Borodin Aleksandr Porfir'evi

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Borodin Aleksandr Porfir'evič

Author: Helmers Rutger

Aleksandr Porfir'evič Borodin (1833, St Petersburg – 1887, St Petersburg), born as the illegitimate son of a Georgian prince and his Russian mistress, combined a career in chemistry with an even more successful calling for musical composition. After completing his doctoral thesis in 1858 and an extended research leave in Heidelberg and Paris, Borodin became a professor at the St Petersburg Medical-Surgical Academy in 1862 and would remain associated with this institute for the rest of his life. In the same year 1862, Borodin met the pianist-composer Milij Balakirev and joined the circle now known as "The Mighty Handful". Although his academic work remained his primary occupation, Borodin managed to compose a significant oeuvre that included symphonic works, chamber music, songs, piano pieces, and the unfinished opera *Prince Igor*.

A number of Borodin’s most significant works have been described as "epic" in style and have been associated with the figure of the bogatyr’, the heroic medieval warriors of Kievan Rus’. Borodin’s Second Symphony (1876), nicknamed *Bogatyrskaja*, has become one of the mainstays of the Russian national repertoire. The same is true of his opera *Prince Igor*, based on the medieval epic *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (“The Tale of Igor’s Campaign”), about that hero’s unsuccessful campaign against the nomadic Polovtsians. After Vladimir Stasov had drafted a scenario in 1869, Borodin worked intermittently on this opera throughout his life; the score, left unfinished at his death, was posthumously completed and orchestrated by Nikolaj Rimskij-Korsakov and Aleksandr Glazunov. Borodin was also able to treat ancient national subject matter in a lighter vein, witness his opera-farce *Bogatyri* (1867), a commission which, for lack of time, became a pastiche of the popular operatic music of the day, and parodied such attempts at national opera as Aleksej Verstovskij’s “Askold’s Tomb” (1835) and Aleksandr Serov’s *Rogneda* (1865).

A second recognized speciality of Borodin was his Orientalism. It is not hard to draw parallels between the clichés employed for the Polovtsians in *Prince Igor* and the contemporary Russian expansion in the Caucasus and Central Asia; such political and ideological implications are even more obvious in the symphonic sketch “In Central Asia” (1880), a work commissioned for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the reign of Alexander II (though never performed on that occasion). As a form of self-definition, however, Borodin’s representation of the Orient transcends simple dichotomies: as well as constituting an exotic-colonial Other, Asia and the Orient were also frequently invoked as part of Russia’s imperial identity as opposed to Western Europe.

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Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, David; 2010. *Russian orientalism: Asia in the Russian mind from Peter the Great to the great emigration* (New Haven: Yale UP)


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