper reporting of his concerts, objections to his arrests and deportations, the frequent vociferous responses to his Bolshevik speeches, all exposed the British Government's nervousness with Bolshevism and the growing unrest amongst workers and disadvantaged communities. Soermus eschewed the formal concert hall and chose rather to play in community halls, frequently for audiences who had little exposure to formal music concerts. His choice of repertoire was eclectic but always connected to his socialist philosophy. His manner of performing and his frequent outbursts of political rhetoric from the stage (sometimes causing public censure and audience fracas at his concerts) were indicative of his zeal and ardour instilled during his active participation in the 1905 uprising in Russia in which he participated as a student. These times became the 'good old days' in his later life for which he

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<sup>29</sup> Rogers Brubaker, 'The 'diaspora' diaspora,' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28/1 (2005): pp. 1-19. Diaspora Journals have proliferated and provided a forum for the discussion of displaced communities and individuals in various national contexts.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett Zon, 'Music Biography' in *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 199-225.

<sup>31</sup> He was similarly politically active in other countries such as Germany and Finland.

longed. He suffered financial hardship in his later years as demand for his concerts waned and further deportation threats resulted in his return to Russia in 1937.

Chapter Three turns to Russian musicians within English communities. The formation of regional balalaika ensembles, both amateur and professional, was a result of the great influence of Vasily Andreeff, a balalaika reformer and conductor who visited the UK with his orchestra in 1910, 1911, and 1913. His concerts at the Coliseum in London were hugely successful and initiated a craze in the country for the balalaika and its repertoire. The chapter assesses the public reception of these concerts of Russian folk music, the resulting fascination with the exotic, and considers the notion of Russian Soul (popular at the time) as a perceived marker of national identity. A number of Andreeff's balalaika soloists, Prince Tchagadaeff and Boris Troyanovsky for example, remained in the country and engaged with amateur balalaika ensembles, in particular the popular ladies' balalaika ensemble in Cheltenham led by Alice Gardiner. Gardiner was a peripatetic music teacher at the Cheltenham Ladies' College. The chapter examines her formation of a balalaika/domra ensemble alongside her mandolin, banjo and guitar ensemble, her choice of repertoire, the characteristics and style of her concerts. The chapter also draws in other English ensembles and considers the impact these ensembles had on regional music-making. The focus is therefore on the engagement with Russian folk music and musicians within English communities.

Chapter Four centres on the Russian contribution to entertainment, most particularly the performance of balalaika music which usually also included singing and dancing. The contexts in which these musicians operated were chiefly Variety Theatre, Cabaret/Vaudeville and Broadcasting. Variety Theatre was conducive to the Wolkowsky Troupe's style of performance. They harnessed the Variety format to showcase Russian folk music and dance and achieved popularity and success well into the 1940s. More unusual environments for music making are also considered such as restaurant dining, performance in public parks, fetes and charity events, social parties and gatherings as well as the unusual presence of the balalaika within the Coldstream Guards. Nikolai Medvedeff, a balalaika/domra player, conductor and arranger, formed his own balalaika ensembles and worked in various British institutions; notably with ENSA during World War II and the BBC. He was a frequent broadcaster of Russian folk music in his own programme and discussion turns to the nature of his programmes, his choice of repertoire and his troubled relationship with the BBC. Medvedeff aspired to an ensemble in the Andreeff mould but professional realities denied his efforts. Nevertheless, Medvedeff sought to promote, popularize and preserve Russian folk music within a foreign environment. Lastly, Vladimir Rosing, a distinguished Russian tenor, is briefly considered in the context of opera production. His entrepreneurship in the face of displacement, his introduction of hitherto unheard Russian opera and song repertoire to English audiences, his introduction of new opera

production methods, acting and performance styles, and his contribution to the early broadcasting of English opera are all considered.

Chapter Five. The theoretical meditations of Svetlana Boym (Nostalgia)<sup>32</sup> and Susan Stewart (Longing)<sup>33</sup> provide some clarification of how nostalgia and longing can be regarded as a driving imperative in the professional lives of these musicians. Pierre Nora's concept of the *site de mémoire*<sup>34</sup> also draws together the notion of folk music (and more specifically the balalaika and domra) as markers of national identity within a displaced environment. Russian folk music was Medvedeff's link to his pre-revolutionary past, to Imperialist Russia, an expression of nostalgia and longing for an existence he could no longer access, a reminder of his youthful connection with music. This was to inform his views on the function of music within a society. The Wolkowsky family found stability and success performing the folk songs and dances of their Russian past, a life irretrievably lost and to which there was no return. Edward Soermus, too, longed for his heady revolutionary student days, a political and social involvement which he sought to perpetuate in his life abroad. All these musicians drew on their memory, love, and nostalgia for their Russian musical heritage.

These Russian musicians were quick to capitalize on the British fascination with the exotic and sought not so much to conform to English musical styles but rather to promote their otherness embodied in their instruments (balalaikas and domras in particular), folk dances and national dress. Russian musical performances generated positive critical and public opinion in the main. The British fascination with the exotic in music and dance from other countries in the early twentieth century, when nationalism and its consequent xenophobia was prevalent within English society, is paradoxical. Set against this social context the success of these Russian musicians is the more remarkable particularly in their ability to influence musical taste, encourage community music-making employing Russian musical instruments, and keeping alive in exile an interest in Russian folk music thereby ensuring their general success within the Light Music industry in the UK. Chapter Five concludes with a brief assessment of the legacy of these musicians in British music and questions why the interest in the balalaika and domra has waned. The need for future research is considered as is the need to preserve existing archives and instruments present in the UK.

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<sup>32</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*. Also, Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations*, 26. Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, (1989): pp. 7-24.

### 1.3 Scope of Study

Elena Dubinets provides a useful orientation (given the vastness of the Russian Empire and its variety of cultures and ethnicities) as to what Russia (Russianness) might denote. She uses *Russian*, *Russian émigrés* and *Russian diaspora* ‘interchangeably and generically to describe the diverse range of ethnic identities from the former Soviet Union, but the same may be applied to the dominions of Imperial Russia.’ For Dubinets, ‘Russianness is thus a conglomerate of the real and the imagined, the constructed and the autochthonous, the ethnic and the multicultural; because of this, there is no need to define it collectively and seek in its representations a stereotyping unity, a preternatural difference from other peoples, or a “mysterious Russian soul.”’<sup>35</sup> This is a viewpoint to which I adhere for the purposes of this dissertation. Richard Taruskin also points out in ‘The Ghetto and the Imperium’ in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad: New Essays* that ‘Nationality is not a property of music, but of readings. It is not exhibited but attributed.’<sup>36</sup> Ernest Newman extends the question as to whether it is possible to define what Russian, or a Russian, is:

Is there such a thing as ‘a’ Russian or ‘the’ Russian? I find that the Russians number some hundred and fifty millions, i.e., one-twelfth of the inhabitants of the earth, occupying one-sixth of the land surface of the globe. It would be amazing indeed were all these people to be built up on the same physical and mental plan, as is assumed by the theorists who talk of Russian folk-music, Russian nationalism and Russian national opera.<sup>37</sup>

However, reception of Russian musicians and music in the British press in the early Twentieth Century did seek a Russian Soul, something which characterized Russian music as well as betrayed ethnic differences inherent in Russian folk music.

From 1880 there were successive waves of Russian Jewish immigrants who sought to escape the Pale of Settlement and who settled in the East End of London. Between 1900 and 1945 Britain saw further arrivals of Russian refugees and émigrés resulting from the 1905 uprisings, the two World Wars, the 1917 Revolution and the subsequent Russian Civil War (1918-1922) all of which had caused social turmoil in Russia. Musicians within these emigrations, collectively

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<sup>35</sup> Elena Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), p. 5. See also, Louise W. Holborne, ‘The Legal Status of Political Refugees 1920-1938,’ *American Journal of International Law*, 32/4 (1938): pp. 680-703 for a discussion of the legal position and protection of (Russian) refugees.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Taruskin, ‘The Ghetto and the Imperium’ in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad: New Essays*, (Oaklands, California: California University Press), p. 286.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest Newman, ‘Russian Opera and Russian “Nationalism”’, *The Musical Times*, 55/858 (1 August 1914): pp. 505–8 (506).

called the first-wave emigration,<sup>38</sup> are my chief concern. The early Jewish emigration is not generally considered part of the first-wave of Russian émigrés. Dubinets refers to this emigration as *minus one* as it occurred before the 1917 Revolution exodus and was largely a Jewish emigration from the Pale of Settlement. Dubinets notes further that over two million Jews emigrated from Russian lands between 1890 and 1914. Russian Jews had lived in Russia for centuries.<sup>39</sup> Some 200,000 Russian Jews found their way to the UK by the time of the First World War. The 1905 uprising in Russia also saw the escape to the West of Bolshevik sympathisers, severely suppressed and imprisoned by the Tzar, and the 1917 Revolution and subsequent Civil War saw the arrival of Russian aristocracy, landowners, intelligentsia and business classes (mainly White Russians) to Britain. Simpson makes the pertinent observation that ‘the conspicuousness of the aristocratic and intellectual elements has obscured the fact that numerically the soldier and the peasant and working-class refugee composed the majority of the emigration.’<sup>40</sup> Yet, there already existed a small community of Russians in Britain. Konstantin Nabokov (1872-1927), *Chargé d’affaires* at the Russian Embassy in London between 1916–1917 and thereafter Russian Ambassador until forced to resign in 1919, reports that the Russian Embassy employed a staff of some 500 people ‘for the performance of duties connected with Russia’s participation in the War as Britain’s ally’ as well as ‘embassy staff and representatives of permanent Russian Government offices in London’ at the time of the revolution. In his discussion of the formation of an Émigrés’ Committee to repatriate Russians who wished to return to the homeland after the fall of the Imperialist government, he mentions there were thousands of émigrés; ‘London, moreover, became the centre to which Russians flocked from all continental countries cut off from Russia by enemy lands.’ He also mentions political refugees who came to Britain to escape persecution by the Russian secret service (*Okhrana*). Many of these Russians were willingly repatriated after the revolution. The Russian Government (Duma) made available £50,000 (the equivalent today of £4,347,043.78) ‘for the needs of the émigrés.’ This sum was confiscated by the British government as well as all other sums belonging to the Russian government as the Revolution unfolded. The invasion of Riga by the Bolsheviks brought another 400 Russian refugees by ship in 1919 as well as ‘hundreds of

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<sup>38</sup> *Second wave* emigration is associated with those fleeing Russia during the Second World War. The *third wave* occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s and consisted mainly of political dissidents, Jews moving to Israel, and expulsion of public figures. The *fourth wave* occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991). It could be argued that a *fifth wave* is in progress in response to the harsher restrictions imposed by Vladimir Putin.

<sup>39</sup> Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned*, p. 171.

<sup>40</sup> Simpson, *Refugees: Preliminary Report of a Survey*, p. 36 See also, Catherine Andreyev and Ivan Savický, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. x-xi for further discussion and description of this emigration.

refugees from Odessa.' Nabokov states they were all destitute, with no property (confiscated by the Bolsheviks) and penniless. A request was made to the British Government to release the £50,000 to assist these refugees but the request was refused.<sup>41</sup> The British and Russian royal families were closely connected and many of the Russian aristocracy who regularly visited Britain found themselves stranded in London. Also amongst this community were Russian artists, dancers, singers, instrumentalists and writers who made London their home, either temporarily, intermittently or eventually on a more permanent basis. Many Russian musicians visited and performed in London over time so there was a decided Russian presence between 1900 and 1945. One of the distinctive features of the Russian diaspora in Britain was its chameleon-like quality resulting from the to-ing and fro-ing of artists, some residing for several years and then moving on, others returning or coming for short periods of time to fulfil contracts. Some performing artists became established and earned a living on the Music Hall and Variety Theatre circuit, others found a purpose in music making within communities and regional centres of Britain.

Discussion focusses on the activities of musicians within the Light Music industry rather than Art Music composers. The period from 1900-1925 (including the First World War, the Russian Revolution and its aftermath in the 1920s) is a remarkable era in Russian music. In this span of time roughly forty-five notable Russian composers chose to leave Russia and settle in the West. Some settled in the large Russian communities in Paris, Berlin and Prague and many travelled to New York. Some, like Sergei Prokofiev, later chose to return to the Soviet Union while others such as Feodor Chaliapin resisted invitations to return home. Russian composers such as Tchaikovsky, Glinka, Stravinsky, Rachmaninov and Prokofiev were regularly featured at the Sir Henry Wood Promenade concerts and interest in Russian music increased in the UK. Rosa Newmarch (1857-1940), musicologist, Russian scholar and writer on music did much to promote Russian music played at the Queens Hall and the Promenade Concerts with her critical commentaries and programme notes.<sup>42</sup> Russian opera singers from the Moscow and St. Petersburg opera houses, forced to flee Russia, remained for lengthy periods of time amongst the émigré community in London and were obliged to earn money by performing in charity concerts and recitals. A good many of them found employment in Variety Theatre where they appeared as featured soloists. These appearances did not rely on lavish sets and costumes and language difficulties were more easily managed. Performing in a balalaika ensemble, for

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<sup>41</sup> Konstantin Nabokov, *The Ordeal of a Diplomat*, (London: Duckworth and Company, 1921), pp. 71 and 95-109.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Ross Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Music*. Royal Musical Association Monographs, 18. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

instance, was not heavily reliant on language skills in the workplace. Learning to speak, read and write English was one of the principal deterrents discouraging Russian refugees from coming to the UK in the first place. There were larger communities of Russians in Paris and Prague where French, a second language for the Russian educated classes, was more generally spoken and integration in these cities did not present the same difficulties as far as language was concerned. Likewise, Russian refugees and exiles settling in the United States found substantial communities of Russians in which they were able to integrate and speak Russian in their daily lives.

Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951), Mischa Spoliansky (1898-1985) and Samuel Alman (1877-1947) are three of the more notable Russian composers who made London their permanent home.<sup>43</sup> Medtner arrived well after the Revolution in 1936 and Spoliansky came to London from Germany during Hitler's rise to power in 1933. These two composers were the most prominent and have left traces of their work in exile in their scores and professional activities and have been documented elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Other composers such as Albert Coates (1882-1953), better known as a conductor<sup>45</sup> and Alexander Tcherepnin (1899-1977) stayed for a short period of time before moving to Paris, the United States and South Africa. Coates was born in St. Petersburg where his

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<sup>43</sup> Initial research revealed that only Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951), Samuel Alman (1877-1947), and Mischa Spoliansky (1898-1985), out of the following forty-two Russian composers who left Russia between 1900-1945, made London their place of residence. Achron (1886-1943), Akimenko (1876-1945), Avshalomov (1893-1917), Berezovsky (1900-1953), Berlin (1893-1989), Bortkiewicz (1877-1952), Coates (1882-1953) he was of English parentage, Conus (1869-1942), de Hartmann (1885-1956), Dukelsky (1903-1969), Fedorov (1901-1979), Gabrilowitsch (1878-1936), Glazunov (1865-1936), Gretchaninov (1864-1956), Haieff (1914-1994), Kosalev (1890-1951), Koussevitzky (1874-1951), Lopatnikoff (1903-1976), Lourie (1892-1966), Lyapunov (1859-1924), Markevitch (1912-1983), Michelet (1894-1995), Monfred (1903-1974), Nabokov (Nikolas) (1903-1978), Obukhov (1892-1918), Ornstein (1895-2002), Pomerentsev (1878-1933), Prokofiev (1891-1953), Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), Saminsky (1882-1959), Schillinger (1895-1943), Siloti (1863-1945), Stravinsky (1882-1971), Tcherepnine (Alexander) (1899-1977), Tcherepnine (Nikolai) (1873-1945), Tiomkin (1894-1979), Ussachevsky (1911-1990), Vronsky (1909-1992) and Babin (1908-1972), Winkler (1865-1935), Wyschnegradsky (1893-1979), Zimbalist (1889-1911). See, Larry Sitsky, *Music of the Oppressed Russian Avantgarde 1900-1929*, (Westport; London: Greenwood Press, 1994), Part VI 'Composers in Exile', pp. 248 – 282 where a number of these composers are considered in some detail.

Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How they Left, Stayed Returned*, pp. 172 – 182 conducts a similar exercise and provides additional lists of émigré composers who left Russia in the second to fifth emigration.

<sup>44</sup> Scholarly works on Medtner and his music are numerous (see Literary Review below) yet few consider the effects of exile on his music. Spoliansky by comparison is less fortunate. Chris Kelly (Spoliansky's grandson and trustee of Spoliansky's estate) notes there are no extended scholarly examinations of Spoliansky's work. Chris Kelly, e-mail to the author, 11 August, 2022. Spoliansky archive material is lodged at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. Samuel Alman similarly has not been documented to any extent.

<sup>45</sup> Albert Coates (1882-1953).

father was a successful businessman. He studied composition under Rimsky-Korsakov and wrote seven operas and some orchestral music. His opera *Pickwick*, directed by Vladimir Rosing, was premiered at Covent Garden in 1936, a production to which I will return. Coates was known more readily as a Russian conductor but he struggled to secure a full-time conducting post in the UK and he eventually emigrated to South Africa.

Samuel Alman (1877–1947), a respected Russian Jewish composer, came to England in 1903 after witnessing the harsh pogrom at Kishinev (1903). He settled in the East End of London, studied at the Royal College of Music, and subsequently confined himself predominantly to composing music for the Synagogue service.<sup>46</sup> Alman became choirmaster of the Bayswater and Hampstead Synagogues and was charged with updating the so-called *Blue Book* (1933)<sup>47</sup>, a collection of synagogue music used by the congregation to follow the music of the service. Alman reformed and updated the 1899 collection and added a supplement of his own compositions for the service in 1933.<sup>48</sup> In 1925 and 1938 he published two volumes (Parts 1 and 2) of works for cantor and choir. Although many of his compositions have fallen into obscurity a number of his arrangements are still used today in concerts and the service. Music within the synagogues of the East End remained predominantly traditional.<sup>49</sup> In the 1880s there had been a shortage of trained Jewish choristers in London and on occasion Christian singers were hired to participate in synagogue choirs, a situation which was naturally met with resistance. This resulted in the establishment of community schools for training choirboys.<sup>50</sup> There were attempts to write new music for the service which also met with resistance.<sup>51</sup>

Alman wrote an opera in Yiddish in 1912, *Melech Ahaz (King Ahaz)*, based on Abraham Mapu's (1808-1867) novel *The Guilt of Samaria* (published 1865), a string quartet, works for piano and organ, arrangements of Yiddish songs and Jewish Art Songs. He translated Verdi's *Rigoletto* into Yiddish and was musical director for its performances in 1912 at the Temple (theatre) in

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<sup>46</sup> See (Rabbi) Geoffrey Shisler, *Samuel Alman*, <https://geoffreyshisler.com/biographies-2/samuel-alman/> Consulted, 5 September, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> A collection of liturgical music for the synagogue (shul music).

<sup>48</sup> (Rabbi) Francis L. Cohen and David M. Davis, eds., Supplement, Samuel Alman (included 1933). Third Edition. *The Voice of Prayer and Praise: A Handbook of Synagogue Music for Congregational Singing arranged and edited for the Choir Committee of the Council of the United Synagogue*, (London: Greenberg, 1899).

<sup>49</sup> *The Jewish Chronicle* of March and April 1880 carries an ongoing argument relating to Synagogue choirs, congregational singing, the composition and performance of new music in the service and the need to train musicians for synagogue choirs.

<sup>50</sup> *The Jewish Chronicle*, 23 April, 1880. There was also some resistance to female voices within the choir.

<sup>51</sup> *The Jewish Chronicle*, 9 April, 1880.



Commercial Road, a theatre which catered for Jewish entertainment.<sup>52</sup> There was a lively Music Hall presence in the East End of London to which Jewish performers and musicians gravitated and were extremely popular. Vivi Lachs provides a comprehensive study of popular music in the Jewish immigrant community of the East End between 1884-1914, particularly popular Yiddish songs and verse. Many of these were adaptations of English and American popular and community songs with satirical rewriting of the lyrics dealing with communal problems confronting immigrant life in a strange country.<sup>53</sup> This is much-needed documentation which extends Lloyd P. Gartner's brief entry for Yiddish theatre in the East End of London.<sup>54</sup>

## 1.4 Britain and Immigration – A Context for Russian Immigration

Jewish immigrants arrived in the UK from the Pale of Settlement,<sup>55</sup> a restrictive border along the west of Russia created in 1791 which existed until the 1917 October Revolution.



Figure 1 Map outlining the boundary of the Pale of Settlement<sup>56</sup>

It was to this area that Jews were forcibly moved and settled. Jews were excluded from other areas of Russia except by permit and even within the Pale some cities such as Kiev were

<sup>52</sup> See a review of the opera in the *Jewish Chronicle*, 19 April, 1912.

<sup>53</sup> Vivi Lachs, *Whitechapel Noise: Jewish Immigrant Life in Yiddish Song and Verse, London 1884-1914*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018). Similarly, Mark Slobin examines popular songs amongst the Jewish community in the United States; Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: the popular music of the Jewish immigrants*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

<sup>54</sup> Lloyd P. Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England 1870 – 1914*, Third Edition, (London; Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 1960), pp. 260 – 261 regarding Yiddish Theatre in the East End of London.

<sup>55</sup> From the Latin *Palus* meaning Stake – or fence surrounding an area.

<sup>56</sup> See Bibliography for Figure references.

forbidden to Jews. There was a quota of Jews allowed at Russian universities and institutions. A place at a Conservatory or University ensured a better social status, the right to permanent residence in a city, exemption from military conscription and an escape from the Pale of Settlement. James Loeffler notes that Anton Rubinstein's St. Petersburg Conservatory accepted Jewish musicians and Rubinstein was criticised for allowing so many.<sup>57</sup> Affluent Jewish merchants, essential artisans and other influential Jews managed to gain official sanction to live outside the Pale. Life within the Pale was economically poor. The May Laws did not permit Jews to own land, trading was restricted and there was little opportunity for advancement. Anti-Semitism was strong in Russia and there was an increase of condoned pogroms against Jews from 1880,<sup>58</sup> particularly in Lithuania, eastern Poland and Ukraine (all at that time ruled by Russia and included in the Pale). As a result of these factors many Russian Jews fled to Western Europe, including the United Kingdom.

By the First World War Michael Marrus estimates there were two and a half million Russian and Eastern European Jewish refugees in Europe, South Africa, Argentina, Australia, Far East and the United States.<sup>59</sup> Between 1881 and 1905 an estimated 100,000 to 120,000 Jews (at a conservative estimate) left Russia and arrived in Britain. After the 1905 Revolution, when both Red and White forces unleashed cruel and widespread pogroms on Jewish communities, a further mass exodus of Jewish refugees to the UK occurred. By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 roughly half of the c.300,000 Jewish community in Britain were recent immigrants from Russia and Sharman Kaddish considers there were probably more Jewish refugees in the country than official figures acknowledged.<sup>60</sup> Britain already had an established Jewish community based largely in the West End of London and there had always been a constant trickle of Jewish immigrants to Britain throughout the nineteenth century but the surges between 1880 and 1925 were unprecedented.

The majority of ethnic Russian immigrants arriving in Europe in the five years after the 1917 Revolution had been attached to General Wrangel's army (130,000), considered White Russians. Gradually through the 1920s the Soviet government introduced restrictive controls curtailing any further emigration. The extent of this mass Russian emigration remains a

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<sup>57</sup> James Loeffler, *The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 31-34.

<sup>58</sup> In particular the pogroms at Warsaw (1881), Kishinev (1903), Kiev (1905), Odessa and Bialystok (October 1906) as well as others in Eastern Europe.

<sup>59</sup> Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 61.

<sup>60</sup> Sharman Kaddish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews: The Anglo-Jewish Community, Britain and the Russian Revolution*, (London: Frank Cass. 1992), p. 1.

contested issue and figures are unreliable and vary according to conditions and time of collation. Elina Multanen provides a collation of various sources for these figures. The League of Nations estimated there were 1.5 million Russian refugees in Europe by 1922. The Central Information Office of Countess Bobrinskii in Constantinople estimated there were 1.5 million refugees in Europe by 1920. In 1922 the American Red Cross estimate there were 2 million. The German researcher, H. von Rimscha believed there were 3 million Russian refugees in Europe and the Far East.<sup>61</sup> Simpson provides a more balanced estimation: 'It is safe to estimate that the total number of refugees from Russia, including Russians already resident abroad and prisoners of war who became refugees, did not exceed one million and was perhaps lower than that figure.'<sup>62</sup> Figures in contemporary reports were sometimes manipulated to achieve some end therefore numbers could be exaggerated.<sup>63</sup> Marc Raeff is of the opinion that there were no efficient or reliable systems in place at the time to monitor population movements across Europe.<sup>64</sup> Simpson estimates that of the Russian refugees only about 10,000 settled in Britain. His *Refugees: Preliminary Report of a Survey*, and *The Refugee Problem: Report of A Survey* appears to be the most reliable and balanced source regarding the extent of the Russian migration into Europe and beyond: 'Estimate of distribution of Russian Refugees 1 Jan 1922: Great Britain 8,000-10,000' and '... the 12,000 Russians evacuated by the British from Archangel settled in other countries of their choice.' The Russian diaspora which already existed in the UK, according to Simpson, was not augmented by more than 4,000 or 5,000.<sup>65</sup>

Diaspora studies frequently contest whether a Russian diaspora existed in Britain at all and give the community very little attention. Andreyev and Savický state that while Russian exiles gravitated towards London in the nineteenth century and there were political and religious connections between the two countries, Russians only stayed for short periods and 'Britain never became a genuine émigré centre.'<sup>66</sup> France accepted a good number of Russian refugees (400,000) to bolster her labour market severely depleted after the Prussian War, and Prague attracted literary and academic refugees.<sup>67</sup> Simpson notes that Czechoslovakia introduced a policy known as *Action Russe* whereby Russian refugee academics, students, and agriculturalists were welcomed to the country and maintained there. Schools, colleges and

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<sup>61</sup> Elina Hannele Multanen, 'British Policy Towards Russian Refugees in the Aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution' (PhD diss., The School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College, London, 2000), pp. 6-8.

<sup>62</sup> Simpson, *Refugees: Preliminary Report of a Survey* (1938), p. 40.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10 and pp. 39-40 regarding the reliability of reports on numbers of refugees.

<sup>64</sup> Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939*, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> Simpson, *Refugees: Preliminary Report of a Survey*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>66</sup> Andreyev and Savický, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938*, p. 184.

<sup>67</sup> Simpson, *Refugees: A Review of the Situation Since September 1939*, p. 10.

universities were established to accommodate Russian refugees. Prague became the academic centre of Russia Abroad. Andreyev and Savický make the observation that ‘the purpose of this education was to prepare refugees for their return to Russia once the country became stable – but it became evident that this was not to be.’<sup>68</sup> Johnston examines France as the political, literary and cultural centre of Russian emigration<sup>69</sup> and Berlin attracted Russian book publishers. Many Russian musicians, and the majority of Russian composers, made their way to the United States.

Britain, in contrast to other European centres, discouraged refugees. Those gaining admittance had to have family or business connections, were capable of self-funding and be financially secure, have a confirmed offer of employment and not a threat to British labour. This last consideration was of particular relevance to profile musicians, dancers, instrumentalists and vocalists who performed a distinctive Russian repertoire and were therefore not considered a threat to local artists. The British Government professed openness towards political dissidents and persecuted refugees, as it had done in the past, yet tacitly there was a restraining hand on Russian immigration. Many of the Russian aristocracy and military refugees had British connections and their assimilation and integration into British institutions, despite the problems encountered with the English language, developed more easily once admitted.<sup>70</sup> The small Russian diaspora in London was able to marshal financial forces and wield influence not found in other Russian diasporas – mainly through its connections with British aristocracy. Pyotr Petrovich Shilovsky describes the easy relationship between Russian exiles/refugees and the Russian aristocracy who had settled in London and notes that prominent figures within the Russian diaspora in London readily supported the exiled Russian community.

Britain had taken a liberal attitude towards immigrants in the nineteenth century which was indicative of relative political, social and economic stability. Immigrants were not generally perceived as a threat. Even those seeking political asylum were welcomed. Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) had formulated many of his ideas of Russian Socialism while in exile in London between 1852-1864 and he established the Free Russian Press in London. Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876), an outspoken Russian anarchist, also found refuge in London. Both men did not seek to influence British socialism but rather addressed their ideas to the émigré community. Pyotr Alexeyevich Propotkin (1842-1921), Sergei Mikhailovich Stepnyak-Kravchinsky (Sergius

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<sup>68</sup> Andreyev and Savický, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938*, p. ix.

<sup>69</sup> Johnston, “*New Mecca, New Babylon*”: *Paris and the Russian Exiles, 1920-1945*.

<sup>70</sup> See the mémoire by Pyotr Petrovich Shilovsky, ‘Here is Imperial Russia....’ in Michael Glenny and Norman Stone, eds., *The Other Russia: The Experience of Exile*, (London: Faber, 1991), pp. 289-301.

Stepniak) (1851-1895), and F.V. Volkhovskii (1846-1914) were all associated through their promotion of the Free Russia Press in their resistance to Russian Imperial domination. In contrast, Georgi Chicherin (1872-1936) and Maxim Litvinov (1876 -1951) both sought to develop and encourage Marxist socialism in Britain. Ben Phillips provides a useful discussion of the activities of political thinkers in London in the nineteenth century leading up to the 1917 Revolution<sup>71</sup> and Ron Grant examines the prevailing British attitudes towards Russian émigré socialists in Britain.<sup>72</sup>

Before 1905 there had been no legal prevention for people wishing to land in the country. The Industrial Revolution in Britain welcomed labour and immigrants willing to work in industry. However, the economic crisis in the 1870s and its aftermath made incoming workers less welcome. Initial sympathy for the plight of immigrant Russian Jews turned to hostility. Aliens, and the Jews in the East End of London in particular, were perceived as a problem for which a remedy or solution needed to be found. Contemporary publications such as Myer Jack Landa's, *The Alien Problem and its Remedy*, Norman Angell and Dorothy Frances Buxton's *You and the Refugee: The Morals and Economics of the Problem* and Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Henry Lane's *The Alien Menace. A Statement of the Case*, serve as typical responses to the perceived social threat of mass immigration into the country.<sup>73</sup>

The Jewish community, characterized by centuries-old wanderings and displacement, was intent on 'getting on' within its new environment, of carving out a life afresh. There was no going back. But the Jewish community found acculturation and integration into the host nation difficult because of its cultural and religious rituals and language (Yiddish). The community was not without skills and education but immigrants were desperately poor. The East End London Jews also did not integrate easily with the already existing Jewish community established in the West End of London.<sup>74</sup> There was a general perception that their foreignness, cultural habits and language (Yiddish) were not conducive to integration into English society. Jewish immigrants

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<sup>71</sup> Ben Phillips, 'Around and About the Other Shore: Russian Political émigrés in London, 1881 - 1917. Pushkin House talks. Accessed 18 January, 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sETWQOMpSs0&t=12s>

<sup>72</sup> Ron Grant, *British radicals and socialists and their attitudes to Russia, c.1890-1917* (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 1984).

<sup>73</sup> Myer Jack Landa, *The Alien Problem and its Remedy*, Reprint (London: P.S. King and Son, 1911). Norman Angell and Dorothy Frances Buxton, *You and the Refugee: The Morals and Economics of the Problem*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1939). Also, Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Henry Lane, *The Alien Menace. A Statement of the Case*, (London: Boswell Publishing Co. Ltd, 1934).

<sup>74</sup> See Sharman Kadish, "Our Own": 'West End' Jewry and the Russian Revolution – Policy,' in Sharman Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews Bolsheviks and British Jews: The Anglo-Jewish Community, Britain and the Russian Revolution*, (London: Frank Cass, 1992), pp. 86-134.

aroused a wave of xenophobia in the country which severely affected subsequent arrivals of Russian émigrés. In some instances, attempts were made to incite anti-Jewish feeling. In the case of Jack the Ripper the so-called Goulston Street Graffito 'The Juwes are the men who will not be blamed for nothing' was found on a tenement block wall together with a piece of apron from one of the murdered women. This was possibly orchestrated to throw the authorities off the scent of the murderer and cast blame on the Jews. The graffito was erased and the information suppressed to avoid rioting and anti-Jewish feeling.<sup>75</sup>

It was often voiced in Parliament and the Press that refugees and asylum seekers were a drain on state resources and had little to offer the host community or that they were willing to work for less pay and for longer hours and thereby drove down wages and took employment away from local English workers. Sympathetic supporters of the Jewish community, such as the Reverend George Lansbury (M.P.), did try and redress the balance of opinion. He took pains to draw attention to the fact that the Co-ordinating Committee of the Board of Deputies of British Jews had made great efforts to raise funds in support of the Jewish poor to avert these accusations.<sup>76</sup>

The Jews were further branded as anarchists responsible for the Bolshevik uprising in Russia. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* caused mischief and was cited as evidence of a Jewish plot to bring down the world order. *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was a hoax document published in Russia c.1901-2 and reproduced in English in 1920 in *The Times*. The English translation was by George Shanks, the son of an English merchant operating in Moscow but financially ruined by the revolution.<sup>77</sup> In 1903 the Tsar's secret police (*Okhrana*) had subsidized the printing and dissemination of the document to rouse anti-Jewish feeling and it is considered that this led to the Kishinev pogroms of 1903 and 1905. Many members of the new Communist Party in Russia were Jewish but adopted Russified names which seemed to confirm the allegations in the *Protocols*. *The Times* of 8 May, 1920 printed a further article, 'The Jewish Peril', which mildly questioned the authenticity of the document but the damage was done and Jews were associated with the Bolsheviks, the destruction of Imperialist Russia and the murder of the Tsar. *The Times* had been opposed to re-opening diplomatic and trade relations with the new Bolshevik government and the article was designed to stall Lloyd George's intentions to

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<sup>75</sup> Stewart P. Evans and Keith Skinner, *Jack the Ripper: Letters from Hell*, (Cheltenham: The History Press, 1997). Also, *Jack the Ripper and the Whitechapel Murders*, (Richmond: Public Records Office). See also Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis, eds., *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History*, (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 215-228.

<sup>76</sup> (Rvd.) George Lansbury (M.P.), *Anti-Semitism in the East End*, (Board of Deputies of British Jews Co-ordinating Committee, 1930).

<sup>77</sup> Holocaust Encyclopaedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Consulted 2 February, 2023.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion>

normalise relations with the Soviet State. The right-wing and anti-Jewish newspaper the *Morning Post*, on the tail of *The Times* articles, continued to wage an anti-Jewish press campaign. After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918) and Rapallo (1922) and the smuggling of Lenin via sealed train through Germany to Russia in 1917, Germany was made complicit in the Bolshevik (Jewish) take-over in Russia. This German/Russian alliance was to fester in Britain with frequent accusations in government debates that Germany was funding Bolshevik/Socialist activities in Britain and causing civil unrest in the country in the run up to the Second World War.<sup>78</sup> Kadish provides a succinct discussion of the impact of the *Protocols* in Britain, due largely to press coverage, and provides the list of Jewish/Bolshevik names (with inaccuracies) originally printed in Howell Arthur Keir Gwynne's *The Cause of World Unrest* printed in 1920. Gwynne, as editor of the *Morning Post* between 1911-1937, resisted and discouraged any rapprochement between the British government and the newly formed Soviet state largely in the interests of trade and industry. Russians in the country, such as the Bolshevik violinist Edward Soermus and his accompanist Bohumir Ulmann were typically treated with suspicion and hounded out of the country.

Russian immigrants (who might hesitantly be called Ethnic Russians) by contrast found support in Russian institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Embassy (not always sympathetic to the émigré community), the Russian Red Cross and other cultural societies and clubs. The arrival of Russian refugees of the first-wave consisted of aristocrats, landowners, industrialists, scientists, businessmen, academics, political dissidents, and artists of various kinds. Vasilii Zakharov provides a rare and valuable account of many of these exiles in his reminiscences.<sup>79</sup> They were not without financial resources (though limited and finite) or education. Like the Jewish community they too found language a barrier and integration problematic. They tended to keep, at first, within the Russian community in London which centred around the Russian Orthodox Church. Music performed for the service was drawn from the traditional canon of the Imperialist era but performance suffered from poor executants. Christopher Birchall notes that music for the church service was provided by amateur choirs and frequent requests were made to the mother church in Russia to send priests who could sing the service as they were poorly served in this area. The choir was considered a luxury and costs (travel for practice, for example) had to be paid for by the congregation. The choir remained an amateur one.<sup>80</sup> Birchall provides an extensive history of the Russian Orthodox Church in London

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<sup>78</sup> Sharman Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews*, pp. 30-38. Also, Howell Arthur Keir Gwynne ed., *The Cause of World Unrest*, Reprint 2012, (London: Forgotten Books, 1920), pp. 131-132.

<sup>79</sup> Vasilii Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, (London: Basileus Press, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Birchall, *Embassy, Emigrants, and Englishmen, The Three Hundred Year History of a Russian Orthodox Church in London*, (New York: Holy Trinity Publications, 2014).

but music within the church is only mentioned in passing and does not become a focus for discussion. Like music in the Jewish Synagogues, Russian church music functioned as a social adhesive, familiar tunes and hymns providing comfort and binding the community together in familiar sounds and rituals. The hierarchy of Russian society in London centred around exiled members of the Russian royal family headed by Princess Xenia Andreevna Romanoff, niece of Tsar Nicholas II. Russian musicians thus found themselves in a social milieu (both English and within the Russian diaspora) defined by status, class, financial standing, language, and social rituals. Encounters with state machinery in the form of laws and regulations nevertheless affected their daily lives and work as professional musicians.

The first-wave Russian immigrants were hopeful of a quick resolution to the unrest in Russia but as the possibility of returning home receded and the reality of making the UK their permanent home took hold, Russian musicians began to engage with the musical establishment. It is debateable, however, whether this led to a successful assimilation/integration of first-generation immigrant musicians. The management of their displacement as outsiders was their strength as they exploited their 'otherness' as a means to 'getting on' but any long-lasting musical influence did not result in English music becoming 'Russified'. The influence of Russian Art Music composers, it is considered, was to have some influence on the compositional style of British composers, a point made by the writer and musicologist Rosa Newmarch (1857-1940) which I will address in a later chapter. Andreeff's visits with his Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra was an exercise in *entente* between Britain (and the United States) and Imperialist Russia and while several of his orchestral musicians remained for a period in the country to promote the balalaika and Russian folk music they all eventually returned to Russia, as did Edward Soermus, and their influence diminished. But the Russian presence in the performance of light music from the turn of the twentieth century to the eve of the Second World War, which is the subject of this research, is remarkable considering the small size of the community.

At first no legislation was implemented to control immigration due largely to opposition from Liberal governments between 1892 and 1895 opposed to anti-alien legislation. The arrival of Russian immigrants between 1900 and 1930,<sup>81</sup> however, found concern within right-leaning parties and pressure groups such as the British Brothers League (BBL) which resulted in the implementation of immigration policies designed to stem the flow of immigrants and impose

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<sup>81</sup> Lucien Wolf, *Russo-Jewish Refugees in Eastern Europe: Report on the Conferences on Russian Refugees held in Geneva, under the auspices of the League of Nations, on August 22-24 and September 16-19, 1921*, (London: Offices of the Joint Foreign Committee, 1921). This report shows the extent of the refugee situation, European concern for the Jewish exodus from Russian lands, and the proposed measures for dealing with such a large influx of refugees to Europe.



conditions of residence and work for those who were admitted. Colin Holmes is useful in this regard and outlines the Governments consequent implementation of the various Alien Acts as a response to the influx of Jews from Russian lands.<sup>82</sup> Multanen also comprehensively outlines the development of British immigration policy.<sup>83</sup> The government's restrictive measures towards immigrants and the implemented Alien Acts were to have consequences for immigrant musicians who sought to live and work in the UK.

The arrival of immigrants from Eastern Europe who settled in the East End of London between 1880 and 1910 led to poor working conditions (known as the sweating industry)<sup>84</sup>, poor housing, poverty and crime - all of which became contentious issues debated in parliament from the 1890s. The liberal attitude of the government towards immigrants hardened and the first Aliens Act of 1905 followed with an amendment and extension of the bill passed in 1914. The Bill was again amended in 1919 after the First World War and together with the addition of the Alien's Order of 1920 the government severely restricted entry requirements and employment eligibility for immigrants. These two Bills (1905 and 1919) cannot be considered solely as a reaction to the arrival of Jewish immigrants. There was already a sizeable German diaspora in London during and after the First World War which also fuelled anti-alien feeling in the country.<sup>85</sup> One further legislative Bill which was to have serious consequences for Russian immigrants (Bolsheviks such as violinist Edward Soermus, for example) was the Seditious Speeches Bill of 1922.

The aim of the 1905 Aliens Act was to ensure immigrants landed at designated ports where there was a port authority immigration officer to process arrivals. Undesirable elements – idiots<sup>86</sup>,

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<sup>82</sup> Colin Holmes, 'Cosmopolitan London' in Anne J. Kershen, *London: the promised land?: The Migrant Experience in a Capital City*, (Aldershot; Brookfield USA; Hong Kong; Singapore; Sydney: Avebury, 1997), pp. 15-21.

<sup>83</sup> Elina Hannele Multanen, 'British Policy Towards Russian Refugees in the Aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution,' *Revolutionary Russia*, 12/1 (1999): pp. 44-68.

<sup>84</sup> Today we are more familiar with 'sweatshops' but in contemporary parliament debates and the press it was referred to as the 'sweating industry.'

<sup>85</sup> See David Cesarani, 'Anti-alienism in England after the First World War,' *Immigrants and Minorities*, 6/1 (1987): pp. 5-29. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 by the British Government declaring the need and support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine may be seen as one of the solutions to the Jewish exile situation in Europe (and Britain).

<sup>86</sup> See Herb Zaretsky, Steven Flanagan, and Alex Moroz, eds. *Medical Aspects of Disability: A Handbook for the Rehabilitation Professional*, Fourth Edition, (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 237-239 for contemporary definitions of 'idiot' and 'imbecile'. The Idiots Act of 1886 was replaced by the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. The Act of 1886 made a distinction between 'idiots' and 'Imbeciles' and the Act of 1913 made further distinctions between 'idiots', 'imbeciles', 'feeble-minded persons' and 'moral imbeciles'. Essentially both Acts considered idiots as mentally deficient and unable to protect themselves from danger. Imbeciles were considered incapable of managing themselves in daily life. Mentally deficient persons were institutionalised in asylums and work colonies and were considered a drain on the public purse. Imbeciles and idiots were thus deemed undesirable by immigration authorities.

troublemakers, chronically ill, and those who could not support themselves and their dependents were refused, but leave to land was not withheld on grounds of poverty should the refugee seek shelter because of political or religious persecution. This provision was vital for the Russian aristocracy (White Russians) who fled bereft of their possessions. White Russian soldiers escaping the Russian civil war, and World War One prisoners of war (POWs) such as Nikolai Medvedeff, were able to remain in the country as protected aliens more or less unhindered. Medvedeff, nevertheless, after many years working for the BBC was required to prove his status as a protected alien (refugee) under the Nansen agreement.<sup>87</sup> Here at least the Act preserved the right of asylum in the country for persecuted persons though a constant issue of deep concern to all parties was the extent to which the new arrivals would be a drain on the 'rates' – the public purse.

Increased xenophobia in the country in the years before the First World War led to calls for further immigration restrictions. In 1914 an amendment to the 1905 Aliens Act was upheld at a time of national emergency. It allowed the government 'in time of war or imminent national danger to impose restriction on aliens.'<sup>88</sup> The Act prohibited aliens landing and embarking, unwanted aliens could be deported and there were restrictions as to the areas in which immigrants were permitted to live. Britain professed to be sympathetic to the plight of refugees but, as Murdoch Rogers demonstrates, the effects of these treaties on a Lithuanian community in Lanarkshire, Scotland, between 1914-1920, challenges the perception of Britain as a protector and guarantor of minority rights.<sup>89</sup> Resentment was also felt towards Russians and Jews who resisted serving in the Allied forces, as Kadish explores.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, on 16 July, 1917 the British and Russian governments signed a Military Service Convention by which Russian Jews could be compelled to serve in either the Russian or the British armed forces. At the close of the First World War anti-alien feeling did not dissipate. Deportation of unwanted Russians (Jews and ethnic Russians) continued and the government refused to readmit those who were unable to show they had engaged in military service in the allied cause, particularly during the British intervention in the Russian Civil War.

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<sup>87</sup> The request does not appear within the BBC archive but Medvedeff's reply confirming his status does: Medvedeff, Letter to Mr Wynn, 1 July 1940, BBC (WAC) Files: RCONT1, Medvedeff, Nicholas: File 1; 1939-1953.

<sup>88</sup> Aliens Restriction Act 1914.

<sup>89</sup> Murdoch Rodgers, 'The Anglo-Russian military convention and the Lithuanian immigrant community in Lanarkshire, Scotland, 1914-20,' *Immigrants & Minorities*, 1/1 (1982): pp. 60-88.

<sup>90</sup> See Kadish, 'Friendly aliens' and the conscription question,' in *Bolsheviks and British Jews: the Anglo-Jewish Community, Britain and the Russian Revolution*, pp. 197-228.

Lloyd George passed the Alien's Restriction Bill in December 1919, despite Labour protestations, allowing the deportation of *all* former 'aliens'. The Bill, deemed necessary as the country was still considered to be in a state of emergency after the war, was intended to be in effect for two years but remained in force until 1971. The Bill was considered a deterrent against former enemy aliens who could now be prevented from entering the country. It also became a criminal offence to promote disaffection amongst soldiers or civilians by seditious speeches, or to promote industrial unrest. To avoid escaping notice, aliens were not permitted to legally change their name and were excluded from working in the civil service, in the navy or merchant fleet, and serving on juries.

These three Bills secured the Home Secretary's powers over entry to the country, employment (and types of employment), and the right to deport unwanted persons. Most importantly the 1919 Bill was not an amendment to the 1905 Bill but rather repealed it and thereby removed an immigrant's legal right to appeal a decision. These powers remained in force until 1969. Finally, the automatic right of asylum was withdrawn but 'decent' political refugees would still be admitted. The Russian royal family's presence in the country after the revolution was an example of this selectivity.

An Aliens Order of 1920 (which encompassed the 1919 Bill) remained in force until 1953. Work permits issued by the Ministry of Labour became mandatory and were only issued for various classes of work for which British or resident alien labour was not available. Musicians and performers needed to persuade the Ministry of Labour that their abilities (and Variety performance acts) were not to be found amongst British artists. The Aliens Order of 1920, which effectively protected labour from foreign competition, was the government's response to British public discontent with post-war economic depression and unemployment.

One further significant Bill was the Seditious Propaganda Bill of 1922 which sought 'to prevent the importation from overseas of money, valuable securities or property intended to be used for seditious propaganda and for purposes connected therewith.'<sup>91</sup> The authorities were clearly fearful of sedition and its effectiveness in stirring up social unrest witnessed in the social upheavals of 1919. The Bill led to an aggressive curtailment of Bolshevik propaganda which government ministers frequently believed was supported by 'German money'.<sup>92</sup> Britain had been heavily involved in the Russian Civil War. Military support was given to the White forces and British troops were sent to assist – primarily in Northern Russia. There were four pressing

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<sup>91</sup> House of Commons Debate, 24 May, 1922, *Hansard*, Vol. 154, c.1209–17.

<sup>92</sup> For example, the exchange in the War Office Meeting of February 7, 1919 (War Cabinet 529 Minutes) which voices these concerns. National Archives, Kew, Richmond: Ref. CAB/23/9. Foreign Office 371/3307, File 4790, HO to FO, CAB/23/9.

reasons for this involvement; the British government was concerned that revolution in Russia could spark revolution in other countries; there was fear that the new Russian regime would form a pact with Germany thereby withdrawing its support from the allies in their war against Germany;<sup>93</sup> there was the fear that Germany might take advantage of Russia's disorganisation and seek to gain control in Russia; and lastly, Britain was eager to re-establish a lucrative trade with Russia, a trade they wished to divert from German interests. These concerns led to Government suspicion of German and Bolshevik intentions in the country leading to the detention, silencing, and deportation of musicians such as the Bolshevik violinist Edward Soermus and his accompanist Bohumir Ulmann, a consequence of the Seditious Propaganda Bill. By January 1920 it became clear the anti-Bolshevik forces would be defeated and consequently Britain withdrew support for General Denikin in March 1920. British troops were withdrawn. Britain was also beginning to feel the economic burden of support and there was much discontent over Britain's involvement in the Civil War particularly amongst British soldiers as well as the British public. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918) between Germany and the Russian Bolsheviks led finally to the impossibility of supporting the White army. The collapse of the White army led to an increase of Russians seeking refuge in the UK. Large numbers of British subjects who had been resident in Russia were also evacuated but accommodated outside Britain, for example in Malta which was a British domain. There was a marked increase in immigration applications from Russian subjects within Russia despite formal discouragement from the Home Secretary, Sir George Cave.<sup>94</sup> The British Consul in Russia was ordered not to grant visas without reference to a military control officer or the authorities in London. Significantly, an exception was made for businessmen of good reputation.

By the Spring of 1919 Bolshevik forces had advanced on Odessa and the Crimea leading to the evacuation of thousands of Russian refugees – some evacuated on British ships. Exceptions were made for selected Russians seeking to enter Britain. Dowager Empress of Russia – Maria (Marie) Feodorovna, mother of Nikolai II, and her daughter Grand Duchess Ksenia (Xenia) with her children were brought to England. King George V sent HMS Marlborough to Yalta to evacuate the Empress – possibly to assuage a 'guilty conscience' as he had not accommodated Tsar Nicholas II and his family in 1917 which led to tragic consequences. Despite these various

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<sup>93</sup> This was affirmed with the signing of the Treat of Brest-Litovsk between Germany and Russia in 1918 – effectively taking Russia out of the war.

<sup>94</sup> The Home Office instructed the Foreign Secretary to inform the Embassy in Petrograd that 'facilities should not be given, save in exceptional circumstances, for Russians and other aliens to leave Russia for the UK.' Foreign Office: FO 371/3307, File 4790, Home Office: Home Office to Foreign Office, 8 January. 1918, PRO.

restrictions to stem the arrival of Russian refugees they continued to arrive throughout the 1920s to form a small Russian diaspora.

## 1.5 The Musicians' Union and the Variety Artistes' Federation

The attitude of the Musicians' Union towards immigrant musicians coming to Britain, its policing and restriction of work opportunities for foreigners, and its efforts to protect the working lives of British musicians has been addressed by John Williamson, Martin Cloonan and Matt Brennan.<sup>95</sup>

Russian musicians (friendly aliens) entering the country on Nansen passports were able to sidestep the restrictive measures of the Union to some extent however the Union's strenuous lobbying of the government to restrict the operation of foreign musicians in the country was to affect the working lives of the musicians under discussion in this dissertation.

In Manchester on 7 May 1893 the Manchester Musicians' Union was formed with twenty members. It was renamed in November of 1893 as the Amalgamated Musicians Union (AMU). This union was convened by musicians who felt threatened by the encroachment of alien musicians in the work environment. Its founder, Joseph Bevir Williams, wished to formulate a policy to 'reduce competition, particularly [from] European musicians who had almost unrestricted access to work in Britain.'<sup>96</sup> The AMU and the London Orchestral Union of Professional Musicians merged in 1921 to form The Musicians' Union. The Union's objections became increasingly vociferous in times of economic hardship, its argument being that British musicians were equally skilled and qualified to occupy engagements which were taken by foreigners. The restriction on popular bands coming from America became a particular concern but the attitude was not restricted to popular music and covered all types of musical activity.

The Musicians' Union frequently lobbied the Ministry of Labour and Trades Union Congress. The Ministry of Labour was formed in 1920 and applied the compulsory requirements of the 1919 Aliens Act that any foreigner seeking employment in the UK must obtain permission from the Ministry. The Musicians' Union was thus quick to lobby the new Ministry but one of the difficulties faced by The Musicians' Union was that it could not control artistes belonging to other Unions such as the Variety Artistes' Federation (VAF) which was willing to represent foreign singers and entertainers (who might also be musicians) on the Variety Theatre circuit. In

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<sup>95</sup> See John Williamson and Martin Cloonan, *Players' Work Time: A History of the British Musicians' Union 1893-2013*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). Also see, Martin Cloonan and Matt Brennan, 'Alien Invasions: the British Musicians' Union and Foreign Musicians,' *Popular Music*, 32/2 (2013): pp. 277-295.

<sup>96</sup> Mike Jempson, *The Musicians' Union 1893-1993: A Centenary Celebration*, (London: Musicians' Union, 1993), p. 8.

this way balalaika and domra players, Russian folk singers and dancers, were defined as Variety Acts and were able to slip through the net.<sup>97</sup> The Minister of Labour (1924-1929), Arthur Steel-Maitland, when questioned in Parliament as to the requirements imposed on visiting musicians replied in part: 'No condition other than a limitation of the period of stay in this country is in general imposed in the case of concert instrumentalists and persons giving stage performances at music halls.' Work permits were usually restricted to short stays, sometimes even for just one concert appearance, and were usually granted on the condition that no British musician could fill the post, that an equal number of British musicians be used or that a reciprocal agreement would be guaranteed for musician's work abroad (conditions which remain to this day). There was also the proviso that musicians who were distinctive in talent and reputation (such as a violin or piano concert soloist), or the type of music they played (national folk music, for example), were more likely to be granted a work permit: 'The conditions imposed depend on the circumstances of the proposed employment of the alien players, and also the kind of performance.... Complete bands to play symphony or national music, for example a Hungarian Tzigane Company, are admitted on an assurance that no British band or British player is being displaced, and that the alien band will not play for dancing.'<sup>98</sup> In 1929 the new Labour Minister, Margaret Bondfield, made the distinction that some visiting musicians were of outstanding ability and were unlikely to be competition for local musicians but would enhance the quality of musical acts. The augmentation of any band or orchestra was only permitted to 25% and on condition that no British musician be displaced. She was also mindful that restrictions on visiting musicians would restrict the ability of British musicians to work abroad in reciprocal agreements.<sup>99</sup>

Another frustrating loophole for The Musicians' Union was that applications for work permit extensions were officially made to the Home Office and not the new Ministry of Labour, who would grant the permit in the first place. Applications for an extension often cited personal circumstances rather than work opportunities. Once a permit was granted the musician was permitted to work for the length of the permit extension. Soermus, for example, had an English wife and two children in the country which earned sympathy when he was faced with deportation and eased the extensions to his residence permits and the annulment of his deportation orders by the Home Office. The Home Office appeared more concerned that applicants did not become a national nuisance, ironically one of the reasons Soermus was

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<sup>97</sup> *Musicians' Union Report*, September, 1937, p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> *Hansard*. Vol. 225, 11 February, 1929.

<sup>99</sup> *Hansard*. 31 October, 1929; *Hansard*. 2 June, 1930; *Hansard*. Vol. 237, Col 628, 27 March, 1930.

issued with a deportation order in the first place.<sup>100</sup> The Musicians' Union was militant in its hounding of immigrant musicians. W.B. Batten, a Musicians' Union member, frequently lobbied the Ministry of Labour on issues dealing with immigrant musicians employed illegally. In the Musicians' Union Report of January 1934<sup>101</sup> Batten reports on his dealings with the Prince Edward Theatre where a Jewish Russian refugee cellist was rehearsing. The cellist was dismissed, his application to join The Musicians' Union refused (on the strength that there were unemployed British cellists available), and the Jewish Refugee Committee sponsored the passage of the Russian cellist and his family to South America.

Opposition was not only towards popular band players and jazz musicians but extended to classical orchestras, instrumentalists, composers and teachers. In 1923 the Vienna State Orchestra, for example, was denied a permit to accompany the Vienna State Opera on its visit to Britain, a restriction viewed as a great victory for the Union.<sup>102</sup> It also sought to intervene in other ventures such as Russian Ballet productions performing at the Alhambra Theatre in October 1921.

The outbreak of the First World War increased xenophobia and resentment towards the presence of foreign musicians working in the country. A letter to the *Musical News* expressed the concern that the war

‘... has suddenly brought to a head the long-smouldering resentment against foreign dominance in British musical circles .... [now] is the chance for the native to assert his proper pre-dominance in the land of his birth.... After having their employment prejudicially affected for years by Germans and Austrians, [orchestral musicians] may be excused if they fail to see how the substitution of French and Belgians is likely to benefit their condition.’<sup>103</sup>

The Musicians' Union Agenda for 18 May 1923 asked members to report foreigners known to be working without permits. Similarly, as Europe moved closer to war in the 1930s the arrival of German Jewish composers and musicians exacerbated the situation. Impending war led to the rounding up and internment of 27,000 Germans in the country, including composers Hans Gal (1890-1987) and Hans Keller (1919-1985). Russians, as allies, were to avoid internment but had to obey curfews imposed from time to time. At the beginning of the Second World War there was resistance to foreign musicians amongst the British music establishment. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) expressed the fear that British music was in danger of losing its national

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<sup>100</sup> Martin Cloonan and Matt Brennan, ‘Alien Invasions: the British Musicians’ Union and Foreign Musicians,’ *Popular Music* 32/2 (2013): pp. 277-295 (283).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*. Quoted p. 286.

<sup>102</sup> The Musicians' Union, London Branch Agenda, 22 February, 1924.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Christopher Fifield, *Ibbs and Tillett: The Rise and Fall of a Musical Empire*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 97.

identity, that it would be inundated by foreign musical influences, particularly German music which had a dominant tradition. The view was that British musical interests needed to be safeguarded:

The problem of home-grown music has lately become acute owing to the friendly invasion of these shores by an army of distinguished German and Austrian musicians. The Germans and Austrians have a great musical tradition behind them. The question is not who has the best music, but what is going to be the best for us. Our visitors, with the great names of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms behind them, are apt to think that all music that counts must come from their countries. We must be careful that, faced with this overwhelming mass of 'men and material', we do not all become little Austrians and Germans. In that case either we shall make no music for ourselves at all, or such as we do make, will be just a mechanical imitation of foreign models. In either case, the music which we make will have no vitality of its own.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the increasing employment restrictions imposed upon Russian immigrant musicians by The Musicians' Union and the Variety Artistes' Federation, Russian musicians became highly sought after on the London scene. The Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938), introduced to London by Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) in 1913 in *Boris Godunov*, was a featured artist whose superlative bass voice and outstanding character portrayals in Russian operas were distinctive and unmatched by English basses. He was offered contracts featuring his skills which would not take work away from English artists. Chaliapin left Russia in 1921 and settled in Paris. He criticised the lack of freedom under the Bolshevik regime and resisted attempts by Maxim Gorky to persuade him to return to Russia. Consequently, he was stripped of his title *The First People's Artist of the Soviet Republic*. Chaliapin remained for lengthy periods of time in London (he had a flat in Covent Garden) to perform at Covent Garden and give solo concerts.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, artistes in Diaghilev's ballet seasons in London between 1919 and 1928 (at the Royal Opera House, Alhambra Theatre and the Coliseum) caused a sensation and initiated an intense interest in Russian folk art and music, fashion and taste. There was certainly an interest in Russian Art Music in English concert halls and opera houses but what is remarkable, and almost entirely undocumented, was the enormous popularity of Russian folk musicians who formed balalaika orchestras and smaller music ensembles. There's was a popularity which lasted from 1909 through to the 1930s, and which lingered on until the late 1950s. Nicolai Medvedeff, Alexander Wolkowsky and Vladimir Vladimoff (to a lesser extent), all Russian immigrants, successfully negotiated British employment legislation and performed successfully with their balalaika ensembles.

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Marcus Patka and Michael Haas, eds., *Hans Gál und Egon Wellesz: Continental Britons*, (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2004), p. 71.

<sup>105</sup> Chaliapin appeared at Covent Garden in Sir Thomas Beecham's season at the Lyceum Theatre in 1931. Feodor Chaliapin, *Man and Mask: Forty Years in the Life of a Singer*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1932).



The frequent accusation that immigrants were a drain on state resources and were taking employment away from local musicians is challenged by the fact that Russian musicians were able to support themselves by performing Russian folk music independently of any state help. They performed in formal concerts in major theatres in London and the provinces, played at important social occasions such as Royal Command Performances, coached in professional institutions such as the Coldstream Guards, and established and assisted in the formation of local English balalaika ensembles. They were active in promoting the balalaika and domra as instruments easy to master, they gave lessons, and provided balalaika arrangements and instruction Tutors. There was also a lucrative trade in imported balalaikas and domras coming from Russia. Alfred D. Cammeyer (1862-1949), a banjo soloist and promoter of plucked instruments, had come to England via the United States in 1888. He formed a partnership with Clifford Essex in 1890 and established The Cammeyer Music and Manufacturing Co. in Greek Street where Essex had a music studio and also manufactured banjos. It was from this studio that Cammeyer imported balalaikas and domras and wrote popular music for banjo, balalaika and other fretted instruments.

### 1.6 Russians in the Entertainment Industry

Despite the numerous restrictions to their pursuit of a music career in the UK, Russian ensembles and soloists became popular turns<sup>106</sup> in Variety Theatre, Concert Halls, galleries, Charity Balls and Benefit Concerts, providing background music in trendy restaurants and upmarket hotels, private functions such as garden parties, weddings, fetes and fund-raising events. Balalaika performances on bandstands were popular in public spaces such as parks and town squares. The instrument was promoted as relatively easy to master and this encouraged the formation of several amateur and professional balalaika orchestras and ensembles within towns such as Bath and Cheltenham, Plymouth and Blackheath in London. Russian musicians assisted these ensembles.

Russian musicians who sought refuge in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century found the country receptive to Russian music and dance.<sup>107</sup> A growing middleclass with expendable

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<sup>106</sup> The term *Turn* is given to an item in an evening of variety entertainment and was introduced to Variety Theatre by Russian artists coming to Britain. It is still used today in the industry to playfully describe an actor: Twirlies being dancers and Techies technicians.

<sup>107</sup> Anthony Cross, 'By Way of Introduction: British Perception, Reception and Recognition of Russian Culture,' in *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture*, edited by Anthony Cross (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), pp. 1-36. Cross provides a succinct contextual overview of 'Russian fever' in Britain from the Elizabethan era to the establishment of the Soviet Union.

income and increasing leisure time was in search of improvement and titillation. Foreign performing artistes, actors, dancers, musicians, singers, and performance troupes were popular and satisfied the public's pursuit of unusual exotic entertainment, particularly in theatre performances. Variety Theatre provided populist respectable fare while established West End theatres and concert halls provided drama, music and dance of a more challenging sort. Sergei Diaghilev first brought his *Ballets Russes* company to the Royal Opera House in 1911 with huge success and introduced dancers Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky<sup>108</sup> to a shocked but excited London audience.<sup>109</sup> Pavlova settled in London<sup>110</sup> where she opened a dance school and formed her own company, as did the dancers Serafine Astafieva and Lydia Kyasht<sup>111</sup> who toured the Cabaret and Revue circuit. Ida Rubenstein too, though based in Paris, appeared with her dance company in London in September 1909 (concurrently with Andreeff's orchestra) and made several further successful and scandalous forays into British theatre.<sup>112</sup> Various Russian choirs were popular - Don Cossack Choir, Slaviansky Choir, Kedrov Quartet - as was the opera bass Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1939). Painters Lèon Bakst (1866-1924), Alexandre Benois (1870-1960), Aleksandr Golovin (1863-1930), and Sergei Sudeikin (1882-1946) provided set designs for Diaghilev and fuelled the interest in Russian art and music in the theatre. Russian literature and plays, the novels of Dostoevsky and the plays of Chekhov for instance,<sup>113</sup> were discovered by the public. The naturalistic acting style of the Moscow Art Theatre was a revelation and revolutionised acting styles in English opera and theatre performance. Theodor Komisarjevsky,<sup>114</sup> the Russian theatre director had worked with the Moscow Art Theatre.

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<sup>108</sup> Nijinsky, after many years in and out of asylums, was to spend his last years (1947-1950) with his wife Romola in Virginia Water.

<sup>109</sup> Gareth Thomas, 'Modernism, Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in London 1911-1929' in *British Music and Modernism 1895-1960*, edited by Matthew Riley (London; Routledge, 2010). Jane Pritchard, Geoffrey D. Marsh, Victoria and Albert Museum, *Diaghilev and the golden age of the Ballets Russes 1909-1929*, (London: V&A, 2010). Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Walter Archibald Propert and Eugene Goossens, *The Russian Ballet in Western Europe, 1909-1920*, (London: John Lane, 1921).

<sup>110</sup> Pavlova bought Ivy House in Golders Green in 1912 where she lived until her death.

<sup>111</sup> Lydia Kyasht first appeared as the featured ballerina at the Empire Theatre in 1908 and thereafter settled in the country establishing her own ballet school (which later moved to Cirencester) and forming her dance and cabaret company *Ballet de la Jeunesse Anglaise*.

<sup>112</sup> Ida Rubenstein, born in Kharkiv, performed in Diaghilev's Paris productions of *Cleopatra* in 1909 and *Scheherazade* in 1910 and thereafter formed her own company making several scandalous visits to London until well into the 1930s.

<sup>113</sup> Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* was published in England in 1912. Virginia Woolf was engaged by Dostoevsky's complexity of characters and understanding of the human psyche, that human nature is a complex mixture of both good and bad. Chekhov's plays were introduced to English theatre goers in productions mounted by Theodore Komisarjevsky, notably his production of *Uncle Vanya* in 1921. Chekhov's *The Wedding* was mounted at The Grafton Gallery in 1921 as was Leo Tolstoy's *The First Distiller*.

<sup>114</sup> Theodor Komisarjevsky naturalised as a British citizen in 1932.

Komisarjevsky's Chekhov productions in London were much praised. He escaped the tragic fate of Vsevolod Meyerhold<sup>115</sup> and settled in London in 1919. Sir Thomas Beecham invited him to stage *Prince Igor* at Covent Garden (1919) and thereafter Komisarjevsky formed the *Russian Musical Dramatic Art Society* with Vladimir Rosing, a young exiled Russian tenor, with the purpose of introducing English audiences to Russian dramas and musical works thereby hoping to improve relations between England and Russia. British audiences had already been introduced to Russian opera performance in 1888 when a Russian opera company (advertised using various names) visited Britain with a repertoire that included Glinka's *A Life for the Tzar*, Rubinstein's *Demon*, Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa* as well as Verdi's *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*.<sup>116</sup> Vladimir Rosing, despite arriving in the country in 1913 with very little finance, demonstrated entrepreneurial resourcefulness by raising financial and artistic means to form his own opera companies and mount independent musical events (operas and recitals) in English concert halls and theatres. Rosing, in a short period of time before he emigrated to the United States, was to make a particular and significant contribution to English opera production particularly in his insistence on naturalistic acting and attention to stage choreography. He is discussed in more depth in Chapter Four.

*The Anglo-Russian Club* was another cultural institution established within the Russian diaspora in London. It was supported by wealthy Russians living in London with the intention of promoting Russian arts and also providing employment for Russian artists in the diaspora. Nikolai Medvedeff's newly formed balalaika ensemble, for example, was employed to play at the club's dinner on the 8 December, 1920. Repertoire was chosen to please the Russian diners but also reveals Medvedeff's intention to introduce Russian folk melodies to English audiences. His repertoire for this dinner included:

1. *March*, Andreeff
2. *Waltz Gatchino*, (Andreeff)
3. *Under the Apple Tree*
4. *Daydreams Waltz*, (Andreeff)
5. *Mountain Ash (Ryabinushka)*
6. *Bright Shines the Moon*

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<sup>115</sup> The theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold was accused of formalism after he defended formalist art at a conference of theatre directors in Moscow on 17 June, 1939. He was arrested on his return to Leningrad (June 1939), tortured and shot (2 Feb, 1940). His wife, actress Zinaida Reich, was brutally stabbed to death in their flat shortly after Meyerhold's arrest.

<sup>116</sup> Tamsin Alexander, 'An 'Extraordinary Engagement': A Russian Opera Company in Victorian Britain' in *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture*, edited by Anthony Cross (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012): pp. 97-112.

7. *Horses Stand Ready*
8. *In the Field a Birch Tree Stood*
9. *Green Grove*<sup>117</sup>

The works of Russian composers were increasingly played in London concert halls<sup>118</sup> and the Russian conductor Wassili (Vasily) Safonoff (1852-1918) and pianists Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) and Alexander Siloti (1863-1945) appeared in London. As already mentioned, Nikolai Medtner settled in London in 1936 where he taught piano and composed and Mischa Spoliansky composed scores for numerous films also made London his home.<sup>119</sup> The hugely popular Russian revue *La Chauve-Souris* formed by Nikita Balieff in Moscow c.1906 was brought to London in the 1920s by Charles Cochran (1872-1951). Balieff had joined the Moscow Art Theatre under Constantin Stanislavski but broke away to form his own Cabaret and Revue company. The Revolution saw Balieff go into exile and settle in Paris. His company toured Europe, Britain, the United States and South Africa and was hugely popular. The Revue satirised Russian life and presented a mixed fare of songs, dances and satirical sketches and carried its own small balalaika and domra ensemble. There were also regular visits of *The Cossacks* with their equestrian spectacles performed in Holland Park. There was interest in Russian cuisine, clothing, crafts, icons, dance, painting and literature. Restaurants served Russian Zakouski (hors d'oeuvres), soups and national dishes. Russian cigarettes and liqueurs were in demand. The Programme for Andreeff's Coliseum concerts included the advertisement 'The Great Fame of the Russian Balalaika Orchestra has even attracted the attention of the King's Perfumers. Messrs Bayley and Co.... who are now Manufacturing the New Delightful "ANDREEFF" and "BALALAIKA" Perfumes and Toilet Soaps, Now Ready for Sale.'

There was an increase in cultural exchange between Russia and Britain in the years before the 1917 Revolution attributed to a resolution of political misunderstandings, the establishment of a provisional government in Russia, and increased economic cooperation between the two

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<sup>117</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, p. 15.

<sup>118</sup> See Gareth Thomas, *'The Impact of Russian Music in England 1893-1929'* (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2005).

<sup>119</sup> Spoliansky wrote the song *Whisper Sweet Little Nothing to Me* for Merlene Dietrich in Hitchcock's film *Stage Fright* in 1950. He collaborated with Paul Robeson on a number of songs. Spoliansky composed for Berlin cabaret theatre, stage musicals and film (*Mischa Spoliansky, Film Music*, Chandos 2009). His *Symphony in Five Movements* was recorded by the Leipaja Symphony Orchestra conducted by Paul Mann (*Mischa Spoliansky, Orchestral Works*, Toccata Classics 2022). Chris Kelly, grandson and trustee of Spoliansky's music estate notes there is no extended study of Spoliansky's work in film in the UK from 1933 to 1985. Chris Kelly, e-mail to the author, 11 August, 2022.

countries.<sup>120</sup> Gordon Craig, for instance, directed *Hamlet* in Moscow for the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911-12 taking his innovative set and lighting designs adopted from Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) to Russia. The British public in exchange was exposed to new, exotic, and progressive trends from Russia which challenged a reserved and conservative English society. Russian artists in all disciplines were praised for their skill and innovation, and most significantly, created a fertile milieu for Russian émigré artists seeking a new life in London. The Russian diaspora in London was populated by Russian artists who visited and/or settled in London during the unstable social situation in Russia. Many artistes made their way to the United States but returned to London for periods of time. In this way the artistic community within the Russian diaspora in London constantly shifted its character, formation and identity, like a chimera, artists coming and going.

Theatres were also undergoing change. Music Halls, popular in the late nineteenth century,<sup>121</sup> made way for a more respectable form of entertainment, Variety Theatre. Gilbert and Sullivan operettas premiered regularly in the 1880s and 1890s and engendered a new form of entertainment, the English Musical – *In Town* (1892), *A Gaiety Girl* (1893) and *The Arcadians* (1909) being typical successful examples. The Edwardian period (1901-1910) saw theatrical entertainment become more accessible to a broader section of society. Working conditions and salaries improved and the working man and woman had a moderate expendable income to enjoy entertainments. Theatre performance times were adjusted to accommodate working hours and dress codes for the upper tiers were somewhat relaxed. It was no longer *de rigueur* for men and women to wear formal evening attire (except in the Dress Circle) to attend the theatre.

The huge popularity and financial possibilities of this burgeoning theatre industry attracted a number of theatre managers. George Edwardes produced at the Gaiety Theatre from 1885 and

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<sup>120</sup> Ludmilla Schollar, *prima ballerina*, Georges Kiakscht, first dancer of the Imperial Opera House and Lydia Khasht *première danseuse* were all appearing in London as was M. Peshkoff and his dancers in Leicester Square and the Palace Theatre. *The Graphic*, 30 October, 1909.

<sup>121</sup> Music Hall entertainment had deteriorated and many Music Halls were condemned as places of prostitution and loose morals. The Music Hall was, however, a much-loved established institution, mainly frequented by men (but not only) and had a loyal following from all classes of society. The distinguishing feature of Music Hall was that food, alcohol and tobacco could be consumed during the performance (chairs and tables were provided) and many Halls became 'houses of ill repute.' Music Hall was superseded by a more respectable 'sit and watch' entertainment, Variety Theatre, aimed at the middle-classes. Both forms of theatre comprised a variety of specialty acts, instrumental performers, popular songs and dances, comedy sketches and comedians. Winston Churchill as a young man was known to have protested at the closing of the Music Hall in Leicester Square: See Winston Churchill, *My Early Life*, (London: Eland, 1930), pp 92-106 for an account of Churchill's defence of the Music Hall. See also Benny Green, ed., *The Last Empires: A Music Hall Companion*, (London: Pavilion/Michael Joseph, 1986), pp. 64-68.

introduced a family orientated, 'reformed' and respectable format of musical – simple plots, romance and comedy, and dancing Gaiety Girls who would show off the latest fashions. Two dominating entrepreneurs of Variety Theatre, Sir Oswald Stoll and Sir Edward Moss, built an empire of theatres both independently and in collaboration.<sup>122</sup> Stoll promoted the idea of Variety Theatre which presented a full evening of independent acts, or 'turns' as they became known, in a continuous uninterrupted sequence of variety. These programmes, which at first were presented thrice daily, changed weekly, acts moving from one theatre, one town, to the next. The Stoll/Moss empire of theatres employed hundreds of performers and entertainers on a weekly basis. Acts were assessed on their originality, their skill, and their appeal as entertainment. The *Ballets Russes*, Sarah Bernhardt, Anna Pavlova and other visiting stars were accommodated in Variety Theatre as 'high art' (and successful financial guarantees) and presented to a growing theatre-going public. The popularity of Variety Theatre and its consequent financial returns enabled Stoll to build the London Coliseum (architect Frank Matcham) as the flagship of his theatrical empire.<sup>123</sup>

It was in this burgeoning theatre and entertainment industry, which prized the novel act, the highly skilled performer, the exotic and the scandalous, that Russian émigré and refugee artists were able to exploit their talents and find the means to survive abroad. Their displacement, their otherness, in a strange cultural environment became their means to a livelihood. Zakharov notes<sup>124</sup> the first priority for refugees in London was to find employment and many became taxi drivers, others opened bakeries and small restaurants; many with the skill to play a musical instrument, particularly the balalaika and domra, formed ensembles and performed in theatres, restaurants, hotels, concerts, charity concerts (for which they were paid) and private homes. Russia became an ally of Britain in the Great War (and in World War II) which increased public fascination with the country and sympathy for its people and armed forces. Charity performances in London and the provinces in the 1920s and 1930s, organised by the Russian and English Red Cross and supported by aristocratic benefactors, raised funds for Russian and East European causes but also provided much needed opportunities for Russian musicians to

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<sup>122</sup> The Stoll/Moss theatre empire was formed in 1899 in Edinburgh (together with Richard Thornton). By 1910 (the year Stoll withdrew his theatres from the group to run them as a separate business) they owned and operated 50 theatres around the country.

<sup>123</sup> In 1905 they declared a joint capital of £2,086,000.00. (the equivalent today of £317,865,189.00). The Moss-Thornton-Stoll Circuit list advertisement of 1905. *The Music Hall and Theatre History Site*. Consulted 9 March, 2024.  
<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/OswaldStoll.htm>

<sup>124</sup> Vasilii Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots* (London: Basileus Press, 2004): pp. 229-274 for a general discussion of 'How they lived and worked.'

perform and earn.<sup>125</sup> Aristocratic houses also employed Russian ensembles for their *soirees* to enhance their “at homes”. In such ways Russian artistes, despite their peripheral immigrant status, contributed significantly to the vibrancy of music making in London.

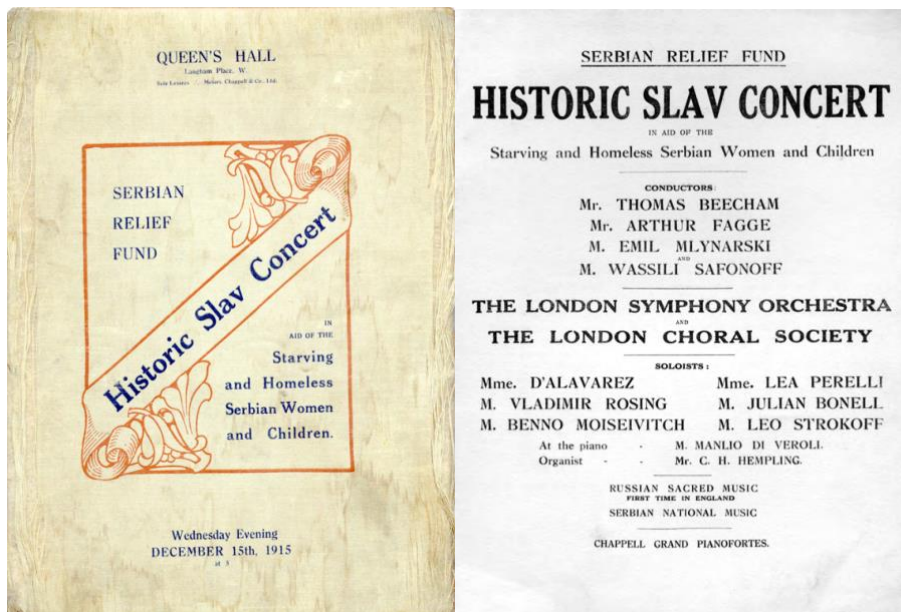


Figure 2 Russian Charity Concert Programmes

In the early decades of the twentieth century foreign artists, having achieved immigrant/residence status using their Nansen passports, were free to perform relatively

<sup>125</sup> Mrs Churchill mounted charity performances ‘Aid to Russia’ at The Coliseum in the 1940s. See Claire Knight, ‘Mrs Churchill goes to Russia: The Wartime Gift Exchange between Britain and the Soviet Union,’ in *A People Passing Rude*, pp. 253-268.

unhindered in the UK.<sup>126</sup> Russian artists settled, married and over time naturalised and became British citizens.<sup>127</sup> Nikolai Medvedeff, George and Alexander Wolkowsky are typical examples.<sup>128</sup> Multanen argues that Russian immigrants in Britain were subjected to harsher immigration procedures but once accepted were more easily assimilated than in other diasporas such as those in Paris, Prague, and Berlin. Multanen attributes this to immigrants having better education, wealth and social status.

The number of artists and performers made for a small but artistically rich diaspora. Foreign artists flooded the English theatre causing concern within the industry that local artists were being crowded out. The question of Foreign Acts came to a head at the Variety Artistes Federation Annual General Meeting on 28 January, 1932. Mr Tex McLeod (an American variety performer) had been ordered by the Home Office to leave the country as his permit had expired and he did not have sufficient confirmed contracts to warrant an extension. The VAF suggests McLeod was made an example of and the union feared reprisals against British performers working in America. By 1939 the number of annual permits granted to foreign Variety Artists had risen to 1757, Circus Acts to 444 and together with Cabaret Artists reached a total of 2201 foreign artists.<sup>129</sup> Many artistes worked illegally until stopped or deported.<sup>130</sup>

The Wolkowsky Troupe and Nikolai Medvedeff and his Corps de Balalaika, later his Russian Balalaika Orchestra, are discussed more fully in Chapter Four and illustrate the difficulties encountered by such artists in theatre entertainment. These ensembles worked together at times and the difficulties they faced were common to them both, though the nature of their work was quite different. There were other similar Russian ensembles such as Zaretsky's Russian Troupe, Captain Strelesky's Balalaika Orchestra and Singers (sometimes Strelesky's Cossack Singers and Balalaika Orchestra), The Bahyan Balalaika Orchestra, and The New Russian

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<sup>126</sup> Nansen Passports were issued to stateless persons by the League of Nations High Commission for Refugees. The formulation and implementation of the document was entrusted to Firdtjof Nansen, a Norwegian statesman and polar explorer, who was High Commissioner for Refugees for the League of Nations. The Nansen Passport was ratified after a conference in Geneva 2-5 July 1922 convened by Nansen.

