

Music: The International Language In Littleton

By Doug Bearce

LITTLETON – They played musical instruments. They sang. They danced. But above all, they taught us.

Last Friday evening, the Lakeland Cultural Arts Center hosted the Golden Gates and the Moscow Nights, a Russian entertainment troupe on tour in the United States from St. Petersburg.

The Moscow Nights were represented by Vitaliy Bezrodnov, who plays the Bayan accordion and also served as the group's tour coordinator, and Makar Golgish, who plays the Balalaikist. The group was originally formed under Bezrodnov's direction in Kaluga, Russia, in the late 1980s and regrouped in the United States in 1996 after completing their classical studies at a musical conservatory. Both began their musical careers at the age of eight and continued their formal educations until graduating from a conservatory - a five year program of study in itself.

In 1998, the Moscow Nights chose Cleveland, Ohio, as their base because of its varied ethnic population, including a large Russian presence. It was here that Golgish, already a prima Balalaikist at 18, joined the group. Bezrodnov praised him as a welcome addition, saying, "Makar is a considerable talent for one so young. His finesse with his instrument, as well as his charming, lilting voice, have helped make the Moscow Nights remain one of the finest Russian folk music ensembles in the

United States." If you are not familiar with the Balalaikist, it is a Russian stringed instrument somewhat like a guitar, but with a triangular body and only three strings.

Bezrodnov was no less charming. As the show's master of ceremonies, he brought much humor to the program and taught the audience more than a thing or two about Russian life, music, culture, and folklore. Said Bezrodnov, "During my studies at the conservatory, I spent considerable time traveling deep into the Russian countryside, interviewing the eldest members of each village I came upon in an effort to both preserve and resurrect pre-Revolutionary Russian culture as reflected in its music some 0 to 300 years ago." Thus, the Moscow Nights are able to bring to its audiences a unique program of music that almost became extinct.

The Golden Gates group was no less impressive. Six young ladies, between the ages of 12 and 14, in authentic Russian costumes, sang and danced together and in solo pieces that had the audience of young and old alike clapping to the music. Gently humorous songs, elaborate lyrical suites, love chants, and pulsating dance numbers displayed the Russian national character - outwardly reserved and cool, but brimming inside with vigor, vibrancy, and more than a little mischief.

Created in 1993, the Golden Gates name is symbolic. Through traditional Russian songs, the members open both their hearts and souls (gates) to knowledge (a

source of "gold"). Over the years, the group has participated in many cultural events, folk festivals, and concerts in their motherland, as well as in Europe and the United States. This was their third tour of the US. The members include some 100 boys and girls ranging in age from 5 to 15. Bezrodnev explained that funds raised during these tours are used to help pay for the tuition and other expenses of talented, but needy, students who could not otherwise afford to attend the music school. In addition, money is donated to the St. Petersburg Orphanage to pay for food, clothing, medicines and school supplies previously funded by the former Soviet Union. With that system of government gone and the new Russia struggling financially, this is one way that the children can still be cared for.

One of the best parts of the program was when Bezrodnov invited members of the audience on stage to accompany the Moscow Nights and Golden Gates with a number of authentic Russian percussion instruments while those in the auditorium clapped their hands and stomped their feet. All in all, the concert had the feel of an impromptu, almost spontaneous performance. But a glimpse by this reporter of the behind-the-scenes preparation left no doubt that these entertainers work very hard to preserve the rich traditions of a culture which has almost been lost. The result was a carefully crafted musical program which honors that past. We hope they will be able to return again and again.