

Dorothea Redepenning

Russian Content in a European Form

The Dialogue of Cultures in Music

Ideas of what should be considered “Russian” music and how it relates to “European” music have changed considerably in the course of Russian music history – a history that is in fact a music history of St. Petersburg. These changes in turn have corresponded to the rhythm of European cultures. In other words, Russian music as an elevated form of art can only be understood through its exchanges with non-Russian music and its contacts with other musical cultures that have helped propel it towards self-determination. Without such a dialogue, music, like any art, remains provincial; beyond the framework of its own culture, it remains unnoticed internationally. This was the case of Russian music before 1700 and, for the most part, Soviet music.¹

What makes music Russian – or, generally speaking, typical of any nation – can be defined, on the one hand, by the level of material and subject matter used: References to or quotations from folk music and themes from a nation’s history make a music specific to a particular nation. On the other hand, what is typical can also be defined by the level of method. However, if a composer decides to use elements of folklore or national history, then his work

Dorothea Redepenning (1954) is Professor of Musicology at Heidelberg University.

may become recognizably Russian, Italian or German. In doing so, however, he shares the decision to work this way with every composer who wishes to create a national piece of music. The procedure or technique is thus international – or European.

International musical languages

When Peter the Great moved from Moscow to St. Petersburg in 1703, he took along the Court Chapel (*Pridvornyi khor*)² and had it sing at the ceremony marking the city's founding. In the mid-18th century, this oldest and most venerable institution of Russian music and musical education, which had traditionally specialized in church music, was put in charge of opera. Eminent composers taught there and travelled throughout the country to recruit talented youths (usually penniless) for the Court Chapel.³ The biography of Dmitrii Bortnyanskii (1751-1825) epitomizes this practice: Arriving for studies at the Court Chapel at age 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. Upon ascending the throne a year earlier, Catherine had launched a cultural policy designed to turn St. Petersburg into a cultural centre of European rank. Where music was concerned, she summoned to the capital internationally renowned Italian composers whose works already belonged to the St. Petersburg repertoire.

These composers – such as Tomaso Traetta, Giovanni Paisiello and Domenico Cimarosa – provided St. Petersburg with works of their own and their colleagues, thus bringing the Russian court's repertoire in line with those of other European courts. When Galuppi returned to Ven-

ice in 1768, Catherine did what all patrons of the arts should do: She let the 17-year-old Bortnyanskii go with him. In Italy, Bortnyanskii completed his study of singing and composition, performed as a soloist singer and was able to produce three Italian operas of his own.⁴ After eleven years of training, he was summoned back to St. Petersburg to work as a harpsichordist, composer and singing teacher at the court. In 1796, he was put in charge of the Court Chapel.

Maksim Berezovskii (1745–1777) and Evstignei Fomin (1761–1800) also studied in Italy for several years.⁵ These examples show how every court that could afford it employed both Italian composers and local musicians trained in Italy. Thus in the 18th century, one could hear the same repertoire at a comparably high level not only in Venice, Naples, London, Lisbon, Stockholm, and Dresden, but also in St. Petersburg (though hardly in Moscow at first).⁶ The nationality of composers and performers was irrelevant so long as they mastered the international style of the day.

The 1742 coronation festivities of Elizaveta Petrovna (1709–62), Empress Elizabeth, featured a production of *La Clemenza di Tito* (*Tito Vespasiano*) based on a libretto by Pietro Metastasio and set to music by Johann Adolf Hasse, the master of the Dresden chapel. This event marked the establishment of opera seria in St. Petersburg, which would become a highlight of Catherine II's court. This grand and prestigious form of opera, which presents primarily mock antique plots that come to a dramatic head but always end well, requires soloists to perform in standardized parts and shine in virtuoso three-part arias (da capo arias). It is associated above all with the name of Metastasio, who dominated Europe's stages until the end of the 18th century.

Just as popular were the *opere buffe*. In St. Petersburg, these stemmed mainly from the pens of Italian composers invited by Catherine II to work at her court. That a German ensemble playing in St. Petersburg during the 1777-78 season should have begun a guest performance with two buffo operas translated into German – *La notte critica* (German, *Die Nacht*) and *La buona figliuola* (*Das gute Mädchen*), both based on texts by Carlo Goldoni and music by Giovanni Paisiello – may have been a homage to the court's then master of the chapel, but it also shows the extent to which this comic form of opera was an international phenomenon as well.

This German opera troupe's specialty, however, were Johann Adam Hiller's musical comedies, a relatively young operatic genre characterized by spoken dialogue (instead of sung recitative) and folksy storylines, following the model of the French *opéra comique*. These German musical comedies and the French *opéra comique* inspired the Russian composers employed by the St. Petersburg court. Bortnyanskii, for example, produced three French-language comic operas for the court's summer residences: *La Fête du Seigneur* (for Pavlovsk in 1786), *Le Faucon* (based on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, for the Gatchina Palace in 1786) and *Le fils rival ou la Moderne Stratonice* (for Pavlovsk in 1787); Fomin and Vasilii Pashkevich (1742-97) turned several Russian texts into comic operas, including a few libretti written by Catherine II herself.

