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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Glinka Mihail Ivanovič

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Mihail Ivanovič Glinka (b. 1804 Novospasskoe; d. 1857 Berlin) traditionally considered the founder of Russian national music, began his musical career in the 1820s as a typical gentleman amateur and St. Petersburg socialite who, while holding a undemanding civil service position, composed elegant piano pieces, songs, and salon-oriented chamber music. In 1830 Glinka travelled to Italy, ostensibly for reasons of health, but with the additional purpose of improving his musical talent. During his three-year stay, he became intimately acquainted with Italian opera. Glinka returned home in the spring of 1834 by way of Berlin, where he studied with the music theorist Siegfried Dehn.

Towards the end of his Italian sojourn, as Glinka later wrote in his memoirs, he realized he could not “sincerely become an Italian” and decided to write “in a Russian manner”. This intention bore fruit in *A Life for the Tsar* (1836), an opera about the folk hero Ivan Susanin who allegedly saved Michael I, the first of the Romanov tsars, from a band of Polish invaders. The subject was suggested to Glinka by court poet Vasilij Žukovskij, who provided Glinka with the words for the final chorus and introduced him to the man who would write most of the libretto, the Baltic German baron Georg von Rosen (Egor Fëdorovič Rozen). The libretto as a whole, and Žukovskij’s concluding hymn in particular, perfectly encapsulated the doctrine of Official Nationality as it had been propagated under Nicholas I, and revolving around the triad of “Orthodoxy, [Imperial] autocracy and [Russian] nationality”. The opera was enthusiastically received by court, intelligentsia, and general audience alike, and would become the traditional season-opener of the Imperial Theatres. *A life for the Tsar* did not necessarily stand out from its Russian predecessors and contemporaries because of its often-cited folk stylizations or its use of the romance (a popular drawing-room genre recognized by Glinka’s contemporaries as “Russian”), but the fact that these styles were integrated with great consistency into an opera that could stand comparison with Italian or French works in terms of seriousness and ambition, caused contemporaries to hail it as a new beginning for national music.

Glinka’s second opera *Ruslan and Ljudmila* (1842), a rather serious Romantic adaptation of Aleksandr Puškin’s light-hearted mock epic, confounded most expectations. It was less overtly patriotic than its predecessor, and its music was less easily accessible or recognizable as “Russian”. The subject, however (which provided the composer with an excellent canvas for displaying his virtuosity), allowed for experiments with musical colours: from the legendary Russian bard Bajan to the magical and oriental music of the evil wizard Černomor. The innovative score would be embraced as a model by younger composers — most notably Nikolaj Rimskij-Korsakov — but in its own time was considered a disappointment. When government taste shifted towards Italian opera, Glinka saw his operatic ambitions shattered.

As with most Romantic composers, native couleur locale was only one tonality on a palette also involving other, more exotic nationalities. Between 1845 and 1847, Glinka's Spanish travels and his encounter with local folk music, resulted in his *Capriccio brillante on the Jota aragonesa* (1845) and what was eventually dubbed *Souvenir d'une nuit d'été à Madrid* (1848/1851), also known as the First and Second Spanish Overtures. These works furnished him with the experience for the more

ambitious orchestral fantasy *Kamarinskaja* (1848), which combined a Russian wedding song and dance tune in a highly imaginative form.

In his final years, Glinka sought to combine Renaissance polyphony with Russian folk song for a new type of Russian church music, and in order to obtain the necessary knowledge of modal polyphony, he returned to his teacher Dehn in Berlin in 1856. These studies remained without any substantial results (Glinka died in Berlin the year after his arrival), but the idea itself was occasionally taken up by later composers.

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