

The Guitar of the Czars

a new English summary redaction

by **Marco Bazzotti**

This is a revision of an article of mine published in the Italian bimonthly "**Seicorde**" [[Note 1](#)], a guitar magazine that ended its life in 1995. To my knowledge it was the first article about this subject published in the Italian language (after the most significant article by Matanya Opee in a concurrent magazine, which was published some 7 years before mine [[Note 2](#)]). I was induced to republish it in English not only to make it available to a wider audience, but also because for editorial purposes part of the original text and all the end notes were cut in the first publication, so I could not give due credit to my references. But it was my first published article, so I was glad for it to appear anyhow. Some years later I noticed also that some of the information contained therein was not completely exact.

I decided to leave the text in a form close to its first version, cutting only the interviews with the Russian guitarist M. Goldort and Italian Professor P. Bonaguri, these now having become dated. I preferred to replace almost all the accompanying images with new ones that I have discovered in the following years.

Since the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, the countries of eastern European have exploded in a painful big-bang that has changed the geography of Europe and Asia drastically. The new Russia was born, now being part of the Community of Independent States (CIS) that replaces the former USSR. The guitar fraternity in Russia has been living for more than 70 years in total isolation, prevented from being in touch with the West. The presence of many types of the instrument that we call "guitar" has been a constant one in Russian music life in all periods, having very old origins. But only recently has this guitar world started opening to western Europe, and we still know far too little about Russian composers for guitar and Russian guitarists.

It was quite difficult for me to get information about some Russian guitarists, due both to the ever-present difficulties in communication (it is still difficult just to send a fax to Moscow during the day time) and to the problems of language comprehension.

In the past, references to the Soviet guitar world in Western music literature were always very scarce, and only in recent years has a subtle breath from that guitar world started blowing beyond the Urals. I wish to thank especially the guitarists **Mikhail Goldort** from Novosibirsk (central Siberia) and **Piero Bonaguri**, teacher at the Conservatory of Rovigo (Italy) as well as the composer **Umberto Bombardelli**, who helped me in collecting more information.

At the beginning there was the domra

The guitar was not the only known plucked instrument in Russia; two other instruments at least are worthy of mention: the **domra** and the **balalaika**. The domra is nowadays known in two variants with three or four metallic strings and in different sizes. It has a triangular shape, is tuned by fourths, and is played by means of a plectrum. It is the most ancient plucked instrument, having been imported by the Mongols during the 13th century. Its tremolo is similar to the one of the Neapolitan mandolin and its range is large, due to its having 16 frets up to the junction of the neck. It is now employed both as a solo instrument and in an orchestra, together with the balalaika .

The balalaika has a peculiar triangular shape and three strings, among which two are tuned in unison and the other a fourth up. It appeared first during the 17th century. It was able to oust the domra in popularity, thanks to the preference of the Czars. It is played both by fingers and with the plectrum; from the last years of the Nineteenth Century it has existed in different sizes which cover all the frequency spectrum of the orchestra. [[Note 3](#)]

The guitar appeared in Russia during the 18th century, in a society far behind the European one in development. However, at the first half of the 19th century it was already known as a national instrument: the Russian guitar. Its own peculiarities were the tuning by thirds on the notes of the G scale, and having seven strings. It is known by the tender-sounding name of "semistrunaia" (a composite noun made from "*sem'*" = *seven* and "*struny*" = *strings*). Its popularity grew among the people of all ranks, both middle and upper class, as described by many Russian poets and writers.

There are also many variants of this main type, in number of strings and dimensions. By studying the surviving photos of Russian guitarists of the last century, re-published in the volume **Guitar in Russia and USSR** (see photo), we see that the guitar with 7 strings on the neck and 4 strings outside of the neck was very popular. The famous photograph of **Valerian Rusanov**, one of the first Russian guitar historians, with his 11-string guitar is significant in this respect [[Note 4](#)]. This instrument shared favor with the six string guitar (the so-called "shestistrunaia", from "*shest*," which means "*six*") tuned as in the West, and many other types.



11-string guitar made by **Robert I. Arkhuzen** (1844-1920), a prominent guitar maker who was active in Moscow



The volume "*Gitara v Rossii i SSSR*" edited by Yablokov, Ed. "Russkaia Entziklopediya», Tyumen-Ekaterinburg, 1992

The main differences between the 6-string and 7-string guitars are naturally not only related to the number of the strings, but to the intervals between them. We recognize in the two Russian systems analogies with the instrument employed by Straube and Geminiani, tuned in thirds, or the one used by Boccherini, tuned in fourths. In Russia the distinction between these two tunings has caused intense rivalry between two opposing groups of supporters: the "zapadniki", a word that means western-oriented, and the "slavophils". This division has lasted practically up to our day. It is a fact that the repertory for the 7-string instrument, though diminished in comparison to the one for the 6-string guitar, is still thriving [[Note 5](#)]. However, many guitarists of the past played both instruments: **Andrei Sychra** (1773-1850) himself, beside his devotion to the Russian guitar [[Note 6](#)]; and certainly many others after him, such as **Vasiliy Lebedev** (1867-1907), **Piotr Isakov** (1886-1958), and many others, of whom we know nothing other than their names [[Note 7](#)].