<sup>127</sup> See Elina Multanen, 'British Policy Towards Russian Refugees (PhD diss.)', pp. 14-16.

<sup>128</sup> George Wolkowsky naturalised in March 1931. Naturalisation certificate HO 334/115/19510, The National Archives, Kew.

<sup>129</sup> *The Stage*, 16 February, 1939 reports on the Variety Artistes' Federation figures for Foreign Acts.

<sup>130</sup> *The Performer*, 28 January, 1932. The argument for and against restriction of foreign acts, the exchange with American artistes, quotas, preferences, discrepancies in salaries, types of acts, was discussed in numerous issues of *The Performer* between 1932 and 1939.



Balalaika Orchestra conducted by M. Vladimov (also Vladimoff's Balalaika Orchestra).<sup>131</sup> These musicians led active (though precarious) professional lives, with many musicians having to take additional part-time employment. Despite the disadvantages they encountered as immigrants they were able to turn displacement to advantage and contribute to the English Light Music scene.

## 1.7 Literature Review

This Literature Review examines works providing a context for the discussion of Russian musicians operating within the Russian diaspora in the UK in the first half of the twentieth century; more specifically, those musicians of the *first-wave* Russian emigration to Britain. British musicology has focussed to some degree on the presence of high-profile Russian composers of Art Music performing and settling in the country. Nikolai Medtner is the most prominent of these and Alexander Karpeyev's dissertation *New Light on Nikolay Medtner as Pianist and Teacher: The Edna Iles Medtner Collection (EIMC) at the British Library* examines Medtner's teaching practices<sup>132</sup> and Michael Jones's essay 'Nicolas Medtner: An Honorary British Composer?' assesses the reception of Medtner in British concert halls.<sup>133</sup> The presence of Russian immigrant *performing* musicians in the UK, particularly folk musicians, has been neglected. The musical activities of these immigrant musicians were diverse and found in a variety of contexts in British society; in concert halls, theatres, broadcasting, provincial communities and a variety of informal spaces for performing music.

British imperialism was still strong at the beginning of the twentieth-century but was shaken by the Boer War, two World Wars, and the desire for national independence emerging in the

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<sup>131</sup> Information about these other ensembles is not as prolific and much of what we know is gleaned from newspaper reporting, reviews and mentions in contemporary trade journals. Vladimov is sometimes written Vladimoff.

<sup>132</sup> Alexander Karpeyev, 'New Light on Nikolay Medtner as Pianist and Teacher: The Edna Iles Medtner Collection (EIMC) at the British Library.' (PhD diss., City University, London, 2014).

<sup>133</sup> Michael Jones, 'Nicolas Medtner: An Honorary British Composer?: Exploring interlinked connections between Russian music and Britain.' *British Music* 42 (2020): 18-36. See also, Martyn Barrie, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*. (London: Routledge, 1995). An extensive list of publications, dissertations and articles as well as a discography is provided at <https://www.medtner.org.uk/publications.html> (accessed 20 February 2025).

Mischa Spoliansky, another composer who settled in the UK, composed for cabaret and film (including for Alfred Hitchcock). There is an autobiography and personal reflections amongst Spoliansky's unpublished papers. Chris Kelly e-mail to the author, 6 August, 2022 states: 'I'm sorry to say, there aren't any scholarly works on Spoliansky as such, there are a number of books which mostly deal with the Weimar Period in which there are a number of references, some in depth, others not so much. Spoliansky wrote an autobiography which has yet to be published, though this is still work in progress, but the contents are mostly Spoliansky's anecdotes.'

colonies. Imperialism and its inherent attitudes in society provides a pervasive background to any consideration of immigrant musicians in the UK at this time. Contributions to the series *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies* edited by Bennett Zon<sup>134</sup> have proved useful in setting a context for the effects of nationalism and xenophobia on immigrant music performed in the UK. So too for exploring constructions of national identity through music, music and empire, music in displacement and diaspora, the folk music revival and issues of gender in music at the *fin de siècle*. *Imperialism and Popular Culture* edited by John MacKenzie<sup>135</sup> also finds resonance in its assessment of British attitudes towards and fascination with popular and folk music from other nations performed in Britain which leads to a consideration of the exotic in music. In this regard Ralph P. Locke's *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*, while focussing firmly on Art Music by established composers, provides useful signifiers for the exploitation of exoticism by Russian immigrant performers.<sup>136</sup> Russian immigrant musicians could be found in English Music Hall, Variety Theatre and broadcasting on the BBC which were all platforms for the performance and enjoyment of a variety of exotic forms of music.

The presence of Russian music and musicians within smaller towns and communities is examined as is their contribution to the light music industry found in informal platforms for music making such as public spaces, restaurants, hotels, social dancing and private homes. In this regard Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* has proved a yardstick for any assessment of music-making within smaller provincial communities.<sup>137</sup>

Erik Levi and Florian Scheduling provide a key collection of texts which examine dislocation and displacement and ensuing repercussions for musicians and music-making in a variety of contexts.<sup>138</sup> The processes by which music operates within displaced communities (diasporas), whether by groups or individual agents, reveal their efforts to preserve, develop, acculturate or reject received cultural forms. Levi and Scheduling's collection of papers was the initial impetus

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<sup>134</sup> *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies* (4 volumes): Volume 1 edited by Bennett Zon; Volume 2 edited by Jeremy Dibble and Bennett Zon; Volume 3 edited by Peter Horton and Bennett Zon. (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 1999-).

<sup>135</sup> John M. MacKenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

<sup>136</sup> Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also, Ralph P. Locke, 'A Broader View of Musical Exoticism,' *Journal of Musicology* 24/4 (2007): pp. 477–521. Also Locke's 'On Exoticism: Western Art Music and the Words We Use,' *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 69/4 (2012): pp. 318–328. Also, Ralph P. Locke 'A Broader View of Musical Exoticism,' *Journal of Musicology* 24/4 (2007): pp. 477–521.

<sup>137</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>138</sup> Levi and Scheduling, eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities, and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*.

to my determination to examine Russian musicians in a displaced environment (the UK) and to focus on their *lived experience* rather than to formulate or advance any theorized notions of displacement, diaspora and identity. Notwithstanding, current discourse surrounding displacement and diaspora forms the background to any discussion of these musicians. Levi and Scheduling were critical of musicologists who have ‘remained reluctant to address the issue [of displacement] ... Among musicologists displacement studies remains in its infancy in the sphere of music.’<sup>139</sup> The one common defining characteristic of the Russian musicians in this research is their displacement, a lived experience in a foreign place. Philip Bohlman’s “‘Das Lied ist aus’: The Final Resting Place along Music’s Endless Journey’ and ‘Dimensions of Silencing: On Nazi Anti-Semitism in Musical Displacement’ by Peter Petersen<sup>140</sup> in this collection explore displacement as a traumatic and negative circumstance. Jehoash Hirshberg, however, provides an alternative investigation which traces the positive contribution of six German composers, displaced to Palestine, in creating ‘a new national culture of concert music.... Displacement ... thus acted as a catalyst for music production.’<sup>141</sup> Displacement as a catalyst for music-making is a key factor which unites the displaced Russian musicians in this dissertation.

Levi and Scheduling’s collection approaches displacement as three conditions; the forced displacement of musicians, the processes of displacement towards acculturation, and theories of displacement. Their subject focus is firmly (though not exclusively) on the European experience, especially Germany, Austria, and the Jewish displacement. Within this collection Sean Campbell’s essay on popular music amongst the Irish diaspora in England is the single paper having a British focus<sup>142</sup> and Russian displaced musicians (in the UK and elsewhere) are not discussed at all. One reason for this is suggested in Scheduling’s forum paper “‘Who is British Music?’ Placing Migrants in National Music History’ where he outlines the prevailing scholarly attitudes towards migrant music in Britain. Here he notes that the *Grove Music Online* entry for ‘England’, in its search for Englishness in music, moves migrant music in British society to the

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 1-2.

<sup>140</sup> Philip Bohlman, “‘Das Lied ist aus’: The Final Resting Place along Music’s Endless Journey,’ and Peter Petersen, ‘Dimensions of Silencing: On Nazi Anti-Semitism in Musical Displacement,’ both in Levi and Scheduling, *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, pp. 15-29 and 31-42.

<sup>141</sup> Jehoash Hirschberg, ‘The Vision of the East and the Heritage of the West: Displacement as a Catalyst for the Creation of Musical Life in the Jewish Community of Palestine,’ in Levi and Scheduling, eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, pp. 57-70.

<sup>142</sup> Sean Campbell, ‘Displaced Sounds: Popular Music-Making among the Irish Diaspora in England,’ in Levi and Scheduling, eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, pp. 89 -103.

periphery.<sup>143</sup> The paucity of any in-depth study of Russian immigrant musicians in the UK may be attributed to Scheduling's opinion that scholarship dealing with music in migration found in Britain has been fragmented when dealing with different genres and diasporas. Most pertinently he believes migrant music, what he calls the sonic diversity of British music, has been almost excluded from British music historiography. This, he admits optimistically, appears to be changing with forums and conferences incorporating immigrant voices. He also warns that diasporic studies of music may fall into the trap of isolating the diaspora community and the music parameters within the host nation. I argue that Russian immigrant musicians actively promoted their otherness and retained a strong cultural identity but sought to infiltrate English institutions and arenas for music-making thereby seeking popularity and legitimacy for their music and contributing to the diversity of musical life of the nation.

Scheduling's *Musical Journeys: Performing Migration in Twentieth Century Music*<sup>144</sup> examines the British musical establishment's attitude to migrant composers and musicians in the 1930s and 1940s, again mainly German, Austrian and Hungarian composers. His focus on immigrant music broadcast by the BBC provides a comparative perspective to my discussion of Medvedeff's work for the BBC. Any discussion by Scheduling of displaced Russian musicians is eerily missing. One factor contributing to this omission could be that Russians, though immigrants, were not considered 'aliens' during the 1930s and 40s, they were not enemy undesirables and did not face the harsher strictures such as internment and non-employment imposed on immigrants from the German countries. Scheduling's study of Mátyás Seiber's relationship with the BBC<sup>145</sup> is nevertheless instructive as it examines and teases out the Corporation's ambivalent, sometimes obstructive, attitude towards Hungarian, German and Austrian migrant composers. Nikolai Medvedeff's relationship with the BBC (he worked regularly for the BBC from 1922 through to the 1960s) suggests there was a more accepting accommodation of Russian folk musicians.

One last contribution in Levi and Scheduling to be considered is Max Paddison's 'Adorno and Exile: Some Thoughts on Displacement and What It Means to Be German.'<sup>146</sup> The philosopher Theodor Adorno fled Germany and resided in England and the United States between 1934 and

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<sup>143</sup> Florian Scheduling, 'Forum. 'Who is British Music?: Placing Migrants in National Music History,' *Twentieth Century Music*, 15/13 (2018): pp. 443-444.

<sup>144</sup> Florian Scheduling, *Musical Journeys: Performing Migration in Twentieth Century Music*, (Woodbridge; Boydell and Brewer, 2010).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibidem*. Chapter 3 'Airwaves in London,' pp. 83-111.

<sup>146</sup> Max Paddison, 'Adorno and Exile: Some Thoughts on Displacement and What It Means to Be German,' in Erik Levi and Florian Scheduling eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, pp. 135-153.

1949. Like many other refugees who found it difficult to acculturate within their host societies and create a sense of Home Adorno, too, experienced this disjunction. Paddison examines Adorno in exile and notions of identity within displacement. Paddison can be read alongside Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* which provides a collection of 153 aphorisms reflecting on modern life and the difficulties of living in exile. The collection, begun during his time in exile abroad, can be considered in the context of Adorno's wider reflections on dwelling and housing. Matt Waggoner, *Unhoused: Adorno and the Problem of Dwelling*<sup>147</sup> suggests that Adorno proposed an ethic of displacement in order to manage living conditions and attachments to places and objects, those aspects which increase our sense of belonging and home. Adorno proposed that in this disjuncture in modern living (felt acutely while writing in exile in the United States) 'it is part of morality 'not to be at home in one's home'.<sup>148</sup> As Paddison notes, managing displacement requires 'a refusal of the security of absolutes'.<sup>149</sup> Avtar Brah also advocates that diaspora suggests a subtext of 'Home', a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination, and while 'the problematic of 'home' and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition, but how, when, and in what form questions surface, or how they are addressed, is specific to the history of a particular diaspora. Not all diasporas inscribe homing desire through a wish to return to a place of 'origin'.<sup>150</sup> These meditations on alienation and Home provide perspectives on Medvedeff's written reflections on Home, his sense of loss of a childhood utopia and his affirmation of Home through music performance.

In a recent study, *Diaspora as Translation and Decolonisation*, Ipek Demir proposes there are two approaches to diaspora found in critical thinking, a) those advocating an ideal conception of what and who constitutes a diaspora, and b) diaspora as a 'becoming', a concept more fluid, not fixed, and which encompasses hybridity. In the former approach she traces the development of the principal characteristics considered necessary to identify a diaspora as a

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<sup>147</sup> See Matt Waggoner, *Unhoused: Adorno and the Problem of Dwelling*, (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2018).

<sup>148</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott, (London: New Left Books, 1974), p 39.

<sup>149</sup> Paddison, 'Adorno and Exile' in Erik Levi and Florian Scheduling, eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*, p 135.

<sup>150</sup> Avtar Brah. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. (London: Routledge, 1996), p.189.

construct that can be examined, those identifying features noted by Cohen<sup>151</sup> and Safran<sup>152</sup> (for example). Her second proposal moves away from what and who constitutes a diaspora towards the notion that diasporas can translate and decolonise, that we should develop an understanding of diaspora as a concept which accommodates transformation as a critical concept.<sup>153</sup> Avtar Brah advocates that the term should be seen as ‘conceptual mapping which defies the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity; for pristine, pure customs and traditions or unsullied glorious pasts’.<sup>154</sup> This dissertation does not engage with any new formulation of the concept of diaspora yet the condition of displacement within the Russian community in the UK with its characteristics peculiar to the British context, is pervasive in the study of the activities of Russian immigrant musicians.

The Russian diaspora in the UK is not extensively documented. The diaspora in the first half of the twentieth century was small by comparison to other countries and it is mentioned only in passing in studies dealing with Russian diasporas in other cities (for example, Raeff considers Prague and Berlin, Johnson examines Paris, and Andreyev and Savický also focus on Prague). Russian *musicians* living within all these diasporas are hardly mentioned and when they are, discussion centres on personalities within the Art Music and Theatre scene.<sup>155</sup> Folk music and music-making at a community level are barely discussed.

Marc Raeff’s pioneering research of Russia Abroad focuses on individuals and institutions in the wider Russian diaspora but with a focus on Prague and Berlin as the literary and academic

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<sup>151</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 3rd Edition. (London; New York: Routledge, 2022). The third edition includes two additional chapters to the 2008 publication addressing the changing meanings and interpretations of the concept of ‘diaspora’. Also see William Safran, ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,’ *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1/1 (1991): pp. 83 – 99. For definitions and discussion of Diaspora see: Lisa Anteby-Yemini and William Berthomière, ‘Diaspora: A Look Back on a Concept,’ *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem [En ligne]*, 16 (2005): pp. 262-270. Consulted October, 2022. <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/257> See also Jonathan Grossman, ‘Toward a definition of Diaspora,’ *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42 (2019): pp. 1263-1282. Consulted July, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1550261>

<sup>152</sup> William Safran, ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,’ *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1/1 (1991): pp. 83–99.

<sup>153</sup> Ipek Demir, *Diaspora as Translation and Decolonisation*, Theory for a Global Age (Series), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024): Chapter One, ‘Theories of diaspora and their limitations,’ pp. 13-24.

<sup>154</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. p 193.

<sup>155</sup> Monographs and studies of composers such as Medtner and Rachmaninoff, biographies of personalities such as Feodor Chaliapin, Sergei Diaghilev, Anna Pavlova, Ida Rubinstein and other leading Russian artists making their home and careers in England are numerous. Some of these works are listed in the Bibliography.

centres of the emigration.<sup>156</sup> The Russian community in England is mentioned only in passing. Raeff also does not specifically examine music-making in the diasporas but rather focusses on ‘the general conditions of émigré artistic and scientific achievements, and attempt(s) to suggest the broad trends of which they were part.’<sup>157</sup> Raeff acknowledges that music represented Russian cultural achievements but he generally views music and visual arts as universal arts and hence believes Russian music is more easily assimilated into Western Arts. He does not consider the impact and function of Russian folk music (as opposed to Art Music) in these communities within the host countries. His work is invaluable for its insights into the political and social construction of Russian diasporas.

Robert Johnson’s study of *Russia Abroad* considers Paris as the political centre of the Russian diaspora and focuses on Russian newspaper, literary and political writing in its efforts to cement relations with the French government in the face of the new Soviet rule in Russia.<sup>158</sup> He provides a sweeping overview of musicians and other artists who settled in Paris but limits this to personalities such as Diaghilev and Pavlova. Music is only discussed as part of the fabric of the diaspora and the arts in general. His discussion nevertheless provides illuminating comparisons with the Russian diaspora in the UK.

Catherine Andreyev and Ivan Savický follow Raeff and focus their research on the Prague diaspora, particularly politics within emigration and issues of identity.<sup>159</sup> They very briefly glance at Britain as a privileged diaspora by comparison to those of other countries and consider the effects of isolation on this community separated from the European mainland. Discussion of the *Day of Russian Culture*, which became a significant event in the English context, is useful giving the genesis of the idea and its effectiveness within the various diasporas. But once again music, which featured strongly in events in the UK celebrating Russia day, is not discussed to any specific degree. However, it is significant that they consider that ‘The importance of the Russian colony in Britain was consequently greater than its size and its resources. In the 1920s it was more than just a group of the better-off and played a significant role in the development of a whole series of émigré initiatives. Nevertheless, it remained a very small community of only a few thousand and negligible political influence or impact on Britain itself’.<sup>160</sup> I challenge their view that Russian immigrant musicians within the Russian diaspora in Britain had little political or social influence or impact. One further study providing perspectives on Russian diasporas is

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<sup>156</sup> Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919 -1939*.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibidem*. p. 11.

<sup>158</sup> Johnston, “*New Mecca, New Babylon*”: *Paris and the Russian Exiles, 1920-1945*.

<sup>159</sup> Andreyev and Savický, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938*.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibidem*. p. 185.

Boris Raymond and David Jones's *The Russian Diaspora 1917-1941* but here again any in-depth discussion of Russian musicians within the diasporas is lacking.

Elena Dubinets provides a recent account of Russian composers in exile. Her discussion of the various waves of emigration is particularly useful.<sup>161</sup> Her focus, however, is firmly on Soviet and post-Soviet *composers* and selections of their works. So, too, is her discussion of Russian national identity amongst Russian composers in exile in 'Music in Exile: Russian Émigré Composers and their Search for National Identity.'<sup>162</sup> These contributions extend current notions of (Russian) diaspora, exile and national identity. Expanding globalisation beginning in the early twentieth-century together with the dissolution of the Soviet Union has allowed Russian composers more freedom to situate themselves in relation to the Homeland in ways that were not possible for first-wave exiles, a focus Dubinets explores in her research 'Defining Diaspora through Culture: Russian Émigré Composers in a Globalising World'<sup>163</sup> included in Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker (eds.) *Russian Music since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*.<sup>164</sup> The papers collated from this conference hosted by the music department at Durham University in 2011 (published in 2017 coinciding with the anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution) focus on scholarship dealing with the development of the Russian Art Music tradition after 1917. Richard Taruskin's contribution 'Is there a 'Russia Abroad' in Music?' questions whether expatriated Russian musicians (composers in the main) ever constituted such a community? Taruskin asks the question 'can one speak collectively of 'Russia Abroad' when speaking of music, or only of various Russians abroad?' He is mindful that Russian music does not only reside in composed works but is found in folk songs, nursery rhymes, school songs, social dances and the like.<sup>165</sup> Performers of folk music worked closely together in ensembles (as opposed to composers who worked largely as independent agents and to which Taruskin turns his attention) and formed close communities which suggests that one could talk of a Russia Abroad amongst immigrant musicians in the UK. Taruskin suggests that it was language rather than music that was the glue that held them together.

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<sup>161</sup> Elena Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021).

<sup>162</sup> Elena Dubinets, 'Music in Exile: Russian Émigré Composers and their Search for National Identity.' *Slavonica* 13/1 (2007): pp. 57-67.

<sup>163</sup> Elena Dubinets, 'Defining Diaspora through Culture: Russian Émigré Composers in a Globalising World' in Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker. eds., *Russian Music Since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 330-356.

<sup>164</sup> Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker. eds., *Russian Music Since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>165</sup> Richard Taruskin, 'Is there a 'Russia Abroad' in Music?' in Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker. eds., *Russian Music Since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 320-329.



This collection of papers also contains Marina Rakhmanova's wide-ranging 'Russian Musicological Scholarship of the Last Two Decades: Achievements and Lacunae'<sup>166</sup> yet, once again, the presence of Russian folk musicians performing in the UK (given that the conference was held in the UK) is again overlooked – at least in this published collection of papers from the conference.

The closest study of first-wave Russian musicians in exile is Natalie Zelensky dissertation 'Music in Exile: Constructing the Russian Diaspora in New York Through Russian Popular and Sacred Music' which provides an incisive study of music in the Russian émigré community in Harlem, New York. The Russian Orthodox Church operates as the centre of her enquiry.<sup>167</sup> Zelensky provides one of the few (if not the only) extended discussions on the function of music (both sacred and popular) within a Russian diaspora. Zelensky addresses folk-music (in which she includes gypsy music) on recordings and in broadcasting as expressions of nostalgia and longing. Nostalgia and memory, she argues, underpins the construction and maintenance of the diaspora: 'It is my contention that music provides ... a forum for remembering, performing and reconstructing the ancestral homeland, however much it is removed from the direct experience of the listener, as well as allows the forging of new identities, new boundaries, and new ways of being Russian abroad.'<sup>168</sup> Russian identity and ethnicity are displayed and affirmed through music making and while her conclusions are specific to the Russian diaspora in New York, her observations, particularly Chapter Two which addresses the first-wave immigration to New York, reverberate with this dissertation's examination of the displacement of first-wave Russian musicians in the UK.

Hon-Lun Helan Yang provides a study which examines the Russian immigrant musical presence in Shanghai in the 1930s.<sup>169</sup> Central questions, which reverberate with my own, consider how musicians adapted to life in Shanghai, how music operated within the Shanghai diaspora, how Russian musicians and their musical activities contributed to the cultural life of Shanghai, and particularly their influence on Chinese music. Hon-Lun Yang, Simo Mikkonen and John Winzenburg also provide further insights into the Russian diaspora in the interwar years in

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<sup>166</sup> Marina Frolova-Walker, 'Russian Musicological Scholarship of the Last Two Decades: Achievements and Lacunae' in Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker. eds., *Russian Music Since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 25-51.

<sup>167</sup> Natalie Zelensky, 'Music in Exile: Constructing the Russian Diaspora in New York Through Russian Popular and Sacred Music' (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2009).

<sup>168</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>169</sup> Hon-Lun Helan Yang, 'Diaspora, Music and Politics: Russian Musical Life in Shanghai during the Interwar Period,' in Pauline Fairclough, *Twentieth Century Music and Politics: Essays in Memory of Neil Edmunds*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 261-265.

Shanghai in *Networking the Russian Diaspora: Russian Musicians and Musical Activities in Interwar Shanghai*.<sup>170</sup>

Personal testimonies of Russian immigrants of the first-wave to Britain are few and Vasilii Zakharov's *No Snow on their Boots*<sup>171</sup> describes many aspects of Russian immigrant life in Britain which includes information on balalaika ensembles and musical personalities while Martin Glenny and Norman Stone's *The Other Russia: The Experience of Exile*<sup>172</sup> provides rare personal accounts from first-wave Russian immigrants in Britain. Konstantin Nabokov's *The Ordeal of a Diplomat*<sup>173</sup> examines the difficulties faced by the Russian Embassy in London, particularly its dealings with Russian refugees at the time of the Revolution and Russian Civil War.

Discussion of the political and literary life of Russians Abroad, which provides a useful context for this dissertation, is well served by Greta Slobin's *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora 1919-1939*<sup>174</sup> and John Glad's *Literature in Exile and Russia Abroad: Writers, History, Politics*. Sergei Glebov's article "'Congresses of Russia Abroad' in the 1920s and Politics of Emigré Nationalism: A Liberal Survival,' examines conduits of financial aid to Russian diasporas of the first-wave in Spain and France.<sup>175</sup>

Music Performance in the Music Halls at the turn of the century was strongly patriotic (particularly in popular songs and ballads) and betrayed an undercurrent of xenophobia in the promotion of imperialist opinions in entertainment aimed particularly at the working-classes. Penny Summerfield<sup>176</sup> is quick to acknowledge that audiences were not homogenous wholes but rather varied between cities and provincial towns and between Scottish, Welsh and English audiences. Summerfield provides numerous examples of patriotic songs and sketches and examines the influence of music hall performances in promoting and maintaining imperial

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<sup>170</sup> Hon-Lun Helan Yang, Simo Mikkonen and John Winzenburg, *Networking the Russian Diaspora: Russian Musicians and Musical Activities in Interwar Shanghai*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020).

<sup>171</sup> Vasilii Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*. (London: Basileus Press, 2004).

<sup>172</sup> Martin Glenny and Norman Stone. eds. *The Other Russia: The Experience of Exile*. (London: Faber, 1991).

<sup>173</sup> Konstantin Dmitrievich Nabokov, *The Ordeal of a Diplomat*. (London: Duckworth and Company, 1921).

<sup>174</sup> Greta N. Slobin, *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora 1919-1939*. (Brighton, Massachusetts: Academic Studies Press, 2013).

<sup>175</sup> Sergei Glebov, "'Congresses of Russia Abroad' in the 1920s and Politics of Emigré Nationalism: A Liberal Survival, *Ab Imperio* 1/3, 4 (2000): pp. 159–185.

<sup>176</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'Patriotism and Empire: Music-Hall Entertainment 1870-1914' in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, edited by John M. MacKenzie, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 17-48.

attitudes in the fin-de-siècle. Imperial confidence was at its height at the end of the nineteenth century, as Summerfield notes 'unity was advocated in terms of the racial superiority of Anglo Saxons'.<sup>177</sup> This nationalist swagger was to be tested by the Boer War (1899-1902) and gave way to a less confident Edwardian Era and the subsequent turmoil of the First World War. Russian musicians arriving after the dissolution of their own Empire after 1917 and seeking an audience for their own folk music and dances found themselves in dialogue with audiences holding strong nationalist feelings and suspicious of the intentions of the newly formed Soviet State. Along with the natives of the dominions of Empire, Russians were perceived as distinctly 'other' but it was this fascination for the exotic which provided the means for Russian immigrant musicians to make a living through music. Yet, the activities of Russian artistes in Variety Theatre have received little attention. The popularity of nineteenth-century Music Hall declined in the early twentieth-century superseded by a more respectable form of entertainment - Variety Theatre. Oliver Double's *Britain had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* goes beyond a sensational, anecdotal account of Variety Theatre and provides a balanced assessment of formats of entertainment, business procedures which illustrate the complexities of running a professional life within the theatre faced by Russian performers, working conditions encountered in the industry, and the nature of the entertainment offered.<sup>178</sup> Double provides a substantial assessment of Variety Theatre charting its history and development from the full-blooded Music Hall into something more genteel – Variety Theatre. Richard Anthony Baker<sup>179</sup> follows a more anecdotal approach in his history of Old-time Variety but nevertheless illustrates the forms and manners of performance popular in the theatre. The rise of a vibrant and lucrative Variety Theatre industry, particularly that of the Stoll/Moss Empire, became a major employer of Russian émigré artists.

Alongside Double, Richard Stites *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*,<sup>180</sup> Laura Olson's *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity*,<sup>181</sup> Laurence Senelick's *Wandering Stars: Russian Emigré Theatre, 1905–1940* and 'Russian Cabaret and the Re-invention of Russia.'<sup>182</sup> all provide perspectives on Russian popular entertainments some of

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<sup>177</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>178</sup> Oliver Double. *Britain had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>179</sup> Richard Anthony Baker, *Old Time Variety: An Illustrated History*, (London: Remember When Publishing, 2011).

<sup>180</sup> Richard Stites. *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>181</sup> Laura J. Olson. *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

<sup>182</sup> Laurence Senelick, ed., *Wandering Stars: Russian Emigré Theatre, 1905–1940*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

which found popularity in English Variety Theatre. The Jewish migration from Russia to the East End of London is well documented and Vivi Lachs's *Whitechapel Noise: Jewish Immigrant Life in Yiddish Song and Verse, London 1884-1914*<sup>183</sup> uncovers a thriving variety and popular music scene in the Jewish East End of London. A companion work to Lachs in the American context is Mark Slobin's *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants. Music in American Life*.<sup>184</sup> These works provide information on Russian popular entertainments which found their way into Variety Theatre in Britain.

Inevitably Russian musicians had to negotiate with The Musicians' Union. The Musicians' Union archives are now lodged at Stirling University and research into their contents is only beginning to be documented and published. Three sources have informed my discussion of the Musicians' Union and its approach to alien artists seeking to work in Britain: Mike Jempson, *The Musicians' Union 1893–1993: A Centenary Celebration*; Martin Cloonan's, *Players' Work Time: A History of the British Musicians' Union 1893-2013*, and Cloonan together with Matt Brennan, 'Alien Invasions: the British Musicians' Union and foreign musicians'.<sup>185</sup> These accounts examine the working lives of musicians, how they were influenced and affected by employment legislature, trade unions and financial institutions, as well as examining social (cultural) and political forces affecting the employment of musicians, foreign musicians amongst them.

Edward Soermus is the focus of Chapter One. German biography and self-published pamphlets are the chief sources for Soermus's musical activities in Europe. Information about his association with the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.), his musical career in London and Wales and his work as a Bolshevik and social reformer in the labour movement in Wales during the 1920s and 1930s, is barely discussed and the researcher must turn to newspaper reporting of his exploits which are often sensationalised. Newspaper reports and reviews clearly show the hand of Left-wing agendas and also expose the British government's anxieties with regard to Bolshevism, the new Soviet regime, and Russia in general. The German translation of Harri Kōrvits' biography *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger, Eine Monographie*,<sup>186</sup> provides the most

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Laurence Senelick, 'Russian Cabaret and the Re-invention of Russia.' *New Theatre Quarterly* 35/1 (2019): pp. 44-59.

<sup>183</sup> Vivi Lachs. *Whitechapel Noise: Jewish Immigrant Life in Yiddish Song and Verse, London 1884-1914*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018).

<sup>184</sup> Mark Slobin. *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants. Music in American Life*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

<sup>185</sup> Mike Jempson, *The Musicians' Union 1893–1993: A Centenary Celebration*, (London: Musicians' Union, 1993). Martin Cloonan and Matt Brennan, 'Alien Invasions: the British Musicians' Union and Foreign Musicians.' *Popular Music* 32/2 (2013): 277- 295. And Jon Williamson and Martin Cloonan, *Players' Work Time: A History of the British Musicians' Union 1893-2013*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

<sup>186</sup> Kōrvits, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger, Eine Monographie*.

detailed account of Soermus's life and career. Despite Soermus's extensive sojourns in the UK, his activities are somewhat passed over by Kõrvits and the significance of Soermus's work in Britain is hardly discussed or analysed. His effect on his audiences, his philosophical views, his connections with the working classes in Britain, his charitable works and his style as a musician must all be gleaned from newspaper reporting, programmes, and the German works listed in my biography. German scholarship on Soermus dwells on his connection with the Workers' Movement in Germany and the promotion of his socialist (Bolshevik) ideals. The value of these works lies in how they provide a wider perspective to Soermus's operations in Wales.

Sharman Kadish<sup>187</sup> is useful in his examination of the effects of Bolshevism on British society and charts the British government's shifting attitude towards the new Soviet State. More specifically, he provides a focus on the Jewish community and its relationship with Bolshevism. The Jews were implicated in the Bolshevik uprising in the minds of the British citizen due largely to Right-wing press reporting. Kadish thus provides an important perspective for contextualising the work of Russian (Bolshevik) musicians in the UK, in particular that of Edward Soermus. Stephen White also provides a comprehensive discussion of Britain's relationship with Bolshevism in *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Study in the Politics of Diplomacy*.<sup>188</sup>

Studies of the balalaika in English are few. Reasons for this could be that the instrument was/is considered a folk instrument and not part of the Western orchestral family of instruments and consequently studies tend to be limited to organology. The rediscovery, rehabilitation and development of the balalaika is a Russian narrative where recent Russian academic studies

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Ilse Heller, 'Julius Eduard Soermus', In *Zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung im Bezirk Halle, Kommentar zur Erforschung Geschichte Örtl.* Series: Arbeiterbewegung bei Bezirksleitung. Halle: Kommission zur Erforschung der Geschichte der örtlichen Arbeiterbewegung bei der Bezirksleitung Halle der SED, 197, (1975): pp.1-47.

Werner Kapfenberger, 'Das Wirken von Eduard Soermus 1922 – 1932 in Deutschland,' in Harri Kõrvits, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, First Edition, (Tallinn; Estonian Books, 1978).

Rudolf Strauss, 'Das letzte Auftreten des sowjetischen Violinvirtuosen Eduard Julius Soermus in Chemnitz,' in S. Beckert, Hans-Joachim Schröter, and Rudolph Strauss eds., *Die unmittelbaren Auswirkungen der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution auf die Arbeiterbewegung in Chemnitz*, Karl-Marx-Stadt Stadtarchiv Series: Beiträge zur Heimatgeschichte von Karl-Marx-Stadt, Vol. 18 (1971): pp. 49–68.

Hans Treubner, 'Soermus – der Rote Geiger,' in *Im Zeichen des Roten Sterns - Erinnerungen an die Traditionen der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft*, (Berlin: The Institute for Marxism-Leninism, Dietz Verlag, 1974): pp. 81-90.

Horst Benneckenstein, 'Soermus: der "rote Geiger",' in *Thüringen', Beiträge zur Geschichte Thüringens* No. 2 (1970): pp. 161–177.

<sup>187</sup> Sharman Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews: The Anglo-Jewish Community, Britain and the Russian Revolution*.

<sup>188</sup> Stephen White, *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Study in the Politics of Diplomacy*, (London: The MacMillan Press, 1979).

have challenged the origins and identity of the instrument. The balalaika was hugely popular in England from 1909/10, through to the end of the Second World War and its impact on the Light Music industry and theatre entertainment in the UK has not been considered nor has its influence within community music-making been assessed. The activities of balalaika players are briefly mentioned in the few autobiographies and accounts of life within the Russian diaspora already mentioned.

It is not until 1900 in Algernon Rose's<sup>189</sup> remarkable paper to The Musical Association that we have a detailed study of the instrument in English. His focus is on the construction of the balalaika but he also mentions its social function as well as its characteristics as an instrument. He discusses Andreeff's development of the instrument and intention to popularise the instrument around the world. It is significant that Rose begins his paper with an apology for the balalaika and insists on its value as an instrument worth contemplating (like the Irish pipes). The published paper also includes an intervention from the floor by Rosa Newmarch (1857-1940), further evidence that knowledge of the instrument was becoming more prevalent in the UK.<sup>190</sup>

Martin Kiszko's<sup>191</sup> more recent dissertation provides an extensive view of the balalaika's resurgence in Russia, its contested origins, its physical characteristics, repertoire and most importantly its migration to the United States – and this becomes the focus of Kiszko's research. He mentions the balalaika's presence in England but does not develop this discussion to any extent nor does he address the social impact and popular reception of the balalaika in Britain. Kiszko provides a further appraisal of the balalaika in *The Galpin Society Journal*.<sup>192</sup>

Nicolas Chlebak<sup>193</sup> examines the balalaika's multiple functions within society from a number of perspectives: the instrument's origins, its physical standardization, its contemporary usage and

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<sup>189</sup> Algernon S. Rose, 'The Balalaika,' *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, 27, (1900-1901): pp. 73-84.

<sup>190</sup> Newmarch's intervention is not listed in Philip Ross Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century England*, No. 18, (Royal Musical Association Monographs, 2009).

<sup>191</sup> Martin E. Kiszko, 'The Balalaika – A Reappraisal,' *The Galpin Society Journal*, 48, (1995): pp. 130-155. Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' Martin E. Kiszko, 'The balalaika', in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (London, New York: Macmillan Grove's Dictionaries, 2001).

<sup>192</sup> Kiszko, 'The Balalaika – A Reappraisal,' pp. 130-155. Ulrich Morgenstern, 'Debating "national ownership" of musical instruments: The balalaika as a subject of ethnopolitical discourse,' in Razia Sultanova and Megan Rancier, eds., *Turkic Soundscapes: From Shamanic Voices to Hip Hop*, SOAS Musicology Series, (London; New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 77-195. Morgenstern dismisses Kiszko's *Galpin Society Journal* (1995) article as speculative and ignoring Russian sources.

<sup>193</sup> Nicolas Chlebak, 'The 'Adaptability' of the Balalaika: An Ethnomusicological Investigation of the Russian Traditional Folk Instrument,' (PhD diss., University of Vermont, 2015).

its cultural impact. He examines the instrument's physical characteristics, repertoire, and its effect in performance. He supports this with ethnomusicological examples from Russia's cultural history. Finally, he places the development of the instrument in the context of other folk instruments from cultures around the world. Mark Slobin asks, when discussing the balalaika's popularity in the West, whether it is possible to speak of the diaspora of an instrument, the notion of the balalaika as a 'dislocated' instrument within a host nation.<sup>194</sup>

Morgenstern provides the English reader with a perspective on current Russian discourse relating to the balalaika, particularly the contested area of origins, development, ethnicity, and identity.<sup>195</sup> He views the instrument as a site for the discussion of nationality in Russian Ethno-organology. His discussions of the balalaika as a folk instrument as well as his consideration of Andreeff's intervention in the development of the balalaika, taking it from the peasant/serf social context and into the concert halls, relates to my discussion of the balalaika in the English context. Morgenstern also draws attention to early mentions of the balalaika in European literature and dictionaries of music but significantly notes that 'there are no substantial studies in English.' Morgenstern's 'Debating "national ownership" of musical instruments: The balalaika as a subject of ethnopolitical discourse'<sup>196</sup> also provides a useful orientation to the debate in Russian scholarship which challenges the notion that the balalaika is of Russian origin and contests its ethnicity – whether it is Turkic, Tatar or Persian.<sup>197</sup> Kiszko, Rose and Olson provide further discussions of the provenance of the instrument. A discussion of the origins, national claims and evolution of the balalaika is beyond the scope of this dissertation but the English public perception of the balalaika in the early twentieth century carried generalised connotations of nationality (it was Russian), identity (national, personal and community), ethnicity, and exoticism - notions which, to some extent, still persist.

Laura J. Olson<sup>198</sup> in *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity* addresses the Russian phenomenon of folk performance; the revival and transference of folk music and popular culture to the context of stage performance. She traces, and criticises, the invention and re-

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<sup>194</sup> Mark Slobin, 'The Destiny of Diaspora in Ethnomusicology' in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, Second Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 96-106.

<sup>195</sup> Ulrich Morgenstern, 'Concepts of the National in Russian Ethno-organology,' (ICTM Study Group on Folk Musical Instruments, Proceedings from the 16th International Meeting, (2006). Also, Morgenstern, 'Debating "national ownership" of musical instruments: The balalaika as a subject of ethnopolitical discourse.'

<sup>196</sup> Morgenstern, 'Debating "national ownership" of musical instruments: The balalaika as a subject of ethnopolitical discourse.'

<sup>197</sup> Kiszko 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture.' Olson, 'Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity.' Rose, 'The Balalaika.'

<sup>198</sup> Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

invention of Folk Music in pre-revolutionary Russia (more specifically Andreeff's work with the balalaika) but most importantly discusses the balalaika as integral to the Russian Folk Revival movement. She likewise addresses issues of nationalism and the operation of power and ritual in the representations of Folk, Russian Orthodoxy, and Imperial Russia in stage performance. The performance ritual, she argues, facilitates the reclamation of village life and rituals in post-Soviet culture. The irony lies in the fact that stage performance was never part of folk tradition in Russia other than bawdy representations by travelling players. Her contemplation of how memory seeks to reclaim past history and preserve social customs and the arts within a community as a mark of identity lead to my final thoughts on the balalaika as a locus for the reclamation and preservation of Imperial Russian culture in exile. Increasingly, Russian discourse on Identity, Memory and Nationalism is ironically turning to a study of Russian diasporas to reclaim Russian arts and customs preserved in exile in an effort to breach the severance from past cultural history. Olson's study is important to my discussion in that it addresses the theatricalization of folk idioms for entertainment – a phenomenon witnessed in theatrical representations of Russian song and dance in theatre performances in the UK.

Finally, research examines the operation of memory, nostalgia and longing, particularly in the attitudes towards the preservation of Russian folk music (and dance) in displacement by the musicians under discussion. Nostalgia and memory are examined in two poignant examples in Levi and Scheduling; Philip Bohlman's '*Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*': "*Das Lied ist aus*": The Final Resting Place along Music's Endless Journey', and Peter Petersen's 'Dimensions of Silencing: On Nazi Anti-Semitism in Musical Displacement'.<sup>199</sup> The present research moves away from Trauma and Holocaust contexts and applies concepts of nostalgia and collective memory, concepts initiated by Maurice Halbwachs and applied by Svetlana Boym, to a Russian community in displacement. Boym's discourse centres on the reclamation of Old-World memories/cultures in a New-World (Post-Soviet) order which bears significance to a consideration of the preservation of cultural forms of Imperialist Russia preserved by musicians in Russian diasporas in exile.<sup>200</sup> Her definitions of nostalgia prove useful to an assessment of the preservation of folk music and musical instruments thereby maintaining Russian identity within the diaspora. Alongside Boym, Pierre Nora's concept of the *site de mémoire*<sup>201</sup> is considered in its goal to capture identity and

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<sup>199</sup> Philip Bohlman, "*Das Lied ist aus*": The Final Resting Place along Music's Endless Journey,' and Peter Petersen, 'Dimensions of Silencing: On Nazi Anti-Semitism in Musical Displacement,' in Levi and Scheduling, '*Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond*', pp. 15-29 and 31-42.

<sup>200</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>201</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, Volumes 1, 2, 3, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).



nationhood, particularly in forms subject to decay and loss. Nationalism is pervasive in this research and the endeavour to preserve national art forms in music (and dance) amongst exiled Russian musicians becomes a poignant undercurrent to imperatives of existence – to the preservation of Russian culture alongside the realisation they may never return to the Homeland and must acculturate (or not) in a new home. The sense of loss, loss of Home and Homeland, experienced by refugees leads to a consideration of Susan Stewart's approach to Longing and the concept of the Souvenir;<sup>202</sup> longing for the homeland as an emotion expressed in folk-music performance and the consideration of the balalaika (and other folk instruments) as souvenirs of a culture increasingly inaccessible. Russian refugee and exiled musicians are considered in their displacement through the prism of these approaches to Nostalgia, Longing, Home and National Identity and suggest how music operated within their lived experience and creative endeavours.

This Literature Review does not do justice to the variety and breadth of literature that informs my research. What is evident is that any assessment of the Russian diaspora in the UK and the performing musicians within that community, particularly in the first half of the twentieth-century, has not been undertaken. More specifically, immigrant contributions to the Light Music scene, to entertainment in theatres, broadcasting and other platforms for performance as well as the influence in music -making within local communities made by Russian folk musicians and performers is a lacuna in British musicology.

This research speaks to the academic disciplines of nationalism in music and to the dialogue between diasporic communities and pervading imperialism in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The exploration of women in music in provincial communities, specifically the engagement with the balalaika and Russian folk music, may add a chapter to the exploration of women's ensembles and musicians within Gender (Music) Studies. The present research may encourage further exploration in Theatre Studies, Variety Theatre in particular, with regard to the reception of exotic forms of music and entertainment. The chapter on Edward Soermus provides an alternative perspective in that it explores a Bolshevik musician who stands outside the diaspora of exiled Imperial musicians. He embraces Art Music in recital performances and presents an interesting case of music brought to the service of social and political change in Welsh society. The preservation of cultural forms in Russian Abroad was of importance to Russian exiles and the performance of folk music and dance resisted the realignment of music within Socialist Realism in the Soviet State. The reception of Russian folk music is considered in

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<sup>202</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1993).

the context of Britain's own concern with folk music and the need to encourage a national music. Russian folk music was understood as expressive of Russian Soul, an expression of Russian identity, character and nationhood – that is, of the people. Music in Displacement is the pervading concern of this research, leading to a consideration of how nostalgia and longing and the need to affirm a Russian identity through Russian folk music (and dance) operate among musicians within the Russian diaspora. The final conclusion is to assert the undoubted contributions these musicians made to music-making in Britain in the first half of the twentieth-century. Theirs are lost musical narratives (forgotten histories) which expand our knowledge and understanding of the complexities of music-making within displaced communities, particularly that within the UK.

## Chapter 2 A Bolshevik Enigma

Julius Edward Soermus

### Der Rote Geiger

Thou wert as sunshine breaking on our night!  
Thou wert a very god in that drab hall,  
Bringing down music from a starry height  
To soothe our ears: Emotions rise and fall  
In some divine Concerto – all the mills  
Of Hope and Anguish working – or a faun  
Laughing mischievously, or happy trills  
Of birds innumerable, welcoming the dawn;  
Or plaintive folk-songs, born of many lands  
For the sustaining beauty, for the art,  
The boon supreme, of thy miraculous hands  
That give the nobler riches of the heart;  
I thank thee, Soermus; Maestro, soul of grace,  
True benefactor of the human race!

Huw Menai<sup>1</sup> June 15<sup>th</sup> 1933<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Huw Owen Williams (1886-1961), a Welsh poet (and Welsh language speaker) who wrote in English. He was a Socialist. He wrote under the name of Huw Menai. William (Billy) Holland, Soermus's brother-in-law, notes that Menai attended a Soermus concert for unemployed miners at the Judge's Hall, Tonypany 'and what a poor depressed, shabby, apathetic crowd they were; Edward played the *Beethoven Violin Concerto* and the *Kreutzer Sonata*....', Billy Holland, 'Incidents in my life with Edward and Virginia Soermus, Germany 1928-1929,' Estonian National Theatre and Music Museum, Storage Unit 22, No. 7896. Unpublished, p. 7. The poem was printed on card with a photograph of Soermus and sold, the proceeds going to children's orphanages.

<sup>2</sup> Printed in the Soermus Taibach Recital Programme 1933. Taibach Ward Labour Committee, Special Visit of Soermus accompanied by Virginia Soermus, Taibach Picturedrome, Sunday, 5 November, 1933. Women's Archive of Wales/Archif Menywod Cymru: Iris Evans Thomas of Taibach Papers. West Glamorgan Archive Service. Ref. GB 216 WAW/29/77-78.

## 2.1 *Der Rote Geiger*

Edward Soermus (1878-1940) – *der Rote Geiger* – was a Russian violinist. He was also a Bolshevik. He joined the Social Democratic (Workers’) Party in St. Petersburg while still a student and participated in the social unrest leading to the 1905 uprisings. He was imprisoned for a time in 1904 for his resistance to the Imperialist Government and owing to the suppression of the 1905 uprisings and the Bolshevik movement, he fled to the West in 1906, a political exile. Soermus travelled extensively through Europe and then settled for a time in Paris in 1913 suffering nervous and physical exhaustion. He first came to England in 1916 as a Russian violinist but his status as an exile became ambiguous and ironic. White Russian émigrés in the West were unable (unwilling) to return to Russia but Soermus, as a confessed Bolshevik, was free to return after the Revolution but he chose to remain in the West and agitate for social change, particularly in England and Germany where he participated in political events on behalf of the Independent Labour Party in Wales and Workers organisations in Germany.

Soermus’s activities in the UK are significant in that they challenge a general perception that refugees are crushed, disadvantaged, displaced and at the mercy of circumstances. Soermus was all of these in his personal life to some extent but he was not submissive. He turned his displacement to advantage, in some sense it became his strength, and he constructively engaged in musical, social and political life, particularly in Wales.

Upon his arrival Soermus did not seek to integrate with the Russian diaspora in London other than with his Bolshevik connections. Very little has been formally recorded of his activities in the UK other than in newspaper reporting and mentions in *Hansard* and government documents. This paucity of information contrasts sharply with the interest Soermus has elicited in Germany where several research papers have dealt with his work there;<sup>3</sup> reporting on his violin recitals,

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction and assessment of Soermus’s work in Germany see the following German publications: Werner von Kapfenberger’s introduction, ‘Das Wirken von Eduard Soermus 1922-1932 in Deutschland’ in Harri Körvits, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger, Eine Monographie*, translated by Christof Rüger, (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1968, reprinted 1978): pp. 13-46. Also, Werner von Kapfenberger, ‘Eduard Soermus und der Revolutionäre Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland,’ *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift. (Gesellschafts-und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, 28 1979): pp. 719-722. He examines Soermus’s involvement with anti-fascism and the Worker Movement in Germany. Also, Rudolph Strauss, ‘Das letzte Auftreten des sowjetischen Violinvirtuosen Eduard Julius Soermus in Chemnitz’ in *Die unmittelbaren Auswirkungen der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution auf die Arbeiterbewegung in Chemnitz*, edited by Siegfried Beckert, Hans-Joachim Schröter, and Rudolph Strauss, Series: Beiträge zur Heimatgeschichte von Karl-Marx-Stadt, (Karl-Marx-Stadt Stadtarchiv, 1971): pp. 49–68. Also, Ilse Heller, ‘J.E. Soermus – sein Wirken im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik,’ *Wissenschaft Zeitschrift*, (Der University of Halle, Ges. U. Sprachwiss. R., H. 3 S. 448, 1966). Also, Ilse Heller,

his Bolshevik speeches on behalf of the Workers' Movement, his confrontation with police authorities, his incarcerations, and his philanthropic activities, particularly with orphaned children and the poor.<sup>4</sup> Also, in Tallinn, the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum has a permanent display dedicated to Soermus and also houses an archive of documents and ephemera relating to Soermus.<sup>5</sup>

Much of what we know of Soermus is found in the biography by Harri Kõrvitz, *Eduard Sõrmus, Der Rote Geiger, Eine Monografie*,<sup>6</sup> translated from the Russian into German by Christof Rüger.<sup>7</sup> The biography records Soermus's sojourns in the United Kingdom but in no great detail despite his lengthy residences in the country, his many recital and lecture appearances, his marriage to two English women, his two daughters raised in England and Wales, his strong association with the Labour movement and its associated organisations, and his confrontations with the authorities, all of which are somewhat superficially glossed over. Two pamphlets, *Soermus: The Russian Violinist*<sup>8</sup> and *Soermus*<sup>9</sup> also provide short biographical information in English. Soermus was active in the Labour Movement in Wales and gave recitals and talks at their meetings and these two pamphlets may have functioned as publicity and promotional literature for his appearances. These pamphlets were either self-published or published by the Labour Movement.

These two pamphlets highlight the chief difficulty faced by the researcher when dealing with Soermus. They contain stories and reminiscences which appear as fact but are clearly lyrical and imaginative reconstructions of events in Soermus's colourful concert life. These details, frequently sensationalised, are then recounted as fact in press reporting, advertisements, articles, reviews and concert programmes. There is a perceived construction of a persona in the literature covering his years of activity in the UK creating the legend of Soermus as the Great

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'Julius Eduard Soermus' pp. 1-47. Also, Horst Benneckenstein, 'Soermus: der "rote Geiger" in Thüringen,' pp. 161-177 which examines Soermus's social work in Thüringen.

<sup>4</sup> *Edinburgh Evening News*. n.d. 'Sometimes his love for toiling humanity took a more practical form, as when in 1924 he was able through proceeds of his concerts to feed 200 children in Leipzig, or in 1925... he sent large sums to help the children of the oppressed in Glasgow, and later no less than £500 (the equivalent today of £109,400.00) for the children of the British miners. Naturally, with such instincts, he was only rich in the love of his fellow-men, for the rewards of his great talents were generously given to others. With Virginia, his wife, he was, as it were, a kind of cultural ambassador for the Russia that he loved.'

<sup>5</sup> Estonian Theatre and Music Museum Archive: FONDI (Fund): No. M-10: Sõrmus, Eduard Julius: *Viiuldaja – revolutsionäär*.

<sup>6</sup> Harri Kõrvits, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger, Eine Monographie*.

<sup>7</sup> I use the German edition. German translations into English are my own.

<sup>8</sup> Julius Eduard Soermus, *Soermus: The Russian Violinist*, (London: The Agenda Press, 1924/25).

<sup>9</sup> *Soermus*, (Thunbridge, Kent: Thunbridge Printers and Bookbinders, Peach Hall Works). No publishing date but a handwritten inscription by Soermus dates the copy 17.4.31.

Russian Violinist, *Der Rote Geiger* (The Red Violinist), the firebrand Bolshevik revolutionary. As recently as 2005 we find mention of Soermus entangled between myth and reality.<sup>10</sup> It is commonly believed the 1912 Marc Chagall painting *Der Geiger* (The Blue Violinist) was inspired by Soermus and that the painting subsequently became the inspiration for the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Waring alludes to the connection between Soermus and Chagall without providing an exact source for the assumption.<sup>11</sup> Chagall, however, painted many violinists inspired by his Jewish background living in Russian Shtetls. Chagall's connection to *Fiddler on the Roof* is more likely to be found in his work with the *Moscow State Jewish Theatre* in 1922 when he designed and painted sets for a dramatization of a number of Sholem Aleichem's short stories one of which was *Tevye and his Daughters* which became the basis of the libretto for *Fiddler on the Roof*.<sup>12</sup> The connection between Soermus and the Chagall painting, mentioned by Waring, appears to have entered into the legend of Edward Soermus. Wecker, however, casts doubt on the connections.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to German research and the Soermus biography there is virtually no formal research published in English examining Soermus's activities in the UK, especially in Wales.<sup>14</sup> The researcher must engage with ephemera, newspaper reviews, reports, correspondence, concert programmes, reminiscences and discussions in the House of Commons concerning Soermus. There are also only four known recordings of Soermus playing the violin, one of which is a rare performance of his own composition *Song of the Birds*.<sup>15</sup>

There are a number of reasons for this paucity of information. Soermus did not persistently seek to establish himself as a soloist in the mainstream Art Music circuit in England and Wales, nor did he broadcast with the BBC, and consequently he did not become a well-known concert musician, certainly not a household name – despite the persistent descriptor *The Great Russian*

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<sup>10</sup> Joyce P. Waring, ed., *Bernard Shaw and Nancy Astor (Collected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw)*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Stein – Librettist of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Jerry Bock – Composer.

<sup>13</sup> Menachem Wecker, 'Marc Chagall: The French painter who inspired the title 'Fiddler on the Roof'', *The Washington Post*, 24 October, 2014. Wecker examines the influence of Chagall on the genesis of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

<sup>14</sup> In 2019 a concert/presentation, *The Red Violinist*, written by director and producer Colin Thomas, was given as part of the *Commemoration, Conflict and Conscience* Series for the Bristol Radical History Group, and then performed again in Tredegar.

<sup>15</sup> David Mason, e-mail to the author, 4 April, 2020, notes: 'I'm inclined to think that the four sides we know are all that Soermus recorded. It was nothing unusual for artists to have their own recordings made. Even major recording artists would have private records made for themselves.... Soermus, in Germany, would have found a wider acceptance of his left-wing views but he probably simply was not a good enough violinist to make commercial recordings.' The recordings are listed in the Biography.

*Violinist* in reviews and promotional literature.<sup>16</sup> There are few formal reviews of his concerts in the London concert halls and even some of these (memories of his concerts) rely on hearsay. His intermittent residencies in the country were troublesome, drawing censure from the government on the one hand, support from the Labour Movement on the other, and his activities reported in colourful and sensational accounts in the press. He spent lengthy periods of time away on the continent giving concerts, lectures and travelling. He did not seek to ingratiate himself with the English Establishment but preferred to operate within radical Left circles. He befriended sympathisers and prominent leaders among these circles,<sup>17</sup> particularly the Labour Movement in Wales, and he preferred to fraternise with the working man and woman. It would have been anathema, given Soermus's political beliefs, to integrate with the Russian diaspora in the UK which was, to a large extent, comprised of White Russians and members of the Russian aristocracy, the very people against which the Bolsheviks, of which he counted himself one, had risen in revolt.

Soermus was born in Estonia in Luunja Parish, Derpt, Tartu County in 1878. By 1880 Derpt (Dorpat) was the second largest city in Estonia and by no means a cultural backwater. The city became the centre of the Estonian *Ärkamisaeg* (national awakening) at the end of the nineteenth century in the country's bid to distance itself from Russian and German domination. The Vanemuine Theatre opened in 1865, the first Estonian Song Festival was held there in 1869, and the Society of Estonian Writers was established in 1872. Railway links to Russia's interior and to Europe were developed and a new railway station opened in 1876. In 1893 Estonia was forced into a process of Russification and Soermus's hometown was renamed Yuriev (Jurjeff). With the disintegration of the Russian Empire in 1917 Estonia entered a War of Independence, armed forces seized control of the city and it was renamed Tartu. Educational institutions, from 1893, had been forced to teach in Russian but with the reopening of the university in 1919 the Estonian language was reinstated as the official language. In 1920 the Treaty of Tartu was signed between Estonia and Russia in which Russia renounced any right to Estonian territory. The Treaty also

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<sup>16</sup> Soermus is variously described as 'greatest', 'distinguished Russian violinist', 'famous', 'brilliant', 'Comrade', 'Bolshevist violinist', 'The Violinist of Sorrows', 'World Famous violinist'. His wife, Virginia, also became elevated to 'The Famous Concert Pianist' in her pamphlet title to her reminiscences about her husband; Virginia Soermus, *I Married a Russian by The Famous Concert Pianist*, (Welwyn Garden City: The City Press and Publishing Company, n.d.). In a publicity poster for Charity concerts in 1927 she is billed as Virginia Tchaikovsky-Soermus (there is no family connection to Tchaikovsky). See the poster illustrations in Kõrvitz, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, pp. 27/28.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Prestwich Scott, editor and owner of the *Manchester Guardian*, was a supporter and admirer of Soermus and petitioned for the quashing of Soermus's deportation order. He also enquired, on behalf of Soermus, about procedures necessary to secure permanent residence for Soermus. See, Edward Soermus (26 June 1924 - 19 January 1932), Correspondence: Ref. GB 133 GDN/A/S73 in the John Rylands Research Institute, Special Collections.

defined Estonia's borders between Finland and the Soviet Union. It was within this social foment that Soermus lived his formative years and which formed his social and political beliefs. Despite Estonia's declared neutrality in 1938 it was annexed by Russia in 1940, the year Soermus died.

Soermus showed musical ability at an early age and his first violin teacher was a local tailor, Gustav Puks. While a student at the Hugo Treffner Gymnasium in Tartu from 1888 he studied with Johann Kelder, a medical student at the University of Tartu. In 1899 Soermus attended Petrograd University to read law (his own publicity states he studied philosophy) but after a year he changed his disciplines to History and Languages. From 1902 Soermus took violin lessons at the St. Petersburg Conservatory under Leopold Auer (1845-1930). It is unclear whether he was a full-time or part-time student but by 1904 Soermus had begun touring Russia giving violin recitals.

As a student Soermus became politically engaged and during his recitals delivered ardent addresses to his audiences concerning the plight of the working classes. These addresses from the recital platform were to become a distinctive feature of his recitals in later years. The Tsar's police force (*Okhrana*) was suppressing rising social unrest prior to the 1905 uprisings, arresting Left-wing agitators and Bolsheviks. Soermus's speeches brought him to their attention and led to his arrest. He was imprisoned in 1903-1904.

Press reports describe how Soermus was permitted to keep his violin in his cell and how he entertained the prisoners by holding his violin against the water pipes that heated the cells to transmit the sound. These facts become woven into the legend of Soermus, the 'Romanticised Soermus', and in 1918 and 1919 these details were frequently related in the British press when reporting his arrest and imprisonment in Brixton prison.<sup>18</sup> The pamphlet *Soermus* contains a short story describing Soermus's incarceration where he played to the prisoners using the waterpipes in his cell to conduct the sound. The story, *The Fiddler: A Russian Tale*, is penned by Fritz Müller with a subtitle noting the story is also printed in *The Sackbut*.<sup>19</sup> Soermus's name is altered to Armus. From this story Soermus became known as the *Violinist of Sorrows*<sup>20</sup> and is

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<sup>18</sup> The pamphlet *Soermus: The Russian Violinist*, is written in the third person and may have been promotional literature published by the Labour Movement. The tone is lyrical and lofty and the appeal to the common man/woman betrays traces of Leftist rhetoric: 'Only those who have known the lonely sameness of prison life can realize the solace which he was able to give to his comrades, and the heightened devotion to his art and to the cause which grew out of such experiences.' p. 1. The pamphlet suggests a collaboration with Soermus in the recording of personal detail and much of this information becomes part of the colourful Soermus Persona/Myth used in publicity.

<sup>19</sup> *The Sackbut*, a musical journal published between 1920-1934.

<sup>20</sup> See *South Wales Argus*, 21 February, 1930, "'The Violinist of Sorrows': Wizardry of Soermus at Newport' The article is reprinted in the pamphlet *Soermus*.



reputed to have composed a work called *Song of Sorrows* reflecting the sorrows of the downtrodden (working classes) to which the story alludes.<sup>21</sup> The blurring of fact and fiction through repetition (perhaps unknowingly) lays bare the mechanisms employed (empathy, sympathy, emotional tone) to manipulate and appeal to the sympathies of members of the Workers' Movement.

After Soermus's release in 1904 he joined the Bolshevik wing of the Social-Democratic Party, taking part in protests<sup>22</sup> and witnessing the massacre outside the Winter Palace in January, 1905 (Bloody Sunday). These were defining moments for Soermus and led to his resolve to support the working classes. Nostalgia for the idealism, comradeship and his belief in Bolshevism fuelled Soermus's ideology in his life abroad, a nostalgia for an ideology which, by the 1930s, had transmuted into Soviet Socialism.

For the next ten years Soermus led a nomadic existence, settling first in Finland then travelling through Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Italy, France and Germany<sup>23</sup> (performing in support of the *Arbeiterbevegung*)<sup>24</sup> giving concerts and speeches to 'audiences of working people.'<sup>25</sup> During his time in Holland Dutch supporters reportedly raised money for him to study violin technique with Henri Marteau (1874-1934) in Berlin and Lucien Capet in Paris (1873-1928).<sup>26</sup> Other than his

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<sup>21</sup> *Song of Sorrows* may have been partially improvised. There is no existing manuscript.

<sup>22</sup> *Soermus: The Russian Violinist*, p. 1. Billy Holland in 'Incidents in my life' recalls Soermus relating how he would ride a white horse with his violin strapped to his back during protests. Holland also recollects meeting Mdme. Johanna Partelpaeg in 1968 when he attended a stone laying ceremony at Leuna [Luunja] in Estonia in honour of Soermus. Mdme. Partelpaeg recalled witnessing Soermus raising the Red Flag above the main portico of Tartu University. These incidents are again cited in newspaper articles about Soermus and become part of the Legend of Soermus.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> The Workers' Movement in Germany developed out of the Industrial Revolution, the urbanization of society and the loss of cottage industries. Worker's unions fought for better social and working conditions and better pay. The movement, which had coalesced into a united front at the [German] Congress of Trade Unions in 1892, grew stronger and more militant with the approach of the First World War.

<sup>25</sup> Soermus was highly regarded in the German Workers' Movement. A street is named after him, Eduard-Soermus-Straße, in the city of Zwickau, Schumann's birthplace. In Dresden there is a children's orphanage built with donation money collected during his concerts. Soermus is honoured on an Estonian stamp, there is a school named after him, as well as a Conservatory scholarship in his name. Bizarrely, a fishing trawler has his name. A monumental boulder with an inscription of his name and an engraving of his head and Maggini violin was unveiled in 1968.

<sup>26</sup> Here again information is unreliable but often repeated. Virginia Soermus relates how Soermus studied with Capet and Marteau in 'Reminiscences about her Husband.' 23.2.1960. Unpublished, Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music, Storage Unit 21, No. 8870. I have found no evidence of Soermus taking lessons with Marteau in Berlin or Capet in Paris. This information is often repeated in accounts of Soermus and once again reaches for legitimacy and connection to renowned violin pedagogy and lineage.

violin studies in Petrograd with Auer there is no evidence of any lengthy study with either of these violin teachers. He may have taken occasional lessons with both. Despite these opportunities for violin study Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933) noted that Soermus played like an 'autodidact'.<sup>27</sup> Soermus had been given a Maggini violin by an admirer in Stockholm reputed to be valued at £2000 at the time.<sup>28</sup> This violin was smashed when, during a recital in Magdeburg, he was arrested on stage and dragged downstairs by the legs.<sup>29</sup> He also possessed a violin built during the blockade of Leningrad by Russian luthier Mikhail Vitachek.<sup>30</sup> Here again, a connection is suggested between the genesis of the violin and the heroic defense of Leningrad, a connection reinforcing the connection between Soermus and defining moments in Russian history. Similarly, Soermus's reported intimacy with Lenin, Gorki and Lunacharsky are recalled – legend building by association.<sup>31</sup>

Soermus had married Ida Pöder, an ardent revolutionary and friend of Lenin, but Soermus divorced Pöder while in Paris and married Englishwoman Frances Hewitt<sup>32</sup> in 1917. It was a short-lived and unhappy marriage. He had two daughters with Hewitt, Edna (born in London) and Pauline (born in Leningrad). Hewitt came from a different milieu to Soermus and is described as provincial or 'lower middle-class' (*kleinbürgerlichen*) with completely different views to Soermus and she did not enjoy his music at all.<sup>33</sup> The recent immigration laws (1914) passed in Britain caused difficulties for Russians seeking to enter and settle in the country which may have led to Soermus taking the opportunity to marry Hewitt. Soermus divorced al in

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<sup>27</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky, 'Ein proletarischer Geiger,' *Pariser Bote (Parishski westnik)*, 4 December, 1913, quoted in Körvits, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, p. 100. The *Paris Messenger* was a popular Russian immigrant newspaper.

<sup>28</sup> Present day equivalent of £112,026.58.

<sup>29</sup> A photograph exists of Soermus holding the smashed violin and bow with hairs entangled; in Körvitz, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, Photograph No. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Tuesday, 22 October, 1935. His Maggini violin hangs in the Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music in Tallinn in a display dedicated to Soermus.

<sup>31</sup> Virginia Soermus relates how Lenin met Soermus and encouraged him to become a violinist and play for the Socialist cause. Soermus would also talk of his time spent on the island of Capri with Maxim Gorky and Lunacharsky: '...it was quite a relief to be invited to Gorki's house and be able to eat properly for a time. He says that the three of them would talk far in to the night about the arts and culture and as he would play after their long discussions he would dream of the time when all mankind would be able to enjoy the beauty of nature...' She recalls that Lenin, after hearing Soermus play in Paris, arranged a pension for Soermus to study at the Conservatory. Virginia Soermus, 'Reminiscences about her Husband.'

<sup>32</sup> Körvitz, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, pp. 11, 114, 173 erroneously names her as Hewlett. Birth, Death and Marriage documents for Frances, Isabella have Hewitt as her surname.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.

1926 and married for a third time, divorcee Virginia Latham, née Holland, and settled with her in Merthyr in Wales.<sup>34</sup> Virginia was a pianist and accompanied Soermus in his recitals.

In the time Soermus spent in Britain between 1916 and 1936 he cemented his relationship with the Labour Movement by giving recitals and Socialist speeches to working-class people. He played in the East End of London, to Welsh miners in the Welsh Valleys, and in the textile districts of Lancashire and Scotland. On the 6 February 1918 Lloyd George's government arrested Soermus for sedition citing his Bolshevik speeches and his intention to cause civil dissatisfaction and unrest. Soermus had been due to make an appearance at the Queen's Hall *Hands Off Russia* gathering on the 8 February but was arrested and sent to Brixton prison. His violin was confiscated and only returned to him after he began a hunger strike.<sup>35</sup> He was served a deportation order<sup>36</sup> and put on a ship at Newcastle bound for Finland where he was again arrested and imprisoned. The White Terror was in full force in Finland's civil war following the crushing of the Finnish Workers' Movement. Frances Hewitt travelled to London and appealed to the Home Office and Scotland Yard to allow her to accompany her husband. This was refused at first but after Soermus had departed she was allowed to travel. She travelled to Russia where she reunited with Soermus.<sup>37</sup> Soermus, on his release in Finland, had returned to Russia.

Soermus then toured the continent again in the 1920s giving concerts. He had an active recital life, particularly in Germany, playing some 200 concerts and lecture-recitals in 1928 alone.

William (Billy) Holland (Virginia Soermus's brother) toured with Soermus as tour manager and

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<sup>34</sup> Norman Vincent Latham filed for divorce from Kate Virginia Latham in 1926. Edward Soermus is noted as co-respondent. (Public Records: Divorce Court File: 4077). Soermus and Virginia married in 1926. At this time Soermus's daughters with Hewitt, Edna and Pauline, were young girls. Joel McKee, e-mail to the author, 28 January, 2021, remembers his grandmother (Edna Soermus) recounting that her father arrived at the house and forcibly took the girls away from their mother leaving Hewitt screaming at the garden gate. After Soermus's death Virginia and Soermus's daughters (married) lived in the Welwyn Garden Suburbs area and Virginia died in 1968. William (Billy) Holland, Virginia's brother, and one-time concert manager for Soermus, also retired to Welwyn Garden Suburbs. He was a process Worker at Imperial Chemical Industries (I.C.I.). See, "Abergavenny Chronicle". A reminiscence by William Holland, *London Welshman*, Autumn, 1984 written when Holland was 84. Holland, at the invitation of the Estonian state, travelled to Luunja in 1968 for the unveiling of a stone monument to Soermus on the occasion of Soermus's 100<sup>th</sup> birthdate: *Welwyn and Hatfield Advertiser*, 26 July, 1968. Holland reports, 'My brother-in-law and I became close friends. Soermus, to me, was one of the greatest violinists that ever lived and to many Russians he has become almost a legend.'

<sup>35</sup> *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 15 February, 1919.

<sup>36</sup> The deportation, and condition of leave to land, was revoked on 9 January, 1924.: 'Report on proceedings of the House of Commons,' *The Scotsman*, 1 July, 1931. Soermus was allowed to return to the UK but refused permission to play or speak from the platform.

<sup>37</sup> Hewitt could not speak Russian, was robbed of her money and belongings enroute, and it was only through sheer co-incidence that she was able to meet up with Soermus. Joel McKee, e-mail to the author, 28 January, 2021.

noted a typical month of recital appearances.<sup>38</sup> Bohumir Ulmann was Soermus's regular accompanist but after his marriage to Virginia Soermus she frequently accompanied him, particularly during periods when he was gagged by the authorities, and she spoke from the platform on his behalf.<sup>39</sup>

Soermus returned to England in 1924 after gaining permission to visit his wife (Hewitt) who had returned to England with his daughters. He again gave concerts supported by the Labour Movement in defiance of a restriction that he would not play in public or make any speeches during his visit. He disobeyed the order and was again ordered to leave the country. Protests against the order organised by the Labour Party induced the government to change its mind and he was permitted to stay. His accompanist, Ulmann, was also deported but again through the intervention of the Labour Party, was permitted to return.<sup>40</sup>

Soermus resided in Merthyr in Wales after his marriage to Virginia in 1926 but in 1936 he was threatened again with deportation for his Communist activities and he finally left for Russia of his own accord (on 31 December, the final day of his permission to remain in the country) arriving there at the height of Stalin's purges. He never left Russia again.<sup>41</sup> It is possible his passport was retained. His opportunities to play became fewer and he was not invited to play at the Leningrad Conservatory. In one incident he was ejected from a hotel in Moscow and we find him playing to the troops of the Red Army on the front line and fraternising with his comrades

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<sup>38</sup> Kõrvitz, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, Photograph No. 29 provides a sample page from Holland's tour-dates diary. Holland notes: 'Total of over 200 concerts for the year 1928. Edward Soermus visited most of countries in Europe and played in most of the capital cities. Below are dates and places he played at while I was with him in Germany. 1928-1929. Billy Holland. Dresden.' Estonian Theatre and Music Museum Archive: FONDI (Fund): No. M-10: Sõrmus, Eduard Julius: *Viuldaja – revolutsionäär*. Storage Unit 6, No. 7326.

<sup>39</sup> Hans Teubner, 'Soermus – der Rote Geiger,' in *Im Zeichen des Roten Sterns - Erinnerungen an die Traditionen der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft*, (Berlin: The Institute for Marxism-Leninism, Dietz Verlag, 1974), pp. 81-90 gives an account of Soermus gagged (*Redeverbot*).

<sup>40</sup> *The Scotsman*, 27 December, 1924 reports on Soermus's recital with accompanist Bohumir Ulmann at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh. The recital developed into a protest demonstration (1000 people) led by the Edinburgh Trades and Labour Council and the Workers' International Relief Committee. A resolution was adopted protesting against the deportations. The Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks had stated in parliament that Soermus and Ulmann were not being deported but merely required to leave at the expiration of their permits. He would not grant an extension beyond 31 December. *The Scotsman*, 12 December, 1924.

<sup>41</sup> Soermus is reputed to have been 'old revolutionary friends' with Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov (1896-1948) from their (Bolshevik) student days. Virginia Soermus describes how Soermus was embraced by Zhdanov on the concert stage in Leningrad in 1928 but despite this connection Holland, on a visit to Soermus in 1938, described Soermus's circumstances as 'grim': William (Billy) Holland, 'Incidents in my life with Edward and Virginia Soermus. Germany 1928-1929,' Estonian National Theatre and Music Museum, Storage Unit 22, No. 7896.

from the 'good old days'. He died of leukaemia in a nursing home in Moscow in 1940. At the time Virginia was visiting her family in England.

The above brief biographical orientation demonstrates the peripatetic, unstable and insecure circumstances in which Soermus found himself. As an exile on the move he showed great resilience and determination. He was reportedly very fit physically, a vegetarian, charismatic and disciplined in his musical practice.

Soermus's sometimes flamboyant contributions as a musician and social agitator become a catalyst for examining the British Government's attitude towards aliens (particularly Russians) coming to this country and the systems put in place to control immigration and conditions of employment.<sup>42</sup> The Government's attempt to silence Soermus's Bolshevik rhetoric further exposes the British Government's ambivalence towards, and nervousness with, Bolshevism and its consequent dilemma dealing with the new Soviet Government. The government clearly viewed Soermus as a threat to social stability within the country. His activities, both artistic and oratorical, aroused working-class aspirations and, at a time of strikes, demonstrations, political rallies, discontent and general social unrest in the 1920s, Soermus's involvement with the Labour Movement was able, in some part, to bring British society to the brink of revolution. Basil Thomson, at the time head of Scotland Yard Special Branch, mentions Soermus's arrest and subsequent inability to appear at the *Hands Off Russia* rally at the Albert Hall; 'There was a large strike on the Clyde at the moment, and many of the speakers really believed that it was the beginning of the General Strike which was to merge into Revolution. At that moment we were probably nearer to very serious disturbances than we have been at any time since the Bristol Riots of 1831.' Soermus brought his musicianship and ability as a violinist to the service of the Revolution and social change.<sup>43</sup>

Soermus experienced levels of alienation and antagonism typically faced by many immigrants. His English was poor and he spoke with a strong Russian accent which clearly marked him as an alien and he was difficult to understand in conversation. In this respect Labour frequently raised an argument in his defence as to his ineffectiveness as a propagandist and rabble-rouser: 'Soermus's command of English is so feeble that he has great difficulty in making himself understood in the most ordinary conversation, and for the same reason his potency as a

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<sup>42</sup> The British Government's approach to Russian immigrants and its shifting relationship with the emerging Soviet state are discussed in Elina Hannele Multanen, 'British policy towards Russian refugees, pp. 44-68. Also, Elina Hannele Multanen, 'British Policy Towards Russian Refugees (PhD diss). See also, Stephen White, *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Study in the Politics of Diplomacy*, (London, The MacMillan Press, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> (Sir) Basil Thomson, head of Scotland Yard Special Branch, *The Times*, 2 December, 1921. See Basil Thomson, *Queer People*, (London; Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1922), p. 92'.

propagandist of Bolshevism in this country may be regarded as absolutely non-existent' (that he was indeed not a threat) and his belief that Bach's music could turn his listeners into 'converted firebrands' was an innocence or 'amiable weakness'. Labour supporters accused the government of overreaction when deporting Soermus with the argument that if Bach's music was capable of revolutionary fervour then 'we should have had a raid on the music publishers who issue the works of the masters and a censorship order to leaders of orchestras and librarians of bands prohibiting the performance of Bach music, whilst the Archbishops would have backed up the ordinances of the secular arm by placing his fugue music on an index expurgatus (sic) issued to choirmasters and organists...' <sup>44</sup>

Soermus consistently encountered government bureaucracy in his applications to reside in Wales despite having his two children in the country and an English wife. His ineligibility for military service (he was exempt both in Russia and the UK) was frequently alluded to by Labour supporters in defence of the legitimacy of his musical activities and right to reside in the country. The conscription of aliens in the UK was a highly charged issue from 1916 and became particularly acute at the time of the British involvement in the Russian Civil War just after the First World War (1917-1923). Jewish and ethnic Russian refugees fleeing to the UK were frequently conscripted and found themselves back in Russia fighting alongside the British, leaving their wives and children in Britain on social support. <sup>45</sup>

Soermus was clearly allied to the Socialist cause in Wales and as such his concerts were promoted and advertised by *The Pioneer*, a Labour biased newspaper published in Merthyr which carried political comment and issues of social relevance to the working classes in Wales. To this end it supported and promoted Soermus as a Bolshevik musician bringing music to the people and fiercely defended his cause in his dealings with the government. Soermus's political and social beliefs were clearly at odds with the English democratic capitalist system which led to several encounters with the authorities and ultimately his two deportations. Despite his

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<sup>44</sup> 'The whole action [Soermus's proposed deportation] is so entirely insane, that one feels a difficulty in trying to unravel it. Probably the easiest way to regard it is that the nerves of Scotland Yard or some Government department hiding behind that institution, are as tautly stretched as those of an hysterical girl who has read *Dracula* just before retiring to rest.' *The Pioneer*, 25 May, 1918.

<sup>45</sup> See Sharman Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews: The Anglo-Jewish Community, Britain and the Russian Revolution*. Vasilii Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, (London: Basileus Press, 2004): pp. 86-89 discusses the 1st Russian Tank Detachment based at Bovington and the refusal of Russian officers to return to Russia to fight in the civil war alongside the British forces.

frequent concert appearances and support he received from the Independent Labour Party it also appears he frequently struggled financially.<sup>46</sup>

## 2.2 Soermus the Musician

Shortly after his arrival in England in 1916 (he was thirty-eight), Soermus played in three recitals at the Wigmore Hall: on 18 February, 12 May and 10 November, 1917. None of these were solo recitals and the performance on 12 May was a charity concert. These three appearances at the Wigmore Hall were his only attempts to try and conquer the Art Music scene in London, and for that matter anywhere in Europe. Throughout his performing career in Europe he played in community halls, schools, Temperance Halls, Town Halls and meeting houses and seldom played in major Art Music concert halls.<sup>47</sup> He did play in Hamburg's Conventgarten in three concerts there. The programme Note for his Taibach Recital in 1933 (held at the Taibach Picturedrome)<sup>48</sup> notes: 'No artist of international fame is able nowadays to fill a concert hall in a large city. Soermus plays to crowded houses...' and Holland mentions that 'Over six thousand people attended his last three concerts in Covent Garden (sic) [Conventgarten] in Hamburg, and hundreds were turned away.'<sup>49</sup> As this hall was also used for political rallies and meetings it is likely that his appearances there were part of the Workers' Movement assemblies and not a solo recital. Soermus did have two violin concertos in his repertoire and while there is no evidence that he ever performed with an orchestra he did perform violin concerto movements with piano accompaniment in his recitals.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> William Holland mentions, 'I know many people thought Edward and Virginia were paid Moscow agents, but this was not so.' Holland, 'Incidents in my life *Holland Reminiscences*.'

