

# Song in Rural Russia

by Margarita Mazo

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The American impression of Russian folk music is primarily based on the repertoire of such "official" ensembles as the Red Army Chorus. The songs performed by these groups are usually of recent vintage ("Kalinka" or "Moscow Nights" come to mind), and if the repertoire does include traditional tunes like "Volga Boatmen" they are presented in a highly arranged form determined by the taste of general consumers of culture. More often than not, the result bears little similarity to the sound of traditional songs in their authentic setting.

The Russian Republic is part of the Soviet Union but is itself a very large area stretching from Eastern Europe across Siberia to the Far East, and from the Arctic Circle to the temperate climates of the Black Sea. It is noteworthy that even today music of peasant origin in Russian villages and urban music in Russian cities remain as two distinctly separate traditions despite their mutual interaction. These musics differ in terms of the choice of repertoire, performance practice, the instruments used and the cultural and social circumstances of the performer. The Russian music at the Festival this year belongs strictly to rural traditions, where singing has occupied a particularly important place in people's daily life and met certain, very specific, social, religious and societal needs. Music has been an inseparable part of rituals, work, games and family events. In the old days, song accompanied every significant event and each stage of a Russian's life, from birth through childhood, youth, marriage and death. Songs, laments and chants were performed only on specified occasions. Hence a wedding lament would only be heard at weddings, but never at a funeral, when other appropriate laments would be performed.

It is believed today that folk rituals were not just festive social gatherings. They also performed the function of assuring the annual, unhampered cycle of seasons, to secure the fertility of the earth, the health of domestic animals, good harvest, successful fishing and hunting – in short, whatever constituted the well-being of the people. Economic life depended on nature, and thus celebrations, rituals and festivals were connected to seasonal change: the year was divided by winter and

summer solstices, spring and fall equinoxes. Songs appropriate to seasonal events are still important for many peasants in the Soviet Union, at least those of the older generation. While songs have perhaps lost their magical function in contemporary Russian village life, they are still performed only at certain points of the solar calendar and according to the schedule of agrarian work.

Russia is well known for its strong attachment to the Christian Orthodoxy. At the same time, Russian folk culture, particularly in the villages, is still a treasure-trove of the archaic heritage of pre-Christian religion. With the acceptance of Christianity by the Russians in 988 A.D. the rituals connected with pre-Christian beliefs did not die out but persisted in modified, reconceptualized forms. Thus St. George, for example, inherited the functions of the earlier traditional patron of domestic animals. Similarly, the Virgin Mary, or *Bogoroditsa*, acquired some functions of traditional Russian fecundity symbols, including "Moist Mother Earth," believed to be responsible for all life. Her image still exists in traditional embroidery and tapestry, and she continues to be celebrated in song.

Looking at Russian folk dances and listening to folk songs of contemporary Russian villages is like walking through time. Many different historical layers are still preserved in the daily musical life of Russian people. Modern songs and *chastushka* (short topical songs, usually four lines in length) exist alongside those which have survived for many centuries – ballads about a long Tartar occupation beginning in the mid-13th century, or songs about Ivan the Terrible, Stepan (Sten'ka) Razin, Peter the Great and other historical figures.

In Russia diversity exists in a great variety of regional styles and local forms and in a wide diversity of musical dialects, each with its own melodic, harmonic and rhythmic grammar and vocabulary. The musical texture of most southern Russian songs, for example, has certain discernible characteristics: all voices are close to each other, men use the high register of their voices, women the low. Every voice has its own textural function and carries its own melodic line; in chorus they project a tight and rich sonority.

By contrast the treatment of musical space is different in some northern Russian traditions. One can perceive distinctly a large gap between low and high voices,



On the shores of Lake Onega women from the northern Russian village Avdeevo perform a *khorovod* dance. Photo courtesy Museum of Ethnography of the People of the Soviet Union, Leningrad

giving the impression of separate levels of sonority. The sound created in this fashion is strikingly resonant but in a manner different from that of southern Russian song. The voices intertwine freely and delicately, like fine lines in Vologda lace of Northern Russia.

