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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Čaikovskij Pëtr Il'ič

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Pëtr Il'ič Čajkovskij (b. 1840 Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia; d. 1893, St Petersburg), was among the first to graduate from the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1865 and became the first truly professional and arguably the most successful Russian composer of the 19th century. Although he was no ardent advocate of nationalism in music, and consequently he was not at the forefront of the development of a distinctive Russian manner of composition, it would be overly simplistic to view Čajkovskij simply as a “cosmopolitan” composer as opposed to the “nationalists” of the “Mighty Handful”. Čajkovskij was among the 19th-century composers who employed the most folk melodies in his compositions, second only to Rimskij-Korsakov. Famous instances of the use folk song are the finale of the Fourth Symphony (1878), the slow movement of the First String Quartet (1871), and, most conspicuously, the Second Symphony (1873), nicknamed “Little Russian” for the Ukrainian folk songs used in three of the four movements; this was the closest he ever came to the aesthetics of the “Mighty Handful”.

In the field of opera, Čajkovskij's most important contribution to national art is probably that he set important works of national literature to music, most famously Puškin's *Evgenij Onegin* (1881) and “The Queen of Spades” (1890). His only comic opera, and also the most folksy one, *Vakula the Smith* (1876), later reworked as *Čerevički* (1887), was based on one of Gogol's Ukrainian stories. Čajkovskij composed two operas on national historical themes: *The Opričnik* (1874), named after Ivan the Terrible's personal agents, and *Mazepa* (1883, also based on Puškin), about the revolt in Ukraine at the time of the battle of Poltava in the early 18th century. Both operas, however, emphasize personal intrigue and individual emotion rather than collective sentiment.

Some more obvious contributions to national culture were considered of lesser artistic importance by composer himself: a collection of “50 Russian Folksongs” (1868-69) arranged for piano four-hands, commissioned by his publisher Jurgenson, the melodies of which were mostly drawn from existing collections by Konstantin Vil'boa (1860) and Milij Balakirev (1866). He also composed various occasional works with a patriotic purport, such as the “Slavic March” (1876), composed for a charity concert organized to support the Serbs in the war against Turkey; the 1812 “Festival Overture” (1882), depicting the Russian victory over the French forces of Napoleon; the cantata *Moscow; and a march* (1883) composed for the coronation of Tsar Alexander III.

During the reign of Alexander III, Čajkovskij became a court favourite and enjoyed considerable privileges. Given his popularity and the esteem accorded to him, the role of his music in the consolidation and spread of the notion of a “Russian national school” should not be underestimated. He was adopted as a model by many later composers and his personal style became national property, regardless of whether it drew on folk music or not.

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