



**Dorothea Redepenning**

## Russian content in a European form

*The dialogue of cultures in music*

A look at the musical history of Saint Petersburg and the intercultural dialogue between Russian and European music.

Ideas of what is to be considered "Russian" music and how it relates to "European" music have changed considerably in the course of Russian musical history. These changes have followed the general rhythm of European cultures. In other words, Russian music as an eminent musical art can only be comprehended in its exchange with non-Russian music and its contacts with other musical cultures that have driven it towards self-determination. Without such dialogue, music, like any art, remains provincial because it is not taken notice of internationally. This was the case of Russian music before 1700 and largely of Soviet music<sup>1</sup>.

What makes music Russian, or more generally, typical of any nation, can be defined, on the one hand, on the level of the material and subject matter used: references to, or quotations from, folk music, and themes from a nation's history make the music specific to that particular nation. On the other hand, what is typical can also be defined on the level of method: if a composer decides to use elements of folklore or national history, then his work may become recognizably Russian, Italian or German; however, he shares the decision to work in this manner with every composer who wishes to create a "national" piece of music: the procedure or technique is international, or European.

### International musical languages

When Peter the Great moved to Moscow in 1703, he took the *Pridvorny khor*, the Court Chapel<sup>2</sup>, with him and made it sing at the city's founding ceremony. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, this oldest and most venerable institution of Russian music and musical education, which had traditionally specialised in church music, was put in charge of opera as well. Eminent composers taught here, and travelled throughout the country to recruit talented and mostly penniless youths for the Court Chapel<sup>3</sup>. Dmitry Bortnyansky's (1751–1825) biography is exemplary of this practice: having come to study at the Court Chapel at the age of seven, he proved so exceptionally talented that he was placed under the guidance of Baldassare Galuppi, whom Catherine II had invited to her court in 1763. She had acceded to the throne a year before, and had immediately begun to pursue a cultural policy designed to turn Saint Petersburg into a cultural centre of European rank. In the case of music this meant that Catherine summoned internationally renowned Italian composers, whose works were

already included in Saint Petersburg's repertoire, to the capital.

These composers, such as Tomaso Traetta, Giovanni Paisiello and Domenico Cimarosa, supplied the court of Saint Petersburg with their own and others' works – putting its repertoire in tune with that played at other European courts. When Galuppi returned to Venice in 1768, Catherine II did what all patrons of the arts should do: she let the 17-year-old Bortnyansky go with him. In Italy Bortnyansky completed his study of singing and composition, performed as a soloist singer and was able to produce three Italian operas of his own<sup>4</sup>. After eleven years of training he was summoned back to Saint Petersburg to work as a harpsichordist, composer and singing teacher at the court. In 1796 he was put in charge of the Court Chapel.

Maxim Berezovsky (1745–77) and Yevstigney Fomin (1761–1800), too, studied in Italy for several years<sup>5</sup>. These examples show that every court that could afford it employed Italian composers and local musicians who had been sent to Italy for training. Thus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century one could hear the same repertoire, at a comparably high level, in Venice and Naples, in London, Lisbon, Stockholm, Dresden, but also in Saint Petersburg (though hardly, at first, in Moscow)<sup>6</sup>. Ultimately the nationality of composers and performers was irrelevant as long as they mastered the international style of the time. The coronation festivities of Yelizaveta Petrovna (1709–62) – Empress Elizabeth, – in 1742 saw a production of *La Clemenza di Tito* (Tito Vespasiano) on a libretto by Pietro Metastasio, set to music by the master of the Dresden chapel Johann Adolf Hasse. This initiated the establishment of *opera seria*, which became a highlight of the Saint Petersburg court under Catherine II. This grand, prestigious type of opera, where soloist singers perform in standardised parts and shine in virtuoso three-part arias (*da capo* arias), and which are based primarily on mock antique plots coming to a dramatic head but always ending well, is associated above all with the name of Metastasio. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century he dominated all of Europe's stages.

Equally popular were the so-called *opere buffe* – in Saint Petersburg they mainly came from the pen of those Italian composers whom Catherine II had invited to work at her court. That a German ensemble playing in Saint Petersburg during the 1777/78 season began its guest performance with two *buffo* operas translated into German – *La notte critica* (Die Nacht in German) and *La buona figliuola* (Das gute Mädchen) – both based on texts by Carlo Goldoni and music by Paisiello, may have been a homage to the court's then master of the chapel; but it also shows to what extent the comic type of opera, too, was an international phenomenon.

The main focus of this German opera troupe's repertoire, however, were musical comedies by Johann Adam Hiller – a comparatively young operatic genre characterised by spoken dialogue (instead of sung recitative) and folksy storylines, following the model of the French *opéra comique*. The Russian composers employed by the court were inspired by the German musical comedies and the French *opéra comique*: Bortnyansky produced three French-language comic operas destined for the court's summer residences: *La Fête du Seigneur* (Pavlovsk 1786), *Le Faucon* (based on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, Gatchina 1786), and *Le fils rival ou la Moderne Stratonice* (Pavlovsk 1787); Yevstigney Fomin and Vassily Pashkevich (1742–97) turned Russian texts into comic operas, including several libretti written by Catherine II herself.