<sup>47</sup> Holland, Soermus's tour manager in 1928/29, mentions Soermus played at the Beethovensaal in Berlin (the concert hall was badly damaged during WWII) and the Vereins House in Dresden in which Holland says Soermus performed more than 28 times. Holland, 'Incidents in my life *Holland Reminiscences*.'

<sup>48</sup> Programme, *Taibach Ward Labour Committee, Special Visit of Soermus accompanied by Virginia Soermus, Taibach Picturedrome, Sunday, 5 November, 1933*. Women's Archive of Wales/Archif Menywod Cymru: Iris Evans Thomas of Taibach Papers. West Glamorgan Archive Service. Ref. GB 216 WAW/29/77-78.

<sup>49</sup> Holland mentions Soermus 'playing in "Convent Garden" in Hamburg to 5000 people and nearly mobbed by excited people as he and Virginia left the concert hall.' These details are also printed in a programme note to his recital at the Taibach Picturedrome for the Taibach Ward Labour Committee (5th November 1933).

<sup>50</sup> *The Amman Valley Chronicle and East Carmarthen News*, 22 August, 1918 claims Soermus had played a concerto with Sir Thomas Beecham conducting but there is no evidence for it and it may have been a publicity ploy.

The concert at the Wigmore Hall on 17 February featured the following musicians: Adolph Raibin (Tenor),<sup>51</sup> Edward Soermus (violin), Carl Budden-Morris (pianist),<sup>52</sup> and Margaret Pierrepont (Accompanist – piano).<sup>53</sup> Critical response was measured:

To speak first of their efforts generally, it may be said that whilst these were worthy of warm praise, yet in each case they just failed to reach the point which would justify a critic in describing them in the highest terms. In the account given of Cesar Franck's well-known sonata for violin and piano, the total effect was that of a conscientious and painstaking rather than of a brilliant and convincing performance, and much the same might be said in regard to the instrumental solos contributed by Messrs Soermus and Budden-Morris.<sup>54</sup>

The recital was as follows:<sup>55</sup>

<b>Soermus</b>	<i>Violin Sonata – Franck</i>
<b>Raibin</b>	<i>Canst thou say why the rose is so pale? – Tchaikovsky</i>
	<i>One word - Tchaikovsky</i>
	<i>No words, my beloved - Tchaikovsky</i>
	<i>The night – Tchaikovsky</i>
<b>Budden-Morris</b>	<i>Organ Prelude and Fugue - Bach arr. Liszt</i>
	<i>Marche Militaire - Schubert arr. Tausig</i>
<b>Raibin</b>	<i>Slowly the day has faded - Borodin</i>
	<i>What is life but a play? - Tchaikovsky</i>

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<sup>51</sup> Adolph Raibin, a young Russian tenor from the Russian Opera, was studying in Manchester. He gave two other recitals at Wigmore Hall. The first together with the violinist Sascha Lasserson and accompanist Percy Khan (9 April 1918). *The Westminster Gazette*, 10 April, 1918 review of Raibin is unflattering: 'It is impossible to find a very great deal to say in favour of Mr. Adolph Raibin.... Unfortunately he has not been endowed with a voice distinguished by either great power or great charm, while there is nothing in his method of using it to make one forget its natural limitations. Certainly he sings with fervour and spirit – sometimes, indeed, to an almost excessive extent; but in any case a good deal more than is required to achieve results of any value, and unfortunately it is not forthcoming from Mr Raibin. Probably in a drawing-room he would do better, but certainly he only makes a very moderate impression in the concert-room. It should be added that he was assisted by M. Sascha Lasserson, who in turn is a violinist of the most ordinary attainments only....'

<sup>52</sup> Carl Budden-Morris was an Australian pianist. He is found in recital programmes in Sydney in the mid 1930s.

<sup>53</sup> Margaret Pierrepont is an English pianist who led an active concert life as an accompanist.

<sup>54</sup> *The Scotsman*, 19 February, 1917.

<sup>55</sup> The programme details for the three concerts discussed are transcribed from programmes supplied by the Wigmore Hall Programme Archive. Spelling and the titles of works are retained.



## Chapter 2

*Shepherd's Song* – Tchaikovsky

### **Soermus**

*Variations sur une chanson populaire* – Wieniawski

*Romance* - F. Broenner [Brüner?]

*Variations sur une theme de Corelli* - Tartini arr. Kreisler

### **Raibin**

*Cradle-Song* - Gretchaninov

*Half-Sleep* - Arensky

*Yes! She loves me* - Medtner

*Peasant's Prison Song* – Slonov

In the concert on the 12 May, a concert in aid of 'The Dependents of a Russian social worker and writer', Soermus appeared alongside:

### **Russian Choir**<sup>56</sup>

*Down the Mother River Volga* – traditional

*The Fair Girl in the Valley* – traditional

*Stay, My Darling, Do Not Hurry* – traditional

*The Birch Tree* – traditional

### **Valérie Valenson**, cello

*Berceuse* – Cui

*La Source* – Davidoff

### **Boris Bornoff**, tenor

*Romance* – Mussorgsky

*Romance* – Arensky

*Romance* – Sachnovsky

### **Vera Kastelianski**, soprano

*Heroism* – Tchaikovsky

### **Edward Soermus**, violin

*Fantaisie de Concert sur des Thèmes Russes* – Rimsky-Korsakov

### **Vladimir Rosing**, tenor

*Air de Lensky* – Tchaikovsky

*The Clock* – Sachnovsky

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<sup>56</sup> The name of the amateur choir is not specified in the programme.

## Chapter 2

*O! Give Me This Night* – Bagrinowski

### **Russian Choir**

*Dubinushka* – traditional

*The Pattering Rain* – traditional

*Country, My Dear Country* – traditional

*Ei Ouchnem* (sic) – traditional

*Hop moi Grichaniki* – traditional

**Vera Kastelianski**, soprano    *Aria of Marie from Mazeppa* – Tchaikovsky

*The Origin of the Harp* – Taneyev

**Maria Levinskaya**, piano<sup>57</sup>    *Barcarolle* – Rachmaninov

*Les Démons s’amusent* – Rebikov

*Near the Fountain* – Arensky

### **Vladimir Rosing**, tenor

**Boris Bornoff**, tenor                      Duets by Gretchaninov and Dargomyzhsky (unspecified)<sup>58</sup>

The entire evening was devoted to Russian music and Soermus played alongside other émigrés residing in London. The musicians, though still relatively unknown, were beginning to distinguish themselves. Vladimir Rosing at this time was a distinguished young Russian tenor who contributed much to English and American opera production. He relocated to America on the eve of World War Two in 1939 but continued to give recitals in England until the late 1930s.<sup>59</sup> Boris Bornoff (Bernard Bornsztein) came from Poland and was naturalized a British citizen on 9 January 1950. He was a tenor with an active career appearing at one time for the Monte Carlo Opera. He appeared in a Patriotic Concert on the 17 December 1914, the proceeds of which were given to the King of the Belgians to assist with Belgian refugees. Vera Kastelianski (Russian Soprano) appeared with Rosing in a Russian Operatic Concert on 19 December, 1916 in aid of the Serbian Christmas Gift. It was a society affair attended by Queen Alexandria. The London Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Wasilli Safonoff. Percy Kahn (English pianist) was an English composer and pianist who studied at the Royal College of Music and accompanied many distinguished singers and instrumentalists, amongst them violinist Fritz Kreisler, sopranos

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<sup>57</sup> Maria Levinskaya (pianist) is listed in publicity but not in the programme.

<sup>58</sup> Wigmore Hall Digital Archives: Programmes.

<sup>59</sup> Rosing is discussed more extensively in Chapter Four.

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Dame Nellie Melba and Luisa Tetrazzini, tenors Enrico Caruso, John McCormack, Richard Tauber, Beniamino Gigli and baritone John Brownlee. He accompanied Richard Tauber regularly for many years.

And lastly, the concert on 10 November featured Julian Bonell (baritone), Eduard Soermus (violin), Angèle Simon (piano), and Percy Kahn (accompanist). The advertisement for the concert in *The Times* mentions only Soermus which suggests he may have placed the notice himself:

Soermus	<i>Violin Sonata in C minor</i> – Grieg
Bonell	<i>Ballad</i> - Rubinstein
	<i>I have come to greet thee</i> - Rimsky-Korsakov
Simon	<i>Piano Sonata in G minor</i> – Kochintzky
	<i>Chaconne</i> – Bach (Busoni?)
Bonell	<i>Trepak</i> - Mussorgsky
	<i>The Wedding</i> - Dargomyzhsky
	<i>Morning Song in the Jungle</i> - Cyril Scott
Simon	<i>Nocturne for the left hand</i> – Skryabin
Soermus	<i>Nocturne</i> - Broenner
	<i>Prelude and Allegro</i> - Pugnani arr. Kreisler
	<i>Russian Carnaval</i> – Wieniawski (Opus 11?)

Soermus's choice of repertoire for all these concerts is ambitious and he continued to play these pieces (except the Franck and Grieg violin sonatas) throughout his career. He established a small core repertoire and did not seem interested in expanding it, preferring to repeat what he knew he could already play and which appealed to his listeners. It is significant that he dropped the Franck and Grieg sonatas – possibly because they were too extended (requiring some concentration on the part of the listeners) and unsuitable as an entertaining item in an evening featuring speakers and contributions from other performers. He chose shorter popular and easily recognisable works from the classical repertoire which he could use as illustrations in his talks to his audience. His repertoire also extended to Russian folk songs, revolutionary music, hymns and sentimental works designed to appeal to a general audience. His performance of *Home, Sweet Home!* was a sentimental favourite with Welsh audiences as was *Drink to me only with thine eyes*. Derek B. Scott discusses *Home, Sweet Home!* as a typical and popular example

of nineteenth-century song composed with moral improvement in mind – what he calls rational amusement. Scott makes the observation that the ballad was ‘still felt to possess a remarkable moral and emotional power’ in the early part of the twentieth-century. Soermus, who sought to educate, inspire and uplift his audiences, would have found the song’s moral message and its appeal to home and brotherly love an appealing aspect. The sentimental song as well as other British folk songs such as *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes* and *Robin Adair*, both of which Soermus included in his concerts, appealed to British subjects at home and well as those living abroad in the colonies of the Empire. The songs evoked a sense of belonging together in a shared reminiscence of Home. Nikolai Medvedeff and Alexander Wolkowsky were to employ Russian folk songs and melodies in their own evocation of Russia (discussed in Chapter Four) and they, too, found *Home, Sweet Home!* appealing and performed a balalaika and domra arrangement in their early concert at the Coliseum. Their choice of British folk songs was perhaps also with an eye to popular appeal (critical responses to performances of these songs were consistently enthusiastic) and deliberately elicited the sentimental feelings of the audience.<sup>60</sup>

It is useful and revealing to list works he is known to have included in his standard repertoire. This list is derived from printed Concert Programmes, reviews in Newspapers, mentions in written works, his biography and other ephemera. There are no indications of the editions Soermus used.<sup>61</sup> It is not always to be assumed arrangements were for piano and violin (he could have played solo) but he had two regular accompanists, his wife Virginia Soermus and Bohumir Ulmann, which suggests arrangements were for violin and piano. Scores of his own compositions *Song of Sorrows* and *Song of the Birds*<sup>62</sup> have not been published (or indeed traceable – they may have been partially improvised) though *Song of the Birds* has been recorded.

### Repertoire:

Cesar Franck

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<sup>60</sup> I address Medvedeff’s use of *Home, Sweet Home!* in his concerts in Chapter 4.

<sup>61</sup> I have suggested editions that can be certain. It may be assumed Soermus made his own arrangements of traditional airs, marches, and revolutionary songs. Where mention is made that he gave his own arrangement of the work I have indicated this.

<sup>62</sup> Derek B. Scott, ‘Music Morality and Rational Amusement at the Victorian Middle-Class Soirée,’ in *Music and Performance Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Temperley*, edited by Bennett Zon, (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp 83-10. See also Chapter 4, fn. 41 regarding *Home, Sweet Home!*

## Chapter 2

- *Violin Sonata* [Pub. J. Hamelle, c.1887]<sup>63</sup>

Edvard Grieg

- *Violin Sonata in C minor* [Pub. Peters Edition c. 1908]

Henri Wieniawski

- *Variations sur une chanson populaire* (possibly *Variations on 'Jechał Kozak za Dunaj'* which became popular in Germany as *Schöne Minka*) [Pub?]
- *Russian Carnival Opus 11* [Pub. H. Litolf, Brunswick n.d. The most likely edition]
- *Russian Dance* (?)

Giuseppe Tartini arr. Fritz Kreisler

- *Variations sur une theme de Corelli* [Pub. Carl Fischer, New York, 1910]

Gaetano Pugnani arr. Fritz Kreisler

- *Prelude and Allegro*<sup>64</sup> [Pub. Schott and Co. London, 1910]

François Couperin arr. Fritz Kreisler

- *Chanson Louis XIII* and *Pavane* [Pub. B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz, 1910.]

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's

- *Fantaisie de Concert sur des Thèmes Russes* [Pub. Carl Fischer, New York, 1921. This may be the arrangement by Leopold Auer c.1921]

Johann Sebastian Bach

- *Chaconne* [Edition?]
- *Aria* [Pub?]
- *Air on a G String* (from Suite No 3 BWV 1068) [Any number of editions are possible]

Ludwig Beethoven

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<sup>63</sup> The publisher *Muzyka* in Moscow which published the score in Russia only became established in 1918 after Soermus's recital. There is a published edition (1915) by Schirmer in New York but given that Soermus resided in Paris until 1916 it is possible he purchased a French edition.

<sup>64</sup> Composed by Kreisler and attributed to Pugnani as a musical joke/hoax. Published in 1905 it quickly became extremely popular in the violin repertoire.

## Chapter 2

- *Violin Concerto* [Pub. Durand, Paris, 1916]<sup>65</sup>
- *Türkischer Marsch* (from *The Ruins of Athens*, Opus 113) [This could be an arrangement made by Leopold Auer. Pub. Carl Fischer, New York, 1916]
- *Menuetto* (Given the nature of Soermus's repertoire this is most likely an arrangement of the Minuet in G)
- *Violin Sonata* Op 24 (Spring) [Any number of editions are possible]
- *Violin Sonata* Op 47 (Kreutzer) [Any number of editions are possible]

### Felix Mendelssohn

- *Concerto* (Opus 64) [Pub. Jurgenson, Moscow, 1915; Durand, Paris, 1916; Carl Fischer, New York, 1917 – all of these are possible]

### Pablo de Sarasate

- *Gypsy Dance (Zigeunerweisen)* [Pub. Carl Fischer, New York, 1895]

### Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

- *Konzert für Violine und Klavier* (Allegro, Andante, Rondo)<sup>66</sup>
- *Violin Sonata F Dur* (unclear which F Major sonata – there are a possible seven)
- *Violin Sonata C Dur* (unclear which C Major sonata - there are a possible eleven)

### Niccoló Paganini

- *Fantasie auf einer Saite* [Variations for the fourth string on the theme *Dal tuo stellato soglio* from *Mosè in Egitto*, Rossini]
- *Caprice (The Laughing Faun – The Devil's Laughter?)* (Op 1, No. 13?).<sup>67</sup> [Pub. Ricordi, Milan, c1818 or Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, n.d.]

### Joachim Raff

- *Cavatina* Opus 85, No. 3 [Pub. Kistner, Leipzig, n.d.]

### Alexander Glazunov

- *Meditation* [Pub. M.P. Belaieff,<sup>68</sup> Leipzig, 1892]

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<sup>65</sup> There is an arrangement by Leopold Auer published by Carl Fischer in New York in 1917 which Soermus may have used given his connection with Auer.

<sup>66</sup> It is unclear which work this is. No identification given other than the movements.

<sup>67</sup> Possibly a reviewer's error for the common name *The Devil's Laughter*.

<sup>68</sup> Alternative frequent spelling: Mitrofan Petrovich Belyayev.

Bedřich Smetana [Smetana (sic)]

- (composer mentioned – but no work specified)

Zdeněk Fibich

- (composer mentioned - but no work)

Antonín Dvořák

- (composer mentioned - but no work)

George Frideric Handel

- *Largo* [From the Opera *Serse (Xerxes)* HWV 40. Many publishing possibilities]

Frédéric Chopin

- *Nocturne* (This is likely to be Opus 9, No. 2) [Any number of publishing possibilities. Sarasate arrangement, Pub. Schirmer, New York, 1913?]

Franz Schubert

- *Ave Maria* (D 839) [Any number of editions are possible]

Robert Schumann

- *Träumerei* from *Kinderszenen* Opus 15 No 7. [Any number of arrangements and editions are possible]

Henry Bishop

- *Home, Sweet Home!*

Traditional (arrangers unspecified)

- *Ar Hyd Y Nos (All Through the Night)*
- *Song of the Volga Boatmen, Wolgalied*
- *Volga Volga*
- Welsh, Polish, Russian Lullabies
- Scotch Selections
- *Drink to me only with thine eyes*

- *Stenka Rasin*<sup>69</sup>
- *Robin Adair* (Irish/Scottish folk song)

Edward Soermus (arranger)

- *Revolutionary March*
- *Revolutionary Funeral March (You Fell Victim to a Fateful Struggle)*

Edward Soermus (own composition)

- *My Song of Sorrow* (This piece also appears as *A Song of Despair*, *An Invocation*, *Mystery of Sorrow*)
- *From Darkness towards Light*

Some general characteristics can be discerned from the above repertoire. Soermus performed relatively few works from the standard violin repertoire. A small number of violin sonatas and concertos are among them but concertos, when performed, were usually only one selected movement. Others were popular works such as Handel's *Largo* or Beethoven's *Turkish March*. Russian and gypsy character works, Revolutionary pieces, Russian popular airs and folk songs, together with Scotch, Welsh, English and Irish traditional songs were included in his recitals.

Soermus's violin technique is generally praised in regional newspaper reviews and he was enthusiastically received when he played at I.L.P.<sup>70</sup> gatherings in Wales. He inspired a rapturous effort in Huw Menai's *Sonnet to Soermus*.<sup>71</sup> He played from memory, had a fine vibrato,<sup>72</sup> 'sureness of touch with the bow, a high degree of skill, virtuosity, breadth of tone'<sup>73</sup> and played with 'charm and artistry.'<sup>74</sup> His performance at the Wigmore Hall, however, drew a more tempered response: '...a conscientious and painstaking rather than a brilliant and convincing performance.'<sup>75</sup> Later recollections of Soermus's recitals at the Wigmore Hall were no less complimentary and doubt is cast on his abilities as a violinist of the first order; '... no high opinion was formed of his playing. If he attracted large audiences both in the East-End and in South Wales, as he is said to have done, the fact was probably due to his speaking, which followed his playing. He is ... by profession an engineer. He came to this country as private

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<sup>69</sup> More commonly translated as *Stenka Razin*.

<sup>70</sup> Independent Labour Party.

<sup>71</sup> Another poem by Richard Fischer also addresses Soermus as a musician of the people: *Der Geiger der Menschen (E. Soermus)*. Printed in a programme fragment (date unknown). Private collection of Joel McKee.

<sup>72</sup> *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 22 October, 1935.

<sup>73</sup> *The Rugby Advertiser*, 7 March, 1930.

<sup>74</sup> *The Falkirk Herald*, 29 May, 1924.

<sup>75</sup> *The Scotsman*, 17 February, 1917.



secretary to Litvinoff (sic), the Bolshevik Ambassador.’<sup>76</sup> As a young man Soermus played at the St. Petersburg Conservatory with revolutionary fervour but his recital at the Leningrad Conservatory in 1925 was met with “delicate reserve” possibly because, as suggested by Kōrvitz, effusive pre-publicity was not matched by Soermus’s performance which resulted in a tepid review.<sup>77</sup> When Soermus later visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s he was not invited to play at the Moscow Conservatory and we recall Lunacharsky’s,<sup>78</sup> criticism that Soermus played like an autodidact.<sup>79</sup>

Apart from the critical response from music critics and the public there are only four recorded examples of Soermus playing – all on 78 rpm records – by which we can judge his playing. Soermus’s recording of *Stenka Razin* (accompanied by Virginia Soermus)<sup>80</sup> has *Song of the Birds*, Soermus’s own composition, on the reverse side. David Mason is inclined to believe the four sides are all that Soermus recorded and if Soermus had pursued a career as a concert soloist in the Art Music concert halls and had recorded even moderately with only a small output, his records would still be much better known.<sup>81</sup> The recording of *Stenka Razin* and *Song of the Birds* was privately commissioned by Soermus and was not sold commercially in shops. Copies were obtainable from the private address of Mrs. I.A. Ellis, 184 King’s Road, Erdington, Birmingham.



Figure 3 Soermus Record Labels: *Song of the Birds* and *Stenka Razin*

<sup>76</sup> *The Times*, 10 February, 1919. Soermus was certainly known to Litvinoff but there is no evidence Soermus was his private secretary. The connection is perhaps made here in a subtle allusion to Soermus’s Bolshevik leanings. The critic also casts a disparaging backhander by alluding to Soermus as an engineer (which he was not) rather than a concert musician.

<sup>77</sup> Kōrvitz, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, pp. 181-182. The source quoted is *Abendausgabe der Roten Zeitung*, 1 August, 1925 and 20 August, 1925.

<sup>78</sup> The Soviet Union’s First Commissar for Enlightenment and the leader of the Bolsheviks in Paris.

<sup>79</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky, ‘Ein proletarischer Geiger,’ *Pariser Bote (Parishski westnik)*, 4 December, 1913. Quoted in Kōrvitz, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, p. 100.

<sup>80</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t-bOx\\_lqoA&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t-bOx_lqoA&t=2s). for the Soermus recording of *Stenka Razin*.

<sup>81</sup> David Mason, e-mail to the author, 5 April, 2020.

The label has an elementary design (partially hand-drawn?) judging by the lettering surmounted over a photograph. The label has a CP matrix number of 236 and 237 which indicates the recording is a Contract Pressing<sup>82</sup> and was a standard prefix used by the Homophone Company, a major independent producer of custom recordings in Britain in the 1930s. A record (pressing) ordered by a private individual might seem surprising but it was not unusual for artists, not only minor ones, to have their own recordings pressed and released. One example of this is the opera contralto Dame Clara Butt who, despite being recorded by the largest recording company, Gramophone Company (HMV), still made private recordings for personal use, as did the Liberal politician George Lansbury.<sup>83</sup>

Soermus made one commercial recording while in Germany noted in a five-volume illustrated encyclopaedia (*Bilderlexikon*) of German 78s.<sup>84</sup> The record, it is noted, has a plain label with the name SOERMUS as the only information, pressed by Artiphon, a small recording company with no particular political leanings.<sup>85</sup> This may be the same recording listed in the German discography *Diskographie der deutschen proletarischen Schallplatten aus der Zeit vor 1933*<sup>86</sup> which lists two recordings made by Soermus for the Labour movement in Germany: Side A *Russischer Trauergesang*, Violinsolo Nr. 1. [Eduard] Soermus spielt; and Side B - *Klagelied eines*

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<sup>82</sup> A 'pressing' is the initial production of a record (acetate or vinyl disc) from the recording, which is then replicated. A Contract Pressing would be the making of a record by a private individual in a contract with the record company.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*. Mason gives the example of a private recording of Clara Butt (contralto) and husband Kennerley Rumford (baritone), sent to her brother in New Zealand on the occasion of his wedding. A list of Butt and Rumford recordings can be found at:

<http://www.trevormidgley.com/ClaraButt/ReleasedRecordings.html>

George Lansbury, leader of the Labour Party from 1932 -1935, also made six private records for his magazine *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*. The company would only press them with plain white labels. The proper labels had to be stuck on in the offices of the magazine but they did get pressed and sold well. David Mason e-mail to the author, 5 April, 2020. One such recording can be found at

[https://www.google.com/search?q=george+lansbury+recordings&rlz=1C5CHFA\\_enGB922GB923&oq=george+lansbury+recordings&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigAdIBCDU1MjdqMGo3qAIA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:dbcf3b7f,vid:3gonROxxf8w,st:0](https://www.google.com/search?q=george+lansbury+recordings&rlz=1C5CHFA_enGB922GB923&oq=george+lansbury+recordings&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigAdIBCDU1MjdqMGo3qAIA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:dbcf3b7f,vid:3gonROxxf8w,st:0)

<sup>84</sup> Rainer E. Lotz, Michael Gunrem and Stephan Puille, *Das Bilderlexikon der deutschen Schellack-Schallplatten (5 Bände)*, (Bear Family Records, Online Company 2019).

<sup>85</sup> Of this recording Holland notes: 'I think the recording was appalling. I will never forget poor Edward's face when he heard it. He really should not have allowed any recordings to be made from it. I am sure it did no good to his reputation as an Artist, but I think he did not want to hurt the feelings of the people who had gone to the trouble of having the master plate made.' Holland, 'Incidents in my life....'

<sup>86</sup> Elfrieda Berger and Inge Lammel, *Diskographie der deutschen proletarischen Schallplatten aus der Zeit vor 1933*, (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1980), p. 261.

*alten Negers*, Violinsolo Nr. 2. [Eduard] Soermus spielt.<sup>87</sup> The *Klagelied* on Side B is identified as *Old Black Joe* composed by American songwriter Stephen Foster. Soermus, it must be surmised, renamed the song for his political and social purposes.<sup>88</sup>

The music recorded by Soermus does not include any works from the classical canon in his repertoire. He recorded only folk songs which would appeal to the sentiments of the Workers' Movement, and his own compositions. His composition *Song of the Birds*<sup>89</sup> would appeal to the programmatic sensibilities of the general audience – something they could recognise – and at the same time display his technical virtuosity and range of tone. The piano accompaniment is unobtrusive, supportive, chordal in character, and at strategic moments used to echo the violin or introduce the cuckoo call. It also establishes and affirms the cadence points of the three sections of the work – roughly Ternary form. The first section is repeated at the octave with some variation. The opening section is hymn-like using conventional harmony<sup>90</sup> and the melody line enriched with double-stopping. The distinctive motif of the cuckoo birdcall is introduced and elaborated upon in the middle section which becomes a 'free improvisation' or extended cadenza where his technical virtuosity is displayed. The piano remains quiet in this section. There is an abundance of portamento which gives the composition a sentimental style. Trills, slides and acrobatic finger work are used to imitate the birdcall and the extreme upper regions of the violin are explored before returning to the opening section and its repeat at the octave. The composition is easily accessible to the general listener and imitates other examples in the classical repertoire where imitation of birds is a common occurrence; Grieg's Lyric Piece *Little Bird* Opus 43, No. 4, Daquin's '*Le Coucou*' from his 1735 harpsichord suite, *Pièces de clavecin, Troisième Suite*, Vivaldi's *Violin Concerto* in A Major RV 335 and Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* No. 6 in F major, Opus 68 to name some obvious examples.

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<sup>87</sup> Albert Meyer, Thale – Harz. Mech. cop. 1929. Matr. Nr. 3881 DNT, 3882 DNT. The Soermus recording of *Klagelied eines alten Ureinwohners* can be heard at: <https://youtu.be/b2QKiA3ywwI>

<sup>88</sup> The 4-CD collection *Dass nichts bleibt, wir es war!*, published by Bear Family Records contains the Soermus recording, *Russischer Trauergesang*, Track 23, CD 3 of Part 1.

<sup>89</sup> There is no connection with the Catalan Christmas Song or Lullaby, *El cant dels ocells*, which Pablo Casals's arranged for violincello and organ.

<sup>90</sup> Harmony and stylistic features found predominantly in European music between 1600 and 1900. Soermus's *Song of the Birds* uses a melody supported by chordal structures (in the piano accompaniment) following composition rules established in Western Art Music during this period.

## 2.3 Soermus and Music for the Labour Movement

Upon his arrival in England in 1916 Soermus met other Bolsheviks in London and was introduced by Maxim Litvinoff to members of various Labour Unions.<sup>91</sup> These were significant introductions as he was to work closely with the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) in the future.<sup>92</sup> His recitals at the Wigmore Hall were abandoned, as was the formal recital hall generally, and he focussed on combining his musical and socio-political interests by playing at political meetings and rallies held under the auspices of the Independent Labour Party. These performances (which were more in the form of meetings or gatherings) were not recitals in the formal sense. His musical contribution was part of a larger order of events which would include an address by the Chairman of the meeting usually on Liberal issues and current workers' concerns. There would be appeals for funding for social causes such as orphanages and almshouses and musical performances would enhance the proceedings. The meeting would sometimes include 'community singing' of popular hymns and songs such as *Home, Sweet Home!* and *Drink to me only with thine eyes* which Soermus would accompany. Soermus's appearance would often be alongside other artists and it was not uncommon for workers' choirs, other soloists and actors to take part in these concerts. His recital at the Olympia Rink in Merthyr on 23 April, 1918, for example, included Bach's *Chaconne*, Bach's *Aria*, Pugnani-Kreisler *Prelude and Allegro* and Couperin arr. Kreisler – *Chanson Louis XIII and Pavane* accompanied by Arthur Hughes. Also on this programme was the Dowlais and Penywern Male Voice Choir conducted by Evan Thomas. This choir presented popular and sentimental items such as *The Crusaders* by Dan Prothero (a popular Welsh composer and conductor), *Annie Laurie*, *Y Delyn Aur (The Golden Harp)* by D. Pughe Evans, Arthur Sullivan's *The Long Day Closes*, and *Men of Harlech*. Mr Tom Stephens, 'The Blind Welsh Tenor' contributed songs and Harry Phillips is praised for his "commendable imitation of church bells". The inclusion of such performers reflects the popularity of variety performers (in this case amateur) in an evening's schedule of entertainment. The Reader for the evening was the Reverend J. M. Jones which implies some religious content in the proceedings. Edward Roux describes Sidney Percival Bunting reaction to a typical social evening where he heard Soermus play: 'He was delighted by

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<sup>91</sup> Körvits, *Eduard Soermus: Der Rote Geiger*, p. 112. After the Revolution Litvinoff was appointed the Soviet government's plenipotentiary representative in Great Britain. His accreditation was never officially formalised. In 1918 he was arrested by the British government for seditious speeches and deported. He married an English woman Ivy Low, a writer and daughter of Walter Low, a Jewish University Professor, a Hungarian émigré.

<sup>92</sup> Soermus's Concert appearances in support of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) began as early as 2 November, 1918 when he played at a Grand Violin Recital and Concert at the Ebenezer School in Colne Road, Burnley. Artistes included Madam F. Wilson (soprano) and Wilfred Hindle (tenor): *Burnley News*, 18 November, 1918.

the recitations given by the Communist 'speaking chorus' who declaimed revolutionary poems in unison, forty or fifty voices together, with great effect, as though they meant it. What is striking in all these meetings is the very outspoken revolutionary sentiments expressed and the immense fervour, conviction and enthusiasm, not to say violence, with which they are expressed.<sup>93</sup> This was typical of the concert format in which Soermus habitually appeared in Wales. There were also concerts when Soermus would be the only recitalist of the evening.

Soermus began a custom of inserting programme notes in his concert programmes. These had a didactic as well as socio/political purpose. He used his notes to explain his ideas about the music and how they relate to the lives of working men and women. At first, due to his sparse knowledge of English and his strong Russian accent, these notes were read aloud to the audience by a member of the Labour Party.<sup>94</sup> This occurred at the Olympia Rink recital where Soermus's address was read by the Reverend Jones.

This particular address, which was also printed in the programme for the evening, bears scrutiny as typical of the addresses Soermus came to deliver. He refers to current social movements operating in Europe, Russia, and England which he sees as a creative process, but one which brings great suffering to those disempowered both politically and socially. He describes the existing governing classes of Europe as working towards their own destruction. The upshot of his argument is that the bourgeois is disappearing and the working-classes throughout Europe are about to seize political power (as in Russia) and will determine future progress – a victory over materialism. Art, and music in particular, is brought to the service of the people (proletariat) as a comforter in their difficult lives, as an educational force, as a means of changing the social order by appealing to the audience's nobler instincts and as a means of bringing people together.<sup>95</sup>

Soermus was convinced music was a force that could lead to social change, that it was not an art form exclusive to the educated and upper classes but that it spoke to all humanity, to the common man. In this belief Soermus attempted to educate the working classes (some of whom

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<sup>93</sup> Edward Roux, *S.P. Bunting (Sidney Percival Bunting): A political biography*, (Belville Johannesburg; Mayibuye Books, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>94</sup> Christina Bashford, 'Concert Listening the British Way? Program Notes and Victorian Culture' in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Listening in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, edited by Christian Thorau and Hansjakob Ziemer, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.187-206. Bashford discusses the writing of Programme Notes as a particularly English phenomenon, the writing of which was to educate the listener and provide contextual signposts to serious listening. Also see Christina Bashford, 'Writing (British) Concert History: The Blessing and Curse of Ephemeria,' *Notes*, 64/3 (2008): pp. 458-473.

<sup>95</sup> Programme note for the recital; Olympia Rink, Merthyr Tydfil, Violin Recital (Edvard Soermus), Tuesday, 23 April, 1918. Trevelyan (Charles Philips) Archive, Newcastle University, File CPT/1/6/1 - File of pamphlets.

may well have been still illiterate) and demonstrate how music could give meaning to their lives: 'That is why Bach's music appeals to the proletariat .... You will discern in it all the shades of human emotions; prayer, suffering, abnegation, protest, triumph. Bach's music is difficult to understand, but we proletarians are not seeking only delight and enjoyment, but depth and strength.' He considered Bach to be the greatest of all composers and he frequently played Bach's *Chaconne* to uplift his audience. He also appealed to the Christian sensibilities of the audience by describing Bach's music as a searching for God, as 'the revolting spirit of humanity' i.e. Reformation and Renaissance.<sup>96</sup>

Soermus refers to the ideas of the Prussian-German social reformer Ferdinand Lassalle.<sup>97</sup> Soermus, like Lassalle, was anxious to address the imbalances found in a class-structured society, something which was endemic in British society. A fundamental idea to Lassalle's philosophy was that the principles which guide the working classes are worthy and fit to live by and by overturning the present decadent society theirs would become the moral system by which a new society would be guided. It is this idea which became central to Soermus's Bolshevik vision. To this end Soermus believed the appreciation of music could contribute to 'help you with the great task - the emancipation of the working-class, the establishment of Socialism'<sup>98</sup> - a new social order.

The wider dissemination of music (lighter works from the classical canon) amongst working people was of primary concern for Soermus as a musician.<sup>99</sup> His repertoire reflected an accessible choice of pieces which could equally stand as examples to his talks. Hans Teubner<sup>100</sup> remembers a concert where Soermus, about to play Mozart, explained that Mozart was a working man, composing to earn a living and suffering periods of hardship and great poverty. He [Soermus] spoke of 'the miserable life that Mozart had to lead until his early end, but

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>97</sup> Lassalle's father was a Jewish silk merchant from Breslau in Silesia. Lassalle dissociated himself from Judaism.

<sup>98</sup> Programme note for the recital at the Olympia Rink in Merthyr on 23 April, 1918.

<sup>99</sup> *Edinburgh Evening News*, n.d. 'Edinburgh Charity Recital', 'The only artiste and celebrity who has dedicated his life's work to the common people. That was the distinction credited to Edvard Soermus, the Russian violinist... Soermus has applied his artistry to many charitable causes, both in this country and on the continent. He has the interests of the working people keenly at heart and, declining opportunities that would bring him personal advantage, he is content to bring his music to the service of the poor and distressed... he has expressed a desire to perform at institutions for the benefit of the poor.'

<sup>100</sup> Hans Teubner was a German politician and journalist (1902-1992) and heard Soermus play in Chemnitz. In 1956 Teubner was vice-dean of the Faculty of Journalism, Karl Marx University in Leipzig, thereafter professor at the Institute for Theory/Praxis. Between 1959-1963 he was editor-in-chief of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* and a member of the Socialist United Party (SED). Thereafter he worked at the Institute for Marxism-Leninism at the SED Central Committee.

that Mozart's spirit remained unbroken and brave, just as the proletariat must be.'<sup>101</sup> Beethoven and Bach were also both working men 'filled with courage and confidence.'<sup>102</sup> Soermus urged the proletariat to be filled with the same courage and self-confidence. Before he played Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*, Soermus explained it 'proclaimed triumph after victory, and that the working class of the whole world would once again rejoice.' Teubner remembers that these speeches aroused 'profound sentiments, strong affection, and confidence' in the audience.<sup>103</sup> Soermus believed the appreciation of and participation in music is not beyond the working man and woman – a principle which would have struck a recognisable chord with the Welsh, a nation that celebrates music and poetry in their annual eisteddfod, many of whom participated in the popular brass bands and choirs across Wales.

A programme for his appearance at the Jewish Trades' Hall in Leeds (27 April, 1918) is typical of these early appearances. He appeared with Mrs Briggs (soprano) and Madame Bouvier (speaker) who delivered introductory remarks and delivered a speech "Bolshevism" given in both halves of the programme. Soermus played Bach's *Chaconne*, Bach's *Aria*, *Prelude and Allegro* (Pugnani), *Chanson Louis XIII* and *Pavane* (Couperin-Kreisler). The second part of the programme included *Song of Despair* (Soermus), *Revolutionary March*, *Revolutionary Funeral March* concluding with the *Red Flag* and the *Internationale*.

Soermus's lengthy programme note typically links music to the aspirations of the proletariat, the inspiration and force behind the changing social and political order in Europe:

Humanity is passing through a great creative process, a process pregnant with sufferings of the greatest magnitude. The old social order is falling to pieces, the old conceptions are disappearing. We are witnessing a grandiose spectacle – the forces created by the old-world order are now destroying the very order which had brought them into being. We see how the existing governing classes of the whole of Europe are now working at their own mutual destruction. The bourgeois order is now disappearing, and with giant strides the moment is approaching when the working classes the world over having seized political

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<sup>101</sup> Neal Zaslaw, 'Mozart as a Working Stiff,' in James M. Morris, ed., *On Mozart*, (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 102-111. Zaslaw challenges the Romantic idea of Mozart composing for Eternity by divine inspiration by arguing that Mozart was a working man, earning a living by composing, plagued by financial insecurity. See also, Percy Collick Obituary "'Soermus" is Dead' for his recollection of Soermus's description of Mozart. Newspaper cutting, publisher unknown, in the private collection of Joel McKee. Collick was Scottish Secretary (and Assistant General Secretary) of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen between 1934 and 1957.

<sup>102</sup> Hans Teubner, 'Soermus – der Rote Geiger' in *Im Zeichen des Roten Sterns - Erinnerungen an die Traditionen der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft*, (Berlin: The Institute for Marxism-Leninism, Dietz Verlag, 1974), pp. 81-90.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*.

power (as in Russia) will lead humanity to further progress. Progress is victory over materialism, the enfranchisement of the spirit.<sup>104</sup>

Soermus viewed Art as the expression of the liberated soul and spirit of humanity, it is the source of strength 'for the further struggle of the common welfare' and Bach becomes the interpreter of the revolting spirit of humanity and of the revolution.

The appreciation by audience and critics in reports and reviews of his concerts is palpable. Reading such sentiments one hundred years later one may be inclined to judge the remarks as sentimental and naïve but in the context of the struggle of working men and women to better themselves socially, financially, educationally and culturally in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, they express a fundamental aspiration felt subconsciously in society. Choral music in Wales, with annual choral competitions, fiercely contested, had become popular from the mid 1800s.<sup>105</sup> Audiences were not entirely musically illiterate. Listening to a violin recital by Soermus may have been a new experience for some listeners but his playing was invariably enthusiastically received. Soermus's success, despite his strong accent, probably lay in his easy rapport with his listeners both as speaker and musician. His recital at Ammanford in 1918 was a new venture for the Trades and Labour Council 'desirous of giving an opportunity to the workers of the town and district of enjoying the best music.' The Chair for the evening was taken by James Griffiths. The Chair was in effect the compere who introduced the various programme items and artists but also delivered council messages, gave a reading from the Bible and imparted other community information. The concert was essentially a meeting of the people with musical content rather than a formal recital, or even a variety evening, as we conventionally know it. On this occasion the Palace Theatre was crowded to capacity. Soermus played Bach's *Chaconne* and encored with the Welsh melody, *Ar Hyd y Nos* 'which evoked thunderous applause.' Soermus also played *Song of Despair*, *Revolutionary March*, and *Revolutionary Funeral March* 'for the purpose of making the people familiar with the feelings and aspirations of the Russian people.' The Trades and Labour Council were congratulated on bringing such music within the reach of everyone. Such recitals were key to Labour's education of the working people. Soermus is described as 'a man of the people, (who) preferred to tour the country and give of his best service to the masses.'<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Jewish Trades' Hall, Cross Stamford Street, Leeds, *Violin Recital, Solos and Addresses*, Saturday 27 April, 1918.

<sup>105</sup> Gareth Williams, *Valleys of Song: Music and Society in Wales 1840-1914*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998).

<sup>106</sup> *The Amman Valley Chronicle and East Carmarthen News*, 22 August, 1918.

*The Glamorgan Gazette*, 18 October, 1918 reviews another such concert in which Soermus played Bach's *Chaconne*, Bruner's *Romance*, Chopin's *Nocturne*, Sarasate's *Gipsy* (sic) *Airs*, *Ar hyd y Noes*, *Annie Laurie*, *Song of Despair* and the *Revolutionary and Funeral Marches*. These



The lengthy programme note printed in the programme for his appearance at the Jewish Trades' Hall, Saturday 27 April, 1918, had also been used for his recital at the Olympia Rink, Merthyr Tydfil, on the 23 April, 1918, a few days before.<sup>107</sup> The critical response to this recital captures the effect the music had on the ordinary man and woman in the audience.<sup>108</sup> The descriptive naivete of the listeners is betrayed by the lofty, quasi-religious and educated style of the writer. However, the report demonstrates what Soermus aimed to achieve through his music making:

WONDERFUL MUSIC AT THE RINK. AUDIENCE OF OVER A THOUSAND.

... the Merthyr people demonstrated their delight... Yet what was it we applauded so loudly? Not the technique, for an appreciation of that would depend upon a training in instrumentation that not one percent of us has had... Did we appreciate the musical message then of Bach? I am inclined to answer that we did not, for the message was couched in language too fluent for our halting speech; too poetic for our prosaic souls.... And so one might try ... to explain the psychology of Tuesday night, when over a thousand of us sat in ecstatic rapture while Soermus' magic music bathed us in a holy atmosphere not of this earth. But try as one will the explanation eludes one. It is as though the greatness of the love and appreciation of Soermus for his splendid art had for a while opened to us doors in the soul, that closed, alas, too early and that left behind but a recollection of a land not as this land, of a life not of this life. A land of always sunshine, and sweetness, and broad vistas and blue skies and splashing waves on golden sands; a life from which the horrors of this materially enwrapped life had been remorselessly carved off, a life in which love and brotherhood and sisterhood was the sovereign rule. For brief spells it were as though the future was opened unto us, and we saw the world that we would hasten—a world that sounds impossibly Utopian to the squalidly environed soul of to-day.... Who shall explain art that does this; who will dare to criticise; ... I am unable to criticise, I can only remember, and be pleased that I was of such an audience; an audience that for the most part was of the people. For after all, the marvel is that such a message should not be far above the masses, who have not had the opportunity to develop their aesthetic nature; nay, whose very conditions of life are artificially so debased in the mad fight of Capital for Profit, that the very seeds of the soul that bring forth such wonderful flowers as this of music, and its appreciation, are poisoned ere they are quickened into life. But though the soil be soured and the air poisoned, the sun of such music as was given to us on Tuesday can penetrate the poison and neutralise the acidity, and stir up the finer life ... Soermus did that for us. The pity is that there are not a hundred Soermuses to do it on a bigger scale, and reaching a greater public.<sup>109</sup>

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works appeared alongside *Lorene*, *Mountain Lovers*, *Death of Nelson*, *I Hear You Calling Me*, *O na Byddai'n haf o Hyd*, and *Dat Little Fellow with his Mammy's Eyes*, *Gwlad y Delyn*, *An old-fashioned Cottage*, and *The Pipes of Pan*, *Watchman*, *What of the Night?* and *The Moon Hath Raised her Lamps Over*.

<sup>107</sup> Olympia Rink, Merthyr Tydfil, *Violin Recital* (Edvard Soermus), Tuesday, 23 April, 1918.

Trevelyan (Charles Philips) Archive, Newcastle University, File CPT/1/6/1 - File of pamphlets.

<sup>108</sup> Newspaper article n.d. 'With his splendid Maggini violin, made in 1600... he sought to evoke in the hearts of his hearers a passionate longing for a more beautiful world.' Newspaper cutting (publisher unidentified) in the private collection of Joel McKee.

<sup>109</sup> *The Pioneer*, 27 April, 1918.

Soermus frequently appealed to his Welsh audiences to remember the Russian proletariat, and indeed other martyrs such as ‘our Austrian comrades’,<sup>110</sup> fighting for emancipation. To this end he chose to play improvisations on Russian revolutionary songs, a revolutionary march and the revolutionary funeral march, the text of which Soermus freely translates as: ‘In the terrible strife you have fallen victims to your limitless love of the people; you have sacrificed for it everything - life, love, and freedom. But the time is coming, and the people will awaken, powerful, strong and free; farewell, brothers, you have honestly trodden your glorious and noble path.’<sup>111</sup> Soermus’s appeals to ‘Save the Revolution’ were reported in the press. There was widespread support in Wales for the working-class masses in Russia prior to the Revolution but fragmentary and often contradictory evidence regarding hard-line Bolshevik tactics, particularly after the 1917 October uprising, drew increasing criticism from the British public.<sup>112</sup> This unease is detected in the I.L.P.’s gradual distancing of itself from the hardening Communist line in Russia. The inevitability of a counter-revolution in Russia seemed certain and would draw support from international forces in the wider arena of post-World War I relations. Soermus was careful to appeal to the Welsh people for their support of the Russian *people*. He professed to being a representative of Bolshevik ideology but some doubted Soermus’s membership of the proletariat considering his refined tastes and musical ability. *The Pioneer*, a liberal newspaper established in 1911 by Keir Hardie and closely allied to the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.), became a conduit for Soermus’s ideas on social reform.<sup>113</sup> The newspaper attracted social commentary from reformers such as Sylvia Pankhurst who wrote a regular column and George Bernard Shaw who wrote an Obituary in the newspaper upon Hardie’s death. *The Pioneer* staunchly defended Soermus and noted he:

‘merely follows the line of most of our great artistes - what was Shelly but a Democrat of the Democrats; when has Whitman been eclipsed, do our friends forget that Oscar Wilde was the author of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"; that William Morris and Walter Crane were not too proud to "soap-box" for Socialism. And so one could go on spinning out the list that would include the very cream of the world's Art.’<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *Edinburgh Evening News*, n.d. ‘He played Mozart’s Concerto in M major (sic), Schubert’s beautiful “Serenade”, and one of Soermus’ own compositions, representing an impression of the period when he studied at Petersburg and witnessed the sufferings of the working people...’

<sup>111</sup> Programme note for the recital at the Olympia Rink in Merthyr on 23 April, 1918.

<sup>112</sup> Martin Ives, *Reform, Revolution and Direct Action Amongst British Miners: The Struggle for the Charter in 1919*, (London: Haymarket Books, 1918), Chapter 5, discusses the reception and effects of the Russian Revolution on the mining communities of South Wales.

<sup>113</sup> Keir Hardie was a founder of the Labour Party in 1900 and its first parliamentary leader (1906 to 1908).

<sup>114</sup> *The Pioneer*, 20 April, 1918.

Soermus professed he wanted to understand the British people who, he believed, were not understood in Russia. His concern was to demonstrate British solidarity with the Russian people despite the British presence fighting for the White armies in Russia.<sup>115</sup>

The Bolsheviks, in their struggle to retain power, were seen to go against the will of the people (majority) and their increasing use of suppression and armed force to cement their authority in Russia was condemned. The social democratic forces also did not materialize in representative bodies and councils in Russia. In some respects, one autocratic system had been replaced by another employing similar measures to retain power. *The Pioneer* newspaper expressed concerns that all was not well in Russia and that 'English Social Democracy has lost that splendid impulse that the dawn of the Revolution gave it.' There was support for the Bolsheviks but there was 'an uneasy feeling that all is not well, and that further convulsions are imminent in Russia ... and whilst we do not hesitate for one moment in rejoicing in the Revolution, we utterly fail to see how we can play a part in "Saving the Revolution."' Some scepticism is detected in the questioning of Soermus's appeals to 'Save the Revolution': 'Apart from pious resolutions of protest, which Soermus may have in abundance, and which are useless, we are afraid that the Bolsheviks have little to expect from English Socialists who lost faith when the Constituent Assemblies were not forthcoming.'<sup>116</sup>

Soermus's revolutionary recital talks resulted in frequent calls in the Welsh and national press to deport him as a troublemaker but these suggestions were strongly countered by liberal politicians in parliament<sup>117</sup> and in the Socialist press, particularly *The Pioneer*. Much was made of Soermus using his violin and music to achieve peaceful social change rather than an emphasis on his personal political beliefs. It was argued he never used violent speeches to put across his Bolshevik ideology, 'He has never written an article or made a speech on Socialism; his one and only form of propaganda is his violin.'<sup>118</sup> This was a half-truth.

Soermus's concern to better the condition of society through music and to help the needy and other worthy social causes was not merely rhetoric but matched by his actions. In 1918 he took

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<sup>115</sup> *The Pioneer*, 3 August, 1918: 'Save the Revolution.'

<sup>116</sup> *The Pioneer*, 3 August, 1918.

<sup>117</sup> William Anderson 1877-1919. Member of Parliament. He was elected Chair of the Independent Labour Party in 1910-1913. In 1911 he was appointed Chair of the Committee set up to launch a new Labour newspaper which became the *Daily Citizen*. See also the debate concerning Soermus's position as a refugee in the country, his right to live and work, and his personal life: *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 26 June 1924, Vol. 175 cc 565-7. Soermus was served a deportation order in 1918 but after strong objections in parliament (that his wife was ill and confined) the deportation order was never served at that time. *The Pioneer*, 8 June, 1918.

<sup>118</sup> *Daily Herald*, 1 June, 1918.

part in a concert at the Alhambra in London in aid of the Nation's Fund for Nurses under the auspices of the National Sunday League. He appeared alongside Lilian Braithwaite, Lady Forbes-Robertson (who sang), Eva Moore, and Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson who gave a recitation, amongst others.<sup>119</sup> As already mentioned Soermus played at the Wigmore Hall in aid of 'The Dependents of a Russian social worker and writer.' Throughout his professional life he raised funds and supported charities.

Inevitably Soermus's Bolshevik propaganda speeches at his concerts drew the attention of the government.<sup>120</sup> Soermus was acutely aware of the British Government's attitude to Bolshevism. He also, significantly, encountered resistance at grassroots level. He was frequently harassed and heckled at his concerts and one detects a note of resistance and frustration in his programme notes: 'You know how in this country the Bolsheviks are calumniated and besmirched, but the fearless Russian revolutionaries are boldly marching towards their gaol (sic!).'<sup>121</sup>

Merthyr, where Soermus had settled with his wife Virginia, was at the centre of the Labour Movement in Wales. *The Pioneer* newspaper was also based in the town. *The Pioneer* was outspoken against the British intervention in Russia on behalf of the White Armies and was outwardly a defender of the conscientious objector against the war. The issue of conscription within the Labour movement was complex. The War had broken out in 1914 and conscription was introduced in 1916. There were voluntary soldiers in favour of the war and conscription but others were against British intervention in Russia's affairs. Lloyd George advocated a path of reconciliation with the new Soviet regime but Winston Churchill favoured support for the White armies who were resisting the Bolsheviks. The Labour Movement was generally in favour of the Revolution in Russia and supported the efforts of the workers there for social change. The news of the February Revolution was received with elation by the Left which resulted in a rally at the Royal Albert Hall on 3 March 1917, attended by 10,000 people with another 5,000 gathered outside. A further rally was held on 24 March at the Great Assembly Hall on the Mile End road in the East End of London attended by 7000. Here they were addressed by Robert Williams of the Transport Workers' Union, Edwin C. Fairchild and Joseph Fineberg from the British Socialist

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<sup>119</sup> *The Era*, 13 March, 1918.

<sup>120</sup> The Labour press persistently but mendaciously denied that Soermus gave incendiary speeches at his recitals: 'He has never written an article or made a speech on Socialism: his one and only form of propaganda is his violin. He has no idea why he should be deported ...' *Daily Herald*, 1 June, 1918.

<sup>121</sup> Programme note for the recital at the Olympia Rink in Merthyr on 23 April, 1918. This programme Note was printed again in Soermus's recital in the Jewish Trades' Hall in Leeds on 27 April, 1918.

Party. In Leeds a Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates Council was established on 3 June 1917 inspired by the Revolution. District conferences of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council were called but many were cancelled or disrupted by hostile mobs. At the London conference 'Shortly before the meeting was due to begin, two or three hundred men, led by overseas soldiers, entered the church singing Rule Britannia.'<sup>122</sup> By the time of the October Revolution there was already growing wariness in Britain in response to the hardening of the political line pursued by the Bolsheviks in Russia and this was to lead to the early demise of the Council of Workers and Soldiers.

In Swansea the Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates conference (July 1917) was similarly disrupted by volunteer soldiers. This, despite a strong Labour movement in Wales, was indicative of a growing opposition to Bolshevism in Wales and in the country generally.<sup>123</sup> Despite this growing animosity Soermus continued to play at miner's meetings, Quaker Houses and in working-men's clubs sponsored by the Independent Labour Party. He appeared in concert at the Bargoed Working Men's Institute on Sunday, 26 January, 1919 which ended in a fracas. Morgan Jones, a local councillor and head of the I.L.P. in Merthyr, in his opening address to the news of the murder of Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht in Germany, stated they had died serving "the cause of Socialism and anti-Militarism." Soermus then chose to close the meeting with a speech criticising the British army presence in Russia:

Mr Lloyd George is safe while the soldiers are perishing...What are they doing in Russia? They are killing people who have not done anything wrong to England.

Then when Soermus was about to play The Red Flag<sup>124</sup> to conclude the event, a soldier stood up at the back of the hall.

Heckler A: Are we going let this man preach red revolution and cause our streets to flow with blood?

Heckler B: That is not what he is saying.

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<sup>122</sup> Stephen White, 'Soviets In Britain: The Leeds Convention of 1917,' *International Review of Social History*, 19/2 (1974): p. 49.

<sup>123</sup> David Egan, 'The Swansea Conference of the British Council of Soldiers' and Workers' Delegates, July 1917: Reactions to the Russian Revolution of February 1917, and the anti-war movement in South Wales,' *Llafur the Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History*, Vol. 1/4 (1975): pp. 12-37.

<sup>124</sup> The people's flag is deepest red  
It shrouded oft our martyred dead  
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold  
Their heart's blood dyed its every fold.  
Then raise the scarlet standard high  
Beneath its shade we'll live or die.  
Let cowards flinch and traitors sneer  
We'll keep the red flag flying here.

C.T. Morgan Jones offered to talk with the soldier outside the meeting. After some booing and what the reporter describes as a “considerable commotion”, Soermus said “Let us unite for the brotherhood of man and International Socialism.”<sup>125</sup>

Soermus drew public criticism in the press: ‘Can nothing be done to stop the baneful activities of that insolent Russian Bolshevik from Merthyr?’<sup>126</sup> Another reader complained that ‘the Soermus meeting was a trespass on the sanctity of the Lord’s Day, the distinctive spiritual purposes of which were subordinated to the Bolshevistic display.’<sup>127</sup>

Morgan Jones argued in a letter published in *The Pioneer* that Soermus had been wrongly accused of urging that the streets should run with blood and that Soermus had merely objected to the British campaign in Russia.<sup>128</sup> But the Bargoed concert had considerable repercussions. A meeting of ex-servicemen was called in Treherbert after the concert and a protest organised against the government’s toleration of Soermus and his revolutionary teachings in South Wales under cover of his violin recitals. They called for his arrest and deportation adding menacingly that ‘failing which ex-Servicemen will effect it.’<sup>129</sup>

Councillor Morgan Jones’s letter in *The Pioneer*, while supporting Soermus, made a distinction between I.L.P. policy and Bolshevik suppression in Russia. In August 1918 the Bolsheviks had moved against other Socialist Revolutionaries resulting in Lenin’s mass deportations of Mensheviks and other political objectors. Morgan Jones’s letter asserted ‘we cannot associate

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<sup>125</sup> Reported in the *Bargoed and Caerphilly Observer*, 31 January, 1919.

<sup>126</sup> L.J. Roberts from Swansea in the *Cambria Daily Leader*, 6 February, 1919. Roberts makes the further criticism that ‘there are hundreds of British violinists who are more skilful players than he... I write now to protest against his dismal, doleful accounts of the fate of our men in North Russia. I have just had a letter from my second son, an officer with the British troops now in Archangel. It brims over with cheerfulness. Has this blatant Bolshevik (or his split infinitive friends) any later news? Are the working men of Wales so mad as to listen to this alien?’

<sup>127</sup> *Monmouth Guardian and Bargoed and Caerphilly Observer*, 31 January, 1919.

<sup>128</sup> *Monmouth Guardian and Bargoed and Caerphilly Observer*, 7 February, 1919. The *Monmouth Guardian and Bargoed and Caerphilly Observer*, 14 February, 1919, also publishes a public response which illustrates the hardening of sympathies for the Bolshevik stance: ‘Admittedly Soermus’s speech suggested bodily harm on no one, but neither did Shinwell’s, Kirkwood’s and Gallagher’s in Glasgow, as far as can be seen; yet Glasgow’s streets ran with blood. A mere incident may excite brute force and ruffianism, when the atmosphere is made and this was what Soermus was doing warming the atmosphere. He called himself a Bolshevik. An article in a Cardiff daily paper on Monday last describes Bolsheviks thus “They make no secret of the fact that their aim is the complete subversion by revolution of the existing order of Society. They aim at destruction not reform, and, unfortunately, their methods are as hideous as those of Prussian Militarism. Their record of crime and violence is worse than that of any recent autocracy. Soermus, being in Britain, walked under cover of a violin. Now, birds of a feather flock together.” What else, therefore, could Soermus’s supporters be than Bolsheviks .... That Bolshevism and Pacifism should centralise in the same source suggests camouflage somewhere, and tends to confirm war time suspicion as to the conscientiousness of at least some who were then Pacifists.’

<sup>129</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 6 February, 1919.

ourselves with the policy of the Bolsheviks in any large measure. We sympathise, naturally, with their desire to establish a Socialist state but that is not to say that we by any means agree with the method of achieving that end.’<sup>130</sup>

Attitudes towards Soermus in Wales were ambivalent leading Soermus to protest against British scepticism about Bolshevism. Bolshevism as the ideology of the people was questioned: ‘...people claiming to voice the aspirations of Russia and enunciating their charges in the terms of Socialism and Democracy, bring charges of Bolshevik retention of power against the will of the majority, by the use of armed force, and by the refusal of representative assemblies. In fact, the abrogation of every collectivist principle, and the employment of every device of reactionary autocracy are levelled at the present regime... Apart from pious resolutions of protest, which Soermus may have in abundance, and which are useless, we are afraid that the Bolsheviks have little to expect from English Socialists who lost faith when the Constituent Assemblies were not forthcoming.’<sup>131</sup>

Further reporting maliciously took note of Soermus’s poor English – a familiar trope - thereby identifying him as ‘alien’ and not one of their own, despite his marriage to an Englishwoman. The fracas hindered further appearances by Soermus. The Neath Town Council cancelled Soermus’s concert at the Gwyn Hall. W. E. Rees, sitting on the council, decided ‘it was thought advisable to put a stop to the wild speeches which had been made by the Russian Bolshevik in other places.’<sup>132</sup> And at the Caerphilly Lower Division Licensing Session a concert by Soermus on a Sunday evening was given as an excuse to withdraw the entertainment licence: ‘Superintendent Williams objected to the renewal of the music and dancing licence for the Workmen's-hall, Bargoed, on the ground that they ... allow the Independent Labour Party to hold concerts.... They bring in all kinds of people to this hall, and all kinds of speeches are made there, and the police strongly object to this.’<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> *Monmouth Guardian and Bargoed and Caerphilly Observer*, 7 February, 1919.

<sup>131</sup> *The Pioneer*, 3 August, 1918.

<sup>132</sup> The support of the Bolsheviks within the Labour Movement was further questioned and condemned: ‘Following the discussion Ald. Morgan condemned in scathing terms the actions of the Bolsheviks, and quoted Mr Soermus, who was reported to have said —" I am a Bolshevik, and the English Government can do nothing against me. They don't touch me because English Labour is behind my back." Was it true? asked Ald. Morgan. Was it true that the trades unions of the country were behind this Bolshevik, whose fellows were drenching Russia in blood – tyrants! Responsible for the anarchy and bloodshed ruffians who were ruining that unhappy country? Were our respectable trade unions behind such men as these?’ *South Wales Weekly Post*, 8 February, 1919.

<sup>133</sup> *Monmouth Guardian and the Bargoed and Caerphilly Observer*, 14 February, 1919.

Soermus's activities in Wales were raised in parliament and discussed in the War Office Meeting of February 7, 1919 (War Cabinet 529 Minutes):<sup>134</sup>

The Home Secretary said ... There were Bolsheviks in the country with German money, and ... it would be wise to prosecute for seditious speeches.... The alien violinist, Soermus, who had been going about the country making violent speeches, had also been arrested.... He thought that if some persons of this description were arrested, and at the same time a few men of the type of David Ramsey... it would do a great deal to show the country the kind of men who were making mischief.... Sir Auckland Geddes suggested that power should be taken to prosecute aliens coming to this country and indulging in propaganda, and would even go the length of taking power to inflict the death sentence.

The government established a Special Branch at Scotland Yard to deal with social unrest with a corps of social spies in various cities across the country and began arresting and deporting 'undesirable' aliens, particularly those involved in propaganda.

Soermus, it seems, was unbowed and spoke out again at a concert held at the Olympia in February 1919. He first appealed to the Christian spirit amongst the English but said the real Christians (Bolsheviks?) were in prison. At first there was general assent expressed amongst members of the audience. He said he felt confident he could not be touched by the English Government because he had Labour support. But when Soermus turned to the allied intervention in Russia he was interrupted by a choir member who stood and said, "some of us desire to leave as we work nights." Later in the evening Soermus questioned why the English were attacking Russia when Russia had done no harm to England. To strike a chord closer to home he described how young Englishmen in Russia were perishing in the cold – and for what cause? "You are sending boys to kill Russians, whom you kill from behind. Your boys will come home demoralised.... Your boys are perishing there. It's cold here now, but in Russia it is twenty times colder." Referring to music he said "The Welsh are a musical nation but the people have no time to study music because their hours of work are too long. But there is no doubt everything will be altered."<sup>135</sup>

By February 1919 the country was in a serious state of social unrest with strikes up and down the country. Rail travel and the Tube were brought to a standstill. The coal miners were on strike. The army was mobilized to bring commuters into central London using army trucks. Many walked to work in bitter cold. The workmen of Glasgow, Govan and Clydebank (including carpenters, cotton spinners, builders, and bakers who objected to night baking) all demanded shorter working hours. They voted in favour of immediate payment of strike money. They wanted

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<sup>134</sup> 1919. War Cabinet 529. Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet, held at 10 Downing Street, S.W., Friday, 7 February, 1919 at 12 noon. Catalogue Reference: CAB/23/0.

<sup>135</sup> *The Rhondda Leader*, 8 February, 1919.



a forty-hour week and warned the Executive Councils of the Unions to cooperate with the strikers. Lloyd George tried to find a way through the impasse and proposed the formation of local industrial councils which would bring together representatives of employers and worker's organisations to try and resolve disputes. But social unrest and change was in the air:

... realization is growing that the present troubles are small compared with those likely to loom up soon ... the belief is gaining ground that England is already passing through a series of revolutions. This has been almost accepted in theory, but it has now to be put into practice. It means a tremendous clash of interest, and the change can be accomplished only with clear vision and calm thinking.<sup>136</sup>

A Liberal conference held at the Memorial Hall in February 1919 was attended by 500 delegates, among them Sylvia Pankhurst. An Indian delegate announced that unless the Allied forces were withdrawn from Russia immediately then the British Bolsheviks would 'bring the industries of this country to a standstill by a general strike.' At this meeting Soermus played the revolutionary funeral march in memory of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and then declared his familiar cry, "A hundred thousand Englishmen are dying amid the far and strange snowfields of Russia. They are killing people who have never done any wrong to England. I have come to England with my violin and you – you are sending men with guns to kill us." Sylvia Pankhurst advocated revolution in the country: "It is far better that we should lose our lives in a revolution than spend them waiting for a revolution that never comes."<sup>137</sup>

It was generally accepted that Britain had reached a danger point. The revolution in Russia encouraged revolutionaries at home. Many of the soldiers who had been in Russia were eager for demobilization and those who had come home were finding it difficult to secure housing accommodation and employment. In February 1919 an attempt had been made by revolutionaries to seize the Town Hall in Glasgow. Soermus was touring the country and drawing large audiences of working men and women, not so much to listen to his playing as to his revolutionary speeches. The working classes were urged to take up arms. There was alarm in parliament. A strike was called on the Clyde. A huge rally *Hands Off Russia* was organised for the Albert Hall on the 8 February 1919 at which Soermus was scheduled to play but he was arrested under the Aliens Restriction Act on the evening of the 6 February.<sup>138</sup> He was served a deportation order, and imprisoned in Brixton prison to await deportation.<sup>139</sup> The event was avidly

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<sup>136</sup> *The New York Times*, 8 February, 1919.

<sup>137</sup> *Nottingham Evening Post*, 20 January, 1919. *The Cambria Daily Leader*, 10 February, 1919, also describes a meeting in the Albert Hall in London where it was announced that Soermus was in Brixton Gaol: 'Miss Sylvia Pankhurst suggested raids on Brixton and Holloway gaols...'

<sup>138</sup> *The Times*, 10 February, 1919.

<sup>139</sup> Such treatment was subjected upon other Russian socialists working for the British Socialist Party at the time: John Maclean writes in *Forward*, 6 October, 1917 of Georgi Chicherin's arrest (ostensibly for his association with Germans and pro-Germans at the London Communist Club

reported in the press across the country.<sup>140</sup> Prison was not unfamiliar to Soermus who had been incarcerated in Russia, Austria, Hungary, Prussia, Germany and Finland. While in Brixton prison his violin was confiscated. This too was not a new occurrence. It had happened before in Hungary and in Russia where he had started a hunger strike in protest. Again, in protest, Soermus started a three-day hunger strike until his violin was returned to him.<sup>141</sup> Soermus's arrest drew vigorous protest from the miners in Wales, from labour organizations across the country, and in the Liberal press. Representations were made to the Home Office to protest against his arrest.<sup>142</sup> On 22 February the *South Wales Weekly Post* reported Soermus had been 'packed off to Russia.'<sup>143</sup> Much was made in the press that Mrs Soermus (Hewitt) was to remain in the UK (she was pregnant at the time) without financial support. She was refused government permission to accompany Soermus. Mrs Soermus appealed to George Bernard Shaw to intercede with the government on her behalf.<sup>144</sup> Permission was granted for her to travel and she made the hazardous journey to Moscow in mid-winter in search of Soermus.<sup>145</sup>

Mrs Soermus later returned to England with her children.<sup>146</sup> Soermus was permitted thereafter to visit his family in England on a number of occasions with the proviso that he make no speeches or appear at any concerts. On his visit in 1924 he failed to leave the country by the due date. He applied for two extensions (both granted) but was still in the country at the end of July 1924. He was served a further deportation notice as was his accompanist Bohumir Ulmann.<sup>147</sup> This again drew protests from Labour organisations across the country, protest letters in the press and discussion within parliament. His date of departure was postponed to the 31

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and for his anti-Ally and pro-German sentiments), and in *The Call*, 29 November, 1919 p. 4 concerning the unjust arrest and internment of Chicherin and Peter and Irma Petroff (for their "hostile associations").

<sup>140</sup> *The Nottingham Evening Post*, 10 February, 1919, gives details of the arrest.

<sup>141</sup> The situation is colourfully reported: *Herald of Wales and Monmouthshire Recorder*, 15 February, 1919.

<sup>56</sup> *The Sheffield Daily Independent*, 11 February, 1919.

<sup>142</sup> House of Commons Debate, 26 June, 1924, Vol. 175, cc565.

<sup>143</sup> *South Wales Weekly Post*, 22 February, 1919: 'Three more notorious Bolsheviks were deported from this country on Thursday, and left for Russia. They are Ed. Soermus, the violinist who has been making violent speeches at Merthyr; Max Sagal, a resident of London, who has been very active in Bolshevik circles; and Myer Hyam, a leader of Bolsheviks (sic) in Manchester, where he has caused much trouble. All three are Russian Jews (sic).'

<sup>144</sup> Waring, *Bernard Shaw and Nancy Astor*, p. 87.

<sup>145</sup> *The Pioneer*, 22 February, 1919. 'Mr. Noah Abett (Miners' agent) described the action of the Government in separating by deportation the wage-earner in the Soermus family from his wife and child and leaving them to starve as a scandalous and barbarous procedure, and stated that the only way in which the two were able to get to London to see Soermus was by accepting the charity of Merthyr people. Mrs. Soermus is stated to have been granted permission by the authorities to leave England.'

<sup>146</sup> Her second child, Pauline, was born in Leningrad.

<sup>147</sup> Other than Ulmann's association with Soermus further information is elusive.

December 1924. One of the persistent arguments raised against the presence of Soermus and Ulmann in the country was that they were taking away work from other British musicians.<sup>148</sup> The question was raised as to what criteria permitted a musician or artist to remain in the country, whether this depended upon their success or failure as musicians.<sup>149</sup> This was to become a frequent argument used by the Musicians' Union against the presence of Russian musicians in the labour market.

Towards the end of December 1924 just prior to his departure, in the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, a recital was given by Soermus accompanied by Ulmann. The recital, organised by the Edinburgh Trades and Labour Council and the Workers' International Relief Committee, took the form of a protest demonstration. A resolution was passed at the recital protesting against the artists' coming deportations and called upon the Government to immediately withdraw the deportation orders.<sup>150</sup>

Questions were again raised in the House of Commons as to their deportation. The Home Secretary (Joynson-Hicks) denied they were being deported but merely required to leave by the agreed date which had expired and that they were being treated in the same way as any other alien who has been allowed to land in the United Kingdom. The complaint was that Soermus and Ulmann had been playing in concerts in spite of the undertaking not to do so and that the

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<sup>148</sup> *Popular Wireless*, 17 October, 1931: 'I understand that the Russian violinist, Edward Soermus, is not allowed to broadcast in England because of the political opinions which he harbours. Let us be clear about this. If E. Soermus would be permitted by the Government to land here I do not see why he should not fiddle for the BBC – if he is good enough and there are no British violinists out of a job. But if Mr Soermus is considered by the Government likely to use some of his time here in pro-Bolshevik (or anti-British) work, then the question of his broadcasting is a secondary matter and the exclusion of an undesirable alien is a primary one.' There is no evidence that Soermus ever broadcast for the BBC. Virginia Soermus, however, mentions that Soermus was more than usually nervous before a concert if it was to be broadcast (probably for German radio). Virginia Soermus, *'I Married a Russian.'*

<sup>149</sup> House of Commons Debate 26 June, 1924, Vol. 175, cc565. Also see *Western Daily Press, Bristol*, 1 January, 1925, for a report of Soermus leaving the country on the 31 December, 1924.

<sup>150</sup> 'Mr Westwood said he understood one of the reasons why the deportation order was issued, and could not be withdrawn, was that the Government were desperately anxious to save the British Empire. (Laughter.) He would suggest that if the deportation of a Russian musician was the only way to save the British Empire, then there was not much left to save. Another argument used was that the two musicians they had been hearing that evening were taking the place of British musicians. He did not believe that was a sound argument, but if it were a sound argument, then there were going to be a mighty lot of deportations from our shores.... (Applause) ... If they had more music, nationally and internationally, they would have greater harmony between nations of the earth than they had at present. (Applause).' *The Scotsman*, Saturday, 27 December, 1924.

legislation was to protect work for British people.<sup>151</sup> Soermus left Britain for Germany on 31 December 1924 at the termination of his leave to remain in the UK.

Soermus visited again in 1926 but was forbidden to play<sup>152</sup> and he was to spend the next ten years in Europe. Virginia Soermus joined him as his accompanist, as did her brother, William Holland, who acted as concert/tour manager. Finally in 1929 the Home Secretary (J.R. Clynes) announced in parliament that restrictions imposed upon Soermus had been removed and that he was free to remain and give performances in the country.<sup>153</sup> The circumstances of Soermus's residence and employment, however, continued to raise questions in Parliament until well into the 1930s. The revolutionary threat had dissipated with the withdrawal of the allied forces from Russia, the acceptance of the installed Soviet Government and the resumption of diplomatic ties and trade links with Russia had resumed.

Soermus, upon his return to Britain found it increasingly difficult to secure engagements and when he did, attendance tended to be poor.<sup>154</sup> The Labour Party focus had shifted, society had changed and Soermus's speeches no longer carried the same urgency despite the looming threat of a new war and growing social unrest within the country. At a recital in aid of the Orphan Fund under the auspices of the local branch of the Associated Society of Locomotive Enginemen and Firemen the attendance was so poor that Soermus requested the charge for admittance be reduced to one sixpence. He still played from his regular repertoire (Beethoven's *Concerto First Movement*, *Stenka Razin*, the *Cuckoo Song* and *From Darkness towards Light*, *Robin Adair* and *Drink to me only with thine eyes*) but his interaction with the audience had become more reflective and reminiscent: 'Soermus and his wife described their journeys through Russia, Austria and Germany. The message they hoped was that "the day was not far distant when international differences would be sunk and the reign of international brotherhood follow."' <sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *The Times*, 12 December, 1924.

<sup>152</sup> *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 27 December, 1926.

<sup>153</sup> *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 9 August, 1929.

<sup>154</sup> *The Northampton Mercury*, 14 November, 1935: Soermus is quoted as remarking 'I don't know why it is. When I play in other halls people are turned away from the door, but when I play in Kettering I have to play to so many empty chairs.' *The Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 22 October, 1935, reports that 'the attendance at Soermus's recital in the Miner's Hall, Monkwearmouth, was poor... A few minutes before the recital was due to begin last night the hall was barely half-full, and it was decided to make each seat the one price, 6d.'

<sup>155</sup> *The Fife Free Press*, October, 1934.

*Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 4 March, 1943. It is clear that Soermus and his wife Virginia still held on to the Bolshevik revolutionary spirit even during the Soviet era leading up to the war, which seems at odds with the situation in Russia during 'The Terror' which seems to indicate that the Soermus's had lost touch with developments in Russia. Virginia Soermus continued to give talks about her husband after his death. In Aberdeen on 2 March, 1943 Virginia addressed the

Soermus's financial situation became desperate as concert opportunities dwindled. Soermus, then living in Cardiff, wrote to the local education authority offering to give free concerts in schools in exchange for his daughter's school fees. Soermus said he had had no engagements and could not afford the fee, but he did not want his daughter's education to suffer.<sup>156</sup> The case was left in the hands of the Director of Education.<sup>157</sup> Soermus even sought to raise money by appearing in *Variety* at the Playhouse in Cardiff as one of the 'turns' of the evening.<sup>158</sup>

Towards the end of Soermus's residence in the country he was able to pay final tribute to a great Labour leader. This occasion sums up Soermus's style, purpose and dedication to *solidaritat* - all that he stood for. He attended a demonstration organised by the Scottish Socialist Party at Legbrannoch near Holytown to honour the 78<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Keir Hardie, the founder of the Scottish Labour Party, the Ayrshire Miners' Union and was a pioneer of the I.L.P. and the Parliamentary Labour Party. He died on September 26, 1915. Soermus gave a brief address and afterwards played a revolutionary air on his violin in honour of Keir Hardie.<sup>159</sup>

Recitals in the UK became sporadic, he made trips to Russia and Germany (where he was confronted by the Nazi Party), and he finally returned to Russia in 1936 at the time of Stalin's purges. Once back in Russia he must have found it difficult to gain permission to leave the country again. He never did. He died of leukaemia in a nursing home in Moscow in 1940 while his wife Virginia was visiting her relatives in Britain.

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Aberdeen Rotarians and again the students of St Andrews University in March, 1942: She recounted that 'a Russian poet (Samuil Marshak) wanted to translate the whole of Robert Burns' poetry into Russian. He had recited *A Man's a Man for a' That* in Russian'. This, she declared, was 'an indication of the great admiration the Russians had for the British people and in particular for Scotland. .... she told the audience of the characteristics, hopes and aspirations of the Russian people. She ended by conveying to the audience, in Russian, greetings from the men and women of the Red Army - "The burning wish of the Red Army, Navy and Air Force, is that we shall be not only comrades in arms during the war, but also comrades in peace. That is really the wish of the Russian people" she declared. She was thanked for her address.' *The Scotsman*, 9 March. Her addresses were described as 'racy' and a more bizarre account was that of Stalin, 'Speaking of Stalin, she said that his outstanding feature was his great patience; he was the world's best listener. He is so calm and imperturbable, she remarked, but when he makes whoopee then he is a Georgian!' *The Mid-Sussex Times*, 20 June, 1945.

<sup>156</sup> Edna went into service at the age of 13 as a nanny, while also caring for her younger sister Pauline. Joel McKee e-mail to the author, 28 January, 2021.

<sup>157</sup> *Northern Daily Mail*, 2 October, 1933.

<sup>158</sup> *The Stage*, 12 October, 1933.

<sup>159</sup> *The Motherwell Times*, 17 August, 1934.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Edward Soermus, as a voluntary exile in the UK, challenges the general perception that a refugee is submissive, disadvantaged, displaced and at the mercy of circumstances. His status as a refugee was ambiguous. Initially forced to flee Imperialist Russia at the time of the 1905 uprising and seek refuge in Finland, once the social order in Russia had changed and the Bolsheviks were in power one would expect he would return to a country more congenial to his political and social outlook. However, he chose to remain in Europe and fight a socialist battle on behalf of the Workers' Movements – particularly in Germany. His wandering and displacement became, in some respects, his strength. He did not seek to integrate into the Russia Abroad communities in Berlin, Paris, Prague or in England. These communities, comprised to a large extent of individuals who were once part of Imperialist Russia and were generally dismissive of the Bolshevik/Soviet regime, were intent on preserving the cultural forms of Old Russia, educating their children for the day they would return to the Motherland, a restored Imperialist Russia, once the civil war was over. Soermus's displacement, while seemingly inconsistent, appears to have increased his charisma, mystery and charm, a persona he actively encouraged. His biographical accounts, promotional reports in newspapers and magazines, programmes, pamphlets and advertisements, reports of his private life, his involvement in the revolution and his imprisonments were colourfully described to create a mystical aura – the creative genius. He was regularly referred to as the Great Russian Violinist, *Der Rote Geiger*, a Bolshevik Violinist, a socialist, the genuine article. His connection with the Welsh liberal movement was strong and it was here that he made his mark socially and politically in the UK. Soermus was in the country when there was general social unrest and discontent amongst the unions, a rise in worker's movements and the growth of a Socialist sensibility leading almost to revolution; something he was able to exploit for his Bolshevik political ends. His violin playing was a means to this end. As a musician he seemed not to seek to expand a narrow repertoire, nor try and conquer the grander concert halls of Europe, nor did he record his playing to any extent but rather used his music as a platform to disseminate his socialist ideals. He struggled financially and was supported to a large extent by the Labour Organisations within the countries he visited.<sup>160</sup> Émigrés of the Russian diaspora (Russia Abroad) sought to preserve the cultural forms, language and customs from Imperialist Russia before the Revolution, to recreate a sense of Home abroad. But it was a nostalgia for a way of life that had already been destroyed and would never be again. Similarly, Soermus's

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<sup>160</sup> Holland, 'Incidents in my life...', p. 3, notes that Soermus was most appreciative of the help given to him by the *Rote Hilfe* (Red Aid) in Germany. The *Rote Hilfe* assisted political prisoners and members of the Communist Party in Germany.

commitment to Bolshevism became displaced as the political landscape in the Soviet Union developed away from Bolshevism. Soermus's nostalgia for the zeal, community spirit and sense of purpose at the time of the uprisings was also for a time that had passed. Soermus, on his return to Russia, to his Homeland, visited and reminisced with many of his old comrades and continued to play to the Red Army at the Front but he was at first roughly treated by the new regime.<sup>161</sup> Holland recalls his visit to Soermus in Moscow in 1938, 'he [Soermus] said to me, proudly, "Look at what my country has given me", referring to his beautiful flat on the Leningrad Chassu (sic) and the lovely grand piano. But this after a really grim time when he was without.'<sup>162</sup> Percy Collick, Member of Parliament for Gateshead,<sup>163</sup> wrote in his obituary to Soermus 'Your fingers may be still "Soermus", your voice silent, your noble features we shall see no more, but your work, your music, your inspiring words will live on forever in our hearts.'

