

## Features

### Anniversary Marked With the Right Note

By Lana Matafonov  
The St. Petersburg Times

The life of a doctor can be full of difficult challenges and decisions. However, when a leading doctor's orchestra in Melbourne, Australia, was given an invitation to perform in St. Petersburg to help celebrate the 25th anniversary between the two sister-cities, the decision was for once very easy and the challenge more enticing than difficult. Here was a chance to test their musical skills and perform in one of the most culturally rich cities in the world...and for them, one that happens to also be on the other side of the world.

Founded in 2002 by cardiothoracic surgeon and violist Phillip Antippa, Corpus Medicorum is an orchestra comprised of doctors, medical students and other health professionals at the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

The group arrived in St. Petersburg in June to perform twice during their stay: one free concert at the Capella Hall on June 24 and at a charity ball at the Pavlovsk Palace on June 25 to help raise

funds for children with cancer. In between rehearsals and sightseeing, they also visited local hospitals to meet with medical teams and exchange ideas.

Despite the tour finishing months ago, the memories and impressions are still vivid for Antippa as he spoke to The St. Petersburg Times from the Royal Melbourne Hospital about the group's tour experience and the impression left by both the city's rich musical culture and its struggling medical scene.

**Q: How and why did this tour come about?**

A: I was initially approached by a prominent figure in the Melbourne music scene, a Russian lady by the name of Alla Petrova. Alla had previously taken a small orchestra to St. Petersburg and approached us a few years ago about whether we would consider doing a tour to St. Petersburg.

The main impetus for this tour was really about the sister-city relationship. So with the support of Alla, along with our city mayor, the City of Melbourne and hospital board, it all just started to happen. It was also a bit of a challenge I guess, knowing that the standards were going to be high as we know that the people of St. Petersburg take their music very seriously, especially during the time we were going — in the middle of the White Nights festival.

We also wanted to represent the city. I think that Australians, and especially Melbournians, are proud of their cities and achievements. Certainly, Melbourne being named the most livable city in the world is not lost on any of us and I guess we were keen to represent and do it proud.

We were also interested in going from a medical point of view. We engaged with a local St. Petersburg charity called Advita, which raises awareness, funds and facilities for bone marrow transplants in childhood cancer and leukemia. We always have a charitable bent with our performances — taking a philanthropic part of what we do is important to us.

The opportunity to engage medically was also very interesting, especially the chance to visit some of the hospitals and clinics. We have very little contact with Russia medically, as compared to many other countries, even those where they don't speak a lot of English. They all seem to be more engaged with Western medicine than the Russians. So it was curious and interesting to see what the system was like and to see if there are ways we could build links or bridges between our hospitals, or ways to encourage trainees to come from Russia to Melbourne for fellowship programs.

**Q: Did you have any hesitations or major obstacles to overcome in organizing this trip?**

A: There was no way we could have been able to operate this tour without the help of Alla. Doing business in foreign countries can be difficult anywhere, but I think in a country where such little English is spoken, having Russian speakers is imperative.



For SPT

The Corpus Medicorum orchestra outside the Rose Garden Pavilion at the Pavlovsk Palace before the charity ball.

Alla spent many nights on the phone organizing arrangements and details, and we had amazing support from the Rimsky-Korsakov conservatorium, which helped with organizing rehearsal studios and equipment. Clearly the language barrier was the major obstacle and we had to rely heavily on Alla's

Russian speaking abilities. But in the end, everything went well. We weren't let down by anyone at any time, so congratulations to all who assisted.

**Q: How were your performances? Were they well received?**

A: The first one was held at the Capella Hall off Nevsky Prospekt and attracted a good crowd of about 500 people. The concert hall is designed in the classic St. Petersburg style, as we were constantly reminded about along with the majority of other architectural features in town by very proud Petersburgers, but this concert hall was truly delightful and when it filled with an audience, the sound inside was a musical instrument in itself. In Melbourne, we have spent many millions designing very beautiful and expensive acoustically-designed concert halls like the one that we play in at home — the Melbourne Recital Hall — but this was a true hall of great musical taste and character. It was a privilege to play in and left one of the most lasting impressions from the tour.



For SPT

Young patients at the Raisa Gorbachev Hospital for Children enjoying art therapy.

Half a dozen members from the St. Petersburg Philharmonic also came along and while I didn't get a chance to speak to them personally afterwards, several of our other members did and they said some very nice, complementary things about us. They were surprised that a bunch of doctors, let alone amateurs, could come along and impress them with the quality of our music making.

The next day we played at the charity ball at Pavlovsk. It was fun to play in a lovely, charming hall in a beautiful country setting. That was a great event but unfortunately we didn't necessarily attract the biggest and brightest of St. Petersburg's society in terms of philanthropy for donations. But in saying that, we had a good and healthy crowd who enjoyed the evening.

**Q: What surprised you about the St. Petersburg music scene?**

A: I think what was surprising for us was the realization that whilst there is so much music in St. Petersburg, with its history of great conservatories, composers, ballet and opera companies, the amateur music scene seemed to us almost completely absent. Understanding this, I guess, was in some ways a way for us to discover and learn about the Russian mentality. That is, if you are a violinist, then you play the violin professionally, or you teach and that's that, no middle ground. So that was interesting but somewhat disappointing, I must say.