This panorama shows that Russian music stepped out of provinciality the moment Saint Petersburg emerged as a centre open to Western Europe and the highly educated, Enlightenment–bred Catherine II managed to fill this centre with a blossoming cultural life. In this context to be Russian meant to be up to the pan–European cultural standard of the time, i.e., in music, to speak Italian.

### The International Bases of Russian Music

Russian and, later, Soviet historians of music saw the folk song as the central basis of Russian music. Composers based in Saint Petersburg and Moscow had begun to collect folk songs in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Soviet musicology in particular equates the method of drawing on folk songs and folk music for subject matter with the blossoming of Russian music writ large – a music which, ideally, feeds on national roots but not on a dialogue of cultures<sup>7</sup>. This kind of nationally–oriented music history obscures the fact that the use of folk songs became a pan–European method in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>.

The phenomenon was started by the *Poems of Ossian*, which enthused educated Europe from the 1760s (and turned out to have been faked by their editor, James MacPherson). Johann Gottfried von Herder translated them into German in 1782 and used them as the model for his collections of folk songs<sup>9</sup> which, in turn, served as examples for Arnim and Clemens Brentano's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1805–8). In Russia Vassily Trutovsky, a singer and *gusli* player at Catherine II's court in 1776–1795, published a collection of folk songs with lyrics and notes (until then text–only collections had been the norm)<sup>10</sup>. A collection of folk songs by Nikolay Lvov and Ivan Prach appeared in 1790<sup>11</sup>. It was to become famous, going through numerous editions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and being highly popular abroad – this was where Ludwig van Beethoven took the *Thèmes russes* for his Razumovsky Quartets (Op. 59). It served as a model for later collections, though editors such as Miliy Balakirev<sup>12</sup> or Nikolay Rimsky–Korsakov<sup>13</sup> strove for greater ethnological correctness, as was the rule in their time.

From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, songs (and, later, operas) written by Russian composers increasingly use types of expression provided by folk songs: the grave sound of the *protiyazhnaya pesnya* (extended song), the fast, rhythmically accentuated dance songs, but above all the melancholic sound of farewell and wedding songs as well as so–called urban folklore and the gypsy romances popular at the time. Once again Saint Petersburg is leading the way: it is here that, after the failed Decembrist revolt of 1825, a specific attitude to life emerges that is peculiarly pervaded with melancholy, finding its expression in a thoroughly sentimental romance tone. Alexander Alyabyev's little strophic song with lyrics by Alexander Delvig provides a typical example:

Nightingale, my nightingale, rich–voiced nightingale! Where,  
where are you flying to, Where will you be singing all night?  
Nightingale, my nightingale, rich–voiced nightingale!

On the surface, the lyrics speak of unrequited love and the nightingale as an abandoned beauty's messenger; the music consciously follows the model of folk songs to be found in the collections of the time. But if we keep in mind that Delvig dedicated this poem as a farewell to his friend Alexander Pushkin when the latter was exiled to the Caucasus, and that Alyabyev too was facing exile, then the little song gains an additional dimension: the nightingale as an intermediary between the exiled and his friends, as well as a symbol of the

singer/poet who remains free and sings of freedom. The titles of numerous poems and songs testify that this is how the nightingale was understood after 1825.

The double meaning of the simple lyrics and the pleasing melody, which has a touch of melancholy thanks to the minor key and is so simple that one can immediately sing along, quickly made Delvig's and Alyabyev's *Nightingale* highly popular in Russia and turned into a "hit" in Western Europe. When Franz Liszt guest-performed in Saint Petersburg in 1842, he adapted it for the piano and published it as *Le Rossignol, air russe d'Alabiéff*.

The superior point of reference for the elegiac tone which dominates Russian *romans* (art song) in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the Russian version of the French *ennui*, such as it was introduced into Russian literature primarily by Pushkin and Lermontov. The life- and world-weary and therefore indifferent heroes of their novels (the ironically sketched Yevgeny Onegin being the prototype *lishny chelovek*) find their equivalent in a poetic persona who is mirthless and detached from the world. In Alexander Dargomyzhsky's setting, Lermontov's *I skuchno, I grustno...* becomes a through-composed lament, sometimes turning almost into a recitative. *Dargomyzhsky, I skuchno... (first bars)*

This setting of Lermontov illustrates how the Russian romance, which draws on the repertoire of folk songs in the broadest sense for its musical impulses, chooses its literary templates in contemporary poetry, which had in turn been modelled on French examples (Alphonse Lamartine, Alfred de Musset, Victor Hugo).

