

Firebird quintet dazzles

By **THERESA GOLDSTRAND**, News Review Correspondent

The Parker Performing Arts Center was a full house for the Firebird Balalaika Quintet last Friday evening. Magical, masterful and mystical, the quintet swept the audience into the ancient eastern European world through wooden "string" instruments, and the unusual accordion-like instrument, the bayan, that is popular in the Ukraine and Russia.

Formed in 1995, the modest quintet includes Iryna Orlova (domra), Anatoliy Mamalyga (bayan), Peter Rothe (prima balalaika), Tom Barnes (contra-bass balalaika) and Lynn McConnell (alto balalaika). The name of the group is adapted from the folklore of many Eastern European countries that share, a common theme about the "firebird" - a magical glowing bird from a faraway land. The story of the firebird folklore inspired many literary works, the most famous being Igor Stravinsky's ballet "The Firebird."

Firebird dazzled the crowd at once, opening the performance with a lively tune that immediately made us understand we were in the presence of greatness. The group then quietly lulled the audience with a lilting waltz called Griozny or "Dream Waltz."

Orlova, a domra virtuoso, grabbed our attention with her extraordinary skill on the round-shaped instrument whose sound can be mistaken for a mandolin. It requires muscles of steel and fingers as deft and quick as a cat to reach the highs and lows of chords on the neck of the delicate instrument. Orlova, we learned, has been playing the domra since the age of 10. She is a graduate of the Kiev Conservatory and is the Ukrainian national laureate of the All Ukrainian Folk Musician Competition held in St. Petersburg in 1979. She has toured extensively through North America, Europe and Asia.

The program ebbed and spiked with impressionistic spirited songs and old-world melodies that lifted us up, then moved us along. Firebird indulged the audience with a soulful rendition of "Lara's Theme" from the beloved movie "Dr. Zhivago" and the lively dance tune from "Zorba the Greek." I had to restrain myself from waving a hankie in the air and dancing and spinning in the aisles.

McConnell, the alto balalaika player, has recorded three albums and performed professionally with several Russian groups including the Troika Balalaikas, Tziganka, the Great American Gypsy Band and the Neva Russian Dance Ensemble. She represents the Firebird Quintet through her company, Lynn McConnell, World Artists, and is one of the founding members of the Balalaika and Domra Association of America.

Barnes is one of the founding members of the Los Angeles Balalaika Orchestra. Rothe has made several recordings and is a balalaika expert who has played for decades. Mamalyga is the principal musical arranger for Firebird. He is an honored artist of Ukraine and a laureate of the Second International Golden Accordion Competition (New York 2000).

These musicians guided our emotions from light and lively to romantic tragedy as they accompanied a mystery guest, the Ukrainian soprano Anna Belaya. Belaya, who arrived from a New York opera audition, took the performance over the top with her sultry Garboesque good looks and an equally beautiful set of vocals during the first and second halves of the show.

The Indian Wells Valley Concert Association has brought sophisticated cultural events like this to our valley since the late 1940s. It also arranges free concerts for the students in our area, in conjunction with the evening concerts.