

# HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## RUSSIAN MUSIC

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**Overview** Music plays a fundamental part in human development, and is one of the essential parts of communication, like language, facilitating human interactions within groups and sometimes even creating selfless union. Formal music originally came to Russia from Byzantium through the adoption of Orthodox Christianity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian Orthodox church's dominant position over music in pre-Petrine Russian cultural life continued until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it engaged in a ceaseless war against folk musicians and instrumentalists. With Peter the Great's Westernization process, Russian music adopted the musical traditions of contemporary Western countries and reshaped it by blending traditional Russian music culture with it.

### POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

#### Early Liturgical Music

When Prince Vladimir converted to Orthodox Christianity in 988 he ruled a land that had not yet become a sovereign state and whose culture was pagan in nature. As a result, the Church moved quickly to become the dominant cultural force in Kievan Rus'. However, Vladimir's decision to convert to Orthodoxy led to Russia's political isolation from its neighbors, and in order to prevent outside religious influences from entering Russia the Russian Church became isolationist. One area of culture in which the Church sought to assert its influence was music, both religious and secular.

Like Orthodox Christianity itself, the music of the Russian Orthodox Church was imported in the 10<sup>th</sup> century from the Byzantine Empire. Initially, musical instruments were not used in the liturgy, as their use was considered sinful by the Orthodox Church, an attitude which would not change until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Another aspect of this hostility towards the use musical instruments was the church's long, bitter struggle against folk musicians, in particular instrumentalists. This animosity was fueled by the Orthodox Church's rivalry with the Catholic Church, which allowed instrumental music, and by its struggle against Russia's pagan heritage, a heritage which folk instrumentalists were continuing in the church's view.

Liturgical music in the Orthodox Church was sung a capella by all-male choirs who performed a monodic chant in unison. Over time this type of liturgical music began to evolve into new forms that were unlike the Byzantine chants. One of these, developed some time around the 12<sup>th</sup> century was the *Znamenny chant* (*Znamenny raspev*). These chants were performed using a system of eight voices.

#### Traditional Instruments and the *Skomorokhi*

Before the introduction of Christianity the musical instruments found in Russia were similar to those used throughout medieval Europe. Among these were the *svirel*, an oboe-like instrument; the *gusli*, similar to a zither; the *gudok*, similar to a fiddle; and horns. In addition there were tambourines, assorted noise makers, drums, and small bells, instruments more typically associated with shamanic rituals. These instruments were played during religious and court ceremonies, and for entertainment. They were also associated with the *skomorokhi*, folk musicians in Kievan Rus and Muscovy who often played at weddings.

**Skomorokhi:** Skomorokhi were the wandering minstrels in Russia; they were singers of freedom, who dared to ridicule the power, the clergy, and the rich and sympathized with the common people. The *skomorokhi* found themselves officially banned during the "Time of Troubles", the period when Muscovite Rus' was being transformed into a secular, centralized state between the 14<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The reasons for this ban are not entirely clear; they may have been sacrificed to maintain relations between the church and the state, or they may have been regarded as a threat to the state. Whatever the true reason, pressured by the church Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich issued the decree banning the *skomorokhi* in 1648. After having

been an integral part of Russian popular culture for over 700 years, the *skomorokhi* found themselves exiled to northern Russia or Siberia, and their instruments destroyed.

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

### **Secular Music and Western Influence**

The Russian tsars saw their position as rulers as having not only a secular aspect, but a spiritual one as well, an attitude that would not change until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when Peter I became tsar. The tsars believed that they were the spiritual leaders of an Orthodox state and servants of God as well. For example, Tsar Ivan IV composed a number of church chants and was said to be a talented church musician. As a result of this view of their religious role, the tsars were against secular music, both foreign and domestic. Anyone giving public performances of secular music, like the *skomorokhi*, were treated as criminals.

The hostile attitude towards secular music changed dramatically when Peter the Great ascended the throne. He set in motion a number of reforms to transform Russia from what he saw as a backward society into a modern, Western-style country. In his new capital, St. Petersburg, he held court balls in the manner of Western Europe where his aristocrats attempted to perform unfamiliar European dances. Copying the Germans, he formed "staff orchestras" that played at court ceremonies, and even travelled with his army in the field. Hoping to marry Peter's daughter, the Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, Carl Friedrich brought a German chamber orchestra with him to St. Petersburg in 1721. The orchestra played works by a number of contemporary composers, and chamber orchestras soon became a requisite element of aristocratic society. In the years after Peter the Great's reign musicians and composers continued to be brought from Europe and paid well for their talents. Private orchestras and choirs, as well as opera and ballet theaters had become feature of the estates of a number of Russian aristocrats by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This trend provided a new opportunity for some former serfs; trained by teachers from Europe they went on to become some of the most famous performers of the day.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

### **Russian Composers and the Incorporation of Russian Influences**

As Russia had no conservatories prior to the 1860's, Russia's first composer, Mikhail Glinka, had to travel abroad to obtain the majority of his musical training. This allowed him to study the folk music of many different countries and to make the acquaintance of many well-known European composers. After his return to Russia Glinka would greatly influence Russian music's development in general, and opera in particular.