The premiere of Mikhail Glinka's first opera, *Zhizn' za Carya* (A Life for the Tsar), in November 1826 at Saint Petersburg's newly-opened Bolshoy Theatre, received an enthusiastic press. Vladimir Odoyevsky celebrated the work as the birth of Russian opera and Russian music, the beginning of a new era in cultural history<sup>14</sup>. Nikolay Gogol rhapsodised: "An opera based on our national themes – how marvellous that should be!"<sup>15</sup>Glinka's second opera, *Ruslan i Lyudmila*, first staged in 1842 also at Saint Petersburg's Bolshoy, was greeted somewhat less enthusiastically.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Catherine II's time, to be European and progressive had meant above all to maintain an Italian opera; in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the time of Pushkin and Lermontov, which was also the time of Nicholas I, it meant striving for a markedly nationally coloured art. The question of whether one sees this phenomenon as international and therefore, from a Russian perspective, as an opening towards the West, or whether the use of the national cultural heritage is viewed as a path which differs substantively from that of other cultures due to Russia's specific national roots, ushers in the controversy between "Westernisers" and "Slavophiles" which shaped the debates among Russian intellectuals in the 1840s.

No matter how the use of the national cultural heritage was understood it must have been clear that these texts, subjects and melodies harbour a seditious potential as soon as they are associated with anti-monarchist ideas. This became obvious during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848/9 at the latest. Daniel François Esprit Aubert's opera *La Muette de Portici*, based on the Neapolitan fishers' rebellion against Spanish rule and rich in Neapolitan melodies, coincided with such a heated atmosphere in Brussels in August that it is said to have caused the revolution in Belgium. The Russian censors thought they

could defuse the opera by renaming it *Fenella*, after the mute heroine's name. Richard Wagner, internationally regarded as a German national composer since *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*, mounted the barricades himself in 1848/9 in Dresden. Operas based on subjects from national history and using a musical language perceived as national were associated with the political upheaval of the time in the public mind. This makes it clear why, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a divergence between the endeavours of the Russian composers – who were mainly from Saint Petersburg – and the Tsarist court's opera policies.

The repertoire of the Bolshoy Theatre, but also that of other opera-playing stages, were still dominated by Italian works. Russian intellectuals such as Vladimir Odoyevsky, however, demanded a genuinely Russian opera, which didn't exist yet. Both of Glinka's operas were singular works, not enough to build a repertoire. Glinka was rated all the more highly. The following generation – most of all Saint Petersburg's Mighty Handful – even declared Glinka the "father of Russian music"<sup>16</sup>. West European composers such as Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt, who were considered the spokesmen of musical progress, concurred with this assessment<sup>17</sup>.

Glinka's operas show that he had learned a lot from his West European colleagues – the *Belcanto* from Vincenzo Bellini and Gioacchino Rossini, the eerie dramatic effects from revolution-era French operas (so-called revolutionary and salvation operas, e.g. by André Ernst Modeste Grétry and Luigi Cherubini) – and Carl Maria von Weber had shown in the *Freischütz* what needs to be done to make an opera sound "German". Where Weber used horns, forest romanticism and the folk song-like Chorus of Bridesmaids, Glinka employed solemn or fast choruses with an irregular measure, a modal musical idiom (with semitones in different places than in the usual major and minor scales), and, in *Ruslan*, oriental dances – *vostochnye tancy* – which were reaching the capital on the trail of the Tsar's policies in the Caucasus, just like Caucasian themes and words were entering Russian literature and language<sup>18</sup>.

The venue for Russian opera was the Mariinsky Theatre, which was opened solemnly in the autumn of 1860 with Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, having been built on the site of the so-called *Teatr-Tsirk* (Circus Theatre) that had burnt down in 1859. In this theatre, a Russian ensemble staged foreign works in Russian translation as well as, increasingly, operas by Russian composers. That it took some time for Russians to start composing operas was partly due to financial reasons, which once more reveal a political decision against Russian music: a decree from 1827 stipulated that a Russian singer or musician was not to earn more than 1143 roubles per year; this was also the highest fee paid for a Russian opera. For comparison, Verdi received 60 000 gold francs (20 000 roubles by another account<sup>19</sup> for his opera *La forza del destino*, which had been commissioned by Saint Petersburg's Theatre Office and was first staged there on 17 November 1862 without notable success. What matters is not the exact sum but the difference between this and the other fees.

### "Anti-Academism"

The court's disinterest in Russian music, as manifested in the low pay for Russian musicians, and the endeavours to create a Russian music publicly asserted in the 1860s by a young generation, predetermined a conflict over cultural policies. The court stuck to its view that good music had to come from Italy; the Russian composers, on the other hand, just like their West European colleagues, thought that good, up-to-date music presupposed turning to the

respective national roots. Anton Rubinstein got between the battle lines. He had been trained as a pianist and composer in Western Europe and therefore perceived the shortcomings of the Russian education system all the more keenly. He therefore pleaded emphatically for the creation of a conservatory in Russia.

