

Name _____

Date _____

The Rise, Fall, and Revival of the Balalaika

The balalaika is a stringed musical instrument of Russian origin, recognizable by its characteristic triangular body and three strings. The balalaika was first mentioned in a document that dates back to 1688, which reports that Savka Fedorov, a citizen of the city of Arzamas, and Ivashka Fedorov, a peasant, played the balalaika while passing through the Yauza Gates. For such imprudent behavior they were flogged and exiled. It seems absurd today that this severe punishment could be doled out to anyone engaged in such an innocent occupation as playing a musical instrument. But some insight into Russian history helps explain this incident and illuminates the history of the balalaika itself.



The incident at the Yauza Gates took place soon after the death of the tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, a leader renowned for his loathing of popular Russian culture. In 1648 he issued a *ukaz*, or decree, which ordered that all musical instruments of the Russian people were to be collected and burned. All those who dared to continue playing music were to be flogged and then exiled to the periphery of the Russian state, the Ukraine.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the persecution of Russian musicians and Russian instruments had gradually subsided. By the end of the eighteenth century, the balalaika had become very popular with the public, from peasant boys who wanted to incur favor with their sweethearts, to court musicians who played it. But after this heyday, the balalaika sank into oblivion in the middle of the nineteenth century. The harmonica took its place as the nation's most beloved instrument, and the balalaika was played only by poor people without enough money to purchase a harmonica.

The balalaika might have passed into complete obscurity, except for Vasily Andreyev, a young Russian landowner who considered himself a connoisseur of the musical instruments of the Russian people. Andreyev overheard his serf, Antip, playing the balalaika, and he was fascinated. Andreyev studied the instrument and learned to play, maintaining a belief that its musical possibilities were limitless. He continued to tinker with his balalaika to improve its sound, and in 1886 he appeared onstage in St. Petersburg. His performance was a sensation, and Andreyev became a household name. Inspired by his success, Andreyev continued to improve the instrument in a range of different sizes.

But this champion of the balalaika also pursued a larger objective: he began teaching the soldiers of the St. Petersburg garrison, a barracks that housed Russian soldiers from all over the country. Each soldier took his balalaika with him when he returned home, and by the end of the twentieth century, Russia boasted some 20,000 balalaika players.

1) The primary purpose of the passage is to

- A. celebrate the extensive efforts of Vasili Andreev
- B. summarize the major turning points in Russian history
- C. provide a brief history of the balalaika

- D. explain why the balalaika is so prevalent in Russia today
- E. affirm the balalaika's place as the most important instrument in Russian musical heritage

2) As used in paragraph 1, which is the best definition of **imprudent**?

- A. unpopular
- B. hasty
- C. unwise
- D. doubtful
- E. secret

3) Based on information in the passage, it can be inferred that in addition to the balalaika, Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich also disliked

- A. Russian poetry and literature
- B. foreign art and artifacts
- C. displays of agrarian and livestock accomplishments
- D. peasants and serfs
- E. local and national athletic competitions

4) As used in paragraph 3, which is the best definition of **heyday**?

- A. a period of enjoyment
- B. current trend
- C. acclaim
- D. a period of popularity
- E. mass appeal

5) According to the passage, which of the following contributed to the balalaika's decline at various points in history?

- I. a Russian leader
- II. a ukaz
- III. the rise of the harmonica

- A. I only
- B. II only
- C. I and II only
- D. II and III only
- E. I, II, and III

6) Based on information in the passage, it can be inferred that the resurgence of the balalaika can most directly be attributed to

- A. the end of the tsarist regime in Russia
- B. the master-serf relationship in Russia
- C. a wealthy landowner's love of the instrument
- D. military interest in the instrument
- E. the instrument's availability in various sizes

7) Andreyev's most effective contribution toward making the balalaika part of Russian life again was

- A. teaching soldiers to play the instrument
- B. his name becoming a household word after his performance
- C. perfecting the instrument and making it available in various sizes
- D. his belief in its musical possibilities
- E. being a connoisseur of Russian musical instruments

8) Using your own words, explain the revival of the balalaika.