Estonia commemorated Soermus with a memorial stone in July 1968, his work is recognised in a display in the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, there are various monuments to Soermus in Germany, but today Soermus's work is almost forgotten in the musical and social history of the United Kingdom.

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<sup>161</sup> His reputed friendship with Zhdanov notwithstanding, Soermus seems not to have found a place within the musical fraternity in Russia either before his departure as a young man or on his return in later life. On one occasion he was thrown out of the Metropol Hotel onto the street (reason unknown).

<sup>162</sup> Holland, 'Incidents in my life...'

## Chapter 3 Balalaika Ensembles and Russian Immigrant Musicians

The arrival in Britain of Russian émigrés, exiles and refugees in the first half of the twentieth century included amongst them Russian musicians who brought their balalaikas and domras with them as well as their love of Russian folk music and dance. The balalaika and domra, and other Russian folk instruments, were new to English ears and were a revelation when first heard in 1909 in a season of balalaika concerts given at the Coliseum in London.<sup>1</sup> Instruments such as the lute, mandolin and guitar were already popular in Britain at the turn of the century and could already be found in ensembles. The history of the lute and the lute consort in Britain stretches back to 1285<sup>2</sup> while the mandolino (mandolin) first appeared in Britain in the first half of the eighteenth-century.<sup>3</sup> In 1843 The Virginia Minstrels from New York appeared in Britain and toured the country with their banjo ensemble. This troupe was the first to bring blackface minstrelsy to Britain and it soon became a popular entertainment. The ukulele, of Portuguese origin and popularized in Hawaii, appeared in Britain in the 1920s becoming part of English blackface troupes in variety entertainment, the instrument famously played by George Formby (1904-1961).<sup>4</sup>



Figure 4 The Polytechnic Mandolin and Guitar Band, Crystal Palace, 1899

<sup>1</sup> These instruments will be more fully described.

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew Spring, *The lute in Britain: a history of the instrument and its music*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Sparks, 'The Mandolin in Britain, 1750–1800', *Early Music*, Vol. 46/1, 2018, pp. 55-66. Also, Paul Sparks, *The Classical Mandolin*, Early Music Series, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Also, James Tyler and Paul Sparks, *The Early Mandolin: The Mandolino and the Neapolitan Mandoline*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (The Clarendon Press), 1992.

<sup>4</sup> The JUBA Project traces early blackface minstrelsy in Britain between 1842-1852. <https://library2.utm.utoronto.ca/otra/minstrels/> See also, Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008.



The excitement elicited by the introduction of the balalaika and domra at the Coliseum concerts encouraged English players to take up the instrument and led to the formation of balalaika and domra ensembles amongst in the country. Queen Alexandra requested His Serene Highness Prince Alexander Sergius Tchagadaeff-Saksansky, leader of the balalaika section of The Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra playing at the Coliseum, to form a balalaika orchestra in London. This balalaika ensemble which Tchagadaeff formed is mentioned in several concert reviews but the orchestra is nowhere specifically named. Bibs Ekkel, a London based balalaika player and scholar, is of the opinion that the orchestra was likely that formed at the studio of Clifford Essex based in Grafton Street, London. This ensemble was named The Clifford Essex Russian Balalaika Orchestra. Tchagadaeff worked very closely with Essex at the Grafton Street Studio, publishing, teaching, performing as soloist, arranging music for balalaika ensemble, importing instruments and conducting.<sup>5</sup> The London Balalaika Orchestra (at Blackheath) founded by Eric Pendrell-Smith and the London Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra were two further noteworthy pioneering ensembles formed in 1909. Further afield Richard Tarrant Bailey and his son Tarrant Bailey (jnr.) set up balalaika ensembles in Bath and Birmingham respectively (they ordered balalaikas through Clifford Essex and Co. in December, 1910)<sup>6</sup> and Alice Gardiner formed her own balalaika ensemble alongside her already popular Mandolin, Banjo and Guitar orchestra in Cheltenham, also in 1909. The Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar Society magazine (*B.M.G.*), first published in 1903 by Clifford Essex, began to promote the balalaika by including articles, news and information relating to the instrument.<sup>7</sup> A Balalaika Society was also convened in Cambridgeshire to promote the instrument and provide opportunities for concerts and discussions. The height of balalaika popularity lasted from 1909 until the First World War, was still enjoyed in broadcasting and Variety Theatre through to the 1930s, and lingered on in English Light Music until the early 1960s. The increasing popularity of the banjolin, banjo, guitar and the coming of Ragtime and Dixieland Jazz during and after the First World War, together with the demise of Variety Theatre, regular summer seasons at the end of the pier in English seaside towns in the 1950s, and the appearance of Rock and Roll from the United States, all contributed to a decline in popularity of the balalaika and domra ensemble. Russian folk music was not accommodated by the English and American folk music tradition nor the emerging Western pop/rock music scene and by the 1980s Russian folk music became relegated to and subsumed into World Music, a catch-all category within the growing music recording industry which,

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<sup>5</sup> Bibs Ekkel e-mail to the author, 15 February, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Contributor, *Banjo, Mandolin, Guitar* magazine (*B.M.G.*), No. 12, 1910, p. 34. Tarrant Bailey (snr.) was a banjo and mandolin enthusiast. He is noted in *B.M.G.* as the first Englishman to play a balalaika solo in public.

<sup>7</sup> In 1909 the editor of the *B.M.G.* magazine was Sir Home Gordon, better known for his journalism on cricket.

included music from cultures beyond the western music mainstream - African, Asian, Latin American, East European, for example. Simon Frith traces the emergence of the term World Music within the recording industry in the 1980s and reminds us that the category World Music is used in the British context whereas in the United States the equivalent retail category is World Beat. Frith points to the difficulty of reaching any definition of the term amongst ethnomusicologists and commercial recording companies. By effectively separating World Music from Art Music and/or Popular Music, which such a categorization entails, Frith raises questions surrounding authenticity in music, identity, nationalism and the confusion of authenticity with mere interest in the exotic.<sup>8</sup> The fascination with the exotic in music forms part of my discussion of Nikolai Medvedeff and his involvement with balalaika ensembles in Chapter 4 and 5.

In a trajectory from late nineteenth century Imperial Russia through the Soviet era to the present Russian Federation the balalaika has been considered the quintessential folk instrument of Russia. The origins of the instrument, whether Turkic, Persian or Russian are contested in Russian musicology. The instrument is, nevertheless, inextricably associated with Greater Russia.<sup>9</sup> It is remarkable then that in the first decades of the twentieth century the balalaika should make a spectacular appearance on London stages and concert halls fuelling an already avid interest in Russian arts. Reception in press reporting, reviews and popular music magazines associated the balalaika with the Russian people in the broadest sense, its music expressive of Russian Soul.<sup>10</sup> The notion of Russian Soul expressed in Russian music was common in English newspaper reviews and reporting in the early twentieth century. The narrative of the balalaika's early development, its use by Russian peasantry in song and dance, the association with *skomorokhs* (strolling players), its emergence as a concert instrument in elegant presentations designed to please a developing middle-class in Russia and its climb up the social musical ladder into the apartments of the Tsar and his family became a romantic exotic tale which fascinated the British public. Russian musicians who arrived in Britain

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Frith, 'The Discourse of World Music' in Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh eds., *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, University of California Press, 2000: pp. 305-322.

<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Morgenstern, 'Debating "national ownership" of musical instruments,' pp. 77-195. See also, Martin Edmund Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' pp. 1-39.

<sup>10</sup> Valentina Apresjan, 'The Myth of the "Russian Soul" through the Mirror of Language,' *Folklorica*, 14 (2009): pp. 91-121. Also, Robert C. Williams, 'The Russian Soul: A Study in European Thought and Non-European Nationalism,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31/4 (1970): pp. 573-588. Also, Michael Hughes and Valeria Powell, 'Decoding the Mysterious Russian Soul,' 2014. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170704105801/http://thekompas.co.uk/article/203> Consulted 23 September, 2020.

escaping the Revolution found a musical and social environment already receptive to their skills, an interest they were able to exploit in their pursuit of 'getting on' in Russia Abroad.

The balalaika and domra, however, did not find a place in Art Music orchestral works, certainly not in English orchestral music, and remained a component of Russian folk ensembles. Russian orchestral composers found the balalaika unsatisfactory, with its delicate timbre set against the instrumental forces of the modern symphonic orchestra. Rimsky-Korsakov, for one, had attempted to incorporate the balalaika into the second act of his opera *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (1907) but abandoned the idea after the first rehearsal. Vasily Andreeff, in a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov dated 16 January 1907, expressed his disappointment that the use of balalaikas had been abandoned. Rimsky-Korsakov replied that the folk band section could not compete with the full orchestra and that the timbre did not suit the orchestration.<sup>11</sup>

Shostakovich was more successful in his use of domras and balalaikas in his opera *The Nose* (Act 2, Scene 6) though they appear as a small ensemble (small domras and two balalaikas together with flexatone) within the orchestral framework.<sup>12</sup> Imitations of balalaikas occur, for example, in Glinka's *Kamarinskaya*, and other Russian composers similarly ransacked themes and rhythms from Russian folk music for their compositions. These concert works caused excitement and interest amongst Western audiences.<sup>13</sup> Sonatas and concertos for balalaika, and orchestral works incorporating the balalaika were written in Russia<sup>14</sup> but the balalaika did not feature in orchestral scholarship in the West, other than as a Russian curiosity, and its contribution to English Art Music was negligible.

The balalaika made its presence felt in English Light Music as an instrument in easy listening arrangements of Russian folk music, arrangements of 'favourites' from the classical repertoire,

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<sup>11</sup> Discussed in Brian Reeve, 'Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's use of the *byliny* (Russian oral epic narratives) in his opera *Sadko*' (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2005), pp. 57-58. Also mentioned in *Grove History of Music Online*, Spenser, rev. Frolova, 'Andreyev, Vasily Vasil'yevich.' Andreeff's correspondence with Rimsky-Korsakov is contained in Bernard Granovsky, *V. V. Andreeff - Material & Documents (B.B. Андреев – материалы и документы)*, Moscow: Muzyka, 1986, p. 175. First printed in *Musical Life*, 23 (1960) and 1 (1961) and in *Soviet Music (Sovetskaya Muzyka)*, 1961.

<sup>12</sup> It is amusing when the balalaikas are 'shut up' by the entry of symphonic percussion and brass thereby reflecting the plot-line.

<sup>13</sup> Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939*, p. 99. Raeff is of the opinion that music as a form of expression has no national barriers, that it is a non-verbal art form and as such is more easily absorbed in cross-national influence. Russian music played by Russian musicians in Russia Abroad, he finds, was more easily absorbed by Western host nations.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Alexander Gretchaninov, *Sonata for Balalaika and Piano*, Opus 188, No. 1 (1932) and Opus 199 (1948): Sergei Vasilenko (Wassilenko), *Concerto for Balalaika and Orchestra* Opus 63, (1929): Nikolai Budashkin, *Variations on a Russian Folk Theme for Balalaika and Orchestra* and a *Concerto for Domra and Orchestra*.

and occasionally featured in dance-band sets having an East European character. The balalaika and domra never featured in orchestrations by popular Light Music composers such as Albert W. Ketèlbey (1875-1959), Percy Fletcher (1879-1932), Eric Coates (1886-1957), Sydney Baynes (1879-1938), Ronald Binge (1910-1979), Trevor Duncan (né Leonard Charles Trebilcock) (1924-2005).<sup>15</sup> Balalaika and domra arrangements, as light casual listening, were enjoyed as colourful ‘character’ or national music usually melancholic, sentimental or wildly exuberant gypsy music. Such common expectations of Russian music were reinforced in the popular operetta (musical) *Balalaika* which opened on 22 December 1936 at the Adelphi Theatre in London and played for a successful run of 569 performances. The plot, set in the First World War and Russian Revolution, follows the fate of ballerina, Lydia, of the Mariinsky Theatre and her aristocratic lover Peter.<sup>16</sup> The score was composed by George Posford (1906-1976) and Bernard Grun<sup>17</sup> (1901-1972) and the balalaika features only as an ‘atmospheric’ instrument evoking melancholy, nostalgia and Russianness, and conjures up the world of Imperialist Russia, Revolution, and Cossacks. The score includes choruses for men and women (operetta ensembles) in arrangements of Russian traditional folk tunes such as *In the moonlight on an island*, *Vodka Vodka (Stenka Razin)*, *Red shirt gypsies wandering the plain*, *This night of feasting*, and *Moonshine*. But orchestration, taking the song *Balalaika* as an example, is more in keeping with light European operetta. The film *Balalaika*, starring Nelson Eddy and Ilona Massey, features only one song from the original score, *At The Balalaika*, which became a hit song.<sup>18</sup>

The main thrust of musical historiography, the grand narrative, has tended to side-line Popular and Light Music. Simon Frith brought Popular Music scholarship to the fore in Britain in the 1980s and the journal *Popular Music* (First published in 1981) provided a much-needed forum for scholarship.<sup>19</sup> Recent musicological enquiry, particularly in Popular Music and World Music,

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<sup>15</sup> A useful recording of British Light Music: *British Light Music Classics*, New London Orchestra, Conductor: Ronald Corp, Hyperion Records, CDS44261/4.

<sup>16</sup> The book by Eric Maschwitz is a loose adaptation of an earlier musical play *The Great Hussar* written by Maschwitz and Grun and mounted in 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Grun (Bernhard Grün), (1901-1972), was a German composer and conductor. He studied Music Theory under Alban Berg, Hans Gal and Egon Wellesz. He fled Vienna in 1935, where he was working, ahead of Hitler’s unification with Austria. He settled in the UK. He is also known for his musical *Magyar Melody* which was broadcast by the BBC in 1939.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Tauber, Nelson Eddy, and Harry Secombe have made notable recordings of the song *Balalaika* and there are numerous instrumental arrangement recordings. Russian contributions to the film score amounted to a Russian Male Choir singing choruses, Theodor Chaliapin’s arrangement of *Ei Ukhnem (Song of the Volga Boatmen)*, and whistling by Sergei Protzenko. The film score became a gallimaufry of Russian and French folk, classical and conventional operetta songs with scoring in typical Metro-Goldwyn Meyer style.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Frith, ‘Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,’ in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, edited by Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 133-149. See also, Simon Frith, *Music and*

has led to the reclamation of marginalized narratives within their sociological contexts but balalaika and domra performance practices in the UK in the early part of the twentieth-century is still undocumented.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.1 The Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra

Arguably the single reason for the enthusiastic interest in the balalaika was the appearance of Vasily Vasil'yevich Andreeff (1861-1918)<sup>21</sup> and his Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra at the London Coliseum in 1909, 1910 and 1912. This was a venture which almost single-handedly popularised the balalaika in the UK.<sup>22</sup> The musical journey culminating in the formation of this orchestra and its appearance in Europe and the United States, which I will outline,<sup>23</sup> is a remarkable one. It demonstrates an acceptance amongst the Russian middle-classes and aristocracy of Imperialist Russia of the balalaika and peasant folk music as expressive of Russianness. Balalaika and folk music were brought into the formal concert space as legitimate music for performance. Andreeff was largely responsible for encouraging this development in Russia as well as popularising the balalaika ensemble and its folk repertoire abroad.<sup>24</sup> Russian folk musicians coming to the West in his wake were clearly influenced by his ensemble formation, style of performance and repertoire.

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*Identity: Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996). Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2007). Simon Frith, 'The Discourse of World Music,' in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, edited by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 305-322.

<sup>20</sup> Vasilii Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots* provides one of the few English commentaries on the activities of Russian balalaika and domra musicians in the country in the 1920s and 1930s. Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' does not examine balalaika players and their activities in the UK to any extent.

<sup>21</sup> As noted in Chapter 1 note 11, I use Vasily Andreeff.

<sup>22</sup> The association of folk music with Imperialism and the Tsar may appear an anomaly here but is discussed elsewhere.

<sup>23</sup> A full discussion would be complex. I outline the salient aspects which give some orientation to my discussion of the balalaika and its repertoire as played by the Russian musicians who came to the UK. See Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' for an extensive discussion of the balalaika, its development and repertoire in Russia. The entry 'Balalaika' in *Grove Music Online*, also by Kiszko, is cursory by comparison as is the entry for 'Andreyev, Vasily Vasil'yevich' by Jennifer Spencer and revised by Marina Frolova-Walker.

<sup>24</sup> See Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia*, particularly Chapter 1: 'The Invention and Re-invention of Folk Music in Pre-Revolutionary Russia,' pp. 16-34; Chapter 3: 'The Origins of the Russian Folk Revival Movement,' pp. 68-105; and Chapter 8: 'Making Memory: How Urban Intellectuals Reinvent Russian Village Traditions,' pp. 204-220.



Figure 5 Vasily Andreeff and The Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra

The balalaika had fallen into obscurity in the Russian Empire by the nineteenth century. One cause of this demise is attributed to its suppression by the Church in public and artistic life. Despite wholesale confiscation of musical instruments and harsh punishments of fines, prison and exile for possession of the balalaika, many musicians and performers continued to play the instrument in the more remote communities of the Russian Empire. It was not until the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century that we see the development of the instrument from a simple, predominantly homemade, folk instrument into a concert instrument with improved construction and tone; and the popularising of balalaika ensembles and rediscovery of folk repertoire which found its way into the concert halls. What had been perceived as a peasant instrument crossed social class structures to become representative of national identity.<sup>25</sup>

Andreeff, having heard the balalaika played by a farm worker (Antip) on his family estate, learned to play the instrument. He believed in its musical possibilities and developed the design and construction of the balalaika (and domra) into an instrument suitable for concert performance. His intention was not to preserve or replicate the instrument in its rustic construction but to improve the instrument's capabilities. He sought the assistance of Fyodor S.

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<sup>25</sup> Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika,' pp. 34-39. Also, Morgenstern, 'Debating "national ownership" of musical instruments,' pp. 77-195.

Pasyerbsky (1830-1904),<sup>26</sup> Semyon Ivanovich Nalimov (the ‘Russian Stradivarius’) (1857-1916)<sup>27</sup> and other luthiers, and over time created a family of balalaikas: (prima, secunda, alto, bass and contra-bass) emulating the string family of the conventional orchestra.<sup>28</sup> He formed an ensemble in 1886, *Bal Circle*, and later again the *Society of Lovers of Balalaika Playing* (nine players, first performance 1888).<sup>29</sup> These early balalaika ensembles were met with some initial derision from the Russian musical establishment. The balalaika was regarded as rudimentary, belonging to peasant culture, not particularly ancient but emerging at the end of the seventeenth or early eighteenth century and, furthermore, it was questioned whether the balalaika was of Russian origin. Its repertoire was considered monotonous; simple arrangements of folk tunes, waltzes and salon compositions of a lighter nature.<sup>30</sup> But Andreeff’s early concerts proved popular and ensured that by 1888 there was widespread interest in the instrument. Andreeff, with the Tsar’s sanction, established balalaika ensembles within army garrisons as well as government schools.<sup>31</sup> He expressed the desire to popularise (universalise) the balalaika to the extent Esperantists were succeeding at the time in popularising the new

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<sup>26</sup> Franz Stanislavovich Pasyerbsky (1830-1904) was a master luthier appointed to the Tsar. He had a workshop in St. Petersburg where he built balalaikas, domras, harps, guitars, mandolins, zithers and violins. In 1886, he made a 12-fret chromatic balalaika for Andreev followed by a chromatic family of balalaikas (descant, piccolo, prima, alto, tenor, bass, double bass) which formed the basis of Andreeff’s orchestra. Pasyerbsky’s instruments were known for their rich sound and the care and elegance of their finish. His balalaikas and guitars are highly valued today.

<sup>27</sup> See Micha Tcherkassky, ‘Vasily Andreev (1861-1918): The father of the modern balalaika,’ (2007).

[http://balalaikafr.free.fr/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=61](http://balalaikafr.free.fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=61)

Accessed 15 November, 2023. Andreeff was to meet S. Nalimov on 19 September, 1890. Nalimov built approximately 170 balalaikas and 150 other instruments for Andreeff.

<sup>28</sup> *The Wigan Observer and District Advertiser*, 24 September, 1910, explains that Andreeff had organised the balalaika family in a similar way to the string family of the modern symphony orchestra. Piccolo and descant sizes were developed but later discarded.

<sup>29</sup> Andreeff’s *Bal Circle* toured Russia in 1888. Feodor Chaliapin sang accompanied by the *Bal Circle* in Nizhni-Novgorod. See, Micha Tcherkassky, ‘Vasily Andreev,’ Accessed 26 January, 2024.

[http://balalaikafr.free.fr/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=61](http://balalaikafr.free.fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=61)

<sup>30</sup> Grenady Ivanov, n.d., ‘Famous and well-known residents of Bezhechan,’ (translated extracts), The City of Brezhetsk Information website. Ivanov discusses the reception of Andreeff’s innovations. Accessed 12 January, 2022.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090504221827/http://bezh.asobezh.ru/bezechane/andreev.htm>

<sup>31</sup> 1891 saw the beginning of free balalaika lessons given to soldiers in Russian garrisons. By 1897 the Organization of Army Musical Instructors provided lessons to soldiers paid for by the government. Free classes were offered at the People’s House in St. Petersburg for the study of traditional Russian instruments. See, Tcherkassky, ‘Life and work of V. V. Andreev, 1861-1918: The Father of Modern Balalaika’ 15 November, 2007. Accessed 26 January, 2024.

[http://balalaikafr.free.fr/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=61&lang=us](http://balalaikafr.free.fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=61&lang=us)

form of universal communication.<sup>32</sup> He believed in the egalitarian nature of the instrument (easy to build, to play, inexpensive, with a repertoire of widely enjoyed folk music) making the instrument accessible to most people. This also subsequently suited post-revolution Soviet State agendas when the balalaika became accepted and promoted as the national instrument of Russia.<sup>33</sup>

Andreeff's balalaika ensemble, under the Tsar's patronage, appeared in the West in the Russian Pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1889 with a second tour of France in 1892. Their appearance at the Trocadero aroused an enthusiastic response from French composers present and their appearance was also reported in the British press.<sup>34</sup> Further visits to Paris followed in 1900<sup>35</sup> at the Paris World Fair, and 1903 also saw concerts in Cherbourg, Le Havre, Rouen, and Trouville. Andreeff received the *Ordre des Palmes Académiques*, (for the introduction of a new element in music) and the *Légion d'Honneur*. On his return to Russia Andreeff expanded the orchestra in numbers and instruments with the encouragement and patronage of the Tsar. The enlarged orchestra became known as the Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra and with this orchestra Andreeff visited Germany in 1907/8. The success of this tour, with two scheduled concerts extended to twelve due to public demand, led to a world tour in 1909/1910 travelling to Berlin, Paris, London, New York, Chicago, St Louis, Philadelphia and Baltimore with return extended visits to London in 1910 and 1912 which also included tours to several provincial theatres (Aberdeen, Southend, Manchester, and Portsmouth for example).<sup>36</sup>

Knowledge of Andreeff and his balalaika orchestra had thus already reached England before the orchestra's arrival. The press reported that Oswald Stoll, the Australian theatre impresario who financed the building of the Coliseum in London<sup>37</sup> and controlled many other theatres, had

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<sup>32</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 October, 1909.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander S. Chagadayev: *V.V. Andreev*, (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1948; reprinted, 1961).

<sup>34</sup> The shape and sound of the balalaika aroused curiosity. The reviewer describes the balalaika as 'a kind of triangular mandoline (sic) with three strings' and notes that the balalaika is mentioned in Dostoevsky's *Recollections of the House of Death*. *Evening Citizen*, 28 September, 1889. Also, *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 13 May, 1892, and *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April, 1892: '...the balalaika, the most primitive of stringed instruments, to the uncanny sound of which the moujick of half a century ago, before the concertina had made its appearance, loved to dance the khorovod.'

<sup>35</sup> Andreeff was awarded the gold medal and Nalimov the silver medal. Andreeff travelled to Paris with 55 musicians.

<sup>36</sup> *The Stage*, 29 September, 1910.

<sup>37</sup> *The Graphic*, 11 December, 1909. Stoll was knighted in 1919. At one time he controlled over 50 Variety Theatres across the country. He employed architect Frank Matchum (1854- 1920) who revolutionized theatre architecture in Britain. See Brian Walker, ed. *Frank Matchum*:



heard the orchestra on a visit to St. Petersburg and invited the orchestra to appear at the Coliseum.<sup>38</sup> Press reported that Andreeff's balalaika orchestra had also welcomed the Tsar and his party to the British Embassy in St. Petersburg in 1898,<sup>39</sup> that the Tsar and Tsarina had taken up balalaika lessons,<sup>40</sup> and that the instrument was taught in Russian schools and military regimental bands.

Andreeff (as conductor) and his musicians were not considered refugees or exiles but supported financially on their tours by the Tsar.<sup>41</sup> The Coliseum programme makes much of this royal sanction which endorsed the whole enterprise. Andreeff and his players were to spend extended periods in the UK and the United States between 1909 and 1913.<sup>42</sup> Thereafter Andreeff returned to Russia but several players in his orchestra chose to remain in the West. Balalaikists Boris Troyanovsky and Prince Tchagadaeff<sup>43</sup> remained in London to promote the balalaika, establish orchestras, and assist as arrangers, conductors, teachers and performers.

Tchagadaeff was fêted in the English press as His Serene Highness Prince Alexander Sergius Tchagadaeff-Saksansky, Prince of Tartar. He was 21 when he arrived in London as leader of Andreeff's balalaika section. He was a pupil of the balalaika virtuoso Boris Troyanovsky who appeared as soloist with Andreeff's orchestra and also took charge of teaching balalaika to the soldiers of the Coldstream Guards. They both did much to encourage English musicians to take up the balalaika and include it in their ensembles. But they too eventually returned to Russia.

The Imperial Russian Court Balalaika Orchestra promised a musical experience that was unusual and exotic but of high quality. The orchestra was unlike the standard western symphony orchestra and comprised unfamiliar and unusual folk instruments – balalaikas, domras, guslies (plucked zither), the zhaleika (Vladimir shepherd's horn), svirel (end-blown flute), the nakry

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*Theatre Architect* (London: Blackstaff Press, 1980). Also, Jack Read and Roy Hudd, *Empires, Hippodromes and Palaces* (London: Alderman Press, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> *The Graphic*, 11 December, 1909.

<sup>39</sup> *St James Gazette*, 14 February, 1898.

<sup>40</sup> *The Shields Daily News*, 6 January, 1904.

<sup>41</sup> In 1907 the Duma awarded Andreeff 10,000 roubles to finance tours and pay his musicians. In 1909 the orchestra received a state grant of 35,000 roubles. 1914 the Duma granted the orchestra a subsidy of 25,000 roubles per year. Andreeff was made Advisor to the Court in 1913 with a life pension of 6000 roubles a year. See Tcherkassky, 'V.V. Andreev.'

<sup>42</sup> **Britain** 1909 (27 September to end of November)

1910 (1 August and 30 September), (1 November – 7 November)

1911 (1 March – 15 March)

1912 (1 January – 15 January)

**USA and Canada** 1910 (28 November – 16 February 1911)

1911 (9 October – 15 December) 100 concerts

<sup>43</sup> Two spellings occur; Tschagadaeff (used in the English press) and Tchagadaeff which he used for his signature (and to which I adhere). Chagadaeff is also found.

(timpani, velum stretched over large clay pots,), spoons and tambourine, all novel instruments which aroused interest. Button accordions, bayans and garmoshkas did not feature in Andreeff's balalaika ensemble formation. These instruments were gradually incorporated by others to become associated with Russian folk ensembles. Andreeff's programme for the Coliseum concerts mentions the patronage of the Tsar (an appeal to British snobbery?), provides a short description and history of the instruments, describes Andreeff's development of the balalaika and domra into concert instruments, and mentions his mission to introduce the instrument to the world. This information coalesced, after frequent repetition in the press, into a grand narrative used for publicity purposes.

Their first season in London opened on the 27 September 1909 and played to consistently full houses. Due to public demand the initial three-week contract was extended to three months running to 192 performances. The Coliseum holds in excess of 2,300 seats so the great numbers that attended such an unusual concert was extraordinary.<sup>44</sup> They played at two Royal Command Performances – one at Windsor for King Edward VII on the 20 November, 1909 and the other for Queen Alexandra's birthday at Sandringham on the 2 December, 1909. The honour was sealed with the presentation to Andreeff by the King of a conductor's baton with a jewelled crown and royal monogram.

Press reporting steered the public's perception of the balalaika. The triangular shape of the instrument was often commented upon as was the fact there are only three strings (two tuned to E and the other to A). It was described as a primitive Muscovite instrument of the guitar family, '... a rough, uncouth instrument sold for a shilling or two and played only by the peasant classes', an instrument of a lower order than the violin family 'formed of common deal'<sup>45</sup> and considered in need of further development to extend its playing capabilities (i.e., to allow for chromatic scales and non-diatonic chords as well as the improvement of its timbre). The domras too, being similar to the mandolin with which the English were more familiar, also attracted interest and illustrations of these novel instruments appeared in the popular press.

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<sup>44</sup> Julius (Iurii) Augustovich Mansfeld, 'Russians in England - A Journey's Tale,' ('Russkie v Anglii - Istoria odnoi poyezdki'), Supplement to *Moskovskii listok*, 1914.

<https://balalaika-master.ru/festival/VI/mansfeld/> Accessed 1 September, 2021.

Mansfeld, in his reminiscences of Andreeff's concerts at the Coliseum, mentions an audience of 5000. A possible exaggeration though two shows a day would have approached this number.

<sup>45</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 17 December, 1909.

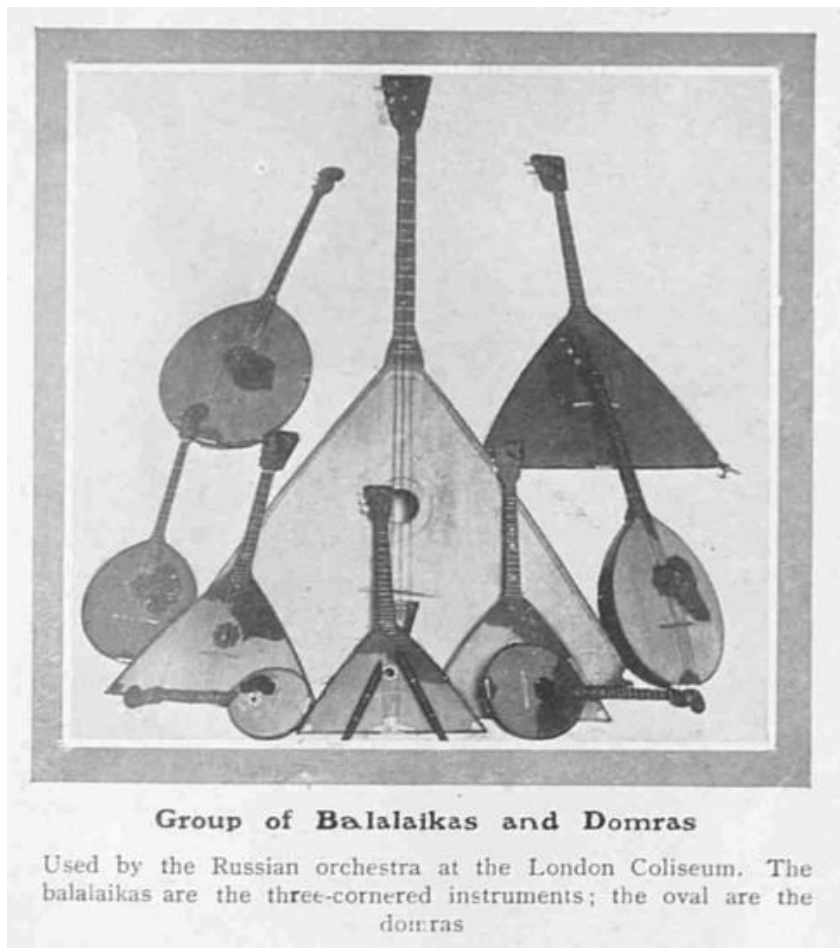


Figure 6 Balalaikas and Domras

The grouping of these instruments in the ensemble is analogous to the string sections of the symphony orchestra and described as such in the interest of European understanding.

Andreeff's orchestra included his full range of balalaikas (Prima, Secunda, Alto, Bass and Contra-Bass) and domras (Piccolo, Prima, Tenor, and Bass). All except the Prima balalaika are plucked; the Prima balalaika is strummed with the fingers. Boiko,<sup>46</sup> noted in Olson,<sup>47</sup> controversially argues that Andreeff borrowed the distinctive technique of playing a melody using a rapid tremolo on one string from Italian mandolin playing rather than it being a Russian style of playing.<sup>48</sup> The technique is, nevertheless, distinctive of modern balalaika playing technique. Laymen's explanations of the instrument's construction were also frequently described: '... the balalaika is made of finer material, has regular shape and dimensions of parts, and a neck or finger-board (previously absent) with permanent metal accords in

<sup>46</sup> Iurii Boiko, 'Russkie narodnye instrumenty i orkestry russkikh narodnykh instrumentov,' in *Traditsionnyi fol'klor v sovremennoi khudozhestvennoi zhizni: Fol'klor i fol'klorizm*, ed. I. Zemtsovskii, V. Lapin, and I. Matsievskii, (Leningrad, 1984), p. 88.

<sup>47</sup> Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia*, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> Andreeff visited Italy in 1882 where he heard mandolin and guitar orchestras.

chromatic order.’<sup>49</sup> There was curiosity in the musical effects and dynamic range achieved by the instrument as was the technical proficiency of the players and the dynamic effects they achieved: ‘But if their aspect is bizarre [the balalaikas], the tone they produce in the pizzicato effects for which, of course, they are largely used, is wholly delightful, and particularly sweet and silvery in the upper register.’<sup>50</sup> ‘Mr Andreeff’s orchestra produces, without doubt, delightful effects of tone-colour. There is not the least suggestion of “twanginess” ... and in pianissimo passages, notably, the delicacy and finish of their playing could not be surpassed, while in dance music the rhythmic swing and crispness achieved is beyond praise.’<sup>51</sup> The dynamic capability of the orchestra was surprising and enchanting, as were the technical abilities of the players.<sup>52</sup>

Andreeff’s development of the balalaika was clearly not a delicate exercise in authentic reconstruction and his intervention in the reconstruction and general improvement of the instrument may be considered today as insensitive, but his achievements have been lauded and considered positively. Furthermore, Olson<sup>53</sup> asserts that audiences readily accepted Russian folk music and dance as manifestations of Russian rural traditions but performances in theatres and concert halls, both instrumental and dance, emerged from nineteenth century productions designed to appeal to the taste of elite society and the appetite for Light Music amongst the growing middle-class audiences in Russia. The phenomenon of Andreeff’s folk orchestra concerts was not to be found in Russian village music-making practices. His concerts were artificial constructs: folk melodies transplanted out of context, purpose and execution, into the artificial context of the formal concert hall stage and presentation spaces - a promotion (exploitation?) of Russian folk culture. Similarly, Nikolai Medvedeff’s later broadcasts on BBC radio in the 1930s featured unaccompanied workers’ and peasant songs (i.e. implying untouched) in pseudo-ethnomusicological performances sung by Russian basses Youra and Nadejine but which were clearly imagined reconstructions.<sup>54</sup> By the time the balalaika appeared in London in 1909 it was firmly associated in the minds of the British as an instrument of the Russian folk tradition which had made the leap to the concert hall:

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<sup>49</sup> *The Graphic*, 30 October, 1909.

<sup>50</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 October, 1909.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> *The Times*, 28 September, 1909. This description from the Times critic is reprinted in the Coliseum Programme. A formal appraisal of the balalaika is provided by Algernon Rose, ‘The Balalaika,’ *Proceedings of the Musical Association*, pp. 73-84.

<sup>53</sup> Olson, *Performing Russia*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> I return to this theme in Chapter 4. The Russian basses were credited using these names only. Biographical information about these basses is elusive.

‘...from time immemorial the Balalaika has been the channel of the musical thought of the Russian people.... There is a throbbing pulsating tremor in its notes that cannot fail to touch even the most callous onlooker. Its message is direct and irresistible; it speaks as plainly as if a human voice were singing a plaintive melody, descriptive of the sorrow of life, of the infinity of love, of dreams, and blind fate. Yet it will equally well interpret the most complicated classical music with such effect that the hearer will be convinced that in the composition of the orchestra there must be brass or wind instruments.’<sup>55</sup>

Andreeff’s concerts were used to encourage Slavophile agendas in Europe and America, a warm *entente* between nations through music. Patriotic songs and national anthems were played as well as folk songs from the UK and America. Andreeff, unlike many balalaika ensembles to follow who dressed in Russian folk attire, insisted his players appear in immaculate evening dress, a mark of the civilised gentleman, the entry of Russian balalaika folk music into the civilised music halls of Western Europe and America.

### 3.2 The Folk Movement and Russian Soul

The study of folklore and the formation of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain which emerged in the mid 1800s was still energetic well into the 1920s. Zon provides an insightful assessment of the emergence of folk-lore and folk music in the English context – emerging from the work of anthropologist E. B. Tylor, George Laurence Gomme and Cecil Sharp, and the establishment of the Folk-Lore Society in 1878.<sup>56</sup> English music saw the reclamation of folk tunes, songs and dances, amongst composers Peter Warlock (1894-1930), George Butterworth (1885-1916), Edward Elgar (1857-1934) and Ralph Vaughan-Williams (1872-1958), to name the most prominent, in the fostering of a national music. Cecil J. Sharp (1859-1924),<sup>57</sup> an influential figure in the Edwardian folk-revival movement, was a prodigious collector of English folk songs and dances while Arnold Dolmetsch (1858-1940) was to encourage instrument making (and playing) of old instruments, restorations and faithful reproductions, which were to find a central position in the Early Music Revival.<sup>58</sup> The interest in Russian folk music and folk art in the UK was indicative of this wider interest and involvement with folk idioms.

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<sup>55</sup> *The Southend Standard and Essex Weekly Advertiser*, 29 September, 1910.

<sup>56</sup> Bennett Zon, ‘Folk Musicology’ in, *Evolution and Victorian Musical Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2017, pp. 199-225.

<sup>57</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions* (London; Taunton: Simpkin and Co; Novello and Co; Barnicott and Pearce; Athenæum Press, 1907). An influential but controversial work.

<sup>58</sup> See Harry Haskell, *The Early Music Revival: A History*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), Chapter 2 ‘The Apostle of Retrogression’: pp. 26-43. Haskell discusses Arnold Dolmetsch and the early music revival in England as part of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Rosa Newmarch wrote prolifically on Russian Art Music until the 1930s, particularly on Tchaikovsky, and sought to bring Russian Art Music before the British public<sup>59</sup> but she was sceptical regarding the forging of a national music based on folk melodies both within Russia and Britain:

In Russia, for example, the importation of quantities of cheap concertinas ... has sufficed to make a considerable change in the folk-singing in some districts. When this process of deterioration has been going on, as it has been with us, for centuries, enthusiasts may save a few of these already decayed folk-songs from complete extinction, but they will no more be able to build up a school of national music on these relics than they would reclothe rural England out of the scraps of smock-frocks and kirtles which may linger in farmhouse cupboards and ragbags in the more out-of-the-way corners of the kingdom.<sup>60</sup>

Philip Ross Bullock situates Rosa Newmarch within the debate for a National Music at the turn of the twentieth-century<sup>61</sup> while William Scott Ball provides an extensive examination on Nationalism in English music in 'Reclaiming a Music for England: Nationalist concept and controversy in English musical thought and criticism, 1880-1920'.<sup>62</sup> The question whether folk music could contribute to the search for a national musical style in Britain was questioned by Cecil Sharp. The committal of folk melodies to paper in musical arrangements in Art Music would appear to betray an essential characteristic of Folk Music. In this regard Sharp compares Art Music and Folk Music noting that compositions (Art Music) are the work of an individual, composed and committed to paper in a relatively short time, and expressing personal ideals and aspirations. It is music fixed in unalterable form whereas Folk Music is a product of race and expresses communal. Folk music is fluid and never completed in its form but mutates and changes with time.<sup>63</sup> Ross Cole in *The Folk: Music, Modernity and the Political Imagination* suggests that for Sharp the problem for English national music lay in the lack of patriotism generally in society and that '... folk songs seemed to provide a deeper, more mystical and organic, and hence more authentic patriotism based on language, kinship, and the soil.'<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> See Philip Ross Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Music*, 'Appendix: Chronological list of published works by Rosa Harriet Newmarch' pp. 147-164

<sup>60</sup> Rosa Newmarch, 'Chauvinism in Music, *Edinburgh Review*, 216, Issue 441, July 1912: pp. 95-116.

<sup>61</sup> For a contextualisation of Rosa Newmarch in the national music movement see Philip Ross Bullock, *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Music*, Chapter 3, 'Nationalism and Music', pp. 38-70.

<sup>62</sup> William Scott Ball, 'Reclaiming a Music for England: Nationalist concept and controversy in English musical thought and criticism, 1880-1920 (Volumes I and II)', (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions*, (London; Taunton: Simpkin and Co., Novello and Co., Barnicott and Pearce, Athenæum Press, 1907), p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> Ross Cole, *The Folk: Music, Modernity and the Political Imagination*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), p. 136.

introduction of folk music into school education, in Sharp's opinion, would improve the musical taste of the people, strengthen the national character and encourage a feeling of patriotism.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, there are the folk-songs, those simple ditties which have sprung like wild flowers from the very hearts of our countrymen, and which are as redolent of the English race as its language. If every English child be placed in possession of all these race-products, he will know and understand his country and his countrymen far better than he does at present; and knowing and understanding them he will love them the more, realize that he is united to them by the subtle bond of blood and of kinship, and become, in the highest sense of the word, a better citizen, and a truer patriot.<sup>66</sup>

The idea that music could express national identity is frequently found in reporting in the English press where Russian folk tunes played on balalaikas and domras is frequently described as expressive of Russian Soul; that it is quintessentially Russian. The idea of a Russian Soul became a cliché (sometimes still attached to Rachmaninoff's works, for example) but was symptomatic of the search for the 'essence' of English, and Russian, music, an expression of nationhood in music. Algernon S. Rose in his paper to the Royal Musical Association in 1900 draws attention to the characteristics of the balalaika and links the instrument to national identity, its sound. Music and manner of playing as expressive of various tribes and people of Greater Russia.<sup>67</sup>

The capture of identity and nationhood is witnessed more recently in Pierre Nora's project *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,<sup>68</sup> an exercise in essentialising the identity of a nation (France) through memorial sites – *sites de mémoire*. In English reception of the balalaika and Russian folk music in the early twentieth century the persistent reference to *Russian Soul* was similarly used to 'capture' the defining quality which inhabits Russian art/music/dance/literature.<sup>69</sup> Whether such a quality exists in Russian music is debateable and the idea expressed in press reporting is best approached as a sentimental exercise in myth making for public consumption, the popular construction of a national identity which is contrasted to that of Western nations. Alfonso, Kokot and Tölölyan take cognisance that 'identity' '... is at least as problematic and contested a term as 'diaspora' and can no longer be referred to without challenge.... The 'essences' of identity are seen by many anthropologists merely as the content of an ongoing process of boundary

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<sup>65</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions*, (London; Taunton: Simpkin and Co., Novello and Co., Barnicott and Pearce, Athenæum Press, 1907), p. 135.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p 136.

<sup>67</sup> See Algernon S. Rose, 'The Balalaika,' pp. 73-84. Rosa Newmarch in comments from the floor, alludes to the instrument's Tartar and Slavonic origins. Her mention of other Russian folk instruments also indicates an awareness of these instruments in musical scholarship in Britain in the early twentieth century.

<sup>68</sup> See Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*. Also, Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,' pp. 7-24.

<sup>69</sup> I address this aspect more fully in Chapter Four.

construction, being constantly re-invented and shifted according to the requirements of the situation. Nonetheless, these ‘essences’ ... may be put to use to stabilize existing conditions, as well as for subversive and critical purposes.’<sup>70</sup> Williams also argues that ‘...the language of the ‘Russian soul’ is ... to ‘freeze’ the perception and self-perception of Russian identity, either in a bid to claim unique, sacral privilege for Russianness or to establish Russian identity as unmanageably ‘other’, irrational and alien.’<sup>71</sup> British popular reporting presents *Russian Soul* as exotic, a quality of a mysterious ‘other’, made tangible and accessible through the balalaika and its music. The participation, even vicariously by watching and listening to Russian dance and music, becomes an antidote to mundane daily life.

The search for a Russian national identity may be traced back to the reign of Peter the Great - an endeavour to create an identity that was not Western.<sup>72</sup> The English perception of Russia was as a backward, uncultured nation of serfs, ‘souls’, owned and ruled over by a wealthy aristocracy. By the 1870s Russia came to be seen as a modernising state and willing to engage with the West. After the 1905 upheavals and the formation of a provisional government, the Duma, Russia was increasingly perceived as a progressive nation, embracing social reform which found fruition in the 1917 Revolution. *Russian Soul* thus became an expression of ‘Russian folk’ as opposed to the aristocracy, a folk tradition that stretched back centuries. The literary works of Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) popularised the idea of a *Russian Soul* as a marker of national identity – something rich and strange, barbaric and sensual, pervaded with melancholy and having associations with the East.<sup>73</sup> Russians themselves were fascinated by Eastern cultures as their own colonial ambitions expanded. Russian Ballets such as *The Firebird*, *Scheherazade*, and operas such as *Prince Igor* and *Boris Godunov* became artistic expressions of ‘the other’. *The Firebird* becomes a melting pot of fairy-tale themes and characters, a constructed orientalism, taken in various forms from eastern cultures. British press descriptions of Russian music and dance reveal a dichotomy between

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<sup>70</sup> Carolin Alfonso, Waltraud Kokot and Khachig Tölölyan, *Diaspora, Identity and Religion: New Directions in Theory and Research*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘The Russian Soul,’ in *Stravinsky in Context*, Online Publication, ed. Graham Griffiths (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 50–57.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Hughes, University of Lancaster, interviewed by Valeria Powell, *Decoding the Mysterious Russian Soul*.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170704105801/http://thekompass.co.uk/article/203>. Consulted 23 September, 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Svetlana Boym provides a discussion of *Russian Soul* as a nineteenth-century ‘creative misreading’ on Russian soil of German Romantics, particularly of Johann Herder (1744-1803) and Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854). *Russian Soul* was a Russian response to German *Volk* and *Geist* and found its psychologism in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky in particular. Svetlana Boym, ‘From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia,’ *Representations*, 49 (1995): pp. 133-166.



the idea of barbaric orientalism and a surprising refinement of taste: 'All of a sudden the land which has been pictured for us for years as the home of barbarism is showing us the daintiest dancing in the shape of the Imperial Opera Ballet, which has been one of the sensations of the season at the Coliseum, and is still represented at the Hippodrome...'<sup>74</sup>:

'The haunting, sad, sweet note of the Russian folk-songs, to which the quaint instrument gives characteristic expression, holds the audience breathless. There are songs of the Volga and the wide plains, whose melodies seem to convey a knowledge of the atmosphere of Russian life that writer's description can never equal... you seem to hear the Volga boatmen singing at their labours, to see the haymakers returning from the fields, and villages with the peasants dancing in the twilight.'<sup>75</sup>

The explosion on London stages of Russian folk art (set designs) in the ballets of the *Ballet Russe*, the balalaika orchestra and its folk song repertoire, costume (couture), culinary experiences, and icon painting were indicative of what Williams sees as '...central to Russian cultural activity for at least a century and a half [which] has been the retrieval of indigenous art forms and religiosity, seeking to go behind the imposed cultural schism of early modernity – so much more acute in Russia than in most Western countries. Twentieth-century Russian art, literature and music all inherit in one way or another this concern for *ressourcement*.'<sup>76</sup> Even in post-Soviet Russia there has been a move to retrieve cultural forms of artistic expression (particularly literature) swept aside by revolution but preserved in Russia Abroad – rehabilitating cultural and historical narratives from pre-revolutionary, Imperialist Russia.<sup>77</sup>

The balalaika, uprooted to Russia Abroad, can thus be considered an instrument, a Russian *site de mémoire*, displaced from its native habitat. As a Russian folk instrument in exile it was played by émigré musicians in the diaspora as an affirmation of identity, but perceived by the host nation as 'primitive', 'natural', 'barbaric' and 'quaint', 'existing for many hundreds of years', 'There is a throbbing pulsating tremor in its notes ... descriptive of the sorrow of life, of the infinity of love, of dreams, and blind fate.'<sup>78</sup> These epithets seem to emerge from, and reside in, the tone of the balalaika which evokes longing and deep emotion, but also wild, barbaric, pulsating savage rhythms and strange eastern harmonic accompaniments<sup>79</sup> – clearly it is characterised as alien to its displaced society of Morris Dancers and Maypole dancing. Russian

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<sup>74</sup> *The Graphic*, 30 October, 1909.

<sup>75</sup> *Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 16 October, 1909.

<sup>76</sup> Williams, 'The Russian Soul,' pp. 50–57.

<sup>77</sup> See Olson, *Performing Russia*, Chapter 4, 'Revival and Identity after Socialism', pp. 106 – 137.

<sup>78</sup> *The Southend Standard and Essex Weekly Advertiser*, 29 September, 1910. See also, Andreeff's descriptions of the balalaika as expressive of Russianness in: *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 28 September, 1909; *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 October, 1909; *The Wigan Observer and District Advertiser*, 24 September, 1910.

<sup>79</sup> Andreeff's Coliseum Programme.

balalaika players characteristically wore Russian folk costume for performances; satin tunics, brightly coloured blouses, high leather boots, sarafans and kokoshniks. The wearing of Russian costume by English balalaika players became common but was not considered an authentic reconstruction. Rather, it became a fanciful exploitation of Russianness – costume rather than dress - to provide something rich and strange for the eye (the prettiness of the ladies was often commented upon rather than any appreciation of authentic details of the costumes) as well as the ear.<sup>80</sup>

One final aspect of fascination was the extent to which the balalaika was commonly played and was integral to music making in Russia witnessed in the reported great numbers of instruments sold in Russia; ‘...large towns in Russia have an annual sale of over 200,000 balalaikas and domras,’<sup>81</sup> ‘In St. Petersburg alone there are twenty thousand players of the balalaika’ and ‘The making of the instruments, too, has become a notable trade, 65,000 pieces being sold yearly in St. Petersburg alone, while the bill for balalaikas in the whole country is a million and a half roubles a year.’<sup>82</sup> Facts attesting to the popularity of the instrument amongst ordinary people in Russian society and not reserved to technical virtuosos and concert players.

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<sup>80</sup> *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 30 March, 1901, notes that the ladies were all dressed in white which the reviewer found pleasing to the eye. The use of a uniform dress was part of Gardiner’s aesthetic before she adopted Russian costume for her balalaika ensemble. See also, *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 15 March, 1902 for Gardiner’s use of Russian costume. Bibs Ekkel, as a balalaika performer himself, relates that balalaika players in performance always wore ‘their Sunday best’. Interview with the author, October 2022.

<sup>81</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 17 December, 1909.

<sup>82</sup> The popularity of these sales was often attributed to Andreeff who, it was said, declined all royalties for his work on balalaikas to ensure the instrument remained affordable. *The Graphic*, 11 December, 1909. Pasyerbsky had attempted to patent his own reconstruction of the balalaika in Russia but was opposed by Andreeff in court. Pasyerbsky was unsuccessful in his bid but was able to patent the domra in Germany. See Bibs Ekkel, ‘Pasyerbsky – True or False?’, in *The Balalaika and Domra Association of America (BDDA)*, 48/1 (2024): p. 8.

### 3.3 The Coliseum Concert – Reception

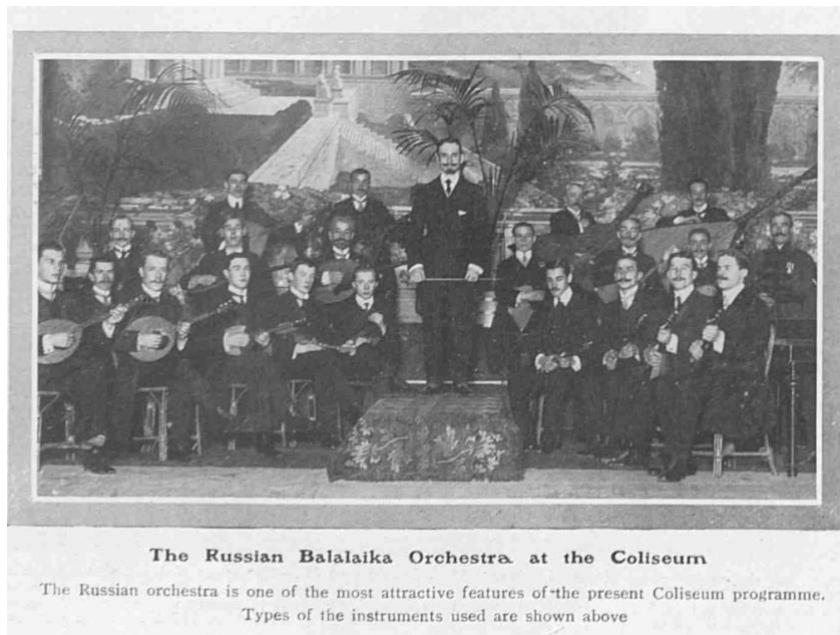


Figure 7 Vasily Andreeff and Orchestra at the Coliseum

The excited reception of Andreeff and his orchestra in London was unprecedented. Audience turnout for an evening of music for the duration of a three-month residency at the Coliseum was extraordinary considering that such an orchestra had never been heard before. Alexander Wolkowsky had already brought balalaika playing to the UK in 1903 with his troupe of performers but this is not acknowledged in the legend of Andreeff and his orchestra. The sound of the instruments and the music played appeared strange at first to an English audience but the dramatic and affective quality of the performance must have been mesmeric and fascinating. A review in *The Whitby Gazette*, 3 December, 1909 gives some indication of the effects the orchestra had on listeners: ‘...no orchestra playing in London is listened to with such strained and eager attention. The pianissimo of this orchestra is, perhaps, the most remarkable effect it produces, and, when its strains tremble away into silence, the Coliseum audience listens with an attention, so close, that even the rustle of a programme can be heard.’<sup>83</sup> Julius (Jurii) Mansfeld’s<sup>84</sup> account of Andreeff’s first concert at the Coliseum goes some way to describe the wild reception the orchestra was to receive in England and the United States:

The first number of the program was played ... a whisper went through the hall. No applause. After the second number, the audience stirred, applause was heard. Then more

<sup>83</sup> *The Whitby Gazette*, 3 December, 1909.

<sup>84</sup> Mansfeld was Andreeff’s tour secretary and interpreter for the tours. He penned some reminiscences of the tours., Julius Augustovich Mansfeld. 'Russians in England - A Journey's Tale' ('Russkie v Anglii - Istoria odnoi poyezdki'), Supplement to *Moskovskii listok*, 1914. Accessed 1 September, 2021. <https://balalaika-master.ru/festival/VI/mansfeld/>

and more listeners were imbued, and after the performance of Ei, Ukhnem! [*Song of the Volga Boatmen*] there was first deathly silence, and then there was just a storm of applause. The British, the restrained British, demanded a repeat.... The curtain was thrown open - and our great Volga song sounded again.... The contract is urgently rewritten, the orchestra's stay in England is extended. English musicians come to Andreeff and ask for notes of some Russian folk songs. Russian music begins to sound in all the most fashionable restaurants. When Andreeff appears in a restaurant, they immediately begin to play Ei, Ukhnem!'<sup>85</sup>

On 23 November 1909 Andreeff's orchestra gave its hundredth day of performances at the Coliseum,<sup>86</sup> 192 performances in this first season, a spectacular feat unmatched by other orchestras and popular entertainment bands of the time. Mansfeld, secretary and translator for Andreeff during the tour of England in 1909-1910, also recalls their final concert:

...there was endless applause. While Andreeff was bowing, he stood literally under a continuous rain of flowers.... When, finally, Andreeff got up on the dais and wanted to start his program, suddenly the theatre orchestra began to play the Russian anthem ... repeated three times, when, finally, the audience calmed down somewhat and began to occupy places. Andreeff, turning to face the audience, began to play the English anthem. Flowers flew onto the stage again. The whole theatre sang, applause covered the voices and the orchestra.... At the end of all the numbers, Andreeff, turning his face to the audience, began to play a farewell song. Silence in the auditorium.... But after a few moments something happened that cannot be described. Something similar to a bursting monstrously huge dam.... Shouts, whistles, applause - everything merged into some kind of general chaos. And when, halfway through the performance of this song, Andreeff waved his baton and Mr. La Rondelle,<sup>87</sup> the bandmaster of the theatre orchestra, joined Andreeff and two conductor's batons were in the air, it seemed that the whole theatre building was about to collapse and its fragments would mix with a raging crowd. What a moment it was! No wonder that in the midst of this celebration handkerchiefs flashed near the eyes of the crying. What a union of hearts. It was felt. The whole atmosphere of the theatre breathed with friendship and brotherhood.<sup>88</sup>

The description is remarkable in that it reveals Andreeff's theatrical acumen, his ability to turn the evening into an emotional rollercoaster for the audience. He appeals to patriotism and national pride – both on the Russian and the English side – and the celebration of a Russian/English 'brotherhood'. The Russian and English national anthems (both in themselves

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<sup>85</sup> Mansfeld, 'Russians in England - A Journey's Tale.' Also, Ivanov, *Famous and well-known residents of Bezhechan*.'

<sup>86</sup> The Coliseum presently has a 2359 seating capacity. The orchestra played a concert twice a day.

<sup>87</sup> Conductor La Rondelle was a band master employed in the variety theatres of the East End of London. His employment at the London Coliseum was prestigious.

<sup>88</sup> Julius Augustovich. Mansfeld, 'Russians in England - A Journey's Tale,' 1914 ('*Russkie v Anglii - Istoria odnoi poyezdki*'), Supplement to *Moskovskii listok*. <https://balalaika-master.ru/festival/VI/mansfeld/> Accessed 1 September 2021. The account is also printed in Genady Ivanov, 'Famous and well-known residents of Bezhechan,' The City of Bezhet'sk Information Website. Consulted 12 January, 2022.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090504221827/http://bezh.asobezh.ru/bezechane/andreev.htm>

stirring) turn the event into an exercise in *entente*. Flowers and bows, whistles and cheers, participation and encores, become part of the hysteria in the theatre. The mentioned farewell song (possibly the hit song of the season, *Song of the Volga Boatmen*) played by Andreeff's orchestra is joined by the resident theatre orchestra, the combined forces of which swept the audience off their feet. The evening is an adept manipulation of cultural, theatrical and musical forces.

It was not long before such another reception would similarly greet Diaghilev and his *Ballets Russes* on the London stage causing scenes of excitement - and shock. At the time of Andreeff's visit in 1909/10 Diaghilev had still to bring not only his 'classical' ballets from the Imperial theatres, such as *Cinderella* and *Swan Lake*, but also those drawn from Russian mythology and folk tales; *Scheherazade* (with Nijinsky as The Golden Slave), *Prince Igor*, *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *Le coq d'or*, the sensual Nijinsky in *The Afternoon of a Faun* and *La Spectre de la rose*, and the searing *Le Sacre du printemps*. These ballets were to be an onslaught of the senses, a challenge to British sensibilities and have since come to encapsulate Russian culture in the West. Prior to these productions English understanding of Russian arts was perhaps naïve.

The front cover of the programme for Andreeff's concerts at The Coliseum (1909) must have been printed in anticipation of his visit and it illustrates a theatricalised English fascination for distant, exotic (eastern) cultures and a latent longing for abandonment and freedom from constraint. The illustrated dancers are peasant gypsy dancers in wild abandon with bare arms, legs, backs and décolleté, and wearing headdresses resembling turbans. The draping of the figures is sexually suggestive as is the wild abandoned dancing, the arching back, the laughing expression, the flinging up of the arms, one holding a ribboned tambourine. The whole is sumptuously situated under a solid arch, garlanded with flowers, and steps leading enticingly up to a temple. The floor is strewn with flowers which cascade down from the temple portico. Such a scene suggests the audience is in for a wild night at the theatre. The illustration misses the Russian cultural cues but it suggests *joie de vivre* which became associated with balalaika music. An astonished critic for *The Graphic* notes, the music offered by Andreeff was instead elegant (concert waltzes) and more in keeping with refined drawing-rooms. Nostalgic folk songs, *Berceuses*, *Polonaises*, *Mazurkas* and dances were more reminiscent of gypsy (Hungarian) music and there were arrangements of tuneful Russian classical works. This challenged the received idea of Russian culture as wild, primitive, barbaric and lacking refinement. The programme quotes *The Morning Post*:

'Their music is faint and fragrant, of extraordinary lightness, and so impalpable that it affects one less as a drink than as a perfume.... It is all very simple, very exquisite, and very affecting, such music as the violet would understand, and might cause a heartache in

the rose. Of the perfect execution there can be no doubt, and an immense audience was so stilled by its quiet appeal that every note was heard, and at the end M. Andreeff had an enthusiastic reception. The 'turn' is a great success.'<sup>89</sup>

Acceptance and legitimacy were desired and royal patronage became a distinctive seal of approval for balalaika ensembles, both émigré and local, and used frequently in publicity. Andreeff and his orchestra and several other Russian ensembles, choirs, and dance groups, received Royal Command Performances proving their popularity across the class divide. As mentioned, the Tsar's patronage gave distinction to Andreeff's orchestra as did reports of the balalaika's enjoyment (and use) amongst educated Russian nobility (and British royalty). Andreeff's musicians (25 members) were all decorated military men who wore their medals and ribbons when they played. Andreeff held the rank of Captain and his array of medals, and those of his players, were commented upon in newspaper reporting and admired by the English public.<sup>90</sup>

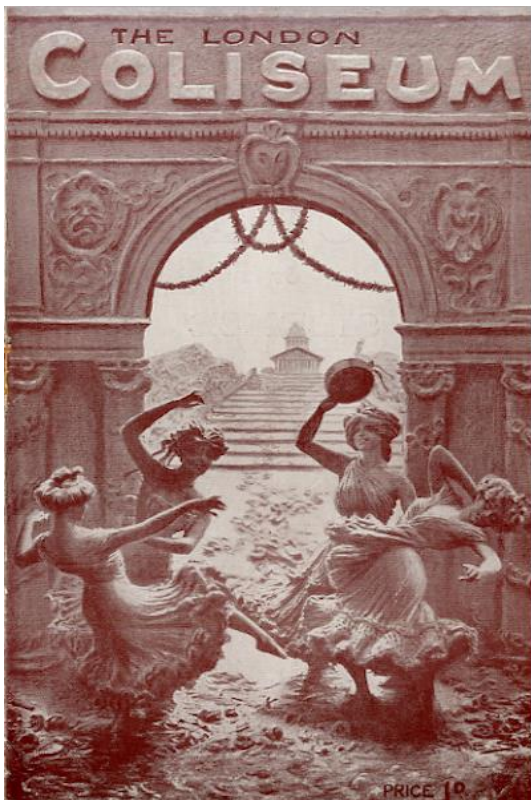


Figure 8 Coliseum Souvenir Programme 1909

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<sup>89</sup> *The Morning Post*, quoted in the Coliseum Programme, 1909.

<sup>90</sup> *The Graphic*, 11 December, 1909. The Imperial Orders of St. Anna and St. Stanislaus, which only men who have distinguished themselves in the service of the Tsar are entitled to receive. The gold medal of the Red Cross, the Star of the Legion of Honour, the *Palme de l'Academie Francaise*, the Star of the Emir of Bukara, the gold medal of the French Senate. He also wore the emblem of the Imperial Orchestra, two balalaikas crossed under a lyre surmounted by a crown, a gift of the Tsar. Balalaika bands of twenty to thirty men had been formed in thirty-six of the Tsar's Guard Regiments.

### 3.4 The Appearance of Balalaika Ensembles in English Society

The popularity of Andreeff's concerts at the Coliseum encouraged the formation of balalaika ensembles in London and smaller towns. Mansfeld mentions the formation of eighteen orchestras, both amateur and professional, at the time of Andreeff's residency in London.<sup>91</sup> It is difficult to ascertain from sources whether ensembles were amateur, professional or semi-professional, but the following were the most active ensembles between 1909 and 1950:

#### **Professional ensembles:**

Alexander Wolkowsky and his troupe

Nikolai Medvedeff and his Corps de Balalaika

The Clifford Essex Balalaika Orchestra (Tchagadaeff's Balalaika Orchestra)

Coldstream Guards balalaika ensemble

Younkmanoff's Balalaika Orchestra. This is possibly a Russified name for

N. Young's Balalaika Novelty Dance Orchestra (conductor, N. Young)

#### **Amateur/Semi-Professional ensembles:**

The London Balalaika Orchestra at Blackheath

The London Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra

Alice Gardiner's Balalaika Orchestra

Tarrant Bailey Bath Balalaika Orchestra

Mr A. Johnstone's Balalaika Orchestra

B.M.G. Orchestra (Plymouth)

The Amalgamated Musicians' Union Balalaika Orchestra

The Balalaika Players (variously Birse's Balalaika Players, The Balalaika Farm Boys)

Madame La Rondelle's Ladies Balalaika Orchestra (London)

'Old Moscow' balalaika orchestra of A. Leontev

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<sup>91</sup> Mansfeld, 'Russians in England - A Journey's Tale.'

Tchagadaeff was Andreeff's 'right hand man' in London and remained to promote the balalaika and domra amongst musicians and assist in the formation of Russian folk ensembles. He was based at the Grafton Street Studios of Clifford Essex where a balalaika ensemble of 40 members was formed. At the studios he coached new players, wrote and published Balalaika Tutors, wrote arrangements for balalaika and domra, and rehearsed repertoire with the ensemble. He also conducted and played solo balalaika. Tchagadaeff's newly formed ensemble played in concert at the Queen's Hall on 15 April 1910 only five months after Andreeff's concerts in London. Tchagadaeff was also engaged in 1910 to teach balalaika to the guardsmen in a newly formed balalaika ensemble within the Coldstream Guards<sup>92</sup> formed by Lieutenant John MacKenzie Rogan.<sup>93</sup> Tchagadaeff's teaching also extended to provincial towns, particularly Cheltenham where he assisted Alice Gardiner by teaching her the balalaika, coaching new players at her studio in the town, and assisting her to form a balalaika ensemble alongside her folk orchestra of mandolins, guitars and banjos. Tchagadaeff together with Troyanovsky<sup>94</sup> also assisted Eric Pendrell-Smith in the formation of The London Balalaika Orchestra at Blackheath as well as assisting the London Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra, both formed in 1909.

Andreeff had succeeded in introducing the balalaika into school music education in Russia and had established balalaika ensembles within military garrisons. It was his mission to see the instrument taken up in music colleges and schools abroad and he showed an interest in the formation of the London Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra and possibly provided the orchestra with arrangements of his compositions.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> I examine the balalaika amongst the Coldstream Guards more extensively in Chapter Four.

<sup>93</sup> Lieutenant John MacKenzie Rogan became Director of Music for the Coldstream Guards in 1895. See, John MacKenzie-Rogan, *Fifty Years of Army Music*, London: Methuen and Co., 1926.

<sup>94</sup> The London Polytechnic Institution was founded in 1838 and had its main campus in Regent Street. The London Polytechnic was later to become Westminster University. Medvedeff erroneously calls the ensemble the Regent's Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra: Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 19.

<sup>95</sup> Three of these compositions, *Welcome to England*, *Butterfly Valse* (both by Andreeff) and *Russian Fantasy* (composed by Glazunov for Andreeff) in handwritten scores became part of Eric Pendrell-Smith's score collection which in turn was purchased by Nikolai Medvedeff.





**THE POLYTECHNIC BALALAIKA ORCHESTRA.**

Conductor, MR. B. M. JENKINS.

**Figure 9 The Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra**

The London Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra was formed within the music department of the Polytechnic. The institution was progressive in outlook and Nikolai Medvedeff,<sup>96</sup> a balalaika player and conductor who arrived in London from Germany as a Prisoner of War in 1919, notes the Polytechnic was ‘...founded on the principal of providing the facility to study not only crafts, but modern science subjects, such as electricity, radio, television, aeronautics, shipping etc. They hold daytime and evening courses for participants of all ages, of both sexes.’<sup>97</sup> The pioneering balalaika ensemble was typical of this progressive approach taken in education by the Polytechnic. However, the ensemble largely confined its activities to within the institution rather than operate as a professional ensemble, and consequently little is known of its activities. In 1920 Medvedeff was made aware of the orchestra when elderly members wished to sell their instruments. He surmised the orchestra, conducted by (Mr) B.M. Jenkins, struggled to endure because players were drawn from a transient student body. Those who remained and did not move on ‘lacked the patience to start all over again with newcomers.’<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the ensemble was still attracting players and performing publicly in 1913.<sup>99</sup> This is the only known instance of a balalaika orchestra formed within an educational institution in the country at that time and Andreeff’s ambition was not fulfilled in the UK. The recorder became the

<sup>96</sup> Chapter Four deals extensively with Nikolai Medvedeff.

<sup>97</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 19.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>99</sup> *B.M.G.*, November, 1913, p. 22.

ubiquitous school music instrument in the UK, largely as a result of the adoption of Carl Orff's *Schulwerk* approach to teaching music in schools founded in the 1920s.<sup>100</sup>

The numbers of musicians (both amateur and professional) taking up the balalaika and domra in 1909/10 was remarkable. Tchagadaeff's orchestra, for instance, comprised forty players and Pendrell-Smith's London Balalaika Orchestra at Blackheath (variously: Eric Smith Balalaika Orchestra, Blackheath Balalaika Orchestra) began with twenty-five amateur players. A concert by this orchestra given at St Peter's Hall, Brockley, May 6, 1913 indicates the rapid increase of instrumental forces: Tchagadaeff, soloist on balalaika; N. Kovacs (also a player from Andreeff's orchestra) on prima domra; five prima balalaikas, three secunda, three alto, two bass, three contra-bass; one piccolo domra, five prima domras, two alto, one tenor, three bass, one contrabass; gusli, tambourine and svirel. The ensemble is also remarkable for its rapid mastery of balalaika repertoire only recently made popular in Andreeff's concerts at the Coliseum: *Introduction to a Russian Suite* (Fomin), *When a Maiden, Molodka, Berceuse* (Jarnefeld), *Welcome to England* (Andreeff),<sup>101</sup> *Volga Boat Song* (arr. Tchagadaeff) *Bright Shines the Moon, Wedding Song, Behind the Forest, Do You Remember?, Merry Wives, Sweet and Low* (arr. Fomin), *Faun Waltz* (Andreeff). Tchagadaeff solos: *Valse Caprice, Russian Dance*. Prima domra solos: *Zigeuner Weissen* (Sarasate) and *Hungarian Dance No. 5* (Brahms).<sup>102</sup> According to Medvedeff Pendrell-Smith over time collected a library of scores '... everything printed in his time and, quite possibly, some publications don't exist anymore.'<sup>103</sup> Medvedeff later acquired Pendrell-Smith's library of scores for his orchestra and on examining these Medvedeff believed Andreeff had worked closely with these two orchestras: 'To judge from the hand-written music for prima [balalaikas] and alto domras which I acquired along with the instruments.'<sup>104</sup> Clearly these early initiatives were modelled on Andreeff's balalaika orchestra.

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<sup>100</sup> The Kalinka Balalaika Orchestra based in Manchester, part of the One Education Music Schools programme, is presently the only instance of the balalaika used as a music instruction instrument operating in the country.

<sup>101</sup> Andreeff's *Recollections of Vienna* (arr. Fomin). See note 181.

<sup>102</sup> *B.M.G.*, 1913, No. 6, p. 142.

<sup>103</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 18. A number of scores were new to Medvedeff: '...for example, *Lollacca brillante, Spanish Dances, Kochanochka...*, *Pavva* (I can't understand why it was spelt this way and not *Pava*). This piece had nothing to do with Fomin's *Pava*; and finally *Bright Shines the Moon* (with some newly-composed variations following after five of Andreeff's).' These scores are not amongst Ekkel's Medvedeff collection and may have been sent to Russia by Medvedeff.

<sup>104</sup> A number of these scores from the London Polytechnic Balalaika Orchestra (stamped as such), were acquired by Medvedeff and are now in the possession of Bibs Ekkel. Medvedeff, in his letters, notes that he had been sending scores from Pendrell-Smith's music library (which he possessed) back to his friends in Russia. Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 18.

The extent to which the balalaika was taken up in local communities in amateur orchestras is demonstrated by the case of Alice Gardiner and her balalaika ensemble in Cheltenham, the success of which was due to the assistance of Tchagadaeff. Tarrant Bailey's balalaika ensemble in Bath<sup>105</sup> and a later flowering of the balalaika ensemble in the 1950s in Birse's youthful ensemble in Cambridgeshire are further evidence of enduring regional ensembles. The eventual demise of these ensembles was due both to a gradual waning of interest in the balalaika and Russian folk music and also the demise of dynamic personalities who formed these ensembles and encouraged community music making.

Alice Gardiner was a peripatetic music teacher at Cheltenham Ladies College from 1897 teaching mandolin, banjo and guitar.<sup>106</sup> Gardiner was enterprising and also established a private professional music studio at 2 Clarence Street in Cheltenham (later at Orme Chambers, North Street) where she taught mandolin, banjo and guitar. She also established an amateur folk orchestra in the town (mandolins, banjos, guitars, harp and piano) drawn from local talent in Cheltenham and Gloucester. The orchestra gave its first performance on 27th March 1901 at the Montpellier Rotunda in Cheltenham<sup>107</sup> and by 1912 Gardiner's forces reached 27 Mandolins, 4 Mandolas, 18 banjos, 4 guitars, mando-bass, banjo bass, contra bass, harp, flute, piano, 2 cellos and drums. She organised an annual concert in the town until 1919.

In 1909 Gardiner took balalaika lessons from Prince Tchagadaeff and, with an eye to business (teaching) and the expansion of repertoire for her orchestra, began teaching the balalaika herself at her music studio in Cheltenham.<sup>108</sup> Prince Tchagadaeff endorsed her abilities and she

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<sup>105</sup> Bailey's repertoire was similarly influenced by Andreeff: A concert, 1 March, 1912, given at Midsomer Norton Drill Hall featured the *Imperial March* (Andreeff), *Le Papillon Waltz* (Andreeff), Russian dance, *Bright Shines the Moon* (Anon), *Valse lente*, *Le Réve* (Andreeff), two step 'I've Got Rings on My Fingers' (arr. Grimshaw). Concert on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1913 included *Marcia*, *Faun Waltz* (Andreeff), *Rings on My Fingers*, *Le Reve* and *Bright Sines the Moon*. The orchestra dressed in Cossack uniforms. Tarrant Bailey's ensemble was still performing actively in the Bath area in 1919. See *B.M.G.* 1913, No. 3; *B.M.G.* 1912, No. 4; *B.M.G.* 1919, No. 6.

<sup>106</sup> Rachel Roberts, archivist for Cheltenham's Ladies College, notes Alice Gardiner was mandolin teacher in the Music Department from 1897. The Cheltenham's Ladies College Prospectus also notes Alice Gardiner was appointed visiting teacher of mandolin, banjo and guitar from c.1899. The 1911 census notes Gardiner as a 'single lodger', aged 39, teaching at Cheltenham Ladies college and 'on own account'. Her occupation is given as Teacher of Music (Banjo, Mandolin, Guitar and Balalaika). The Cheltenham's Ladies College Magazines 1898-1914 only reveal press notices for concerts given by Gardiner's orchestra at the College from 1909-1911 (and not as a teacher). Rachel Roberts, e-mail to the author, 28 July, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 30 March, 1901 describes the concert as the first from Gardiner's ensemble.

<sup>108</sup> *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 7 May, 1910. Mr S.E. Turner also advertises balalaika lessons in Cheltenham. Turner was a soloist with the Clifford Essex Pierrots, a performing troupe which took part in Gardiner's annual concerts and was popular with the Cheltenham public. This

used this in her advertising.<sup>109</sup> In 1909 Gardiner also formed an independent amateur ensemble of 16 balalaikas and domras alongside her folk orchestra of 61 players. Considering the size of the Cheltenham/Gloucester community this was an extraordinary gathering of local musical talent. Gardiner's Russian folk ensemble was a ladies' ensemble with members drawn from the Cheltenham and Gloucester environs.<sup>110</sup>

A Ladies' Orchestra such as that of Alice Gardiner found its precedent in the *damenkapellan*, a phenomenon first seen in Viennese amateur music circles in the 1850s.<sup>111</sup> The Viennese Lady Orchestra appeared at the Albert Palace Theatre in Battersea in 1885 as well as playing in Battersea Park. Two Ladies' Orchestras were similarly formed in the UK in the 1850s; in Scotland, the Dundee Ladies String Orchestra, and Lady Radnor's Orchestra in London.<sup>112</sup> Rosabel Watson formed the Aeolian Ladies Orchestra and Mrs Hunt's Orchestra, a highly proficient ensemble, toured the UK extensively and included visits to the Paris Exhibition and the Nice Municipal Casino. Paul Sparks notes that 'By the early 1890s, dozens of all-female ensembles could be found throughout London, at many levels of society, and with varying degrees of musical accomplishment.'<sup>113</sup> In particular, Sparks examines the ensemble formed by Clara Ross, The Ladies' Mandolin and Guitar Band (formerly known as The Kensington Mandolinists), and Mabel Downing and her Clifton Ladies' Guitar and Mandolin Band. Sophie Fuller, too, in her examination of women composers and the position of women musicians in English society in the British musical renaissance (1880-1918) draws in a discussion of women as performers and the formation of ladies ensembles which provides a useful orientation with regard to Alice Gardiner's activities. Gardiner's balalaika and domra ensemble followed the example of these ladies' orchestras and by 1912 her ensemble comprised 17 women of a range of ages. It is notable from the illustration at Figure 10 that the ensemble included a full range of domras and balalaikas in the Andreeff configuration – most notably the presence of a contra-

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ensemble featured the balalaika in its performances. Clearly, interest in the balalaika was stimulated by the visit of Andreeff in 1909.

<sup>109</sup> 'Miss Alice Gardiner gives lessons in Banjo, Mandoline, Guitar and Balalaika.' Copy of Certificate signed by Prince Tchagadaeff "I hereby certify that Miss Alice Gardiner, of Cheltenham, had lessons from me, and is now capable of teaching the Balalaika". *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 17 September, 1910.

<sup>110</sup> See, Derek B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The 19<sup>th</sup> century popular music revolution in London, New York, Paris and Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 1 'Professionalism and Commercialism,' pp. 15-37.

<sup>111</sup> See, Shannon Draucker, 'Ladies' orchestras and music-as-performance in *fin-de-siècle* Britain,' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 45/1 (2023): pp. 7-22.

<sup>112</sup> Helen, Countess of Radnor. Charles Hubert Parry composed his *Suite in F* (*Lady Radnor's Suite*) for her orchestra (1894) published by Novello and Co.

<sup>113</sup> Paul Sparks, 'Clara Ross, Mabel Downing and ladies' guitar and mandolin bands in late Victorian Britain', *Early Music*, Vol 41/4 (2013): 621-632.

bass balalaika. The banjo, mandolin and guitar (plucked and strummed instruments) were already present in English ensembles at the turn of the twentieth-century. It was the triangular shape of the balalaika, the dynamic range, and whispering timbre characteristic of the instrument which drew most comment, as did the musical effects achieved by the rapid strumming of just three strings tuned A,A,E.

Gardiner's female players were at first dressed in white costumes but she later incorporated traditional Russian dress for her balalaika players. Dressing in Russian national costume became a common feature amongst balalaika ensembles and was not confined to ladies' ensembles. Dressing in Russian national costume was a fashion first adopted by Clifford Essex and his Balalaika Orchestra with the purpose of emphasising the folk character of the music played.