This panorama of works shows that Russian music moved beyond provinciality the moment St. Petersburg emerged as a centre receptive to west European influence and as soon as Catherine II, who was both highly educated and raised in the spirit of the Enlightenment, could infuse it with a flourishing cultural life. In this context, to be Russian meant to

be up to the pan-European cultural standards of the time, and in the field of music, that meant speaking Italian.

The international foundations of Russian music

Russian and Soviet music historians saw the folk song as the main foundation of Russian music. Composers in St. Petersburg and Moscow had begun collecting folk songs in the late 18th century. Soviet musicology in particular equated the method of drawing on folk songs and folk music for subject matter with the blossoming of Russian music - a music that ideally feeds on national roots but not on a dialogue of cultures.⁷ This kind of nationally oriented music history obscured the fact that the use of folk songs had become a pan-European method in the first half of the 19th century.⁸

The phenomenon was started by *The Poems of Ossian*, which enthralled educated Europe in the 1760s (and turned out to have been faked by their editor, James MacPherson). Johann Gottfried von Herder translated the poems into German in 1782 and then used them as a model for his own collections of folk songs,⁹ which in turn served as examples for Arnim and Clemens Brentano's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1805-8). In Russia, Vasilii Trutovskii, a singer and gusli player at Catherine II's court, published a collection of folk songs with lyrics and notes (until then text-only collections had been the norm).¹⁰ A collection of folk songs by Nikolai L'vov and Ivan Prach appeared in 1790¹¹ and went on to become quite famous, going through numerous editions in the 19th century and enjoying great popularity abroad. It was here, for example, that Ludwig van Beethoven took the thèmes russes for his "Razumovsky Quartets" (Op. 59). The L'vov-Prach col-

lection served as a model for later collections, although editors such as Mili Balakirev¹² or Nikolai Rimskii-Korsakov¹³ strove for greater ethnological correctness, as was the rule in their time.

From the early 19th century on, songs (and later operas) written by Russian composers increasingly drew on forms of expression provided by folk songs: the grave extended song (*protyazhnaya pesnya*); fast, rhythmically accentuated dance songs; but above all melancholic farewell and wedding songs as well as urban folklore and gypsy romances that were popular at the time. Once again, St. Petersburg led the way: Here, after the failed Decembrist Revolt of 1825, a specific attitude towards life emerged, which was strangely permeated by melancholy and found expression in a thoroughly sentimental romance tone. A strophic song by Aleksandr Alyab'ev with lyrics by Aleksandr Delvig offers a typical example:

Andante con espressione

Klavier

fp *p* *f*

So - lo - vej moj, so - lo - vej,

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 song found in contemporary collections. But if we keep in mind that Delvig dedicated this poem as a farewell to his friend Aleksandr Pushkin when the latter was exiled to the Caucasus, and that Alyab'ev too was facing exile, then this little song gains an additional dimension: the nightingale as an intermediary between the exiled person 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 suggest 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 its minor key and is so simple that one can immediately sing along, quickly made Delvig and Alyab'ev's "Nightingale" highly popular in Russia and turned it into a "hit" in western Europe. When Franz Liszt guest-performed in St. Petersburg in 1842, he adapted it for piano and published it as "Le Rossignol, air russe d'Alabieff".

The superior point of reference for the elegiac tone that dominated the Russian romances, or artistic song, in the first half of the 19th century is the Russian version of the French *ennui*, as it was introduced into Russian literature primarily by Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov. The world-weary, indifferent heroes of their novels find their equivalent in a poetic persona who is joyless and detached from the world (Pushkin's ironically sketched Evgenii Onegin being the prototype *lishnii chelovek*). In Aleksandr Dargomyzhskii's setting, Lermontov's "I skuchno, i grustno..." becomes a lament set to music, sometimes almost turning into a recitative.

Andante non troppo lento

The image shows a musical score for the first bars of Dargomyzhskii's "I skuchno, i grustno...". The score is in 6/8 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Andante non troppo lento". The vocal line begins with the lyrics "p i skuch - - no i" and continues with "grust - - no, i ne - - ko - mu ru - ku po - dat". The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand. The score is labeled "Klavier" and "Kl.".

Dargomyzhskii, "I skuchno, i grustno..." (first bars)

Lermontov's setting illustrates how the Russian romans, which draws on the Russian repertoire of folk songs in the broadest sense for its musical impulses, chose its literary templates in contemporary poetry, which was again something modelled on French examples (Alphonse Lamartine, Alfred de Musset and Victor Hugo).

