

# Balalaika Балалайка

The balalaika is a wooden, three-stringed instrument of Russian origin, with a characteristic triangular body. The balalaika is played by strumming and plucking with the fingers of the right hand. An important part of balalaika technique is the use of the left thumb to fret notes on the bottom string, where it is often used to form chords.

There are many theories about the origins of balalaika and how it developed into its triangular shape. In any case, the first written record was in 1688. The balalaika was supposed to be invented by peasant serfs to relieve their hard living under cruel landlords. Gradually the instrument spread among peasants and *skomorokhi* (wandering minstrels and jesters) who traveled all around the vast expanses of Russia. *Skomorokhi* performed at fairs, using their ballads to poke fun at church and state. Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich issued an order to burn all balalaikas, *domras*, horns and *guslis*, or punish those who would not yield. Although the repressions ended with the Tzar's death, balalaikas did not achieve their former popularity until the mid 19th century, with Vassily Andreyev, a violinist, composer and arranger.

One day as Vassily Andreyev, a young nobleman, was walking in his estate he heard his house-serf playing the balalaika. He was astonished at the unusual sounds of the instrument as he considered himself a connoisseur of Russian folk instruments. He began to learn how to play it and realized how much potential the instrument held. He set to work perfecting and standardizing the balalaika and even went to St. Petersburg to ask the violin master Ivanov for advice.

At first Ivanov refused to make a balalaika, but after listening to Andreyev's masterful performance, he could not resist. It was long, hard work but eventually they created an improved balalaika. Andreyev's vision was to bring the balalaika back to the folk and popularize it. On his initiative all the soldiers serving the army were given balalaikas which they took with them after retiring from the army. In this way balalaika again spread all around Russia and became a popular instrument.

With the help of master instrument makers, Vassily Andreyev created a family of balalaikas, like in a string quartet. There are six sizes - piccolo, descant, prima, secondary, alto, bass, and contrabass. These instruments formed the basis of the Great Russian Orchestra, which later toured in many countries of the world to glorify the balalaika and Russian culture.



## Treschyotka Трещётка



The Russian folk *treschyotka* is a kind of rattle which produces a variety of percussion sounds. It is formed from many wooden slats threaded together on a string.

*Treschyotkas* were often used in wedding ceremonies and were decorated with ribbons, flowers and sometimes little bells. Their use in weddings suggests that perhaps the instrument also served a mystical function of protecting the newlyweds from evil spirits. In some villages people still keep the tradition of playing and making *treshyotkas*.

*Treschyotka* should be made of completely dry wood, preferably oak – this is what provides musical qualities of the instrument.

In order to produce diverse sounds and rhythms, hold the string, stretch it like an accordion, then then squeeze the slats together. Try with different forces and vary the angle of the slats.



## Zhaleika Жалейка

The *jaleika* is a wind instrument with a single reed inside the mouthpiece, and finger holes to make different pitches (like a recorder.) It has a raucous, jaunty sound, takes a lot of air pressure to get a sound, and is often used to highlight melodies.

## Lozhky Ложки

From ancient times, Eastern Slavic people used percussion instruments for war, hunting, in rituals, for singing and dancing.

In the 19th to early 20th centuries, choirs and folk instrument ensembles used spoons in elaborate stunts. *Lozhky* players performed solo, accompanied singing and dancing, or were part of various ensembles.

Musical spoons are made of harder wood than regular table spoons, often have longer handles and the ladle part has a polished surface. Sometimes jingles are attached to the handle. A set of spoons can have 2, 3 or 4 spoons of a different sizes in order to create different pitches.

There are many techniques and tricks for playing spoons. To play them put two between the fingers of your left hand, and hold the third one in your right hand. Hit the first two spoons with the third one. Slide each strike from one spoon cup to another, then clap the two left hand spoons together.



## Buben Бубен



*Buben*, or tambourine, is a hand-held percussion instrument with a narrow round frame and a membrane (rawhide or manmade) stretched over one side. Little bells, or pairs of jingles may be attached in the slots of the frame. *Buben* were widely used by *skomorokhi* (wandering minstrel-clowns) and bear tamers.

Virtuoso *buben* players did all sorts of tricks: they could toss it up in the air and catch it, bang it on their knee, head, chin or nose. Of course they beat it with their hands, elbows, fingers, shaking and rattling it, all while singing and dancing.

## Kolokolchiki Колокольчики

*Kolokolchiki* is the plural of bells. The horses wear jingle bells, called *bubenchik* (like the jingles on the tambourine, or *buben*), on leather harnesses strapped around their necks, heads, bodies, chests and rumps. On the wooden structure over the center horse (called *duga*), there are three tuned *kolokochiki* hanging to let everyone know the troika is coming.



## Gusli Гусли



*Gusli* is the oldest East Slavic multi-string plucked instrument, belonging to the zither family, due to its strings being parallel to its resonance board. Its roots lie in Veliky Novgorod in Novgorodian Rus'. There are many different kinds of gusli, some are large table-top instruments which have a place in the Russian folk instrument orchestra, others are held in the arms or hands. There are many different tunings and fingerings as well. The instruments were used by the wandering *Skomorokhs* musicians and entertainers. Preserved instruments discovered by archaeologists in various digs have between five and nine strings with one example having twelve strings. *Gusli* is supposed to have been the preferred instrument of the bards.



## Russian Folk Instruments



### **Domra** **Домра**

The *domra* is a long-necked string instruments with a round body and three or four metal strings, from the lute family. Although often found in ensembles with the balalaika, the domra has a much larger range and is played with a pick.

### **Kolokol** **Колокол**

For hundreds of years, since Old Rus, bells have been considered to be special. Some people even consider them to be singing icons - a bell is the voice of God. Many legends tell about bells having magic and supernatural abilities, such as foretelling and averting danger. Bells were blessed before they were used. Some stories tell about ringing bells to ward off diseases, storms, thunderbolts, or a devil's plot. Bells of all sizes express the gamut of emotions - from weeping and moaning, to celebrating and praying. The way you strike the bell (technique), the patterns of rhythms, and how many differently pitched bells will give the listener a specific message. *Zvon* is the Russian word for ring, toll or peal.



### **Volinka (Bagpipe)** **Волынка**

Every village has its own *volinka*, or bagpipe, made out of a goat, sheep or pig stomach. There is a chanter with finger holes and a reed in the mouthpiece. There might be one or two drone pipes. Each ethnic group has its own type and tuning, and its own way to decorate the instrument.



## Vladimirsky Rozhok

## Владимирский Рожок

The most famous *rozhok* (wooden trumpet) in Russia is the Vladimir. These wooden trumpets, often with the trumpet-like mouthpiece carved into the one-piece body, are usually played on the corner of the mouth. Usually they are played in choirs and have quite a distinctive sound - warm, pleasant and funny. There don't have the high frequencies, like brass trumpets. Their soft and gentle tones were originally used to call the cows.

## Garmoshka

## Гармошка

Every region and village has its own version of a *garmoshka* and it plays an important role in folk music and dance. It's portable, can play chords, melodies and is loud enough to be played outside. It can be diatonic or chromatic. The *garmon*, or *garmonika* is a kind of Russian button accordion - a free-reed instrument. Some have keyboards on one side but mostly both hands play buttons. They can be brightly colored, decorated with ribbons and often have bells or jingles. The *garmoshka* is a key ingredient in Russian *chastushki*, an improvised rhyming couplet banter in villages, festivals and weddings.