Figure 10 Alice Gardiner and her Balalaika Ensemble

Andreeff's orchestra at the Coliseum in 1909 was an all-male ensemble due to the fact that players were largely drawn from Russian military regiments. Bibs Ekkel notes that Andreeff's orchestra had been unusual in that it adopted evening dress for the players. Andreeff was determined to present the balalaika ensemble as respectable, emulating the dress code of symphony orchestra players, and marking his musicians as worthy of great musical performances. Ekkel notes that more generally Russian folk ensembles such as his own, when playing for an audience, 'would always dress in their Sunday best.'<sup>114</sup>

The presence of female balalaika players was evident in Wolkowsky's ensembles as well as those of Medvedeff and balalaika playing was not a male preserve amongst Russian ensembles.

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<sup>114</sup> Bibs Ekkel, e-mail to the author, 13 February, 2024.

Medvedeff's early artel ensemble included female players from Russia. All-female mandolin, banjo and guitar ensembles emerging in the nineteenth century in Britain chose to dress uniformly thereby presenting a united front to the public. Professional orchestras were still dominated by male players dressed formally in suits whereas fashionable ladies' ensembles dressed in the current fashion or adopt a particular, sometimes fanciful, costume theme. Shannon Draucker examines the manipulation of fashionable costume adopted in women's orchestras<sup>115</sup> as does Philip Rudd in his study of the Countess of Radnor and her ensemble.<sup>116</sup> Newspaper reporting and formal criticism of music concerts in the late nineteenth century, such as that of George Bernard Shaw, was predominantly that of the male gaze. Michael Holroyd, by way of example, assesses Shaw's attitude to women and feminism both in his creation of female characters in his plays as well as his attitude towards feminism and outstanding women in society.<sup>117</sup> Critical comment, including that of Alice Gardiner's ladies' ensemble, typically draws attention to the physical appearance of the ladies. Commentators found women's dress titillating, and the details of their dress and manner or performance are mentioned rather than the skill of the performers. Critics are surprised that Alice Gardiner showed skill on the mandolin and the balalaika (as soloist as well as leader of the ensemble), and that she performed with a refined musical taste. She was also praised for her ability to marshal local musical forces to produce concerts of such high standard. Gardiner's ladies' ensemble can be regarded as typical of the period but what made it extraordinary and startling was her choosing to employ balalaikas and domras, instruments relatively new to plectral ensembles in the country.

A similar ladies balalaika orchestra was Madame La Rondelle's Ladies Balalaika Orchestra formed in London in the 1920s. Very little is known of this ensemble's activities but Madame Rondelle surely witnessed Andreeff's concerts at the Coliseum. La Rondelle's husband, a bandmaster on the Music Hall circuit in the East End of London, was resident theatre conductor for Andreeff's performances at the Coliseum and these concerts most likely inspired her to form a ladies' balalaika ensemble. The ensemble travelled as an independent women's group as far away as Scotland.

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<sup>115</sup> Shannon Draucker, 'Ladies' orchestras and music-as-performance in *fin-de-siècle* Britain,' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 45/1 (2023): pp. 7-22.

<sup>116</sup> Philip Christopher Rudd, 'Countess, Conductor, Pioneer: Lady Radnor and the Phenomenon of the Victorian Ladies' Orchestra,' (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2017).

<sup>117</sup> Michael Holroyd, 'George Bernard Shaw: Women and the Body Politic,' *Critical Inquiry* 6/1 (1979): pp. 17-32.



Figure 11 Madame La Rondelle and her Ladies' Balalaika Orchestra

Tchagadaeff appeared as soloist with Gardiner's ensemble as early as 1909 and provided balalaika/domra arrangements for her orchestra. The inclusion of works by Andreeff in Gardiner's repertoire at this early date is notable as they were yet to be published.<sup>118</sup> Prince Tchagadaeff's presence in Cheltenham, a genuine Russian prince, was avidly reported in the press. He was considered 'a high priest of the art' and his appearance with Gardiner's orchestra was critically much praised. He received encores for *Valse Caprice* and *Scene de Ballet*, both virtuosic compositions by Andreeff, played an arrangement by Boris Troyanovsky of *Bright shines the moon*, which was to become a popular Russian folk tune amongst English audiences, and a *Spanish Dance* also by Andreeff. That a peasant instrument was played by a Russian Prince did not seem to cause any puzzlement.

The instrument and its capabilities were also a revelation to the audience. Tchagadaeff is praised for his 'delightful technique' which, the reviewer suggests, if 'applied to the more serious instrument [violin?], would win for him consideration as 'a great interpretative artist.' Clearly the instrument is considered inferior: '... in the opinion of superfine critics the limitations of the banjo, mandolin and balalaika do not bring them under the head of "musical" instruments.'<sup>119</sup> The instrument is relegated to the realm of light entertainment and not to serious music. Legitimacy is sought for the instrument when a concert is described as a 'high-

<sup>118</sup> The mss of Andreeff's *Welcome to England*, *Butterfly Valse* and Glazunov's *Russian Fantasy* in Medvedeff's score collection are examples of these early circulated copies of these compositions. There are no published scores of Andreeff's works c.1909/1910.

<sup>119</sup> *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 25 January, 1913.

class and intellectually enjoyable programme.’<sup>120</sup> Royal interest is again conjured to encourage attendance by the upwardly socially mobile in society.<sup>121</sup> Clearly Miss Gardiner’s efforts found legitimacy for the balalaika, banjo, mandolin and guitar, which she used in her ensembles, as instruments of quality, worth mastering and listening to:

... the cult of the plectral instruments – mandoline, mandola, banjo, guitar, balalaika, domra etc., is growing in Cheltenham year by year, ... hundreds have learnt at these “festivals” to admire plectral music, and to take it as seriously as an art form as they would take the violin or the piano. This might have been regarded as ridiculous a few years ago, but performers like Mr Olly Oakley, and teachers like Miss Gardiner have changed all that.

Gardiner’s concert is described as ‘a plectral feast’ and ‘evidence that the vogue of the instruments ... is by no means waning’ – an allusion perhaps to the great popularity Andreeff’s orchestra had aroused at the London Coliseum in 1909. The audiences ‘thoroughly entered into the spirit of the music’ suggesting that offerings were somehow curious and strange and a particular frame of mind was needed to appreciate the music. Balalaika offerings included arrangements of Offenbach’s *Tales of Hoffmann* and the composer William Heller Nicholls conducted his own works including *The Waltz from The Feast of Roses* which drew inspiration from the oriental romance *Llala-Rookh*. This work was composed for the Cheltenham Pageant in 1908 in the grounds of Marle Hill House but the music now adapted for Miss Gardiner’s orchestra. The music played by the balalaika suggested eastern mystery and exoticism, ‘local colour’. Gardiner conducted and must have been musically astute. She is praised for her musical taste and ability to project the ‘strong points of such instruments.’ The reviewer holds the opinion that ‘... the plectoral (sic) family does not stand for what is broadly grand and powerful in music, but the neglect by the greater composers has perhaps been much more severe than has been justified.’ A reference to the *Serenade* in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* which seeks to imitate the mandolin by employing pizzicato is ‘a grief to all good plectoralists (sic), and to everyone who has ever heard the part taken by the instrument for which it was intended.’ However, the perception in this review is that the balalaika is inferior to instruments such as the mandolin or mandolas but is redeemed in the hands of an expert such as Tchagadaeff when it is ‘almost unequalled in airy, whispering music.’<sup>122</sup>

Gardiner’s Annual Concert became a highlight of the Cheltenham Musical Season, invariably played to full houses, and could fill the Town Hall to capacity. Gardiner’s concerts remained an eclectic occasion. The orchestra, usually conducted by Peter Jones, was led by Alice Gardiner

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>121</sup> *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 25 February, 1911.

<sup>122</sup> *The Echo*, Thursday, 23 February, 1911.



on mandolin and balalaika. She featured soloists from her studio and engaged fashionable society singers and instrumentalists. In 1908 she featured the *Clifford Essex Royal and Original Pierrots*, a popular quartet of banjoists in Pierrot costumes. Essex, significantly, was to form his own successful balalaika orchestra in London. In 1912 she invited the nationally acclaimed zither-banjoist Mr Olly Oakley who became a regular soloist with the ensemble. Gardiner's bands fulfilled a social function by providing an occasion for making music by local amateur musicians, for learning a musical instrument, engage with local events such as pageants and theatre productions and fulfil her wider objective to raise funds for charity.<sup>123</sup>

Repertoire for both her bands was not exclusively Russian and arrangements were also made of popular songs and light classical works, typically Elgar's *Salut d'Amour*, Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, Braga's *Serenata*, Bemberg's *Chant Venetian*, Massenet's *Oeuvre tes vœux bleus*, Czibulka/Tobani's *Hearts and Flowers* and von Suppé's *Poet and the Peasant Overture*. Songs included Chaminade's *Rosemond*, Cowen's *For a Dream's Sake* and *The Auld Plaid Shawl*. Gardiner's interest in the balalaika and domra was a natural outcome of her interest in folk music. Her concert of 1901 had included two numbers for banjo reflecting its association with grassroots African American music. The banjo became popular in English music halls where it featured in Blackface Minstrels. Printed song-sheets from these minstrel shows often became hits in America and England so it is not unusual to find their inclusion in a small regional orchestra. The two numbers, *The Darkie's Awakening* and *The Darkie's Dream* are compositions of George Lansing, an American songwriter who composed pieces for banjo around an imaginary character, Darkie. The insertion of *The* before the titles in Gardiner's programmes (which does not appear in the original titles of the songs – Darkie is the character's name) is perhaps indicative of a racial generalising of such music.<sup>124</sup> Gardiner's 1902 concert also includes the Cake Walk 'Go 'long dere' by J.E. Dallas, the Cake Walk being a strutting dance found among slaves on America plantations often accompanied by the banjo. It was a short leap to Russian folk music and the balalaika for Gardiner and her folk orchestra. Russian repertoire included the following works by Andreeff: *Valse Caprice*, *Scène de Ballet*, *Spanish Dance*, *Iskorki*, *Le Reve*, *Imperial March*, *Mazurka No 3*, *Le Papillon (Valse)*, *Mazurka No 3*, *Impromptu*. *Bright Shines the Moon*; and Russian folk songs: *Russian Wedding Song*, *Song of the Boatmen*

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<sup>123</sup> For instance, she raised money for women's causes such as the local Women's Club (a concert in June 1911 in which she engaged the Lyric Glee Singers), a concert for Belgian refugees accommodated at Linden Lawn in 1914 at the start of the Great War, a fundraiser for the R.S.P.C.A in Newbury in 1915, a concert in aid of the Italian Red Cross, a concert in aid of the Anti-Vivisection Society in 1906 as well as for the Eye, Ear and Throat Free Hospital - all of which attest to her involvement in community causes.

<sup>124</sup> Recordings of these songs have varying titles: *Darkey's Dream*, *Darkies Dream*, *Darky's Dream*.

on the Volga, Selection of Russian Folk Songs (unspecified), *Kamarinskaya*, *March 'Preobajenski'*, *The Red Sarafan*, and the *Russian National Anthem*. Glinka's *Triumphal March* and Schenk's *Mazurka Russe* were additional Russian character pieces.

On February 15, 1912 at the King's Hall in Cheltenham a production of *Diplomacy* took place. *Diplomacy* was the English title given to an adaptation by Clement Scott and C.B. Stephenson (*noms-de-plume* of Saville Rowe and Bolton Rowe) of Victorien Sardou's play *Dora* (1877). The production had been mounted at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket in 1878 with the Bancrofts in the leading roles.<sup>125</sup> Significantly, characters and scenes of this adaptation reflected the imminent conflict between Russia and Turkey which was to lead to the Congress of Berlin in 1878.<sup>126</sup> The play was revived again in 1884 in a further radical adaptation in which a ludicrous character, the Honourable Algernon Fairfax, makes an appearance<sup>127</sup> and it was this English adaptation adopted by Sardou when the play was revived in Paris shortly before his death in 1908.<sup>128</sup> *Diplomacy* was mounted again at the Wyndhams Theatre in 1912/1913 with Gerald du Maurier and Gladys Cooper leading the cast and it was this production which must have inspired the production in Cheltenham.<sup>129</sup> The Russian references prompted Russian music provided by Alice Gardiner's Russian Balalaika Band, in Russian costumes. Appearing in costume at performances became a typical feature of Gardiner's orchestra (as it did of many other bands – Clifford Essex being credited with the first to do so) and consequently her balalaika orchestra was an appropriate choice for the Cheltenham production.<sup>130</sup>

The popularity of the folk orchestra in Cheltenham lasted until after the Great War when Gardiner was still pushing the boundaries of the sound experience by bringing well-known Hawaiian guitarist Levaun to her concerts in 1919. But the initial popularity of the balalaika had waned and it was not featured at this concert. Gardiner produced entertainments through the

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<sup>125</sup> Squire Bancroft (1841-1926) and Effie Bancroft (1839-1921) were celebrated actors (married) who frequently performed together. They were formidable theatre managers and did much to promote Drawing Room Comedy.

<sup>126</sup> The Congress of Berlin (13 June – 13 July 1878), led by the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, met to reorganise the Baltic Peninsula after the Russo-Turkish War 1877-1878.

<sup>127</sup> It is co-incidental and tempting to speculate that Oscar Wilde may have been aware of this production and reincarnated the idiotic Algernon and (Gwendolyn) Fairfax in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* first performed in 1895.

<sup>128</sup> George Rowell, 'Sardou on the English Stage,' *Theatre Research International*, Vol 2/1 (1976): pp. 33-44.

<sup>129</sup> The Cheltenham amateur ensemble appeared under the patronage of Her Grace the Duchess of Beaufort and the proceeds of the production were offered to the Red Cross Society.

<sup>130</sup> *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 9 December, 1911.

1920s and in 1938 is still found providing small-scale entertainment in the Pillar Room of the Cheltenham Town Hall. Alice Gardiner passed away in December 1945 at the age of 73.<sup>131</sup>

Gardiner, together with Tchagadaeff, are significant in that they raised the profile of the balalaika within regional folk ensembles:

From very small beginnings, Miss Gardiner has, within the space of a few years, not only succeeded in forming a combined Cheltenham and Gloucester orchestra of fifty excellent players, but has won for the romantic mandolin family of instruments a position in the local musical world which would have been deemed almost incredible a decade ago, when their orchestral possibilities were practically unknown.<sup>132</sup>

The balalaika, despite not being integrated into British school music, was taken up in a remarkable educational initiative in Cambridgeshire which sought to encourage young players of the balalaika. This was an amateur ensemble called The Balalaika Players, sometimes Birse's Balalaika Players and The Balalaika Farm Boys.<sup>133</sup> The ensemble stands not only as a youthful, educational enterprise (which Andreeff would certainly have endorsed) but also demonstrates the continued influence and regulation of the Musicians' Union, particularly with regard to amateur balalaika ensembles hoping to broadcast for the BBC or perform within professional music circles.

Robert A. Birse's small balalaika ensemble was formed in 1947, a late flowering of a balalaika ensemble.<sup>134</sup> The players were teenage boys between the ages of 13 and 19 drawn from working-class families living in villages surrounding Royston in Cambridgeshire.<sup>135</sup> Ensemble numbers varied over the years (between 8 and 12 players) but it remained a small ensemble with Birse as group leader. Birse established a music studio in the nearby village of Litlington where he taught

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<sup>131</sup> Obituary, *The Gloucester Echo* 11 December 1945. The obituary suggests Gardiner never married. She is named as the daughter of the late Mr and Mrs W. Gardiner of London and the sister of Mr Harry Gardiner of Wembley. Sue Jones, *Votes for Women: Cheltenham and the Cotswolds* (Stroud: The History Press, 2018), p. 105 makes the following erroneous assertions: 'Mrs Alice Gardiner was married to Charles Irving Gardiner, who later showed his support for the cause through CUWFA. He was a schoolmaster and in the schedule for 6 Patagon Parade he describes himself as married, but there is no reference to her or to the length of marriage, one of the required bits of information. He married Alice Ann Pearce in 1904, when she was a teacher of banjo, mandolin, guitar and balalaika at the Ladies' College – a lady of some talents.' There is clearly a confusion of identities in Jones's account.

<sup>132</sup> *The Echo*, 16 February, 1906.

<sup>133</sup> The Kalinka Youth Balalaika Orchestra founded and directed by Brian Hulme is based in Manchester and is presently a last remaining balalaika ensemble for young people in the country.

<sup>134</sup> Information for the discussion of Birse is drawn from BBC Written Archives (WAC) Files: Artists: Balalaika Players: File 1; 1949-1954 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>135</sup> Birse frequently used poverty amongst the boy's families as leverage to obtain return travel fares to broadcast engagements.

the boys how to play balalaika and domra. He supplied the boys with his own imported balalaikas from Russia. They played in costume; white tunics, blue trousers and top boots. The band's repertoire was not extensive and was drawn from traditional Russian folk tunes, Waltzes, Marches, and works by Andreeff and Birse, and popular classics.<sup>136</sup> Birse admired Alexander Wolkowsky's style of performance and repertoire which he emulated.

Birse, by his own account, had lived for many years in Russia. His father was a Scottish merchant whose career took him to Russia. While living in St. Petersburg he took up the balalaika and was taught by A.P. Sanders (father of film star George Sanders). Sanders was a member of Andreeff's ensemble at the time (1889).



Figure 12 A.P. Saunders is third from the left next to Andreeff (centre)

The Sanders family returned to Britain at the start of the revolution as did many British businessmen and women. Birse returned as did his brother, Arthur Birse, a highly respected Russian interpreter for Winston Churchill and Sir Anthony Eden. The brothers formed the Balalaika Society in Litlington which held concerts for balalaika and other fretted instruments in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The Balalaika Players performed at local fetes and county shows (Cambridge Trades Fair, for example) but Birse had ambitions for his ensemble and lobbied the BBC for chances to

<sup>136</sup> This repertoire list is drawn from BBC correspondence and the required Programme Forms submitted for broadcasts. Repertoire is typical of that found in Andreeff's concerts: *Le Rêve-Waltz*, *Meditation Waltz*, *Gatchino Waltz*, *Faun* (Andreeff); *Dance Medley*, *Medley of Russian Folk Tunes*, *The Green Dell* (Medley), *Apples*, *Organstchiki*, *Barinia*, *Bright Shines the Moon*, *Down the Kazanka River*, *Two traditional songs related to rivers*, *The little Dove*, *The lonely birch tree*, *Fill Up Your Tankards*, *The Drinking Song* (Traditional); *Waltz*, *March*, *The Farmer's March* (Birse); *Austrian March*, *Russian March* (Eztrell); *Serenade* (Abt)'; *Sweet and Low* (Barnby).

broadcast. In 1949 the ensemble appeared on television on the popular programme *Picture Page*<sup>137</sup> which featured personalities and public events. This led to a further appearance on *First Attempts - Children's Hour* (radio) - Birse noting, 'playing balalaikas to an audience of English children' - and again on *Children's Hour - Young Artists Programme* in September 1950. The players were amateurs but paid for their appearance and these three early broadcasts led Birse to persistently request appearances on BBC programmes, both London and regional centres.<sup>138</sup>

Birse in his letters to the BBC acknowledges that the BBC was obliged to employ only professional musicians and consequently, in 1951, he states his intention to obtain professional status for his ensemble by joining the Musicians' Union. The Variety Programmes Department of the BBC, noted in an internal memo, '...we should of course, under present rulings [Performing Unions] have to say "full-time pros only" .... *Children's Hour* and *Children's Hour* television I know use semi pros but I think we should be firm.'<sup>139</sup> This was to be a consistent obstacle for further broadcasts. Birse perhaps did seek to join the Musicians' Union but as this condition persisted through later years it can be assumed he never attained professional status and was therefore limited in the BBC programmes on which the band was allowed to appear. A letter to Mr Birse from Geoffrey Riggs, the Variety Booking Manager, notes, 'We regret that we are not able to consider semi-professionals or amateurs in connection with "First House" or any other general Variety programme ... if all the members of the act should attain full professional status we shall, of course, be pleased to reconsider your application.' The Musicians' Union was clearly unsympathetic to non-professional bands broadcasting despite the novelty value of a balalaika ensemble. This was a situation constantly faced by amateur and semi-professional balalaika ensembles in the country. They were able to play at community level but failed to gain wider public exposure through the BBC and other professional channels. The situation was also to be found in theatres and concert halls. The Kedrov Quartet, for example, appeared in Bradford and invited The Balalaika Players to make an appearance in their performance but the invitation was withdrawn because Birse's ensemble did not have professional status, clearly

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<sup>137</sup> *Picture Page* was an extremely popular Magazine Programme broadcast live from Alexandra Palace between 1936-1939 and again between 1946-1952. As the broadcast was live none of the programmes were recorded.

<sup>138</sup> A Joint Fee of £5.5s.0d (£163.85) plus £4.2s.6d. (£128.74) for return travel for 9 players. Total £9.7s.6d (£292.58).

The fee for subsequent BBC broadcasts by the ensemble stabilized at:

Broadcast or Performing - 5 Guineas: £5.5s.0d (£163.85).

Mechanical Reproduction - 2½ Guineas: £2.12s.6d (£81.92).

Overseas Use - One Guinea - £1.1s.0d (£32.77).

Subsequent Reproduction - Half a guinea: 10s.6d (£16.38).

Birse always haggled for a return coach fare for his ensemble. He viewed the fee as "pocket money" for his boys.

<sup>139</sup> Addressed 'To Mr Newman'.

adhering to Musicians' Union rules. The Musicians' Union, in its desire to protect the labour market for English musicians, limited the wider exposure to balalaika ensembles, both exile and local ensembles.

Birse, in his letters to the BBC, consistently sought legitimacy for the band by noting appearances before royalty and other distinguished guests and drawing attention to appearances on important occasions.<sup>140</sup> His implication was the boys played well but in 1954 the BBC requested Birse to re-audition his ensemble before further broadcasts would be considered despite the fact that the ensemble had made 93 public appearances, had had three previous auditions for the BBC, and had appeared on *Children's Hour*, *Accent on Youth*, *Colette* as well as *Hallo There* (a holiday programme for teenagers). Their television appearance on *Picture Page* had also been recorded at Birse's studio in Litlington.

The ensemble was clearly active at a community level and was remarkable in that it was formed of young players. There is no record of what became of the ensemble; no further broadcasts were made after 1954, mentions in the B.M.G. cease, and Birse's letters and requests to the BBC stopped. Once the driving force of the enterprise was removed the balalaika ensemble was no more.

### 3.5 Professional Ensembles

Professional balalaika ensembles were formed by Russian musicians settling in London. Alexander Wolkowsky and his family troupe of players, singers and dancers appeared in London at the turn of the century and performed in Variety Theatre, and Nikolai Medvedeff formed the Corps de Balalaika in 1921 and The Russian Balalaika Orchestra in various incarnations between 1921 and 1950. The New Russian Balalaika Orchestra (sometimes Vladimoff's Balalaika Orchestra – conductor, V. Vladimoff) also appeared in Variety and broadcasting. Clifford Essex became a dynamic bandmaster and active promoter of the Balalaika and formed the Clifford Essex Russian Balalaika Orchestra in 1910. His band repertoire, as early as 1911, is stated as 48 numbers and increased to 80 numbers by 1913.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Appearances included those for H.H the Princess Louise who had 'given them her patronage', Countess of Athlone Princess Alice, the Queen, H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, H.R.H. the Queen Mother, H.R.H Princess Margaret, H.R.H. the Duchess of Kent. Birse also notes the band's star player, Joe Buchan, had won a silver cup for his balalaika performances at a music festival of the British Federation of Fretted Instruments. (Birse had donated the cup and Buchan was the only entrant for that section.)

<sup>141</sup> Repertoire additions: *Scène de Ballet*, *Spanish Dance*, *Polacca*, *Valse Caprice*, *Grand Valse de Ballet* (Fomin), *Luchinushka*, *Horovod "La Pavane"*, *Souvenir de Gatchina* (Andreeff) (Medvedeff's spelling), *Molodka*, *Oh My Beautiful Garden* (Fomin).



Figure 13 The Clifford Essex Russian Balalaika Orchestra

The Bahyan Balalaika Orchestra (Conductor, Vladimir Launitz) featured visiting Russian exiles: for example, Helen de Frey (soprano), Maxim Turganoff (tenor), Mdles. Ludmila Babitcheva (premiere ballerina from the Moscow Opera House), Pandora Philipova [Phillips?], Barbara Hayman (dancers).<sup>142</sup> Strelsky's Singers and Balalaika Orchestra (conductor, Captain A. E. Strelsky) were active on the restaurant circuit (as was Nikolai Medvedeff) providing after-dinner entertainment in Russian restaurants such as the Kazbek Restaurant with his Kazbek Balalaika Orchestra. Lesser-known ensembles include N. Young's Balalaika Novelty Dance Orchestra (conductor, N. Young) and the 'Old Moscow' balalaika orchestra of A. Leontev.<sup>143</sup>

Younkmanoff's Balalaika Orchestra (possibly a Russified name for N. Young's dance orchestra) appeared as a 'turn' in a distinctly Jewish evening of entertainment at the reopening of the Pavilion Theatre in the Whitechapel Road in the East End July 19, 1913.<sup>144</sup> Amongst these ensembles there was some degree of cross-pollination. Musicians often worked with several ensembles in different capacities. There were also guest conductors such as Constant Lambert (1905-1951), Ter-Abramoff (1888-1977), Ivan Romanoff (1914-1997), and Eugen Emeljanoff

<sup>142</sup> Selection of Russian Folk Songs, *The Volga Boatmen Song*, *Stenka Razin* sung by Paul Malchonoff (bass), *Lullaby*, *Alone the Road a Maiden* sung by Helen de Frey (soprano), *The Birch Tree* (Phantasy on a Russian Folk Tune), *The Pine Forest*, *Impromptu*, *Doubinoushka* (Folk Song) Paul Malchonoff (bass), *Do Not Reproach Me, Beloved* (Folk Song), *The Spinning Song*, Two Children's Songs "Girls", "Boys", *Snowflakes*, *Thou Art Alone*, *Masques*, Helen de Frey (soprano), *Maestoso March*, *Phantasy on Two Russian Folk Tunes*.

<sup>143</sup> Zakharov, 'No Snow on their Boots,' p. 249.

<sup>144</sup> *East London Observer*, 19 July, 1913.

(?),<sup>145</sup> who conducted on occasions. Balalaika orchestras also sometimes changed their names to suit particular occasions.

Zakharov recalls ‘...there were several Russian orchestras in London between the wars, quite apart from individual performers who found work playing in English orchestras and concerts. But these were all of a popular nature, mainly balalaika orchestras.’<sup>146</sup> He recalls a Russian military band [unnamed], an orchestra made up of soldiers which toured and made several recordings of marches such as the *Egorskii* and *Preobrazhenskii*, marches associated with Russian Guards regiments. Members were prisoners of war arriving in the UK from Germany (as did Medvedeff) and Russian military personnel working with the British army based at Bovington, a military base which billeted Russian soldiers released from German prison camps and arriving in England. The orchestra disbanded as soldiers moved into civilian life and found other means of employment. Lastly, Nikita Baliev’s *Chauve-Souris* cabaret ensemble carried its own balalaika/domra ensemble. The company, which had huge success across Europe, engaged Russian artists adrift in London, a number of whom travelled with the company to the United States.

Balalaika ensembles found employment in bars, cafes, restaurants; hotel foyers, lounges and dining rooms; fetes, bazaars, garden parties, weddings; balls and social get-togethers and social dance evenings. Events were also frequently centred around a Russian theme and were used to display Russian arts and crafts, music, song and dance, religious icons, bookstalls (literature), food and drink. A formal day of Russian celebration (Russia Day) was established within the communities of Russia Abroad. These ‘Joy Days’ celebrated Russian national identity and functioned as a link between the diaspora and Mother Russia. The first Day of Russian Culture had been held in Estonia in 1924 where Russians, in the minority in Estonia at the time, established an occasion to celebrate and preserve their Russian culture while away from home. In 1925 a meeting of the Pedagogical Bureau in Prague proposed a similar day be celebrated across all Russian diasporas as a means of uniting exiles and asserting Russian cultural links to Imperial Russia.<sup>147</sup> The fear of denationalization, which was inevitable as exile wore on, was counteracted by a day of celebration and provided the opportunity to display Russian culture to

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<sup>145</sup> Eugen Emeljanoff passed through the Berlin Nansen Office and was granted a Nansen passport and protection on 25 January 1926. Birth and Death dates unknown. He conducted The Russian National Balalaika Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall in 1929.

<sup>146</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, pp. 248-249, (unnamed photograph of the military orchestra) p. 255.

<sup>147</sup> Catherine Andreyev and Ivan Savický, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938*, p. 130. Also, Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939*.



the host nation and create congenial links. This last was important to political and social leaders in Russian diasporas seeking to further their cause with the host nation against the Soviet regime. Pushkin's birthday was selected as the day for the event. – 6 June 1799 (Gregorian Calendar).<sup>148</sup> Russia Day was eventually celebrated in 42 countries but with varying success and ultimately did not achieve the desired unity within the diasporas, mainly due to political and social pressures leading up to the Second World War.<sup>149</sup>

In England the Russian diaspora was organised on a social structure reminiscent of that found in Imperial Russia. Most exiles were aristocrats, landowners, businessmen and academics, an educated and well-connected society. King George V, and the British government, had failed to provide shelter for his cousin Nicholas II and his family but in 1919 the Dowager Queen Alexandra was rescued and brought to England from the Crimea where she had fled. George V sent the warship HMS Marlborough to rescue her and 17 other Romanovs including her daughter the Grand Duchess Xenia. Queen Alexandra retired to Denmark leaving the Grand Duchess Xenia as head of Russian society in London. Russian aristocratic families provided employment for balalaika performances at their soirees, and royal connections amongst the British aristocracy were frequently invited to drum up support for charitable events in which balalaika performance often featured. These frequent fund-raising occasions raised money for Russian and English charitable causes (for which balalaika bands were paid for their participation) particularly leading up to the two World Wars. Funds raised at a Russia Day held on 18 November 1915 was described as a gift from the British Nation. Funds supported the Anglo-Russian hospital in Petrograd, ambulances carrying wounded Russian soldiers at the front, and the relief of Russian prisoners in Germany. On this occasion 20,000,000 Russian flags were sold to raise money. Theatrical performances were also frequent occasions for fund-raising. A Russian play, *The Theatre of the Soul* by E. Evreinoff<sup>150</sup> with Lady Tree (1863-1937)<sup>151</sup> and Ellen Terry (1847-1928) in the cast, an operatic ballet *A Theban Night* arranged by Mme Serafine Astafieva (1876-1934),<sup>152</sup> and Russian songs and sketches were performed at the Alhambra attended by Queen Alexandra and other royalty. Prince Tchagadaeff and his balalaika orchestra once again provided the entertainment playing folk songs and dances. A short address, "England's Message to Russia", was read out by Mr Bottomley.

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<sup>148</sup> 26 May, 1799 (Julian Calendar).

<sup>149</sup> Andreyev and Savický, *Russia Abroad*, p. 131.

<sup>150</sup> Nikolai Nikolaevich Evreinov, *The Theatre of the Soul: A Monodrama in One Act* (London: Hendersons, 1926). The initial E. in the quote appears to be an error.

<sup>151</sup> Helen Maud Holt, an actress, who married Herbert Beerbohm Tree.

<sup>152</sup> Serafine Astafieva danced with the Ballets Russes. She opened a Dancing School in Chelsea – Margot Fonteyn, Anton Dolin and Alicia Markova were pupils.

Teas (a Russian tea bazaar at the Ritz Hotel, for example), luncheons and dinners were held at leading London hotels and were usually accompanied by small balalaika ensembles. At the Carlton Hotel tea there was a performance of ‘...Russian National Music arranged by M. Sacha Votitchenko. Mlle Ratmirova and Mlle Levinskaya and other artists assisted.’<sup>153</sup> Fundraising for causes such as the Red Cross, Russian orphans, soldiers at the Front, the Golden Square Throat, Nose and Ear Hospital (money raised at The Golden Ball) and others were frequently patronised and supported by members of Russian aristocracy living in London and endorsed by English aristocracy, usually listed in advertising. Their presence swelled the coffers and provided an enticement to people wishing to rub shoulders with the elite. One such concert on 7 October 1914 featured Prince Tchagadaeff and his balalaika orchestra at the Queens Hall under the patronage of Queen Alexandra who enlisted a long list of aristocrats including the Russian Ambassador and Countess Benckendorff.<sup>154</sup>

The Grafton Galleries in 1917 presented a well-organised series of Russian exhibitions and events over several days. Chekhov’s one act play *The Wedding* was performed,<sup>155</sup> Russian dances (danced by Marie Rambert and Jean Varda), Edwin Evans delivered a lecture of Russian music with musical examples, J. Foster Fraser delivered a lecture “Russia as I Saw it” accompanied by Lantern Slides. The London Balalaika Orchestra performed as did a Russian Folk Song Choir conducted by Maria Levinskaya, accompanied on the piano by Myra Hess. A Russian Restaurant was provided.

BBC radio regularly featured Russian music.<sup>156</sup> The Marquis de Chateaubrun was compère of a programme which sought to create the ambience of a Russian restaurant, the *Red Sarafan*, a nostalgic memory (soundscape) of cafes and restaurants which had flourished along the Neva River in St. Petersburg in Imperialist days. The Marquis de Chateaubrun was Captain Vivien of the Imperial Grenadier Guards who had ‘escaped from Russia after the Revolution.’ He found employment in the Russian Embassy in London in 1920 and was active in the formation of ex-officer’s balalaika ensembles and choirs and ‘entertainments reminiscent of pre-war Russia.’ He managed the Kasbek Grill restaurant in London in the 1930s which became a centre for Russian music performance.<sup>157</sup> The BBC programme was titled *An Evening at the Red Sarafan: A Russian Caberet* (sic) produced by A.W. Hanson. BBC listings provide a cast of Russian singers and instrumentalists (émigrés) including Alexander Strelsky and his balalaika ensemble.

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<sup>153</sup> *The Times*, 19 November, 1915.

<sup>154</sup> *The Times*, 24 September, 1914.

<sup>155</sup> More commonly known as *The Marriage Proposal*. This One Act Comedy was first performed in Russia in 1890.

<sup>156</sup> This is more fully addressed in Chapter Four.

<sup>157</sup> *BBC Radio Times*, Issue 611/34.

Strelesky was a noted Russian tenor and frequently appeared alongside Olga Alexeeva (soprano) on Medvedeff's radio broadcasts of Russian music in the 1930s. Vladimir Zaaloff appears as balalaika soloist with the Emilio Colombo Red Sarafan Orchestra. Emilio Colombo had been a court violinist to the Tsar. The Siberian Cossacks appear directed by Captain Sorokin as do the Novaya Derevnnya Gipsies<sup>158</sup> and Marina Yurlova (singer?). The programme aimed to provide a format for a changing repertoire of balalaika music, solo instrumentalists and vocal artists, and an audio suggestion of dancers. This programme had the ambitious intention to regularly employ Russian musicians living in London and broadcast Russian music to different regions of the country on a regular basis but the format did not endure.

The nature of short contracts and stiff competition reflected in the foregoing examples of employment, compounded by difficulties faced dealing with managements and employment systems, often led to financial insecurity. The Russian Balalaika Orchestra (Russian Imperial Balalaika Orchestra) conducted by Victor Abaza appeared in London at the Palace Theatre in 1910 at the time of Andreeff's concerts at the Coliseum. Abaza, a balalaika player and composer, had formed a balalaika orchestra while still a student at the St. Petersburg Imperial School of Law (he graduated in 1897). As an émigré he lived in France & Monte Carlo and between 1920-1930 his balalaika ensemble performed regularly in Paris & Nice. The orchestra's debut at the Palace Theatre in London had the distinction of playing for the second of Pavlova's London farewell concerts. Pavlova danced to balalaika accompaniment in a tribute to her Russian compatriots.<sup>159</sup> Despite this opportunity, Abaza met with poor audiences in London which led to financial shortcomings despite the alleged patronage of the Grand Duke Sergius; patronage was not a buffer to financial difficulties.<sup>160</sup> The orchestra migrated to Manchester where it was hoped finances would improve but Abaza withheld salaries, players refused to perform, Abaza absconded and left his players to appeal to the Russian consulate to be repatriated. Andreeff organized a joint concert, the proceeds of which supported the stranded players.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Derevnnya is a Gypsy suburb on the outskirts of St. Petersburg.

<sup>159</sup> *The Globe*, 8 August and 9 August, 1910.

<sup>160</sup> The mention of Sergius' patronage in publicity and reviews may have been an advertising ploy giving the orchestra some distinction. The extent of his patronage is not mentioned.

<sup>161</sup> 'Scandal with Russian balalaika players in Manchester', *Leaflet (Listok)*, St, Petersburg, 6 October, 1910.

There was a notion, encouraged by the King,<sup>162</sup> that a balalaika band could be formed in one of the regiments in England similar to those formed in Russian regimental bands and on Russian ships.<sup>163</sup>



Figure 14 Russian Sailors with Balalaikas on Board Ship

Twelve musicians from the Coldstream Guards were taught to play the balalaika – ‘after only eight lessons, [they] are already able to play.’<sup>164</sup> Lieutenant Rogan formed a band of twenty balalaikas and domras imported from Russia. The Guardsmen appeared for the first time in public at the Scala Theatre in a Sunday concert in 1910 with Troyanovsky as soloist and conductor.<sup>165</sup> They appeared again at the Queen’s Hall with Prince Tchagadaeff conducting; ‘a spruce young man of about 25, with raven black hair brushed *a la Anglaise*. It is no little testimony to native enterprise and skill that within a month or so of the Russian orchestra’s season at the Coliseum, London has a Balalaika orchestra of its own. Half of the 40 players are members of one of the crack bands of the Guards, and at the functions they attend throughout the country their programmes will include balalaika selections.’<sup>166</sup>

Tchagadaeff writes to Andreeff in 1910:

<sup>162</sup> *The Evening Telegraph and Post*, 15 December, 1909.

<sup>163</sup> Balalaika orchestras in Russia were closely associated with Imperial Guard regiments of which there were reportedly thirty-six. Each regiment had its own balalaika orchestra. *The Morning Post*, 22 November, 1909.

<sup>164</sup> *The Graphic*, 11 December, 1909.

<sup>165</sup> *The Daily News*, 25 October, 1910.

<sup>166</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 16 April, 1910. Despite these mentions in the press Colin Dean, Household Division bands archivist, states that there are no mention in the *Guards Magazine* regarding these concerts. Colin Dean, e-mail to the author, 4 December, 2018.

'The orchestra played marvellously, we had to play lots of 'encores', the press reviews were the very best, altogether complete success. The same could not be said for material success, as the fee barely covered the expenses.... I am now preparing for a second concert in view of this tremendous success. This time it will be organised and directed by Rogan, the conductor of the Goldstream (sic) orchestra. He is in no doubt as to its success and has therefore decided to help me. I am deeply satisfied with the results of my work with the orchestra and the reception accorded to me by the public exceeded all my expectations....

All my hopes here are on the Goldstream (sic) Regiment. One is very aware of the lack of literature for the orchestra, beautiful Russian songs which would bring pleasure to the musicians as well as the audience. And if there is something you can do to help me in this regard, then I will be eternally grateful....'<sup>167</sup>

Despite this enthusiastic beginning the balalaika enterprise within the Coldstream Guards did not last. The Coldstream Guards enterprise is discussed in Chapter Four.

Such initiatives to form professional and amateur ensembles is indicative of Andreeff's efforts to popularize the balalaika in English society.<sup>168</sup> Tchagadaeff and Troyanovsky<sup>169</sup> took on this responsibility on behalf of Andreeff and became energetic teachers, soloists, composers and conductors with these newly formed local bands:

Dear Vassili Vassilievich!

The Goldstream (sic) Regiment has received the instruments sent earlier. They will shortly begin rehearsals and have asked me to assist. My first amateur orchestra is progressing in leaps and bounds. .... It's not long now before I'll be performing with them. Tomorrow, Saturday the 16th I'm performing for the first time at the "Bechstein Hall" in a charity concert.

A. Tchagadaeff.<sup>170</sup>

Despite these positive initiatives there were difficulties:

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<sup>167</sup> Bernard Borisovich Granovsky, *V. V. Andreeff - Material & Documents (B.B.Андреев – материалы и документы)* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1986), pp. 179-181.

<sup>168</sup> *The Era*, 9 April, 1910.

<sup>169</sup> Troyanovsky returned to Russia to form a balalaika orchestra together with S. Sobolev, A. Ilyukhin, and P.I. Alexeyev in 1919. This orchestra was named First Moscow Great-Russian Orchestra of Folk Instruments. In later incarnations it became the well-known Osipov State Russian Folk Orchestra now known as the National Academic Orchestra of Folk Instruments of Russia. Tchagadaeff also returned to Russia in 1916 after becoming bankrupt. Debtor's name: Tchagadaeff, H.H. Prince; Address, 196 Holland Road, London. The Bankruptcy Act 1914 – Petition Files April 12, 1915; Receiving Order No 187, May 6, 1915. *The Times*, 21 July, 1915. Tchagadaeff rejoined Andreeff's orchestra but in 1919 was arrested and was jailed in the Lubyanka and Taganka prisons. He taught at the *Bolshevo Working Commune OPTU No. 1*. Later in life Tchagadaeff conducted and taught at the October Music School in Moscow. He published ten volumes of pieces for folk orchestra and *A Handbook for Organisers of Folk Orchestras (balalaika & domra) in Working Men's and Red Army Clubs and Schools*, Moscow 1925.

<sup>170</sup> Granovsky, 'V. V. Andreeff - Material & Documents,' pp. 179-181. Letter to Andreeff, 15 January, 1910, London.

December [1909] ... there are no pupils so far ... during our absence things have fallen somewhat by the wayside - gone are the masses of clients, bookings etc.... I think everything will improve again, but one will have to work and work. Possibly I will have to perform more often, both solo or with my group... I'm considering ... a trial concert.... I received an invitation from Mr. Stoll to perform on Saturday in one of his theatres - the Empire. He wants to give it a try, so to speak, so I won't be getting paid. If successful, I am to be booked for a week.... I'll start giving lessons on January 4th (old calendar).<sup>171</sup>

As early as 1899, before Andreeff's visit, it had been considered possible to introduce the instrument in the country; '... it is quite in harmony with our ideas of music, and is yet sufficiently national in character to surprise us and add the fascination of novelty to charm and delicacy.'<sup>172</sup> Andreeff hoped for a universal acceptance of the balalaika and its adoption in English music making:

(Tchagadaeff), 'I try to publicize it everywhere possible .... I am altogether glad that the balalaika here is not looked upon in the same way as in Russia, but rather even with respect that such a simple-looking instrument can give so much in terms of sound, technique and other things. *There is absolutely no doubt that in a few years the balalaika will be "anglicized."* [my italics]. Luthiers attempting to make balalaikas have already appeared, although unsuccessful so far.'<sup>173</sup>

Andreeff promoted the instrument as easier to learn than the pianoforte or violin and proved his point by teaching the stagehands at the Coliseum how to play the instrument.<sup>174</sup> He hoped the instrument would be taken up in homes and community ensembles and to this end balalaikas were imported from Russia by the Clifford Essex Music Company and they could be bought relatively cheaply for fifteen shillings. Balalaika lessons were given by Clifford Essex, Emile Grimshaw, Bert Bassett and Tchagadaeff (£3. 3s. for 12 lessons).<sup>175</sup> Lessons were also advertised in the Coliseum programme as 'given by members of the orchestra by arrangement.' The *Clifford Essex Balalaika Tutor* was published in 1910 and in April 1914 the *B.M.G.* magazine began a monthly series of articles on how to play the balalaika. Playing techniques were discussed, scores provided, and explanations of Andreeff's method of staff notation (a cipher system similar to lute tablature)<sup>176</sup> which provided fingering and note identification which

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 179-181. Letter to Andreeff, January, 1910.

<sup>172</sup> *The Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 15 November, 1899.

<sup>173</sup> Granovsky, 'V. V. Andreeff - Material & Documents,' pp. 179-181. Letter to Andreeff, 20 February, 1910.

<sup>174</sup> *The Inverness Courier*, 2 November, 1909: 'Mr Andreeff...contends that anyone with the smallest amount of trouble can master the art of drawing forth music from the instrument in a fortnight. This experiment was also reported in the Coliseum programme.

<sup>175</sup> Present day equivalent: £406.20 for 12 lessons.

<sup>176</sup> Kiszko provides an example of cipher notation in Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' p. 134.

differed from conventional staff notation.<sup>177</sup> This was to facilitate players who had no formal musical training and who played by ear. Pupils were also encouraged to join one of the balalaika orchestras in London.



Figure 15 *Santa Lucia* arranged by A. Ilyukhin. Notation and Ciphre

Newspaper articles devoted entire supplements to the balalaika and how to play it and the Coliseum programme advertised copies of all music played at the concerts as well as instruments sold by Messrs' Breitkopf and Härtel.<sup>178</sup> The demand for instruments is reflected in Tchagadaeff's letter to Andreeff, 'Why didn't you send piccolo and bass domras? Their absence is sorely felt ... When will the table gusli be ready? There are already orders, and everyone has to be palmed off with a "soon, soon". Is it not possible to hurry Gergens, and if possible, to then send a couple, since they will probably be acquired quickly.'<sup>179</sup>

<sup>177</sup> There were three popular Tutors: Clifford Essex and Prince Tchagadaeff (of the Russian Imperial Court Orchestra) and Emile Grimshaw, n.d. *The Essex Balalaika Tutor: Practical Theoretical and Illustrated* (London: Clifford Essex Co.).

n.a. n.d. *The Simplicity Tutor: The Balalaika* (London: Hawkes and Son).

W. Nassonow, n.d. *Practical Balalaika Tutor for Self-Instruction: Theory – Studies-Melodies-Pieces and Duets in Modern Notation. Parts 1 and 2* (Leipzig; St Petersburg; Moscow; Riga; London: Julius. H. Zimmermann). Stamped: Bought at Breitkopf and Härtel, London.

Bibs Ekkel, *Complete Balalaika Book: A Comprehensive Guide and Tutor* (Mel Bay Publications, 1997) provides a more recent Tutor.

<sup>178</sup> *The Morning Post*, 29 November, 1909. An enquiry to Breitkopf and Härtel in London received the response that, contrary to advertising and mentions in the press, they have no records of importing balalaikas or dealing with Andreeff at that time and did not publish balalaika scores for domestic use. Mathias Otto, e-mail to the author from Breitkopf and Härtel, 17 September, 2020.

<sup>179</sup> Letter to Andreeff from Tchagadaeff, 20 February, 1910, in Granovsky, 'V. V. Andreeff – Material & Documents,' pp. 179-181.



April, 1910.]

B.M.G.

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REPRINTED from the "DAILY MAIL," March 5th, 1910.  
INTERVIEW WITH CLIFFORD ESSEX.



### How to Play the Balalaika.

THE GROWING POPULARITY OF THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL INSTRUMENT.

says that the balalaika is far easier to play. He has known pupils who have practically mastered it in eight lessons, and some who have been able to perform quite pleasingly after two weeks' practice. The instruments, which are all imported from Russia, are simple yet handsome in appearance. Some of the most ornately decorated ones may cost as much as £25, but they can be obtained as low as eight or thirty shillings.

The keyboard is something like that of a banjo, but is shorter, and there are only three strings. The first peculiarity that strikes the beginner is that two of the strings are tuned to the same note—E. The other string is tuned to A.

It is not played like the banjo, the mandoline, or the guitar, but in a manner quite peculiar to this one instrument.

The thumb of the left hand slides up and down the two E strings, while the other fingers are used for the higher notes on the A string.

The first finger of the right hand is passed rapidly and lightly over the three strings, and as it moves backwards and forwards a "trill" effect is produced. Occasionally all the four fingers of the right hand are swept across the strings to give the effect banjoists call the "rasp."

A hundred different effects seem possible with the balalaika. One of its beauties is the rather plaintive sliding note produced by the thumb and fingers gliding up and down the strings.

When played as a solo instrument it sounds well accompanied by a piano, but the possibilities of the balalaika cannot be properly understood till an entire band has been heard.

A balalaika orchestra is composed of almost any number of players, and the instruments they use are of different sizes, but all of the same pattern. There are prima, secunda, alti, bassi, and contra-bassi balalaikas.

Londoneers will remember the haunting beauty of the Volga Boatman's Song, played by Prince Tchagadeff's band. It is supposed to represent the drifting chants sung by men as they carry heavy timber down the banks. Like sailors who sing as they weigh the anchor, the Volga boatmen find that music helps them to keep time.

**HAUNTING**

There seems every indication that the balalaika will soon be almost as well known in England as it is in its native Russia. Army men going abroad often take a few lessons before leaving England, knowing that its loudly staccato music will be appreciated.

Mr. Rudyard Kipling says the banjo is "the war-drum of the English round the world."

The sweeter-toned balalaika seems to be taking its place.

THE musical world has fallen in love with the balalaika. It is heard in drawing-rooms, on concert platforms, in Army mess-rooms; hostesses find that a balalaika band is a greater attraction at a musical "at home" than the most famous of violons.

The balalaika is an instrument that can get your nerves tingling. It suggests moonlight and serenades. It can be plaintive as the violin and as modishly sweet as the harp.

Russia invented it; for hundreds of years it has been the national instrument of the peasants; its strings ring through the long, white winters; it is heard at every summer sunset. For generations voices have blended with its tones, and dancing feet have tripped to its music.

Prince Tchagadeff, the leader of the Imperial Court orchestra, showed England the possibilities of the instrument last winter, when Mr. Andrew's band performed in London; but it is only recently that amateurs have made the balalaika a fashionable craze. To-day half the world seems to be learning it.

The first attraction about the balalaika is the real beauty of its tone. It is soft, sweet, haunting. The second point in its favour is that it is the easiest of all musical instruments to learn. Mr. Clifford Essex, who taught hundreds of well-known folk to play the banjo when the fashion for that instrument was at its height,

**Delicacy of Touch.** Inarticulate person, guide from vicinity to cultured society.

Mr. Clifford Essex begs to announce that his next

## Grand Concert

WILL TAKE PLACE AT

ST. JAMES'S HALL, GREAT PORTLAND STREET,

ON

Wednesday, June 8th,

AT 8 P.M.

In addition to the usual Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar features which have made all previous Concerts so successful, a great Novelty will be presented on this occasion by the appearance of a complete

## Balalaika Orchestra,

Conducted by Prince Tchagadeff, of the Russian Imperial Court Balalaika Orchestra.

Popular Prices: Stalls, 5/-; Second Seats (Numbered and Reserved), 3/-; Unnumbered, 2/-; Admission, 1/-. Plan at 15A, Grafton Street, New Bond Street, W.

In writing to Advertisers kindly mention "B.M.G."

Figure 16 Learn to Play the Balalaika

### 3.6 Repertoire

One of the attractions associated with the balalaika was the accessibility of its repertoire.

Arrangements for balalaika and domra were technically relatively easy to master. Repertoire specifically for balalaika and domra in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was

limited and mainly comprised of arrangements of Russian folk tunes (*Chansons Lyriques*),

dances, marches, wedding songs, and comic songs. Rose mentions melodies such as "The

Night" ... and certain tunes by Glinka, Tschaikovsky (sic), Vertofski, Lvov and other well-known

native musicians... The glorious folk melodies of Russia come mostly from the Volga district,

between Moscow and Nijni Novgorod.... The Kasatzock and Kamarinska are danced by the men,

and the Harovod is a village dance in which all join...<sup>180</sup>

<sup>180</sup> Rose, 'The Balalaika,' pp. 73-84.



Andreeff composed several *Valses* and *Marches* and Nikolai Petrovich Fomin (1864-1943), a close collaborator with Andreeff, adapted *Berceuses* and *Serenades* which suited the gentle whispering character of the balalaika. *Polonaises* and *Mazurkas* brought a Hungarian gypsy character to the repertoire.<sup>181</sup> Andreeff's development of the balalaika's capabilities also allowed for the addition of light classical repertoire. Fomin arranged potpourris of popular waltzes, opera overtures and arias, extracts from symphonies, concertos and suites. Works by Chopin, Schumann, Bizet and Grieg were popular as were works by Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, Taneyev, Borodin and Tchaikovsky which reflected the new repertoire of Russian national Art Music.<sup>182</sup> Tchaikovsky clearly approved of the balalaika.<sup>183</sup> A medley of Tchaikovsky's waltzes<sup>184</sup> and a *Fantasie*, which included fragments of the Fourth Symphony and the Piano Concerto in B flat minor, became extremely popular with audiences.<sup>185</sup> Large-scale, more complex works for balalaika and domra ensemble did exist such as Glazunov's *Russian Fantasy* Opus 86, dedicated to Andreeff's Great Russian Orchestra (1906).<sup>186</sup> This is Glazunov's only work for balalaika. On tour in the UK Andreeff also turned to English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish tunes obviously with an eye to public approval and eliciting a sentimental response. Patriotic songs and national anthems were also arranged with the intention of rousing the audience to patriotic fervour;

A few nights ago, by way of conveying his sense of the gratification he had experienced from the welcome accorded him by the British public, the conductor added "Rule Britannia" to the pieces which had been performed, and the enthusiasm of the Coliseum audience knew no bounds. There is no question about it – the Balalaika Orchestra has achieved in London what the French call a "souche fou".<sup>187</sup>

We have two examples of typical repertoire chosen for royal performances, selected by Princess Henry of Battenberg and another by the Queen:

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<sup>181</sup> The gypsy ensemble was popular on country estates owned by Russian aristocracy – many of whom maintained their own gypsy ensembles.

<sup>182</sup> *The Graphic*, 30 October, 1909.

<sup>183</sup> Mention of Tchaikovsky's approval of the balalaika is discussed in Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' p. 136 and Note 5.

<sup>184</sup> *The Times*, 28 September, 1909.

<sup>185</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 October, 1909. It is unlikely this *Fantasie* was arranged by Tchaikovsky but the review implies that it was. Repertoire selected by Princess Henry of Battenberg for a concert at the Coliseum includes a *Fantasie* by Tchaikovsky. *The Leeds Mercury*, 5 November, 1909. I have found no formal record of an arrangement for balalaika orchestra composed by Tchaikovsky.

<sup>186</sup> A rare handwritten (copy) of this work is in the possession of Bibs Ekkel. The MS was part of Nikolai Medvedeff's score library. A score for two piano reduction was published by J.H. Zimmermann, Leipzig; St Petersburg; Moscow; Riga; London in 1909.

<sup>187</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 October, 1909.

# PRINCESS HENRY'S CHOICE OF MUSIC

... the Princess's choice fell upon a Tschaikowsky (sic) "Fantasie", Grieg's "Album Blatt", Formeen's (sic) "Valse de Ballet", and Rieff's "Valse Caprice." The two Russian dances, "I Have Been Dancing with the Gnat" and "Bright Shines the Moon", the beautiful Russian folk songs "In a Pine Forest Roamed a Riderless Horse" and the "Song of the Boatman on the Volga."<sup>188</sup>

The programme chosen by Queen Alexandra for a concert at Windsor (November 20, 1909) included:<sup>189</sup>

- I Folk Songs and Dances
  - (a) *Chansons Lyrique*: "Over the River, the swift flowing river, bends the weeping willow"
  - (b) Wedding Song: "When the Bride enters the Town with the Golden Key"
  - (c) Dance: "Come Home, merry wives" (Arranged by N. Fomeen)<sup>190</sup>
- II Autumn Song: Tschaikowsky (sic)
- III "Greeting to England" – Valse: W.W. Andreeff<sup>191</sup>
- IV *Fantaisie*: Tschaikowsky (sic)
- V *Kamarinsky* – Danse Russe: Glinka  
(Solo – B. Troyanovsky)
- VI *Pareenia*-Danse Russe: W.W. Andreeff  
(Solo – B. Troyanovsky)
- VII Folk Song and Dance  
*Chanson Lyrique*: "O, my Garden, my Garden"  
Dance: "I have been Dancing with the Gnat"

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<sup>188</sup> *The Leeds Mercury*, 5 November, 1909.

<sup>189</sup> Programme is reported in *The Morning Post*, 22 November 1909. Spelling and composer's names are transcribed from the newspaper article. N. Fomeen should read N. Fomin in all instances.

<sup>190</sup> There is confusion amongst reporters regarding different musicians and the correct spelling of Fomin/Fomeen/Fomine. Boris Fomin (1900 -1948) Russian Band leader and arranger of band music. Basil Fomeen (1902-1985) was a band leader who emigrated to the United States after the revolution. Both would have been too young to assist Andreeff. Nicolai Petrovich Fomin (1869-1943) was a professional musician who joined Andreeff's orchestra and contributed many arrangements of folk melodies for the orchestra.

<sup>191</sup> A work with this title (*Greetings to England – Valse*) exists as a handwritten ms score in the possession of Bibs Ekel. There is no record of such a work amongst Andreeff's works. The title *Welcome to England – Waltz* is written on a piece of paper pasted over the original title. The work transpires to be Andreeff's *Recollections of Vienna* (arr. Fomin). Clearly the piece of music was used to fit the appropriate occasion, with a change of title intended to flatter the audience. The Ekel ms is part of the Eric Pendrell Smith collection of scores (stamped London Balalaika Orchestra) which Medvedeff acquired.

(Arranged by N. Fomeen)

VIII *Album Blatt*: Grieg

IX *Valse de Ballet*: "Life is a Dream"

(Arranged by N. Fomeen)

X "Bright shines the moon," Russian Dance

(Arranged by N. Fomeen)

XI "Song of the Boatman on the Volga." Folk Song

(Arranged by N. Fomeen)

At the time of their London visit Andreeff offered a repertoire of ninety-five works.<sup>192</sup> Not all pieces were played in one concert but varied between performances, the number next to each item would be indicated from the stage on boards for that evening's performance. This was a convention borrowed from Variety Theatre and would have been familiar to the audience at the Coliseum.

... THE ...

## Repertoire of the Russian Balalaika Orchestra.

Under the Direction of MESS. W. W. ANDREEFF.  
Soloist \* \* \* \* \* MESS. TROJANOWSKY.

*The Number of the piece to be played will be shown from the Stage.*

<p><b>FOLK SONGS, arranged by N. FOMEEN.</b> <b>Chansons Lyriques.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 "Do you remember, my darling"</li> <li>2 "Oh my garden, my garden"</li> <li>3 "Behind the Forest rise the black clouds"</li> <li>4 "When a maiden, I walked in this same garden"</li> <li>5 "Oh ye fields, ye endless fields"</li> <li>6 "In a pine forest roamed a riderless horse"</li> <li>7 "How long and dreary seem the Autumn nights"</li> <li>8 "Here dear brothers enjoy your life"</li> <li>9 "Oh Winter, Winter, how cold hast thou been"</li> <li>10 "In a high tower sat a Maiden"</li> <li>11 "At the door stood the horses of the unwilling bride"</li> <li>12 "Song of the Boatmen on the Volga"</li> <li>13 "Let me walk with you in the valley, beloved"</li> <li>14 "Over the river, the swift flowing river, bends the weeping-willow"</li> </ol> <p><b>Wedding Songs.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15 "The drunken berry" (sung when the loving-cup passes round)</li> <li>16 "When the bride enters the town with the golden key"</li> <li>17 "Oh my bridesmaids" (the bride bidding good-bye to her friends)</li> </ol> <p><b>Comic Songs.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18 "Our Happy Evening"</li> <li>19 "I am sitting on a little stone"</li> <li>20 "Molodki-Molodka" (sung to a young married woman)</li> <li>21 "My bagpipes"</li> <li>22 "When John went on the spree"</li> </ol>	<p><b>GRIEG.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>23 Peer Gynt Suite</li> <li>24 Album Blatt</li> <li>25 Solveig's Lied</li> <li>26 "I love you," Romance</li> </ol> <p><b>RIMSKI-KORSAKOFF</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>27 Fantaisie from Opera "Sadko"</li> <li>28 Song of the Indian from the Opera "Sadko"</li> <li>29 Leo's Song from the Opera "La Nuit de Mai"</li> </ol> <p><b>TSCHAIKOWSKY.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>30 Romance op. 5</li> <li>31 Autumn Song</li> <li>32 Le Premier Réve</li> <li>33 Maladie</li> <li>34 Fantaisie</li> <li>35 Valse du Ballet "La Belle au Bois Dormant"</li> <li>36 Chanson triste</li> <li>37 Chant sans paroles</li> <li>38 Andante cantabile</li> <li>39 Natasha's Song from the Opera "Opretschnik"</li> <li>40 Air from Opera "La Sorcière"</li> </ol> <p><b>GLAZOUNOFF.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>41 Grande Fantaisie Russe (Dedicated to the Balalaika Orchestra)</li> <li>42 The Minstrel's Song</li> </ol> <p><b>A. S. TANEFF.</b></p> <p>Berceuse</p> <p><b>BIZET.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>43 Fantaisie from "Carmen"</li> <li>44 Extrait Act IV. "Carmen"</li> </ol> <p><b>GLINKA.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>45 March from the Opera "Russian and Ludmila"</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>46 "Etoile du Nord," Romance</li> <li>47 "Romance," Duet</li> <li>48 "Doubt," Romance</li> </ol> <p><b>BORODINE.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>49 Peasants' Chorus from the Opera "Prince Igor"</li> <li>50 "In Central Asia," Musical Poem</li> </ol> <p><b>SERENADES.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>51 Abt.</li> <li>52 Drigo</li> <li>53 Schubert</li> </ol> <p><b>BERCEUSES.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>54 Yonkefeld</li> <li>55 Spendiareff</li> <li>56 Fomeen</li> <li>57 W. W. Andreeff</li> <li>58 Godard</li> <li>59 Moszkowski</li> </ol> <p><b>POLONAISES.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>60 Polonaise Brillante By W. W. Andreeff</li> </ol> <p><b>MAZURKAS.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>61 Mazurka No. 1. By W. W. Andreeff</li> <li>62 Mazurka No. 2. By W. W. Andreeff</li> <li>63 Polka-Mazurka By W. W. Andreeff</li> </ol> <p><b>DANCES.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>64 Danse d'Auvergne By N. Fomeen</li> <li>65 Coquette By N. Fomeen</li> <li>66 "Pawa" By N. Fomeen</li> <li>67 "Toreador and Andalouse" By A. Rubinstein</li> <li>68 "Horovod" By N. Fomeen</li> <li>69 "Barenia" By W. W. Andreeff</li> <li>70 "Kamarinskaia" By Glinka</li> <li>71 "I have been dancing with the Goat"</li> <li>72 "Bright shines the Moon"</li> </ol>	<p><b>DANCES (continued)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>73 "Come home, merry wives"</li> <li>74 "In the Garden"</li> <li>75 "I travelled round the world but could not find my Love"</li> <li>76 "Sun in the sky, stop shining" By W. Nassenoff</li> <li>77 "Let us dance, maidens" Danse Russe</li> <li>78 "Dance of the Postillions" Danse Russe</li> </ol> <p><b>VALSES BY W. W. ANDREEFF.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>79 Greeting to England</li> <li>80 Fawn</li> <li>81 Meteor</li> <li>82 Butterfly</li> <li>83 Caprice</li> <li>84 Souvenir de Gatchina</li> <li>85 Rowing</li> <li>86 Balalaika</li> <li>87 Improvisé</li> <li>88 Feuille d'Album</li> <li>89 Orchid</li> </ol> <p><b>VALSES BY N. FOMEEN</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>89 Deux Valses Caractéristiques</li> <li>90 Valse de Ballet, "Life is a Dream"</li> </ol> <p><b>DRIGO.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>91 Bluettes</li> </ol> <p><b>SCHUMANN.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>92 "Warum"</li> </ol> <p><b>CHOPIN.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>93 Prelude</li> <li>94 Nocturne</li> </ol> <p><b>FOMEEN.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>95 Overture from the Opera "The Seven Knights and the Charina," arranged by Fomeen</li> </ol>
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Figure 17 Repertoire in the Andreeff Coliseum Programme, 1909

<sup>192</sup> Reports vary as to the extent of the repertoire.

### Chapter 3

The following table lists additional numbers not mentioned in the Coliseum programme but played by the orchestra during their three tours: <sup>193</sup>

<i>The Mower's Return</i>	Traditional
<i>Russian Melodies</i>	Arr. Nassonoff
<i>Mendelssohn Transcriptions</i>	Felix Mendelssohn
<i>Russian National Anthem</i>	Alexei Lvov
<i>Waltz</i>	Johann Strauss
<i>Waltz</i>	Riccardo Drigo
<i>Kamarinskaya – Danse Russe</i>	Mikhail Glinka
<i>Valse Caprice</i>	J.G. von Rieff
<i>Sur tes yeux je voyais des larmes</i>	Victor Abaza
<i>Toreador et Andalouse</i>	Anton Rubinstein
<i>Because</i>	Guy d'Hardelot
<i>Yip-i-addy-i-ay!</i>	Grossmith <sup>194</sup>
<i>Pieces</i>	Anton Arensky
<i>Songs</i>	Feodor Akimenko
<i>Songs</i>	Cesar Cuti (sic?) Cui?
<i>Songs</i>	Alexander Borodin
<i>Prelude: Traviata</i>	Giuseppe Verdi
<i>Petite Valse</i>	Riccardo Drigo
<i>Au clair de lune</i>	Claude Debussy?
<i>Warrior's Chorus: Kitezh</i>	Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
<i>Weeping Willow</i>	Pyotr Tchaikovsky

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<sup>193</sup> This additional repertoire list is drawn from mentions in newspaper publications and programmes.

<sup>194</sup> Composed by Americans William D. Cobb and John H. Flynn in 1908. The song was given adapted lyrics by George Grossmith Jnr. and included in Act 2 of the musical *Our Miss Gibbs* at the Gaiety Theatre in London, 1909.

### Chapter 3

<i>North Star</i>	Mikhail Glinka
<i>Intermezzo: Madame Butterfly</i>	Giacomo Puccini
<i>Aria: Madam Butterfly</i>	Giacomo Puccini
<i>Absent (song)</i>	
<i>Red Sarafan</i>	Alexander Varlamoff
<i>If I might Only Come to You (song)</i>	Traditional
<i>Selection from Il Trovatore</i>	Giuseppe Verdi
<i>Wooden Soldiers</i>	Leon Jessells
<i>Caucasian Knife Dances</i>	Traditional
<i>Troika</i>	Traditional
<i>1812 Overture</i>	Pyotr Tchaikovsky
<i>Barcarolle from Les Contes D' Hoffman</i>	Jacques Offenbach
<i>Overture from The Life of the Tsar</i>	Mikhail Glinka
<i>March "For the Front"</i>	A. Williams of the Grenadier Guards
<i>Overture: Raymonda</i>	Schubert
<i>Intermezzo: Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	Pietro Mascagni
<i>Selection of Scottish Airs</i>	
<i>Rag-time ditties</i>	
<i>The Rosary (song)</i>	Ethelbert Nevin
<i>Tennessee (song)</i>	
<i>National Anthems of the Allies</i>	
<i>Tipperary</i>	
<i>Selection of British National Airs</i>	
<i>The Men of Harlech (song)</i>	
<i>The Dear Little Shamrock (song)</i>	

<i>Annie Laurie (song)</i>	
<i>Scottish Reels</i>	
<i>The British Grenadiers</i>	
<i>Recollections of Vienna</i>	W.W. Andreeff
<i>Rule Britannia</i>	Thomas Arne

It is significant that very few early manuscripts of these numerous arrangements used by these professional balalaika ensembles have survived. Kiszko mentions<sup>195</sup> the likely situation that some players (military men) in Andreeff's orchestra played by ear. Medvedeff also mentions that very often, due to time constraints, he wrote simple arrangements in short-hand and cipher on scraps of score paper to assist less experienced players. Scores frequently used chord sheets and shorthand in arrangements hastily put together for broadcasts. Examples of Medvedeff's score writing can be found in Appendix B.<sup>196</sup> The conductor's reductions for *Why Worry?* and *The Red Headed Family* provide the vocal melody line (together with the lyrics), essential instrumental figures and an outline of rhythm and underlying harmonies. His writing for prima balalaikas (*Why Worry?*) indicates the balalaikas are split into two sections (using two-voice chords). This is more consistently indicated in his arrangement for prima balalaikas for *The Red Headed Family* where balalaikas play more consistently together. Medvedeff occasionally splits the balalaikas into three voices, for example for *Mother Do Not Scold Me* and *The Red Headed Family*, particularly at punctuated moments in the melody line or to emphasise harmony. His writing for bass indicates essential figures played by other instruments to provide orientation for the basses. His notation also shows his idiosyncratic writing of note stems below the middle line which lie on the opposite side of the notehead to conventional writing. The arrangements are clearly sketchy and suggest they were hastily written down perhaps betraying the time pressure in rehearsals for broadcasts.

Short rehearsal time and the need to arrange music for special occasions was a constant factor for balalaika ensembles. 'At Homes', occasions where national anthems or particular requests were played to honour guests, required hasty arrangements. It was not until c.1906 that the composer Fomin assisted Andreeff by developing a system of tablature and notation for balalaika and domra suitable for publication. Arrangements generally avoided complex string writing which made most works accessible to amateur players at the risk of perpetuating a view

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<sup>195</sup> Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' p. 133.

<sup>196</sup> These are the only examples of Medvedeff's score writing held by the BBC scores Library. are held in the BBC Scores Library. See Bibliography.

that these compositions were inferior. Nikolai Medvedeff (Chapter Four) broadcast a Russian music programme on the BBC throughout the 1930s and again after World War II. He composed arrangements of Russian folk songs and classical repertoire for his ensemble and possessed a large collection of balalaika scores. His radio listings, while acknowledging composers (such as Andreeff), always end with the proviso, 'All arrangements by Medvedeff'. Appendix B contains the only examples the author has located of manuscripts written by Medvedeff.

By the 1930s more complex works were composed specifically for balalaika though these were few in number:<sup>197</sup> Wassilenko's (1872-1956) *Concerto for Balalaika and Orchestra* attempted complex virtuosic string writing for balalaika in a desire to reach art-work proportions and demands. Similarly, Ippolitov-Ivanov's (1859-1935) *Fantaziya (Fantasia) for Balalaika* made technical demands beyond the reach of most amateur players. Virtuoso works such as Andreeff's *Valse Caprice*<sup>198</sup> were popularized by balalaika virtuosos such as Boris Troyanovsky, soloist with Andreeff between 1904–1911. Troyanovsky promoted the balalaika as a solo instrument with extensive range, capable of bravura displays, and capable of evoking intense nostalgia and emotional expression.

The reliance on arrangements and transcriptions was not always critically approved with the view that the original score could not be improved upon or suited to such treatments. Despite such carping the concerts at the Coliseum presented a classical repertoire to an audience which may not have chosen to listen to such music in the first place. Popular concerts brought classical repertoire to a middleclass increasingly eager for entertainment and enjoyment of Art Music and dance; performance art-forms only recently largely the preserve of the leisured classes.<sup>199</sup> Kiszko discusses the democratic thrust effected by the balalaika orchestra in the American context – the melting-pot of nations and the evolution of a plural society of cultures which created a legitimate space for the popular reception and absorption of Russian

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<sup>197</sup> Alexander Gretchaninov; *Sonatas and a Rondo* for balalaika with piano accompaniment, Opus 188 and 199, (both 1948). Boris Goltz; two works for Balalaika: *Elegie in E minor for Balalaika and Piano (Slow Melody and Dance)* and *Dance Melody* (1939). Sergei Wassilenko (Vassilenko); *Balalaika Concerto*, Opus 63 (1929), (Leipzig, Universal Edition, 1932). Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov; *A Village Evening – A Fantasy on a Russian Folk Theme for Balalaika and Large Orchestra*, Opus 64, (1934), Aleksei Davidov; *Gavotte and Mazurka* for balalaika and piano (1939).

<sup>198</sup> J.G. von Rieff or W.W. Andreeff – both wrote a *Valse Caprice* but sources do not specify which one was played.

<sup>199</sup> Theatre performances in London's West End tended to begin at five or six o'clock in the evening. Dress for the stalls and circle was evening wear. Both factors precluded working people who could not get to the theatres on time after work nor had the time to change and have the money for evening wear. They were relegated to the 'gods' if they could manage to attend – a subtle division of classes.

repertoire.<sup>200</sup> In the English context, with its entrenched class system, the move towards forging a national music of its own found a resistance to embracing influences from Europe. The influx of German Jewish composers in the late 1930s, for instance, was not encouraged. Academic posts, conductorships, positions within orchestras, even teaching posts (private and institutional), were made difficult to access for foreign musicians coming to the UK. German musicians such as Has Gal were detained and interned as enemy aliens in the UK on the eve of the Second World War. By contrast Russian musicians, as allies, were free to pursue a music career if they could secure it. It is perhaps for these reasons that balalaika orchestras and their repertoire of Russian folk songs, dances and classical works were viewed more as colourful examples expressive of a distant culture which did not threaten the development of English music. Rosa Newmarch, in a discussion of Tchaikovsky, suggests that Russian music (Art-Music?) did have some influence on English music in that it encouraged a more overtly emotional content in British music where orchestrations became more flamboyant: 'As to young composers, the influence of Russian music has been extensive and salutary. They have learned from Tchaikovsky a certain emotional pessimism and in general the art of effective orchestration.'<sup>201</sup> Accessible composed works of a lighter character arranged for balalaika orchestras came increasingly to the realm of popular music and were listened to by all classes in England (usually in Variety Theatre concerts), a remarkable occurrence not lost on commentators: 'The greatest triumph of all however, is the capture of the Coliseum audience, some three thousand strong, which listens enraptured to Tschaikovsky's (sic) "Autumn Song." A few years ago that would have been impossible.'<sup>202</sup>

The popularity of the balalaika, found in the formation of professional and amateur balalaika ensembles, and the enjoyment of Russian folk music and dance in the UK in the early twentieth century, a popularity found across the class divide, is a remarkable occurrence indicative of the presence of a creatively active Russian community of musicians. Russian musicians performed music not only as a means of earning a living but also as a performative practice which bound them together in close-knit ensembles within the diaspora. Performance of folk music was an affirmation of identity, a recognition of an inherited musical culture, affirmed in displacement, in the many spaces and places of a foreign environment. Music marked a place for themselves and affirmed a deep-felt set of values brought from Russia and practiced within their host

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<sup>200</sup> Kiszko, 'The Origins and Place of the Balalaika in Russian Culture,' p. 53.

<sup>201</sup> Rosa Newmarch, *The Musical Times*, 1 April, 1911, pp. 226-227 and '... familiarity with the Russian school in general has imparted immense style and brilliance to our orchestration during the last ten years.' Rosa Newmarch, 'Chauvinism in Music,' *The Edinburgh Review*, July 1912, p. 101.

<sup>202</sup> *The Graphic*, 30 October, 1909.



community. Music evoked nostalgia for a Homeland through performative action. The social cultural cohesion of the diaspora, found in the performance of music in the community, does not appear to have been a primary conscious objective. Rather, the performative act was primarily a means to survival. Musicians such as Andreeff and his players succeeded in rousing and maintaining an interest in Russian music in the UK, creating a willing receptivity (in the face of the shifting relationship Britain had with the emerging Soviet state) which could be exploited socially and financially by musicians arriving after the revolution. Interest too stemmed from a resurgence of folk idioms, the pursuit of musical novelty, interest in new forms of music-making and newly discovered instruments, and the creation of exciting, exotic, extravaganzas in entertainment. How deep-rooted Russian folk music came to be entrenched in English music-making is debateable but we are, nevertheless even today, able to hum 'Yoho heave ho, Yoho heave ho...' without a second thought as to the provenance of this haunting Russian folksong found in our musical vocabulary.

## **Chapter 4 Russian Musicians in Theatre and Entertainment**

Russian refugees arrived in the UK with very little finance or possessions but some of the musicians did have skill playing musical instruments such as the balalaika and domra which they brought with them. London was also to see the arrival of professional Russian classical dancers, singers and concert musicians. The following discussion examines a number of these musicians finding professional employment in the entertainment industry. Nikolai Medvedeff, a balalaika/domra player and leader of balalaika ensembles, provides the main focus for discussion, with shorter interludes focussing on the Wolkowsky Troupe (a family of musicians and dancers), and the tenor Vladimir Rosing. The activities of these musicians are examined in a variety of entertainment contexts: Variety Theatre, opera production, broadcasting for the BBC, performing for the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) during the Second World War and performing in public spaces such as restaurants and public parks.

These arenas for professional music-performance challenged these musicians, some of whom were amateur or semi-professional with no knowledge of professional procedures. These challenges were found in language difficulties which often led to misunderstandings, finesse in business proceedings, rehearsal procedures (theatre and broadcasting) and the demands of mounting a musical performance, the practicalities of maintaining ensembles and troupes particularly as members struggling financially, raising finances, finding favour with British audiences in their choice of repertoire, dealing with advertising and critical reviews, negotiating immigration requirements, contractual obligations with institutions such as the BBC, and conforming to union rules such as those of The Musicians' Union and the Variety Artistes' Federation.

The musicians considered here engaged strategies for negotiating these challenges and found a measure of public success. They performed Russian folk music and dance, introduced Russian operas and art songs (some of which were premiers in London), and promoted opera production values influenced by the Moscow Art Theatre. Musicians found critical acclaim and public enthusiasm for their balalaika and domra ensembles and were able to succeed, despite their displacement, and make a significant contribution to musical concert life in the UK.

## 4.1 Nikolai Medvedeff (1891-1963)

On the 13 September 1959 Luna 2, Russia's Second Soviet Cosmic Rocket, made a crash landing on the moon, the first human-made space vehicle to make contact with a celestial body in outer space in an attempt to explore a region beyond the confines of Earth – a journey to a foreign/alien place. The achievement of exploring other regions beyond home was a source of pride to the new Soviet government, an irony not lost on Nikolai Medvedeff living in exile in England for the past thirty-eight years.<sup>1</sup>

Despite 55 years of involvement with the balalaika, the formation of balalaika ensembles, and the performance of its repertoire in the UK since 1921, Medvedeff's life and work, that of a displaced Russian musician, remains a lost history in the annals of the British and Russian Light Music industry. Maurice Goreham in *Broadcasting and Television since 1900* makes the point that numerous smaller ensembles (naming Medvedeff's ensemble as an example) became household names during their professional lives as a result of their BBC broadcasts.<sup>2</sup> Despite Medvedeff's popularity virtually nothing has been formally documented about his contribution to music and theatre in the UK. This is perhaps understandable. He left Russia in his twenties, spent the First World War as a POW in Germany, in the UK he was a foreigner, a Russian, a refugee who struggled at first to speak English, who played a strange triangular musical instrument, who for the most part played a repertoire of strange folk-music from the land of snow and barren Steppes, and who operated on the fringes of musical and theatrical life. And yet, during his time as a professional musician in the UK, his balalaika orchestras were popular from 1925 through to the late 1950s. He played in two royal command performances and was heavily in demand at functions in aristocratic houses and charity performances.<sup>3</sup> His orchestra accompanied the immensely popular dancers Anna Pavlova and Nikolai Legat as well as the dancer, Lydia Kyasht, with whom he and his ensemble toured for three years with her cabaret show *A la Russe*. He formed his own balalaika ensembles, the Corps de Balalaika and Medvedeff's BBC Balalaika Orchestra, performing in Variety Theatres, concert halls and public

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<sup>1</sup> Medvedeff had been prevailed upon in 1959 to write about his life (both autobiographical and musical) to his friends Boris Alekseevich and Piotr Fomich who resided in Russia. He makes several requests to share his letters with Alexei Sergeevich Il'in and Boris Avksentiev. Bibs Ekkel notes that Boris Avksentiev was a member of the Avksentiev balalaika-playing dynasty. Yevgenii Grigorevich (1910-1989) was the most active performer of this group, one of the 'mighty five' of his time. His sons Boris and Konstantin played in the Osipov orchestra. Alexei Sergeevich Il'in was based in Moscow as conductor for the dance company *Beryozka*. Bibs Ekkel, e-mail to the author, 18 July, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Goreham, *Broadcasting and Television since 1900* (London: Andrew Dakers Ltd, 1952), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> These appearances were together with Alexander Wolkowsky's troupe which I discuss below.

parks up and down the land. In his later established years he broadcast regularly for the BBC Radio Service and toured during the Second World War as part of ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) bringing balalaika music to the British public and armed forces in selections of lighter classical works, opera and operetta extracts, ballet music, Russian folksongs and dances, newly composed salon pieces, and the new expanding repertoire of jazz numbers. He collected an extensive library of Russian folk music, published scores and original manuscripts, and composed his own balalaika arrangements tailored to the abilities of his players. He was also an active teacher of the balalaika and domra in his later years.

