

Apr 20th, 3:40 PM - 4:00 PM

Musically Russian: Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century

Joshua J. Taylor

Cedarville University, jjtaylor@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research_scholarship_symposium

 Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

Taylor, Joshua J., "Musically Russian: Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century" (2016). *The Research and Scholarship Symposium*. 4.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research_scholarship_symposium/2016/podium_presentations/4

This Podium Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Research and Scholarship Symposium by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

Musically Russian: Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century

What does it mean to be Russian? In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Russian nobility was engrossed with French culture. According to Dr. Marina Soraka and Dr. Charles Ruud, “Russian nobility [had a] weakness for the fruits of French civilization.”¹ When Peter the Great came into power in 1682-1725, he forced Western ideals and culture into the very way of life of the aristocracy. “He wanted to Westernize and modernize all of the Russian government, society, life, and culture... .Countries of the West served as the emperor’s model; but the Russian ruler also tried to adapt a variety of Western institutions to Russian needs and possibilities.”² However, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Russia in 1812, he threw the pro-French aristocracy in Russia into an identity crisis. They felt betrayed and quickly lost their attachment to France and its culture. As a result, the intellectuals began producing literature, music, and artwork that represented Russian culture and served to separate them from France and its culture. The creation of Russian literature, artwork, and music was the beginning of nationalism in Russia in the nineteenth century.

Marina Frolova-Walker claims that literary nationalism and musical nationalism were two driving forces that comprised Russian nationalism.³ According to literary nationalism, a true Russian was gloomy, morbid, unkempt, and mystical.⁴ However, there existed five influential

¹ Charles Ruud and Marina Soraka, *Becoming a Romanov. Grand Duchess Elena of Russia and her World* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015), 115.

² Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Russian Identities: A Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79.

³ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: from Glinka to Stalin* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 1.

⁴ Frolova-Walker, 1.

composers known as the Mighty Kuchka (which is Russian for the Mighty Little Heap), who invented a new style of musical nationalism that incorporated folk-song genres to encompass what was considered to be Russian culture.⁵ These five composers in addition to several other Russian composers were responsible for shaping musical nationalism in Russia by combining literature and music that represented the country. In particular, Modest Mussorgsky, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov each contributed to Russian culture by approaching nationalism in different, but significant ways.

Nationalism is driven by people. International historian Ben Curtis argues that nationalist intellectuals exist who he identifies as “political entrepreneurs.”⁶ It is these people who are responsible for creating culture that unites a populace. Curtis states that they are “concerned specifically with promoting the nation’s culture.”⁷ According to philosopher Ernest Gellner, “people are loyal not to a monarch or a land or a faith...but to a culture.”⁸ Culture gives individuals a sense of belonging and identity. The people in Russia were seeking this identity following the French invasion. Nationalists in the nineteenth century operated on the idea of primordialism. The primordialist theory can be defined by eighteenth century writer Johann Gottfried von Herder and his idea of the *Volksgeist*, which “is the immutable national identity of a people that finds expression through music.”⁹ According to this theory, every people group has a unique musical style and subsequent folk music. While this theory cannot be proven to be true, it outlined the Russian thought regarding national culture creation in the nineteenth century.

⁵ Frolova-Walker, 1.

⁶ Benjamin Curtis, *Music Makes the Nation* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), 21.

⁷ Curtis, 21.

⁸ Curtis, 25.

⁹ Curtis, 28.

Five of the significant political entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century were the members of the Mighty Kuchka. Included in this group were Mily Balakirev (the leader), César Cui, Modest Musorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin. The Kuchkists' approach to nationalism was outlined clearly by Mikhail Glinka's Russian nationalistic opera, *A Life for the Tsar*. In this opera, Glinka mirrored the Russian nationalistic concept of the sad *protiyazhnaya*, which is translated to mean, "drawn-out song."¹⁰ The *protiyazhnaya* was a "splendid form of melismatically decorated [folk] song set to poetry of great expressive power and lyrical intensity... .That folk music springs straight from nature and that Russian music 'can be breathed in with the Russian air' is a nineteenth-century idea. Folk music seemed a world apart from everything that European art music stood for."¹¹ Therefore, composers in Russia in the nineteenth century relied heavily upon folk music as a reflection of the country's nature. Glinka used the melancholy themes typical of the *protiyazhnaya* throughout *A Life for the Tsar* to depict the Russianness nature. Balakirev in particular believed that this opera was an appropriate example of Russian nationalism because it portrayed the sorrowful, gloomy, and miserable mood of literary nationalism.