Mikhail Glinka's first opera, *A Life for the Tsar* (*Zhizn' za Tsarya*), received an enthusiastic press after its premiere in November 1836 at St. Petersburg's newly-opened Bolshoi Theatre. Vladimir Odoevskii celebrated the work as the birth of Russian opera and Russian music, the beginning of a new era in cultural history.¹⁴ Writer Nikolai Gogol' rhapsodized: "An opera based on our national themes - how

marvellous that must be!”¹⁵ Glinka’s second opera, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, which was first staged in 1842 at the Bolshoi, was greeted somewhat less enthusiastically.

In the 18th century, in Catherine II’s time, to be European and progressive had meant above all to maintain an Italian opera house; in the first half of the 19th century, in Pushkin and Lermontov’s time, which was also the time of Nicholas I, it meant striving for an art markedly coloured by national themes. The question whether one sees this phenomenon as international and therefore, from a Russian perspective, as an opening towards the West, or whether the use of national cultural heritage is to be seen as a path that diverges substantively from that of other cultures due to Russia’s specific national roots ushers in the controversy between “Westernizers” and “Slavophiles”, which had been shaping debates among Russian intellectuals since the 1830s.

No matter how the use of national cultural heritage was understood, it must have been clear that these texts, subjects and melodies harboured a seditious potential as soon as they became associated with anti-monarchist ideas. This became obvious during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848-49 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 1830 that it is said to have caused the Belgian Revolution. 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 in 1848-49 in Dresden. Operas based on subjects from national history and musical language perceived as national came to be associated in the

public mind with contemporary political upheaval. This makes it clear why, in the 19th century, there was a divergence between the efforts of Russian composers –who were mainly from St. Petersburg – and the opera policies of the tsarist court.

The Bolshoi Theatre's repertoire, as well as that of other opera stages, was still dominated by Italian works at the time. However, Russian intellectuals such as Odoevskii demanded a genuinely Russian opera, which did not exist yet. Glinka's operas were the two exceptions, and that was not enough to build a repertoire. As a result, Glinka was rated all the more highly. The up-and-coming generation – most of all St. Petersburg's "Mighty Handful" – even declared Glinka the "father of Russian music".¹⁶ West European composers such as Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt, then seen as the spokesmen of musical progress, concurred with this assessment.¹⁷

Glinka's operas reveal just how much he had learned from his west European colleagues: the Belcanto opera style of Vincenzo Bellini and Gioacchino Rossini, the eerie dramatic effects from revolution-era French operas ("revolutionary" and "salvation" operas, e.g. those by André Ernst Modeste Grétry and Luigi Cherubini) and the lessons of Carl Maria von Weber's *Freischütz*, which showed what needed to be done to make an opera sound "German". Where Weber used horns, forest romanticism and the "Chorus of Bridesmaids", which was similar to a folk song, Glinka employed solemn or fast choruses in irregular measures, 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 Russian capital as the tsar's expanded into the Caucasus, just like Caucasian themes and words entered Russian literature and language at the same time.¹⁸

Allegro vivo

Klavier

f

ff

f

ff

f

ff

f

ff

Ruslan: Lezginka

The main venue for Russian opera was the Mariinskii Theatre. Built on the site of the Circus Theatre (Teatr-Tsirk), which had burnt down in 1859, the Mariinskii opened in the autumn of 1860 with a solemn ceremony featuring a performance of *A Life for the Tsar*. In this theatre, a Russian ensemble staged foreign works in Russian translation as well as operas by Russian composers. That it took time for Russians to start composing their own operas was partly due to financial considerations, the result of a political decision taken to the detriment of Russian music: An decree from 1827 stipulated that a Russian singer or musician was not to earn more than

1,143 roubles per year; this was also the highest fee paid for a Russian opera. By comparison, Verdi received 60,000 gold francs (20,000 roubles by another account¹⁹) for his opera *La forza del destino*, which had been commissioned by St. Petersburg's Theatre Office and was first staged there on 17 November 1862 without notable success. What matters here, however, is not the exact sum but the difference between Verdi's commission and the one paid Russian composers.

“Anti-academism”

The court's disinterest in Russian music and the public efforts of a young generation of composers to create a Russian music in the 1860s predetermined a conflict over cultural policy. The court stuck to its view that good music had to come from Italy; the Russian composers, however, just like their west European colleagues, thought that good, contemporary music presupposed turning to national roots. Anton Rubinstein, who had trained as a pianist and composer in western Europe and was well aware of the Russian education system's shortcomings, took up a position between the battle lines. He pleaded emphatically for the creation of a conservatory in Russia.

