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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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This week, Russia finally got it with Eurovision, sending the Buranovskiye Babushki, who dance in shoes made of birchbark, but to a disco beat.

The ladies from the Udmurtia republic, known mainly as the birthplace of the Kalashnikov assault rifle, are going to sing "Party for Everybody" in Baku. It promises to be a vintage contest, what with sizzling political tensions and sideburned crooner Englebert Humperdinck representing Britain in another spot-on decision.

Even the election protesters hushed for a moment to watch the Russian round on Wednesday. "The Buranovskiye Babushki ... We are watching," wrote the For Honest Elections Twitter feed.

And former Eurovision winner Dima Bilan and lavishly tattooed rapper Timati, both of whom lost against the babushkas in the heat, were quick to offer them a slap on the back.

"The grans are really cool. They're just incredible," Bilan wrote on Twitter, while Timati said, "Objectively, this is 100 percent the babushkas' victory. Thanks to all the fan clubs who voted.

Peace."

Bilan's producer Yana Rudkovskaya was less diplomatic, however. "In my opinion, it wasn't professional singing," she told Komsomolskaya Pravda. "I just really doubt they'll get a high place."

Moskovsky Komsomolets' showbiz expert Artur Gasparyan agreed, telling an Azeri news site, 1news.az, that "cold logic" would have backed Bilan in a duet with Yulia Volkova of fake lesbian duo Tatu. But he admitted that the babushkas "made everyone fall in love with them."

But other critics were more enthusiastic. Artemy Troitsky praised their "feel-good kitsch" to NTV, saying they were the best thing on the Russian pop scene, while pop producer Iosif Prigozhin, who has previously contested the result of a heat starring his wife and client Valeria, told KP that they deserved to win. "My inner voice told me that it should be the Buranovskiye Babushki," he said.

"This is really Russia, not some pathetic imitation of the West," critic Svyatoslav Belza told KP.

The video of their song on YouTube has already been watched more than a million times. And Russian television must be laughing with the extreme unlikelihood of any damaging cocaine or gay orgy stories ever coming out about these contestants.

A website based in the Udmurtia capital of Izhevsk, Izhlife.ru, explained what the words of their song, mainly in the Udmurt language mean.

"The grannies are singing about laying the table with food, inviting guests and children, everyone comes and then they are singing and dancing for them with all their soul. They ask everyone to dance with them."

The ages of the babushkas remain somewhat in doubt, with KP saying the eldest is 74, while Rossia-24 television said their average age is 75. It's a crucial point for Humperdinck, who will be 76 by the time the contest is held and may be grinding his sparkly white teeth at the unexpected challenge to his "oldest ever contestant" title.

Humperdinck is not exactly a household name in Russia any more, but he does have the approval of its pop king Filipp Kirkorov, who has called him his favorite singer and borrows some of his barnstorming, big-haired style.

Critic Gasparyan praised "the subtle, sophisticated English humor" of this year's choice.

Sadly this week, Armenia said it was pulling out of Eurovision, after hopes that "disco diplomacy" could allow neighboring Azerbaijan and Armenia to forget their grievances for a few hours. But no. Azerbaijan had already put backs up by refusing to issue visas to the contest for anyone who had visited disputed Nagorno-Karabakh, the worst bone of contention between the countries.

In 2009, Azerbaijan scandalously traced and questioned all the handful of people who voted for the Armenian contestant.

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