



# Winds from

By Jay Coote

Photography by Vincent Begin

*When* the Russian National Orchestra (RNO) returns to Russia this February from its US concert tour, it will leave behind three young players from its woodwind section. The orchestra is not abandoning the musicians to the whims of fate, but instead launching them on their first independent chamber tour. The three RNO musicians will be joined by two colleagues from Moscow. Together, they comprise the RNO Wind Quintet.

The RNO is Moscow's finest orchestra and rivals St. Petersburg's Mariinsky (Kirov) Theater Orchestra and St. Petersburg Philharmonic as the best in all of Russia. The RNO has a considerable following in the US through its regular tours over the past decade and its many recordings. But, for the fledgling RNO Wind Quintet,

the February tour, which includes venues on the East Coast of the US and at the Bermuda Festival, is an attempt to crack the difficult nut that is the North American chamber music circuit.

"The chamber music scene is brimming with good young talent – mostly string players," said Mary Ann Allin, who is organizing the quintet's tour. "But what sets the RNO Wind Quintet apart is their flawless technique, combined with an enthusiasm for experimental music and new compositions, often their own! Immediately they are

collaborating with jazz musicians, choreographers, and music set to poetry or with narration."

There are thousands of chamber music groups in the US and competition is stiff. Margaret Lioi, CEO of Chamber Music America, a professional association of chamber ensembles, said that her organization alone has over 800 ensembles in all genres. "There are so many chamber groups," Lioi said, "it is impossible to say how many there really are. They are so fluid, exchanging and overlapping members ... And then there are groups

that come from [about 900 US] orchestras ... In the time that we are living, musical training around the world is probably at the highest level it has ever been. And every year thousands of great musicians are graduating ... in short, the level of competition is very high."

So what can set a chamber group apart, give them a leg up in the marketplace for live music?

First, Lioi said, "it is about finding opportunities wherever you are, realizing that it is as important and valuable to play in interesting local venues as in the 'top' spots like Carnegie Hall."

Second, it is about doing something new and interesting, carving out a unique niche. "If you are doing something new and different, blending different art forms and really pushing the envelope," Lioi said, "that puts you in a different category."

In this respect, the RNO Wind Quintet should have what it takes. "The Wind Quintet builds on the extraordinary musical traditions of the RNO," said Richard Walker, President of the Russian Arts Foundation, the US non-profit which supports the RNO internationally. "Yes, they are world-class musicians. But they are also the

new generation, and their passion and commitment to their art is infectious, perhaps even contagious."

The RNO Wind Quintet traces its origins to an ad hoc ensemble formed three years ago by a trio of recent Moscow Conservatory graduates: flutist Maxim Rubtsov, clarinetist Andrey Shuty and bassoonist Andrey Snegirev, who were later joined by oboist Andrey Rubtsov (no relation to Maxim) and horn player Alexey Serov.

While Shuty and Snegirev do not play with the RNO (both find work with a number of other Moscow orchestras), the orchestra's manage-

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# *the East*



ment nevertheless decided to take the Wind Quintet under its wing and allow the group to benefit from the RNO's name and financial support.

Sergei Markov, Chief Executive of the RNO, explained why the orchestra was eager to extend its brand to the young quintet: "This group impressed me with its rare combination of fine musicianship and youthful energy, of an earnest commitment to music with an open-mindedness and diversity of artistic and human interests. These young people are gifted in so many ways: all are perfect instrumentalists, but, aside from this, one is a composer, two others are skilled in folk dance, one is a perfect cook ... they glow with talent, and one can feel it ... and after all, isn't radiation of talent and energy part of what we call 'charisma'?"

The Wind Quintet has appeared with the RNO in Moscow as a solo ensemble, performing music by Mozart and by contemporary Russian composer Boris Tchaikovsky (joined by a harpist), and has presented numerous concerts, both public and private, throughout the Russian capital.

### SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

One evening in late November, the Quintet's players made their way through Moscow's first real snowfall of the winter to the RNO's Orchestrion, the converted movie theater in southern Moscow that the orchestra uses as a rehearsal hall and sometimes for concerts. There, the five musicians set about rehearsing and, when it came time for break, spoke about their music and their upcoming tour of the US and Bermuda.

In the realm of chamber music, a wind quintet that brings together flute, French horn, clarinet, oboe and bassoon has a long history and can draw from an extremely rich repertoire, including numerous arrangements of pieces written for full

orchestra and for differently configured chamber ensembles.

The RNO Wind Quintet has already explored a large part of the standard repertoire, ranging from Mozart and



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Beethoven to such 20th century composers as Arnold Schönberg, Francois Poulenc and Georgy Ligeti. But they have also broken loose to find music that is distinctly their own. And it is that which fills most of the programs they have in store for their February tour. "We want to play new music,"

said bassoonist Snegirev, at 31 the quintet's oldest member, "because we think it will attract real interest in what we are doing."

One important new direction so far has been the music of Chris Brubeck, trombonist, composer, and son of jazz great Dave Brubeck. Dave Brubeck has a long history of collaborating with the RNO, and both Brubecks toured with the RNO last year in the United States. "That's when I got to know Chris," Maxim Rubtsov said, "and he suggested we try some of his music."

