

Introduction to Festschrift for Eduard Alekseyev

By Robin P. Harris

After living in Russia's Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) for several years, in 1998 I began researching Sakha music for graduate level intercultural studies courses at Columbia International University. During those "pre-Google" years, the inter-library loan service at the University of South Carolina was my salvation and I quickly discovered the writings of Eduard Yefimovich Alekseyev. Since virtually nothing in the scholarly arena had been written about Sakha music in English, I was grateful for the opportunity to borrow copies of his Russian language works from university libraries around the U.S. Through his large body of works, he became a "virtual mentor" to me, and I began translating particularly pertinent passages from his books in order to quote him in my papers.

A decade later, I had finished a second MA, this time in ethnomusicology, with a final project documenting English-language written resources and recordings of Sakha music, a corpus which had grown only slightly in the intervening years. Anthropological works in English and Professor Alekseyev's Russian works were still my primary resources for analytical and descriptive scholarly texts on Sakha music.

In 2007 I attended the 52nd Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Columbus, Ohio. There, Margarita Mazo, an Ohio State ethnomusicology professor and specialist in Russian folk music, told me that Professor Alekseyev had immigrated to the US and was living in Boston. She encouraged me to contact him and introduce myself, adding, "He is a wonderful person, and he will be happy to help you further your studies." My strong sense of reticence at foisting myself upon a respected scholar kept me from following through on her suggestion. It was easier to admire someone from afar than to risk rejection up close.

Over a year later, I received an email "out of the blue" from an "E. Alekseyev" and, although I recognized his name in the subject line, I thought to myself, "Alekseyev is a common name; it can't be *Eduard* Alekseyev." But it was! He was curious about me, and wanted to meet this person who was writing about Sakha music. I immediately called him and we talked on the phone for quite a while about our mutual interests and my connection to Yakutia. He invited me to visit Boston, which I did, and our friendship was born.

Although we come in many ways from different "worlds," we have common ground that has enriched and deepened our friendship. For example, in addition to our common focus on Sakha music, my decade of living in Yakutia (his birthplace) had created some interesting connections. Unknown to us at the time, our physical presence in Yakutia had overlapped with that of the Alekseyevs during 1996-97. His wife (Zoya) had even worked as a housemother in the residential music school outside Yakutsk where my daughter Katherine studied. She remembers seeing a little girl in a ponytail and hearing about "the American" studying at the school.¹



¹ Zoya Alekseyeva's interview with Katherine Harris Rick about her years at the Higher School of Music is at <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/guests13.html> (accessed Nov. 30, 2013). Photo of E. Alekseyev is used by permission.

We also discovered a spiritual connection. Although it is rare to meet scholars from Russia who self-identify as Christians, he told me about his journey to faith in his last years of living in Russia, and I had the privilege of attending church services with him in Boston. In an academy in which Christians are a distinct minority, having a mentor who understood and supported this aspect of my life was very meaningful to me.

Professor Alekseyev's mentoring has deeply impacted my life. In addition to the joy that such a friendship brings, working with him on various aspects of my dissertation project greatly enriched my understanding of the Soviet historical context, of Sakha music, and of the epic song and storytelling genre of *olonkho* in particular. Most importantly, I have been inspired in my own work by his character qualities of humility (he avoids opportunities for self-promotion), scholarly inquisitiveness (like his love for musical "field experiments"),² and loyalty (his life is currently dedicated to "giving back" to those who worked with him and provided field materials). He has modeled for me a generous, kind, and unpretentious life of scholarship.

This issue of *GIALens* celebrates the 75th anniversary of Eduard Alekseyev's birth and highlights his contribution to ethnomusicology scholarship in general, and his scholarly work connected to the Sakha epic music and story-telling tradition of *olonkho* in particular. The articles featured in this issue have been written by just a few of his many friends and colleagues, but all of them are connected in some way to his collection of field recordings which are housed in the Archive of World Music at Harvard's Loeb Music Library.

I became acquainted with two of our article writers, Anna Larionova and Vasilii Illarionov, during their visits to the U.S.³ at the invitation of Harvard University to speak on the topic of *olonkho*.⁴ Helping to host their visits, I served as driver, translator, and fellow-lecturer. Anna Larionova's article on the life and scholarship of Eduard Alekseyev, given to me after her visit, provided the impetus for this issue. The author of several books on Sakha music, Larionova was also mentored by Professor Alekseyev and has explored and developed his seminal ideas in her own works.

Vasilii Illarionov's article on transformation in the performance practice of *olonkho* comes out of his decades of documenting the lives and works of *olonkho* performers during the years of Soviet power. He is considered a key *olonkho* scholar in Yakutia, and continues to work with Alekseyev and the World Music Archive staff at Harvard to provide important metadata for Alekseyev's Fieldwork Collection there.

Co-authors Ghilyana Dordzhieva and Liza Vick have worked extensively on Harvard's Eduard Alekseyev Fieldwork Collection, and are uniquely qualified to give an overview of its contents in relation to *olonkho*. Together, this collection of articles represents just a few of the many

² Some of these experiments were described in an interview with Robin Harris and Eduard Alekseyev in May 2009, archived at his site: <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/video11.html> [beginning at 11:40], (accessed Nov. 12, 2013).

³ Sergei Vasil'ev, a specialist in the digital documentation of *olonkho*, accompanied Professor Illarionov on his 2012 trip to Harvard. Although this issue doesn't feature his writing, he played a key role in the organization of our presentations at both Harvard University and Dartmouth College, and his online portal for information on *olonkho* (<http://olonkho.info>) was a substantial help to me in my dissertation. An interview with him discussing the *olonkho* portal is available at <http://vimeo.com/user9521669/videos> (accessed Nov. 12, 2013).

⁴ There is an informational Harvard Music Library webpage connected to this event, created by Liza Vick: <http://guides.library.harvard.edu/content.php?pid=427916&sid=3518114> (accessed Nov. 21, 2013).

people who have benefited from intersecting with the life and scholarship of Professor Alekseyev.

Students in the World Arts program at GIAL are learning to understand and analyze the Sakha *olonkho* epic tradition, both the traditional solo version and its most popular derivative, *olonkho* theater. It is my great hope that this collection of articles will inspire our students (as well as other researchers) to a life of outstanding scholarship and dedication to others, as exemplified by Professor Alekseyev, and furthermore, that they will consider the epic a topic worthy of focused study, whether it be Siberian epics or those of other places and people. Happy 75th, Professor Alekseyev!

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