He won over the grand duchess Yelena Pavlova for his project. In 1859 he founded a Russian Musical Society (*Russkoe muzykal'noe obshchestvo*) which gave regular public concert performances. The benefits were used to establish courses for students of music from 1860 onwards, spawning the first Russian conservatory, which was solemnly opened on 8 September 1862. The decisive criterion for Anton Rubinstein was that the Conservatory could award the title of "free artist" (*zvanie svobodnogo khudozhnika*): this helped musicians – instrumentalists, singers, composers – to become honourable members of society.

Around the same time a circle of young music enthusiasts formed in Saint Petersburg. The self-educated Miliy Balakirev was the group's only music specialist; all the others had engaged in military careers: Alexander Borodin was an army doctor and later made a career for himself as a chemist; Modest Mussorgsky was an officer and, after the abolition of serfdom, earned money as a clerk; César Cui, then a sea-going cadet school pupil, later became a professional musician.

The circle's intellectual spearhead, its mastermind and ideologue, was Vladimir Stasov, who had just taken up a post as a custodian at the Public Library. He was learned, polyglot, well travelled, possessed an alert and agile mind, and was driven by a vision of a Russian national music playing a leading role in the ensemble of Europe's national musical cultures. It was to be created by the circle of composers around Balakirev.

What was the conflict about? When Rubinstein, supported by the Tsarist court, inaugurated the Conservatory and – *faute de mieux* – appointed mainly foreign lecturers, he was heavily attacked by Stasov and his circle in the press. The background to this feud were the tensions between Slavophiles and Westernisers. The Conservatory was unmistakably a Western-type institution with a clear intention to build a professional Russian musical culture. In the Academy of Fine Arts, which was formally organised along similar lines but had been established for a long time, students under the leadership of Ivan Kramskoy rebelled against the selection of classical subjects for examinations; in 1863 they caused a stir by rejecting the subjects, and therefore the exams, and instead painting subjects of their own choice and exhibiting their work outside the Academy. This was the origin of the "anti-academic" travelling exhibitions (*peredvizhnye khudozhestvennye vystavki*) initiated in 1870.

Against this background it becomes clear that for Stasov and the Saint Petersburg composers, the creation of a conservatory represented an anachronism and an obstacle to the development of a national culture. As early as March 1862 they therefore established a Free Music School (*Bezplatanaya muzykal'naya shkola*); it was financed by concerts, not supported by the court and over the years established itself primarily as a singing school. The conflict between Rubinstein, the court, the Russian Musical Society and the Conservatory on the one hand, and Stasov, the "Mighty Handful" and the Free School on the other hand is typical of the Russian process of self-searching – which mainly took place in Saint Petersburg – such as it was depicted by Nikolai Chernyshevsky in his novel *Chto dela* (What Is To Be Done?, 1863).

This conflict can also be understood as a symptom of the general period of upheaval around 1860. It visibly ended in 1872, when Rimsky–Korsakov agreed to take up a professorship at the Conservatory. This laid the foundations for a Russian "school of composers" reaching well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The "Russian school's" self-finding process

In his 1882/3 essay *Our Music in the Past 25 Years*<sup>20</sup>, Vladimir Stasov programmatically outlined this "school's" characteristic features. Let me quote three passages from a series of introductory statements all of which are too categorical to be tenable:

Glinka thought he was just creating Russian opera, but he was wrong. He created all of Russian music, an entire Russian musical school, a whole new system. [...] Yes, since Glinka the Russian school exists with such distinctive traits as set it apart from other European schools<sup>21</sup>.

The Saint Petersburg composers, including Tchaikovsky and the younger generation that had graduated from the two conservatories, shared the conviction that Glinka had been the founder of a specifically Russian musical "school". In this sense Stasov was formulating a *communis opinio*. However, he does not provide proof of this uniqueness which implies the idea of a lead over other European countries; for from his perspective it would almost be scurrilous to admit that Russian composers had taken up suggestions by foreign composers.

There is another important trait that defines our school – the striving for nationality [nacional'nost']. This began with Glinka and continues until today. We find such a striving with no other European school. The historical and cultural conditions have been such with the other peoples that the folksong – this expression of immediate, unaffected popular musicality – has long since almost entirely disappeared with the majority of civilised peoples<sup>22</sup>.

This imputation makes it obvious that Russian music, according to Stasov, was at the head of the European musical avant-gardes because it was the only one to be able to resort to a living culture of folk songs. Given the works of e.g. Stanislaw Moniuszko, Bedrich Smetana, Antonín Dvorzak, Nils Gade, Filipe Pedrell or George Enescu, this is plainly false; but aside from that, the equation between "national character" and "folk song" which was later to be balefully revitalised in Socialist Realism, was already a gross and careless reduction, which could easily be demonstrated through examples of works that did not explicitly use folk songs. In order to support his assertion, Stasov is forced to reinterpret the change of paradigm which took place in European art at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the form of the turn to folk songs, as a peculiarly Russian feature. Another trait Stasov mentions is the "Eastern element":

Nowhere else in Europe does this play such an outstanding role as it does with our composers<sup>23</sup>.