Due to the different climates in the southern regions the majority of songs and dances are performed in the open, outdoors in the field or on a village street, while in the northern areas they are performed inside most of the year. This results in totally different acoustical environments for performance. One of the most ancient Russian dances is the *khorovod*, a round dance known to many Slavic cultures. Dancers move in a big circle from left to right – “sunwise,” as they explain – or in lines or complex figures. The *khorovod* is a communal dance with as many as a hundred participants. The southern Russian version is generally fast and lively, while the northern *khorovod* is much slower and more stately, resembling a procession more than a dance. As with most Russian folk songs, the *khorovod* songs which accompany the dance are sung a cappella, though in some southern traditions they may also be accompanied by such instruments as *zhaleika* (a short wooden pipe with a reed, recognized by its nasal sound), *kugikly* (a

set of short pan-flutes) and *rozbok* (a horn). In all Russian regions, instrumental accompaniment is more typical for fast dances, called *pliaska* – basically successions of fast improvisations by individual dancers. During *pliaska* the singers often cheer on and inspire the performers by special vocal inflections. *Pliaska* is often accompanied by some improvised percussion instrument such as wooden spoons, a metal pot or even a scythe. During a fast *pliaska* a player will usually select a short tune in a quick tempo, repeating the melody with endless variations to demonstrate his virtuoso improvisational skills. Dancers will also display their capabilities and try to outperform each other in the so-called *pereplias*. Here each dancer has to repeat the figures of the previous performer and introduce some of his own, which are then passed to the following dancer, and so on.

Russian Orthodoxy rejected folk musical instruments. In the Middle Ages their players were called *skomorkbi* – traveling entertainers very much like the *trouweres* of Western Europe. The struggle with the Church came to a head with a tragic event in the 17th century – the burning of five carriages filled with folk music instruments on the banks of the Moscow River. In spite of efforts to eradicate traditional instruments in



Even at a recording session women from Podserednee village cannot resist the impulse to raise their arms, a gesture characteristic of southern Russian dances. Photo courtesy Vera Medvedeva

pre-revolutionary Russia, many are still popular among Russian villagers. Instruments such as the *balalaika* (a plucked three-stringed instrument with a triangular body) and *garmoshka* (a sort of concertina) reached Russian villages only during the last two hundred years, thus their popularity is of a very recent nature. Once introduced, however, they were quickly accepted in Russian villages and cities.

Within the Soviet Union, folk song has been understood as a cultural phenomenon through which national originality reveals itself. As a manifestation of national soul, Russian folk song came to be used as the cornerstone for the development of national art music. Since the end of the 18th century, when the interest in folklore became an important factor of social life, practically all Russian composers expressed a serious interest in native folk music, though their approach to musical folklore underwent continual change over the centuries. Composers' interest in and use of folk material in creating their music varies from simply quoting folk melodies or folk lyrics intact to using similar musical vocabulary, grammar and methods of development of musical material.

During the last few decades, fieldwork in rural areas has brought to the surface as many examples of old Russian folk tradition as were collected in the previous two centuries. In the 1880s Fedor Istomin and Sergei Liapunov collected folk songs in the Vologda province at the request of the Russian Imperial Geographic Society. One of Istomin's major concerns in his report to the Society was that all of his informants were old, and that within two decades, when these people had died, folk culture would disappear with them. Working in the same villages almost a hundred years later, I, too, collected material from old people, and I must express the same concern. However, I found the same kind of material and, surprisingly, substantially more. It might be a sign that the culture that survived for centuries is not about to disappear.

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*Margarita Mazo received her training at the Leningrad Conservatory. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on regional styles in Russian traditional music. She teaches ethnomusicology and Russian music at Ohio State University, is a fellow at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies (Wilson Center) and curator of the Soviet program at this year's Festival.*



A summer festival in the Russian village Podserednee. Photo courtesy Vera Medvedeva

*Suggested reading*

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