Rubinstein was eventually able to win over Grand Duchess Elena Pavlova for this project, and in 1859, he founded the Russian Musical Society (Russkoe muzykal'noe obshchestvo), which gave regular public concert performances. The proceeds from these benefit performances were then used to establish courses for music students starting in 1860, thus leading to the founding of the first Russian conservatory, which finally opened on 8 September 1862. The decisive criterion for Rubinstein was that the conser-

vatory be able to award the “title of free artist” (zvane svobodnogo khudozhnika). This helped musicians – instrumentalists, singers and composers alike – become respected members of society.

Around the same time, a circle of young music enthusiasts had emerged in St. Petersburg. The self-educated Mili Balakirev was the group’s only music specialist. All of the others had started their careers in the military: Aleksandr Borodin was an army doctor and later a chemist; Modest Mussorgskii was an officer and, after the abolition of serfdom, earned money as a clerk; Tsesar’ Kyui, then a sea-going cadet, only later became a professional musician. This circle’s intellectual leader, its mastermind and ideologue, was Vladimir Stasov, who had just taken up a post as custodian at the public library. He was educated, multi-lingual, and well-travelled, possessed an alert and agile mind and was driven by a vision of a sweeping Russian national music that was to play a leading role in the ensemble of Europe’s national musical cultures and was to be realized by the circle of composers gathered around Balakirev, a group that would become known as the Mighty Handful.

When Rubinstein, supported by the tsarist court, inaugurated the Conservatory and - faute de mieux - appointed mainly foreign lecturers, he was heavily attacked in the press by Stasov and his colleagues. The background to this feud had already been provided by the tension between the Slavophiles and Westernizers. The conservatory was unmistakably a western-style institution that clearly intended to create a professional Russian musical culture. It was also around this time that students under Ivan Kramskoi’s leadership rebelled against the selection of classical subjects for examinations at the Academy of Fine Arts, which was formally organized along similar lines as the

conservatory but had existed for a longer time. In 1863, the art students then caused a sensation by rejecting their courses, and with them their exams, and instead insisted on painting subjects of their own choice and exhibiting their work outside the academy. This was the origin of the “anti-academic” travelling art exhibitions (peredvizhnye khudozhestvennye vystavki), which were initiated in 1870. Against this background, it becomes clear that, for Stasov and the St. Petersburg composers, the creation of a conservatory represented an anachronism and an obstacle to the development of national culture. Already in March 1862, they had established a Free Music School (Bezplatanaya muzykal'naya shkola), which was financed by concerts, received no support from 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 Music School, on the other, was typical of Russian self-searching – which also took place mainly in St. Petersburg – as depicted by Nikolai Chernyshevskii in the 1863 novel *What Is To Be Done? (Chto delat'?)*.

This conflict can also be understood as a symptom of the general period of upheaval around 1860, and it only came to an unambiguous end in 1872, when Rimskii-Korsakov agreed to take up a professorship at the conservatory. With that, the foundation was laid for a Russian “school of composers”, which would extend well into the 20th century.



Title page of folk song collection edited by Rimskii-Korsakov.

The self-searching process of the “Russian school”

In his 1882-83 essay, “Our Music in the Past 25 Years”,²⁰ Stasov outlined the characteristics of the Russian school’s program. Three passages from a series of introductory statements bear repeating here, all of which are too categorical to be tenable:

Glinka believed 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, a Russian school exists with such distinctive traits as to set it apart from other European schools.²¹

The St. Petersburg composers, including Pëtr Chaikovskii 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 did not provide proof of a uniqueness to suggest a Russian lead over other European countries. In Stasov’s view, it would have been almost scurrilous to admit that Russian composers had seized on suggestions by foreign composers.

There is another important trait that defines our new school: It is the striving for nationality (*nacional’nost’*). This began with Glinka and continues today. One finds such a striving in no other European school. The historical and cultural conditions have been such among other peoples that the folk song – this expression of immediate, unaffected popular musicality – has long since almost completely disappeared from among the majority of civilized peoples.²²

This insinuation makes it clear, according to Stasov, that Russian music was leading the European musical avant-garde, because it was the only one able to resort to a living culture of folk songs. Given the works of Stanisław Moniuszko, Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, Nils Gade, Filipe Pedrell and George Enescu, this is plainly false. That aside, equating “national character” and “folk song,” which was later to be balefully revitalized in Socialist Realism, was at the time already a gross and careless contraction, which could easily be demonstrated through examples of works that fell short of explicitly using folk songs. And to support his assertion, Stasov had to reinterpret as a peculiarly Russian feature the change of paradigm that had taken place in European art at the end of the 18th century, when composers turned to folk songs. Finally, Stasov refers to the “eastern element” as a further characteristic of Russian music:

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

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 “orientalism”. Russian composers considered opera the noblest form of art (see table). But when one considers the most significant works, it is seen that, strictly speaking, Russian opera is a St. Petersburg phenomenon.²⁴ The table also shows that it was a fairly long time before 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*. And the table shows that by 1880 at the latest Rimskii-Korsakov had become almost the only representative of “the St. Petersburg school”. For

him, it was his duty 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 arranged.