Evidence is provided by references to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *alla turca* and Félicien David's symphonic poem *Le désert*. Stasov's "Eastern element" is what became known as Russian composers' trademark "orientalisms". Russian composers considered opera the noblest form of art (see table).

Considering the most significant works, we can see that, strictly speaking, Russian opera is a Saint Petersburg phenomenon<sup>24</sup>. As the table makes clear, it took a fairly long time until Russian operas could be staged: the "Mighty Handful's" first two operas, *The Maid of Pskov* and *Boris Godunov*, came out 30 years after *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. The table also shows that by 1880 at the latest, Rimsky–Korsakov had become virtually the only representative of the Saint Petersburg "school". In his eyes this implied a duty continuously to produce one opera after the other and, above all, to arrange his late colleagues' unfinished or, as he saw it, imperfectly finished works for posterity, or, later, to make plans for them to be so arranged.

In the Saint Petersburg composers' opinion, only two kinds of subjects were fit for an opera deserving to be called "Russian" and "national": great historical subject matter and eposes (*The Maid of Pskov*, *Boris Godunov*, Borodin's unfinished *Prince Igor*, Tchaikovsky's *Oprichnik and Mazepa*, and Rimsky–Korsakov's *Sadko*), or fantasy and fairy tale subjects such as were set to music mostly by Rimsky–Korsakov (*May Night*, *The Snow Maiden*).

The few operas which did not follow the model derived from Glinka – César Cui's *William Ratcliff* and Angelo, Dargomyzhsky's *Kamenny gost* (The Stone Guest) – were nevertheless declared "Russian national operas", both in the circle's self–understanding and in its public proclamations. The case for their "naturalisation" is based on compositional technique – the introduction of the through–composed recitative or *opéra dialogué*, which largely dispenses with closed forms such as arias, ensembles, and choruses. This technique was then adopted by the other Saint Petersburg composers, most distinctly Mussorgsky who closely followed Dargomyzhsky in his unfinished setting of Gogol's *Zhenit'ba* (The Marriage) but then allowed in choruses again in *Boris Godunov*<sup>25</sup>.

This type of opera, which Cui and Stasov claimed as peculiar to Russian national opera, was first realised in *Lohengrin*, the first of Richard Wagner's operas to be staged in Saint Petersburg, on 4 October 1868. At this time Dargomyzhsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky–Korsakov and Tchaikovsky were working on operas based on national subjects; none of these works were finished yet. From Wagner's point of view, *Lohengrin* represented a stage he had already left behind; from the perspective of the Russian composers this opera must have perfectly realised what they were striving for: a national and poetic subject pointing back to archaic antiquity and embodying the boldest progress in terms of technique. They were correspondingly harsh in their attacks on the work. Vladimir Odoyevsky was the only one who, as early as 1863, had come to see Wagner as a model both for the development of a national Russian school and for the struggle against Moscow's Italianised opera establishment<sup>26</sup>. That the conception of a Russian national opera after Glinka can also be read as a productive adoption of Wagner was spitefully but accurately pointed out by the Moscow critic Hermann Laroche on the occasion of the reopening of *Lohengrin* in 1873:

Nobody in Russia had so much as an idea of Wagner when Serov, with his usual quick temper, already took up arms against his [Wagners – D.R.] enemies in true Russian style. Clad in a shimmering chain mail, wielding a sword and shield, he rode out into the open field and began serving out blows left and right in total solitude, imagining he was slaying Wagner's foes. [...] When Wagner came to give concerts in Saint Petersburg and Moscow in 1863, the theatres were brimming.

A few months later the opera *Judith*, which bears distinct traces of a strong influence by Wagner, was staged at the Mariinsky Theatre and received sympathetically. Only then came the works of the "New Russian School" [...]: William Ratcliff, *The Stone Guest*, *The Maid of Pskov*, *Boris Godunov* – works which would never exist in the form in which we know them if not for Lohengrin, *Tristan and the treatise on The Art–Work of the Future*. The authors of these operas [...] copy [...] technical details of Wagner's style: his chromatic writing, his restless modulations, his unending dissonances, his instrumentation [...]. What is remarkable is that the press herald of this trend, the columnist of the *Sankt–Peterburgskie vedomosti* [César Cui – D.R.] enthusiastically welcomes every occurrence of Wagnerism in Russia, but doesn't acknowledge Wagner himself, because he finds him untalented. He is trumpeting about the new school, but he repudiates its head; he is, so to speak, preaching a beheaded, [...] a headless Wagnerism<sup>27</sup>.

