TMS Member Profiles

Dmitri Nassyrov's Noteworthy Achievements with the Balalaika

By Lynne Robinson

Sweet and wistful, the strains of the balalaika in Dmitri Nassyrov's hands tell tales of snowy evenings and lost love in the Russian countryside. This is what most people have come to expect from this traditional folk instrument, Nassyrov notes, which is why he delights in "showing the possibilities of the balalaika" to his audiences. His fingers flying over the frets, his left hand a blur across the strings, Nassyrov performs anything from a sassy, jazz-tinged number by George Gershwin, to a driving Astor Piazzolla tango, to the delicate "Vocalise" by Sergei Rachmaninoff.

When his listeners express amazement at the versatility of the triangular, three-stringed instrument, Nassyrov says he likes to quote the innovative banjo player, Béla Fleck, who once observed, "All jazz players play the same notes. I just have to find these notes on my banjo."

A rising senior in materials engineering at McGill University in Montréal and a 2010 TMS Light Metals Division

Scholarship winner, Nassyrov began playing the balalaika as a first grader in his native Russia as part of a school music program. "On the first day of classes, our music teacher gave all the girls a domra (an instrument similar to the balalaika with a round body) and all the boys got a balalaika," he recalled. "I wasn't given much of a choice."

Although his introduction to the instrument was somewhat arbitrary, Nassyrov found that he really enjoyed playing and took formal balalaika lessons until his family moved to Montréal. Unlike in Russia, where the balalaika is widely beloved, Nassyrov discovered that "balalaika players were nowhere to be found" in Canada and was compelled to work on his own to improve his skills and technique. His efforts did not go unnoticed. "Russian concert organizers somehow quickly found out that there was a 'cute little boy playing the balalaika who absolutely has to perform in that upcoming festival,'" said Nassyrov.

As Nassyrov became more in de-

mand on the festival circuit, his parents approached Victoria Khramova, an accomplished pianist, to play accompaniment for their son's performances. Nassyrov said he had mastered only a very few traditional selections until 2005, when he and Khramova decided to formally establish a balalaika-piano duo. The two started practicing together regularly and eventually built up their current eclectic repertoire for solo concerts. They now perform throughout Montréal and Québec province in small concert halls, community centers, churches, schools, and cafés. For a change of pace, Nassyrov occasionally plays balalaika in a friend's rock band.

Nassyrov doesn't mind juggling the demands of his coursework with his performance schedule, saying, "People, in general, know very little about this instrument and I really enjoy sharing it with them." He is currently exploring a number of materials science interests in school, and has already held two research positions in alloy design through computational thermodynamics and completed an internship in pyrometallurgical processing. This summer, he is working on polymer photovoltaics and will be focusing on hydrometallurgical processing in the fall. Although he's still considering his options after graduation, Nassyrov said that the balalaika will always be part of his life, "even if it's at a pace slower than today."

He remarks, "I am thankful that I turned out to be one of the few who had the chance to be taught to play this instrument."

To hear a balalaika performance by Nassyrov, go to www.stringsandkeys.com/eng/audio.html.

Each month, *JOM* profiles a TMS member and his or her activities both in and out of the realm of materials science and engineering. To suggest a candidate for this feature, contact Maureen Byko, *JOM* editor, at mbyko@tms.org.

Dmitri Nassyrov performs on the balalaika, a Russian folk instrument that dates back approximately 350 years and was historically played by peasants. Its sound is reminiscent of a mandolin.