

Balalaika group exposes audience to Russian folksongs

By Avigdor Zaromp
special writer

Most of you have heard of the balalaika, the Russian triangular instrument with strings like a guitar. For most people, the sound of this instrument, even though quite familiar, does not evoke more than a passing interest, in spite of some polite denials.

One group that has done a lot to present the balalaika to audiences here is the Balalaika Orchestra of Detroit. Its program last Saturday at Orchestra Hall was a celebration of that group's 59th anniversary.

As the list of performers and their instruments on the program suggested, what is commonly known as a balalaika is not a single, standard instrument but rather a collection of related instruments of various ranges and sizes. This makes the group into something

analogous to a string orchestra.

WHILE ONE may readily notice the majority of Russian names among the performers, most of them were raised in this country, and are therefore removed from the folklore they were trying to represent. However, the dedication to these roots is deep and sincere. Part of the repertoire was arranged by Sergio Larioff, born in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad), who had been the director of the group for 35 years prior to his death in 1966. The present director, William Goldes, proved to be a real virtuoso on the instrument. His solo was especially impressive with one of the closing numbers, a Hungarian Dance by Liszt, featuring passages which are more natural for the fiddle but ably performed on the balalaika, in spite of the added challenges and awkward runs.

Many of the tunes on the program

were familiar to those exposed to Russian songs.

For most part, the selections were written by composers not universally known. One of the exceptions was the dance presented by the three Nova Dancers at the end of the first half, featuring the Dance of the Russian Sailors by Gliere, who was not credited in the program. Those dancers were among the most impressive features of the program. The group's male dancer

performed some daring acrobatics with the 'Kazachok' dance style. Far less satisfying was the singing of Bonnie Kobovec, whose voice sounded coarse and uncultivated. While I did not expect to understand the Russian words, these were equally unintelligible to one of my Russian sources, who speaks the language fluently.

However that disappointment was offset by the performance in the second portion of the program by singer Gary

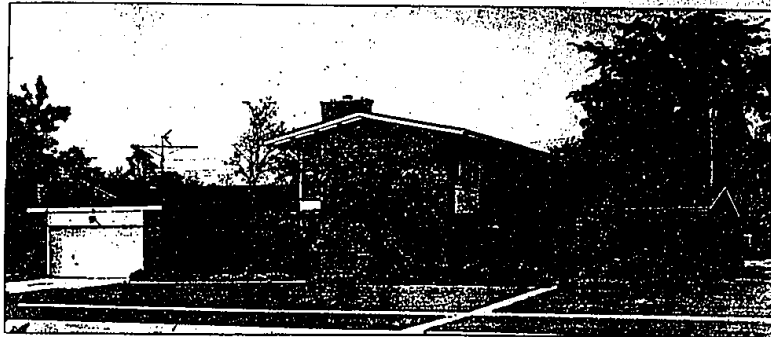
review

Nova. His songs, "Snowfall" and "Devil's Wheel" sounded genuine and authentic. His voice projected richness and wealth of expression. He obliged the extended applause with some fa-

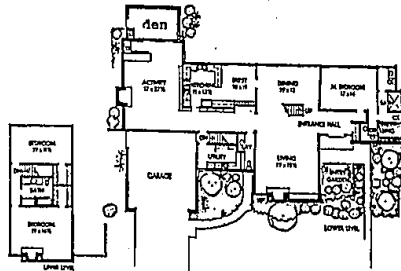
miliar tunes from "Fiddler on the Roof."

It is hoped that the Balalaika Orchestra of Detroit will be here to offer its cultural treat for many more seasons.

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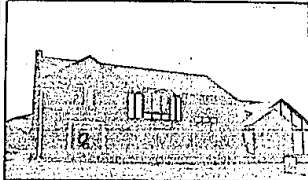
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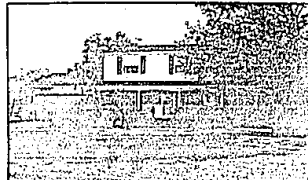
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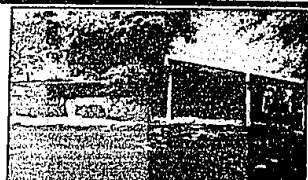
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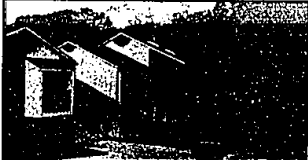
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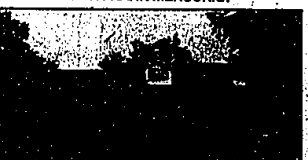
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