That the importance of Wagner's idea of musical drama for the conception of Russian national opera is not to be underestimated can be seen from the two subjects whose settings were especially dear to Stasov: the *Lay of the Host of Igor*, the oldest surviving epos on national history, and the *byliny* about Sadko, the legendary Novgorod tradesman, sailor, singer and *gusli* player. In the *byliny* – orally preserved heroic eposes – old history, myths and elements of fairy tale blend into a unity which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was perceived as the epitome of the poetic. Since the 1860s, in a period of national revival and endeavours for national emancipation, both topics were attracting greater interest among historians and writers. Stasov was all too aware that Russian opera had to tackle these topics if it was to occupy a leading place in the context of European cultures. The breadth of the chasm between his vision of Russian national school of international rank and the reality of composing can be grasped from his correspondence. Already on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1861 he wrote to Balakirev:

It seems to me that with the *Lear* [music for the Shakespeare play – D.R.] and one or two more pieces you will forever bid farewell to general European music and will soon move on to that for which you were born: a Russian music, new, Great, unheard-of, unprecedented, even newer in its forms (and above all in its content) than that which Glinka started to general scandal. [...] You asked me about the Russian water mythology yourself. [...] Remember, I had come across the "sailor's song" [the sailors' chorus from the third act of the *Flying Dutchman* – D.R.], that conventional piece, that "common place" which every vulgar person puts into his music. [...] How much better is *Sadko*, who plays golden *gusli* in the Sea Tsar's hut and fires him up into a furious storm! This would be an equivalent to Gluck's *Orpheus*, only with a completely different subject and – Russian style<sup>28</sup>.

Balakirev never set *Sadko* – he passed the subject on to Mussorgsky, who declined as well; Rimsky–Korsakov's small symphonic poem was finished in 1867. When Rimsky–Korsakov was working on the opera in the 1890s – at a time when the idea of national opera was already obsolete – Stasov encouraged him: "Our *Sadko* is the Russian version of the Greek *Ulysses*"<sup>29</sup>. It is no accident that two references are overlapping in Stasov's mind: the mythical

figure of Sadko – a singer like Orpheus and an artful sailor like Ulysses – was especially suited to incorporate contemporary (national) art into the canon of classical works of art or even to stake out a claim for the heritage of Greek antiquity's masterworks.

It was with similar emphasis and ultimately with just as little success that Stasov promoted the *Igor* subject. He sketched a script in April 1869 and sent it to Borodin; a year before Stasov had penned a study of *The Origin of the Russian Byliny* where he places the *Lay of the Host of Igor* into the tradition of the *byliny* and praises it as a poetic document of earliest national history. The subject became more pressing for him after he had travelled to Munich in September 1869 in order to witness the premiere of *Das Rheingold*. His report for the press, while rather critical on the whole, makes it evident he clearly saw that the *Ring des Nibelungen* was going to be an *opus maximum* of paramount significance:

One day he took it into his head to take a subject such that when coupled with his, Wagner's, music, it would give rise to a great national monument of German dramatic art. So he chose the poem that many good-natured Germans have always taken for something like their own home-grown Iliad and Odyssey – and that's the Nibelungen. It was supposed that from the moment Wagner's Nibelungen were to appear the German art world would be a significant work richer, a work which in its musical aspect would be a perfect equivalent to Homer's two eposes<sup>30</sup>.

From Stasov's point of view, the premiere of *Das Rheingold* as it were inaugurated a race between the nations for the realisation of an opera, i.e. a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which had a greater claim to the heritage of Greek Antiquity than all the others. Since Borodin was not advancing on the *Prince Igor* project and even dropped it at times, Stasov beset Rimsky-Korsakov to take over the subject. The premiere of *Prince Igor* took place on 23 October 1890, in a version which Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov had compiled from Borodin's manuscripts and their own additions.

### **Saint Petersburg music as a synonym of Russian music**

Stasov's vision of a Russian national opera writ large, realised by Saint Petersburg composers, only took shape from the late 1880s onwards, at a time when, under the sign of emancipation and international solidarity, the idea of national art had long begun to shift to a kind of early cultural imperialism, and the idea of national opera had rigidified in national egomania. The premiere of the *Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth in 1876 was widely regarded as an obvious sign of this tendency. In this context thinking about music was marked by categories typical of the time, such as competition and rivalry – categories which should be alien to music. This thinking is based on the pursuit of a precedence which cannot exist in music in a measurable form. At the same time it excludes the thought that art and everything that the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw as progress in art is only made possible by a dialogue of cultures. If one acknowledges this intercultural exchange it becomes evident that the Saint Petersburg composers learned a lot from their self-designated father Glinka, whose peculiar Russian-ness was a result of intercultural dialogue, and that they also helped themselves to elements of Wagner and created something unique and distinctive out of it all.

From the point of view of cultural exchange Stasov's thesis, which became the basis for Soviet historiography of music, needs to be inverted: precisely because the Saint Petersburg composers were initially receptive to Wagner's, and also Giacomo Meyerbeer's, methods, because they dealt with them constructively and an exchange took place, there could emerge a music which is perceived as distinctively Russian both in Russia and abroad.