For St. Petersburg composers, only two kinds of subjects were fit for an opera worthy of being called "Russian" and "national": great historical subject matter and epics (Mussorgskii's *Boris Godunov*, Borodin's unfinished *Prince Igor*, Chaikovskii's *Oprichnik* and *Mazepa*, and Rimskii-Korsakov's *The Maid of Pskov* and *Sadko*) or fantasy and fairy tale subjects (Rimskii-Korsakov's *May Night* and *The Snow Maiden*). The few operas which did not follow the model derived from Glinka – Tsesar' Kyui's *William Ratcliff* and *Angelo* and Dargomyzhskii's *The Stone Guest* (*Kamennyi gost'*) – were nevertheless declared "Russian national operas", both in the circle's understanding of itself and in its public pronouncements. The case for the "naturalization" of these two works 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 composers in St. Petersburg, most distinctly Mussorgskii, who closely followed Dargomyzhskii in his unfinished score based on Gogol's *The Marriage* (*Zhenit'ba*), but then once more allowed choruses in *Boris Godunov*.²⁵

This type of opera, which Kyui and Stasov claimed as peculiar to Russian national opera, was first realized in *Lohengrin*, which was the first of Richard Wagner's operas to be staged in St. Petersburg, opening on 4 October 1868. At the time, Dargomyzhskii, Mussorgskii, Rimskii-Korsakov and Chaikovskii were all working on operas based on national subjects, but none of them were finished. From Wagner's point of view, *Lohengrin* repre-

sented a stage he had already left behind. From the perspective of the Russian composers, this opera must have seemed the realization of what they were striving for: a national and poetic subject pointing back to antiquity and embodying the boldest progress in terms of technique. They were correspondingly harsh in their attacks on the work. Odoevskii was the only Russian composer who, in 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 Italianized opera establishment.²⁶ That the conception of a Russian national opera after Glinka can also be interpreted 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, took up arms against his [Wagner's, D.R.] enemies in true Russian style. Clad in 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 St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1863, the theatres were brimming. A few months later, the opera *Judith*, which bears clear signs of strong Wagner influence, was staged at the Mariinskii 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 that would never exist in the form we know them if not for *Lohengrin*, *Tristan* and the treatise on "The Art-Work of the Fu-

ture”. 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* [Tsesar’ Kyui, 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 be-headed... a headless Wagnerism.²⁷

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 epic of national history, and the byliny about Sadko, the legendary Novgorod tradesman, sailor, singer and gusli player. In the byliny – orally preserved heroic epics – old history, myths and elements of fairy tale blend to form a unity, which in the 19th century was considered the epitome of the poetic. Since the 1860s, in a period of national self-contemplation and national struggle for emancipation, both topics were attracting greater interest among historians and writers. Stasov was all too aware that Russian opera had to take on these topics if it was to assume a leading position in the context of European cultures. The gulf between his vision of a Russian national school of music of international rank and the reality of composing can be grasped from his correspondence. As early as 13 February 1861, he had written to Balakirev:

It seems to me that with *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 occurred to Glinka to spark a general scandal.... You asked me about the Russian water mythology yourself.... Remember, I had come across the “sailor’s song” [from the third act of *The Flying Dutchman*, D.R.], that bureaucratic piece, that “common place” that every ordinary person puts into his music.... How much better is Sadko, who plays golden gusli in the sea tsar’s hut and inspires him to ever wilder dancing! This would be the equivalent to Gluck’s *Orpheus*, only with a completely different subject and – Russian style.²⁸

Balakirev never set Sadko to music; he passed the subject on to Mussorgskii, who declined as well. Rimskii-Korsakov’s small symphonic poem based on the subject was finished in 1867. When Rimskii-Korsakov was working on the opera version in the 1890s – at a time when the idea of national opera was already obsolete – Stasov continued to encourage him: “Our Sadko is the Russian version of the Greek Ulysses.”²⁹ It is no accident that two references overlap in Stasov’s mind: The mythical figure of Sadko – a singer like Orpheus and an artful sailor like Ulysses – was especially suited for incorporating contemporary (national) art into the canon of classical works or for staking out a claim on 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 written a study *The Origin of the Russian Byliny* that places “The Lay of the Host of Igor” in the byliny tradition and praised 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 to witness the premiere of *Das Rheingold*. His report for the press, while rather critical on the whole, makes it clear he saw that *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was going to be an opus maximum of paramount significance:

One day, he took it into his head to take up 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* appeared, the German art world would be a significant work richer, a work that in its musical aspect would be a perfect equivalent to Homer’s two epics.³⁰

From Stasov’s point of view, the premiere of *Das Rheingold* inaugurated a race among nations to realize an opera, a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), that 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 encouraged Rimskii-Korsakov to take over the subject. The premiere of *Prince Igor* took place on 23 October 1890, in a version

that Rimskii-Korsakov and Glazunov had compiled from Borodin's manuscripts and their own additions.



