

# Troika Balalaikas

## Study Guide

### Program Description

From the Steppes to the Caucasus, the Kremlin to the Crimean, the **TROIKA BALALAIKAS** brings you music from the heart of the vast Russian continent. This unique ensemble performs on balalaikas and domras ranging from small to enormous, the ancient gusli, an assortment of authentic percussion, and indigenous wind instruments. Singing in the Russian and Ukrainian languages, the ensemble recreates a sense of old world history and the spirited excitement of Russian folk melodies and rhythms

### Artist Bio

The ensemble first formed in San Francisco in 1976, began performing concerts throughout the United States and Canada, and recorded two albums. Eventually they became based in Atlanta, Georgia. The group belongs to the Atlanta Balalaika Society (20-piece balalaika orchestra) and the Balalaika and Domra Association of America (100-piece orchestra that performs nationwide).

### Background on Art Form

The word “balalaika” literally means “to chatter”. It is Tartar in origin reflecting the arrival of the Mongols and especially the great Ghengis Khan who swept over the territories of Northern Asia in the thirteenth century.

The balalaika is a descendent from the domra, a three-stringed round-bodied instrument that can be traced back to the ninth century Tartars. The balalaika originally had only two strings attached to a long neck with a gourd-like sounding box. Eventually this was replaced by the triangular sound-box, the neck was shortened, and a third string was added.

Today there are six sizes of balalaikas and four sizes of domras, and these make up the body of the modern balalaika orchestra that exist in Russia, the United States, and the entire world.

### Pre/Post Activities

#### Prepare (Pre- or pre-performance)

*Teachers, please read this to your students.*

Today we're going to enjoy a musical journey together through a performance by the Troika Balalaikas—a group of professional musicians. These performers will introduce a variety of instrumental sounds that will help stir our imaginations and encourage our own exploration of themes common within our curriculum and supportive of appreciation of the arts.

**Warm Up Questions to set the stage for engaging students:**

What are some instruments in the string family?

How are the balalaikas played?

What is the national instrument of Russia?

Can songs and music be used for communication—how?

What is the shape of the balalaika?

What are some ways you could learn to play the balalaika?

Can anyone name some percussion instruments?

What other instruments look and sound like the balalaika?

What languages are spoken in Russia?

**Warm Up Questions for meeting the Georgia Performance Standards for “Listening/Speaking/Viewing”:**

Describe the perfect audience.

What are some of our class rules for being good listeners?

How do we show someone we appreciate a visit to our school or classroom?

How does being part of an audience help make you a good citizen?

What are some examples of bad audience behavior or attitudes?

How does a negative audience member effect your enjoyment of a show or performance?

How would this make the performer feel?

How do we want the performer to feel when they leave our school or classroom?

### **Reflect (Post- or post-performance)**

Reflection activities may vary, but some suggestions include—mapping some of the places encountered in the musical journey; journaling about the performance experience; creating a short in-class performance of a Russian song; list the names of the instruments on the board and match them to their definitions or the sounds they make; researching the history of Russian folk music or allowing students to create their own Russian percussion which explores their cultural background or cultures currently being studied; learning counts or beats which mirror mathematical concepts; reading stories which feature Russian folk tales; challenging students to draw, or devise a way to recreate their favorite Russian instrument from the show.

### **Additional Activities**

- Find Russia on a map; discuss how far it is from where students live; what are the major borders or bodies of water
- Offer students a puzzle map of Russia & have them put it together individually, in cooperative large or small groups, or in think-pair-share; then label the capital, cities, or major political or geographical landmarks
- Make a tambourine or draw a balalaika from materials around the classroom.
- Ask students what they know about Russian music or history and record it on a graphic organizer for a “before-and-after” comparison or fill in a K-W-L Chart chronicling What do you KNOW about Russian music / What do you WANT to learn / What did you LEARN
- Look up information on the Internet or use technology to introduce Russia
- Compose “Fun Facts”, such as noting how at one time in history the balalaika was a one-stringed instrument that originated from the ninth century Tatars and traveled across the continent of Asia to Russia. Or, what does the word “balalaika” literally mean?
- Photocopy photos or pictures of the vocabulary instruments and see if students can match them before and after the performance to their sounds or names or the way they looked

### **Vocabulary**

**Balalaika** – 3-stringed triangular instrument that comes in 6 sizes

**Domra** - a 3 or 4-stringed round-bodied instrument that comes in 4 sizes

**Gusli** - Instrument in a trapezoidal shape with fifty-five strings

**Bayan** – Similar to an accordion with buttons on both sides. Balalaika groups use either an accordion or gusli.

**Loshki** – Russian spoons

**Zhaleika** – New Year's Eve party horn

**Birch Bark Whistle** – We will save this as a surprise!

### **Resources for Teachers & Students**

[www.LynnMcConnell.com](http://www.LynnMcConnell.com) (Information on the Troika Balalaikas)

[www.russianfolk.com](http://www.russianfolk.com)

[www.bdaa.com](http://www.bdaa.com) (Balalaika and Domra Association of America)

Basic information from Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia>

World Fact Book statistics on Russia <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gv.html>

US Embassy in Russia <http://russia.usembassy.gov/>

Blank outline map of Russia <http://geography.about.com/library/blank/blxrussia.htm>

### **Books**

*Folk Music Instruments of the World*, by A. Buchner, Crown Publishers

*Mel Bay's Complete Balalaika Book*, by Bibs Ekkel, Mel Bay Publishers

*A Russian Song Book* by Michael Stillman, Miro Music Inc

*Russian Songs* by Jerry Silverman, Oak Publications

*Russian Songs* by Henry Lefkowitz, Kammen Music Co.

### **Recordings**

*Russian Carousel* and *Standing Room Only*, by the Troika Balalaikas

Osipov Balalaika Orchestra, Melodia label

*Feel Yourself Russian!* Recorded by Moscow Nights