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Alexei Rakhmanov: “Marimbas and xylophones by Forte are in demand both in Russia and abroad”

Modern musicians, playing percussion instruments, feature many excellent marimba performers. Let’s recall the unusual sound in Mamma Mia song by ABBA. Magic sounds by this musical instrument are heard in the iconic Under My Thumb song by The Rolling Stones. The legendary Queen also used marimba on their Queen II album. At the same time this type of percussion instruments is actively used in folk and classical music all over the world. Along with Europe, the USA and Japan, marimbas are produced in Russia by Forte enterprise, headed by Alexei Rakhmanov, who answered questions by BM Moscow Foresight.

Please tell us, how did it all start?

After a summer camp trip in 1979 I decided to become a drummer. An eight-year boy at the time, I liked the sound of drum at a Young Pioneer event and decided to learn to play the instrument and asked my parents to enter me into a music school. During classes, apart from drum lessons, I also had to play a xylophone. In the USSR they used to make many music products, but unfortunately, factory-made xylophones had very poor sound. My father, Vladimir Sergeevich Rakhmanov, helped me out a lot. He made a xylophone with a good sound with his own hands by copying an imported instrument, which immediately brought him orders from musicians. I watched this from my early age, absorbed and accumulated knowledge, ultimately continuing the

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family business under the Forte brand now famous with musicians.

What does Forte do today? What does your enterprise make?

We are manufacturing keyboard percussion instruments – marimbas, xylophones, orchestra bells (glockenspiel), tubular bells. Speaking of a marimba, it is an instrument, similar to a xylophone, but with a lower range, its bass notes are much harder to tune and to make, it is larger in size and weight.

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Could you please tell us in more detail: how does a modern marimba work?

Marimba is an instrument with wooden bars, usually made from rosewood or mahogany, placed as a piano keyboard. Below each bar there is a metal or wooden resonator pipe that amplifies the sound and produces a richer tone quality. Unlike xylophone, marimba has broader bars and larger resonators. Marimbas come in different sizes - from 2-octave ones to large bass 5-octave instruments.

Marimba has unique, melodious sound and a broad range, which makes it popular for solo and collective performance. Marimba is used in various music styles, including classical, jazz and folk music. So it’s quite likely that many Russians have heard its sound many times without realizing it! For example, there is the most popular IPhone ringtone.

Playing marimba requires good coordination and training, because it is considered one of the most complex techniques. Just imagine: a musician has to hold two mallets in each hand, and sometimes four or even six mallets are used!

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Let’s remind our readers of where marimba and xylophone come from, and how did these instruments become popular?

It is usually said that the history of xylophone and marimba began in Africa, and I could agree with this, but the first properly tuned xylophone was devised 200 years ago by Mikhail Guzikov. He was born in Russia in Mogilev Governorate. He took cimbalom, a traditional Belorussian instrument (a string instrument played with sticks) and replaced strings with wooden bars. After his xylophone tour across the Russian Empire, Guzikov played several concerts in Vienna, causing a sensation. Music enthusiasts fell in love with the instrument. Starting from this time, composers began writing music with use of its colorful sound.

Industrial production of professional xylophones and marimbas started in early XX century in the USA by Leedy, Ludwig and Deagan companies. These enterprises are no more, but they were the first ones to manufacture all percussion instruments, improved xylophone design, developed production of marimbas, invented such instruments as vibraphone and tubular bells. New products by these manufacturers gave rise to a wider use of percussion instruments, making performers, composers and listeners appreciate their sound in a new way.

Just when marimba fell into the hands of skilled experts, it got an ideally tuned sound with a soft, warm and unusual tone quality, loved all over the music world.

And in Guatemala marimba became a folk instrument, it was even awarded the status of a national Guatemalan instrument.

In Ecuador they conceived a folk dance, named after the instrument, and the dance, according to its creators, expresses the unique nature of Ecuadorians and their love of freedom.

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Which concert organizations or theaters are currently interested in buying Forte products?

Today Forte has regular customers from over a thousand of educational institutions and hundreds of theaters, including the Bolshoi Theater, the Mariinsky Theatre, the Tchaikovsky Conservatory, the Operetta Theater, the Stanislavsky Theater, the New Opera Theater, the Moscow Philharmonic, the Tsvetnoy Boulevard Circus.

What are the main products of your company?

Primarily most of our products are inexpensive xylophones for music school students. They have relatively simple design, but they produce great sound with a lifetime warranty. And what matters most – they are affordable.

How does Forte promote its products?

We help organize contests all over Russia, where we showcase our products and advertise new instruments, we actively support young musicians, provide free assistance to multiple educational institutions for children, facilitate competitions across Russia, establish special awards for beginner musicians.

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It would seem that your instruments have to be tuned by experts with an ear for music?

Yes, they have to have a very good sense of pitch. But I still test all products myself. If necessary, I would reject a semi-product or send it for reworking.

Where do you get your materials?

We mostly use Russian materials, supporting Russian manufacturers. Materials for marimbas and xylophones are imported.

How many employees do you have?

Now we have about 15-16 master craftsmen. When we get an urgent order, we employ 20 people.

If that's okay to ask, what kind of people work at Forte? They must have some sort of special education?

No, I select and train craftsmen for production by myself.

Alexei, Forte has been operating since 1981 and is a major Russian maker and exporter of xylophones, bells and marimbas. What are the countries you export your products to?

Mostly our instruments are in demand in Israel, Malaysia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan. We purposefully label our products with “Sdelano v Rossii”, and not “Made in Russia”.

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