Leon Bakst. Costume of the Firebird. Sketch, 1913 (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

St. Petersburg music as a synonym of Russian music

Stasov's vision of a sweeping Russian national opera realized by St. Petersburg composers only began to take shape in the late 1880s, at a time when, under the sign of emancipation and international solidarity, the idea of national art had long since begun shifting to a kind of early cultural imperialism, and the idea of national opera had hardened in the direction of national self-importance. The premiere of *Der 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 that should be alien to music. This thinking is based on the pursuit of a precedence that cannot exist in music in any measurable form. At the same time, it excluded the possibility that art, and everything that the 19th century saw as progress in art, was only made possible by a dialogue of cultures. If one acknowledges this intercultural exchange, it becomes evident that the St. Petersburg composers learned a lot from Glinka, the man they called father, whose peculiar Russianess was the result of such an intercultural dialogue, and that they also helped themselves to elements of Wagner and created something unique and distinctive out of it.

From the point of view of cultural exchange, Stasov's thesis, which became the foundation of Soviet music historiography, needs to be inverted, precisely because the St. Petersburg composers were initially receptive to Wagner's methods, and those of Giacomo Meyerbeer's. Because they dealt with them constructively, and because an exchange took place, a music was able to emerge that 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 St. Petersburg repertoire at the turn of the 20th century. In 1906, Sergei Dyagilev, the founder of the group and journal *World of Art* (*Mir iskusstva*), organized 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 Rimskii-Korsakov's adaptation, with Fëdor Shalyapin in the lead role. The first *saison russe* in Paris followed in 1909 – a series of ballet performances choreographed on “Polovtsian Dances” from *Prince Igor* and other works. Through this, 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” ultimately led to the work of Igor Stravinskii, 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 that decisively shaped 20th century music. The stylistic devices seen by the St. Petersburg composers and their mentor Stasov as realistic expressions of a national musical culture were integrated into a strict principle of *l'art pour l'art* by Dyagilev and Stravinskii; their Russian origin was secondary to abstract forms that had been quasi-eroticized by adornment and movement.

The example of St. Petersburg's musical history makes evident two paradigm changes characteristic of all of European cultural history. First, at the turn of the 19th century, there was a shift away from an Italian-dominated

perception of music centred on a pan-European stylistic ideal to an understanding of music defined by national roots – roots whose diversity was valued across Europe as the voice of the people. Second, towards the end of the 19th century, there was a change from an aesthetic point of view that saw art as national and could show itself to be constricted by nationalism, toward form of aesthetics that understood national elements as the building blocks for an international l'art pour l'art. This was a shift the older generation (Rimskii-Korsakov, Kyui, Stasov and Aleksandr Glazunov) did not want or were unable to follow.

Irrespective of these considerations, almost all of what Dyagilev exported to the West under the label of “Russian music” came from St. Petersburg. Even those stylistic devices in Chaikovskii perceived as “Russian” have their roots in the musical aesthetics of St. Petersburg. Thus, strictly speaking, “Russian music” was a St. Petersburg invention.

Translation from German by Misha Gabovich, Moscow

Operas by St. Petersburg composers (a selection)

Premiere (year)	Stage	Title	Composer	Plot / based on	Notes
1836	Bolshoi	A Life for the Tsar	Glinka	Founding of the Romanov dynasty	A prototype. Historical, known as Ivan Susanin in Soviet times
1842	Bolshoi	Ruslan and Lyudmila	Glinka	Pushkin	Another proto-type: fairy tale
1856	Circus Theatre	Rusalka (The Mermaid)	Dargomyzhskii	Pushkin	The mermaid theme is also commonly found in the West
1863	Marinskii Theatre	Judith	Serov	Biblical (murder of Holofernes)	Hardly fits the "Russian" profile, rejected by the Mighty Five

1865	Marinskii Theatre	Rogneda	Serov	Russia between paganism and Christianity	Typical theme, rejected by the Mighty Handful
1869	Marinskii Theatre	William Ratcliffe	Kyui	Heine, translated by A. Pleshcheev	Hardly fits the "Russian" profile
1871	Marinskii Theatre	The Power of Evil	Serov	Ostrovskii's play <i>Don't Live the Way You Want</i>	Rejected by the Mighty Five
1872	Marinskii Theatre	The Stone Guest	Dargomyzhskii	Pushkin's <i>Little Tragedies</i>	Created in 1863-1869, completed by Rimskii-Korsakov and Kyui, staged posthumously
1873	Marinskii Theatre	The Maid of Pskov	Rimskii-Korsakov	Lev Mey's <i>Ivan the Terrible</i>	Revised several times
1874	Marinskii Theatre	Boris Godunov	Mussorgskii	Pushkin	Begun in 1868, several versions, including two by Rimskii-Korsakov
1876	Marinskii Theatre	Angelo	Kyui	Burenin's libretto based on V. Hugo	Hardly fits the "Russian" profile