Much of the information about Medvedeff is gleaned from the reception of his performances in newspaper articles, trade journals, reviews and magazines articles. The BBC *Radio Times* listings mention his extensive music collection and the fact that he almost always composed his own arrangements for balalaika orchestra as a fact of impressive kudos. Attempts have been made to locate this lost library of music. The BBC written archive and score library have no knowledge of its existence and 'do not hold biographical information' on past employees.<sup>4</sup> This prompted a number of questions. Who was Nikolai Medvedeff and where was his collection of music? As an immigrant to this country how had he arrived here and manage to establish himself as a balalaika player with his own orchestra; what effect did his displacement have on these activities; and what were his encounters with the British musical establishment? Furthermore, his dogged determination to place the balalaika at the centre of his musical life and his consistent exploration of Russian folk music in a foreign environment appears risky particularly as Britain's relationship with Russia was ambivalent and the social and political order within Russia (resulting from the 1905 and 1917 revolutions) was undergoing fundamental changes. Why would anyone in the UK care for such music and consequently how did the balalaika and its music become so popular in the Light Music industry in this country? These questions led to further considerations in Chapter Five as to how memory and nostalgia for a past life, for the preservation of Russian national folk music, for the remembrance of a Russian way of life (which was fast disappearing), operate within Medvedeff's private, professional and musical outlook.

In 2021 a collection of Medvedeff's letters written towards the end of his life<sup>5</sup> between 1959 and 1960 was discovered.<sup>6</sup> These letters reveal that Medvedeff had begun sending his musical

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<sup>4</sup> Archivist e-mail to the author, BBC Written Archives, 4 September, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Medvedeff passed away in 1963.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A for a Report on the Letters. Upon the death of Medvedeff's wife in 1988 Bibs Ekkel took possession of Medvedeff's papers and scores, programmes, correspondence with the BBC music contract department, newspaper reviews and articles. Medvedeff's papers also

collection – printed manuscripts, his own arrangements and other ephemera (programmes, reviews, articles) – back to his sister and friends in Russia to form part of a balalaika archive there.<sup>7</sup> This seems a last-ditch attempt by Medvedeff to preserve his collection (which he thought was of little worth to anyone in England where the popularity of the balalaika had waned by 1960) and to secure in his letters a record, in some measure, of what he considered to be the important aspects of his private and professional life. Medvedeff mentions he was to be operated on in 1959 for an enlarged prostate and he may have had some presentiment that his time may be drawing to a close. The letters, then, are a selective, subjective, critical and nostalgic memory of time past.<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of his life in the late 1950s early 1960s, when the balalaika had properly fallen out of favour and radio had succumbed to television broadcasting, Medvedeff wryly noted of his English sojourn and his promotion of balalaika music in the UK: ‘Looking around me, it somehow seems to me that what Andreeff started here is up to me to finish. There’s no chink of light, and that is sad. I think that 1959 is not the last, but one of the last.’<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Andreeff and Tchagadaeff, Medvedeff did not come from an aristocratic/landowning privileged background. His general education was provincial. More specifically his musical education, theoretical understanding, ability to read and write music, and his ability to play the balalaika were acquired through trial and error and grasping at opportunities to learn from others. His parents were working people, his father worked for the railways, and after his schooling Medvedeff entered the military academy where a secure source of income could be guaranteed. His desire to attend university was never fulfilled due to WWI and, from the tone and comments in his letters, he felt intellectually and musically inferior all his life.<sup>10</sup>

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contained a collection of letters concerning his musical activities in the UK. These have been gifted to the author by Bibs Ekkel.

<sup>7</sup> Medvedeff acquired Eric Pendrell-Smith’s collection of music: ‘A week ago I sent you the rest of Smith’s repertoire, including printed music from his archive .... He collected everything printed in his time and, quite possibly, some publications don’t exist anymore....’, Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 18. It has not been possible to locate where these scores have been lodged in Russia. Repeated enquiries to *The Glinka National Museum Consortium of Musical Culture* have been unsuccessful.

<sup>8</sup> The collection contains meticulous lists of newspaper articles dealing with the balalaika and balalaika performers, not only Medvedeff’s but also Andreeff’s tours of the UK, Europe and America (1911-1913). The list records articles from named newspapers according to year and month and stretch back to 1888. This suggests Medvedeff may have consulted newspapers in the British Library. Newspapers from Berlin, München, Breslau, Vienna, Hamburg, Dusseldorf, Leipzig, Cologne, Halle, Paris, Rouen, Cherbourg, and Riga are noted. Copies of the reviews are not amongst his papers.

<sup>9</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> As late as 1959 just prior to a visit to Moscow Medvedeff laments the state of the balalaika in Russia but appears unsure of his judgement: ‘Even before arriving in Moscow, reading new scores and listening to orchestras on the radio, I saw that something was wrong, something that

The balalaika was the one constant factor in his life and became the centre of his professional activities due not so much from a conscious choice but to historical circumstances; revolution, WWI, displacement during his internment as a German POW for the duration of the War; and as a refugee in the UK dodging conscription in the White Army fighting alongside the British at the front in the Russian Civil War. Medvedeff turned to the balalaika as a source of income while he was working in a co-operative workshop fixing tractors, a skill he may have acquired as a prisoner of war.

Medvedeff's letters are an account in two halves, a) his early personal life and b) his professional musical activities in the UK. He divides his life into seven periods beginning with a substantial elegiac account of his birth, family, education, and early encounters with the balalaika. There is a mundane and restless intermission as a German POW during the First World War. He was captured only a few weeks into the war and remained a POW for the rest of it until his arrival in the UK in 1919.

The division of his life into periods provides a useful orientation as to when events occur and how influences and consequences of his actions operated in his professional life.<sup>11</sup>

Period 1: 1891–1920: Birth, family, education, early encounters with the balalaika, military academy and World War I

Period 2: 1921: The first orchestral group of a professional character

Period 3: 1923–1925: The arrival of the Wolkowsky family

Period 4: 1925–1928: Life with Lydia Kyasht

Period 5: 1928–1933: Incidental work

Period 6: 1933–1939: Radio work<sup>12</sup>

Period 7: 1940–(1960): The War and ENSA

His letters (written between September 1959 and February 1960) reveal a reticence of critical opinion coupled with mild flattery of Russian musicians and musical life mindful, no doubt, of

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should not have happened. I thought perhaps it was because I failed to understand something, that I hadn't received a good musical education and was out of touch.' Medvedeff Letters, 19 October 1959, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> There are confusions in his letters: For instance, Medvedeff names '1921: The first orchestral group...' as the First Period but later identifies this time as the Second Period, obviously considering his life in Russia and during the War as the First Period. Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, p. 12 and 1 October 1959, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Medvedeff continued to broadcast sporadically through to the early 1960s.

those authorities who, during the Cold War, may make it their business to peruse the contents of his letters. He may also have wished to avoid trouble for his Russian friends.

Biographical information is discussed when it betrays an influence on his musical choices and outcomes in his career. His involvement with the balalaika in his early life provided experience which helped him overcome difficulties as a musician in England and influenced his professional and musical choices in his later career. The letters also identify the ways Medvedeff's displacement chartered his career. Lastly, Medvedeff's personal thoughts on career and life, his self-reflection, illustrate how memory and nostalgia influenced his choice of repertoire, guided his approach to musicians and the formation of ensembles, and how he viewed the balalaika and its music in the general pattern of Light Music in the UK (and Russia). Finally, the outcome of this account is to assess the undoubted contribution Medvedeff made to musical life in the UK.

## 4.2 Russian Refugees and Musical Initiatives

Many first-generation émigrés and refugees of the first-wave had no desire to return to Russia to fight against their own people in a civil war.<sup>13</sup> Medvedeff's situation was typical of Russian POW soldiers sent from Germany to Britain after the First World War. Medvedeff's last camp was in Berkzen where prisoners were given certificates showing how long they had been prisoners: 'Mine was from 29th August 1914 (modern date system) to 23rd May 1919.'<sup>14</sup> Prisoners were informed they would be sent home via England. Upon arrival in the UK they were marched to barracks outside Newmarket in Cambridgeshire and again interned in readiness to be sent back to Russia to fight alongside the British. Medvedeff resisted this and managed to 'leave' camp with the help of English friends.<sup>15</sup> By July 1920 he was in London which remained his place of

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<sup>13</sup> See Sharman Kadish, *Bolsheviks and British Jews*, pp. 205-229. Kadish discusses the problems encountered because of forced conscription among Russian Jewish Refugees. Lucien Wolf suggested 'naturalisation' should be offered to refugees. In this way conscription could be expected of Jewish refugees. Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, pp. 41-89 discusses the conscription of Russian soldiers by the British Government and the Russians' reluctance to return to fight in the Civil War in Russia.

<sup>14</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, p. 88 gives details of Russian officers fighting alongside the British on the Western Front then returning to the UK: 'These officers were then stationed at Bovington Camp where they joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Russian Tank Division. In 1919 at the close of the War these officers were moved to Newmarket [where Medvedeff was interned] and ordered to embark on a ship to the South of Russia to fight against the Bolsheviks....' In the event, when ordered to embark for Russia, they refused as a group: 'The Russian military order that I have in my archive recording the incident just says that 'the officers stayed in Britain.' Further research by Zakharov could not trace what became of these Russian soldiers. Possibly they were incorporated into the British army.

residence until his death in 1963. His professional life as conductor and musician was a peripatetic one; performance contracts took him to different venues across the country, sometimes at short notice, travelling by trains and buses, lodging in theatrical digs, cheap hotels and dormitories, always on the move on tour and living out of a suitcase. His sense of self and Russian identity, the Home of his childhood, was conjured through memory evoked in the Russian folk songs and dances he performed with his balalaika ensemble. Theodor Adorno, in his meditations on exile, articulates this process affirming a sense of being and belonging while in exile; 'For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing [or in Medvedeff's case - balalaika] becomes a place to live...' <sup>16</sup>

Lieutenant Medvedeff's English was rudimentary. He had learned some English while in the camps but, like many Russian refugees, fluency in the English language was a skill which hampered many in the quest for work and social acceptance. Business dealings were particularly stressful, as will become evident, and frequent misunderstandings occurred due to different business procedures. Medvedeff sought help, as did many Russian soldiers and refugees, from the Russian Red Cross, an organisation left over from Tzarist times. A branch had opened in London in 1916 to assist soldiers from the war front in Europe and in 1920 was still administered by the interim government. <sup>17</sup> The organisation in London had enormous funds at its disposal but money could not be spent without accountability and purpose which would satisfy the control board in England. Despite the funding Medvedeff received from the organisation he betrays a fundamental distrust of the organisation and the power structures within it.

The Russian Red Cross assisted refugees by organising them into artels, <sup>18</sup> a Russian pre-revolutionary cooperative association of craftsmen living and working together thereby supporting each other financially. Ex-soldiers were divided into categories according to their skills. Groups were formed for bookbinders, tobacconists, farmers and mechanical groups, for

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<sup>16</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott, (London: New Left Books, 1974 [1951]). p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> *The Russian Red Cross* was founded in 1893. A branch opened in London in 1916 as a consequence of the First World War. In the 1920s, when Medvedeff arrived in London, it was still officially under the control of the Interim Government in Russia and its offices were housed in Chesham House, the Russian Embassy. Ironically, it provided assistance to exiles and soldiers fleeing the Revolution. After the Second World War it provided shelter from both German and Russian oppression. In 1948 it became known as the *Russian Benevolent Society* 1917 to distinguish it from the *International Red Cross*. The name was again altered to the *Russian Refugees Aid Society* in 1978 thereby embracing refugees from later Russian regimes. See Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, pp. 123-163 for Russian Societies based in London.

<sup>18</sup> Manya Gordon, 'Education and Self Government in Russia,' *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 1918, 138: pp. 270-279 for a contemporary understanding of artel.



example. Medvedeff joined a tractor artel which serviced tractors.<sup>19</sup> Premises and farms were rented by the Red Cross and provided to each artel. Machinery and materials were owned jointly. Mechanics were given premises furnished with necessary tools and farmers were provided with land and machinery. The Red Cross offered loans to ex-soldiers to buy civilian clothes<sup>20</sup> and supported their needs until they became financially stable. Thereafter loans had to be repaid. While these loans were a relief it did bind the receiver to the commitment and refugees found it difficult to become independent. Members had to be prepared to work and were paid according to the hours they worked. All income was divided equally amongst members and although accommodation was provided, the men living communally, this could prove a precarious arrangement. The Red Cross, for example, sold the property housing Medvedeff's mechanical artel and he was forced to find private accommodation.

The relationship between the artels and the Red Cross was volatile and distrustful. The Red Cross was funded by wealthy Russians in London who were also members of the Anglo-Russian Club. Some of these members had been factory owners and landowners in Russia who wished to administer the Red Cross artel-cooperatives in London, to unite them into one overall cooperative to be named Anglo-Russian.<sup>21</sup> Each artel was to have a salaried director with an overall general director of the united cooperatives salaried by the Red Cross. Members of artels were to be paid by the hour and in accordance with their skill. Medvedeff's artel was concerned about this proposal and raised objections which aroused the anger of the Red Cross. The Red Cross suggested the mechanical artel sack its representatives, calling them Bolsheviks, and threatened it with closure. The majority of the members, fearful of the outcome, dismissed protesting members despite their good intentions. Clearly there were financial and power struggles within the organisations set up to assist Russian refugees in the UK.

The Russian Red Cross established a balalaika artel in London in September 1920 soon after Medvedeff's arrival. Medvedeff joined the artel. The group rehearsed once a week at the Russian Red Cross headquarters in Chesham House (the Russian Embassy). Some members possessed their own instruments (domras, balalaikas and mandolins) and the Red Cross also provided funds to purchase instruments. Some instruments were imported by Pilevin (an artel member) from Denmark where he had been interned during the war and where he had formed a balalaika

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<sup>19</sup> This is a skill he must have acquired as a POW but he does not mention it in his letters.

<sup>20</sup> Medvedeff notes that many Russians after the war still wore British officer uniforms, a matter of concern to the authorities when these 'officers' behaved in some inappropriate way. Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> This was the fate of the artel enterprise in the new Soviet Russia where all work was brought under the control of the state and self-employment initiatives were discouraged. See Manya Gordon, 'Education and Self Government in Russia,' pp. 270-279.

ensemble.<sup>22</sup> Members were measured and tailors employed to make Boyar costumes – also funded by the Red Cross. The self-appointed organiser and conductor of this co-operative was captain Marquis Vivien de Chateaubrun, wearing the uniform of an English staff officer.<sup>23</sup> The orchestra appointed a chairman and secretary from the members. Medvedeff, because of his previous experience with balalaika orchestras, was made Marquis de Chateaubrun's assistant and required to write out parts for the instruments.

The ensemble had thirty-two members (men and women). Fifteen players were former prisoners of war from internment camps and deserters from the White cause. Two Russians had 'got stuck' in England while on a business trip. The Revolution prevented them from returning to Russia. The rest were English citizens who had made a life in Russia but had left 'at the suggestion of the new Revolutionary Government as they did not wish to become Soviet citizens.'<sup>24</sup> They had been born in Russia and spoke no English. Some of the Russian women had married Englishmen. One member (Finley) from Bryansk, Medvedeff's home town, had served in Brasov and played in the local balalaika orchestra there on an estate. He couldn't speak English and his uncle (also an exile), before his arrival, had never heard English spoken. In Russia they had not become Russian citizens in order to avoid military service.

Amongst the members were 12-15 able musicians who possessed quality instruments made by superior luthiers in Russia (Medvedeff). This was a family unit (four of the women were female relatives, one a wife), all educated in Russia and the men had been employees of English businesses in St. Petersburg. The group had belonged to a wealthy English Club in St.

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<sup>22</sup> Medvedeff sarcastically reports that instruments imported by Pilevin were 'cheap Zimmerman products, some of them distorted and almost unplayable.' Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Medvedeff implies he may have been an imposter. There were members of the Russian nobility and armed forces who used questionable titles and rank to impress and gain influence. The captain Marquis Vivien de Chateaubrun may have been a Russian captain, now dressed in British Staff Officer uniform. The French flavoured Marquis emerged in Paris where he was organiser of entertainment at the Russian Embassy before appearing on the British scene where he ran the Kasbek restaurant. *Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, 6 April, 1935. His conducting and musical skills were questionable and lampooned by Medvedeff: 'I fully expected him to say something but he, having thanked me for my help in writing out the music, was otherwise engrossed, standing sideways to the room's enormous wall mirror and practising his conductor's hand movements. "We'll start with the waltz" – came the conductor's voice. "Ready?" "Three, four!" A sweep of the baton, a turn of the head towards the mirror with obvious self-satisfaction. But what's with the orchestra?...' After initially seizing the conductor's baton Chateaubrun was demoted. 'The Marquis phoned me and asked to be my assistant because he "so loved conducting". But his request was refused as he not only didn't play any instrument but was not interested in learning one due to being too busy. We ended up putting him on tambourine. I chose Finley as my assistant.' Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, pp. 11-12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

Petersburg where they had formed a folk ensemble of Russian folk instruments.<sup>25</sup> Nasonoff and Fomin (both composers and balalaika players who had assisted and worked with Andreeff) were invited as instructors, Andreeff had assisted with repertoire, and Troyanovsky performed with the group as balalaika soloist. They brought their instruments, and experience, with them to England.

Medvedeff took control of the artel orchestra as conductor with the proviso that any new conductor should be trialled for two or three weeks before being permanently employed. The new ensemble consisted of: 1 piccolo balalaika (the 9-year-old son of a lady domra player), 4 prima domras, 3 alto domras, 3 bass domras, 3 prima balalaikas, 2 secondo balalaikas, 2 altos, 2 basses, 2 contrabasses and percussion – spoons, tambourine, triangle’ (22 players plus possible extras). Medvedeff’s account of early rehearsals is humorous and sardonic and provides an account of a motley group of players of different abilities, mainly amateur. The underlying imperative evident in this enterprise was that refugees desperately needed to earn a living, find employment and purpose which would sustain them, and find an activity that was ‘self-contained’ within a group of like-minded members who spoke the same language and which did not force them to engage in English with wider English institutions, employers and business systems.

Medvedeff’s initial efforts to raise an amateur ensemble to professional standards were met with difficulties he had encountered in his youth. Only four players could read music. He used tablature to assist the players.<sup>26</sup> Players were confused and unclear about their ability to play and didn’t understand the etiquette of rehearsal and ensemble playing. Medvedeff drew on his extensive knowledge of balalaika repertoire to write simple arrangements which accommodated their limited skills. Players were taken into small groups and coached, learning their parts from memory by repeating from example. Medvedeff articulates the desperation faced by the players: These members ‘had signed up to the orchestra ... they needed money and rehearsals were paid ... they couldn’t be kicked out as they had also taken on a portion of the Red Cross loan, which had to be repaid.’<sup>27</sup> Members still needed to find alternative employment

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<sup>25</sup> Catherine Andreyev and Ivan Savický, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938*, p. 184 notes the Anglophilia of the Russian nobility which found expression in the formation of The English Club in St. Petersburg: ‘Anglomania spread amongst the highest ranks of the aristocracy in St. Petersburg at the beginning of the twentieth century.’

<sup>26</sup> Tablature was a system of notation which indicated the use of fingering and strokes rather than the notation of notes (pitches) to be played. This was useful for players who could not read music.

<sup>27</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, p. 12.

to supplement their Red Cross loans; Medvedeff, for example, continued to work in the tractor workshop.

During the depression in the 1930s, employment was scarce though balalaika ensembles continued to be popular. Ensembles were paid according to the number of players in the band and devious means were sometimes employed to secure payment for desperate out-of-work Russians:

... the orchestra leader ... decided on a very simple solution. Stroeve, who couldn't play any instrument, was just hired to stand at the back wielding a bass balalaika, and making suitable motions with both hands. The orchestra leader did teach him how to play a few notes, but his general instructions were clear: "just look as if you are playing, but for God's sake don't touch the strings!"<sup>28</sup>

However, such tactics of deception could lead to poor quality performances, poor reception by audiences and critics, which affected subsequent securing of contracts.<sup>29</sup>

Medvedeff set about rehearsing the orchestra, securing contracts and securing an agent, 'the same agent that represented Pavlova, Chaliapin and other prominent Russian performers in England.'<sup>30</sup> Internal relations, administrative and logistical work relating to the orchestra were dealt with by committee. Players were divided into ensemble players and apprentices. Apprentices were coached, counted as full members of the collective, and drafted into the orchestra as they became more proficient. Early repertoire comprised Nasonoff's *Family Evenings* collection of folk arrangements – *The Horses Stood Ready, By the River, In the Field the Grass is Drying & Wilting, In the Field a Birch Tree Stood, Under the Apple Tree*, and excerpts from Glinka's *Ruslan & Ludmila*. These were to remain standard fare in Medvedeff's concerts. Progress was slow and Medvedeff found it difficult to achieve any musical finesse. Nevertheless, he noted that the overall sound was pleasing. The Russian Red Cross faced financial difficulties as Russia moved from Imperialist to Soviet system and the Bolsheviks assumed control. Funding was curtailed, rehearsals at Chesham House came to an end. The

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<sup>28</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, pp. 250-252.

<sup>29</sup> Medvedeff describes Vladimoff's ensemble performance at the Palladium: 'There were 23 players onstage (2 prima domras, 5 prima balalaikas, 2 bass balalaikas, 3 alto domras, 2 secunda balalaikas, 3 contrabass balalaikas, 2 bass domras, 2 alto balalaikas, gusli & drums) but the sound was weak and the style of playing poor. Vladimoff (Kodlubovsky), as I later learned, had played an unforgivable trick on the public: he had four players who were there as mimers, purely to make up the numbers, and lest they should accidentally touch the strings of their instruments, he had had these replaced with cotton string. This deception speaks volumes.' Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Medvedeff does not state who this was but it is possible it was Victor Dandré, the husband and business manager of Anna Pavlova. Dandré worked as an agent for various Russian companies and artists in the 1920s.

ensemble rehearsed in the mechanical workshop before moving to the salon of Lady Edgerton, a patron who had a close association with the Russian Red Cross.

Patronage was a vital source of support for Russian artists in London. Wealthy Russian individuals within the diaspora, British aristocracy and numerous charitable societies raised funds by organising fetes, Russia Days, and charity theatre performances.<sup>31</sup> Countess Benckendorff, wife of the last Imperial Russian ambassador, organised many Russian charity events (employing Russian artists) in support of Russian soldiers at the front during World War I and for Russian refugees. British aristocrats frequently employed Russian musicians to play at private functions. Medvedeff's ensemble played on a number of occasions for Mrs. Guinness: 'I was pretty shocked at what she said next: "Could you play for me on the 19th of March?! – If you can, then I will immediately phone the Queen and invite her along." Naturally I agreed straight away... A couple of days later I received a letter expressing the Queen's gratitude for the pleasurable entertainment provided.'<sup>32</sup>

Russian artists gathering in London were not passive and made efforts to generate work for themselves by organising promotional events involving all forms of artistic expression. In 1917 in the aftermath of the revolution a promotion of Russian arts had successfully taken place at The Grafton Galleries.<sup>33</sup> In March 1921 the *Russian Association of Representatives of Art and Literature* was formed with Tamara Karsavina appointed Society president. The Society undertook to support performers by attracting employers and agents to view their work and thereby secure theatre and concert engagements for Russian artists. On 17 April 1921, repeated on 8 May, the Association mounted a performance called *Russian Artists: "At Home"* to achieve this. The venue at the Princes Galleries in Piccadilly consisted of two rooms, one for a concert

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<sup>31</sup> The Russian Refugees Relief Association was a typical organisation offering relief to Russian refugees. The organisation (est. 1933) assisted refugees from the Revolution to settle in Western Europe and to educate their children. A further wave of refugees after the Second World War led to thousands of displaced persons stranded on the Continent and the association helped to settle refugees. It established a home for aged and invalid people in London. Charity Balls and events were used to raise funds for the upkeep of the home and care for the displaced and homeless White Russians without financial means of supporting themselves. R.A. Birse and his Balalaika Players played for the Association at its society ball at the Dorchester Hotel 6 May, 1952. Programme: BBC Written Archives (WAC) files: Artists: Balalaika Players: File 1: 1949-1954.

<sup>32</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> The season ran for a month in May 1917. Proceeds went to the Anglo-Russian Hospital. The exhibition included a Russian restaurant, art, literature and music, war photographs, jewellery, ikons, peasant industries and a Russian Commercial Information Bureau. Sixteen concerts were given under the direction of Sir Thomas Beecham. Rosing was a featured singer as were pianists Mark Hambourg and Benno Moiseiwitsch. Leo Tolstoy's *The First Distiller* and Chekhov's *The Wedding* were mounted in the style of a Russian travelling theatre.

performance, and the other a drama for which a stage was erected and tables set for the audience. A Russian restaurant offered Russian cuisine throughout the evening. The entertainment, *The Curious Centipede*, was directed by Theodor Komisarjevsky. This comprised a series of ballet and pantomime scenes followed by Factory Girl Songs. Medvedeff's orchestra played during intermission.<sup>34</sup> The second half comprised further short ballets, *Romances sentimentales*, peasant and gypsy songs.<sup>35</sup> The society was supported by the Russian émigré elite but, according to Medvedeff, the sheer numbers of artists seeking work prevented the undertaking from moving forward. The sum of money raised to support the artists needed to be substantial and Medvedeff wryly notes *The Curious Centipede* used up most of the funds injected into the society to cover production costs.

### 4.3 Intermezzo – Vladimir (Val) Rosing

Displacement is frequently characterized by a sense of helplessness, disadvantage, loss of identity in a strange place/environment. Nevertheless, many Russian refugees and exiles countered their displacement by promoting their Russianness through their art, particularly music. Vladimir (Val) Rosing, an organising member of the *Russian Association of Representatives of Art and Literature*, was a Russian tenor who came to London and showed great entrepreneurial talent. After a sensational debut at the Albert Hall on 25 May 1913 he successfully organised charity concerts and solo recitals which introduced Russian music to English audiences. He particularly championed the songs of Mussorgsky.<sup>36</sup> In 1915, with the closure of Covent Garden Opera House, he organised an opera season (*Allied Opera*) at The

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<sup>34</sup> The repertoire consisted of Andreeff's *March* and *Butterfly Valse*, *Korobushka*, *Matushka golubushka*, *Green Grove*, and *Song of the Volga Barge-Haulers/Boatmen*. The Russian Balalaika Orchestra had also appeared on the 8 December 1920 at the Anglo-Russian Club dinner.

<sup>35</sup> Medvedeff quotes a letter from Tamara Karsavina after the event: "Dear respected colleagues. The Society's board of directors wishes to express their sincere gratitude to you, following the secretary Yvelinov's report regarding your unstinting and invaluable contribution during the first organised evenings. The Board hopes that before long their main aims will be achieved, namely the possibility of providing our unemployed colleagues permanent, rather than casual, employment. Of course in London this is hard to achieve quickly and it's only thanks to our general organised work to which we applied our collective effort that we managed to achieve the desired result. T. Korzhevina" [Karsavina]. Letter quoted in Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> George Bernard Shaw, Ezra Pound and Charles Ricketts held him in high regard, the equal of Chaliapin. See Ezra Pound, *The Athenaeum*, March 12, 1920 pp. 348-349 for a review of Russian Matinees: 'Mr Rosing himself is the only "unique attraction," the only one and original...' Also see Vladimir Rosing, *Vladimir Rosing: Memoirs of a Social, Political and Artistic Life*, edited and annotated by Richard Rosing (2009). Unpublished. Bakhmetiff Archive - Columbia University: Rare Book and Manuscript Library: BA 0613. Box 2, Folder 1, pp. 114-120 for a description of Rosing's meetings with George Bernard Shaw.

London Opera House.<sup>37</sup> The season was ambitious and included British premieres of Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame* (*The Queen of Spades*) and Rachmaninoff's *Aleko*. Other operas included *Mozart et Salieri* (Rimsky Korsakov), *Mademoiselle Fifi* (Cui), *Zhenitbe* (Mussorgsky), *Eugene Onegin* (Tchaikovsky), *Life for the Czar* (Glinka), *Carmen* (Bizet), *Lakmé* (Delibes), *La Legende du Point d' Argentan* (Fourdrain) and *Madame Butterfly* (Puccini) in which he introduced the Japanese soprano Tamaki Miura as Butterfly.<sup>38</sup> Conductors were Eugene Goossens and M. Gouravich (Moscow Opera). It was also the intention to include four ballets by Nougous (?) and one English opera.<sup>39</sup> Rosing had limited financial resources but raised money through wealthy friends and arts benefactors and hoped for excellent box office returns.<sup>40</sup> The season employed more than 400 personnel (including an orchestra of 75 and 100 dancers and corps) and although a critical success the start of the war and bombing led to poor houses and the season closed for financial reasons.<sup>41</sup> He gathered an international company of artists:

The complete list of artists at present engaged is as follows :—  
 Marie Louise Arne, of l'Opera Comique, Paris.  
 Marie Duvernay, of l'Opera Comique, Paris.  
 Nina May, of l'Opera Comique, Paris, and the Boston Opera.  
 Tamaki Miura, of the Imperial Theatre, Tokio.  
 (Special Performances of "Madame Butterfly.")  
 Eugenie Rathmirova, of l'Opera de Petrograd.  
 Mignon Nevada, of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.  
 (Special Performances of "Lakmé.")  
 Aimee Nikitina, of l'Opera de Petrograd.  
 Marguerita Sylva, of l'Opera Comique, Paris.  
 (Special Performances of "Carmen.")  
 Eugenie Baron-Fonariova, Odessa and Theatre de La Monnaie, Brussels.  
 Slava Krassavina, of l'Opera de Petrograd.  
 Octave Dua, Theatre de La Monnaie, Brussels.  
 Auguste Bouilliez, Theatre de La Monnaie, Brussels.  
 Alexandre Leonidoff, Opera de Petrograd, Moscow.  
 Leon Lafitte, Grand Opera, Paris.  
 Wladimir Rosing, Arts Opera, Petrograd.  
 Charles Vaimorel, Opera de Marseilles.  
 Julian Bonell, Opera House, Kieff and Paris.  
 Constantin Stroesco, Boston and Montreal Opera.  
 Henri de Potar, the Grand Opera and Opera Comique, Paris, and Boston.  
 Sylvia Nilla.  
 Ethel Althouse. Melisande D'Egville.  
 Irene Sagar. Bessie Tyas. Olive Tani.  
 Petro Molchanoff. Nikolai Shacknoff.  
 Julian Kimbell.  
 Raymond Ellisceeritch.  
 Mannitto Klitgaard. Powell Edwards.

Figure 18 Artists appearing in Rosing's Opera Season

<sup>37</sup> Oscar Hammerstein's opera house in Kingsway opened in 1911. It became a theatre in the Stoll Moss Empire but was demolished in 1958. *The Peacock Theatre* took its place.

<sup>38</sup> The soprano Tamaki Miura was one of the first Japanese sopranos to sing the role in the West.

<sup>39</sup> *The Observer*, 5 February, 1915.

<sup>40</sup> See Ruth Glen Rosing, *Val Rosing: Musical Genius*, (Yuma, Manhattan: Sunflower University Press, 1993), p. 73. Rosing's Memoires mention that his bridge acquaintance gave him £5000 towards the venture, the equivalent today of £294,961.00. Rosing's description of the season, 'May 1915 - Young and Stupid and Unafraid' pp. 94-97 discusses his own business inexperience for this season.

<sup>41</sup> *The Daily Citizen*, 15 May, 1915.

In 1919 Rosing formed *LAHDA The Russian Musical Dramatic Art Society* together with Theodore Komisarjevsky and dancer Laurent Novikoff with the purpose of bringing Russian arts before the English public. This resulted in a production of Russian work (dances and songs) mounted at the Wigmore Hall using a constructed stage extension.<sup>42</sup> Thereafter, in 1921 they hired the Aeolian Hall and mounted a season of *Opera Intime* in which the orchestra (members of the London Symphony Orchestra with piano and chamber organ, Adrian Boult conducting) was vastly reduced, choruses dispensed with and the libretti sung in English (an experiment that resulted in critical approval). The season, though suffering from stage technical difficulties, was a critical success.<sup>43</sup>

After a period in the United States (where he headed the American Opera Company)<sup>44</sup> Rosing returned to London in 1933 and formed the British Music Drama Opera Company.<sup>45</sup> He directed the premier of Albert Coates' *Pickwick*, the first opera broadcast by the BBC on 13 November 1936 and a Covent Garden season followed in which he also directed the premiere of Roger Quilter's *Julia*.<sup>46</sup> In 1938 he formed the Covent Garden English Opera Company with a televised *Il Pagliacci* as preview to his season at Covent Garden.<sup>47</sup> These remarkable initiatives are counter to a belief that displacement is a debilitating condition (which in many instances it is) but displacement also provided the spur to 'getting on', not only in financial terms but in fulfilling the potential of Russian musicians forging a career on new musical frontiers and contributing to the musical life of their host country, Britain.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> A participating dancer, Phyllis Bedells, remembers the Wigmore season was financed by Russian Boris Said. Phyllis Bedells, *My Dancing Days*, (London: Phoenix House, 1954), p. 107. Further seasons were mounted at The Duke of York Theatre and The Royal Court in Sloan Square.

<sup>43</sup> The production toured to Edinburgh and Glasgow. The season included Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades (Pique Dame)*, *Pagliacci*, and *The Barber of Seville*.

<sup>44</sup> Established at Rochester University. First called Rochester American Opera Company (1924) then renamed American Opera Company (1927). Financed by George Eastman (Kodak).

<sup>45</sup> Rosing, under the influence of Komisarjevsky and the legacy of Stanislavsky, introduced more naturalistic acting and choreographed (rather than a loose arrangement of performers) ensemble scenes in opera performance. His company was formed to promote his ideas and train upcoming opera talent using these principles.

<sup>46</sup> The season also included productions of *Boris Godunov*, *The Fair at Sorochyntsi* and *Il Pagliacci*.

<sup>47</sup> The Season included *Faust*, *Rigoletto*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Il Pagliacci*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, and *The Serf* (George Lloyd).

<sup>48</sup> Val Rosing married the English singer Marie Falle. They had a son Valerian Rosing (1910-1969) who became a popular crooner both in the UK and the USA. He also performed using the name Gilbert Russell after 1938. Valerian Rosing (junior) was to sing for the famous recording of *The Teddy Bear's Picnic* (American composer John Walter Bratton) with the BBC Dance Orchestra directed by Henry Hall. Val Rosing senior (married five times) also had a daughter Diana (b.1928) and another son Richard (b.1955).



## 4.4 Medvedeff and Variety Theatre

Variety Theatre became an early source of employment for Medvedeff's balalaika ensemble. Variety presents a series of novelty Acts, or Turns as they were referred to, listed in a programme by number (also lit onstage on boards) indicating which act is performing. There is no through-narrative but each performance is individual in character and usually not related to each other. The individual Acts themselves usually featured some unusual skill or talent and in Medvedeff's case featured a string of Russian folk songs, dances and instrumental pieces played on balalaikas and domras and seamlessly woven into an unbroken performance. The bass balalaika was visually unusual as was the folk costume; silk blouses for the men, breeches and boots, embroidered dresses and ribbons and flowers in the ladies' hair. Pathé footage of Medvedeff's ensemble, also appearing in Variety, provides an example of how these 'turns' were constructed and held together in a seamless stream of song, dance, and ensemble playing. Medvedeff's Variety format remained consistent and he was still employing this format in 1947.<sup>49</sup> Variety Acts changed every week and performers travelled from one theatre to another in different combinations. Contracts lasted a week but in the case of the Stoll Moss Variety Theatres popular acts could work on extended contracts for months. Stoll Moss Variety Theatres (known as 'Number Ones') were in larger cities, were prestigious, and employed hundreds of entertainers. Smaller regional theatres were 'Number Twos' or 'Number Threes'.<sup>50</sup> Of the Stoll Moss theatres, the Palladium was the flagship Variety Theatre followed by the Finsbury Park Empire and the Coliseum. To appear in a 'Number One' theatre, a Medvedeff did, was a mark of the excellence of the act.

Theatres had a resident orchestra which supported the Acts if need be, playing an overture (a popular melody) to the evening, playing between Acts and during the interval. Variety bills began with a dance act or some high energy performance which would grab the audience's attention. These were not large chorus-lines of pretty girls dancing a Busby-Berkley routine (which were seen in larger Variety Theatres on occasion) but rather short ballets or small groups or duos (*adagio* work) which involved spectacular lifts, tap routines and fast moves. Thereafter a string of 'front cloth comics', slap-stick performers, piano players, singers, jugglers, animal acts and 'specialty acts' appeared leading to the 'second top performer' just before the interval. The climax of the evening would be the 'top of the bill' performer, a well-known artiste, usually preceded by his/her own signature tune which everyone would know. The final show-stopper act

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<sup>49</sup> A short clip of Medvedeff's style of performance in Variety Theatre can be seen in a Pathé film clip: Nickolas Medvedeff and His Orchestra aka Medvedeff Russian Band (1947). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDZ9nFVATnE> accessed 20 December 2024.

<sup>50</sup> This terminology is still used today in theatre circles.

served a functional purpose by stopping the audience leaving for the buses during the ‘top of the bill’.

The bill or poster named the acts and artists, usually in blocks with appropriate lettering according to billing. Position on the bill indicated the billing - top of the poster in biggest lettering for the most important acts – and the pecking order in backstage privileges (dressing rooms, for example). Unlike modern television variety and celebrity shows the private lives of performers were generally not foregrounded in Variety Theatre. However, the private lives and off-stage antics of performers such as Marie Lloyd or Vesta Tilley were sometimes used as publicity – and so it was with Medvedeff. His colourful life as a Russian, his part in the First World War as a POW, his ‘escapes’ and his presence in England as a Russian refugee were colourful facts often noted in reviews and newspaper articles. Medvedeff found the pursuit of publicity and financial gain distasteful:

... they justified this with the requirements of advertising, pointing out that no one knows us and one needed to “lay it on thick for publicity”. What won’t these people stop at to make money and make a sale! The agent has to get the employer interested by any means in order to make his percentage on the goods – the goods being us. The employer is interested in making a profit on the goods which he paid for and presented to the public. And, well, the public pays for all this by buying the tickets. So that these modest payments in the form of fees for entrance are as numerous as possible it is imperative to get as large an audience as possible for the premier. If the show turns out well, then the public and press will spread the news about it and people will come to see the visitors.’<sup>51</sup>

Variety performers developed on-stage personas, carefully crafted, polished, and honed over long periods of time which were repeatedly performed in theatres up and down the country, playing two performances in an evening (usually 6.15pm and 8.30pm)<sup>52</sup> every night of the week except Sundays. Venues such as the Coliseum in London held around 3000 people and on popular bills would mean 6000 would attend the theatre in an evening. Full houses for the week meant 36,000 people would attend one variety theatre in a week.

Medvedeff’s introduction to Variety Theatre was typical of many performers and not peculiar to immigrant artists. Employment in Variety was precarious and competitive and securing a contract, promoting an act and maintaining one’s presence on a Variety bill needed professional experience of which Medvedeff in the early 1920s had none. A young Jewish

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<sup>51</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 9 October 1959, pp. 1-2. It is significant that this description of the mercenary tactics of agents, publicists and employers is outlined for the benefit of his Russian friends to whom he is writing, an introduction to ‘the raw capitalist workings of theatre and concert economics.’

<sup>52</sup> Initially performances played three times an evening but this was reduced to the more conventional two performances.

entrepreneur, Edwin Greenfield,<sup>53</sup> had watched the sell-out Russian Revue *La Chauve-Souris* in 1920 when it appeared in London after a hit run in Paris. Greenfield, recognising the business potential and public interest in Russian theatre and music, offered to represent Medvedeff's ensemble. Agents such as Greenfield were licensed and regulated by the London County Council to avoid exploitation of performing artists. Agents knew how theatre managers operated, how Variety business was conducted, and their connections within the industry were valuable to artistes such as Medvedeff.

Greenfield secured an audition, hosted at a grand tea organised by Lady Edgerton,<sup>54</sup> and a 'show-date' (week of 31 October 1921) at the Coliseum. The Coliseum agreed to engage ten players including a singer and dancer at £25 per week (the equivalent today of £4825.00).<sup>55</sup> The ensemble was offered two further trial Variety appearances at the Chiswick Empire (week of 19 September 1921) and the Walthamstow Palace (week of 3 October 1921) before their Coliseum appearance.

Greenfield advised performance improvements in keeping with Variety expectations. He suggested a 15-30 minute set (turn) which would include Russian song, dance, balalaika and 'some jolly number.' This last recommendation suggests Greenfield may have wanted to lighten a somewhat heavy impression the ensemble made on English ears. Medvedeff invited Russian soprano Xenia Lomakina, a former artiste of the Mariinsky Theatre who had married an Englishman, to sing.<sup>56</sup> Greenfield's advice that they play from memory and smile and not sit like statues behind music stands suggests ensemble members were not extrovert experienced performers. Greenfield also suggested they include a drummer for 'added colour.' This was not

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<sup>53</sup> In Medvedeff's Letters variously: Greenfield, Grinfeld, Greenfeld. Very little is known of Greenfield though tantalisingly an Edwin Greenfield wrote the screenplay *The Invader* (also known as *An Old Spanish Custom*) (1935) starring Buster Keaton and Lupita Tovar.

<sup>54</sup> Cissie Williams, the powerful booking agent for the Moss Empire of Variety Theatres, would usually watch these auditions at the Finsbury Park Empire.

<sup>55</sup> Medvedeff arranged the song *Matushka golobushka* and *Korobeiniki* for their singer.

<sup>56</sup> The mezzo-soprano Lomakina is elusive. She sang in the Russian Artistes "At Home" already discussed. A soprano, Xenia Lomakina is included in the cast list (Sopranos) for Stravinsky's premiere production of *Les Noces* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City in 1929. It is likely Lomakina emigrated to the United States. After a week of appearances at the Coliseum Lomakina was poached by Balieff and his *La Chauve-Souris* and she sailed with the company for America where they had tremendous success. Lomakina was tearful and guilty she was deserting Medvedeff after he had given her exposure but she said her salary would be five times as much and she needed to accept. Medvedeff relates, 'On no account miss out on this opportunity... I explained to her that our main work was centred on folk instruments and that singers and dancers were incidental, and that they could not be dependent on us, nor we on them. I was glad that worthy artists had an opportunity to shine with our provided backing. She was very happy and grateful for me calming her down.' Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, pp. 10-11.

something Medvedeff had considered, nor aspired to. It was alien to his conception of a balalaika orchestra which he based on Andreeff's model. The drumkit was an element drawn from the creeping American musical influence in popular dance music and songs. Two of Medvedeff's players, the contrabass and secunda player, resigned as they considered they could never be 'artistes' - some musicians were unable to adapt to these demands. Medvedeff employed a pianist and composer, (Vladimir) Launets,<sup>57</sup> who devised new musical ideas and variations applied to Russian folk tunes and dances but Medvedeff's players were unable to realise these musical suggestions and he was forced to rearrange the material to suit the abilities of his players. Medvedeff advertised for male and female dancers in a theatrical paper (*The Stage?*) which drew 200 responses. He employed an Indian dancer 'who somehow had learned to dance in the Russian way' plus two girls who danced with 'temperament' in their movements. Greenfield proposed the name for the ensemble: The Russian Corps de Balalaika which Medvedeff thought akin to Corps de Ballet and would act as 'bait' for English theatre-going audiences.<sup>58</sup>

Greenfield's influence and knowledge was also evident in the choice of repertoire. He suggested musical numbers more accessible to English taste and also advised the inclusion of a jazz number, but in the Russian style. This would have been *Whispering*.<sup>59</sup> Despite some resistance from ensemble members the old Russian national anthem was also included with new lyrics. The programme explained the anthem was included specifically for its beautiful melody and not in any political or patriotic sense. While public sympathy lay with Russia and support for the White forces in the civil war Medvedeff consciously avoided any political controversy.

For the first time the ensemble (which was to a large extent amateur) appeared alongside professional artistes. The importance of these Variety contracts was not lost on Medvedeff as he explained Variety to his Russian friends: 'In London there were 40 or so such theatres. An artiste, having once entered the circuit, could work 40 weeks in the year in London alone. It was the dream of every artiste. Performers included singers, dancers, comedians, jugglers, musicians, acrobats, wrestlers and narrators. All this in a light genre in the style of variety.... Many were the artistes who, having come up with a set routine never changed it to the very end, touring the whole of England.'<sup>60</sup>

Medvedeff's programme comprised:

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<sup>57</sup> Various Launnetz, Launitz, Launets in Medvedeff's letters and elsewhere in Newspaper reporting. Vladimir, it is suspected, was a Russian name invented for the English musician.

<sup>58</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1958, pp. 4-6.

<sup>59</sup> *Whispering* was a hit song of 1920; lyrics by Malvin Schonberger, music by John Schonberger.

<sup>60</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 6.

1. *Russian National Anthem*. Soloist Madam Lavrova<sup>61</sup>
2. *March – Military* (Andreeff)
3. *Dance – Polka* – Yekaterina Valkovich & Yekaterina Rusanova
4. Foxtrot – *The Whisper*. Drummer S. Kosky
5. Folk songs: *Sten'ka Razin* & *Korobushka*. Mme. Lavrova
6. Folk dance – *Moonshine* (*Svetit mesyats*). Militsa Wales & A. Leon [dancers]  
with Vladimir Plavuntsov – pianoforte

Ensemble: Ivan Pilevin, Nikolai Finley, Victor Finley, Ivan Kutzko, Alexei Pesyakov, Ivan Wales and Vladimir Plavuntsov.

The Coliseum engagement was momentous for the ensemble. Theatre Billboards outlined *Balalaika* and Medvedeff's name in bold (good billing) in electric lights. The ensemble's 'turn' was in a prime position - first after the interval. The stage presentation was closely managed with the players seated in a crescent with Medvedeff conducting standing on a carpeted box in the middle dressed in a white velvet kaftan and lilac trousers and shirt. The players were dressed in national costume; coloured velvet kaftans, the ladies in colourful sarafans with kokoshniks on their heads. Andreeff's band in 1909 had appeared (also at the Coliseum) in starched shirts and black tails announcing Russia as part of the civilized world whereas Medvedeff was keen to evoke the exotic and strange and exploit their marginality (in Susan Stewart's terms, 'the exoticising of the self' to which I will return).

The lighting designer suggested a sunlight effect for the first two numbers, a blackout for the third number with spotlights on only two people, and full lighting for the remaining numbers. Medvedeff agreed but lacked experience in stage matters and his account implies they had no onstage technical rehearsal beforehand – memorizing the music had been sound advice. The resident theatre orchestra (25 strong) introduced Medvedeff's ensemble (standard practice in Variety Theatre) playing Andreeff's *March*:

'The stage rotated and we found ourselves behind the lowered main curtain, which was raised almost immediately.... The first two numbers were well received, although I felt that a good quarter of the musicians were terrified and not playing at all. For the third number the singer was also greeted warmly but, no sooner had I swept my baton to start the introduction, than the stage was plunged into total darkness with light shining only on my back and on the singer. Reading written music was now naught but a fond memory as even the frets of one's own instrument were invisible. The introduction continued at half

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<sup>61</sup> Xenia Lomakina (mezzo-soprano) was replaced by Mme. Lavrova for the Coliseum performance. Tatiana Lavrova, a Russian soprano of note in the 1920s, was employed by Medvedeff to give lustre to his programme and raise its credentials.

volume, presumably that part being memorised, but following that the sound got gradually quieter and quieter so that when the singer finished only five or six instruments were playing. With the end of the song the lights came on and the singer was given an ovation. But the musicians' mood was ruined and the last two numbers, our best ones were performed only so-so, although the audience didn't notice and applauded well. Afterwards some of the orchestra participants told me that they wanted to run off stage, but were only stopped by their inability to see where to go.'<sup>62</sup>

Trumpets from the house band announced the Russian Anthem sung by Xenia Lomakina. *In the Garden, in the Orchard* included dancers which added visual interest followed by the 'jolly number' with a Russian flavour, the foxtrot *Whispering*. A sentimental tone was introduced with *Korobushka* and *Home, Sweet Home!* presented with silhouette lighting. *Moonshine*, played as an up-tempo dance, again introduced the dancers and the theatre orchestra joined to increase the sound and give the *finale* a boost. Critics praised the performance and took pains to describe the balalaika instrument and its sound but significantly suggested 'the collective could well afford to stick to a purely Russian repertoire, particularly as it performs it so well and, apart from that, such material is becoming invaluable.'<sup>63</sup> Clearly Medvedeff had found a formula which appealed to English audiences.

Variety business was challenging for Russian performers. Speaking English and being understood was the first stumbling block. Employment reliability was also insecure. There were frequent changes of players, some moving from one ensemble to another, others needing to find other employment because they couldn't manage financially. Disagreements arose amongst players and conductors and while Russian performers generally supported one another there was fierce competition for the few opportunities that arose. Medvedeff suffered a 'take-over' of this first (artel) ensemble. The Marquis Chateaubrun introduced M. Kodlubovsky<sup>64</sup> who announced he had paid the £560 (equivalent today of £31,380.00 in labour earnings) owed to the Red Cross by the ensemble. He took possession of all instruments and properties; members wishing to remain could do so and were released from their debt. Those with little talent for music left the ensemble. The group of 'English-Petersburgers', who were not

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<sup>62</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 24 September 1959, pp. 14-15.

<sup>63</sup> *Daily Telegraph* and *The Era* quoted in Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 10. 'The administration made a good business decision inviting the "Corps de Balalaika" to the Coliseum. The representatives of Russian artistry and their varied programme were received enthusiastically by the audience.'

<sup>64</sup> Kodlubovsky changed his name to Vladimoff (sometimes spelled Vladimov). He was reputed to have served in the Tsarist diplomatic corps in Persia. He made several broadcasts for the BBC in the early 1920s but he did not sustain his relationship with the BBC and was not as successful as Medvedeff.

financially dependent, remained. Twelve members remained with Kodlubovsky and his newly named Vladimov Balalaika Orchestra.<sup>65</sup>

Medvedeff faced frequent reformations of his ensembles as members accepted other offers or stopped playing altogether to accept more lucrative work. Players were frequently dissatisfied believing their chances would be better elsewhere, some attempted to belong to more than one ensemble. Two members, Pilevin and Finley (both married with children),<sup>66</sup> felt a smaller ensemble (a quartet with a piano accompanist) would have better work prospects and a split income would be higher with fewer players. After Vladimov's takeover Medvedeff formed a new ensemble again organised on *artel* principles – a system familiar to Medvedeff and in which he trusted. All participants were treated as equals with travel and expenses for ensemble business such as strings, manuscript paper, paid for from a joint account.

Medvedeff's lack of theatre business experience in the English context led to misunderstandings. His approach to financial matters was built on trust. Deals were frequently agreed upon a handshake. Lydia Kyasht, in 1936, was unable to pay in full for Medvedeff's work with her cabaret company (the debt was never paid). The owner of *Odeninos* restaurant refused to agree upon an end date to their contract (verbal) leaving Medvedeff unable to accept other offers. Even when contracts were signed Medvedeff's ensemble members distrusted their agent Greenfield accusing him of fraud (Medvedeff reports Greenfield was called a 'money-grabbing Jew' by ensemble members)<sup>67</sup> by getting them to sign fake contracts and himself signing the legitimate contracts thereby siphoning off money. This led to an ill-considered meeting between disaffected players and the Coliseum management where Greenfield's advice not to do so was vindicated; 'The manager ... pointed out that for them, as foreigners, there was inevitably much in England they found confusing. The sum of money the boys mentioned ... was precisely the

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<sup>65</sup> The lack of formal contracts led to a number of power struggles. Vladimoff, Wolkowsky and Launets all attempted to gain control of Medvedeff's various ensembles. Medvedeff notes, 'We work, as a collective (*artel*), split everything evenly and now Launets thinks it's not enough and comes out with a proposition that we transfer everything to his name and he will give us a work contract. We ended up giving him a counter offer: that he should first give each of us a minimum year's work contract – only then would we sign the collective over to him. This was all probably prompted by his wife and also a review that appeared in one of his friend's Russian émigré newspapers in Berlin. Although the review was positive overall, it contained a lot of lies too. For example, it stated that the participants were former officers, while in fact there were only two, and apart from that, another six were English. Anyhow, he now left us alone.' Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, pp. 123-129 mentions the increased difficulties refugees faced bringing children to Britain.

<sup>67</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 14. Medvedeff relates two other occasions in which he had to deal with antisemitism. Medvedeff professes to not discriminating against Jewish musicians and he employed a number of Jewish players in his ensembles.

sum as per contract.... He didn't have the authority to show them the books as this was contrary to commercial practice, ... but he was prepared to satisfy their curiosity – but at a high price: if the figures proved correct the collective would never again be employed in Variety Theatres. This threat, however, did not throw the hot-headed comrades, who took that answer to be nothing more than scare-tactics, and they stood by their demands. The manager showed them the books. The numbers tallied exactly. 'Now he drily bade them not "*au revoir*" but "*adieu*" goodbye forever'. The ensemble in its present form never did play the Stoll/Moss Variety theatres again.<sup>68</sup>

Medvedeff's egalitarian principles and co-operative approach to managing an ensemble, instilled in him during his youth, lead to difficulties in the English context of conducting business. He was also not comfortable acceding to management demands to include dancers, jazz instruments and popular repertoire merely to increase entertainment value and financial gains. Newspaper reviews of his early Variety appearances, however, report a positive public reception and fascination with the balalaika ensemble and Medvedeff sought other arenas in which to perform balalaika music.

## 4.5 Interlude – The Wolkowsky Troupe

Another professional balalaika ensemble led by Alexander Wolkowsky, assisted by his half-brother Boris Wolfowsky, negotiated a successful engagement with Variety Theatre and light entertainment for over thirty years. Unlike Medvedeff, Wolkowsky's Russian troupe was not principally an instrumental/orchestral ensemble but combined balalaika/domra playing with spectacle – energetic acrobatic dance numbers (whirlwind dancing) and Russian folksongs with performers dressed in a display of exotic and extravagant costumes. The brothers led a tight family troupe of adults and their children and on occasion featured various Russian guest artists.

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<sup>68</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 14. Medvedeff was to encounter similar deceptions well into his career. He was trusting and gullible and was often taken advantage of: 'The drummer who joined us at the end of this period ... suggested to me that we divide our work: I would be responsible for the music and conduct the artistic side of things, while he would run around searching out bookings.... The main thing that bothered the agent in our partnership was that any time we earned a good fee I insisted on paying the artistes well, whereas he would prefer to squeeze what he could out of them, although he was no more than a drummer – an amateur and pretty uncultured. We played five times a day, seven days a week, and he paid the musicians the absolute bare minimum, while lining his own pockets with 25-30 times more. When I became aware of what dirty business was going on behind my back, after the last performance I decided to extract myself from this 'Cloaca' and announced that I was leaving. I said everything I needed to about his despicable conduct. He was pleased I was going and my words meant nothing to him.'



Poverty, famine, the repressive racial laws and brutal pogroms inflicted on Russian Jewish communities at the turn of the century had seen a steady trickle of Russian performing artists leaving the Pale of Settlement and finding their way to western Europe and America in search of a better life.<sup>69</sup> The Wolkowskys were just such a family leaving Russia in the 1890s,<sup>70</sup> appearing in Europe then travelling on to join circuses in the United States – most notably in Chicago and Baltimore - before settling again in London.<sup>71</sup>



Figure 19 The Wolkowsky Troupe: Postcard



Figure 20 Similar Russian Performance Troupes: Postcards

<sup>69</sup> It is nowhere discussed whether the Wolkowsky family was Jewish. Alexander Wolkowsky married Maria Alexandrova who may not have been Jewish. However, Alexander was buried in the Jewish cemetery at East Ham suggesting his parents may have had Jewish roots on his mother's side.

<sup>70</sup> Alexander Wolkowsky was 20 when he escaped from Tsarist pogroms. He had worked as a tenor in travelling troupes in Russia. Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 22. George Wolkowsky, the son, was born in 1900 in Kharkiv in the Ukraine as was his brother Bob Wolly suggesting the family came from that region.

<sup>71</sup> Other troupes of a similar kind were the Imperial Russian Troupe and Zaretsky's Russian Troupe.

The Wolkowsky Troupe travelled to Chicago and toured with *The Ringling Brothers Circus*. Thereafter they appeared with the *Orrin Brothers' Circus* in Mexico in 1906<sup>72</sup> and again with the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers' Circus later in 1906.<sup>73</sup> A performance courier<sup>74</sup> distributed in Nacogdoches (Wednesday, November 15) lists the star performers as the Seven Marvelous O'Briens, the Wolkowsky Troupe, the Aurora Zouaves, and Captain Webb. These couriers, printed in black and white or colour, were of various sizes depending on the budget and the importance of the appearance or size of the city and were used as advertising in conjunction with posters and leaflets.



Figure 21 The Wolkowsky Troupe in Russian Costume

<sup>72</sup> New York Clipper, 17 March, 1906, p. 114.

<sup>73</sup> David Martin *Circus Biographies*: <https://classic.circushistory.org/History/BiosV.htm>  
 Consulted: 7 January 2022. In 1905 the Wolkowsky Troupe toured with The Ringling Brothers Circus. They departed Bremen 21 March 1905 on the Kaiser der Wilhelm der Grosse and arrived at New York on 29 Mar 1905. Passenger lists (spelling retained) show the troupe consisted of: Alexander Wolkowsky, 36, M, Russian; Marie Wolkowsky, 27, F, Russian; Vasili Gorbunoff, 24, M, Russian; Ludmella Gorbunoff, 24, F, Russian; Max Franke, 20, M, Austrian; Peter Drobinsky, 26, M, Austrian; Boris Wolkowsky, 26, M, Austrian (sic) Charli Adler, 20, M, English; Matilde Alexandrows, 23, M, Russian; Lisa Alexandrows, 16, M, Russian; Hertha Schroth, 20, F, German; Hedwig Feustel, 14, F, German; Jenny Keyworth, 17, F, English; Franzl Seiffort, 16, M, Austrian. The Wolkowsky Troupe appeared again with the Orrin Brothers' Circus in Mexico early in 1906. (*New York Clipper*, March 17, 1906, p. 114). Alexander Wolkowsky arrived in New York. Boris Alexander is listed as crossing the border by train at Laredo, Texas (16 -22) from Mexico. Mr Alexander Wolkowsky, 38, M, Russian; Mr Nicoli Ivanoff, 26, M, Russian; Ms Marino Keritzenko, 22, F, Russian; Ms Matilda Alesandrowa, 23, F, Russian; Ms Ethel Alice Cox, 16, F, English; Ms Judy Field, 19, F, English.

Boris Wolkowsky's party included Boris Wolkowsky, 27; Walter Mausky, 23; Frina Mausky, 23; Franz Seifero, 17; Nassia Gorbouoff, 27; Lola Gorbouoff, 24; Lisa Wolkonisky, 17.

The troupe also appeared with the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers' circus in 1906. *Spokane Daily Chronicle* (WA), 26 July, 1906, p. 16.

A further appearance at the Imperial Theatre, Brooklyn NY, in January, 1906 is also recorded in *The Brooklyn Daily League Eagle*, 23 January, 1906.

<sup>74</sup> Couriers were posters used by American circuses to provide forward publicity in cities they were to visit - what we now call a 'flyer'.

The Wolkowsky Troupe had a small balalaika/domra ensemble and had already appeared in London, Berlin and Paris in 1903<sup>75</sup> long before Andreeff's visit to London with his orchestra in 1909. Press reports of Andreeff and his balalaika ensemble at the World Exhibition in 1889 had already aroused interest in the English press.<sup>76</sup> Algernon Rose had also brought early attention to the balalaika in his address to the members of the Royal Music Association in 1900.<sup>77</sup> Andreeff's balalaika ensemble appeared in the UK in 1909 with greater publicity and created a craze for balalaika playing in the country but Wolkowsky, who preceded him, is not generally credited as the first to feature the balalaika in England.

The Wolkowskys toured extensively leaving a trail of appearances through Europe; they played at the Eden Theatre in Nimes in 1904,<sup>78</sup> at the Alhambra Theatre in Paris in April 1910, (again in July 1921),<sup>79</sup> and later at the Gaumont Palace in Paris in February/March 1913. In Scotland they performed at the newly built (1906) King's Theatre in Edinburgh. The house, which holds 1350 seats, was full and 'standing room only was the announcement from the King's Theatre.'<sup>80</sup> The Troupe was regularly *Top of the Bill* in Variety evenings. The B.M.G. reports they appeared as a circus act in the Netherlands and Germany in 1909, and were in Munich at the Kaiserlichen Theatre at the outbreak of the First World War from where they fled 'having to leave behind all their stage properties, instruments, and many of their private belongings, and fly for their lives across the frontier, *via* Holland to this country.'<sup>81</sup> Appearances at the Palace Theatre in London in February 1903, and again at the Hippodrome in Maidstone and in Leeds were as the star turn. The Leeds/Maidstone venues suggest they were regularly touring the provinces in Variety.<sup>82</sup> They remained popular well into the 1930s appearing regularly at the Crystal Palace Circus and Alhambra Theatre where 'they met with much applause'. Their performance was obviously

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<sup>75</sup> *London Evening Standard*, 1903. 'Appearing at the Palace Theatre, London. This evening at 8.0: Ida Rene, G.M. Chirgwin, Rose and Johan, Richard Temple Junior, Johnson and Murray, the Channings, Sylvia Sablanc, the Anartos, Julia Karen, Ada Florence, the Wolkowsky Troupe, Norman Salmond, Cliff Ryland, Yamamoto et Koyoshi, Henry de Vry, and the Ascent of Mont Blanc. *The Stage*, 5 March, 1903. 'Maidstone. Hippodrome. The chief turn here is given by the Wolkowsky Troupe of Russian Dancers, whose business creates a furore nightly. Permane's Bears are clever.'

<sup>76</sup> *Evening Citizen*, 28 September, 1889.

<sup>77</sup> Algernon S. Rose, 'The Balalaika,' pp. 73-84.

<sup>78</sup> *Nimes Journal*, 15 October, 1904.

<sup>79</sup> *The New York Herald* Paris, 4 July, 1921 and 8 July, 1921.

<sup>80</sup> *The Scotsman*, 4 October, 1910.

<sup>81</sup> The B.M.G. 1915, Vol. 6. This may have been one of Wolkowsky's stories as Medvedeff relates that at the onset of WW1 the troupe had to escape Germany 'so hurriedly that he left food on the table on silver plates.' Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 22.

<sup>82</sup> The B.M.G. 1915, Vol. 6 also notes that they were appearing in Barrow-in-Furness, Widnes and Chesterfield which suggests that they had been touring the provinces for more than ten years. And their appearance at the Crystal Palace in 1920 suggests that their popularity was ongoing.

popular and they displayed great energy in touring extensively across the country in Variety Theatre.

The format of a Variety evening often led to unusual bedfellows: the Wolkowskys appeared alongside Francini Olloma and his page who 'give a remarkable turn which includes instrumentalism, juggling and tumbling. A most wonderful feat is the performance of 24 somersaults whilst playing the concertina.' In Chesterfield they appeared alongside Captain Grahame and his baboon, monkeys and dog and at Preston's New Prince's Theatre Joe Almasio the Jumping Juggler and Yamina 'The only real Arab lady tumbler in existence' were other exotic acts. A short Pathé film-clip of the Wolkowsky dancers in performance at the Crystal Palace in 1932 displays the athleticism of both male and female dancers, their acrobatic moves and ensemble work. They feature national dances which were to become part of the core Ballet training syllabus. Displays of Russian folk-dance were also incorporated into the choreography of Russian ballets such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Coppélia* and *The Nutcracker*.<sup>83</sup>

Wolkowsky regularly invited Russian guest artists who needed employment to appear as featured artists with the troupe— Nikolai Medvedeff, Olga Alexeeva (soprano), Monsieur Slobodoff (whirlwind dancer), Maxim Turganoff (a tenor from the National Opera House, Moscow), Effie Mann and Captain Strelsky<sup>84</sup> all maintained a regular presence in Wolkowsky's entertainment as well as featuring in other Russian entertainments. The troupe, billed as 'Native Russian Dancers, Vocalists and Instrumentalists including the celebrated Balalaika Orchestra, 12 in Number' appeared in two command performances before the late King Edward VII.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *The Lancashire Daily Post*, 23 July, 1910. See Pathé film clip of the Wolkowsky's dance performance alongside other variety acts – a hippopotamus and a pantomime donkey routine from 1932. Accessed 20 December, 2024.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k\\_vcHJLGuzY&t=12s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_vcHJLGuzY&t=12s)

<sup>84</sup> Captain Strelsky's real name was Leonid Khaltychin (Medvedeff Letters, 9 October, 1959, p 11). Bibs Ekkel explains in an e-mail to the author, 5 May, 2024: 'I would surmise that for a 'tough Cossack leader' Khaltychin is a pretty rotten name. In Russian a "Khaltura" is a shoddy, badly done job - 'Shoddyman'? Strelsky implies a shooter, archer (strelyat'- to shoot; strelba- a shoot-out, strela - arrow). I probably told you - I never met Strelsky, but my friend Xenia told me in the 70s that he got kicked out and banned from the 'Orthodox church in exile' in Gloucester Rd. for causing a ruckus and punch-up during the service. Something to do with choirmaster - over who has final authority. And I was told he fell out with Medvedeff and marched off with half the instruments, which he placed in a 2nd hand shop in S. London. I heard from other old timers about that shop of dreams stacked with balalaikas going cheap. I, many years later, acquired a contrabass and prima that originally came from there.' Captain Strelsky formed his own troupe of singers called *Strelsky's Cossacks*. They appeared alongside Georges Wolkowsky and Esme Grande (performing as acrobatic dancers). The advertisement for the Sunderland Empire called the review *As We Like It* which featured a balalaika orchestra under the direction of A. Wolkowsky. The Sunderland Empire was part of Moss Theatres at that time (1934).

<sup>85</sup> *The Lancashire Daily Post*, 23 July, 1910.

Ironically, not all members of this troupe were Russian or of the Wolkowsky family. Medvedeff performed with the troupe on these occasions and a number of the dancers and instrumentalists were English.<sup>86</sup>

**Monday, August 27th,**  
 For 6 Nights Only. At 7 o'clock and 9 o'clock.  
 A. WOLKOWSKY presents the FAMOUS RUSSIAN  
**Corps de Balalaika**  
 under the direction of Mons. Nicholas Medvedeff.  
 As performed before Her Majesty the Queen.  
 Assisted by  
**MONS. GEORGES WOLKOWSKY & NADIA**  
 (in Classical and National Dances),  
 Mons. F. FEODOROFF (the eminent Pianist) and  
 Mdle. M. MAROVA (celebrated Soprano).  
 Members of Orchestra—  
 Domra-Prima Mons. G. Wolkowsky Balalaika Prima A. Alexandroff  
 Domra-Alto Mons. N. Medvedeff Balalaika Seconda J. Kanashin  
 Domra-Bass Mons. A. Severny Balalaika Deca-Bass A. Wolkowsky  
 Drums Mons. A. Granooff At the Piano F. Feodoroff  
 Special Prices for this week only, **3/6, 2/4, 1/7, 1/3**  
 Book now, no extra charge. Free List suspended.  
 All Children must be paid for.

Figure 22 A. Wolkowsky, producer of Medvedeff's Corps de Balalaika

Members of the orchestra, named in the above advertisement, are described as ex-soldiers who had 'served alongside the British forces' dressed in 'brilliant national costumes.' Here again we see the frequent cross-pollination between orchestras, musicians, performers and conductors. Medvedeff both conducts and plays the alto domra and balalaika. The ensemble is named as the Corps de Balalaika – Medvedeff's ensemble – with Alexander Wolkowsky who gives his name as producer of the ensemble and plays contrabass balalaika. Feodoroff (pianist) and Marova (soprano) are guest artists with the troupe. Wolkowsky's son, George, later known for his dancing but here plays prima domra and dances national and classical dances with his long-term partner, Nadia. Medvedeff relates that George Wolkowsky (14 years old) was an accomplished domra player, that the whole family was musical, and skilled on Russian folk instruments: 'The father insisted on excellent playing and made sure his sons achieved this aim. He sat them on the instrument from the age of eight. So many tears were shed when the father, having given them a passage to learn, locked them in a room and only let them out when he could hear that the lesson had been accomplished.'<sup>87</sup> The young George Wolkowsky was brought to play for Medvedeff who noted, 'I had never come across such a domra player before.

<sup>86</sup> Author's interview with Bibs Ekkel, October, 2022.

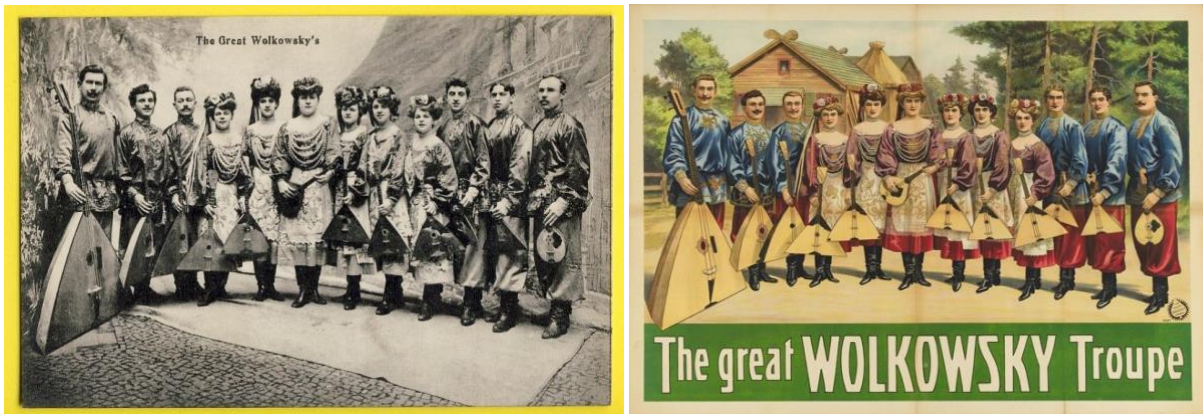
<sup>87</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 9 October 1959, p. 1.



He had fantastic technique. The domra in his hands was transformed into some kind of burbling brook.<sup>88</sup>

The Wolkowsky troupe advertised themselves commercially and pro-actively as an exotic Russian 'turn'. A variety of promotional methods were used such as colourful postcards (often avidly collected by enthusiasts), posters, frequent advertisements in newspapers and notices in the monthly B.M.G. magazine, a journal devoted to Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar enthusiasts. One photograph shows an early example of 'photoshopping' in that the ensemble's pose remains the same while the background to the group is altered, possibly reflecting the theme of their current act. The black and white photograph is also reproduced in colour suggesting the financial fortunes of the company may have improved.

The postcards carry a number of visual cues – the black and white photograph evokes something primitive and strange – somewhere in the East?; with rough background, carpeting and paving. Balalaikas, domras and costumes feature strongly. In the coloured photograph the background is altered to suggest a rural 'folk' environment and the colourful costumes stand out. The women's beading, floral headdresses, low bodices, aprons and leather boots and the men's silk embroidered *blouson* shirts, Cossack trousers and leather boots all promise something exotic, alluring, colourful and strange. The B.M.G. magazine strives for authenticity and identifies the costumes as worn in 'Little Russia' as well as 'Court Costumes as worn in Russia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.'<sup>89</sup>



<sup>88</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 22.

<sup>89</sup> B.M.G. 1915, Vol. 6.



Figure 23 Promotional postcards of the Wolkowsky Troupe

Their balalaika orchestra (between 12 and 16 performers), of which several were vocalists, included athletic ‘whirlwind dancers’ of whom Stepanoff was feted as a ‘whirlwind dancer who never seems as though he could “stop enough”,’<sup>90</sup> and classically trained dancers George Wolkowsky, Esme Grande, Nadia and Lydia – female artistes billed without surnames. The troupe performed in a format using scenarios such as ‘the gypsy camp’ lasting roughly half an hour. This self-contained extended format was unusual in that Variety turns usually lasted between ten and fifteen minutes.<sup>91</sup> This extended format allowed for the incorporation of a variety of individual singers and dancers – ‘turns’ within a ‘turn’ - according to need and availability of performers. They presented Russian folksongs and dances but also played to the sentiments of British audiences by incorporating British national airs and anthems. The Wolkowsky Troupe regularly performed within the Stoll/Moss empire of Variety Theatres repeating their format/formula unchanged in all the time they performed. All members knew the performance format and could adapt easily to new guest performers.

The Troupe distributed programme notes describing the balalaika and domra, outlining a brief history of their use by Russian peasantry, and tracing their growth in popularity as the national instruments of Russia. It was also noted that the refinement of construction and improvement of tone of the instruments had led composers to compose music for the instruments.<sup>92</sup>

There are rare instances where repertoire is discussed specifically. The B.M.G. magazine notes they were featuring *Hopak* (Mussorgsky), *Souvinir de Moscou* (Wieniawski)<sup>93</sup>, *Volga Boat Song*, *When the Bride Enters the Town*, *Bright Shines the Moon*, and *In a Pine Forest* – the majority of

<sup>90</sup> B.M.G. 1915, Vol. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Pathé footage of Medvedeff’s ensemble, also appearing in Variety, illustrates how these ‘turns’ were constructed and held together in a seamless stream of song, dance, and ensemble playing. Accessed 22 October 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDZ9nFVATnE>.

<sup>92</sup> B.M.G. 1913, Vol. 11.

<sup>93</sup> Medvedeff uses this alternative spelling of *Souvinir* when discussing repertoire in his letters.

numbers drawn from Russian folksong. A review in Derby (Grand Theatre) in 1911 praises the house orchestra for playing music ‘unusual in character and so difficult in rhythm’. In this instance the troupe sang Russian national folksongs and played an arrangement for domra and balalaika, “a ‘queer’ and unique instrument”, of Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture* and ‘a capital selection of British national airs, including *The Men of Harlech* for Wales, *The Dear Little Shamrock* for Ireland, and reel and *Annie Laurie* for Scotland, and *The British Grenadiers* and *Rule Britannia* for England.... The performance also featured *Gypsy Life*, ‘in which there is some really good singing and remarkable Russian “whirlwind” dancing, which is the most difficult of any style of dancing.’<sup>94</sup>

Reviews and pre-publicity note the exotic and ‘weird’ nature of the balalaika and its music and it is this aspect which appealed to British audiences. Much is made of the Native Russian dancers and musicians – an appeal to the authenticity of the performers from the exotic land of Tartars, Tzars, and Cossacks, a suggestion of an untamed and libidinous culture. In Scotland, where the bagpipes are equally curious, the balalaika’s ‘novelty seemed to appeal strongly to all present. The instruments were heard to great advantage in the Russian folksongs, with their weird and plaintive melodies, and even the British airs which were given, assumed a new significance at the hands of the gifted company.... When they left the stage they were followed by a burst of cheering.’<sup>95</sup>

Wolkowsky occasionally embarked on independent productions. His entertainment *The Blue Saraphan* (in other incarnations *The Red Saraphan*) opened in 1910 at the Prince’s Theatre, Piccadilly, transferred to the Chiswick Empire, and ran for two years, as did *As We Like It* (1927/8) at the New Prince’s Theatre before it toured the provinces. Wolkowsky’s advertisements describe the saraphan as fifteenth-century Russian national costume, a triangular shaped pinafore, highly decorated and paraded on festive days of celebration, worn by Russian women. It is also a symbol of ‘all that is best in art’; the whole evening becoming a celebration of Russian performance culture. George Wolkowsky and Nadia featured as adagio dancers and their recent appearances at His Majesties and Drury Lane in London are used as an advertising drawcard. *The Blue Saraphan* employed a large company of performers (and support staff) with consequent financial obligations. A review gives a sense of the structure, style and range of the entertainment which is reminiscent of Variety:

The performance is remarkably rapid. No less than 21 scenes are given during the entertainment. The vocal harmonies are wonderful – notably an artistic rendering of the Volga Boatmen’s song – and the dances assisted by the Balalaika orchestra.

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<sup>94</sup> *The Derbyshire Advertiser*, 23 July, 1910.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*.



The 25 performers include principals from the Imperial Grand Theatre and the National Opera House in Moscow and from Mm. Pavlova's Ballet Company. Beautiful scenes, dancing of every description, vocalism, and specialty turns are features in the show. The producer, Mr Wolkowsky, appears in several items, notably in a Chinese scene and a realistic "Perrior's (sic) Dreams." Mr Turganoff assists in the chief vocal numbers and scores heavily with Miss Effie Mann. There are brilliant dances, a Chopin ballet, a chatter in front of the curtain between the acts by the compere, Ireland Cutter.<sup>96</sup>

*The Blue Saraphan* at the Alhambra in 1926 featured 'Eight scenes (are) given in twenty-seven minutes, mostly in panel form, sided by blackouts'<sup>97</sup> and an expanded version of this production opened at the Gaiety Theatre on 4 July 1927 and featured 26 scenes of song and dance. The orchestra was conducted by Vladimir Launitz, the 'celebrated composer and author' given a Russian forename and poached from Medvedeff. Scenes ranged from 'old Russia to China, Virginia to Venice; one gets glimpses of Chopin: the Picture Gallery and the old Chelsea pensioner's dream; "The Song of the Volga Boatman" in its original setting, and many others most effective and interesting....'<sup>98</sup> A further season opened in 1928 at the Cheltenham Opera House<sup>99</sup> providing a full evening's entertainment including George Wolkowsky and Esme Grande.<sup>100</sup> In the same production Billy Cavis appears 'by arrangement with George Wolkowsky' which suggests George Wolkowsky was operating as a performer's agent.

George Wolkowsky danced with two partners Nadia and Esme Grande – both stage names.<sup>101</sup> Their speciality was Classical dance repertoire (known as *adagio dancing* in Variety theatre)<sup>102</sup> as well as athletic, acrobatic dancing known as *Apache Dance* style. The Apache dance was a re-enactment of a street fight between a man – or men – and a woman through choreography and dance often featuring moments of abuse (by both male and female characters) portrayed through daring choreography (the pulling of hair and dragging of bodies, for instance). Such a scene was witnessed by a journalist in Paris, reported in the press and then taken up in clubs and bars in dance form. The film *Old Mother Riley in Paris* (1938), also re-released as *Old Mother*

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<sup>96</sup> *The West London Observer*, 14 September, 1928.

<sup>97</sup> *The Hendon, Finchley, Edgware and Mill Hill Times*, and *Golders Green Guardian*, 26 February, 1926.

<sup>98</sup> *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 25 June, 1927.

<sup>99</sup> Wolkowsky in business partnership with tenor Max Turganoff.

<sup>100</sup> George Wolkowsky lived in Brixton until 1980.

<sup>101</sup> George Alexander Wolkowsky married Mlle. Nadia (1920s). He married Kathleen Sarah Crawley aka Esme Grande in 1937. Wolkowsky (born: Wolfkowsky) was born 13 November, 1900 in Kharkiv, Ukraine. His naturalisation Certificate A19510 was issued on 4 March, 1931.

<sup>102</sup> Reviews mention their acrobatic skill and grace in a scenario involving a girl asleep on a settee while a burglar climbs through a window and wakes her – more balancing and acrobatic dancing – perhaps an ironic glance at Fokine's *Le Spectre de la Rose*. *Devon and Exeter Gazette* 11 November, 1938.

*Riley Catches a Quisling*, features Wolkowsky and Esme Grande in an Apache Dance.<sup>103</sup>

Advertising sees the couple billed as ‘The Great Russian Dancers from Moscow, Wolkowsky and Grande in Sensational Flames of Passion’ and ‘Wolkowsky and Grande the great Russian dancers from the opera house, Moscow.’<sup>104</sup> Neither had had a career in Russia. Their successful partnership led to European tours, appearances in operas,<sup>105</sup> pantomimes (*Aladdin* Derby 1938, Middlesbrough 1940)<sup>106</sup> and films such as *Old Mother Riley in Paris*. During the Second World War they were employed by the National Service Association entertaining the troops.<sup>107</sup>

Wolkowsky’s close family unit appears to have been its strength. Financial burdens could be shouldered within the family and mutual support enabled Wolkowsky to fearlessly travel to the States, Europe and the UK, with his troupe. His continued success suggests he understood how to arouse the audience’s interest in the exotic and unusual by featuring the balalaika and his Russian dancers. He was able to tailor his resources to the demands of circus, English Variety Theatre and Revue.