That it really is a case of exchange and dialogue is demonstrated by the export of the Saint Petersburg repertoire at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1906 Sergey Dyagilev, the founder of the *Mir iskusstva* (The World of Art) group and journal, organised an exhibition of Russian icons in Paris. In 1907 he arranged a series of concerts of Russian music. And in 1908 he produced *Boris Godunov* in Rimsky-Korsakov's adaptation, with Fyodor Shalyapin in the name part. The first *saison russe* in Paris followed in 1909 – a series of ballet performances set, among other, to the *Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor*. Through this export Dyagilev created the conditions for what from then on was to count as Russian music abroad and what Stasov had defined as characteristic of it in his essay on music history: the use of folklore in the broadest sense, mostly accompanied by sweeping chorus parts and exoticisms inspired by Caucasian music.

These "Russian orientalisms" lead up to Igor Stravinsky, who used them with virtuosity in his *Firebird*. The *Firebird* was first produced in 1910 during Dyagilev's second *saison russe*. In *Petrushka* (1911) and *Le sacre du printemps* (1913) the use of folklore gains a new technical and aesthetic dimension which decisively shaped 20<sup>th</sup> century music. The stylistic devices which the Saint Petersburg composers and their mastermind Stasov had seen as a realistic expression of a national musical culture were integrated into a strict *l'art pour l'art* principle by Dyagilev and Stravinsky; their Russian origin was secondary to the abstract but, through adornment and movement, quasi-eroticised forms.

The example of Saint Petersburg musical history thus makes evident two paradigm changes characteristic of all of European cultural history: first, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there appears a shift from an Italian-dominated musical self-conception oriented by a pan-European stylistic ideal, to a conception defined through national roots – roots whose diversity was valued across Europe as "voices of the people". Next, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there is a change from an aesthetic point of view which comprehends art as national and may narrow it down nationalistically, towards an aesthetics which understands such national elements as building blocks for an international *l'art pour l'art*. This was a shift the older generation (Rimsky-Korsakov, Cui, Stasov, Alexander Glazunov) was not able to follow.

Irrespectively of these considerations, virtually all of what Dyagilev exported into the West under the label of "Russian music" came from Saint Petersburg; even those stylistic devices in Tchaikovsky which are perceived as "Russian" have their roots in the musical aesthetics of Saint Petersburg. Strictly speaking, so-called Russian music is a Saint Petersburg invention.

---

<sup>1</sup> On the history of Russian music, see: Jurij Keldys (Ed.), *Istorija russkoj muzyki* [The history of Russian music], 10 Vols. Moscow, 1983–97; Mark Mühlbach, *Russische Musikgeschichte im Überblick. Ein Handbuch*. Berlin, 1994; Dorothea Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und sowjetischen Musik*. Bd. 1: Das 19. Jahrhundert, Laaber 1994; Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically. Historical and Hermeneutical Essays*. Princeton, 1997; Lucinde Braun, *Studien zur russischen Oper im späten 19. Jahrhundert*. Mainz 1999; Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music. From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*.

