

**CD Report: Russian Duo
Oleg Kruglyakov, balalaika & Terry Boyarsky, piano**

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Siberian Balalaika virtuoso Oleg Kruglyakov and Cleveland Heights pianist Terry Boyarsky came together in 2007 to form The Russian Duo, an international project meshing two cultures represented by two musicians whose “commonalities are surprising: conservatory training, chamber music, folk music and dance backgrounds, a lifetime of singing”.

The Duo can be encountered live in concerts at libraries, churches, schools and special gatherings all around Northeast Ohio, as well as on tour throughout the US — and now the artistry of these two gifted musicians can be enjoyed in their first CD, simply entitled “Russian Duo”.

Alas, the Dr. Zhivago theme sums up everything many of us know about the Balalaika. Too bad, because in the right hands, this Russian folk instrument, suppressed by the Czars, then revived in the 19th century by Vasily Vasilevich Andreyev, is capable of some remarkable musical feats (not to mention its potential as an ensemble instrument — it comes in six sizes and whole Balalaika-based folk orchestras have toured the world).

Kruglyakov began studying his triangular-shaped instrument at the age of seven and some thirty years later must be one of the world’s great Balalaika players. He toured widely with different Russian folk ensembles and moved to the US in 1998 to become part of the ‘Moscow Nights’ company. Boyarsky’s CV is wide and deep — she’s studied experimental psychology at Reed, Eurhythmics at CIM and Ethnomusicology at Kent as well as receiving training in Dalcroze and Orff

methods. She’s also an accomplished pianist and a sensitive and versatile collaborator.

The Duo decided to choose an eclectic program for their first foray into CD-land. In just over 45 minutes, they cover territory ranging from traditional Russian tunes and concert pieces to transcriptions of Schubert, Mozart and Dvorak, gypsy band favorites (Vittorio Monti’s ‘Czárdás’) and completely unexpected tunes (the Brazilian ‘Tico Tico’ and their own arrangement of ‘Russian Rag’ by George L. Cobb — funny, he doesn’t sound Russian!)

No matter what he’s playing, Oleg Kruglyakov demonstrates an astonishing command of the Balalaika and its many voices, tossing off virtuosic riffs one moment, tugging at the heart strings the next with the infinitely sad tremolo the instrument can produce, then reminding it of its folk instrument roots in lively dance tunes, sometimes outshining the best pickers in the American bluegrass tradition. Terry Boyarsky is the perfect colleague at the keyboard, closely following Kruglyakov in every rubato and tempo change and taking care to make some tricky balances work.

The album opens with the ‘Rondo’ from Mozart’s ‘Haffner’ Serenade, a 6 minute and 45 second work which immediately establishes the Duo’s credentials as fine musicians, though a shorter piece might have provided a more gentle plunge into the special world of the Balalaika. Next, Andreyev’s contribution to the repertory is honored with his attractively sentimental ‘Balalaika Waltz’. On the third track, an arrangement of Schubert’s song ‘Ständchen’ gives Kruglyakov plenty of lyrical opportunities including the strange but expressive effect of bending of pitches against piano notes.

Three Russian folk pieces follow the Schubert. ‘Volinka’ (‘Play My Bagpipe’) begins with piano drones, develops into an energetic galop and passes through a lovely, slower section with sweet harmonies before heading back to the beginning. ‘I Met You’ (an old Russian romance) turns out to be what we know as ‘Hearts and Flowers’, the wrenching tune silent movie pianists always pulled out when a musical sob was required. ‘Banya’ (‘Steam Bath’) was just a fun, folksy tune in a thoroughly straightforward arrangement.

Poor Vittorio Monti, the Neapolitan composer who tried to make a go of an opera career in Paris. He's only remembered now for his 'Czárdás', but at least he left one good tune to posterity, and the Duo play it with spirit and style. Dvorak's 'Slavonic Dance, op. 46, no. 2' is more of a concert work in the same ethnic dance genre, realized here with nice changes of texture and articulation in the piano.

The 'Russian Rag' and 'Tico Tico' — two little adjacent bon-bons effortlessly tossed off by Kruglyakov & Boyarsky — are followed by three Russian selections that bring the CD to a conclusion — really four, for 'Blooming Flowers' and 'Ah! You Birch Tree' are two contrasting songs on the same track. The first is a lyric tune accompanied very simply, the second a fast, frolicking number. Vera Gorodovskaya's 'Kalinka Concert Variations' is real show-off virtuoso material in the spirit of the innumerable 'Carnival of Venice' variations composed during the 19th century. The CD ends rather quietly with 'Devitsa', an 'Evening Song' arranged by Alexander Shalov.

By genre, 'The Russian Duo' is a niche recording, but the musicality and virtuosity displayed here will appeal to a broad spectrum of music lovers. Sensitive recorded by Bruce Gigax at Audio Recording Studio, this CD is a really fun listen and deserves to find its way onto many gift lists during the coming holiday season. To acquire a copy, visit the Duo's handsome web site, where there's also abundant information about the performers and their forthcoming activities.