Last year, Rubtsov and his colleagues included Chris Brubeck's *Crescent City Suite*, scored for wind quintet and percussion, on their first recording, which is soon to be released on the PentaTone Classics label. Their public debut of the work will take place when it is performed on their US tour. Some concerts on the tour will also feature a joint appearance with the Brubeck Brothers Quartet, with the two ensembles performing together Brubeck's, *Vignettes for Nonet*.

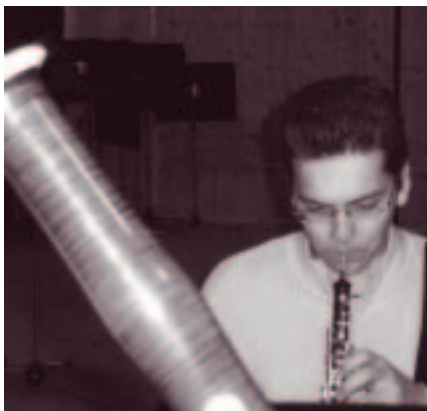
"It's a great feeling to be able to communicate halfway around the world in this manner," said Chris Brubeck about his collaboration with the Wind Quintet. "*Vignettes for Nonet* features jazz improvisation with The Brubeck Brothers Quartet, together with the RNOWQ. We're both very excited about performing this together and making a collaborative effort on the same part of the planet at the same time."

A second new direction for the quintet stems from the talents of its resident composer, oboist Andrey Rubtsov. Though only 21 and still a student at the Moscow Conservatory, Rubtsov has already produced an impressive array of music, including a Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra, which was premiered last spring by the RNO. "I grew up in a musical family," Rubtsov said, "and I'm not really sure when I began to compose. My music is traditional, not avant garde or atonal. I have no wish to break away



from the mainstream Russian school of composition.”

Rubtsov has also arranged other composers’ music for the Wind Quintet, including *Wolf Tracks*, an orchestral piece commissioned by the Russian National Orchestra from the French composer Jean-Pascal Beintus. *Wolf Tracks* shares a new RNO CD with Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*. Narrated by Sophia Loren, Bill Clinton and Mikhail Gorbachev, and conducted by Kent Nagano, the orchestra’s CD has just been nominated for a GRAMMY. The quintet will perform both wolf pieces in Bermuda, with narration by Diana Douglas (mother of actor Michael Douglas) and Sean Dill. *Wolf Tracks* is also the centerpiece of a special benefit concert planned for Vermont, to aid preservation of wolf habitats in the northeastern US. And it will be presented as part of a special RNO evening in Washington, DC, with French pianist Hélène Grimaud, at the



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residence of Russian Ambassador Yury Ushakov.

“The youth and dynamism of the Wind Quintet just seems to attract exciting new collaborations,” Allin said. “At the Bermuda Festival, local choreographer Conchita Ming seized the opportunity to create a dance for “Frivolity,” the last movement of Rubtsov’s *Three Moods*. Along with the performance at Wesleyan [in CT], we are beginning a collaboration to set poetry of the late Joseph Brodsky to music.”

As well, building on the RNO’s strong tradition of outreach and education, the quintet will offer a variety of master classes, seminars, demonstrations and rehearsals with student orchestras and chamber ensembles. “We don’t really know what they have planned for us,” Maxim Rubtsov said. “It’s all going to be a surprise.”

Once back home in Moscow, the musicians will return to their full

The musicians rehearse in Moscow. From left: Alexey Serov, Andrey Snegirev, Maxim Rubtsov, Andrey Rubtsov and Andrey Shuty.



schedule of orchestral work, and Serov and Andrey Rubtsov, for their part, will continue their studies at the Moscow Conservatory. Of course, they will also seek concerts in the capital for the Wind Quintet. The chamber music

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scene in Moscow is no less competitive than in the US, and the five young musicians are determined to carve out an important place for themselves, while breathing a bit of their life into it. As Snegirev said, they will “try to overcome the widespread notion that a wind quintet isn’t pleasant to listen to.”

Since the early 1990s, Russia has suffered enormous losses of musical

talent, lured abroad by higher pay and better working conditions. But, as now appears increasingly the case with younger musicians, the members of the RNO Wind Quintet have no desire to make their home anywhere but in Russia.

“Last year,” said Maxim Rubtsov, “I was invited by [San Francisco Symphony Music Director] Michael Tilson Thomas to join his orchestra, under an internship program with the RNO, for a festival of Russian music. While I was in the States, I thought I might as well try out for an orchestra there, and I did get a place with Tilson

Thomas’ New World Symphony, in Florida. But then I learned that Mikhail Pletnev was coming back to head the RNO again. I have tremendous respect for Pletnev as a conductor, so, in the end, I decided that I absolutely had to return to the RNO.”

To judge by what this reporter heard at rehearsal, the RNO Wind Quintet, despite its fairly brief existence, has already molded itself into a first-class chamber ensemble. Both the RNO Wind Quintet’s playing and imaginative choice of repertoire should prove a delight to those lucky enough to hear it on its February tour. **RL**

### **RNO Wind Quintet February 2004 Tour Schedule\***

February 5 • Middletown, CT  
Wesleyan University

February 7 • Guilford, CT  
Shoreline Arts Alliance  
Branford High School Auditorium  
(with The Brubeck Brothers Quartet)

February 8 • Vermont  
Wolf Tracks Benefit Concert

February 11-12 • Hamilton, Bermuda  
Bermuda Festival

\* Subject to change.  
Check [www.rno.ru](http://www.rno.ru) for latest  
information.

