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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Rimskij-Korsakov Nikolaj Andreevič

Author: Helmers Rutger

Nikolaj Andreevič Rimskij-Korsakov (b. 1844 Tihvin; d. 1908, Ljubensk), turned to music after meeting the pianist and composer Milij Balakirev in 1861. He abandoned his naval cadet training and joined the circle led by Balakirev and the art critic Vladimir Stasov, which would later be known as the *Mogučaja kučka* or “The Mighty Handful”, Russia’s most prominent advocates of a distinctly national school of music.

Rimskij-Korsakov’s early compositions have much in common with those of the fellow composers of the circle. His *Overture on Three Russian Themes* (1866) was clearly modelled on a similar work by Balakirev, as was the *Fantasia on Serbian Themes* composed for the occasion of the Slavic Congress of 1867. The historical opera *The Maid of Pskov* (1872), set in the times of Ivan the Terrible, is closely related to *Boris Godunov* by Musorgskij, the other junior member of the circle, with whom Rimskij-Korsakov temporarily shared quarters while they were composing their respective operas.

In 1871, Rimskij-Korsakov accepted a post at the St Petersburg Conservatory, the very institution which Stasov and Balakirev had fiercely opposed in the preceding years, when it was still led by its founder Anton Rubinstein. Sensing that the informal training he had received under Balakirev’s tutelage did not suffice in his new capacity, the young composer undertook a systematic attempt to re-educate himself, particularly in the fields of counterpoint, voice-leading, and instrumentation. Rimskij-Korsakov’s technical abilities and professionalism would eventually make him not only the most productive but also, in his own time, the most influential member of the “Mighty Handful”.

In the mid-1880s Rimskij-Korsakov joined a new artistic circle around the wealthy timber merchant Mitrofan Beljaev, and in which he would soon occupy a central position. Unlike the Balakirev circle, this new group clearly represented the capital’s musical establishment. The Conservatory’s most talented pupils routinely joined the gatherings organized by Beljaev, and a number of its members trained by Rimskij-Korsakov, such as Anatolij Ljadov, Aleksandr Glazunov, and Nikolaj Sokolov, also held positions at the Conservatory. Together with these pupils in the Conservatory staff, Rimskij-Korsakov raised practically an entire generation of Russian composers, as well as several composers who became leading figures in other national schools, such as the Latvians Jāzeps Vītols and Emilis Melngailis, the Estonians Rudolf Tobias and Artur Kapp, the Georgian Meliton Balančivadze, and the Armenian Aleksandr Spendiarian.

Rimskij-Korsakov made a formative contribution to what has become known as the “Russian style”, both through his own compositions and by advocating the work of fellow-composers. Together with Balakirev he made the first critical edition of Glinka’s operas, and he helped to complete the unfinished scores of Aleksandr Dargomyžskij’s *The Stone Guest*, Musorgskij’s *Hovanščina*, and Borodin’s *Prince Igor*. Controversially, he also revised Musorgskij’s *Boris Godunov*.

In his own compositions, Rimskij-Korsakov probably did more than any of his contemporaries to integrate folk music or a folk-song inspired style into Russian art music. He himself edited two collections of folk songs, *Sbornik 100 russskih narodnyh pesen* (1877), and *40 narodnyh pesen*

(1882). As they were not based on fieldwork, these collections, like Balakirev's of 1866, present the melodies with invented, quasi-folk-like harmonizations. Rimskij-Korsakov introduced seasonal songs, *horovody* (ceremonial circle dances), and *byliny* (epic songs) into his own compositions, particularly his operas. Inspired by the work of folklorist Aleksandr Afanas'ev, particularly his 1866-69 study *The Slavs' Poetic Outlook on Nature*, Rimskij-Korsakov became fascinated by pagan beliefs and rituals, which play a prominent part in his dramatic output. These various aspects of folklore are reflected in the majority of his operas, including the two based on Nikolaj Gogol's Ukrainian stories, "May Night" (1880) and "Christmas Eve" (1895); the works based on Russian fairytales, such as "The Snow Maiden" (1882, with sets and costumes designed in traditional peasant style by Viktor Vasnetsov) or "The Tale of Tsar Saltan" (1901); and those works generally categorized as "epic", such as the opera-ballet *Mlada* (1892), *Sadko* (1897), and "The Legend of the Invisible City Kitež and the Maiden Fevronija" (1907).

Although his oeuvre is inseparably associated with the notion of a national school, the composer himself lost faith in the myths of musical nationalism in his later career, and went some way to demystify Russian music. To his young friend Vasilij Jastrebcsev, he denied that he owed his style to any profound study of folk music, and claimed that he merely had the talent to "remember and assimilate what was most typical in the melodies". In an interview held in 1900, Rimskij-Korsakov claimed that there was no such thing as a "distinctively «Russian music»", and described how one could arrive at a national sound merely "by removing from the common language of music those devices which are inappropriate to a Russian style". The composer's rebellion against the nationalist ideology was manifested most conspicuously in his operas *Servilia* (1902) and *Pan Voevoda* (1904), set in ancient Rome and early-modern Poland, for which the composer drew on the respective styles of Italian opera and Chopin, which would have been off-limits in the days of the *Mighty Handful*. With these two operas, Rimskij-Korsakov implied that a skilled composer should be able to appropriate any style he liked; however, these unsuccessful and soon-forgotten works have done little to prove that point.

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