The Russian repertory

It is well known that the prominent composer **Mikhail Glinka** (1804-1857) knew at Villadolid the skillful flamenco guitarist *Felix Castilla*, who gave him the inspiration for the First Spanish Overture [[Note 8](#)]. His interest in the guitar would have been known to Russian guitarists of his epoch: it is not by chance that the patriarch of the seven-string guitar, the Lithuanian *Andrei Sychra*, transcribed in full for two guitars two of Glinka's greatest operas: *A life for the Czar* and *Ruslan i Ludmila*.

The transcription of folklorist themes is the main feature of the repertory of the Russian guitar.

The popular tradition always had a big influence in Russian music, which influence has continued up to our day; one thinks of the great importance of popular tales in the imagination of Russian composers like Musorgsky or Stravinsky.

The contacts between Russian guitarists and Europe were important. For example, Nikolai Makarov (1810?-1890?), a 7-string guitarist and author of a book of memoirs, lived in Warsaw. He was a companion on gallant evenings of Fryderyk Chopin and other virtuosos of those years. [[Note 9](#)]

The methods

After the revolution of 1917 and the events that followed, the closing off to the majority of important western musical experiences instituted by the USSR initiated a critical period in the history of the 6-string guitar, which was already showing a tradition of open sharing with the West. That year, a talented painter by the name of **Vladimir Bobritzki** (1898-1986) left his Ukrainian birthland forever, as did many other artists from all over Russia. The western world then afforded him Segovia's friendship and a new name: **Bobri** [[Note 10](#)].

The fact that, regardless of the official position, a large amount of letters was exchanged by Russian virtuosos and western guitarists, is quite valuable. The sporadic recitals in Russia by **Andrés Segovia** (in 1926 and 1927, then in the season 1935/36), thanks to their glamour, gave an impulse to Soviet guitarists. However, for students

After that, in 1948, came the method book by **Alexander Ivanov-Kramskoi** (1912-1973), a 6-string guitarist, mainly designed for those teaching themselves. This text is still used frequently in conservatories, together with other European methods.

As to the study of history and literature of the Russian guitar in this transition period, the works by **Vladimir Mashkievic** (1888-1971) had the most significant impact. He was an erudite musical critic, a guitarist, a meticulous collector and engineer, who gave concerts on the 7- and 10-string guitar. He dedicated himself to music criticism while working in Kharkov as an engineer. He founded a monthly guitar magazine **Gitara i gitaristy** with a circulation primarily in the region of the Don. His publications appeared also in Italian guitar journals of those years [[Note 11](#)].

Another remarkable figure is **Boris Perott** (1882-1958), if for no other reason than he was **Julian Bream**'s teacher and presented Bream to Segovia. He was a practicing surgeon, a guitar virtuoso and teacher who worked in London since the Twenties, where he founded the Philharmonic

studying during the Soviet regime, the only way to study the 6-string guitar at approved institutions was to pass through a method *written by a Russian author*.

The 7-string guitarist **Piotr Agafoshin** (1874-1950), already old at the time of the Revolution, was able to publish the most well-known first Soviet method for the 6-string guitar, after his conversion to the Western instrument. But this happened only in 1934.

Society, which often gave opportunity to the young Julian [[Note 12](#)].



Piotr Spirindovic Agafoshin (1874-1950)



A Segovia's playbill of his concert in Moscow (12 March, 1927) with music by **Sor** (Study, *Thème varié*), **Malats** (Serenada), **Tarrega** (Dance, Study), **Bach** (Prelude, Fugue, Courante, Gavot), **Mendelssohn** (Canzonetta), **Torroba** (Sonatina), **Albeniz** (Legenda)

The guitar today

Nowadays the interest for the guitar in Russia is in a renewal phase. The number of festivals, courses and competitions is on the increase in all the Republics. Unluckily the main problems are always the poor availability of scores and the high prices of good guitars. One finds that, in 1993, a guitar for study cost at least 1,000,000 rubles and a discreet concert instrument at least the double, a sum equal to about two years of a medium-level salary [[Note 13](#)].

At the end of the course of study, the opportunities for employment for young musicians are basically in the institutional channels, such as in the Theaters, Philharmonics, etc. Their economic and sometimes their professional status is not very high. In fact, manual work in Russia has traditionally been recognized as greater than and has paid more than intellectual professions. This aspect is particularly keen as regards the guitar, an instrument that has no orchestral function.