- Berkeley et al., 2002.
- 2 The Court Chapel was founded in 1479 in Moscow as a song school for boys and men [called "Choir of the Monarch's Singing Clerks" until 1701 – Translator's Note] and was affiliated to the sovereign's court. It remained a central institution throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century despite the creation of a Conservatory, and survived the October Revolution as *Narodnaya khorovaya akademiya* (Popular Choir Academy). In 1922 it was renamed *Gosudarstvennaya akademicheskaya kapella* (State Academic Chapel), and in 1954 was rebaptised *Leningradskaya akademicheskaya kapella im. M.I. Glinki* (Leningrad Glinka Academic Chapel). Since *Perestroika* it has been very successful in exporting Russian choir music.
  - 3 Michael Glinka, *Aufzeichnungen aus meinem Leben*, hg. v. Alfred Brockhaus. Berlin, 1961 (first Russian edition: Mikhail Glinka: *Zapiski*. Moskva, 1870).
  - 4 *Creonte*, Venezia 1776, *Alcide*, Venezia 1778, and *Quinto Fabio*, Modena 1778.
  - 5 Berezovsky was in Italy from 1765 to 1774; in 1773 he produced *Demofonte*, based on a libretto by Metastasio, in Livorno. Fomin studied in Bologna in 1782–5, and was elected a member of its Philharmonic Academy in 1785.
  - 6 The repertoire catalogue for the years 1700–99 shows impressively that only Saint Petersburg had a Russian music life of European rank. See *Istoriya russkoy muzyki*, Vol. 3, p. 375–400.
  - 7 This approach is reflected in both *Istoriya russkoy muzyki* and in most Soviet works on the history of Russian music.
  - 8 For detailed studies see: Silke Leopold, *Grönland in Mannheim: Abbé Voglers Polymelos und die Idee der "nazional-karakteristischen" Musik*, in: Annette Kreuziger-Herr (Ed.), *Das Andere. Eine Spurensuche in der Musikgeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Frankfurt/Main, 1998, p. 203–24; Dorothea Redepenning, "...unter Blumen eingesenkte Kanonen..." *Substanz und Funktion nationaler Musik im 19. Jahrhundert*, *ibidem*, p. 225–45.
  - 9 First published in 1778 and 1779, the final edition came out posthumously in 1807 under a title that became famous: *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (Voices of the People in Their Songs).
  - 10 *Sobranie russkikh prostykh pesen s notami*. Newly edited by Viktor Belyayev. Moskva, 1953.
  - 11 Nikolay L'vov, *Sobranie narodnykh russkikh pesen s ikh golosami na muzyku polozhil Ivan Prach*. Newly edited by Viktor Belyaev. Moskva, 1955.
  - 12 *Sbornik russkikh narodnykh pesen*, 1866, New edition by Yevgeny Gippius. Moskva, 1957.
  - 13 *Sbornik russkikh narodnykh pesen – 100 Chants Nationaux Russes*. Sankt-Peterburg, 1877; Moskva, 1882.
  - 14 Glinka, *Aufzeichnungen...*, p. 263.
  - 15 *Ibidem*, p. 264.
  - 16 The term "Mighty Handful" (*moguchaya kuchka*) was coined by Vladimir Stasov on the occasion of the first Slav Congress in Saint Petersburg. He was referring to the composers whose works were played during the gala concert: Glinka, Dargomyzhsky, Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov, but not the circle of Balakirev's disciples. The critic Hermann Laroche used the term in a review of César Cui's opera *William Ratcliff* in 1873 as a polemical reference to the Balakirev circle. Thereafter "Mighty Handful" became an honourable collective designation for Saint Petersburg composers.
  - 17 Hector Berlioz, *Michail Glinka. Das Leben für den Zaren. Rußlan und Ludmilla*, in: *Literarische Werke*, Bd. 9, deutsch von Gertrud Savic. Leipzig, 1903, p. 145–51.
  - 18 On adoptions of the Caucasus in Russian culture see: Natalia Iwanowa, *Der Kaukasus in der russischen Literatur*, in: Freimut Duve, Heidi Tagliavini (Eds.): *Kaukasus – Verteidigung der Zukunft*. Wien; Bozen, 2001, p. 287–98.
  - 19 A.I. Vol'f (in *Khronika Peterburgskikh teatrov, godovye obozreniya russkoy i francuzskoy dramaticheskoy sceny, operay, baleta*. 2 Vols. Sankt-Peterburg, 1887 and 1884, Vol. 2, p. 118) quotes 60 000 gold francs; Robert C. Ridenour (in *Nationalism, Modernism and Personal Rivalry in Nineteenth-Century Russian Music*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1981, p. 7) mentions 20 000 roubles. I have not found any proof of this unfortunate decree ever having been lifted.
  - 20 Vladimir Stasov, *Nasha muzyka za poslednie 25 let*, in: *Statyi o muzyke*. Ed. By Vladimir Protopopov. 5 Vols. In 6 Books. Moskva, 1974–80, Vol. 3, p. 143–97.
  - 21 *Ibid.* p. 144.
  - 22 *Ibid.* p. 148.
  - 23 *Ibid.* p. 149.
  - 24 Peter Tchaikovsky, who lived and taught in Moscow, produced his operas sometimes in Moscow and sometimes in Saint Petersburg.

- <sup>25</sup> Dargomyzhsky's *The Stone Guest* started a tradition of its own which runs through settings of Pushkin's other *Little Tragedies* – Rimsky–Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri* (Mocart i Salieri), Sergey Rakhmaninov's *A Feast in Time of Plague* (Pir vo vremya chumy) to 20<sup>th</sup> century operas such as Sergey Prokofiev's setting of Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler* (Igrok) or Dmitry Shostakovich's *The Nose* (Nos). Its traces can even be found in the so-called mono-operas of the 1960s and 70s.
- <sup>26</sup> Vladimir F. Odoyevsky, *Vagner v Moskve* [1863], in: idem, *Muzykal'no-literaturnoe nasledie*, Moskva, 1956, p. 254–7.
- <sup>27</sup> Hermann Laroche, *Rikhard Vagner i ego Loengrin*, in: *Golos* No. 61, 2/3/1873, emphasis in the original.
- <sup>28</sup> M.A. Balakirev i V.V. Stasov, *Perepiska*. 2 Vols. Ed. by A.S. Lyapunova. Moscow, 1970–1, Vol. 1, p. 122–23.
- <sup>29</sup> N.A. Rimsky–Korsakov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy, literaturnye proizvedeniya i perepiska*. 8 Vols. In 9 books, Moskva, 1955–82. Vol. 5, p. 421.
- <sup>30</sup> Vladimir Stasov, *Pis'ma iz chuzhikh kraev*, in: *Statyi o muzyke*, Vol. 2, p. 202–16. The quote is from p. 203.

---

Published 2004–09–14

Original in German

Translation by Mischa Gabowitsch

Contribution by Neprikosnovennij Zapas (NZ)

First published in [Osteuropa](#) 9–10/2003 (German version) [Neprikosnovennij Zapas](#) 30 (4/2003) (Russian version)

© Dorothea Redepenning/Neprikosnovennij Zapas (NZ)

© Eurozine