Modest Musorgsky began his compositional career by thoroughly embracing the approach to nationalism of the Kuchkists. Musorgsky also studied Glinka and was an influential realist composer. He approached nationalism from a more literal perspective. Balakirev supported and encouraged Musorgsky's realism.¹² Musorgsky's basis for composition came

¹⁰ Frolova-Walker, 30.

¹¹ Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3.

¹² David Lloyd-Jones, 1994. Review of *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue*. *Notes* 50, no. 3 (1994): 908–11., 4–20.

from Russian folk songs. In his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of North Carolina, Hyun-Jong Lee writes,

One of the most influential Russian music scholars, M. D. Calvocoressi, pointed out the relationship of Musorgsky's music to the modal scales and rhythms of Russian folk music. Calvocoressi claimed that the distinctive characteristics of Musorgsky's music, for example, the use of the whole-tone scale, church modes, triads with added tones, unresolved dissonances, melodic tritones, irregular phrasing and meter, and avoidance of the leading tone, were influenced by Russian folk music. The new and bold harmonies were developed and extended not from the traditional school of harmony, but from the modal scales found in Russian folk songs.¹³

Therefore, Musorgsky was heavily influenced by folk songs. However, he believed that using material directly quoted from folk songs was not sufficient.¹⁴ "It turned out that realism, a literature movement that prevailed in Russia in the 1850s and 1860s was a perfect partner for Musorgsky to establish an identity of Russian music and to develop his own techniques... . Musorgsky believed that musical elements, such as melody, harmonic progression, rhythm, should not overpower the words that describe reality."¹⁵ For Musorgsky, art was the process of describing absolute reality and music was only meant to exist provided that it did not overshadow the words describing a real event. "The idea of setting the text of a play word for word as it was written, without re-working it into a libretto in the usual way, came to Musorgsky from Alexander Dargomizhsky, who started to compose Pushkin's *The Stone Guest* in 1866."¹⁶ The realism that Musorgsky embraced is depicted particularly in his opera *Boris Godunov* in which he imitates Russian speech. Within this opera, Musorgsky tried to follow the natural rhythm and pacing of speech as closely as possible. The Coronation Scene of *Boris Godunov* is

¹³ Hyun-Jong Lee, "The Evolution of Lyricism in Modest Musorgsky's Compositional Style as Evidenced in *Songs and Dances of Death*" Ph.D. Diss., (University of North Carolina, Greensboro, 2011), 6.

¹⁴ Hyun-Jong Lee, 7.

¹⁵ Hyun-Jong Lee, 7.

¹⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *Realism in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Archives, 1985), 73.

an example of words set naturistically: syllabic with accented syllables on the strong beats.

Musorgsky took realism to such a degree that “the traditional division of an opera into sections-arias, choruses, instrumental interludes- became no longer workable.”¹⁷ The complete freedom of musical speech was a Russian national development that was in contrast to Wagner’s vocal writing. Musorgsky and the rest of the five were against Wagner’s ideas considering vocal writing. Furthermore, Musorgsky’s harmony could be considered revolutionary during his lifetime. He used predominantly tonal harmonies, but would occasionally use modal harmonies to provide a gloomy and eerie tone with unresolved dissonances. Musorgsky’s devotion to nationalism transcended his musical compositions into other areas of his life. A portrait of himself painted in March 1881 by Ilya Repin two weeks before his death demonstrated that nationalism was a way of life for Musorgsky. In the portrait, he wears a peasant shirt and demonstrates realism through his unkempt hair and vacant expression. In the portrait he does not look well and his addiction to alcoholism is likely a primary reason for his rough outward appearance. Musorgsky did not ask for a portrait that painted him with a more attractive appearance because this would violate his personal belief that realism should permeate all areas of art, including portraits. Musorgsky’s contributions to Russian culture are significantly related to the Russian realism that he embraced. In a letter he wrote in 1857, he is quoted saying: “I want the note to express the word, I want truth.”¹⁸ His contributions to Russian nationalism in the nineteenth century reflect the influence of folk songs and Russian realism in his compositions.

¹⁷ Nicolas Slonimsky and Electra Yourke, *Nicolas Slonimsky: Russian and Soviet music and composers* (Abingdon: Psychology Press, 2004), 20.