In 1923 Wolkowsky and Medvedeff agreed to work together. Both men dreamed of a balalaika ensemble in the manner of Andreeff, but Wolkowsky warned Medvedeff early in his career that an orchestra consisting of Russian folk musicians, playing folk music on folk instruments, was costly and would never survive outside of Russia without a patron. He suggested instead a versatile collective of performers such as his own, an idea which Medvedeff embraced.<sup>108</sup> Medvedeff and Wolkowsky’s association was distrustful and despite Wolkowsky’s strong connections in the industry Medvedeff became uneasy as Wolkowsky seemed to be disliked

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<sup>103</sup> Apache Dance – George Wolkowsky and Kathleen Sarah Crawley (*Old Mother Riley in Paris* – 1938. Accessed 20 October 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrF30n1Z2PY> Acrobatic moments were often featured by the Wolkowsky dancers. A review mentions ‘Wolkowsky ... plays a violin while going through some tricky evolutions’ *The Manchester Evening News*, 25 April, 1939.

<sup>104</sup> *The Cheshire Observer*, 25 October, 1941. George Wolkowsky left Russia as a boy and would not have appeared at the Russian opera house. This was clearly advertising sleight of hand. Esme Grande was an English dancer.

<sup>105</sup> George Wolkowsky danced in the 1923 production *Hassan: And How he Came to Make the Golden Journey to Samarkand* by James Elroy Flecker. The production was arranged for stage by Basil Dean and Frederick Delius (music) and ran for 282 performances from 29 September, 1923 – 24 May, 1924. See Joyce P. Waring, *The London Stage 1920-1929: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel*, (Washington: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>106</sup> *The Stage*, 17 November, 1938, ‘Derby Grand *Aladdin* ‘...Specialty Dancers Wolkowsky and Grande...’; *North-Eastern Gazette*, 9 January, 1940, ‘Empire, Middlesbrough ‘... Messrs Walter Paskin and Elkan Simons’ colourful pantomime “Aladdin” at the Middlesbrough Empire ....’

<sup>107</sup> *The Stage*, 3 December, 1942.

<sup>108</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 9 October 1959, p. 1.

and was not well received during meetings with managements and agents.<sup>109</sup> Performance dates were secured for 1923<sup>110</sup> but Wolkowsky and Medvedeff fell out over contractual offers, Wolkowsky unsuccessfully attempted a takeover, the ensemble disbanded, Wolkowsky taking his family and leaving Medvedeff to hurriedly organise a performing ensemble and secure Summer contracts.

## 4.6 Medvedeff and the Balalaika

Medvedeff's displacement was a disruption of his young life felt most acutely in his musical development. As a teenager he was largely self-taught. He had a passion for Russian folk music and the balalaika which he learned to play and subsequently was able to teach to others. His great energy led to the formation of several ensembles during his school years which finally, in 1911, numbered sixty members. He attempted to write his own arrangements (using cipher/tablatore) and began conducting. In Britain as a refugee Medvedeff felt detached from musical developments in Soviet Russia and he tried to counteract this by acquiring new scores and listening to balalaika recordings and radio broadcasts of Russian music. He believed balalaika orchestras in Russia were losing their way – for Medvedeff this implied drifting from Andreeff's ensemble ideals established before the revolution in the late nineteenth-century and which underpinned Andreeff's tours to the West. It is now much of a trope in diasporic studies that displaced communities of the first-wave generally endeavoured to preserve the cultural heritage of which they were deprived in the hope that when they return to the homeland they may reinstate the culture they had preserved. Medvedeff never professed to uphold this purpose but he instinctively worked to preserve the musical experiences of his pre-revolutionary youth and tried to preserve the balalaika ensemble and its repertoire abroad. Medvedeff, in his letters, appears to suffer from inferiority due to his lack of formal musical education but expresses a deep love of Russian folk music and questions why he is no longer moved by balalaika performances coming from the Soviet Union:

‘I thought perhaps it was because I failed to understand something, that I hadn't received a good musical education and was out of touch. But why, I ask myself, does one music satisfy me, excite me, penetrate deeply into my soul, while another leaves me cold. For

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<sup>109</sup> ‘During these visits I must say I was less than impressed by the reception accorded to the old man by these agents. He had told me that he could fix things up very easily, that everyone knew him well, but during our meetings he kept pointing to me, saying that I had a really strong ensemble. I got the impression that they didn't believe him.’ Medvedeff Letters, 9 October 1959, p. 1.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*. Bookings were readily secured for 1923: 14 – 20th Bournemouth Winter Gardens. 28 May, 23 July, 11 and 17 September Crystal Palace. 28 June Eastbourne in Devonshire Park (3 days). 16 June Glasgow Alhambra (one of the few failures due to lack of rehearsal). 21st August Whitstable. 24 September Hunstanton. 27 September Cromer (4 days).

example, when I listen to Wagner, it amazes me how this person could create so many contrasts, display such power of sound, the great conception. After listening, you remain sitting under the impression that something huge has fallen upon you, which you still need to somehow come to terms with. ... You do not undertake to criticize him for fear that you will be considered insufficiently educated in music, but you want to mention something that fails to satisfy you. And you don't want to talk about Tchaikovsky: he penetrated your soul, filled you, and you will experience what you heard for a long time. When I listen to large orchestras of Russian folk instruments, almost the same thing happens to me.'<sup>111</sup>

Medvedeff never achieved the formation of the ideal balalaika ensemble which combined balalaika, domra, with the addition of pipes and flutes. He guarded against the dilution of this configuration by the addition of violins, cellos, drums, button accordions and other folk instruments despite having to frequently include these instruments in his ensembles when playing in theatres, restaurants, parks and private functions when easy listening was required.

Medvedeff was critical of Russian folk orchestras which began including button accordions, Bayans and other folk instruments alongside balalaikas and domras, particularly in the 1940s when the popularity of folk orchestras in Russia was increasing. Medvedeff drew a distinction between balalaika ensembles and folk orchestras. The early folk orchestras in Russia in the 1920s, for example the First Moscow Great-Russian Orchestra of Folk Instruments (as it eventually became known, the Osipov Balalaika Orchestra), formed by Boris Troyanovsky and Pyotr Alexeyev in 1919, gradually incorporated a variety of folk instruments and by the 1960s this folk orchestra seemed 'alien' to Medvedeff, too symphonic in its ambitions; 'A good, large symphony orchestra would not go for such a programme, yet an orchestra of folk instruments was obviously pleased that they almost reached Symphony Orchestra heights. But is this really necessary for folk instruments?'<sup>112</sup> On the Fortieth Anniversary Concert of the Osipov Orchestra Medvedeff bemoaned the fact that only one composition by Andreeff was included in the programme. Significantly, in 1996 the orchestra was given a new title: The Osipov National Academic Folk Instruments Orchestra of Russia. What had begun as a balalaika ensemble was now proudly playing Russian, European and Soviet classical compositions including works by Rossini, Mendelssohn, Glinka, Mussorgsky, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Sviridov and Stchedrin.'<sup>113</sup> Andreeff had not avoided arranging works from the classical repertoire but chose those that could be accommodated by his balalaikas and domras. Rather than striving to imitate a symphonic orchestra he adapted his repertoire to show the qualities and beauty of these instruments. By way of example, Medvedeff cites Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No 2*, and Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance*, where the limits of the balalaika struggle to achieve the effects

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<sup>111</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 19 October 1959, pp. 1-2.

<sup>112</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 28 January 1960, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> Osipov official website: <http://www.ossipovorchestra.ru/en/history/bio> accessed 7 September 2022.

demanding by such pieces. Liszt's *Rhapsody No 2* cannot be performed solo effectively on prima balalaika as it is impossible to play below "E" in the bass to achieve the left-hand piano part. Any arrangement of the piece for balalaika would not capture the musical effect of the original composition and the listener would be disappointed.

Medvedeff clearly perceived of the balalaika as a folk instrument evolving from a pre-industrialised society: 'Workmen all over the world found solace and joy in their folk instruments - in Italy with a mandolin, in Spain with a guitar, in England with a lute, in Germany with a zither, we have the balalaika.'<sup>114</sup> He theorized that with the coming of factories and congregations of large work forces the noise of work increased and consequently music ensembles increased in size and volume. Accordions, concertinas, and button accordions, relatively easy to master, were used to amplify the more delicate sound of the balalaika ensemble, and equally hide poor playing of the more difficult balalaika. Andreeff excluded the accordion from his ensemble, Medvedeff notes, because it was acoustically incompatible with the more delicate acoustic of the balalaika and domra. The balalaika was central to Andreeff's ensemble but he had incorporated penny whistles, wooden svirel flutes and zhaleikas or shepherd's horns (Vladimir horns), brought together to compliment and balance the balalaika/domra sound. He did not use orchestral horns, bayans, harmonicas and button accordions or orchestral oboes, flutes and other wind and string instruments.<sup>115</sup>

Medvedeff was not against the development of the folk orchestra *per se* and acknowledges that interesting and valid music could be composed for such instrumental combinations but many arrangements of classical repertoire proved unsuccessful when played by a folk orchestra; 'If you educate the people, instil in them a culture in the field of music, then for this you need to give them everything in its original form, and not in imitation.'<sup>116</sup> Medvedeff pleaded for the

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<sup>114</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 19 October 1959, p. 2.

<sup>115</sup> Medvedeff notes there was a persistence in 'improving' bayans to sound like flutes, oboes, English horns, saxophones and other wooden, 'thankfully, not yet brass', instruments. Button accordions were easier to master and when played with the right and left hand, 'can produce the sound of 10 flutes or 10 bassoons etc. and can be made to bark all in one go. And how many flutes, oboes and other instruments are required in a symphony orchestra with 85 performers? For sure not 10. Violins - yes, the more of them the better, and other instruments in limited numbers, i.e. just enough to give the desired effects required by the composer's work.' Medvedeff Letters, 28 January 1960, pp. 4-5.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3. By way of example Medvedeff cites Aleksandr Ivanovich Allo, a musician and teacher, born on February 15, 1895 in Samara. His father was a railway conductor. In 1917 he organized a balalaika circle at the Club of Railway Workers (named after the Revolution of 1905) which was an early formation of a folk instrument orchestra in Russia. Between 1920 and 1962 he taught at the Kuibyshev Music School. His orchestra is formed largely of balalaikas and domras. Medvedeff links his orchestra to regional authenticity - a 'stronghold of originality, just like the peoples of the Urals and Siberia'. By contrast he cites the choir led by Comrade

recognition of the balalaika ensemble just as for the string orchestra, symphonic pop orchestra or jazz ensembles.

Medvedeff was critical of creeping mechanization, particularly sound recording and amplification: ‘... take a balalaika and play it without an amplifier and then with an amplifier - the difference will be noticeable. Or record onto a tape recorder and listen to what it plays back. Sort of that, but not quite. Just how subtle mechanisms need to be in order to convey the balalaika well.’<sup>117</sup> Medvedeff was embarrassed by the quality of his recordings. Recording techniques in the 1920s were still new. Rehearsal time was usually inadequate in front of the microphone and repertoire had to be short and relatively easy to play with only one run-through. Medvedeff’s recordings for the BBC in the 1920s were some of the first trialling microphone recording rather than the trumpet tube. Sound operators were still learning to operate the technical aspects of recording which often led to poor sound quality.<sup>118</sup>

Medvedeff was equally concerned with the craftsmanship of instrument making and the sound quality of the balalaika. Balalaikas were manufactured on a massive scale in Russia and exported around the world. In London from his Grafton Street studio, Clifford Essex imported balalaikas and domras to supply local demand but not all instruments were of good quality often affecting the sound, playability and consequently the success of players and ensembles: ‘I’ve seen them with virtuosos, heard their playing on them and it really moved me to see how these masters of playing apply such effort and skill to make these instruments sound and sing. But how much can one expect from masterful playing on un-masterfully made tools. I have heard more than one accomplished player sounding bad on balalaika - not through any fault of their own, but through the fault of the instrument itself’.<sup>119</sup>

Medvedeff felt very much on the periphery of Russian music when confronted with visiting Russian musicians to the UK, suffering from the awareness he was a Russian living abroad and not at the heart of music making in Russia, particularly folk music. During the height of the Cold War the balalaikist L. Vladimirov visited London with the Beryozka dance ensemble. Medvedeff found Vladimirov’s instrument poor and impulsively offered him one of his own; ‘At that time

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Sveshnikov which became popular but by implication Medvedeff feels does not present an authentic repertoire.

<sup>117</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 19 October 1959, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Medvedeff mentions his gramophone recordings; e.g. (*Vocalion Label*, x-9950, 1926. Side A: *Bright Shines the Moon* (Trad.) Side B: *Waltz (Souvenir de Gatchino)* by Andreeff) which he took to his family in Russia. He was acutely embarrassed by the sound quality of the recordings. He was more familiar with sound recording for broadcasting purposes while working in the BBC studios.

<sup>119</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 28 January 1960, pp. 1-2.

(1955) there was still a certain alienation, a characteristic typical of the first swallows to fly into the country of the capitalists, where all sorts of excesses could be expected and where it was still unclear how to behave. What could a Soviet citizen feel when some Russian approaches him and tells him his instrument is imperfect and offers him a balalaika as a gift, one which is supposedly better than his own. And can it be accepted from a person who hangs out away from the Motherland?’<sup>120</sup> Medvedeff also bemoaned the fact that the instruments offered to him by the Coldstream Guards had suffered from neglect and were heavily in need of repair but costs were inhibitive. He met with indifference when he approached the Russian Ministry of Culture for help in his efforts to buy and restore these Russian instruments.

## 4.7 Musical Initiatives in Public Spaces

In the 1920s and 1930s a number of popular Russian themed restaurants opened in London. The *Troika* in Denman Street near the Windmill Theatre and the *Volga* off Leicester Square, while offering Russian cuisine, were run by non-Russians. The *Kazbek* Grill, part of the *Café de la Paix* off Regent Street, was managed by an Italian (but with a Russian chef).<sup>121</sup> These restaurants, which attracted wealthy and aristocratic diners, aimed to provide a Russian culinary experience part of which was the appearance of a balalaika ensemble, sometimes featuring Russian singers and dancers, providing music and entertainment for diners. The *Kazbek* Grill featured Captain Strelesky’s Cossack Orchestra, a band of five ex-officers of the Imperial Guard and their ladies, played balalaikas, a gusli, and a piano. The bar, which had walnut-panelled walls and an illuminated azure dome, was formerly a Masonic temple in which the Prince of Wales was reputed to have been initiated into the order. This information was used to attract an upwardly mobile clientele which included Diana Cooper, Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson, and the Prince and Princess Galitzine, all noted diners. The restaurant was managed by the ubiquitous Marquis de Chateaubrun, identified enigmatically in advertisements as Captain Vivien who held a commission in the Imperial Grenadier Guards and had ‘escaped from Russia after the Revolution’, found employment in the Russian Embassy in London in 1920, and was active in the formation of ex-officers’ balalaika ensembles and choirs, ‘entertainments reminiscent of pre-war Russia.’<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>121</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, pp. 246-249 mentions a number of Russian restaurants and tea-shops in London which he believes were never financially successful, ‘Non-Russians soon tired of the food and didn’t return (everyone was speaking Russian), Russian diners couldn’t (didn’t) pay and it was difficult not to serve them (even if they promised to pay later) and some merely stayed to drink coffee and socialise - eventually the business closed.’

<sup>122</sup> *The Era*, 20 May, 1931.

In the years leading up to the First World War, music in restaurants was becoming part of the dining experience. A small orchestra or ensemble would play accompanying the meal or at some interval in the service. This was not always welcomed by diners but as the 1920s progressed it became fashionable in salons and hotel restaurants such as the Savoy where the New Savoy Tango Band played.<sup>123</sup> Restaurants offered dining before theatre, concert and music hall performances, but increasingly dining became an entertainment in itself rather than having a purely functional service. The restaurant environment became theatrical. The décor of Odenino's Imperial Restaurant at 54 – 62 Regent Street, part of the hotel,<sup>124</sup> had mirrors along the walls encouraged the voyeur of beauty across the room; flirting, admiring, and ostentatious dining. The Grill Room had heavy moulded ceilings and walls, a large wooden clock above the fireplace, two heavy chandeliers and paintings on the walls. Tables were laid out in rows with tall-backed leather covered chairs, set with linen and silver service. One thing it did not have in 1922 was music, and the restaurant was struggling to attract diners.

Greenfield persuaded the dubious restaurant owner, Auguste Odenino, to employ Medvedeff's balalaika ensemble. The arrangement was precarious and the agreement verbal. Greenfield took no agent's fee but asked for one shilling for every guest over and above the first twenty-five each night. Wages for the ensemble were £45 a week (today's equivalent of £11,070.00) and they were required to provide a singer and pianist. A large guest room above the restaurant was provided for rehearsals.

Medvedeff's Corps de Balalaika, newly formed in October 1921, had seven players plus Medvedeff who played from his stand. Repertoire was at first limited and unpolished. A short programme was adequate as a 'turn' at the Coliseum and Alhambra theatres but a longer residency of nightly performances required an extensive and varied repertoire. Medvedeff hastily made new arrangements (parts) using tablature for each musician. His English players and 'musical director of revues and musical comedies' were unfamiliar with the execution and style of Russian music – the unwritten cues and stylistic traits of performance, adjustments of

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<sup>123</sup> See Brenda Assael, *The London Restaurant 1840-1914*, (London; Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 58, 207-208. The Grand Salon of the Holborn Restaurant had a small balcony which housed an ensemble which played light classical music. At the Monico Restaurant on Shaftesbury Avenue the Bellini orchestra (which had an Italian 'flavour'), played popular marches, waltzes, and opera overtures. *Frascati's* introduced 'musical dinners' which were popular with diners. The influential restaurant critic of the time, Nathaniel Newnham-Davis, looked for theatricality in dining and music was part of this experience.

<sup>124</sup> Owned by Auguste Odenino. The restaurant, The Imperial Restaurant, was popularly known as *Odenino's* after the name of its owner. It closed in 1926. Its signature dish was *Culotte de Boueff Imperial*. Christopher Isherwood, Benjamin Britten, and Evelyn and Eric Waugh were frequent diners there.



rhythm, expressive and dynamic ‘givens’, and the use of rubato. He also needed a singer who could perform Russian songs. London after the Russian October Revolution was crowded with Russian aristocrats in search of employment. Despite past wealth, education and titles many exiles were financially bereft and suffered physical hardship. Opera singers from Russian opera houses and stages were also adrift in London seeking employment. Medvedeff employed the singer Baroness Royce Garret<sup>125</sup> whose Russian husband had lost a leg during the war and she said they were starving:

I asked her what she could sing and where she had sung. “Oh, I don’t know”, she answered with child-like naivety, “I’ve never sung anywhere before, but I’m told I have a very nice voice.” .... we settled on *Korobushka*, *Stenka Razin*, *Gaida Troika* and *Na poslednuyu piatyorku*. We couldn’t get any more out of her.’<sup>126</sup>

The Corps de Balalaika began playing on 12 February 1922 on a stage constructed for the ensemble. They played from 7-9pm and again from 10-11.30pm. The ensemble consisted of domra prima, alto and bass, balalaika prima, secunda and contrabass, piano, drums and Baroness Royce Garret. Repertoire increased to 24 pieces.<sup>127</sup>

Medvedeff’s ensemble became popular, the restaurant was full and tables had to be booked. The ensemble benefitted from generous tips (which sometimes exceeded their weekly salary), and alcoholic drinks could be exchanged for cash through an arrangement with the restaurant. Employment was secure but open-ended with no job security. The proprietor would not confirm the length of the engagement other than it would last “for the season”. The vagueness of the arrangement became a hindrance; as the popularity of the ensemble grew, employment offers from other establishments could not be accepted.

The whole enterprise was precarious; agreements based on trust, last minute hurried rehearsal, sudden improvisation, getting by, underpinned by financial insecurity, long hours and

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<sup>125</sup> *The New York Times*, 1 August, 1926. In Miami, Florida, ‘Discovery by the police of a note indicating that a suicide pact had been entered into (with Baron Royce-Garrett) was announced this afternoon as the latest development in the death of Baroness Royce-Garrett, whose body crashed to the sidewalk from the eighteenth floor of the Everglades Hotel here last night.’ *The Evening Telegraph*, 2 August, 1926 notes ‘Mme. Vera Lavrova, [her Russian name] The Famous Soprano (No sole Agent). She and the Baron had made a pact to drown themselves should financial hardship become too much to bear. She unexpectedly threw herself from the window, the Baron tried to hang himself, but failed. The Baron had lost his fortune, and his leg, during the Russian Revolution. See also *The Era* Thursday 15 February, 1923. Mme. Vera Lavrova appears on the front cover of *The Sketch*, 3 May, 1922.

<sup>126</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 16.

<sup>127</sup> The order of performance was printed on cards placed on each table. These had to be re-printed each time the repertoire changed, which could be nightly. This became a challenge as new repertoire was chosen each night for the following day and the cards sent for printing.

compromises in standards of musical refinement (amateur musicians). In the case of Vera Lavrova (stage name assumed by Baroness Royce-Garret):

The singer, despite singing the same songs every day, was fantastically successful. Our twenty-two-year-old blond, blue-eyed beauty was met with enormous enthusiasm and forced to give encore after encore. As soon as she appeared the pianist took fright and began sweating profusely, trying to accompany her properly. She often mixed up the order of words, but for us that was irrelevant, we followed the expression of her words, but the poor pianist, having only recently marked in his music notes any slow-downs or speeding-ups, ended up either running ahead or dragging back. Of course he was upset at being unable to fall into rhythm with her, and blamed her for mixing things up due to her lack of musical education. Because of this I concluded that a foreigner would find it very difficult to understand our Russian music.<sup>128</sup>

Musicians and singers pursued the best financial engagements possible. Most musicians were on short contracts (if they were fortunate to secure a written contract), or none at all and were free to move on. Artists were not shy in inflating their publicity or changing their names for performing purposes. Baroness Royce-Garrett became Vera Lavrova, an artiste of the Petrograd Imperial Opera House (where, according to Medvedeff, she had never performed). Lavrova was soon poached by the Coliseum offering better money. Medvedeff replaced her with Tatiana Makushina<sup>129</sup> a solid, well trained Russian soprano from the St. Petersburg Opera 'who could sing and learn anything' but did not possess the physical attributes of Lavrova and, despite her abilities, was less successful with the public.<sup>130</sup>

Medvedeff was also not averse to seizing better opportunities. The Grand Hotel in Manchester offered a lucrative contract, Medvedeff resigned from *Odeninos*, and on 21 of March 1922 began playing six days a week (Sundays off) from 12:30pm-2pm in the Grand Hotel's Winter Garden, from 5pm-7pm in the Tea Room, and again from 9pm-11:15pm in the Winter Garden. Salary was £90 per week (the equivalent today of £22,140.00) with meals provided. The large Winter Garden was frequented by businessmen and Medvedeff's reception was cool. However, in the smaller Tea Room 'Here for the first time I witnessed tears at our barge-haulers and other songs, which I had to write out from memory.'<sup>131</sup> The Manchester contract lasted two weeks followed by three weeks at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool and a return to Manchester for three weeks (eight weeks

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<sup>128</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 17.

<sup>129</sup> Russian soprano Tatiana Makushina, a singer from the pre-Soviet days. 'She described herself as a "White Russian". She would talk for hours of her "Dear Czar and Czarina" and it seemed to all who listened to her that her heart had been left there behind, but still that nothing would induce her to go back. Erik Chisholm  
<http://www.erikchisholm.com/menandmusic/makushina.php> Accessed 2 April, 2022.

<sup>130</sup> She was matronly. She found success in English concert halls and made several recordings.

<sup>131</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 19.

in total with an option for renewal, which did not materialize). As with short-term contracts, the ensemble found themselves back in London looking up old and lapsed connections.

On the 23 of May 1922 the Corps de Balalaika began playing at Selfridges in the top floor restaurant from 12noon-2pm and from 4:30pm-6pm, five days a week. Salaries were greatly reduced to £21 per week (today's equivalent of £5166.00), 'i.e. £2 (£492.00) a week each and the remainder between the married men, i.e. £2-10s (£615.00) each.'<sup>132</sup> They were provided with velvet costumes, fed, and could take food home to supplement their wages. All requests for a raise were refused. They were enormously successful with the restaurant filled with people standing between the tables making waitress service difficult. Despite success here Medvedeff reports that agents refused to find them additional work on the pretext that the listening public would not pay to hear what they could hear for free at Selfridges. The contract lasted until the end of September.

The idea of Russian music played to diners was an appealing programme idea for the BBC. *The Red Saraphan* appeared again on radio as a fictionalized restaurant in which diners listened to performers of Russian music. The BBC explained that the variety of musical items would provide employment for needy Russian musicians in the UK; 'Everybody connected with the entertainment will be Russian, and every effort will be made to create the impression of a Russian atmosphere. This will be carried so far that the orchestra, playing for listeners every three weeks, will wear the traditional peasant uniform of top boots and blue blouses.'<sup>133</sup> There were some familiar personalities, '... "The Red Saraphan" ... will be under the direction of the Marquis Vivien de Chateaubrun, [master of ceremonies] who has in past years been responsible for "Kasbek" and the Russian exiles' Balalaika Orchestra'<sup>134</sup> and, in fact, most of the musical enterprises devised since the Revolution to help stranded Russian officers.'<sup>135</sup>

Social dancing was at a peak during the 1920s and 1930s though it appears Medvedeff's Russian music was not generally suitable for the fashionable Foxtrot, Quickstep and Two-Step. However, on occasion he did participate in charity balls and socials. The League of Nations organised a bazaar-exhibition in St. Albans and again at the Hyde Park Hotel (6-14 and 25 November 1922) and invited Medvedeff's ensemble to play. The hotel also employed the ensemble to provide dinner music and thereafter dancing between 9pm and 2am on New Year's Eve. Medvedeff turned to Russian folk dances 'Russian waltzes and half-a-dozen foxtrots' and

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>133</sup> *The Leeds Mercury*, 8 April, 1935.

<sup>134</sup> This presumably referring to the early artel balalaika ensemble of which Medvedeff was a member and which was taken over by Vladimoff.

<sup>135</sup> *Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, 6 April, 1935.

arranged twenty English ballroom dancing pieces. He considered this engagement a failure as the music they played was unfamiliar and not in the Russian style and his players found it monotonous.<sup>136</sup>

Russian themed events often became an exercise in fantasy; indulging in Russian fancy dress, dancing to balalaika music, watching displays of Russian dancing, and indulging in Russian food and drink. These occasions naturally provided employment for Russian bands, singers, and entertainers. A typical event enthusiastically reported in the press occurred in Folkstone. The Russian themed ball was attended by eight hundred guests at the Leas Cliff Hall in 1935. The Blue Saraphan Ball<sup>137</sup> was the climax of 'Folkstone's Brightest Week'. There were two orchestras: Roland Yates and his orchestra which played "Soft Lights and Sweet Music" to welcome the guests, followed by a programme by Medvedeff and his BBC balalaika orchestra. The Russian soprano Olga Alexeeva, who broadcast regularly with Medvedeff's ensemble, provided the vocal numbers. The eclectic programme included: *Soldiers on the March*, *Raspashol*, gypsy songs, *Moldavian Steppe* (Traditional folk song) and a selection of popular Russian songs. The *Norwegian Dance* (Grieg), and *Faun - Valse-Fantasia* (Andreeff). Alexeeva sang the *Blue Danube Waltz* (Strauss), the traditional song *A Little Farm House* (arr. Klimovsky) and *Bright shines the Moon*. Russian fare included a Cossack song selection arranged by Medvedeff, and the hugely popular *Volga Boatmen Song*. The balalaika music was encored again later in the evening. The entertainment went on past midnight and included an exhibition of Russian dance (Cossack?) and an acrobatic dance by 'Berylita, a clever child dancer'. Prizes were awarded for best Russian costumes. Here again, a context (a Russian Evening) is created to provide an occasion for wild dancing, imaginative Russian fancy-dress costume, hats, Russian food, balalaika music and gypsy song – a chance to step out of the everyday and experience an exotic world through fantasy. Clearly the evening was an indulgence in 'otherness'.<sup>138</sup> Generally, Medvedeff shied away from social dancing engagements such as

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<sup>136</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 21.

<sup>137</sup> The Saraphan (sometimes also Saraphan) is an elaborately ornamented dress worn by Russian peasant women on celebration days such as weddings and festivals. The dress evolved into something decorative and elaborate and became a symbol of a holiday. Wolkowsky had popularized the Saraphan in the titles of his successful Russian shows *The Blue Saraphan* and *The Red Saraphan* which appeared at the Prince's Theatre, Piccadilly and the Chiswick Empire as early as 1910 and later again at the Alhambra in 1926. The Blue Saraphan Ball therefore conjured up something distinctly Russian for prospective participants.

<sup>138</sup> We also witness the smashing of plates and dancing to *Zorba the Greek* in Greek restaurants – partaking in abandoned behaviour and dance which is paraded as authentic Greek behaviour.

these but they were lucrative and attracted the attention of aristocratic clientele; ‘certain guests asked for my address and we started to get invitations to play at rich and aristocratic houses.’<sup>139</sup>

The appearance of musicians to enhance entertainments in aristocratic homes was commonplace before and after the Great War. Exiled Russian aristocrats in London formed friendships with English gentry and intermarriage between English men and women and Russian aristocrats and businessmen provided opportunities for Russian music at soirees, dinners and receptions. Medvedeff exploited these occasions. He played regularly for Mrs. Guinness’ “at homes” and for Lady Diana Cooper. Medvedeff encountered Feodor Chaliapin at a *soirée* held by Lady Diana Cooper in 1923. His description offers a rare glimpse of the undercurrent of psychological displacement felt by some Russian exiles, a state of mind not easily gauged over time. Displaced exiles experienced social insecurity which made them sensitive to condescension, a sense of not being accepted in society and not good enough. Medvedeff’s description also reveals the unspoken connections between exiles, the subtle cues and recognitions which existed in the familiarity of rituals, behaviour, and modes of speech. It is the recognition of the (cultural) familiar in the displaced space/society in which they were forced to live and operate and which was the glue that bound them together. Equally, Medvedeff’s observations reveal his own readiness to exploit situations (financially) and express some contempt towards his host society. The remembered account (1959) is also indicative of Medvedeff’s own lingering sensitivity to his condition of exile and displacement:

‘He [Chaliapin] was most probably invited, officially as a guest, but, of course, for a fee. When opportunity arose he was not averse to “make a bit on the side” and, doubtless, got paid ten times the fee for our group of eight.

When we entered a small room (after 11 o’clock) Fyodor Ivanovich stood leaning on the grand piano. To me he appeared enormous, compared to the other guests, who sat arrayed out on the floor in front of him, some on stools. There was a free and easy atmosphere. I got the distinct impression that Fyodor Ivanovich was hanging onto the piano not to fall over. “I reckon he’s had a bit to drink” was my first thought. The guests cheerfully applauded him and asked him to sing something. There were about 25 guests, all clearly high society types.

Chaliapin was full of himself and sang without enthusiasm. Muttering under his breath in Russian he “bad-mouthed” the guests, assuming that none of them would understand.

“What’s the point in me singing for these idiots? There’s no way they will ever understand a Russian song. And you lot...”, – he turned to us, – “have you come to play? So where are your instruments?”... he said, and shook my hand.

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<sup>139</sup> Medvedeff kept a scrapbook of reviews in which representatives of various nationalities wrote comments about their impressions of the ensemble - these included Italian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Danish, Norwegian, English and others. Such names as Marconi, Healey (first president of Eire), Churchill, Guinness, MacCormick, Khore (Xope?) and others. Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 21.

The hand was hot. Judging by Fyodor Ivanovich's height, I expected the grasp of a large hand, but it turned out to be quite small – but oh! how friendly it was.

He turned to the pianist in French. This one, not even reaching for music, played him the introduction to *If only I could express in sound ....* Fyodor Ivanovich sang it in Russian.... Having heard so much about his voice, I assumed that the room would be too small for him, but imagine my surprise when I heard a voice no louder than ordinary conversation level, but delving so deep into my soul as to send everything there topsy-turvy. They clapped him long and loudly, but I got the impression that some of the audience were poking fun.

When Fyodor Ivanovich finished, our hostess stood up and led us into the dining room, and we were asked to go into the garden and await the guests.... Fyodor Ivanovich came up and asked, "What could you play for me, boys?" I reeled off a few titles.

"Looking at this pleasant night, a rarity for London, it wouldn't be bad to sing for them *Nochenka* – but would they understand, may the devil take them!?" In that case let's do *Stenka Razin* – you try and follow me as best you can", he said, in his self-assured manner. We also played for him *Ei, Ukhnem! (The Volga Barge-haulers)* after which he said "Well, that's enough for them. Now play your own stuff. Thanks for the accompaniment, it couldn't have been better. Bravo, boys!" He shook hands with us each in turn and went off to join the guests.<sup>140</sup>

## 4.8 Medvedeff's Performances in Parks

Between the wars a popular attraction on Sundays were band performances in London parks organised by the local Borough Councils.<sup>141</sup> Military bands had been part of public life throughout the Victorian age and were still popular in the 1920s. The London County Council employed dance bands, folk ensembles, Russian bands as well as military bands to entertain the public. Medvedeff's ensemble frequently performed in Kensington Gardens, Regent's Park, Waterloo Park, Silver (Jubilee) Park, Horniman Park and Clapham Common amongst others. In the years before the Second World War there were approximately 145 parks in London where music could be played but, according to Medvedeff, '80 bands were asked for but only 15 bands were used ....'<sup>142</sup> These performances could last two hours with an interval and required an extensive repertoire of 12 to 15 pieces.

Medvedeff had heard music played in public spaces in his youth, in the local recreation park in Bryansk where a bandstand (veranda) had been erected. Members of the volunteer fire service organization played as well as a local Jewish band. Military bands also performed as the town had a garrison of two regiments, an arsenal, and a military rusk factory. For Medvedeff 'Music sounded, collected and settled in the head, in the memory.'<sup>143</sup> Performing in London parks

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<sup>140</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 9 October 1959, pp. 4-6.

<sup>141</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, p. 250.

<sup>142</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 21.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

would have appealed to his sense of community, a reliving of past experience, of his youth. In the summer of 1911 he had been persuaded by his school friends to perform in the park: 'We were 22 in number and performed three numbers in each half.'<sup>144</sup> Such enterprises were not new to Medvedeff and he was able to draw on this early experience.

In the years leading up to the Second World War (1939/1940) interest in Medvedeff's Russian ensemble intensified. English sympathies with Russia were further aroused when Germany attacked Russia in June 1941. The London County Council turned to musicians to play in the parks to raise the spirit of Londoners during the early bombardments and they provided Medvedeff with numerous opportunities to perform. Medvedeff expanded his ensemble to between 20 and 25 musicians (achieved with increased funding from the London County Council) and arranged popular works in a combination of lutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons and violins in conjunction with balalaikas and domras and he also used singers<sup>145</sup> and dancers<sup>146</sup> in a populist repertoire. He also incorporated various comedians and 'performers' which together presented something for the eye and introduced comedy into the entertainment.<sup>147</sup> Medvedeff was certain a balalaika ensemble alone would have novel appeal for English audiences but he realised his concerts in parks needed an entertaining repertoire with more general appeal: 'Presenting only Russian traditional folk music would have worn thin with the public... I couldn't produce many effects in the open air and also was bound to play music which people in the parks would understand easier than something new.'<sup>148</sup> 'From now on we became a variety band.'<sup>149</sup>

Medvedeff performed on the streets or wherever there was an avenue or cluster of trees. Public gardens were turned into vegetable gardens and orchards during the war and Medvedeff would

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>145</sup> Singers included Michael Ivan, Paul Fedoroff, Max Turganoff, Nuta Lesko, Miss Briquette, Denisov, and Michael Ivanov. There is a distinct difference between the singers Medvedeff used for his BBC broadcasts (when he required folk singers), compared to those used for Parks performances and Variety Theatre appearances who could perform arias and a light varied song repertoire.

<sup>146</sup> Dances were popular and included Rimsky Korsakov's *Song of India (Sadko)* as well as 'Adagio Dancers' George (Wolkowsky) and Esme (Grande). Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 5.

<sup>147</sup> Eddie Lisak was a dancer and entertainer. He was born in Russia and is said to have jumped ship while docked at London. He found employment in Variety Theatre, together with George Lewis, as an acrobat in the duo *Vadidos Brothers* between 1950-1953.

<sup>148</sup> BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1: 1939-1953, letter to Mr Dunn of the BBC, 13 September, 1941. Glazunov's *Russian Fantasy* Opus 86 was just such a work composed for a large ensemble of folk instruments. Medvedeff possessed a handwritten ms of the work amongst his score collection but curiously there is no evidence that he performed it in public.

<sup>149</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 8.

arrive to serenade the gardeners: 'We would turn up during lunch breaks, where the vegetable garden workers would surround us and listen, holding their spades and forks. Even the sounding of the air-raid warning sirens didn't stop us from continuing with the concert. These were probably the most pleasurable concerts ... we played them Soviet melodies, old ones as well as the new ones registered with the Workers' Music Society [Association],<sup>150</sup> of which I was a member. There was no one around to play at that time, it seems, apart from us. Alan Bush, in charge of music at the Society, got called up,<sup>151</sup> and there were no other collectives.'<sup>152</sup> It is curious that research has found no other references to balalaika players busking in the streets. The timbre of the balalaika and domra was delicate which may have deterred musicians from playing in exterior noisy surroundings. Balalaika playing outside was often found in Russia in rural communities. Andreeff, for example, had heard the balalaika played by one of his farm workers (Antip) on his estate. Andreeff brought the balalaika and domra into the salon where formal concerts and gatherings became the usual environment for performances. This was common in the UK too where balalaika performances were given in the salons of aristocratic houses and other indoor spaces. Medvedeff's appearances with a small ensemble in public gardens is therefore unusual, an activity which could be called busking.

Despite numerous opportunities to perform in parks and public spaces Medvedeff found it difficult to focus on balalaika repertoire. He relied on a core of experienced balalaika players but as the Great Depression of the 1930s took hold many of his gifted players drifted away hoping to secure better employment. Experienced Russian balalaika/domra players became fewer and he had to teach and train English players for his park bands. This, according to Zakharov, contrasted with Medvedeff's orchestras of the 1920s when '... most of his orchestra members were Russian, although the actual people changed from time to time.'<sup>153</sup> Medvedeff, throughout his professional life, struggled to find balalaika/domra players of sufficient ability. He put down this lack of interest not to the shortcomings of the balalaika and Russian folk music but to a general lack of musical taste within English society.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> The Workers' Music Association is still in existence. It was founded in 1936 by Alan Bush, conductor, pianist and composer who was appointed President of the Association. He became a member of the Communist Party after a visit to Germany in 1929 when he saw first-hand the effects of the rise of Nazism. See, <https://workers-music-association.co.uk/> for the Association web-page. See also, Ewan MacColl, ed., *The Shuttle and Cage: Industrial Folk-Ballads*, (London: Workers' Music Association, 1954). Membership of the Association has included many musical luminaries including Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Pablo Casals, Eric Chisholm, Dmitri Kabalevsky, Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger et al.

<sup>151</sup> Alan Bush served in the Royal Army Medical Corps between 1941-1945.

<sup>152</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 9.

<sup>153</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, p. 250.

<sup>154</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 1.



The peripatetic nature of piece-meal band-work on short contracts created difficulties for players, a situation permanently employed orchestral players did not experience. Zakharov notes that park bands were paid a performance fee according to the number of players in the band.<sup>155</sup> Band work supplemented other employment but was sometimes disadvantageous as ‘half of any money earned from music gets taken away in taxes as extra earnings.’<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, Medvedeff’s park performances were hugely popular, received positive critical press, and provided much needed income during the financially difficult war years.

## 4.9 Medvedeff and the Coldstream Guards

Andreeff’s visit to the Coliseum in 1909 and King Edward VII’s reported interest in the balalaika led to the formation of a balalaika ensemble within the Coldstream Guards under Lieutenant Rogan.<sup>157</sup> Twenty five balalaikas and domras were imported from St. Petersburg for the regiment in 1909<sup>158</sup> and the formation of this ensemble attracted public interest and reporting in the press.<sup>159</sup> Colin Dean, the Household Division bands archivist, suggests members of such a balalaika ensemble were not members of the regimental band but more likely ‘... drummers or ordinary soldiers, perhaps even officers, who took it up for fun to entertain their colleagues. At this time, battalion concerts were regular affairs and involved the soldiers themselves and rarely the band.’ Any balalaika band or performances would have been reported in *The Guards Magazine* but Dean finds no mention of balalaikas in the index. The formation of smaller ensembles within regiments was/is not unusual. The Countess of Wessex Orchestra is a recent formation of a string ensemble and in the 1960s ‘the drummers of 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards formed a steel band and performed at the Festival of Remembrance....’ Despite Dean’s assertions there is evidence that a balalaika ensemble did exist amongst the guardsmen.<sup>160</sup>

In October 1959 Medvedeff was approached by the Coldstream Guards regiment with an offer to sell him its collection of balalaikas. Medvedeff, in his search for balalaikas, had already

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<sup>155</sup> Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, p. 251.

<sup>156</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 1.

<sup>157</sup> *The Evening Telegraph and Post*, 15 December, 1909.

<sup>158</sup> This date is incorrectly recalled by Medvedeff (he states 1908) as Andreeff and the excitement over the balalaika only occurred with Andreeff’s visit in 1909. The order was more likely to have been made in 1910. Medvedeff relates that the conductor of the regimental band was in St. Petersburg in 1908 and returned with 20 domras and balalaikas. Medvedeff Letters, 21 October 1959, p. 1.

<sup>159</sup> Major David Hammond makes no reference to this ensemble in his history of military music in the United Kingdom between the two world wars. David Hammond, *British Army Music in the Interwar Years: Culture, Performance and Influence*, (Peterborough: The Cloister House Press, 2020).

<sup>160</sup> Colin Dean e-mail to the author, 4 December, 2018.

approached the Coldstream Guards in 1921/22 with an offer to buy their collection but had been refused. Medvedeff reports; 'You can imagine with what trepidation I entered the room ... I felt much like the archaeologist when one of the pyramids of Egypt was opened.'<sup>161</sup> The instruments were in poor condition with only a prima domra and three balalaikas in playing condition and the rest would need restoration;

'All the instruments were laid out on the tables for me. Pity took over as I looked at them. These cripples, rather than gallant soldiers, stood and lay in front of me. Andreeff's badges were not on them and that means they were not from Andreeff - but instead of the badges, regimental marks and numbers in order from piccolo-domra to contrabass. On the tables lay as follows: 1 piccolo domra, 2 prima domras, 1 alto domra, 1 bass domra, 5 balalaikas, 1 secunda, 2 basses and 2 double basses in the corner. Open mouths, necks bent over to the bodies and only four solid ones.'<sup>162</sup>

Medvedeff, in an effort to raise finance to restore the instruments, approached the Ministry of Culture at the Russian Embassy but to no avail. In 1959 he found no interest in the provenance of these instruments and his request caused bewilderment. This response draws from Medvedeff a rare criticism of Soviet indifference, 'It's a shame that strangers should treat them better than their own people. What a joy it would be to receive them in any House of Pioneers. They would fix them themselves and could easily learn pieces on them, since they are easier to play.'<sup>163</sup> Medvedeff felt they had historical value, should be repaired and saved but the cost was prohibitive; 'And so their fate is - the bonfire. Only five or six will be sold for wall decoration.'<sup>164</sup> The Coldstream Guards instruments were donated to Kneller Hall in Isleworth where the School of Military Music had a small museum.<sup>165</sup>

In 1987 Kneller Hall was to close. Bibs Ekel, knowing of the existence of the balalaikas, offered to buy the remnants of the instruments; 'So for 50 quid I bought the broken remnants of five

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<sup>161</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 21 October 1959, p. 1.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>163</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 28 January 1960, p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 21 October 1959, p. 2.

<sup>165</sup> Kneller Hall was sold by the British Army in 2021 and is now the Upper School for Radnor House School, Twickenham. Medvedeff had a previous association with the Coldstream Guards. They were to appear together at the Empress Hall in Earls Court for a celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1942. Medvedeff was to play his march *Warrior (Boyets)*, a medley of the latest Soviet themes. The conductor of the Coldstream Guards asked that *The Holy War is Being Fought* be changed from 3/4 to 4/4 as the guards were unable to march to a waltz. Medvedeff recounts; 'Unfortunately, he failed to delve into the music sufficiently, and to realize that the tempo was perfectly in keeping with a march. I didn't argue as there was little time left to orchestrate for their band of 75 and I wrote it out to match the rest of the march.' Medvedeff Letters, 23 November 1959, p. 7. On Sunday, 18 June, 1944 the Guards Chapel in Wellington Barracks was struck by a German flying bomb in a rare daytime raid. Over 120 people were killed, many from the nobility, including the Director of Music, Major Windram, and five of his musicians.

instruments. They were all made by the famous maker Ziuzin and I know that via Andreeff, Colonel (sic) Rogan had ordered 25 instruments, just like Andreeff, and this is what was left, the five pieces in the cellar, plus the bass domra which was in the showcase on display.<sup>166</sup> The other instruments included a broken prima balalaika, alto balalaika, prima domra, alto domra and a bass balalaika all identified with the initials BBCG (Balalaika Band Coldstream Guards) in faded gold paint on the neck. Ekkel had all the instruments restored; the contrabass balalaika, the most important instrument, ‘cost me £500 to get it all glued back together.’<sup>167</sup> Mikhail Ignatieff, a Russian composer and balalaikist living in Hamburg suggested to Ekkel that a Swiss family, Cobeltz, would be interested in buying the Ziuzin instruments.<sup>168</sup> The Cobeltz family offered £5000 for the contrabass and some of the other instruments.<sup>169</sup> Ekkel relates they also gave him a contrabass balalaika in part exchange but ‘a few weeks later they said they weren’t entitled to let me have it and gave me another £1500 to get it back so that was a good deal.’<sup>170</sup> Ekkel has two remaining instruments, a bass domra and alto balalaika that belonged to the Coldstream Guards.<sup>171</sup> That a balalaika ensemble did exist within the Coldstream Guards is without question. The demise of the ensemble and the obvious neglect of the instruments suggests that interest waned, probably after the Second World War. The complex relationship between Britain and the Soviet government during the Cold War may have further contributed to the shelving of any close associations between British military establishments and Russian cultural interests.

#### 4.10 Medvedeff and Repertoire

Medvedeff is reputed to have had a large collection of scores, many sent back to Russia, and a few of which remain in the UK. The few examples we have of Medvedeff’s own hasty part-writing for balalaika ensemble (cf. Appendix B) corroborates Medvedeff’s own assessment of his arrangements for his ensemble: ‘I will send you something as an example of my work, but all the arrangements of folk motifs and melodies written out from memory are of no use to anybody. They might only be of use to some amateur collective, and that at the beginning of their work ....’ Elsewhere in his letters his lack of confidence in the quality of his own arrangements is expressed:

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<sup>166</sup> Author’s interview with Bibs Ekkel, October 2022.

<sup>167</sup> The purchasing price of £500 today is £1762.61.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibidem*. Ekkel relates that Ignatieff was of the opinion that Ziuzin instruments were superior.

<sup>169</sup> The purchasing price of £5000 today is £17,626.07.

<sup>170</sup> The purchasing price of £1500.00 today is £5287.82.

<sup>171</sup> There are other instruments from this collection in existence which surface from time to time. Ekkel noticed a bass or contra bass balalaika (BBCG 18, probably also by Ziuzin) which appeared for online auction (with accompanying picture) by a Cumberland auction company.

‘...they are in such a primitive state that I wouldn’t dare send them without a total overhaul. Unlike you, being unfamiliar with my history of having to re-write material for constantly changing orchestra members, they would throw the stuff out and classify me as an ignoramus. When Ye.G. Avksentiev toured here, I took a risk and showed him my arrangement of the musical scene *Stenka Razin*. He didn’t say much and the less said by me, the better. What sounded good here would not sound so good with that mass of extraneous instruments drowning out the balalaika.’<sup>172</sup>

Medvedeff acquired scores from Eric Pendrell-Smith, founder of the London Balalaika Orchestra in the 1920s. These are still loosely bound in covers stamped with the orchestra’s name. Other scores bear Medvedeff’s personal stamp.<sup>173</sup>

Our knowledge of Medvedeff’s repertoire is largely restricted to titles, with one or two specifically mentioned publishers in programmes and BBC Programme Forms required for broadcasts, BBC Radio Times Listings, mentions in his personal letters, newspaper reviews and professional newsletters. Two observations can be deduced from these sources: repertoire for BBC broadcasts is distinctly biased towards Russian folk music, songs and instrumental dances, whereas repertoire for entertainment in theatres, charity concerts and public spaces is populist and included well-known works from across the Light Music repertoire.

His choice of repertoire was determined by a number of factors: his aural memory of Russian folk songs (from different regions of Greater Russia) learned during his youth, his access to

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<sup>172</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 November 1959, p. 2. As noted elsewhere, Ekkel took possession of Medvedeff’s scores long after Medvedeff’s death.

<sup>173</sup> Editions of scores in Medvedeff’s collection in Ekkel’s possession are listed in the Bibliography. Medvedeff also makes reference in his letters to ‘... some old printed music’ which he intended to send back to Russia: ‘I will list them for you:

1. Compilation of Andreeff’s pieces (all 7 books of scores): 71, beginning with an easy “Barynia” and finishing with “Bohemian Song”.
2. Family Evenings (I already sent them to you).
3. Album of Gypsy Songs (N.A. Fyodoroff). For balalaika orchestra (three books, 10 pieces).
4. Album of Dances & Marches (N.A. Fyodoroff). For orchestra 4 books, 15 pieces.
5. Album (2<sup>nd</sup> part) for five balalaikas. From the time when the alto, bass and contrabass were tuned E,A,E. (so called ‘razlad’ tuning).
6. Songs of the Homeland (*Rodnye napevy*). For single balalaika. With standard and tablature notation. Compiled by Nassonoff. 60 pieces. With lyrics added.
7. Album of Gypsy songs. For single balalaika. 50 pieces. Music & lyrics compiled by Fyodoroff.
8. Ukrainian Songs and Dumkas. Compiled by Nassonoff. 6 books. 60 pieces for single balalaika with lyrics in standard notation and tablature.
9. Album of Operas and Pieces for single balalaika. Compiled by Fyodoroff. 25 pieces in standard notation.
10. Album of Ballroom Dances, waltzes etc. For one balalaika. Arr. Dobrokhotoff. 3 books, 50 pieces in standard tablature. I don’t know if they are of any interest or value except for a museum, as they don’t exist anymore.’ Medvedeff Letters, 20 November 1959, pp. 3-4.

recently published scores (and recordings)<sup>174</sup> sent to him by his sister in St. Petersburg,<sup>175</sup> and scores he found in the British Library. He chose what he considered accessible to English listeners, the suitability of repertoire for different performance contexts, and the suitability of songs and dances for musical arrangement. Medvedeff also listened to an increasing availability of balalaika recordings from which he was able to make his own arrangements. Published balalaika scores in the 1920s were still scarce in England.

A survey of Medvedeff's repertoire for his Park performances can be categorized as follows: Marches, Waltzes/Valses, Medleys, Selections, Potpourris and Sketches, Descriptive pieces combining multiple tunes descriptive of a musical theme, Fantasias/Fantasies, Overtures, Intermezzi and Finales, Dances (Mazurkas, Gavottes, Polkas, Galops, Quadrilles and Czardas), Folk Songs (from Scotland, Wales, Ireland and England - sung and instrumental arrangements), Opera Duets, Trios and Quartets, contemporary popular songs played '*a la Russe*', Variations which provided the opportunity to string together tunes under a theme or character, salon works, particularly those of Andreeff and Fomin, gypsy airs, Chastooshki which were ironic humorous songs on topical subjects, and works from the light classical repertoire. He also composed his own original works. Programmes often list works given different titles but which are clearly the same work. Works listed in his BBC Programme Forms also indicate that most arrangements were kept short (2 to 3 minutes). The majority of these works were in arrangements by Medvedeff, the arrangements depending on the availability and ability of the performers at his disposal for any particular concert.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> A recording of Andreeff conducting *Remembrance of Gatshina Valse* can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6T-qHoY6\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6T-qHoY6_k)

The reverse of the record label reads: The balalaika is at present the most famous instrument in Russia. Every regiment has a balalaika orchestra, and the music on the Czar's yacht during the recent stay at Cowes was furnished by a balalaika band. This instrument is a kind of guitar with only three strings, in several sizes, from that of a mandolin to something near a double bass. The visit of this great organisation to America is an event of unusual importance. Mr Andreeff, the leader, has rehearsed his men with great care, and the technical skill and precision of these twenty-five players is simply astonishing, while the effect of the whole orchestra is soft and rich, with an exquisite *pianissimo*. This charming waltz, composed by Mr Andreeff, exhibits well the striking effects produced by these gifted players.

An unusual recording is that of Andreeff's *La Valse de Noel* – but not for balalaika orchestra. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-DZQJGAkH4>

<sup>175</sup> Medvedeff's sister sent him all the scores he had collected when living there and she also sent him printed music for folk instruments of pieces arranged by Tchagadaeff, Andreeff, Fomin, Niman and others. Medvedeff also '...started visiting the British Museum where, apart from old editions of Russian songs and romances, I found all Russian operas, starting with the very earliest. There, in the Museum, I put together potpourris, picking out the most appropriate melodies. Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 4.

<sup>176</sup> These categories derive from a survey of his Programmes for his Parks concerts as well as from his Programme Forms for the BBC.

Medvedeff used German collections of folk tunes, dances and gypsy airs published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as his sources.<sup>177</sup> These collections contain piano arrangements, sometimes including translated lyrics, or simple scoring for small ensemble. The arrangements draw on conventional four-part harmony and show little resemblance to the complex polyphonic and rhythmic complexity found in Russian peasant music and performance.<sup>178</sup> They are invariably a reduction of the tune and simplification of the lyrics aimed at accessibility by urban middle and upper classes. They are not in any way a faithful ethnographic reproduction of the tunes as they would be found in the field.<sup>179</sup> Swann notes, ‘... collectors noting mostly what hovered in the minds of townspeople, i.e. urban versions of village intonations.’<sup>180</sup>

Medvedeff’s ability to arrange and construct concert versions of folk tunes which sustained interest and variety was met with difficulties frequently faced by other Russian composers. Abraham notes that Glinka was ‘... concerned with nothing more than stringing together of folk-tunes into frankly popular fantasias, harmonising them and orchestrating them so as to complete the spiritual pictures for which they were only rough sketches.’<sup>181</sup> Balakirev, Dargomyzhsky, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov all tussled with fitting simple folk melodies into sonata and other large musical forms.<sup>182</sup> Abraham identifies one of the chief difficulties faced by composers plundering the folk-tune repertoire for material; ‘For a folk song is a complete entity, not a mere cell as a motif is, and therein lies the difficulty. Being already a fully developed whole it contains no growing power. Nor, without vandalism, can it be decomposed into its constituent parts and these parts treated as germ-cells.’<sup>183</sup> The published collections of

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<sup>177</sup> A Number of these are in the remnants of his library in Ekkel’s possession – noted in the Bibliography.

<sup>178</sup> Examples of these collections can be found in Medvedeff’s collection: Möller, Heinrich (Dr.) n.d. *Das Lied Der Völker: Russische Volkslieder*, Mainz, Leipzig, London, Brussels, Paris: B. Schotts Sohne: and Von Bruno. (arranger and translator) n.d. *Album Russischer Romanzen und Volkslieder für eine Singstimme mit Begleitung des Pianoforte*, Leipzig: Schuberth, Fritz Jr.

<sup>179</sup> Alfred J. Swann, *Russian Music and its Sources in Chant and Folk-Song*, (London: John Baker, 1973), Appendix 1, pp. 206-207 provides a catalogue of Russian Folk Song collectors from the late 1700’s to 1958. Gerald Abraham, *Studies in Russian Music*, (London: William Reeves, 1935), p. 45 makes the further observation: ‘Their fundamentally wrong conception of Russian folk-music as homophonic was pointed out in their own life-time by Y.N. Melgunov, who died as long ago as 1893, but his discovery of the polyphonic nature of a great deal of Russian folk-music came just too late to influence the development of Russian art-music.’

<sup>180</sup> Swann, *Russian Music*, p. 19.

<sup>181</sup> Abraham, *Studies in Russian Music*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>182</sup> Typical examples include Alexander Dargomyzhsky’s *Chukhon Fantasia* (1867) (*Fantasia on Finnish Themes*) and Balakirev’s *Overture on Three Russian Themes* (1858).

<sup>183</sup> Abraham considers the application of folk music by Russian composers in their works – the shortcomings and difficulties of incorporating them into longer works. He doesn’t address folk

arrangements of folk songs and dances found in Medvedeff's collection reveal just this: they are generally arranged in 8 or 16 bars of balanced structure, rhythmic consistency and conventional harmony bearing no 'development' reminiscent of conventional Sonata form.

While working for the BBC between 1933 and 1939 Medvedeff found weekly programmes required 10-15 different numbers., '...but some needed to be made up of several separate tunes, probably involving 25-30 melodies. All this had to be rehearsed in three-hours (more rarely two) ....'<sup>184</sup> Russian folk melodies (being short) needed to be extended not by 'development' but by repetition, constructing variations on the theme, or stringing together a selection of folk tunes around a central idea. Medvedeff was wary of writing extended variations or repeating motifs for fear pieces might all sound the same; 'I was afraid lest some musical expert would take issue with me, and for this reason I quickly changed one melody for another.'<sup>185</sup> These were the only effective ways Medvedeff could see to extending the length of a work for concert purposes. Overall, his potpourris, soundscapes, musical sketches and descriptive scenes (usually having descriptive titles) aimed to unify this selection of folk music.<sup>186</sup> He also attempted, in his broadcasts, to approximate the singing of peasant, soldier and worker songs using an unaccompanied bass (Nadejine or Youra).<sup>187</sup> These performances, though not true ethnomusicological exercises, are indicative of Medvedeff's sensitivity to the provenance of the songs and his attempt to capture their complexities in a concert performance.

Medvedeff's score collection does contain a number of salon pieces specifically for balalaika. Amongst these are the rare scores (mss) of Andreeff's *Butterfly Waltz (La Papillon)*, his *Welcome*

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music in depth but makes the pertinent point that folk songs and dances are whole entities in themselves.

<sup>184</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 5.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>186</sup> Medvedeff notes among them: *Speeding Train (Galp-poezd)*, *Smithy in a forest with an anvil*, *Waves of the Amur*, *Volga Themes*, *Russian Rivers*, *Sounds from the Barracks*, *Soldiers on the March*, *Kobza*, *Bandura*, *Students*, *"Rogneda"*, *"Bandits of the Volga"*, *"Askolda's Grave"*, *"Ivan Susanin"*, *"Zaporozhets za Dunaem"*, *"Ruslan & Ludmila"*, *"Khovanshchina"*, *"Rusalka"*, *"Noise"*, *"Troika"*, *"Storm on the Volga"*, *"A Summer Night in Beryozovka"*, *"A Russian Peasant's Hut"*, *"Ukies (sic) living it up"*, *"Christmas Time"*, *"Gypsies"*, *"Name-day celebration in a provincial town"*, *"Student party"*, *"Cossacks"*, *"May Day Gathering"*, *"Round Dance"*, *"Night before Ivan Kupala"*, *"Peasant hut No.3"*. Medvedeff's score collection also includes two potpourris by A. Schirmann (1922 and 1930) models Medvedeff is likely to have followed. The BBC score library holds a published copy of Medvedeff's selection of folk-songs evoking *Nights on the Volga*. This Selection is arranged for small ensemble (excluding balalaikas and domras) by Basil Karin. The score is the Piano Conductor's reduction published by W. Paxton and Co, London (1937).

<sup>187</sup> Nadejine and Youra were two Russian basses – they used this name as their artist's name.

to England, both extremely popular at the time of Andreeff's visit to the Coliseum in 1909<sup>188</sup>. Another rare score (ms) is Glazunov's *Russian Fantasy Opus 86* for balalaika folk orchestra written for the Velikoroussky Balalaika Orchestra which Glazunov admired. This was first conducted by Andreeff who was admired by Glazunov and remained part of Andreeff's repertoire for his concert tours to the West, a work almost forgotten today.<sup>189</sup> These three rare scores are stamped with The London Balalaika Orchestra (Pendrell-Smith), may have been acquired by Smith at the time of Andreeff's visit to the UK, and subsequently found their way into Medvedeff's collection.

#### 4.11 The Difficulties of Occasional Work

A common difficulty experienced by Russian ensembles was the instability, and consequent financial insecurity, caused by the haphazard availability of engagements. Players tended to go where the work was. In the summer months seaside towns such as Bournemouth,<sup>190</sup> Hastings,<sup>191</sup> Southsea,<sup>192</sup> Great Yarmouth,<sup>193</sup> Eastbourne,<sup>194</sup> Bognor<sup>195</sup> and Bexhill<sup>196</sup> often employed popular ensembles which played on piers, in public squares and parks and band-stands on the sea front. The appearance of these bands was very popular and became part of the holiday experience. The work was seasonal but assured and Medvedeff consistently pursued these contracts throughout the 30s, 40s and 50s.

The Anglo-Russian Company, of which Medvedeff was a member, facilitated engagements such as showcases (accompanying the ballerina Audrey Ashby)<sup>197</sup> and concert appearances (23 May 1924) at the Aeolian Hall featuring Nikolai Legat (then of the St. Petersburg Ballet) and David Zillerman (cello) for which Medvedeff provided music. The League of Sunday Concerts also provided engagements between October and May on Sunday evenings in many London theatres. Artistes were required to perform in evening dress and dancing was forbidden.

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<sup>188</sup> The printed scores are handwritten copies and not typeset.

<sup>189</sup> There is a performance of this work on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4uC-CiM8U4>.

<sup>190</sup> See fn. 142.

<sup>191</sup> Medvedeff appeared at the White Rock Pavilion in Hastings. *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 18 March, 1950.

<sup>192</sup> Medvedeff appeared at the South Parade Pier in Southsea. *The Evening News*, 17 October, 1936.

<sup>193</sup> Medvedeff appeared at the Wellington Pier in Great Yarmouth. *The Journal*, 5 September, 1935.

<sup>194</sup> Medvedeff appeared at The Winter Garden in Eastbourne. *Eastbourne Gazette*, 19 April, 1950.

<sup>195</sup> See reports and advertising in *The Observer and West Sussex Recorder*, 28 March, 1923.

<sup>196</sup> Medvedeff appeared at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill. *Hastings and St Leonards Observer*, 25 January, 1936 and *The Courier*, Saturday 21, 1936.

<sup>197</sup> I can find no information on Audrey Ashby.



Medvedeff approached theatre managements directly thereby avoiding commission fees. He relied on *The Stage* newspaper for knowledge of theatres and performance venues noting who, how and where performances were held. He approached venues regardless of capacity (theatre, or village hall), or size of village or town. He pursued vacancies caused by last minute cancellations by other performing groups and supplied past programmes and copies of reviews to prospective agents and theatre managers to arouse their interest. By 1940 Medvedeff had signed with The Bowker Andrews Concert Direction Agency which assisted Medvedeff securing contracts and negotiating with the BBC.<sup>198</sup> Medvedeff was not reticent in insisting the BBC honour its obligations and promises of alternative dates for cancelled broadcasts.<sup>199</sup> Concert agent representation for Medvedeff's ensemble added some measure of security and did lead to other employment opportunities. Charles Harvard, his agent (Mr Bennet) in the 1940s, had connections with the South African entertainment industry and Medvedeff was to secure a tour to South Africa.

His involvement with The Anglo-Russian Company led to his association with Lydia Kyasht in December 1924. Kyasht had been enticed to the Alhambra as their featured Russian ballet dancer to replace Adeline Genée in 1908. Kyasht formed her own company (and dancing school) and offered Medvedeff an extended contract accompanying performances of her Cabaret/Burlesque production *A La Russe*.<sup>200</sup> This was a major tour to Number One theatres throughout the country and work began on the 5 January 1925 and lasted until 1928. Medvedeff was able to employ 12 musicians (2 prima domras, 2 alto domras, 2 prima balalaikas, secunda, alto, bass, contrabass, piano and drums) on a regular wage.<sup>201</sup> It was the ensemble's first regular and secure work.

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<sup>198</sup> For instance, Mr Andrews enquired of the BBC whether Medvedeff had been paid correctly for a programme not broadcast. The Bowker Andrews Concert Direction Letter, 7 March, 1940. BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT 1, Nicholas Medvedeff, File 1, 1939-1953. In reply to Mr Bowker-Andrews a letter from the BBC.(unsigned in copy) states '... none of the programmes you mention... were recorded. We may add that fees are dispatched automatically as soon as recorded programmes have been transmitted once round the Empire. If no cheque is received it means that the programme has not been recorded, or, if recorded, not used.'

<sup>199</sup> Letter to Mr. Wynn 17 December, 1940, BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff, File 1, 1939-1953. Medvedeff in the same letter complains of only having had two broadcasts that year which clearly shows a declining interest in his balalaika ensemble. However, this attitude was to change with the onset of the war and the alliance with Russia which I discuss elsewhere.

<sup>200</sup> First Performance, Cardiff Playhouse.

<sup>201</sup> Medvedeff typically asked his 'comrades' whether they wished to take up the offer. Medvedeff Letters, 9 October 1959, p. 12.



Figure 24 Lydia Kyasht's A La Russe Programme

Financial pressures were not relieved. Medvedeff, perhaps not understanding the arrangement of a 'split week' (when a theatre would split profits with the visiting company rather than the visiting company hiring the theatre and its staff for the performances) complained of only receiving 65% or 70% of the usual payment.<sup>202</sup> Medvedeff frequently had insufficient funds to pay salaries and delayed payment to the next theatre. Finances were clearly a problem for Kyasht even in 1925, the first year, when they performed for 34 weeks at a financial loss. Kyasht's employment of Medvedeff's ensemble as a separate band rather than integrating singers, dancers and instrumentalists into the company created a financial responsibility she could not honour. By 1927 Medvedeff's ensemble reached critical success and booking proposals increased. Work with Kyasht became less attractive. The ensemble was frequently out of London and unable to reliably sign BBC contracts and concert agents were unable to engage them with any certainty. As the tour progressed theatre venues deteriorated and pay was cut. Medvedeff's ensemble was reduced from 12 to 10 players and Kyasht's overall company from 31 to 24. Some of Medvedeff's ensemble became walk-on dancers.<sup>203</sup> Kyasht's financial situation worsened and in 1928 she filed for bankruptcy and her debt to Medvedeff was never paid.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>203</sup> While touring with Kyasht, Medvedeff managed to secure work with Wolkowsky and Vladimoff for the players he was unable to employ. Medvedeff Letters, 9 October 1959, p. 14.

1927 also saw the advent of the ‘talkies’ with the consequent curtailment of live music performance. Theatres in provincial towns became kinematographs where better financial returns were certain. Medvedeff notes that some twenty-five thousand artistes and musicians found themselves unemployed as a result. However, Kinematograph theatres did begin to include half-hour live concerts between two films in the evenings and Medvedeff was asked to play but he felt ‘Nothing wonderful nor even good was achieved....’<sup>204</sup>

## 4.12 Medvedeff and the BBC

The BBC was another institution which regularly employed Russian musicians. Vladimoff’s Balalaika Orchestra had secured broadcasts for the BBC in the 1920s as did the solo balalaikist Gregori Tcherniak. Medvedeff, touring with Lydia Kyasht’s burlesque/cabaret performances between 1925–1928, only managed five broadcasts in the 1920s – beginning in 1926<sup>205</sup> – but between 1933–1938, his most successful period, work for the BBC became more consistent.<sup>206</sup> As the Second World War approached and Russia became an ally of the British there was a resurgence in interest in Russia and Russian music and Medvedeff saw the opportunity to reach a wider audience both on the Home Service and the newly-formed Empire Service.<sup>207</sup>

Medvedeff’s relationship with the BBC was difficult, despite the popularity of his programmes, resulting from changes in the hierarchy within the BBC Light Music Department. He repeatedly had to prove himself, and the ability of his ensemble, to new personnel in ‘test’ broadcasts and auditions. Working relationships with new personnel and changing agents had to be maintained. In the 1930s his ensemble of 17 players was reduced to 12. The BBC constantly looked to cut costs. Medvedeff would often play second domra to boost the number of players, would

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<sup>204</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 2.

<sup>205</sup> Medvedeff was initially restricted in the number of instrumentalists he was able to employ due to the overall fee offered by the BBC. He could only afford to employ 12 musicians and he led the orchestra playing on alto domra. The line-up was: 2 alto domras, 1 bass domra, 4 prima balalaikas, 1 alto, 1 contrabass, piano (only accompanying lightly), and 2 singers. A second broadcast included 2 alto domras, 2 bass domras, 4 balalaikas, 1 alto, 1 contrabass, bayan, piano and singers – soprano and baritone. Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 3. Zakharov, *No Snow on their Boots*, p. 250, notes that during the 1920s Medvedeff’s ensemble employed mainly Russian musicians. Medvedeff was an intimate friend of the Zakharov family.

<sup>206</sup> Medvedeff’s consistent employment by the BBC contrasts with Scheduling’s study of German refugee composers and their turbulent relationship with the BBC. See, Florian Scheduling, *Musical Journeys: Performing Migration in Twentieth-Century Music*, Chapter 3, ‘Airwaves in London,’ pp. 83–111.

<sup>207</sup> Letter to Mr Dunn, 22 January, 1942. BBC Written Archives (WAC), Files: RCONT 1, Nicholas Medvedeff, File 1, 1939–1953: Medvedeff states he had been broadcasting programmes ‘20–35 during the year’. Medvedeff’s contracts for this period of work (1930s) are not available in the BBC Archive – possibly destroyed during the war – nevertheless *Radio Times* listings for the period late 1933 to 1938 indicate 85 separate broadcasts for Medvedeff and his ensemble.

conduct from his music-stand, and additional singers could only be engaged by special request or be included within the ensemble number. He frequently felt performances were compromised by these accommodations. BBC contracts quoted an all-inclusive fee calculated on the number of players and conductor which included all rehearsal and recording sessions, reproduction fee, overseas and home broadcast use and 'other reproductions.'<sup>208</sup> A Programme Form was also required providing full programme particulars, accurate timings for each item and the supply of composers', arrangers' and publishers' names in every case. Fees varied over the years and were increasingly regulated by the Musicians' Union. By 1953 Medvedeff's fee had reached £44.10.0d (today's equivalent of £3,818.00), (Broadcasting and Recording), £10.3.9d (£874.00), (Overseas use), £41.9.0d (£3559.00), (Other Reproduction) – approximately £96 (£8236.00).<sup>209</sup>

Typical Light Music Programmes on which he performed included: *Music in the Home*, *Brightly Shines the Moon*, *Music for the Housewife*, *Music in your Home*, *Light Music with...*, *Café on the Corner*, *Music in the House*, *Variety Band Box*, *Afternoon in Russia*, *Morning Music*, "They Shall Rise Again" – *Novgorod*, *Freedom Club*, *London (for the) Forces*, and *Isbushka*, a stand-alone programme lasting 45 minutes. Programmes in some contracts are identified as "Light Music" or "Russian folk music". Billing was consistently 'Mr Medvedeff and his Balalaika Orchestra'.

At the start of the Second World War the BBC was again obliged to economise. Mr Wynn of the BBC proposed a reduction of ensemble members from 12 to 8 players (a combination Medvedeff had used in the 1930s). Medvedeff reluctantly agreed. Medvedeff suggested twenty guineas for this combination and proposed that he deal directly with the BBC, rather than through his agent, thereby cutting agent's fees. With reduced forces he could still pay his players the same wage, take a cut in his own fee, reduce rehearsal time, and perform with the group as leader and conduct from his stand. He felt he could not pay his agent out of the 20

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<sup>208</sup> In May 1940 Medvedeff was contracted for 8 players, conductor and singer (ensemble of 10). Payment (present day equivalent given in brackets) was £23.2.0d (£908.90) for Broadcasting and Reproduction, £5.15.6d (£227.23) for Reproduction, £7.14.0d (£302.97) for Overseas Use and £15.8.0d (£605.93) for Other Reproduction. In the 1940s the set fee stabilized at £33.15.0d (£1327.94). A typical contract in 1947 gives a further breakdown: Conductor £4.4.0d (£149.32), Leader £4.4.0d (£149.32), 8 Principals 60/- each (£177.80), 3 Others 50/- each (£88.90), £39.18.0d (all inclusive) (£1418.50). From 1<sup>st</sup> December 1948 the Musicians' Union stipulated a minimum fee for casual studio broadcasts: Principals: 60/- (£177.80), Others: 50/- (£88.90). Overseas reproduction fees were calculated at 25% of the performance fee. (noted in contract).

<sup>209</sup> This is the last contract with Medvedeff available in the BBC Written Archives files. My calculations (here and elsewhere) uses the Measuring Worth site at [https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php?use%5B%5D=CP&use%5B%5D=WAGE&year\\_early=1953&pound71=96&shilling71=&pence71=&amount=96&year\\_source=1953&year\\_result=2024](https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php?use%5B%5D=CP&use%5B%5D=WAGE&year_early=1953&pound71=96&shilling71=&pence71=&amount=96&year_source=1953&year_result=2024) and the Bank of England Inflation Calculator at <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>

Guineas without affecting wages.<sup>210</sup> Medvedeff retained his agent for larger theatre contracts, summer seasons, concert appearances and tours and should the BBC wish to use his full complement of 12 ensemble members then his agent would negotiate the contract. This arrangement was with Mr Andrews' consent.<sup>211</sup> Medvedeff was clearly unhappy with this new arrangement (inferring it was a regression to early beginnings): 'Repertoire will be reduced to about 500 pieces and orchestra will consist of 3 Domras, 4 Balalaikas and a piano (exactly as we started Radio Performances). If you would desire to add a singer it would be an increase of two guineas extra. I hope that this suggestion will meet with your approval.'<sup>212</sup>

Despite these agreements Medvedeff doggedly lobbied the BBC Light Music Department to use larger ensemble forces (he was currently using 25 performers for his LCC concerts) and to expand the repertoire to include more complex Russian works not heard in the UK, works by Shostakovich, Roval, Dunaevsky and others.<sup>213</sup> Mr Wynn remained sceptical. In a memo to Mr Arnold Perry Mr Wynn writes: 'I cannot imagine Medvedeff handling a larger orchestra with any results worthwhile. I would like to see this Modern Russian Light Music before agreeing to this proposal. Could Mr Perry be of service for both investigations!' There is an implication within the general correspondence between Mr Perry, Mr Dunn and Mr Wynn (within the Light Music Department of the BBC) that they did not consider Medvedeff a good conductor and that his rehearsal methods, performance preparation and discipline amongst his players was questionable. An internal memo from Mr Perry comments: 'Medvedeff handles this combination well and gets good discipline in his quiet way.'<sup>214</sup> The music is characteristic and has quite a flavour. He played one or two of the suggested modern Russian melodies and they sounded very pleasant. The addition of woodwind gives him more scope and I had to point out to him that he could use even more contrast than he was employing. He played a Russian Army march that was very effective. All arrangements are by Medvedeff.'<sup>215</sup> It is evident there was some reassessment of the quality of music provided by Medvedeff's ensemble in 1942 and again in 1946 he was requested to present his ensemble for 'audition' despite having broadcast for

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<sup>210</sup> Letter to Mr Wynn, 25 April, 1940: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>211</sup> Letter to Mr Dunn, 22 January, 1942: BB.C Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>212</sup> Letter to Mr Wynn, 3 April, 1940: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>213</sup> Letter, 21 July, 1941: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>214</sup> Mr Perry notes the ensemble under discussion consists of 4 violins, Cello, Bass, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, 6 Balalaikas, Drums, Piano and 4 singers (Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass)

<sup>215</sup> BBC Internal Memo from Andrew Perry, 2 September, 1941: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

many years before that. Auditions were required again in 1948 and 1952.<sup>216</sup> Popular music tastes were changing with the arrival of American 'Pop' music and the Light Music Department questioned whether Medvedeff's Russian music was still appropriate. Mr Dunn attended a performance of Medvedeff's orchestra at the Regal Theatre (Wimbledon Broadway) in March 1942 and noted: 'Apart from the stage setting, dressing and presentation, the performance as a musical feature was disappointing.' Medvedeff's musical forces included four woodwind, three violins, two cellos, bass, a section of balalaikas and percussion as well as principals and chorus. Mr Dunn found the chorus good 'apart from intonation peculiar to their style and they sang with a fine sense of rhythm, ensemble and character.' Medvedeff used his ensemble as accompaniment to the chorus but Mr Dunn felt it sounded very badly in the hall. 'There were many passengers; the strings were lifeless and the woodwind was hardly heard at all.' Mr Dunn felt there could be very little improvement expected from an expanded ensemble, he could not justify the expense, and he felt the standard was not acceptable. He suggested a smaller ensemble consisting of Balalaikas, Soprano and Male Quartet, Piano and double bass, the latter giving support to the bassline.<sup>217</sup> Despite these reservations Medvedeff's contracts from the late 1940s and 1950s continued and consistently employed 8-12 musicians (including the conductor) with the occasional added singer or featured instrumentalist.

After the Second World War Medvedeff and his agent solicited the BBC Light Music department suggesting a series of programmes titled *Nights on the Volga* which would comprise a script introducing Russian music 'composed by Mr Medvedeff, with English and Continental numbers interspersed, possibly on similar lines to the old favourite "Café Colette" in which this orchestra was the feature.'<sup>218</sup> These overtures led to another post-war audition for his new ensemble. More successfully the BBC accepted his proposal for an extended (45 minute) scripted

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<sup>216</sup> Internal Memo from Mr Arthur Wynn, 4 September, 1946: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>217</sup> In his letter inviting Mr Dunn to a performance Medvedeff notes 'The company consists of 27 members including Male Sixtett (sic), 2 sopranos and orchestra of 19 (string, wood and balalaikas). The programme consists of the most favourite music played in Soviet Russia at present time and about 40 minutes duration.' Letter to Mr Dunn, 17 March, 1942: BBC Written Archive (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>218</sup> Letter to the Director of Programmes from Medvedeff's agent Mr Bennet at Charles Harvard, 21 August, 1946: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953. Medvedeff followed with a letter to Mr Wynn offering his balalaika orchestra: 3 Prima Domra, 2 viola domra, 1 bass domra, 3 balalaikas, 1 secondo balalaika, 1 alto balalaika, 2 basses, piano and 2 singers. And 4 April, 1946: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953 and Mr Douglas Lawrence noting his ensemble consisted of: 4 violins, viola, cello, Double bass, flute, oboe and 2 clarinets, Bassoon, drums, Piano, Prima Domra, Basso Domra, 2 Prima Balalaikas, Alto Balalaika, Contra-Bass Balalaika and Bass singer. Letter to Mr Lawrence, 17 May, 1946: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

programme called *Isboushka*<sup>219</sup> which required a Quartet of singers and the addition of shepherd's pipes and accordion.<sup>220</sup> Medvedeff brought to the recording nine players and a singer and himself as conductor on the fee of 8 players as “*Izboushka*” requires volume for a party and not to be too weak.<sup>221</sup> He also proposed a programme ‘Light Music while you work’ (Soviet folk music for women)<sup>222</sup> for broadcast by ‘The Programme Arranging Department for Russia’. He suggested it would interest Russian listeners hearing Russian balalaika music played in the UK by English balalaika players as well as English tunes and songs played on Russian instruments. The BBC’s Russian department referred Medvedeff to the Light Music Department but questioned whether ‘their standard (is) now too low?’<sup>223</sup>

Medvedeff tried again to interest Mr Lawrence in his new *Estrade Orchestra* in 1948.<sup>224</sup> He was again called to a “test broadcast” which Mr Lawrence warned: ‘Think it only fair to bring to your notice the importance we attach to this broadcast. We shall listen to the programme most carefully and trust you understand that in the light of past comments this broadcast has been offered you as a test case. May I take this opportunity of wishing you success and trust that, as a result, we shall be in a position to offer you further engagements.’<sup>225</sup> Mr Dunn attended the rehearsal and broadcast and reported: ‘There was a slight improvement in the standard of playing, but by no means was it good enough.... The playing lacks light and shade, attention to dynamics and expressive markings and is rhythmically inelastic. The responsibility for this

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<sup>219</sup> Medvedeff uses *Izboushka*. The BBC uses *Isbushka*.

