

# 150 Years on, Clock Will Sing Once More

By [Galina Stolyarova](#)

November 07, 2012



The craftsman behind the clock sold lottery tickets to win the timepiece. **Alexander Belenky**

The State Hermitage Museum's legendary Johann Strasser clock, also known as "the mechanical orchestra," is to be restored by 2014 as part of the museum's 250th anniversary celebrations.

The elaborate 18th-century clock has been silent for at least 150 years.

"This clock is outstanding in so many ways: It is a fascinating example of decorative and applied art, it is a technical marvel, it is a fine musical instrument in which there are recordings of masterpieces of 18th-century classical music, and it is an artifact that has a most romantic and dramatic story behind it," said Igor Sychev, the Hermitage curator responsible for the maintenance of the exhibit.

The celebrated craftsman Johann Georg Strasser originally designed the Mechanical Orchestra for the Mikhailovsky Castle, the residence built by Tsar Paul I that already housed two of Strasser's less sophisticated clocks. It took the master eight years — from 1793 to 1801 —

to finish the technically challenging piece.

The tsar, however, never had a chance to enjoy the commission: He was murdered in the spring of 1801, before the order was complete. After the tsar's death, the master craftsman, whom the project had saddled with losses as he invested most of his fortune into making the unique item, decided to organize a lottery and make the clock the main prize. It took Strasser more than two years to sell enough tickets to make the lottery financially viable. To promote the lottery, he traveled across the country and arranged performances of "the mechanical orchestra."

The drawing was held on May 4, 1804, yet the lucky winner would not show up for almost a year. The winner, a young officer who, en route to his detachment, was staying with a Latvian widow, gave the lottery ticket to his landlady as a parting gift before the winning ticket was announced. When she discovered her luck, the widow decided not to keep the clock, and arrived in St. Petersburg in 1805 with the intention of setting up another lottery to dispose of it, but Tsar Alexander I instead agreed to buy it from her for 20,000 rubles plus a lifetime pension.

According to some sources, Alexander I also had a plan for the unlucky clock. He allegedly intended to include it among the gifts that were being sent to China with a diplomatic mission. However, the Chinese emperor refused to receive the Russian ambassadors, and the clock was instead installed in one of the halls of the Winter Palace.

The Mechanical Orchestra is shaped like a temple. It is about 4 meters high, and has a portico and paired mahogany columns embellished with gilded bronze.

The organ is driven by four weights, each weighing nearly 200 kilograms. The music is recorded on 14 removable wooden barrels, with each of them playing an eight-minute classical composition.

The original thirteen barrels contained pieces by Haydn and Mozart, including the overture from Mozart's opera "The Magic Flute." One of the pieces, composed by the then-popular Viennese pianist and composer Anton Eberl, was written especially for Strasser's "mechanical orchestra." In 1861, a 14th barrel was added, but even at that time the clock was barely functional, and it has been broken ever since.

"Like any experimental piece, and like any unique piece, the 'mechanical orchestra' has a rather long list of sensitive issues," said restorer Mikhail Guriyev, head of the department of restoration of clocks and musical instruments at the State Hermitage Museum.

"Despite its massive size and imposing looks, the Strasser clock is a very fragile creature. The coil springs that make the barrels roll can be compared with those of a steam train. The poises would often drop, destroying the mechanics, and the instrument needed to be fixed. The trick is that the instrument needs to produce a smooth, light, graceful sound, despite the rather mighty machinery that is involved in making it run."

The grand-scale restoration project is being funded by JTI tobacco company, which signed an agreement with the Hermitage in 2011. Such charitable activities are at great risk of being banned for tobacco companies in early 2013: A draft law that would ban tobacco companies

from taking part in philanthropic activities is currently awaiting review at the State Duma. If passed, the law, which has stirred a nationwide debate, would prohibit tobacco companies from donating to charities and taking part in any other philanthropic activities.

The bill's critics have branded the initiative as hypocritical: After all, the Russian state is comfortable with harvesting high tax revenues from tobacco companies, yet is willing to impose a ban on charity for them, thus ostracizing their business.

Anatoly Vereshchagin, JTI's director of charitable projects, has promised that the company will deliver on all its obligations, regardless of the outcome of the forthcoming Duma vote.

"There is still time for the State Duma to decide against the law; however, if the ban does get introduced, we will transfer all the money required for the restoration of the clock before the law comes into force," Vereshchagin said. "All calculations of the costs have been made, and we can assure you that the money will suffice."

#### **Related articles:**

- [Kandinsky Nominees On Show at Udarnik](#)
- [Magical Storm, Talk But 'Snow' Not Quite Theater](#)
- [Schapiro: From Brando to Kennedy and MLK](#)

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/11/07/150-years-on-clock-will-sing-once-more-a19205>