A number of composers after Glinka followed his lead and composed music based on Russian fairy tales; among them were Rimsky-Korsakov, *The Golden Cockerel*; Stravinsky, *The Nightingale*; and Prokofiev, in *Love for Three Oranges*. In the compositions for ballet, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky and Prokofiev would also be influenced by Glinka's use of fairy-tales.

Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* and *Ruslan and Ludmila* which was first performed in 1842 would be the first in a long line of operas based on Russian fairy tales. Glinka's compositions mark a turning point in Russian music, the point at which Russian music truly becomes a part of European music, while still retaining its folk music traditions.

**Russian Musical Society:** Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna and the composer Anton Rubinstein established the *Russian Musical Society* in 1859. Its primary aim was to encourage and expand the musical study and performance in the country. Regarded as Russia's first school of music, the Society provided instruction to anyone who wished to study music.

One of the most important events in the growth of Russian music occurred with the opening in St. Petersburg of Russia's first conservatory in 1862.

**Balakirev Circle:** Mily Balakirev established the Balakirev Circle, a musical group, in St. Petersburg. The Circle studied a wide spectrum of musical traditions to employ in their own compositions: Russian folksongs, classical composers and music from Spain, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Exoticism was becoming as important a part of Russian music as it was in European music. This can be seen in the Middle Eastern influences in *Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov, and the Central Asian elements in Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*.

In 1866 Russia's second conservatory was established in Moscow by Anton Rubinstein from St. Petersburg and Nikolai Rubinstein from Moscow. Both brothers would play important roles in making Russian music more professional. Famous graduates of Russia's first two conservatories include Tchaikovsky (St. Petersburg) and Rachmaninoff (Moscow).

**Mighty Handful (Moguchaya kuchka):** At approximately the same time, five composers from St. Petersburg formed a group which became known as "The Mighty Handful" (or "The Mighty Five"). They shared common political and aesthetic opinions and held that music made by Russians should accurately reflect the people of Russia, and not what was taught by Germans in the conservatory. The group's leader was Balakirev, with Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and César Cui making up the rest of the group.

They advocated the use of Russian elements such as folk music and folklore in compositions, and were disturbed by the predominant position of European music and European musicians. Because of their ability to convey a narrative message they preferred song, symphonic poems and opera over other genres. Despite the group's early solidarity, by the mid-1870s Balakirev and the other members were no longer on good terms and the group was, for all practical purposes, dissolved.

A number of well-known works would be composed by members of the Mighty Handful, among them the operas *Sadko* and *The Snow Maiden*, and the symphonic poem *Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov; *Khovanshchina* and *Boris Godunov* by Mussorgsky; *Tamara* by Balakirev; and *Prince Igor* by Borodin. All are regarded as masterpieces of romantic nationalism and are inspired, as many of the Mighty Handful's works were, by Russian literature, history and folk stories.

One of the first graduates of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Pyotr Tchaikovsky disagreed with the Mighty Handful over the composition of classical music, in particular which tradition, Western or Russian, should determine how it was composed. Although Tchaikovsky's interest in nationalistic music grew in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, he remained opposed to the Mighty Handful's nationalistic bent. Despite his disagreements with the *Mighty Handful*, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* shows the influence of Balakirev.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the central themes of composers such as Sergei Vasil'evich Rachmaninov, Igor Fedorovich Stravinsky, Sergei Sergeevich Prokofiev and Dmitry Dmitrievich Shostakovich were liturgical and folkloric. Specifically, Mussorgsky in his historical operas *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*; Rimsky-Korsakov in his *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevronia*; and Prokofiev in his score to Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*, used Russian folkloric and liturgical music combining the techniques of Western music and the Russian classical music tradition.

After 1917 musicians were subject to extreme pressure from the state to follow aesthetic standards determined by the government. State control over musicians was extended by Stalin in 1932 with the formation of the Union of Soviet Composers. This was a regulatory body whose mandate was to direct all musical activity for the government's own political purposes. One result was that all Soviet composers were compelled to follow very specific regulations concerning the types of music they produced and this also led to the permanent emigration of numerous music composers and musicians, such as Stravinsky, Rachmaninov, and the pianist-composer Nikolai Karlovich Medtner, to Europe and the United States.

### Discussion/Questions

1. Discuss the early developments in Russian music. Why would the Skomorokhi be treated as criminals?
2. Discuss Westernization and its effects on Russian music. How were the 19th century Russian composers influenced by Western composers and how did they influence the popular culture of the West?

### Reading

- 1-Russia and Western Civilization, Edited by Russell Bova, ME Sharpe, New York, 2003, Ch. II, Sect. 6.
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- 3-Sargeant, L. M., Harmony and Discord, Music and the Transformation of Russian Cultural Life, Oxford University Press, 2011, Ch. 1.
- 4-Taruskin, R., On Russian Music, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2009.  
Jensen, C. R., Musical Cultures in Seventeenth - Century Russia, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009.
- 5-Robinson, H., "Music", in the Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture, 1998, Ch.10, pp. 236-263.