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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

National-classical music : Russian

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Throughout the eighteenth century, and for a considerable part of the nineteenth, secular art music in Russia was a Western import, practiced predominantly by foreign musicians. It acquired a permanent presence when Empress Anna installed an Italian opera troupe at her court in 1735, and eventually talented Russian subjects (Vasilij Paškevič, Maksim Berezovskij, Dmitrij Bortnjanskij, Jevstignej Fomin) would receive tuition in musical composition from these court musicians or were sent to Italy for training. Meanwhile the interest in local folk music came early in the wake of Herder, as is witnessed by early collections as that of Nikolaj L'vov and Ivan Prač (1790). This interest found its way into the vernacular music theatre in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (comic opera, vaudeville or *Singspiel*) in which the lower-class characters were traditionally represented by folksy music, and in which the inclusion and imitation of Russian folk music contributed a distinctive native element. During the early decades of the 19th century, it was fashionable to compose so-called "Russian songs", pseudo-folksongs for the drawing room, and this genre was cultivated by popular romance composers such as Aleksandr Aljab'jev (1787–1851) and Aleksandr Varlamov (1801–1848). Composers also began to address more serious subjects in stage works on national themes, as in Ivan Susanin (1815) by the Venetian-born Catterino Cavos. Romanticism made its appearance in Russian music particularly through the works of Aleksej Verstovskij (1799–1862), whose main model for serious and magical opera was Carl Maria von Weber.

Although Verstovskij's most successful opera *Askold's Tomb* (1835) remained popular throughout the century, his name is now largely forgotten in favour of his contemporary Mihail Glinka, whose first opera *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) – on the same subject as Cavos's *Susanin* – has been canonized as Russia's first truly national opera. It appealed to the authorities because of its embodiment of the doctrine of Official Nationality, and it was embraced by the intelligentsia and fellow musicians for its exceptional musical and dramatic qualities, and for raising Russian music "to the level of tragedy", as the writer Vladimir Odoevskij (1803–1869) put it.

This singular accordance between state interests, aristocratic audiences and native musicians was not easily repeated. After Glinka's second opera *Ruslan and Ljudmila* (1842) failed to satisfy both nationalist and dramatic expectations, Nicholas I attracted several international stars to form an 1843 Italian opera troupe in St Petersburg, which replaced the Russian Opera as the most prestigious musical institution in the capital. In the ensuing decades, Russian composers tended to define themselves in opposition to this heavily-subsidized foreign competition. The only Russian operas worthy of mention in the subsequent decades are Aleksandr Dargomyžskij's *Rusalka* (1857) and Aleksandr Serov's *Judith* (1863) and *Rogneda* (1865).

With the aim of improving musical life in Russia and raising the social status of musicians in the Empire, the piano virtuoso Anton Rubinstein (1829–1894) enlisted the support of Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna and founded the Russian Musical Society (1859), which offered frequent symphonic concerts, and which paved the way for the St Petersburg Conservatory (1862). Both these institutions would also have branches in Moscow, led by Rubinstein's brother Nikolaj (1835–1881).

Regardless of the undeniable boost to Russian musical life, Rubinstein's initiatives met with fierce opposition from the upcoming generation of dilettante and self-taught composers, whose opportunities were threatened by the new institution. Besides Serov, the most prominent opponents of the Conservatory were the members of the "Mighty Handful" (*Mogučaja kučka* [Моручая кучка], also known as "The Five" or the "New Russian School"). This circle had formed between 1856 and 1862 around the pianist-composer Miliĭ Balakirev, and included the dilettante composers César Cui (1835–1918), Modest Musorgskij, Nikolaj Rimskij-Korsakov and Aleksandr Borodin. The main spokesmen for this group were Cui, who was active as a music critic, and the librarian Vladimir Stasov. Stasov's tireless activity as a critic, polemicist, and historian and, for the foreign audiences, Cui's influential essay *La Musique en Russie* (Paris, 1880), contributed to the canonization of Glinka, Dargomyžskij and the Mighty Handful as the authentic lineage of Russian music at the expense of Glinka's contemporaries, Serov, Rubinstein, and Pëtr Čajkovskij. Rubinstein was effectively discredited as a composer of national music, although he composed several symphonic and dramatic works on national Russian themes. Čajkovskij, who was among the first graduates of the Conservatory (1865), emerged as the most successful composer of his generation and would not be denied a place in the national canon, but critical opinion in the West has long been affected by the reproach of lacking in Russian authenticity.

Due to their divergent interests, the Balakirev circle fell apart in the early 1870s. Although Stasov and Cui continued to define the group in opposition to the Conservatory, this was already an anachronism by the time its junior members enjoyed their greatest successes: in 1871, Rimskij-Korsakov was appointed a professor at the St Petersburg Conservatory and would himself become an ardent advocate of what Stasov condemned as "textbook learning". In the mid-1880s, a new circle emerged around the timber merchant Mitrofan Beljaev, which did not include Stasov or Balakirev, and of which Rimskij-Korsakov would soon be the most prominent member. With its large overlap with conservatory personnel and the support of Beljaev's own publishing house, this circle would represent an established, institutionalized, and increasingly conservative national school of music beyond any status the Mighty Handful had ever had.

For most of the 19th century, opera was the most important genre in the definition of Russian national music. In symphonic music, Glinka's artful combination of two folksongs in *Kamarinskaja* (1848) was an important model, praised by Čajkovskij and emulated in Russian overtures by Balakirev and Rimskij-Korsakov. Some famous composers also acted as folk song collectors and editors: Balakirev compiled his own collection through field work; Rimskij-Korsakov and Čajkovskij acted as editors and harmonizers. Composers trained in the modern Western tonal system, harmony and counterpoint usually restricted themselves to the use or imitation of the tunes of folk music and made only limited use of, or indeed remained oblivious to, many other details of Russian folk performance, such as the practice of improvised heterophony, which could only be accurately reproduced after the advent of recording technology. Instead of strict emulation, one finds a tendency towards loose theorizing and cultivation of features that could distinguish Russian music from the West, as for instance in the writings of Odoevskij, who envisioned a Russian music free from "Western" chromaticism, dominant sevenths or leading tones – ideas which were never fully adopted in musical practice but were undoubtedly influential.

Russian fairytale, legend, and medieval and early-modern history furnished the majority of subjects for Russian compositions throughout the century. Russian musicians, generally continued to turn to older writers and poets for inspiration, particularly Puškin, whose work was exhaustively mined for lyrics and subjects.

The depiction of the Orient has a prominent place in the Russian repertoire; Stasov pointed

out Orientalism as of its four defining features (the others being striving for the national, independent thought, and a penchant for programme music). The prominence of the “oriental style” in Russian music is understandable given Russia’s imperial/colonial interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia, but as Stasov’s writings show, it could also be used to define Russian music vis-à-vis the West.

In the early 20th century, interest in the notion of national music waned. At the death of Balakirev in 1910, the critic Vjačeslav Karatygin even spoke of the ‘de-nationalization’ of Russian music. Yet even after the Bolshevik Revolution, Romantic nationalism had far from run its course: under Stalin, Glinka and the Mighty Handful again became obligatory models not only for Russian composers, but also for the national music of many other Soviet republics.

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