

Oberlin Artist Recital Series welcomes genre-mixing Russian Renaissance

by Jarrett Hoffman



More and more, today's musicians are shrugging off divisions of genre. Another trend in programming? Folk instruments from places far and wide are being welcomed into the world of mainstream classical music. Give those unfamiliar instruments a listen and be rewarded.

A perfect example of all that is the 2017 M-Prize-winning ensemble Russian Renaissance, which visits Finney Chapel as part of the Oberlin Artist Recital Series on Friday, February 28 at 7:30 pm. The quartet of Ivan Kuznetsov (*balalaika*), Anastasia Zakharova (*domra* and *domra alto*), Alexander Tarasov (button accordion), and Ivan Vinogradov (*balalaika contrabasso*), aims to “marry tradition and modernity, creating a fusion of styles and eras.”

That's echoed in Friday's program, which ranges from the Baroque and Romantic eras to folk, jazz, and tango, including music by J.S. Bach, Tchaikovsky, Richard Galliano, Piazzolla, Egberto Gismonti, Zequinha de Abreu, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Béla Fleck, Django Reinhardt, and the members of Russian Renaissance themselves. A full program and ticket information are available [online](#).

“It's very important for us to mix different genres, because we consider music to be a universal language of communication, without borders and limits,” the ensemble wrote in an email. “To play in a particular genre requires some immersion in history and style, and a knowledge of the features of the work. We study this and try to convey the essence of the music.”

Venturing into different styles brings up the challenge — or the opportunity — of arranging music. “We compile our arrangements ourselves,” the group said. “Music for Russian folk instruments is rich, but for a quartet like ours, there is sadly not much original music of good quality. We painstakingly look for the best sound, and some of the pieces require a lot of effort.”

Alexander Tarasov is the main arranger for the group. “He brings in his ideas, and the process of rehearsal creates the final result, which we present to the audience. Sometimes this process takes many months.”

Like many great classical musicians, the members of Russian Renaissance began learning their instruments early in their lives. Kuznetsov took up the three-stringed, triangular-bodied *balalaika* at age five, the same age that Zakharova started on another lute-like instrument: the round-bodied *domra*. Tarasov began playing the accordion at age nine, while Vinogradov found his way to the massive *balalaika contrabasso* at fifteen after beginning on other instruments.

The group came together four years ago following a tour of Serbia by Kuznetsov and Zakharova. At the suggestion of Serbian filmmaker, actor, and musician Emir Kusturica, that duo expanded into the quartet for a performance in Moscow.

Chemistry is difficult to quantify from the outside, but a brief listening session suggests there’s a special energy, playfulness, and sense of communication among the Russian Renaissance players. “It seems that we are united by the desire to play music,” the group said simply. In terms of chemistry, they added, “It is either there or it is not.”



Their debut album, [*Russian Renaissance*](#), was released just this month on Cleveland’s Azica Records.

“This album weaves a very tangled musical texture,” the ensemble said. “We think these pieces are a good example of our eclectic interests. It includes avant-garde music by Alfred Schnittke, a tango by Richard Galliano, the music of Ryuichi Sakamoto from the movie *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, and our own piece, *Vanya*, where American rock is intertwined with

Russian folk songs and improvisation. We also include classical works of Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Johann Sebastian Bach.”

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