

'Marusya' Folk Singers Win Over Russian Audiences

All the performers are students or graduates of Krasnodar universities.

By [Yulia Skopich](#)

March 30, 2021



"Marusya" **Courtesy of Pavel Chelakhov**

Yasho Thierry from Côte d'Ivoire has been performing with the Russian folk music group "Marusya" for the past ten years.

Based in the southern city of Krasnodar, the group was born from a chat about musical culture between an African student at the city's university and the leader of a Russian folk ensemble, Pavel Chelakhov. There are now 25 performers in the group, which performs live around Russia, on radio and television. In 2013 they performed on Russian national Channel One's "Minute of Fame," which led to performances at the Sochi Olympics.

Thierry told The Moscow Times that audiences are surprised when they first see the singers, before being won over by the skill of the performance.

“When asked why I don’t sing songs from my homeland, I say it’s because I live in Russia,” he said.

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Thierry is one of the first members of “Marusya.” Now working as a programmer, he joined the ensemble when he was still a student. “I wanted to study abroad, and when I was choosing between Turkey and Russia, I decided on Russia.” He said performing was hard at first, since when students begin, they usually don’t speak Russian well, and there are other stylistic differences. “In my country, the dances are faster than in Russia, and the movements are very different.”

Johana Dawak came to the ensemble through a friend, which is how most members join up. “When I was studying at the preparatory department before beginning my degree work, I met a guy who had been singing in the group. He heard me sing and asked if I wanted to join ‘Marusya.’ I said yes. When I told my mother about it, she didn’t believe me. I sent her a video of our performance, but she is still amazed.”

Johana came from Cameroon to study at the Kuban State Medical University. “At home, we are given more theory in medicine, but I would like to get more practical experience. My brother has been living in Russia for a long time and he suggested I study here. I have two years left, and I haven’t decided whether to stay or go back home.”

The group sings Russian, Cossack, Ukrainian, Armenian, Georgian and Circassian songs. At the first rehearsal, the group’s founder Pavel Chelakhov reads the text and explains the meaning of every word and phrase. Then the singers study the general meaning and put accents where necessary. Next, they print the text with accents on each word and highlight the strong beat of the song's rhythm. This process usually takes several days. Then the singers work on pronunciation and artistry.

“My favorite songs are ‘Oisya, Ty oisya,’ ‘Marusya’ and ‘Valenki,’” Xaviera Fomo said. “Marusya” is the favorite of most members of the ensemble.

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Xaviera came to Russia from Cameroon. “I think emotions are the same wherever you perform, in Russia or in Cameroon. On stage, I feel like an artist.”

“The only problem,” he added, “is that the endings in Russian words are really difficult.”

Over the years “Marusya” has performed in Novosibirsk, Astana, Sochi, Yalta, Tyumen, and many other Russian cities.

Jonathan Tepe, who is from Côte d’Ivoire, told The Moscow Times that most audiences generally really like their performances.

“The audiences are thrilled by us! They can’t believe that we learned how to sing Russian songs. We almost never hear bad reviews,” Johana Dawak added.

For more information about the group, see their site [here](#).

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