1880	Marinskii Theatre	May Night	Rimskii-Korsakov	Gogol: the mermaid theme with some mythology added on	First recognized opera
1882	Marinskii Theatre	Snegurochka (The Snow Maiden)	Rimskii-Korsakov	Aleksandr Ostrovskii's fairy tale of the same name	Mythology, philosophy of nature
1886	Private stage	Khovanshchina	Mussorgskii	The streltsy (musketeers) before Peter the Great. Stasov's idea	Begun in 1872, completed by Rimskii-Korsakov
1890	Marinskii Theatre	Prince Igor	Borodin	<i>The Lay of Igor's Host</i> and other Old Russian sources, Stasov's idea	Begun in 1869, completed by Rimskii-Korsakov and Glazunov, staged posthumously
1892	Marinskii Theatre	Mlada	Rimskii-Korsakov	Pre-Christian era, Old Slavic gods	Opera-ballet, mix of fairy tales and early history

1895	Mariinskii Theatre	Christmas Eve	Rimskii-Korsakov	Gogol, plus mythological and fantasy motifs	First appearances of Kolyada and Ovsen
1898	Mariinskii Theatre	Sadko	Rimskii-Korsakov	The Sadko bylina and other bylina. Stasov's idea	Stasov wished this had appeared 30 years earlier – the “Russian Orpheus”
1898	Moscow Private Opera	Boyarinya Vera Shcheloga	Rimskii-Korsakov	Lev Mey	Prologue to The Maid of Pskov
1898	Moscow Private Opera	Mozart and Salieri	Rimskii-Korsakov	Pushkin's <i>Little Tragedies</i>	Dedicated to the memory of Dargomyzhskii
1899	Moscow Private Opera	The Tsar's Bride	Rimskii-Korsakov	Lev Mey's <i>Ivan the Terrible</i>	
1900	Moscow Private Opera	The Tale of Tsar Saltan	Rimskii-Korsakov	Pushkin	Famous “Flight of the Bumblebee”
1902	Mariinskii Theatre	Servilia	Rimskii-Korsakov	Lev Mey, <i>Ancient Rome</i>	Turn away from Russian themes

1902	Moscow Private Opera Conservatory	Kashchei the Immortal	Rimskii-Korsakov	Fairy tales	One-actor parable on the antiquated tsarist regime
1904		Pan Voyevoda	Rimskii-Korsakov	Poland 16th-17th century	“Pan-Slavic”
1907	Marinskii Theatre	The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevronia	Rimskii-Korsakov	Historical: the Tatar invasion in the 13th century; mythical: Fevronia as Nature’s Child	Clearly close to Wagner’s Parsifal
1909	Moscow Private Opera	The Golden Cockerel (Le Coq d’Or)	Rimskii-Korsakov	Pushkin’s fairy tales	Parable on the antiquated tsarist regime
1911	Concertante	Sorochintsy Fair	Mussorgskii	Gogol	Begun in 1874, unfinished, different versions

- ¹ On the history of Russian music, see Yurii Keldysh (ed.), *Istoriya russkoi muzyki*, 10 Vols. (Moscow 1983–97); Mark Mühlbach, *Russische Musikgeschichte im Überblick. Ein Handbuch* (Berlin 1994); Dorothea Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und der 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 and was affiliated to the sovereign's court. It remained a central institution throughout the 19th century despite the creation of a Conservatory and survived the October Revolution as Popular Choir Academy (Narodnaya khorovaya akademiya). In 1922, it was renamed State Academic Chapel (Gosudarstvennaya akademicheskaya kapella) and in 1954 the Leningrad Glinka Academic Chapel (Leningradskaya akademicheskaya kapella im. M.I. Glinki). Since 1985, it has been most successful in exporting Russian choral music.
- ³ Michael Glinka, *Aufzeichnungen aus meinem Leben, published by Alfred Brockhaus* (Berlin 1961). The first Russian edition was Mikhail Glinka, *Zapiski* (Moscow 1870).
- ⁴ *Creonte* (Venice 1776), *Alcide* (Venice 1778) and *Quinto Fabio*, (Modena 1778).
- ⁵ Berezovskii was in Italy from 1765 to 1774. In 1773, he produced *Demofonte*, based on a libretto by Metastasio, in Livorno. Fomin studied in Bologna from 1782 to 1785 and was elected a member of the local Philharmonic Academy in 1785.
- ⁶ The repertoire catalogue for the years 1700-99 shows that only St. Petersburg had a Russian music life of European rank. See *Istoriya russkoi muzyki*, Vol. 3, p. 375–400.
- ⁷ This approach is reflected in *Istoriya russkoi muzyki* and 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 am Main 1998), pp. 203-24; Dorothea Redepenning, "...unter Blumen eingesenkte Kanonen..." Substanz und Funktion nationaler Musik im 19. Jahrhundert", *ibid.*, pp. 225-45.
- ⁹ First appearing in 1778 and 1779, the final edition was published posthumously in 1807 under the title that became famous, *Voices of the People in Their Songs (Stimmen der Völker in Liedern)*.
- ¹⁰ *Sobranie russkikh prostykh pesen' s notami*, new edition (Moscow, 1953).
- ¹¹ Nikolai L'vov, *Sobranie narodnykh russkikh pesen' s ikh golosami na muzyku polozhil Ivan Prach*, new edition (Moscow 1955).

