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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

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 Miliĭ 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 *bogatyř*, the heroic medieval warriors of Kievan Rus'. Borodin's Second Symphony (1876), nicknamed *Bogatyřskaja*, 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 *Bogatyři* (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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