<sup>220</sup> Letter to Mr Dunn, 22 January, 1942: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953. Letter from Mr Dunn, 6 January, 1942: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953; Letter from Medvedeff to Mr Dunn, 30 December, 1941: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>221</sup> Letter to Mr Dunn, 22 January, 1942: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953. By contrast Medvedeff was at the time performing at the Theatre Royal, Marble Arch (to which he invited Mr Wynn to see a performance). He appeared daily at 1.45pm, 4.50pm and 7.58pm. For these performances his ensemble forces consisted of 27 members including a male sextet, 2 sopranos and an orchestra of 19 (string, wood and balalaikas). ‘The programme consists of the most favourite music played in Soviet Russia at present time and of about 40 minutes duration’. Letter to Mr Wynn: 17 March, 1942: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>222</sup> Letter to Mr Wynn, 4 April, 1946: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>223</sup> Letter, 5 April, 1947: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939 -1953.

<sup>224</sup> Letter to Mr Lawrence, 16 August, 1948. BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939 -1953.

<sup>225</sup> Letter to Medvedeff from Mr Lawrence, 8 March, 1948: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939 -1953. Mr Lawrence wrote with approval on 31 March, 1948 after listening to the broadcast and was happy to offer Medvedeff further engagements.

inevitably falls upon the conductor. Medvedeff does not inspire. His left hand merely duplicating the right. He lacks drive and enthusiasm. Intonation was at times faulty. I did not see any attempt at tuning during the period covering rehearsal, break and broadcast.<sup>226</sup> Mr Eric Arden (presenter) reported more positively: 'The performance of the above orchestra showed a great improvement over their last broadcast. As most of these men do not read music I think that it is essential they have plenty of time between one broadcast and another in which to learn the parts they are going to play, and, provided that Medvedeff sticks to Russian folk music, he can give quite a distinctive entertainment. There are other points which could be improved upon, mainly the expressing, dynamics etc. which were practically negligible; also the importance of his seeing that his orchestra give a final tune-up to their instruments just before the broadcast commences.'<sup>227</sup>

Mr H.M.C. Ricketts of the Light Music Department, in the light of these comments, was asked to assess the ensemble. His response is a begrudging appraisal: 'As a very occasional entertainment I suppose this serves a purpose. The material played covers a wide range from instrumental solos, duets and slow dirge-like songs, to full red-blooded dances with and without shouts and cries to goad the players to further effort, if in fact that is needed.' This was a style of performance alien to what British listeners to Light Music on the radio were accustomed. The BBC viewed the ensemble as an entertaining novelty which justified its use on the radio service. Mr Ricketts questions the authenticity of Medvedeff's performance on various levels: 'I quote the case of the Lady whose Balalaika sounded like an old G Banjo with the strings let down and purposely detuned. This was used for the second and third beats of the accompaniment to a waltz and sounded like a multi-string bass phono-fiddle. Amusing but unmusical: authentic? doubtful.' Mr Ricketts continues his sardonic assessment of authenticity with regard to the woodwind: 'Then there was the case of the lady with what I had at first thought was a genuine shepherd's pipe, the type that uses the bill of a snow goose for a double reed. This instrument was in fact an oboe blown presumably *a la Russe*. That was screamingly funny but unmusical. I learned later that she could not get a reed for the shepherd's pipe. What a pity.'<sup>228</sup>

The assessment of the instrumentalists is that they are individually poor and intonation appalling '...so bad, in fact, that I had to ask on more than one occasion for a general tune up in

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<sup>226</sup> Internal Memo from Mr Dunn, 23 March, 1948: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939 -1953.

<sup>227</sup> Internal Report from Mr Eric H. Arden, 19 March, 1948.: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File.

<sup>228</sup> In his BBC broadcasts Medvedeff also included worker and peasant songs sung by the basses Youra and Nadejin unaccompanied.



order to get an idea of the harmonies being played.’ Mr Ricketts also seemed confused by Medvedeff’s arrangements, the playing of which had to be explained to him. The tone of the letter is highly condescending. Despite this response the recording session appears to have been enjoyed: ‘A good time was had by all including those in the box’ – the sound recorders and technicians. Mr Rickett’s concedes that the ensemble has entertainment value and ‘there certainly isn’t anything like it on the air’. Mr Ricketts suggests ‘...gingering it up and tuning and perhaps some vocal help might add to the attractions.’<sup>229</sup> This last suggestion indicating that perhaps Mr Ricketts had missed the point of style and performance altogether.

By 1960 Medvedeff’s Russian balalaika music programmes had become part of the ambience of Sunday radio listening which began to irk the public and draw criticism.<sup>230</sup> This led Mr Lawrence to appoint Mr Littmann to undertake research into listeners’ preferences. It became necessary to present a programme of balalaika music which did not include other bands so an assessment could be made of audience reaction to balalaikas as opposed to other orchestrations within the series.<sup>231</sup> Once again, very late in Medvedeff’s career, his ensemble was to be tested.

Medvedeff’s repertoire for BBC broadcasts featured mainly Russian folk music - popular songs and dances (320 noted broadcast works have Russian connections). Programmes were usually 15 and 25 minutes long. A Programme Form listed works for broadcast which would be scrutinized by the Light Music Department and any adjustments thought necessary were made. The Programme Form also required two Extras (also recorded), which could be used should one of the proposed items have been recently broadcast. Despite the submission of the information Medvedeff frequently complained about the lack of programme details in *Radio Times* listings and the arbitrary alteration/renaming of titles, some differing from his submitted Programme Form.<sup>232</sup>

Medvedeff’s arrangements of published works required acknowledgement by the BBC in accordance with copyright laws which the Musicians’ Union monitored and strictly enforced. Medvedeff indicated ms for manuscripts in his possession or folk songs and dances

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<sup>229</sup> Internal Memo (Private and Confidential) from Mr H.M.C. Ricketts, 4 April, 1952. BBC. Written Archives (WAC), Files: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>230</sup> *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, for example, published readers’ criticisms of BBC programming. Mr Reg. Pulford’s radio hates are: ‘1) Accordion and Mandoline (sic) Bands (for which I can find no excuse whatever), 2) Pseudo-exotic orchestras of the Hungarian, Magyar, Balalaika and Gipsy variety whose unmusical efforts seem to be inseparable from Sunday broadcasting.’ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 14 April, 1939.

<sup>231</sup> Letter from Hubert Clifford, Head of Light Music Programmes, 5 August, 1953: BBC. Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953. The results of this report are not available but Medvedeff continued to broadcast for the BBC until 1961.

<sup>232</sup> Medvedeff Letter, 22 October 1959.

remembered aurally but sometimes would also indicate ms for arranged works from published songs and works published in Russia; for example, *Until* by Wilfred Sanderson published by Boosey and Co. (1910), *There's a boy coming home on leave* by Jimmy Kennedy, copyright Peter Maurice (1940), and *My Country* by Dunaevsky (published in Russia). This was questioned by the BBC.<sup>233</sup> Clearly Medvedeff was at fault: 'I thought I was right to mark ms in cases where I rearranged pieces entirely and used only manuscripts.'<sup>234</sup> The onus to fulfil copyright payments lay with the BBC but Medvedeff's procedure may betray his circumvention of paying royalties by making his own arrangements.

Increasing broadcasts demanded a greater variety of folk songs (10-15 numbers each using 25-30 separate melodies). As for his park performances Medvedeff created musical cycles based around a tune/theme: for example, *Volga Themes*, *Russian Rivers*, *Sounds from the Barracks*, *Soldiers on the March*, *Kobza*<sup>235</sup>, *Bandura*,<sup>236</sup> and *Students*. He arranged works by Tchagadaeff, Alexeev, Fomin, and Niman, Ukrainian and Cossack songs, and rifled old editions of Russian songs, romances. From these he created twenty-five potpourris: *Rogneda*, *Bandits of the Volga*, *Askolda's Grave*, *Ivan Susanin*, *Zaporozhets za Dunaem*, *Ruslan & Ludmila*, *Khovanshchina*, *Rusalka Noise*, *Russian Rivers*, *Troika* among them. These were sometimes renamed when rebroadcast. Programmes were arranged to appeal to English listeners but also to other nations as programmes were broadcast to other countries. Medvedeff was also an early broadcaster of Soviet music in the UK. Medvedeff estimates that between 1933-1939 he arranged 42 marches, 44 waltzes, 25 operatic potpourris and fantasies, 88 potpourris – Russian, Ukrainian, Gypsy songs, waltzes & dances, 14 numbers of characteristic music (*Train*, *Storm on the Volga*, *Smithy in the Forest*, for example) 42 excerpts from opera and light classical music, 258 Russian folk melodies, 47 accompaniments for tenors, 102 - for the soprano Olga Alexeeva, 41 accompanying a baritone, 33 for quartet, 4 for trio, 31 duets, 84 songs for solo voice, 21 items of musical sketches, 58 mixed numbers, 14 English melodies, and 16 numbers for solo balalaika.

Ryan Ross makes a strong argument for Julius Berger's introduction of the potpourri format to BBC programming, tracing its genesis from *pasticcio* opera, early silent film accompaniment, Hörspiel and Radio Opera: 'After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Burger successfully transferred this radio genre to the newly established BBC Variety department in January 1934

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<sup>233</sup> Letter from Mr Dunn, 16 April, 1940. BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>234</sup> Letter to Mr Dunn, 25 April, 1940. BBC Written Archives (WAC) File. RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>235</sup> Kobza is a Ukrainian lute.

<sup>236</sup> Bandura is another Ukrainian instrument – something between a zither and a lute. Sometimes also called a *kobza*.

where it became an influential mainstay in programming throughout the life of the department.<sup>237</sup> Medvedeff in his letters similarly claims to be amongst the first to broadcast using the potpourri format, a style of structure he used in his youthful compositions for his early ensembles in Russia.

Medvedeff's idea of creating musical pictures of Russian life, such as *Storm on the Volga*, *A Summer Night in Beryozovka* was a concept new to the BBC where music programmes generally comprised soloists, ensembles and orchestras performing separate works, each individually announced by the presenter. Each would also be noted for copyright monitoring organisations. Medvedeff's new potpourri/selections format meant the announcer would 'tell listeners they would hear a performance of *A Russian Peasant's Hut*, explaining to them the significance of the word *Izbushka*, that it would be the place for parties with singing and dancing.'<sup>238</sup> The announcer's role became minimal. Medvedeff's format was taken up by the BBC in other programmes which began presenting continuous music under a single heading and dispensing with the announcer. The arrangement of popular tunes into short medleys was also to be found in popular music publications such as those by Lawrence Wright, Francis and Days and Boosey and Hawkes. Charlie Kunz, a popular pianist, brought this form of medley to his piano broadcasts and recordings.

Medvedeff's players were of varied ability - some were not good sight readers and some self-taught. This was a difficulty when rehearsal time was short (2-3- hours for a programme). Medvedeff wrote quickly, on demand, often using tablature or shorthand: '... there was no time to wait until a balalaika player learned to sight-read music, and I preferred to write him out a simplified version, so that he could immediately go out and earn money.'<sup>239</sup> Medvedeff professed to be an 'old believer' as far as prima balalaika was concerned and he was used to tablature. He was rarely satisfied with his scores: 'I would not be ashamed to have my arrangements played in front of any great musician, but wouldn't dare showing them the written arranged parts for fear of being chided for my illiteracy.'<sup>240</sup> Mr Ricketts could not make out Medvedeff's arrangements which had to be explained to him by a player.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Ryan Ross, 'Media, Migration and the Musical Aesthetic: Julius Burger's Radio Potpourri (1933-1945),' (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2023), p. 218.

<sup>238</sup> The first continuous uninterrupted performance on English radio was broadcast on 2 August, 1934. "*Izbushka*"/*The Peasant's Hut* was popular and on the 9th of October we broadcast "*Izbushka No.2*" for a full 45 minutes. Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 6.

<sup>239</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 14 January 1960, p. 1.

<sup>240</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 22 October 1959, p. 5.

<sup>241</sup> See Appendix B for an example of Medvedeff's arrangement style.

Medvedeff was further challenged by circumstances affecting his players. Olga Alexeeva, Captain Strelsky, Nadejine and Youra were his BBC singers but in 1937 Alexeeva moved to Paris. Strelsky was forced to take other employment to earn more money and Medvedeff was left without vetted BBC singers. Medvedeff's agent died and broadcasts became scarcer in the late 1930s - 17 performances in 1937, 22 in 1938 and 8 in 1939 as the war approached and finances tightened. Broadcast engagements halted at the start of the war. He was forced again to rely on cinematograph appearances and one-off concerts. Foreigners, such as himself, were forced to obey an 11pm curfew, his musicians were called up for the army, London emptied and the children left. Medvedeff's immigrant and refugee status was questioned by the BBC: 'With reference to your enquiry today I am a stateless person under protection of British Government. All members of the orchestra are British.'<sup>242</sup> BBC contracts stated there were to be no aliens employed and members drawn from the armed forces needed to have the permission of their Commanding Officer to perform and their fee was to be declared. The BBC made a distinction between artistes who were 'on their books' and occasional guest artists. Those not 'on the books' were subjected to audition before they were permitted to broadcast. The BBC kept extensive lists of banned artists during the war.<sup>243</sup>

Despite the consistent adjustments Medvedeff was forced to make to accommodate the BBC's requirements his ensemble in its many guises was consistently popular with the general public for over thirty years through to the 1960s and contributed to the vitality of BBC Light Music programming despite the rapid changes in popular musical taste.

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<sup>242</sup> The letter/memo does not appear within the BBC archive but Medvedeff's reply does: Letter to Mr Wynn, 1 July 1940: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

<sup>243</sup> Letters to Mr Dunn, 13 September, 1941 and 16 September, 1941: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953. In the case of soprano Ms Kyra Vane Medvedeff was called upon to provide her details probably due to the fact Ms Vane performed under several stage names which may have made the BBC suspicious. She appeared as Kyra Vane, Kyra Wane and Kyra Vronska. Medvedeff takes pains to explain Ms Vane's background: 'She is British, being born in England, but her parents are Russians. She speaks English Russian and French equally and sings in Italian and German as well. She is just as Olga Alexeeva was 2 years ago.... She had parts in *Chauve-Souris* (Russian and English), broadcast with Evelyn Laye's Party, ENSA's party. Her style and richness of her voice are equal to Olga Alexeeva. That is chiefly why I would like to have her with my ensemble. She will broadcast with ENSA (Mr Williams party) in September again. I hope Mr Wynn will not object including her in the programme.' Mr Dunn obviously wanted to hear her sing before she was included in the programme... 'At present she is taking part in a new Russian opera which is going to begin at Savoy Theatre on 6<sup>th</sup> of October. The first opera will be *Sorochinsky Fair* by Mussorgsky. Miss Kyra and Oda Slobodskaya taking the same part in turns (different days).' There was no objection from Mr Wynn to Ms Vane appearing with the ensemble. BBC Internal Memo from Mr Dunn, 9 September, 1941 and Letter to Medvedeff from Mr Dunn, 14 August, 1941: BBC Written Archives (WAC), File: RCONT1, Nicholas Medvedeff: File 1, 1939-1953.

### 4.13 The War Years - ENSA

As the Second World War approached Medvedeff received increasing requests for Russian, and particularly Soviet music, in his concerts. His balalaika ensemble was, by the 1940s, the only one of its kind in England and charity performances in aid of the war effort became plentiful. Medvedeff notes that the number of concerts was 'staggering' but despite the increased number of performances his ensemble could not survive financially playing for charity. His collective joined ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) to provide music for the military. This ensured a steady income and living support during the war years. His players were likely to be called-up in any event and artists joining ENSA would entertain the armed forces for the duration of the war rather than fight in the army. Ensembles were costumed, instruments and running costs paid for, players received a salary, transport was provided to performance venues around the country and artistes accommodated in digs, hostels and hotels. ENSA provided entertainment for infirmaries, hospitals and places for the recuperation of the wounded; a department was responsible for the entertainment of active divisions outside the British Isles; there were departments of drama, chamber performances (quartets and trios), solo artists, ballet, operetta and revue. Each department had its own administrative personnel which planned the assigning of groups, ensembles and collectives and managed accommodation, transport, finance and catering.

Once an ensemble was ready to perform it was housed in a dormitory, hotel or requisitioned house. Performers paid a tenth of their salary towards accommodation. They received breakfast, dinner, a teatime snack and something to eat before leaving for the show. Hot soup and tea awaited the ensemble upon arrival. Cleaning and servicing of accommodation was done by mobilised or hired staff. Members carried identity cards with photographs which allowed freedom of movement and were also used to obtain rations. Citizens were assigned provision shops but ENSA personnel, travelling on active service, submitted their cards to ENSA who arranged provisions. Expenses were claimed by presenting receipts.

ENSA assigned venues for performance. Each evening the ensemble would be driven to the performance venue (usually six days and six different venues). Journeys could take 2-3 hours to reach the performance venue and very often ensembles returned in a blackout. Performers gathered at ENSA headquarters and then bussed to venues. Shows and concerts usually started at 7:30pm, matinees at 3:30pm. A minimum fee was charged to watch the show – the reason lay in the assumption that anyone who paid would appreciate it more and not misbehave. After the performance performers were driven to the nearest public transport for home. Belongings, costumes and props remained packed in theatrical baskets on the bus, which remained, along with the driver, with the ensemble for the whole week.

Performances took place in aerodromes, hospitals, army camps, navy barracks and sometimes in fields in large tents. Medvedeff reports that reception of the orchestra showed a divide between officers and men. Commanding officers seated at the front tended to remain seated for the *Internationale* whereas the lower ranks further back would stand 'only to sit down again in embarrassment when they saw that their bosses remained seated. Sometimes soldiers would approach me on their own or as a delegation to apologise.'<sup>244</sup> Medvedeff included an arrangement of the *Internationale* (still not much heard in performance in England) and the English national anthem woven together. The score of the *Internationale* had been sent from Russia to the *Workers Music Society* and passed to Medvedeff. He also included arrangements of the American, Polish, Norwegian and Belgian national anthems for occasions when they played for troupes from those countries. Medvedeff generally met with strong support for the Russians in the war. 'One day we performed at an aerodrome at the mouth of the Thames. After we finished and gathered in the officers' mess the pilots brought us a flag (a red cross with a circle in the middle containing a crossed hammer and sickle in yellow to represent gold) which had supposedly been fished out of the water by a motorboat patrol. They suggested we use it as a backcloth for our performances. Its size was such, that it would probably have covered half the back drapes of the Tchaikovsky Hall. Wherever possible we always used that flag as the backdrop for our performances.'<sup>245</sup>

Medvedeff's ENSA collective (called *Russian Folk*) comprised 19 artists including dancers, singers and balalaika/domra players. Yet again, it was not his ideal collective. He was also expected to include artists provided by ENSA. Artistes were chosen through audition (sometimes 20-25 hopefuls auditioning each week), held twice a week, and chosen purely on the entertainment value and what they could do. Medvedeff points out that artistes were sometimes awarded because of their social connections as a way of avoiding call-up during the war. Medvedeff had to contend with conscription dodgers who couldn't play their instruments, eccentric behaviour from artists assigned to the ensemble by ENSA, and performers conducting personal business on the side as they moved around the country. Medvedeff once again faced accusations of antisemitism despite the presence of Jewish musicians employed in his ensemble. This last instance brought their work with ENSA to an end subject to a 'review'.

Between 1942-1944 Medvedeff remained in London and witnessed the constant bombing from the French Coast as well as the flying bombs over East London. Between 1944 and 1947 Medvedeff entertained in hospitals and infirmaries, houses requisitioned for recovering soldiers,

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<sup>244</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 21 November 1959, p. 2.

<sup>245</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 23 November 1959, p. 11.

sanatoria, and theatres for the wounded and family and friends. He performed with a very reduced ensemble which bore no resemblance to a folk orchestra – 1) domra prima – Medvedeff (sometimes solo balalaika); 2) clarinet; 3) alto balalaika; 4) piano; 5) singer – bass (playing a bit of balalaika); 6) soprano; 7) and dancer: ‘Believe it or not, the impression this combination made will last me all my life.’<sup>246</sup> Audiences were small but appreciative. Often there was no stage and they performed in spaces amongst the bunkbeds:

‘We even visited such places where the patients had been since the 1914-1918 war. Some of them had never got up from their bunk beds in all those following years. Some had spent more than 20 years in plaster and there were some wards where people were in sacks as all that was left of them was a head and torso. Cables were stretched across this ward, so that they could move around using their teeth. To the rest of the world they were dead and buried. Their names were not given to anybody and their relatives believed them to be dead. What a joy it was to give them the pleasure of hearing Russian music! Seeing the pleasure in their eyes and feeling how they wholeheartedly received us was the greatest prize for us.... we stayed to talk to them.... And it did happen that during our presentation they changed someone’s dressing... we were always greeted only with smiles and gratitude. Music or singing distracted them from the pain.’<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 23 November 1959, p. 15.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 4-6.

A typical programme at these concerts is outlined by Medvedeff:

1. *Moonshine* and introduction.
2. *March of the Aerial komsomol* with singing from the whole ensemble (“We were born, to turn a fairy-tale into reality”).
3. To a drum roll the singer enters singing the march from *The Happy Lads*. And marching, she goes off-stage.
4. The Fantasy *Nights on the Volga*, with singing and dancing.
5. *Do not go, Gregory*. This song was arranged as a popular foxtrot in England with the title *Yes, my Darling Daughter*. It was sung by Dianah Shore and very popular with the troops.
6. *The Butterfly Waltz*, which finished with the girl dancer.
7. Potpourri *Troubadours* for balalaika orchestra.
8. A small vaudeville number: “It happened in a tavern not far from the front”.
9. Old English songs, with a comical element.
10. Two dancers perform the dance *The Doll and the Wooden Soldier* to the music of *Parade of the Tin Soldiers*.
11. The tenor sang in Russian: *For the Last Five Roubles* and a waltz from a film in English (unspecified).
12. *Song of the Indian Guest* from *Sadko*, the dancer performed an Indian dance.
  - a. *Tachanka* with singing.
  - b. Youth song, sung by all *A Golden Haze by the Roadside*.
  - c. *Polyanka* (The Forest Glade), which finished with a dance (Hilda Hills jumps up and dances with the balalaika).
13. Quadrille – dance.
14. Singer with a popular song of the day.
15. Some easy dance: tango, slow Russian or polka.
16. Tenor: An English Ballad.
17. Variations: *Moonshine* (finishing with a dance).
18. Balalaika solo (Hilda Hills).
19. Potpourri of Scottish songs.
20. *Song of the Volga Boatmen* with singing & where possible lighting effects.

Medvedeff continued to perform throughout the 1950s in summer seasons in seaside towns, for occasional concerts, for Russian themed events, and the occasional broadcast for the BBC, but the English love affair with the balalaika and Russian folk music had waned. Medvedeff turned to teaching the balalaika and domra and to the preservation of his library of balalaika scores and documents. He visited Russia and assisted with the centenary concerts honouring the life and work of Vasily Andreeff. His work as a musician in exile was bent on the preservation of Russian folk music, to promoting the balalaika ensemble advocated by Vasily Andreeff, to winning the approval and appreciation of English audiences, and establishing a place for the balalaika and Russian folk-music in the sonic diversity of English popular music. Medvedeff's own assessment of his success in doing so is poignant: 'Looking around me, it somehow seems to me that what Andreeff started here is up to me to finish. There's no chink of light, and that is sad. I think that 1959 is not the last, but one of the last.'<sup>248</sup> The balalaika and domra and the Russian immigrant musicians who played them, so popular in Britain in the early twentieth-century, have become a lost history in the narrative of Light Music performance in Britain.

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21. *Barynia* – music and dance.

22. *My Wide Motherland*. To the sound of this song from either side of the stage two people emerge holding the British and Soviet flags and sometimes, when there was time for a costume change, a farm girl came out holding a scythe and a worker from the other side with a hammer, both crossing them front of stage beside the two flags.

23. Finishing with the *International* and the British *National Anthem*.

<sup>248</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 21.



## Chapter 5 Russian Musicians: Longing, Nostalgia and the Exotic

The enthusiastic reception of Russian balalaika ensembles in press reporting and trade journals such as the *Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar Magazine* and the willingness of English musicians to learn the balalaika and domra, to set up local ensembles, and seek the help of Russian folk musicians, ensured a professional musical life for many Russian immigrant musicians. The great popularity of Russian folk music, particularly from 1910 through to the 1930s was due to the exotic appeal of the repertoire and the dances they performed as well as the musical qualities of the balalaika and domra. Newspaper reporting of the time frequently refers to Russian folk music as an expression of Russian Soul, a national character or state of being which is associated with feelings of intense longing and nostalgia, emotions which listeners found present in Russian music. The Russian word *toska* (*tocka*) is used to express this feeling state but it is a word of complex and subtle meaning inevitably lost in translation. The word has associations with melancholy and depression, homesickness, longing, and yearning for the unobtainable. Vladimir Nabokov, in the annotations to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, provides a much-quoted definition of *toska*:

No single word in English renders all the shades of *toska*. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom.<sup>1</sup>

Anna Wierzbicka, in her examination of *tocka*, guards against any neat English translation of *the word*. *Toska*, at best describes an emotional state evoking sadness (which Wierzbicka suggests is closer to *grust* -*sad*), which is caused by the absence of something or someone. It can also imply yearning and wanting to be somewhere else (home).<sup>2</sup> In this regard *toska po rodine* is also frequently found, translated as a longing for home or for the home-country (motherland). The word *toska*, it is safer to accept, carries a complexity of meanings, it is idiosyncratic and polysemous, and there is no English equivalent of the word. The word *saudade* in Portuguese

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<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse: Commentary*, Volume 2, translated by Vladimir Nabokov. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 27-216 [p 141].

<sup>2</sup> Anna Wierzbicka. *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 169-174.

has similar complexities of meaning, also expressing longing, nostalgia and an approach to living one's life. *Toska* is also often associated with gypsies and expresses their view of the world and a way of being in the world which resonated with the displaced (homeless) community of Russian musicians in exile. Zelensky notes that gypsy music is defined by *toska* and for Russian musicians in exile they could play at being gypsies alongside their willing representation of Russian folk. They deliberately took on the roles of exotic others, the representation of a sensibility away and beyond the cultural environment in which they were performing – English society.<sup>3</sup> Richard Stites, however, describes the gypsy song, *tsyganshchina*, as an imagined construction in popular music of 'old Russia' for which these immigrant musicians pined:

The gypsy was an emblem of freedom and looseness in Russia.... It was the peasant and cossack *volya*, signifying the open steppe, rolling waggons, savage dignity, and wanton abandon. Gypsies were not only homeless but did not even know where their homeland was: they thus excelled in evoking a favourite Russian mood, *toska* .... But turn of the century gypsy singing stars were no more Gypsy than their songs. The new singers shaped wild sensibilities into a manageable performance art suitable for stage and the intimate cabinet of a restaurant. The gypsy idiom contained violent and rhythmically exotic flourishes of uncontrolled passion – intimations of sex, hysteria, flights of fancy.... Particularly effective was the shock of sudden changes in tempo and the accelerando-crescendo phrasing that became its hallmark.<sup>4</sup>

Performing gypsy music in the diaspora, such as Wolkowsky's scenario *In a Gypsy Camp* and Medvedeff's potpourris of gypsy tunes and songs such as *Dark Eyes*, served as an orientalist representation of the self (in Stewart's terms, the 'exoticising of the self') thereby positioning their Russianness as the 'other'. The Wolkowsky Troupe had left Russia for good. Their wanderings to the United States to perform in circuses and their touring of European cities over decades was a restless and rootless existence. In Roma culture this wandering existence is known as *dor* which carries feelings of longing and sadness bound up with restless travel on the road, an endless, rootless wandering in search of work. There was no going back to Russia for the Wolkowskys, to a society which they had found hostile, but they carried with them their musical heritage and the family's cultural links to the homeland which marked their identity as Russians. Soermus's expressions of nostalgia, by comparison, were of a different order. He too played gypsy concert music in a display of virtuosic violin playing, but he longed for his student, salad days, for the camaraderie of his Bolshevik comrades, and for the excitement and involvement in a socio-political purpose which he expressed in his choice of revolutionary songs

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<sup>3</sup> Natalie K. Zelensky. 'Music in Exile: Constructing the Russian Diaspora in New York Through Russian Popular and Sacred Music,' (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2000): pp. 68-77.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p 13.

and anthems. The reality found upon his return to Soviet Russia was in sharp contrast to his constructed memory of past times. Medvedeff expressed in his letters a longing for the simple, semi-rural life he had known in Imperialist Russia and for his early encounters with the balalaika, domra and Russian folk music which he sought to preserve in exile, a persistent expression of *toska po rodine*.

Theodor Adorno observed in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* that for the refugee, the exile, the displaced person, Home is a provisional space, impermanent and temporary,<sup>5</sup> and so it could be said of these musicians in their displacement. Medvedeff, when programming for his concerts, frequently chose Sir Henry Bishop's sentimental air *Home, Sweet Home*!<sup>6</sup> Verse two as follows;

An exile from home splendour dazzles in vain  
Oh give me my lowly thatched cottage again  
The birds singing gaily that came at my call  
And gave me the peace of mind dearer than all  
Home, home, sweet, sweet home  
There's no place like home, there's no place like home!<sup>7</sup>

Arranged for balalaika orchestra it never failed to please as Medvedeff notes:

*Home, Sweet Home* – an old English song about home. During the playing of this piece the stage was plunged into darkness. The singer appeared against a blue-lit background. Four balalaika players accompanied her, appearing as silhouettes in the dim lighting. It gave a fantastic effect.<sup>8</sup>

One must wholeheartedly recommend this performance for its originality and highest degree of excellence. Its music was of the very best and the feeling and emotion

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<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, (London: New Left Books, 1974). See also, Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Third Edition, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), Introduction p. xxii. Said discusses this aspect found in Adorno.

<sup>6</sup> The famous lyrics to the tune were written by American actor and dramatist John Howard Payne and included in his opera *Clari, or the Maid of Milan* (1823).

<sup>7</sup> One is today reminded of Dorothy's mantra in *The Wizard of Oz* – a character longing for home, Kansas. There is no evidence that Medvedeff knew of Lyman Frank Baum's children's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* written in 1900.

<sup>8</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, p. 9.

expressed in that much-loved old melody “Home, Sweet Home” will be long remembered.<sup>9</sup>

*Home, Sweet Home!* played on balalaikas (an ironic juxtaposition, the familiar coupled with the exotic), not in sharp-lit relief, but in shadowy silhouette, almost a dream, a remembrance of things past. Medvedeff, like a good many first-wave refugees and exiles, was never really at home in exile. Perhaps, for Medvedeff, home was conducting and directing in front of his balalaika orchestra – somewhere he could be himself, a destiny and outcome he could control, despite the many vicissitudes he faced. Bibs Ekkel recounts<sup>10</sup> that when Medvedeff passed away (1963) his English wife, Dorothy May, closed up his study and private rooms and they remained so until she died (1988). For Medvedeff there was no return to his homeland, to the sweet home of his youth. He visited Russia in the 1950s and early 1960s but he never chose to return permanently – his temporary dwelling had become permanent, but not Home. Andreeff, Troyanovsky, Tchagadaeff and Soermus, on the other hand, all succumbed to the pull of the Homeland and eventually returned to Soviet Russia to mixed fortunes, a discussion of which is beyond the confines of this dissertation.

Medvedeff’s letters, written towards the end of his life, are a rare personal testimony of a Russian musician in exile in the UK. It is from these letters, a tangible record, that we are able to approach an understanding of how music operated in the lives of exiled musicians. Medvedeff’s letters betray a lingering longing for the past, more specifically his youth and the musical traditions conjured in the balalaika, a souvenir from a more idyllic life. Susan Stewart’s *On Longing* views the souvenir as an object redolent of the past, both as object and as a stimulus to memory; an object of nostalgia and longing for a past experience, an embodiment of an exotic ‘other’.<sup>11</sup> Natalie Zelensky in her discussion of the function of music as a unifying activity among members of the Russian diaspora in New York (Harlem) also draws on Stewart’s concept of the ‘souvenir’ as a magical object, as ‘a physical object that serves as an embodiment and reminder of the past’.<sup>12</sup> Zelensky expands this concept to treat *music* as a ‘relic’ and ‘talisman’, an ephemeral process (as opposed to a physical object) that binds the diasporic society together. The relic (music) operates as a manifestation of memories of the past; the talisman ‘evokes

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<sup>9</sup> *The Mercury*, ‘Talented Russian Musicians at the Globe Theatre,’ quoted by Medvedeff. Date unknown. Medvedeff Letters, 1 October 1959, pp. 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Author’s interview with Bibs Ekkel, October 2021. Bibs Ekkel is a professional balalaika player in the UK with an extensive knowledge of Russian folk music.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, pp. 132-151.

<sup>12</sup> Natalie K. Zelensky, ‘Music in Exile’ p.89.

nostalgia rather than eliciting direct memories.’<sup>13</sup> The balalaika (the object as souvenir) too, appearing in performance in exile, ‘is not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather, its function is to envelop the present within the past. Souvenirs are magical objects because of this transformation.’<sup>14</sup>

The balalaika (souvenir) appears in Britain as a strange exotic instrument, an object of curiosity and wonder to those who listened to it in concert, an embodiment of an exotic culture, making ‘weird’ music which transports the listener to another world. For Medvedeff, this world was Home. The balalaika, in his displaced environment in exile becomes the souvenir of another life, a lost childhood and youth, a life closer to the peasant world (and music) of Russia, a sense of his identity which is at odds with his present displaced mundane existence. The longing hovering around the balalaika for Medvedeff operates in Stewart’s conception of the souvenir which ‘seeks distance (the exotic in time and space), but it does so in order to transform and collapse distance into proximity to or approximation with the self [that is, Medvedeff in his displaced environment].’<sup>15</sup> The souvenir therefore contracts the world in order to expand the personal.’<sup>16</sup> The balalaika (souvenir), by appearing out of context, as Stewart explains ‘incongruously surviving in the present’ in a displaced environment functions by ‘...envelop[ing] the present within the past. Souvenirs become magical objects because of this transformation.’<sup>17</sup>

Medvedeff’s purpose in forming his balalaika ensemble in London was initially financial, a means of survival. He never avers in his letters to reach for the lofty ideal of using balalaika music to encourage the cohesion of a community of exiles, the Russian diaspora in London. Yet, his letters betray a longing for a pre-revolutionary personal, musical and community life rooted in longstanding Russian folk traditions and rituals which he experienced as a younger man. He views this past as something wholesome. His desire to perpetuate the music (and dance) associated with this utopian world is rooted in his performances; they become temporal, ephemeral ‘souvenirs’. His is a nostalgia for an idealised and imagined existence he does not find in England, nor evident in English musical taste or the Englishman’s musical sensibility. His desire to form a ‘pure’ balalaika ensemble uncluttered and diluted by jazz elements, jazz instruments, western drumkits and orchestral instruments, which became the backbone of the Dance Band of the 1920s and 1930s, is a hankering after a prelapsarian balalaika orchestra

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Natalie K. Zelensky, ‘Music in Exile’ p.125.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, p. xii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

identified closely with Andreeff's late nineteenth-century orchestra. Ironically, Andreeff's balalaika/domra orchestra was in itself a sophisticated construction which had little to do with Russian folk culture but more to do with satisfying the fashionable taste for salon music. Nevertheless, this ideal for Medvedeff was constantly unavailable due to practicalities of finance, the ability of players, the quality of instruments and the musical possibilities of the arrangements he was forced to make. It could never be perfect and match what he pictured in his mind's eye, his musical ear, in his desire. It is a dream existence which remained constantly unavailable but, by being so, generated a sense of longing, desire and nostalgia. His consistent use of gypsy airs and dances, Russian opera tunes, Russian folk songs and dances, workers/soldier/student/peasant songs, are all expressive of music from his homeland, a past existence and way of life, a utopia, which must now reside in his imagination as a place inexorably changed by the Revolution. The drive to repeat this longing and kindle this nostalgia in the playing of his chosen repertoire becomes a constant reliving of his past experience and its associated emotional landscape. Though the performance is a temporal ephemeral one it becomes, in Stewart's terms, a 'second-hand personal experience' repeated over and over again in order to recapture it. Balalaika music performance collapses time and place into a relived imagined (emotional) experience which carries its own personal meaning and emotion.<sup>18</sup>

Medvedeff, by constantly repeating the music in performance also creates a 'souvenir' for the listener; for the Russian listener and participant something which is recognisable amongst Russian members of the diaspora, something which binds them together and yet which carries an element of sadness and loss for an existence destroyed by revolution and replaced by a new order – it is distant and unobtainable yet familiar and comfortable. The music elicits desire and longing and may alleviate the listener's nostalgia but like a drug leaves the listener craving more, desiring to relive the experience. The music can never alleviate the nostalgia (the longing for place and time) it evokes in the listener's imagination. For the British audience, Medvedeff's balalaika performances, and those of other similar folk ensembles, become temporal souvenirs of something exotic, primitive, unusual, melancholy and terrifying, an expression of the listener's imaginary idea of Old Russia, of Russian Soul, a souvenir through which the British audience can vicariously experience Russia.

Medvedeff's constant criticism of folk music played amongst newly formed folk orchestras both in England and Russia, the poor choices of repertoire, and the infiltration of jazz elements and various folk instruments not associated with the balalaika orchestra, suggests Medvedeff discredits the present and idealises the past. He reaches after an aural expression that is driven

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

by a desire to serve the music through informed and tasteful choices. Stewart sees this as the double function of the souvenir which ‘authenticate(s) a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time discredit(s) the present’. Medvedeff’s displaced existence remains ‘too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating compared to an intimate and direct experience [of contact with Russia] which the souvenir has as its referent’. <sup>19</sup> Using Stewart’s description in Medvedeff’s case, ‘The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and the exotic’ and for Medvedeff, a music aesthetic from past times. <sup>20</sup>

Svetlana Boym similarly finds nostalgia manifests itself in the longing for a place, one essentially of a different time other than the present. For Medvedeff it is the yearning for the Russia of his childhood and youth when he first encountered music and the balalaika. Boym argues this nostalgia rebels against the concept of time defined by history and progress. For Boym, ‘the nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time as space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.’ <sup>21</sup> This description embraces the emotional, intellectual, cultural and psychological displacement experienced by those first-wave refugees and exiles who fled Russia, who held to the notion of Old Russia and refused to accept the ascendancy of a new order. Medvedeff’s decision to remain in exile and perform Russian folk music within a displaced environment can be perceived as a mission to preserve a lost musical landscape.

Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: the Restorative and the Reflective. Restorative Nostalgia which stresses *nóstos* (home) ‘attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home’ <sup>22</sup> (i.e. pre-revolutionary Russia) a home that no longer exists – it is ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy,’ <sup>23</sup> effectively Medvedeff’s attempt to recreate an evocation of his lost home through the performance of its music. Medvedeff seeks to remain faithful to Russian folk music, appearing not consciously nostalgic but affirming a belief in tradition, what Boym refers to as Restorative Nostalgia. Boym also describes Restorative Nostalgia as the ‘longing for a place, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time....’ <sup>24</sup> This, as in Boym’s observations, is exemplified in Medvedeff’s quest for authenticity in balalaika performance, his choice of repertoire, and his desire to create arrangements that he considered

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p 139.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. p.140.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xv.

<sup>22</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xviii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xiii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xv.

true to the origins and spirit of the music. Boym also refers to Reflective Nostalgia which dwells on the longing itself – *álgos*. Medvedeff's performances of Russian folk music become prolonged moments of longing in a delayed homecoming – they are temporal, ephemeral, and come to an end leaving the listener, performer, and conductor (Medvedeff) hovering at the threshold of fulfilment, the ritual to be repeated again and again.

The balalaika, folksongs and dances were, for Medvedeff and the Wolkowsky Troupe, the musical voice of Russia - of Greater Russia. As such, the potency of the balalaika, as a physical musical object containing memory, can better be understood in terms of Pierre Nora's concept of the *lieu de memoire*.<sup>25</sup> The balalaika is quintessentially Russian (in a similar way that the baguette, madeleine and Eiffel Tower are for the French) and stands for Russia. Similarly, folk music and its melodies, rhythms and lyrics, are infused with Russianness just as the *La Marseillaise* is for the French. The balalaika becomes symbolic of Russia and by the early twentieth century had become part of Russian national identity. Recent research, summarized for the English reader by Morgenstern,<sup>26</sup> questions the origins of the balalaika as a purely Russian instrument. It was in common use in Russia in the sixteenth century in the form of the Tartar domra, suppressed by the Russian Orthodox Church possibly because of its association with the bawdy *Skomorochi* (Russian travelling players), but the balalaika lingered in far flung communities throughout Russia until 'rediscovered' and developed by Andreeff. Recent research has been more critical of Andreeff's intervention as an insensitive reconstruction/restoration and re-invention that betrays the origins of the instrument.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the popularity of the instrument grew in Russia in the late nineteenth century and was absorbed into the historiography of Russian folk music. In Nora's terms an object such as the balalaika becomes vested with communal memory (collective memory) as well as historical significance as an expression of peasant culture (that of Russia). Sites of memory need not be physical objects, places or monuments but can also be found in ephemeral occurrences such

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<sup>25</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Also, Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations* 26/1 (1989): pp. 7-24.

<sup>26</sup> Ulrich Morgenstern, 'Concepts of the National in Russian Ethno-organology,' ICTM Study Group on Folk Musical Instruments, Proceedings from the 16th International Meeting. *Tautosakos darbai* 32 (2006): pp.148-160. <https://www.lti.lt/failai/16%20Morgenstern.pdf> Also, Morgenstern, 'Debating "national ownership" of musical instruments: The balalaika as a subject of ethnopolitical discourse' in *Turkic Soundscapes: From Shamanic Voices to Hip Hop*, edited by Razia Sultanova and Megan Rancier, SOAS Musicology Series. (London; New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 77-195. And, Morgenstern, 'Dynamics of Identity in Russian Instrumental Folk Music Culture,' ICTM Study Group on Folk Musical Instruments, Proceedings from the 16th International Meeting. (2006). <https://www.lti.lt/failai/16%20Morgenstern.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Laura J. Olson, *Performing Russia*, pp. 16-20.



as ceremonies, music, or symbols, consequently Russian folk music (in which the balalaika frequently features) can be similarly viewed in this way.

The rehabilitation of the balalaika in the late nineteenth century had in some measure been appropriated by the middle and upper classes in Russia. The balalaika became representative of Russian peasant communities but made to speak for Russia as a whole. Nora warns that such a process can appropriate *lieu de mémoire* to further political ends (as it was made to speak for the people of the new Soviet State) and may betray the memory of local communities; 'In the past, then, there was one national history and there were many particular memories. Today, there is one national memory, but its unity stems from a divided patrimonial demand that is constantly expanding and in search of coherence.'<sup>28</sup> In this way such sites of memory as the balalaika and its folk tune repertoire may become invented traditions. Nora articulates Medvedeff's sense of his break with the past, the rupture caused by revolution and personal displacement to another place other than Home; there is a 'consciousness of a break with the past (which) is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn - but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites [the balalaika and folk music] where a sense of historical continuity persists.'<sup>29</sup> These are *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory) for Medvedeff because a *milieux de memoire*, the real environment of memory, has been lost – and, as in Tzarist/Imperialist Russia, gone forever. Medvedeff resists the loss of memory in the face of Soviet rewriting of national culture.<sup>30</sup> Nora expresses this loss of memory in the face of a constructed, rewritten historical sensibility as:

'An increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear - these indicate a rupture of equilibrium. The remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility. Self-consciousness emerges under the sign of that which has already happened, as the fulfilment of something always already begun. We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 7.

<sup>30</sup> See Rebecca Mitchell, 'In Search of Russia: Sergei Rakhmaninov and the Politics of Musical Memory after 1917,' *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 1917 and Beyond: *Continuity, Rupture and Memory in Russian Music*, 97/1 (2019): pp. 136-168. Mitchell discusses Rachmaninov as a site of memory, as 'a nostalgic symbol of 'true Russian' identity' following Nora's conception.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 7.

Nora is conscious of an irrevocable break in memory caused by the disappearance of peasant culture which he views as the 'quintessential repository of collective memory.'<sup>32</sup> This rupture he lays at the feet of democratization and mass culture. The ascendancy of the Soviet State and its ideologies disrupts the 'transmission and conservation of collectively remembered values, whether through churches or schools, the family or the state; the end too of ideologies that prepared a smooth passage from the past to the future or that had indicated what the future should keep from the past...'<sup>33</sup> Nora proposes that modern society has confused history (our construction of the past) with memory which he views as 'social and unviolated.' It is this sense of communal memory resting in the balalaika and its repertoire that Medvedeff is constantly at pains to preserve, an effort he ultimately views as a failure.<sup>34</sup> Medvedeff's letters are affective recollections filtered through personal memory, they operate as a bond which connects him with his life in Russia, what Nora describes as the 'eternal present'; they are 'affective and magical, (and) only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic-responsive...'<sup>35</sup>

Nora locates the occurrence of a *lieux de memoire* at times when immense (revolutionary) and intimate (lived life in Russia) moments are dislodged and disrupted. Nora's *lieux de memoire* operate as remains, as an embodiment of a 'memorial consciousness' in a world more concerned with historical nostalgia – the record of the past in archival collections. The Russian Revolution of 1917 swept away the old Imperialist order and its way of life. For Russians in exile this was met with resistance and a determination to protect, remember and cherish their way of life which was being swiftly swept away. Marc Raeff makes the observation that Russia Abroad did not consciously write its own history. Exiles and refugees slowly came to the realisation that they would never return but the recording and documenting of their memories and experiences was not a priority. Raeff notes that refugee archives such as the one in Prague were returned to the Soviet authorities. There are a number of personal accounts but 'no attempt to write a history of Russia Abroad was made either by the émigrés themselves or by Western historians.'<sup>36</sup> It was the obligation of the displaced individual, the Russian in exile, to preserve memory; 'It gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity; when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Medvedeff Letters, 20 September 1959, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Marc Raeff, 'Recent Perspectives on the History of the Russian Immigration (1920-1940),' p. 320.

collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory individuals.<sup>37</sup> The repeated act of performance of Russian folk music by a balalaika orchestra in exile becomes the perpetuation and preservation of a cultural way of life which, in their present circumstances, was out of reach. A return to Soviet Russia was not the answer for Medvedeff. His visit to Russia in 1960 and his encounters there with the new approach to folk (balalaika) music was one of disillusionment. His longing was for a reality which existed away and beyond the new Russia (Soviet Union), a country now as alien to him as his life in Britain. Nora locates a third aspect - distance-memory: 'rememoration', the repeated recollection of memories. In Medvedeff's case the repetition of memory through performance. Nora describes this retrieval of the past as 'a lapse experienced as a filiation to be restored.... the confident assumption of knowing to whom and to what we owe our existence - whence the importance of the idea of "origins", an already profane version of the mythological narrative, but one that contributed to giving meaning and a sense of the sacred to a society engaged in a nationwide process of secularization'<sup>38</sup> – in Russia's case a reordering of society through Soviet ideologies.

Nora sees *Lieux de memoire* as *lieux* in three senses of the word - material, symbolic, and functional.<sup>39</sup> The balalaika is the material object, it represents the cultural life of Russia (particularly of the peasants), it is symbolic and functional in its recapture and perpetuation of the past. The essential factor is that there 'must be a will to remember. Without the intention to remember, *lieux de memoire* would be indistinguishable from *lieux d'histoire*'. What makes the *lieux de memoire* a potent concept is the disruption of continuity with the past by change. The disruption caused by the Revolution and the sense of displacement felt by Russians abroad ultimately precludes a simple recollection of the past. The *lieux de memoire* become as Nora describes 'mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Mobius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile.'<sup>40</sup> Nora's view is that if the purpose of the *lieux de memoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial ... all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs, it is also clear that *lieux de memoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.<sup>41</sup> In this way it is possible to make sense of Medvedeff's unwavering belief in

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<sup>37</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations*, 26 (1989), p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

the value of the balalaika, the balalaika orchestra in its 'pure' form and the performance of Russian folk music all within the context of his displaced environment, an environment where *lieux de memoire* become merely *lieux de exotique* for the British public.

## 5.1 The Exotic in the British imagination

The expansion of the British Empire across the world from 1815 through to 1914 and beyond brought with it exposure to music repertoire, instruments and manner of performance from other nations, races and ethnicities, the cultural transfer to Britain of music performance which was considered curious and exotic entertainment. Musicians from the dominions of the empire, from the East (India) as well as Sub-Saharan Africa, inevitably came to British shores in the later nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century. The music played by Russian immigrants arriving in Britain was also identified with the East. Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, performing in London in the 1920s, reinforced this perception. The plethora of musical styles and modes of performance available to British audiences, vibrant expressions of the 'other' and expressing identities of distant nations through their music, stirred a contemporary concern that Britain did not have a national music of its own. William Scott Ball examines this national insecurity in an extensive examination of Nationalism in English music;<sup>42</sup> the insecurities found in music scholarship, whether the English could be considered a musical nation, whether nationality can indeed be expressed in music, and whether British folk music (as distinct from Art Music styles) could be considered a solid basis for the development of a national style.

Music from the dominions of the British Empire was frequently performed at exhibitions such as the Imperial International Exhibition (1909), the Festival of Empire (1911), and the British Empire Exhibition (1924). These exhibitions celebrated British innovation and culture and were essentially a celebration of the British Empire. Press reporting of musical entertainments featured at these festivals was frequently paternalistic and xenophobic and described the music as exotic, primitive, and barbaric and clearly an expression of an 'other' in relation to British folk music. Ben Shephard provides one fascinating reception study of 'Savage South Africa, a vivid realistic and picturesque representation of LIFE IN THE WILDS OF AFRICA', which opened at the Empress Theatre, Earl's Court, on 8 May 1899.<sup>43</sup> John MacKenzie notes that 'imperial powers tend to create shows out of the peoples they dominate, subjecting them to all

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<sup>42</sup> William Scott Ball. 'Reclaiming a Music for England: Nationalist concept and controversy in English musical thought and criticism, 1880-1920 (Volumes I and II).' (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> Ben Shephard, 'Showbiz Imperialism: The Case of Peter Lobengula' in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. MacKenzie, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 94-112.

the isolation of spectacle....The 'native village' became a central part of imperial exhibitions and, at times, a familiar sight in seaside entertainment.'<sup>44</sup> Russian folk music and dance was similarly described as wild and barbaric but could also surprise by its delicacy and charm, a characteristic which challenged common British notions of Russia.

Ralph P. Locke provides an extensive examination of exoticism in music (predominantly Art Music) which includes the works of Russian composers such as Rimsky Korsakov, Glinka and Stravinsky.<sup>45</sup> Locke usefully locates exoticism in a number of signifiers which can be usefully applied to folk music played by Russian immigrants:

- in the evocation of distant places and peoples: for example, those suggested in the titles of Medvedeff's medleys *Bandits of the Volga*, *Askolda's Grave*, *Ivan Susanin*, *Zaporozhets za Dunaem*, *Ruslan & Ludmila*, *Khovanshchina*, *Rusalka Noise*, *Russian Rivers*, *Troika* amongst many.
- The use of unfamiliar folk dances; such as the *czardas*, *khorovod*, *barynya*, *kalinka* and *hopak*, dance styles not found in western social dancing.
- The evocation of a social milieu and morals of gypsies, Cossacks, and wild eastern tribes, distinctly 'other' to British sensibilities.
- The use of colourful descriptive and programmatic titles; Russian folk songs; *Under the Apple Tree*, *Daydreams Waltz*, *Mountain Ash (Ryabinushka)*, *Bright Shines the Moon*, *Horses Stand Ready*, *In the Field a Birch Tree Stood*, *Green Grove*, for example. These titles contrast to those commonly found in Art Music such as sonata, symphony, quartet and the like.
- The use of other languages in lyrics; lyrics of the folk songs were in Russian. Russian sounded strange to English ears. It was less commonly heard than the court languages of French, Italian, and Spanish.
- Performance on strange instruments; timbre, construction and manner of performance were frequent points of fascination in newspaper reporting. The triangular shape of the balalaika with its three strings which were strummed or plucked, guslies (plucked zither), the zhaleika (Vladimir shepherd's horn), svirel (end-blown wooden flute), were unusual and English ears were unaccustomed their timbre.

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<sup>44</sup> John M. MacKenzie, 'Introduction.' In *Imperialism and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> Ralph P. Locke. *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 64-71.

- Performance modes employed: Russian performers often shouted encouragement to dancers in their frequent outbursts of athletic dancing by both sexes (including whirlwind dancing which drew much comment), stamping feet and slapping of thighs.
- Driving rhythms, strange harmonies and musical scales (frequent use of the pentatonic scale).
- Extra-musical factors; players and dancers dressed in colourful national costume, tight trousers and boots, flowers in the women's hair and tambourines with ribbons all distinguished the performances as distinctly 'other', music performance expressive of an exotic culture in stark contrast to the formal and decorous performance practices of western concert music players.

British perception of the exotic in Russian music performance can be further understood applying Locke's suggested binarisms:

- Then and Now: Russian folk music drew on cultures from a distant past – enduring folk culture of Old Russia.
- Near and far: geographical distance and difference, music from lands and people "far away", from a locale with different climate, topography and ways of living. This is often linked to the binarism Us/Them.
- The real and the fictive: Locke cautions that evocations of exotic locations could be imaginary and need not be real, however the evocation of an exotic culture draws on the imagination of the listeners in a construction of the 'other'.
- Musical and extramusical signs come together to construct the exotic.<sup>46</sup>

These aspects of the exotic all reinforce notions of difference, social boundaries and cultural differences for the British listener/observer. However, as Stokes reminds us, the structuralist notion that a musical performance reflects 'underlying' cultural patterns and social structures, or that it can replicate/reflect the essence of a society, is limiting.<sup>47</sup> Musical performance should rather be understood as a dynamic process generating meaning (what it is to be Russian) which provides the means to negotiate and transform hierarchies of place (the Russian musician in displacement). For Russian immigrant musicians the performance of music and dance was a process whereby they were able to affirm their identity within an alien environment (place). Russian musicians, however, also found a ready audience for the enjoyment of the exotic, particularly in Variety Theatre, cabaret and vaudeville, where the novel and unusual was

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 64-71.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Stokes. ed. *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, (Oxford: Berg, 1994), Introduction: p. 4.

celebrated. Here they were able to package their 'otherness' for British consumption and forge successful professional musical careers.

## 5.2 Envoi

By 1950 the borders of Russia were closed and emigration was reduced to a trickle. There was clearly no going back for Russian exiles and refugees and first-wave immigrants were gradually absorbed into English society. The Cold War set in and cultural exchange between Britain and Russia virtually ceased. The huge popularity and interest in Russian folk music from 1910 to 1945 had run its course in Britain and the balalaika and domra made way for jazz and rock-and-roll.

It is curious that Russian musicians coming to this country after the 1905 uprising and Russian Revolution have not been documented to any extent and this dissertation has set out to examine the activities and popularity of these Russian exile musicians operating in Britain between 1900 and 1950 and restore their lost histories to British musicology. These musicians settled and were active within a small but artistically influential Russian diaspora centred predominantly in London. Some forty Russian composers had left Russia to settle in the West during and after the Revolution but only two composers remained and settled in London for any length of time. There was, nevertheless, a significant number of Russian folk musicians who arrived in Britain and engaged with the Light Music industry and also made their presence felt in concert recitals and opera production. These musicians have been examined in three contexts: music and social/political conscience, music and community, and music in the entertainment industry. The overriding core question has been to what extent displacement affected their lived lives and activities as professional (and amateur) musicians, how they engaged and negotiated with British institutions, and to what extent they were able to influence English music and music-making, both in the short term and the long term. An assessment of the reception of these musicians by critics and the general public has been a pervasive concern and has revealed how they were able to promote their 'otherness' to appeal to a British public in love with the exotic and novelty in entertainment. One of the central concerns has been to understand their approach to music performance and why they chose the repertoire they performed. Central to their music-making was the folk ensemble, which usually included the balalaika and domra. Research has examined the extent to which these ensembles were able to influence and encourage similar ensembles formed of English players. The approach to the function of music in society, whether to encourage a sense of national identity (particularly for refugees in displacement), to promote a political/social ideology and change society, as well as the more practical agenda of earning a living are examined against a backdrop of Imperialism

and Nationalism underlying British society at this time. The musical opinions of these musicians (in the rare instances where they recorded their thoughts) has also been examined through the lens of nostalgia, longing, and memory to understand how mental, emotional, psychological and practical conditions functioned in their musical lives.

A number of musicians were selected for discussion: Edward Soermus, Alexander Wolkowsky and his family troupe, Vasily Andreeff, Nikolai Medvedeff, Vladimir Rosing, Prince Tchagadaeff and Boris Troyanovsky. Extended accounts in English of Russian immigrants in Britain such as these mentioned have proved elusive though scrutiny of contemporary newspapers has revealed a quantity of critical reviews and information about their work. Data was also collated from the few trade journals and from ephemera such as programmes, contracts, personal letters and self-promotional literature. In the case of Medvedeff the fortuitous discovery of his private unpublished letters offered up a wealth of information regarding the operations of these musicians. Some further German and Russian secondary texts dealing with the English context were also translated.

This research has not attempted theoretical conclusions about displacement and diaspora but rather used these conditions as a context for examining the lived lives of immigrant Russian musicians. These lost histories provide a better understanding of how displacement (both forced and voluntary) affects and influences immigrant musicians but this research also affirms that despite disadvantages found in their disrupted lives, Russian immigrant musicians were able to contribute to the richness and diversity found in the musical life of their host nation, Britain.

Studies of Russian diasporas in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century has been well served but the Russian presence in Britain, and particularly the contributions made by Russian musicians to British musical life, has been neglected and is in need of research in English. Russian composers, for example those associated with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, have received attention as has Medtner and his works, but Russian *performing* musicians in British music needs further research and has been the focus of this research. There is also need for a comprehensive study of the reception of Russian music in Britain in the twentieth-century.

Alice Gardiner and her mandolin, guitar, banjo and balalaika ensembles formed in Cheltenham also extends the research into female composers and performers in British society. Russian male musicians are foregrounded in this research but acknowledges that female immigrant players, singers and dancers, were present in the ensembles of Wolkowsky, Medvedeff and Rosing. A study of Gardiner's ladies' ensembles adds further perspectives to studies of female musicians and composers in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain.



Variety Theatre is still a developing arena for research (where Music Hall has been better served) particularly the presence of foreign performing artists appearing on British stages (as exotic acts) to which this research contributes. The Variety Theatre was in love with the novel and exotic and frequently featured music from the dominions and colonies of the British Empire. This research extends the study of immigrant music not only as exoticisms, but also music which functions as a marker of identity and nationhood. The discussion of the function of folk music played by these Russian immigrants finds a place in the wider history of the pursuit of a national music for Britain. The attitudes stemming from Nationalism and Empire are a pervasive backdrop to much of the discussion in this research, a pervasive national mood and attitude which influenced the reception of foreign music and acceptance of immigrant communities.

This research establishes that there was indeed a Russian diaspora in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. Russian musicians within this diaspora were not passive victims of their circumstances but actively sought to perform and promote their music in various arenas of British music-making: in theatres, concert halls, broadcasting, community music making, and various informal performance spaces. In doing so they successfully negotiated British immigration policies and the restrictions imposed by the Musicians' Union and the Variety Artistes' Federation. Their encounters with artistic managements, contractual formalities, financial arrangements, programming, were met with some misadventure. These musicians were at first predominantly amateur and lessons were learned the hard way through practical experience but in the final account theirs was a significant contribution to British Music and the Arts in the first half of the twentieth century.

This dissertation draws a line at 1950 but the continued life of the balalaika, balalaika ensembles and Russian folk music in Britain is still in need of further research. Bibs Ekkel, a prima balalaika soloist living in London, leads his own song and dance company, *Tziganka*, and his folk group *Russian Tornado*. His companies have been active since the 1960s. There is only one other balalaika orchestra presently operating in the country in Manchester, The Kalinka Orchestra, which is comprised predominantly of young musicians. This ensemble has strong links with musical education institutions and ensembles in St. Petersburg. Ekkel mentions venues where Russian balalaika performance has lingered on, such as the Borscht N Tears pub in Knightsbridge. Ekkel's own musical activities over the years follow similar patterns of employment discerned amongst the early balalaika ensembles in the country, playing for

soirées and society parties,<sup>48</sup> films and television,<sup>49</sup> hotels,<sup>50</sup> and a variety of concerts and performance events.<sup>51</sup> Like many ensembles, he has similarly entertained royalty and toured widely.<sup>52</sup> Ekkel possesses a collection of balalaikas, some rare, some formerly of the Coldstream Guards collection, as well as an extensive collection of scores, mss and secondary material in English and Russian which have proved a rich source of information. He has participated in video recordings, demonstrations and lectures and his own research strives to record and maintain the balalaika's folk heritage. He continues to teach the balalaika, one of the few who continue to do so. Some formal record of Ekkel's archive would benefit the study of Russian music performance in the UK.

Soermus returned to Russia as far back as 1937, Wolkowsky's ensemble disbanded after the leader Alexander's death. Vladimir Rosing visited Britain throughout the 1920s and 1930s but when war broke out in 1939 he travelled to the United States (together with Albert Coates) where he permanently settled. He became a renowned opera and events director. Medvedeff ceased to broadcast in 1960. Medvedeff began writing a script for a film about the balalaika. He collected existing Andreeff recordings and chose repertoire for the film but he was unable to marshal the financial and artistic forces to realise the film. Interest in the balalaika waned. Medvedeff's letters, a last grasp at memory, have languished in a forgotten archive, themselves only a saved carbon copy of original letters; his contributions to music, and the balalaika in particular, and his work in the Light Music industry in Britain forgotten and hardly acknowledged, his life as an exiled Russian musician lingering in memory and half-captured recollection. The lives of Russian immigrant musicians and their performance of Russian folk music in Britain,

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<sup>48</sup> Lord & Lady Aldington; Lady Lennox-Boyd; Lady Castell; Lady Carolyn Townsend; Princess Yuri Galitzine; Princess Helena Gagarin Moutafian; Lady Shawcross; Countess Benckendorff; War & Peace Ball; Russian Monarchists Ball; St. Petersburg Ball; Disney's "Anastasia" film premiere; Annabelle's; Rudolf Nureyev Birthday Party; Count Bismarck; Count Tolstoy.

<sup>49</sup> *An Englishman Abroad* (1983); *Reilly, Ace of Spies* (1983); *Gulag* (1985); *The Living Daylights* (1987); *The Comrades of Summer* (1992); *The Man Who Knew Too Little* (1997); *Swept from the Sea* (1997); *Onegin* (1999); *Enemy at the Gates* (2001); *Crime & Punishment* (2002); *The Lost Prince* (2003); *Eastern Promises* (2007); *Anna Karenina* (2012).

<sup>50</sup> Dorchester; Grosvenor House; Cafe Royal; Intercontinental; Hilton; Landmark; Inn on the Park; Hotel de Paris, Monte Carlo; Savoy.

<sup>51</sup> Raisa Gorbachev Foundation Ball; Last Night of the Proms 2006; Elton John's Charity Ball; Andreyev Balalaika Festival, Vyshnii Volochek, Russia 2007; Jerry Springer Show; National Lottery; World Cup 2004; Hall of Columns, Moscow; Orpheum, Vancouver; Tchaikovsky Hall, Moscow; Purcell Room; Queen Elizabeth Hall; U.S. & Canadian tours; BBC Welsh Orchestra; London Philharmonic Orchestra; Melody Maker Outstanding performance prize; Theatre Royal, Bath; All-Russian Folk Festival, Yaroslavl; Miss World Contest, Royal Albert Hall; Wigmore Hall, London; BBC Radio Friday Night is Music Night; Bermuda Music Festival; Moscow TV-1; King's Royal Hussars Officers Banquet 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Toured to Russia, Poland, China, Britain, the US and Canada.

with which this dissertation has been concerned, have been lost histories to British music historiography.

## Appendix A Report on Medvedeff's Letters and Documents

The letters are retrospective in content reflecting on his life as a musician in both Russia and the U.K. They were written between 1959-1963 in the last years of his life, perhaps a last-ditch attempt to leave a record of his work. Medvedeff died in February 1963. The Medvedeff's had no surviving relatives or children. Upon Mrs Medvedeff's death in 1988 Bibs Ekkel was invited to take possession of Medvedeff's collection of scores and papers. Ekkel is the foremost balalaika player still practicing in the U.K. He has an extensive collection of balalaikas and domras, scores, academic articles. The Medvedeff letters and documents have been gifted to me by Bibs Ekkel.

The collection of documents consists of loose-leaf letters and notes, reviews, programme copies and lists of performances in the UK, France and Germany. The letters are carbon copies of the originals which were sent to friends in Russia. They are typed in black ink in double space on one side of the paper – except for fragmented typed pages the reverse of which are used to make ordered lists of notes. This suggests Medvedeff may have used the backs of discarded pages of typed letters for his jottings. However, the typed fragments still provide information. The pages of each letter are numbered with some errors in the sequence of numbering. There are also a number of hand-written notes and jottings in Russian, German and English. A detailed list appears below.

The letters are contained within an H.J. Ryman Ltd, London blue binder with metal punch hole spikes. The letters are not contained by these spikes but are collected loose.

The worn blue folder cover has a stamp: *Medvedeff's Balalaika Orchestra* and a large black stamp *Chastocchka*.

### Letters

There are 190 pages in all with each page an average 250 words = 47,500 words

20.9.59 Pages 1-27

24.9.59 Pages 1-25

1.10.59 Pages 1-28 (Page 12 numbering is repeated so actually 29 pages)

9.10.59 Pages 1-17 (Page 14 numbering is repeated so actually 18 pages)

## Appendix A

19.10.59 Pages 1-4

21.10.59 Pages 2

First Page no typed number – handwritten number 5

Second Page typed 2 – also handwritten number 6

Suggesting that this letter is a continuation of the letter dated 19.10.59

22.10.59 Pages 1-13

11.11.59 Pages 1-3

20.11.59 Pages 1-30

14.1.60 Pages 1-5

28.1.60 Pages 1-10 Incorrectly numbered. Number 6 is accidentally missed

9.2.60 Pages 1-2

8.3.60 Pages 1-6 Handwritten

8.3.61 Pages 1-2 Handwritten

Fragments consist of:

A) Handwritten notes on the back of numbered, typed pages with no logical sequence. The typed information is still of some informational value. The arrangement appears below. See \*\*\*

B) Sequence of pages, 1 – 37, numbered in red pencil. These appear to be a record of newspaper articles and/or mentions of his orchestra.

a. Page 1

i. 1888

ii. 1890

iii. 1892

iv. 1894

b. Page 2 - 6

i. 1892

- c. Page 7 - 8
  - i. 1900
- d. Page 9 - 17
  - i. 1908
- e. Page 18 - 24
  - i. 1909
- f. Page 25 - 26
  - i. 1910
- g. Page 27 - 34
  - i. 1911
- h. Page 35 - 37
  - i. 1912

The letter for 8.III.60 is handwritten on both sides of the page in blue ink. The numbering is 1-4 on each alternate page.

The letter for 8.3.61 is handwritten on both sides of the page. The handwriting in blue ink.

The file includes several programme copies:

1. Chelsea Palace Theatre Programme: Saturday March 22 1924
2. Medway Hall, Tonbridge: Monday 7 April
3. Stroud Popular Concerts: 4 July
4. Hyde Park Concert
5. Kings Hall, Aberystwyth: Sunday July 17 1938
6. De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea: Sunday 26 January
7. African Consolidated Theatres, Limited: February- March 1937
8. Weston-Super-Mare: no date
9. Pre-publicity for the orchestra in South Africa (article) no publishing details (photocopy)

## Appendix A

10. Pre-publicity for the orchestra in Glasgow (article) no publishing details (photocopy)
11. Pre-publicity for a Radio Broadcast (BBC?) of Medvedeff's orchestra. No publishing details
12. Newspaper Article – Russians in Southport. No publishing details
13. Programme – unidentified. No publishing details
14. Cabaret Up-to-Date programme – with Lydia Kyasht. Theatre Royal, Newcastle. 7 June 1926
15. Programme – Regal Theatre, Minehead. 15 August 1937
16. Programme – Alexandra Palace Concert in the Grove Sunday, 18 August
17. Programme – Ye Olde Hambone Clubbe – no publishing details
18. Programme – Civic Hall, Wolverhampton, Sunday April ...(obscured) Russian Salad
19. Programme - King's Theatre, Glasgow: Monday 21 June 1926

\*\*\*Typed pages with numbers on the reverse of which is a sequence of handwritten notes

The reverse of Page 1 – typed page 42

The reverse of Page 2 – typed page 51

The reverse of Page 3 – typed page 49

The reverse of Page 4 – typed page 48

The reverse of Page 5 – typed page 44

The reverse of Page 6 – typed page 43

The reverse of Page 9 – typed page 26

The reverse of Page 10 – typed page 25

The reverse of Page 11 – typed page 24

The reverse of Page 12 – typed page 23

The reverse of Page 13 – typed page 22

The reverse of Page 14 – typed page 21

## Appendix A

The reverse of Page 15 – typed page 20

The reverse of Page 16 – typed page 19

The reverse of Page 17 – typed page 18

Two professional translators have been employed to provide an English translation of the material:

Bibs Ekkel has translated the typed letters.

Trefor Thynne has translated all fragments and handwritten letters.



## Appendix B Medvedeff Arrangements

### Why Worry? – Conductor's reduction

68546 Why Worry?!

*Ad libitum* *Recitativo* *One more passage after Ben Medvedeff*

PROPERTY OF B. B. G.

POSS GEE-TA-RO ZYOO-CHET NG-WOF-TAN-NA-YA

POST AY-DA-YET STROO-NA ZA STROO-NOY MUG-TOO-MA-VIT GLA-ZA TVO-EE PYA-NY-YE

PO-DNA-PE-VY TVOY SNEH RAKA-ROY SHT-MNE GO-RE JIZ-NI NO-RE MUJ-NOL

DO DNA VAY! SER-ZE TI-SHE, VY-SHE, VY-SHE! KNOB-KI STARA-VARE-NA

2

KNOB-KI STARA-VI-NA!

Why Worry? – Prima Balalaika



Why Worry? – Bass Balalaika



## The Red-Headed Family

## Conductor's Reduction

68546 THE RED-HEADED FAMILY *Can hold to same idea - 78 Bars (5)*

*Handwritten:* *Handwritten:* *Handwritten:*

FRANKY RED-HEADED GRANDDAD TOO, MY DAD IS RED-HEADED, SO IS MOTHER,

UNCLE'S RED-HEADED, AUNT-IE TOO, MY SISTERS RED-HEADED, ~~SO IS~~ BROTHER I AM RED-HEADED

AND MY WIFE WILL BE RED-HEADED ALL HER LIFE! I AM RED-HEADED AND MY WIFE

WILL BE RED-HEADED ALL HER LIFE!

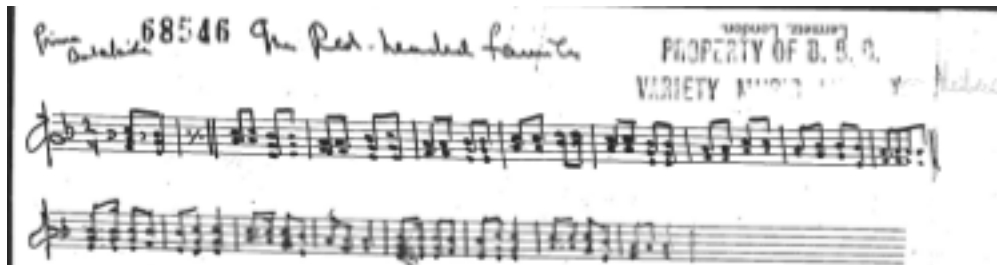
PROPERTY OF A. B. C. VARIETY MUSIC LIBRARY.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the song 'The Red-Headed Family'. The score is written on a single page with a header '68546 THE RED-HEADED FAMILY' and a handwritten note 'Can hold to same idea - 78 Bars (5)'. The music is written in a single system with a treble and bass staff. The lyrics are written below the notes. The score is marked with a 'V' and a checkmark. The page is labeled 'PROPERTY OF A. B. C. VARIETY MUSIC LIBRARY.' on the right side.

The Red-Headed Family – Bass Balalaika



The Red-Headed Family – Prima Balalaika



Mother Do Not Scold Me – Prima Balalaika



# Bibliography

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### Estonian Theatre and Music Museum

### The Eduard Soermus Archive

### FONDI (Fund): No. M-10: Sõrmus, Eduard Julius: Viuldaia – revolutsionäär

The collection listed below, provided by the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, contains materials in Estonian, Russian, German, and English. There are no scores of Soermus's compositions in the collection:

### Archive Inventory Notes

Pages 1-4

### Biographical Documents

Storage Bins: 1-4

Call Numbers: 7335, 7346, 7601

- Documents from the era 1892-1904

Storage Bins: 1-4

Call Numbers: 7032, 7073, 7346, 8870

- Soermus material about political activity by the police 1906-1932

Storage Bins: 1-4

Call Numbers: 6527, 7073, 7327, 7330, 7340, 7346, 7774

### Creative Documents

- Commercial Performances by Soermus 1927-1936

Storage Bin: 5

Call Numbers: 5467, 6365, 6903, 7048, 7346, 8870

- Repertoire, assessments

Storage Bin: 6

Call Numbers: 7073, 7326, 7346

- Concert Plans

Storage Bin: 7

Call Numbers: 6903, 7048, 7346, 7360, 7516, 7517, 7561, 7656, 8870

### **Soermus's Writings**

Storage Bin: 8, 9, 10

Call Numbers: 5388, 5420, 7073, 7308, 7346, 8870

- Soermus Correspondence 1924-1940

Storage Bin: 11

Call Numbers: 6965, 7326, 7407, 7434, 7593, 7610, 7656

- Letters to Kate Holland (Mother-in-Law) and Billy Holland (Brother-in-Law)

Storage Bin: 12

Call Numbers: 6965, 7326, 7610, 7656

- Soermus correspondence with friends/acquaintances

Storage Bin: 13

Call Numbers: 5467, 5849, 7346, 7516

- Letters to Soermus

Storage Bin: 14

Call Numbers: 7517, 7593

### **Material About Soermus**

#### **TMM Action, Soermus memories when performing**

- Correspondence with various individuals

Storage Bin: 15

Call Number: 7601

- Answers to TMM Letters

Storage Bins: 15, 16

Call Number: 6581, 7476, 7601, 7656, 8870

- Soermus in Art

Storage Bin: 17

Call Numbers: 7408, 7611, 7330, 8870

### **Personal (Reminiscences) Memories of Soermus**

- L. Kirrepe and H. Kõrvits, letters and records (material given)

Storage Bins: 18, 19

Call Numbers: 7155, 7210, 8870

### **Immediate Memories of Soermus**

Storage Bin: 20

Call Numbers: 7155, 7210, 8870

### **Virginia Soermus memories of her Husband**

Storage Bin: 21

Call Numbers: 7297, 7908, 8870

Includes:

Soermus, Virginia. 'Coincidence.' Unpublished. Storage Bin: 21, Call Number 7908

Soermus, Virginia. 'Reminiscences about her Husband. 23.2.1960.' Unpublished. Storage Bin: 21, Call Number 8870

Soermus, Virginia. 'The Nazi Arrest Soermus' by Virginia Soermus, Famous Concert Pianist.' Unpublished. Storage Bin: 21, Call Number 7908

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Soermus, Virginia. 'Song of Annya, Revolutionary.' Unpublished. Storage Bin: 21, Call Number 7908

Soermus, Virginia. *I Married a Russian by The Famous Concert Pianist*. Published. Welwyn Garden City: The City Press and Publishing Company. Storage Bin: 21, Call Number 7297

### **Billy Holland memories of Soermus**

Storage Bin: 22

Call Numbers: 7896, 8870

Includes:

Holland, William (Billie). 'Incidents in my life with Edward and Virginia Soermus. Germany 1928-1929.' Unpublished. Storage Bin: 22, Call Number 7896

### **German Party Veterans' Memories**

Storage Bin: 23

Call Numbers: 7220, 7640

- *Answers to The Free World*

Storage Bins: 24, 25, 26, 27

Call Numbers: 7330

### **Letters regarding the investigations into Soermus's activities**

Storage Bins: 28, 29, 30

Call Numbers: 6581, 7049, 7278, 7282, 7360, 7476, 7515, 7516, 7610, 7687, 7774, 8870

### **Newspaper Clippings Periodical Boxes**

Storage Bins: 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38

Call Numbers:, 6365, 6433, 7049, 7058, 7168, 7249, 7276, 7278, 7308, 7339, 7345, 7360, 7516, 7774, 8870

### **Research and Printing Materials about Soermus**



Storage Bins: 39, 40, 41, 42

Call Numbers: 6985, 7073, 7330, 7360, 8870

**Materials from Virginia Soermus 1927-1968**

Storage Bins: 43, 44

Call Numbers: 7126, 7289, 7407, 7434, 7610, 7656, 7517, 8870

**Memories and Comments of Virginia Soermus (Unpublished), and advertising**

Storage Bin: 45

Call Numbers: 7297, 7318, 7335, 7908, 8870

**Virginia Soermus on her visit to the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. Unpublished Reminiscence.**

Storage Bin: 46

Call Numbers: 7126, 7297, 7517

**William (Billy) Holland material etc.**

Storage Bin: 47

Call Number: 7360

**B. Holland letters to Estonia**

Storage Bin: 47

Call Numbers: 7126, 7142, 7280, 7297, 7326, 7360, 7563, 7687, 7774

**Photos**

**Photographs of Soermus and his family**

Storage Bin: 48

Call Numbers: 5467, 5743, 5849, 6290, 6434, 6527, 6903, 6925, 7032, 7048, 7073, 7278, 7308, 7346, 7360, 7563, 8870

**Group Pictures with J. Soermus**

Storage Bin: 49

Call Numbers: 6527, 7048, 7073, 7346, 7563, 8870,

**Soermus's relatives, youth comrades and places**

Storage Bin: 50

Call Numbers: 7032, 7249, 7326, 7346, 8870

**William (Billy) Holland compilation photo album**

Storage Bin: 51

Call Number: 7280

**Virginia Soermus Photos**

Storage Bin: 52

Call Numbers: 7142, 7434, 7774, 8870

**Virginia Soermus Photo Album: Visit to Tallinn**

Storage Bin: 53

Call Numbers: 7335

**Billy Holland Photos of his visit to Estonia**

Storage Bin:

Call Numbers: 7774, 7896, 8870

**Additions**

Storage Bin: 29

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The BBC Symphony Orchestra

Programming 1904-1939 (Russian Works)

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File: Artists: Nicholas Medvedeff: File III, 1963-1967

File: Artists: Balalaika Players: File I, 1949 -1954

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1.10.1959 – Letter 3

9.10.1959 – Letter 4

19.10.1959 – Letter5

21.10.1959 – Letter 6

22.10.1959 – Letter 7

11.11.1959 – Letter 8

12.11.1959 – Letter 9

20.11.1959 – Letter10

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21.11.1959 – Letter 11

23.11.1959 – Letter 12

14.1.1960 – Letter 13

28.1.1960 – Letter 14

29.1.1960 – Letter 15

9.2.1960 – Letter 16

8.3.1960 - Letter 17 (Handwritten)

8.3.1961 – Letter 18. (Handwritten)

n.d. Notes: Fragments.

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3. Programme - Cabaret Up-to-Date with Lydia Kyasht. Theatre Royal, Newcastle: 7 June, 1926
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5. Programme – Regal Theatre, Minehead: 15 August, 1937
6. Programme - Kings Hall, Aberystwyth: Sunday, 17 July, 1938
7. Programme - De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea: Sunday, 26 January
8. Programme - Medway Hall, Tonbridge: Monday, 7 April



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10. Programme – Alexandra Palace Concert in the Grove: Sunday, 18 August
11. Programme - Hyde Park Concert: no date
12. Programme - Weston-Super-Mare: no date
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14. Programme – Civic Hall, Wolverhampton: Sunday, April...(obscured)

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*Orchestra.* <https://www.angelfire.com/pa/ImperialRussian/directory/balalaika.html>

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**Figure 23** Postcards of the Wolkowsky Troupe. In the private collection of Bibs Ekkel.

**Figure 24** Lydia Kysht A La Russe Programme. Copy, private collection, David Alcock, GB-BRIDalcock.

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