- ¹² *Sbornik russkikh narodnykh pesen*, 1866, new edition (Moscow 1957).
- ¹³ *Sbornik russkikh narodnykh pesen*, 100 *Chants Nationaux Russes* (St. Petersburg 1877) and *ibid* (Moscow 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 St. Petersburg. He was referring to the composers whose works were played during the gala concert: Glinka, Dargomyzhskii, Balakirev and Rimskii-Korsakov, not the circle of Balakirev's disciples. The critic Hermann Laroche used the term in a review of Tsesar' Kyur's opera *William Ratcliff* in 1873 as a polemical reference to the Balakirev circle. Thereafter, Mighty Handful was an honourable collective designation for St. Petersburg composers.
- ¹⁷ Hector Berlioz, "Michail Glinka. Das Leben für den Zaren. Rußlan und Ludmilla", in *Literarische Werke*, Vol. 9 (Leipzig 1903), pp. 145-51.
- ¹⁸ On adoptions of the Caucasus in Russian culture see Natalya Ivanova, "Der Kaukasus in der russischen Literatur", in Freimut Duve, Heidi Tagliavini (eds.), *Kaukasus, Verteidigung der Zukunft* (Wien, Bozen 2001), pp. 287-98.
- ¹⁹ A.I. Vol'f, in *Khronika Peterburgskikh teatrov, godovye obozreniya russkoi i francuzskoi dramaticheskoi sceny, opery, baleta* (St. Petersburg 1884-87), Vol. 2, p. 118, refers to 60,000 gold francs; Robert C. Ridenour, in *Nationalism, Modernism and Personal Rivalry in Nineteenth-Century Russian Music* (Ann Arbor 1981), p. 7, mentions 20,000 roubles. I have found no proof that the unfortunate decree restricting salaries for musicians and composers was ever lifted.
- ²⁰ Vladimir Stasov, "Nasha muzyka za poslednie 25 let", in *Stat'i o muzyke*, Vladimir Protopopov (ed.), Vol. 3 (Moscow 1974-80), pp. 143-97.
- ²¹ *Ibid.* p. 144.
- ²² *Ibid.* p. 148.
- ²³ *Ibid.* p. 149.
- ²⁴ Chaikovskii, who lived and taught in Moscow, produced his operas in Moscow and St. Petersburg.
- ²⁵ Dargomyzhskii's *The Stone Guest* started a tradition of its own, which runs through Pushkin's other *Little Tragedies*: Rimskii-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri*, Sergei Rakhmaninov's *A Feast in Time of Plague*, Sergei Prokofiev's *The Gambler* and Dmitrii Shostakovich's *The Nose*. Its traces can even be found in the mono-operas of the 1960s and 1970s.
- ²⁶ Vladimir F. Odоеvskii, "Vagner v Moskve", in *idem, Muzykal'no-literaturnoe nasledie* (Moscow 1956), p. 254-57.
- ²⁷ Hermann Laroche, "Richard Wagner i ego Loengrin", in *Golos*, 61, 2.3, 1873, emphasis in the original.
- ²⁸ M.A. Balakirev and V.V. Stasov, *Perpiska*, Vol. 1 (Moscow 1970-71), pp. 122-23.
- ²⁹ N.A. Rimskii-Korsakov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, literaturnye proizvedeniya i perpiska*, Vol. 5 (Moscow 1955-82), p. 421.
- ³⁰ Vladimir Stasov, "Pis'ma iz chuzhikh kraev", in *Stat'i o muzyke*, Vol. 2, pp. 202-16, here p. 203.



Victims of “de-kulakisation” in front of the ruins of their house in the village of Udachno, Hryshuns’kyi rayon, Donets’k oblast. Photo: M.M. Zhelezniak