

Russian Orff Odyssey

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"Time and again, my breath caught as we made something so intricate and complex from such simple materials."

"It was a joy to watch us all grow and bloom like flowers – this work touched my soul."

"I now have experienced what before I could only imagine and hope was possible."

"Today's education is either dull work or senseless entertainment. Now I understand how education can make work fun and fun work."

"As a child psychologist, I can only say that if all children experienced this approach, I would be out of work!"

One by one the participants in the Orff course stood up and delivered the above testimony and more. It was the end of a three day course I had given in the beautiful Rachmaninoff Center in the old town of Novgorod. Thirty people had gathered from St. Petersburg, Moscow and Novgorod, some for their first Orff workshop, some for refreshment and future training.

The growth of Orff Schulwerk in Russia can be almost single-handedly attributed to the efforts of Slava Zhilin, who many may remember as our guest at the Cincinnati Conference. Awarded the Pro Merito Award in 2001 for his work, Slava continues to both give and organize courses throughout Russia. He opened the Novgorod course with a children's demonstration class and then served as my translator in the days that followed.

As there were very few Orff instruments, we spent our days exploring body percussion, games, movement and simple rhymes in various languages. We had one particularly inspiring session exploring the sonic potential of some wooden chairs. I was impressed with the musicality, sensitivity and creativity of the participants and deeply moved by their poetic testimonies at the end of the course.

After a whirlwind one-day tour of Moscow, Slava and I flew to Yekaterinburg, an industrial town near the Ural Mountains north of Kazakstan. Here I worked with 80 teachers from as far away as the Ukraine and Siberia for four fun-filled days. There was a healthy supply of Orff instruments, allowing us to create some tonal improvisations, explore elemental style and even play a bit of jazz. (This was a big hit!) Two memorable

classes stand out – variations on yogurt cups that the participants brought in and a speech piece based on the Russian words for coffee, tea and juice.

At the close of the course, the participants shared some of the songs, pieces and dances from their respective regions. Deeply moved by their music and by all we had experienced together, I gave the following closing speech:

" My grandparents came to America from Vitbsk, the home of Marc Chagall. Though still a ways from Belaruse, this is the closest feeling I've had to contacting my roots. I've had many talks with my good friend Slava about what a miracle it is that we are doing this together. Slava and I were born in the same year, just two weeks apart, and we grew up in a time and place where we were taught to hate each other. Being here helped me remember that when I was 12 years old, I had an American flag on one side of my desk, a Soviet Union Flag on the other side and a United Nations flag in the middle. I guess I had some notion that these two opposing forces needed to be brought into harmony like contrapuntal lines in a Bach piece. I'm sorry to say that the United Nations seems to be failing miserably these days in finding the right chords to make sense of opposing lines, but that the Orff Schulwerk is the United Nations of the future, not only bringing Slava and I so joyfully together, but allowing all of us to share this very special time together. It seems that peace is not the absence of tension, but the active, thoughtful and purposeful harmonizing of different voices. I think that's part of what we've tried to do here. And we've had a great time doing it, I might add! Spaciba!

Of course, there is so much more I could write about it – the food, the trains, the houses, the recording of the virtuoso marimba group from Siberia, the fabulous wooden spoon playing, the remarkable bell ringer in Novgorod, the always warm hospitality of my hosts. But for now, I simply want to thank the AOSA International Outreach Project for financial assistance in realizing these two special courses and to encourage all AOSA members to support this much-needed new fund. Orff Schulwerk worldwide will be the richer for it.

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