In Melbourne, we have a strong amateur music scene with up to 30-odd amateur orchestras. Amateur musicians, I think, certainly know their place — we know we are not professionals and we actively support our professional orchestras at home. We are not seen as competition.

**Q: What was one of the highlights for you on the tour?**

A: Possibly the greatest treat was playing with the great Mikhail Gantvarg, who joined us for Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. That was an extraordinary treat, especially knowing that Tchaikovsky

wrote the piece for Leopold Auer, who was the director of the conservatory and the most influential teacher for the all of the violin schools in Russia, which Gantvarg was a part of. To play with someone in direct line, a descendant, was phenomenal and an honor for us.

**Q: Did you notice any similarities between the two cities?**

A: St. Petersburg is certainly one of the great cities in the world, no doubt about it. Whilst it is similar to Melbourne in terms of its population size, perhaps also with its classical or, dare I say it, Victorian influence and European architectural influence... I think that's about where the similarities stop.

**Q: What can a city like St. Petersburg offer Melbourne?**

A: I think St. Petersburg has a great deal to offer — its historic and cultural interest is extraordinary. From a concert point of view, the White Nights Festival is phenomenal. Whilst we have a lot of visiting orchestras come to Australia and our own orchestras are very busy, I think it pales in significance as to what's on offer in St. Petersburg. To have not only one but two Mariinsky theaters, plus the Mikhailovsky and two large concert halls and smaller performance halls in one city, which are all well attended is incredible. I think if you live in St. Petersburg, you wouldn't know what to do to first.

**Q: Did Russia's political climate affect the tour or influence your impression of the city?**

A: I think the political situation at the moment is unfortunate but I

think if you spend time in Russia and certainly in St. Petersburg, there is nothing like understanding the culture and how this can influence your view.

I certainly know that the news we receive in Australia is very Western, very American-centric and very biased. And while some of it is true, I know that much of the sentiment is inaccurate. Certainly from the perspective of Petersburgers, it seems they feel they are being victimized on several levels. Firstly from the news reporting we receive in the West, which may not be accurate, and secondly they are citizens in a country and their views may not necessarily be represented by their government — just like in a fully democratic society like Australia where the same thing can happen. We were certainly sensitive to those views though, but I have to say that politics was rarely discussed amongst us while we were here. Tensions were rising in Ukraine while we were here but we felt none of that tension or hostility towards us as Westerners in any shape or form.



For SPT

Surgeon and violist Phillip Antippa, I, with member of the Corpus Medicorum orchestra.

There was, however, one incident. We had a couple of lawyers traveling with us who met with some local lawyers at their university where they argued about the rules of law and other matters. This turned into heated arguments about Ukraine and I am not entirely sure if it was triggered by the fact that one of the Australian lawyers was unintentionally wearing a tie that was blue and yellow. Of course this was not deliberate, he just hadn't realized what was going on and perhaps this became a little bit of a focus for unintended angst by their hosts.

**Q: What were your visits and interactions like at the local hospitals?**

A: We had one day where the group was split to visit four different hospitals. Some went to the large children's hospital, which sounded terrific, well facilitated with all the machinery, and our doctors had an opportunity to engage with some of the children.

A few of us, including myself, went to the cancer research institute out in Pesochny, where we met with some other thoracic surgeons.

These thoracic kindred surgeons had a more aggressive approach than us in Australia — we would favor utilizing multimodality treatments, whereas our Russian colleagues showed us many cases of extended surgical procedures treated successfully in their hands.

However, I did find it disappointing that with the wealth of the city and the wealth of the Russian Federation, medicine was being left a bit behind and perhaps not nearly as well supported or funded as the other activities going on. I was told that some of the population, if they have money or influence, would actually head out of the country to Germany, Switzerland or even Israel for medical treatment, which I think is profoundly disappointing in a country like Russia.

I also offered junior staff to come to Melbourne and spend time doing fellowships with us and while this was considered at the time, I have yet to receive an acceptance.

I think some of our other members from the orchestra had similar experiences but overall found it a great opportunity to engage with the local medical community.

**Q: What are the future plans for the orchestra? Any plans to return to St. Petersburg?**

A: Our future plans include traveling to the rest of Melbourne's sister cities. We are hoping to organize a tour to Osaka, Japan, in 2016.

A return tour to St. Petersburg would definitely be on the cards as long we maintain our sister-city relationship. We had an effort by one minority lobby group in Melbourne to stop the sister-city relationship based on some of the anti-gay laws enacted in Russia last year. Thankfully that didn't go through.

I think anyone that says that there isn't a good bond between these two cities is being unjust — certainly from our point of view, a musical point of view, I think it would be a great thing to continue and remain in place. I am hopeful the people we met in St. Petersburg were

pleased we were there and that we helped in some way to make a difference, and helped maintain the strong relations between the two cities. I think the entire orchestra would be happy to visit St. Petersburg again. I personally I would love to go back tomorrow if I could.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*