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NEWSLETTER - December 1, 1994

Dear friends old and new,

It has been a long time since I sent the last newsletter and many changes have occurred since then. One of the results of these changes is that the "Thomas Dickinson, Pianist" newsletter will be sent more sporadically as attention and energy is shifted to a new non-profit corporation called Musical Bridges, Inc. No, I haven't quit performing, but my direction has broadened, and a new newsletter about the activities and projects of Musical Bridges, Inc. will reflect this. Its first issue is included here.

Following the "Musical Bridges" tour to China and Russia in 1991--yes, it has been that long!--I spent the summer of 1992 on the faculty of the Bay View Music Festival and Summer Conservatory in northern Michigan. It was a wonderful summer of good music and good friends.

In October 1992, I embarked on another trip to Siberia, this time to stay for a school year to teach. On the way, I performed in four cities in what was then Czechoslovakia (so many changes!), including at the beautiful Smetana Hall in Prague, with the North Bohemian Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Tomas Koutnik. We played Leonard Bernstein's unusual symphony/concerto, "The Age of Anxiety" (Symphony No. 2) as part of concerts celebrating the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America. The Czech tour was the result of the hard work and kindness of Zdenek Prouza, a wonderful cellist and friend with whom I played many most satisfying concerts. Now he has returned to the Czech Republic, having had his Czech citizenship returned to him, and I miss his wonderful music and dry humor.

Chita, Russia was my final destination; it was my third visit to the city. This time, however, I was determined to stay for a while and learn more about the place and its citizens. It was an honor being the first American to live in Chita, which had been closed to the outside world from 1922 until 1988. My generous host was Sasha Sukhachev, the founder and director of Chita's first private school, who had acted as one of our interpreters during the 1991 visit. He arranged for me to teach piano and English at Chita Region's music college and university, respectively, which are located in Chita.

He also showed me the terrific hospitality for which Russians are so famous by taking me on various outings. These included a visit to a nearby village for the annual fall slaughtering of the family pig, a fascinating--and well-lubricated--all-day party. I knew I was seeing an aspect of Russian life that hasn't changed in hundreds of years. We also enjoyed a Russian *banya* or bath on a frosty November Saturday, again, a taste of old Russia. This rather complicated--if done properly!--ritual of hot steam and washing, alternating with visits to the cold outdoors, and including "gentle" beatings with a leafy fagot of birch branches, leads to physical restoration...or collapse. It was followed by some serious Russian hospitality which completes whichever course you are on!

At the music college, I had four very able students, all around twenty-years old. The students were a joy to work with; the Russian system of music education was somewhat more of a challenge. I was appalled to learn that none of my students had ever performed in public, even in informal class recitals. They, as I was told, were being trained to teach, and therefore, were not performers. I had to disagree with my department, since these students had to undergo the worst kind of performance every other month: juries before the faculty. When would they ever learn that playing for others is not, first and foremost, a test, and that it can actually be fun? These questions seemed foreign to the teachers and to my students as well.

Teaching English was easier in many ways. I was the first native English speaker to teach at the university (soon after I left, another American, John Holmes, happened upon Chita and later returned to teach) and my main job was

to talk, not a difficult task for me, as some of you know! Getting the students to talk was another matter. In class, students, even faculty in my class of English teachers, were reluctant to express themselves. I tried in vain to get any of them to talk about the great changes going on in their country, or to describe what growing up in Chita was like, and the problem was not their English, because that was generally excellent. This reticence in public, I was told, is part of "the Russian character," and my "American" ease in sharing my thoughts and talking about my background was, therefore, fascinating to them.

But this changed in the informal setting of a party in someone's home. There, among good friends, food, drink, singing and dancing, everyone was more forthcoming, especially through "anecdotes" or satirical jokes or stories, most of which it seemed, in their subtlety, were untranslatable!

Performing in Russia was limited this time around to two recitals in Chita and a television performance with Chita's Budashkin Folk Instrument Ensemble. The nine-member Ensemble was a joy to work with, and the sound of the balalaika, domras, gusli and bayan playing their repertoire, whether traditional music or the ragtime arrangements we played together, was warm, lively and inviting. One of Musical Bridges' projects is to bring them on tour to the United States.

Unfortunately, the stay in Chita was cut short. My host, struggling with running a school in the midst of 1% a day inflation, simply could not maintain responsibility for a guest. Though the university and music college tried to take over the invitation, being unaccustomed to having visiting teachers, neither institution was able to find a place for me to stay. The visit ended, sadly, after only 3½ months, in February, just at the weather was beginning to moderate. (Notice I haven't mentioned the cold until now...yes, it was...very.)

Upon returning to the U.S., I took a sabbatical from the piano after ten years of attending to nothing but, and began to pursue an old interest, composing. I, also, together with my sister, Anne Dickinson, Manager of Treasury Operations at GenRad Corporation in Concord, Massachusetts, and Deborah Smith, Director of the Newberry (South Carolina) Opera House, formed a new non-profit corporation called "Musical Bridges, Inc." which takes its name from the 1991 tour.

Musical Bridges was formed to aid with cultural exchange between the U.S. and other countries, starting with projects involving Chita and the people and institutions there with which I came in contact. It is not limited to music as you will learn in the accompanying Musical Bridges newsletter.

This summer, I composed and played the piano at my leisure. There was only one performance, a most enjoyable recital in the beautiful Museum of Fine Arts in Hagerstown, Maryland where I have played twice before, once with Zdenek Prouza. The composing efforts (which continue!) finally resulted in a tape of twelve pieces in popular idioms, which I am more than happy to offer for sale, the proceeds of which will go to support the work of Musical Bridges, Inc.

My next big project is sponsored by Musical Bridges, Inc.: a return to Chita in January 1995, to finish out the year of teaching begun two years ago.

I hope you will learn about Musical Bridges and its work, and support it with your resources, ideas and encouragement. The world may not be getting smaller, but important changes, both good and bad, seem to be happening faster and faster. I believe Musical Bridges can, in its own small way, make a difference. For, if my many travel experiences have taught me anything, they have taught me that cultural exchange brings people together. And people together learn to be good neighbors, and good neighbors make peace.

Sincerely,

Tom