The impression we get from those persons involved in the present guitar life in Russia is one of great excitement. A young Siberian guitarist, **Mikhail Goldort**, with some appreciable on-the-road experience behind him, gave me his impressions about the Russian guitar world today by normal correspondence, e-mail, and telephone.

His *curriculum vitae* is typical. Mikhail Goldort was born in Novosibirsk in 1966. He started the study of the guitar at 13 years of age in classes with **Yuri Kuzin**. He became a student at the Conservatory of Novosibirsk; then he started the intense activity of a young concert player. He often took part in the Pansoviet competitions and in international festivals of guitar in Moscow, Poltava and Donietsk (Ukraine). In 1990 he qualified as the winner at the Panrussian concourse of guitarists. In the festival of Novosibirsk in 1991 he received the Grand Prize. He took part in international competitions and tournées in Cuba, Spain and Austria; then he was invited by **Alvaro Pierri** in Canada, where unluckily he was not allowed to go. His recitals at the festival of Lambach (Austria) in 1989 established him as a virtuoso. In 1991 he was admitted to the master course in the Musical Academy of Moscow to study with Professor **Alexander Frauchi**. From 1993 to 1996 he has been teaching at the the Conservatory of Music "M.I. Glinka" of his city. Now he has moved to Saint Petersburg.

The society most responsible in Moscow for the organization of concerts in Russia is the **Goskonzert**, which has been functioning for many years.

The Guitar teaching in Russia

In the former USSR there were about 30 conservatories of music [[Note 14](#)].

The Russian conservatory is a university level school that gives performers, theoreticians, musicologists and future teachers a full professional preparation in five years. The student usually starts at the age of 18 years and receives the diploma at 23. We need to consider that the student who enters a conservatory has already had technical preparation established in the previous 11 years--6 years of primary school and 5 years at a secondary musical school.

One can enter the conservatory by means of an admittance examination that imposes different kinds of attitudinal tests to evaluate the preparation received at the secondary school. There are batteries of psychological tests that evaluate the capacity of self-control and physiological attitudes, and these are given serious consideration.

The music courses are unified and centrally controlled by the Education Minister, even if some local differences may be found. Most of the conservatories have a "Central School of Music" where the particularly gifted younger pupils, from the age of 7/8 years, receive a musical education integrated with general subjects. The main effort of the Russian Conservatories is always to form competent soloists on the different instruments. On the other hand, some other matters such as the history of music are underdeveloped for lack of institutional funds, though they are considered as important as the other subjects.

As to teaching, there are three main ranks: professor (the highest), lecturer and assistant. The teachers have to submit themselves to an exam every 5 years, which includes an evaluation from the students. Regarding the internal organization, there is great flexibility, even in availability: the conservatory operates 24 hours a day. Students can always study there. Pupils are also free to attend any course on any subject taught there that interests them.

To my knowledge there are still no chairs of lute, but the lute literature is very beloved and frequently played (usually on the guitar) [[Note 15](#)].

At present **Alexander Frauchi** (1954) is Professor of Guitar at the Russian Musical Academy at Moscow, together with the older **Nikolay Komoliatov** (1942). The "Ciaikovsky" Conservatory of Moscow had at one time a chair of guitar, where **Natalia Ivanova-Kramskaia**, daughter of **Aleksandr Ivanov-Kramskoi**, taught, but it was suppressed [[Note 16](#)].

The second most important chair of guitar is situated in Saint Petersburg (formerly Leningrad). In the Conservatory **Evgeni Pheodorovich Larionov** (1940) teaches but only from 1995, **Jadviga Kavaleskaia** (1922) has been teaching for many years in the College "M. P. Musorgski" (I am indebted to **Sergey Ilyin** for this information).

Another chair of guitar is situated in Novosibirsk, the central main Siberian city, has been active since 35 years ago, and it is very accredited in Russia. Students come there from every region on the East of the Pacific Sea. The chair of Popular Instruments was held by **Arcadii Burkhanov** and **Mikhail Goldort** (up 1996). They were both Yuri Kuzin's pupils. The class had eleven pupils guitarists in a total population of about 400 students (1993). The Prof. Burkhanov was born in 1958. After his studies with **Natalia Ivanova-Kramskaia** and **Kliuev** in guitar and lute he specialized with **Stepan Rak** and **John Duarte**. In Novosibirsk there are also the Opera and Ballet Theatre, called the Siberian "Bolshoi", a Symphonic Orchestra directed by Arnold Kaz, the violinistic school Sachar Bron and the Philharmonic. In the city there are constantly festivals and concerts.

