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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Musorgskij Modest Petrovič

Author: Helmers Rutger

Modest Petrovič Musorgskij (Модест Петрович Мусоргский, 1839, Karevo, Pskov district – 1881, St Petersburg) was born into an ancient land-owning family. His family destined him, the younger of two sons, for a career in the prestigious Preobraženskij regiment, but in the late 1850s his life took a different turn following meetings with musical figures such as Aleksandr Borodin, Aleksandr Dargomyžskij, César Cui, and Milij Balakirev, and the art critic Vladimir Stasov. Musorgskij, who as a young child had already been a precocious piano talent, became an apprentice of Balakirev in 1857 and abandoned military service in 1858. The emancipation of the serfs effected by Alexander II in 1861 deprived the composer of the steady income from the family estate; henceforth he would earn his keep with low-ranking civil service jobs and would remain dependent on the support of his aristocratic and musical friends.

Largely self-taught, Musorgskij was a highly idiosyncratic and intellectual artist. He characterized his art as a quest “towards new shores” and as “a means of communicating with people” and drew his inspiration and themes largely from Russian and Ukrainian sources. As he developed his own voice, he could not always count on much appreciation or understanding even among his fellow-composers of Balakirev’s circle (now known as “the Five” or “the Mighty Handful”), although Vladimir Stasov, the main ideologue and advocate of the group, remained one of his staunchest supporters.

In 1868, Dargomyžskij’s opera “The Stone Guest” (begun in 1867) inspired Musorgskij’s most radical experiment in operatic realism, an almost verbatim setting of Gogol’s play “The Marriage” (1842), in which the composer tried to capture the thought and feeling of his characters through the faithful reproduction of the rhythm and stress patterns of Russian speech. Although this experiment was abandoned after the first act, it paved the way for the more monumental *Boris Godunov*, Musorgskij’s first mature and only completed opera, based on Aleksandr Puškin’s play of the same title (1831), and dealing with a dynastic crisis in the early-17th-century “Time of Troubles”. The rejection of Musorgskij’s original composition of 1868–69 by the Imperial Theatres prompted a second version, completed in 1872 and premiered (with substantial cuts) in 1874. In this latter version, the focus was shifted away from Tsar Boris’s personal demise by the addition of not only a relatively conventional scene of love and intrigue, but also a concluding scene with a rioting crowd (taken from the historian Mykola Kostomarov rather than from Puškin or his source, Nikolaj Karamzin), which introduced “the people” as a force in history, albeit it not a very reassuring light.

No such role was played by the lower classes in Musorgskij’s next operatic project, *Hovanščina* (begun in 1872), based on various historical sources and addressing another pivotal period in Russian history: the rise of Peter the Great and the religious schism between official Orthodoxy and the Old Believers. During these same years, Musorgskij also worked on the opera “The fair at Soročincy” (begun in 1874), a Gogol comedy set in Ukraine. In both these operas, his former manner of realistic speech-song had been largely replaced by more conventional lyricism and folk song style.

Musorgskij completed neither of these two projects. His final years were increasingly clouded by

alcoholism, and in 1881 he died solitary, impoverished and without permanent residence. His public reputation as a composer was largely founded on the success of *Boris Godunov* and a number of his songs. It was left to others, most notably Rimskij-Korsakov, to complete, edit, and publish much of his musical legacy, including such now famous pieces such as “Night on the Bare Mountain” (first version 1867-68) and “Pictures at an Exhibition” (1874). Without institutional affiliations or musical pupils, and having never left the Russian Empire himself, Mussorgskij’s influence during his own lifetime was limited. It was only after his death that his works came to occupy a central place in the canon of Russian music; his international renown developed after a production of *Boris Godunov* in Paris in 1908.

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