Besides in the Conservatories, the guitar is taught in the four-year musical colleges as well. The Musical Institute of Voronezh, a city with 1.5 million inhabitants in the central Russia,

A small number of students are admitted to post-diploma courses (called the "*aspirantura*"). These are offered in the most of the conservatories and at the prestigious Russian Musical Academy in Moscow, a section of the "Ciaikovsky" Conservatory of Moscow. The student who gets through the two or three-year course receive a degree that is comparable to the American master's degree.

The classical guitar studio is not regarded as an independent chair in the conservatory, but is included under the responsibilities of the Chair of Popular Instruments and is relatively recent.

where **Vasiliy Sarenko** was born in 1814, has a class of guitar. In 1992, the city hosted the first "International Competition for Young Guitarists" open to outsiders in the history of Russia, and an important festival, "Guitar in Russia". These events introduced many young Russian "enfant prodige" of the guitar to the public; the rebirth of interest in the guitar in Russia was possible, thanks to their enthusiasm.

We will follow subsequent events with great attention, as it will be possible, and will report about them in future articles.

Marco Bazzotti © 1997-98

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[*English revision: M. Penny*]

End Notes

1. *See:* Marco Bazzotti, "*La chitarra degli zar*" (in Ital.) no.43, Jan.-Feb. 1994, p. 12-19.
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2. *See:* Matanya Ophee, "*La chitarra in Russia Osservazioni dall'Occidente*", in **il "Fronimo"** no. 58, Milano 1987.
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3. Francois-Rene Tranchefott, "*Les instruments de musique dans le monde*" Vol. I, Editions du Seuil, 1980.
See also, for example, the liner notes to the CD "*Osipov State Russian Folk Orchestra: Balalaika Favorites*", CD Mercury 432 000-2, 1962
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4. This photo of V.Rusanov appeared in some guitar magazines. See for example the cover of the first number of the Moscow guitar journal "*Gitarist*" (1993), edited by **V.D. Volkov**, published by Russiko in Moscow.
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5. It is interesting to note in this regard that the **Igor Rekhin's** "Russian Concert" (1987) was originally composed for the "Russian guitar", but then was transcribed by the author for the *western* 6-string one.
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6. See Matanya Ophee, **Introduction** (from "*Andrei Sychra: Four Concert Studies*"), Orphee Editions, Columbus 1991 & Matanya Ophee, *Der Patriarch der russischen Gitarristen Andrei Osipovich Sychra, Gitarre & Laute* 61/1993, p.47-55, 1993.
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7. At the time of writing this article I based my knowledge on the information provided from the non-specific volume "*Russian Composers and Musicians, A Biographical Dictionary*", by A. Vodarsky-Shiraeff, Da Capo Press, New York, 1969. Recently I discovered that **Vasily Petrovic Lebedev** was a pupil of the prominent 6-string guitarist **I.F. Dekker-Schenk** (1825-1899), the promoter of so-called German guitar school, based on the power sound of the guitar. Lebedev wrote a "*Method for the 7-string guitar by Russian and Spanish tuning*" as well.
Piotr Ivanovic Isakov instead wrote more then 300 arrangements for the 7-string guitar (among which is the Bach's "Chaconne") and he is considered a champion of the Russian guitar.
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 8. See for example: **David Brown**, *Mikhail Glinka, A Biographical and Critical Study*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Toronto, 1974.
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 9. Boris A. Perott, *Incontro con Makaroff* (trad. M. Ablóniz), in *L'Arte Chitarristica*, ed. Bèrben no. 54/55 year X, Modena, Nov.-Dec. & Jan.-Febr. 1956.
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 10. See e.g. the entry **Vladimir Bobri** in Maurice Sommerfield, *The Classical Guitar. Its Evolution and its Players Since 1800*, Ashley Mark Publishing Co. (UK), Second Ed. May 1991.
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 11. Some Vladimir Mashkievic's articles were published in *La Chitarra*, Bologna, 1934.
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 12. See e.g. the entry **Julian Bream** in Maurice Sommerfield, *The Classical Guitar. Its Evolution and its Players Since 1800*, op. cit.
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 13. Sergey Kordenko, *private communication*.
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 14. I took this information from an important book by **Boris Schwartz**. After the Eighties the number of Conservatories increased slightly, but now many former States have become Independent Republics. I do not know the present number of Conservatories in the new Russia.
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 15. But many lutenists are present and active in all of present Russia: starting from Vladimir Vavilov (1925-1973), who played the lute during his last years, now Aleksandr Suetin (Moscow, 1958), Arkadiy Burkhanov (Novosibirsk, 1958) and others.
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 16. The story of the Chair of 7-string guitar at the Conservatory of Moscow is well summerized at the entry **Piotr Agafoshin** in the book volume "*Gitara v Rossii i SSSR*", edited by M.S. Yablokov in Tyumen-Ekaterinburg (1993).
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