¹⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, 73.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky was the leading Russian composer in the second half of the nineteenth century. Unlike Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky did not rely heavily upon the words of Russian folk music, though he occasionally drew upon the characteristics of Russian folk and popular music. “Although Tchaikovsky’s music is unmistakably Russian, he but rarely resorts to literal quotations of Russian folk songs (as in the finale of the Fourth Symphony).¹⁹ In terms of nationalism, Tchaikovsky sought to reconcile nationalist and internationalist tendencies within Russian music. His national philosophy differed from the Mighty Kuchka. While the Mighty Kuchka believed that music should be an expression of the nature of a county, Tchaikovsky believed that Russian music should be pursued with musical excellence and should stand on its own feet. Once musical excellence was achieved, he argued that it should be shared with the rest of Europe to contribute to music as a whole. Ironically, despite his philosophical differences in ideology, Tchaikovsky had correspondence with Balakirev for a number of years and was even mentored by him.²⁰ Tchaikovsky was “trained at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire under Anton Rubenstein and Nicholas Zarembo [and] had received an orthodox Germanic musical education which placed him, in terms of the Russian musical situation, in a diametrically opposite position to Balakirev.”²¹ Despite Tchaikovsky being trained in European musical ideals, Balakirev believed the he could still mentor him and persuade him to change his stylistic direction. Tchaikovsky likely agreed to Balakirev’s leadership because he felt a sense of isolation after moving to Moscow and wanted to feel accepted and recognized by his peers. “There is much evidence to suggest that Tchaikovsky felt both a great need for and, simultaneously, a resentment of guidance.”²² Balakirev was willing to give this guidance and many of his letters to

¹⁹ Nicolas Slonimsky, 8.

²⁰ David Brown, “Balakirev, Tchaikovsky and Nationalism.” *Music & Letters* 42, no. 3 (1961): 227–41., 227.

²¹ David Brown, 229.

²² David Brown, 229.

Tchaikovsky reflect “a mixture of strict, paternal criticism made less unpalatable by some implied compliment.”²³ Eventually, Tchaikovsky grew in his own self-assurance and Balakirev’s guidance gave him the confidence to venture out on his own path of musical development, at which point, he sought independence from Balakirev. “What Balakirev imposed upon Tchaikovsky was that all-around severity of standard which elicited from him the effort which he needed to enable him to discover his true artistic self.”²⁴ Tchaikovsky’s interaction with Balakirev allowed him to develop his own approach to music through personal introspection. His inward reflection allowed him to develop Russian emotions which he portrayed in his music. These emotions contributed to his position towards nationalism. “Tchaikovsky’s nationalism lies in the extraordinary power to create a peculiarly Russian mood by means of expressing its own inner sentiments.”²⁵ The Russian mood, as exemplified by Russian literature, was typically gloomy, dark, and depressing. Tchaikovsky embraced the Russian pessimistic outlook on life and was able to depict his true feelings and expression into his music. This can be shown through his favoring of minor keys and choice of melancholic titles: *Chanson Triste, Melancholic Serenade*, etc.)²⁶ Despite Tchaikovsky’s preference of gloomy, sad sounds, his works reflect joy and merriment as well, dispelling the theory that Russian music is irrevocably melancholic. Tchaikovsky’s symphonies were dark and somber. “The Fourth and Fifth Symphonies express the inexorability of fate and the futility of struggle. The Sixth Symphonie...is pervaded with the spirit of dejection.”²⁷ However, within these symphonies, Tchaikovsky includes uplifting and joyous material as well. Tchaikovsky also emphasizes

²³ David Brown, 227-228.

²⁴ David Brown, 233.

²⁵ Nicolas Slonimsky, 8.

²⁶ Nicolas Slonimsky, 8.

²⁷ Nicolas Slonimsky, 9.

romantic beauty and sadness within his symphonic poems: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Francesca da Rimini*. This demonstrates that Tchaikovsky was trying to incorporate the Russian sad outlook on life with popular romantic characteristics of the period. Although Tchaikovsky borrowed Western European techniques and characteristics, he also incorporated Russian culture into his works. His opera, *The Queen of Spades*, was based on a novel by Russian writer Pushkin. In this opera, he drew on musical ideas from the classical Russian period during which Catherine the Great reigned. This demonstrates that Russian nationalistic music was not only influenced by folk songs, but by other Russian musical characteristics throughout history as well. Tchaikovsky contributed to Russian culture through his personal expression of his melancholic Russian inner sentiments and by combining Russian musical characteristics with European characteristics.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was a Russian composer who was considered to be a Russian teller of tales. “He will pass for ever into musical history as the... musical bard who immortalised the Russian legend in musical forms endued with the national colouring suited to it.”²⁸ According to American musicologist Richard Taruskin, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov “is perhaps the most underrated composer of all time.”²⁹ Rimsky-Korsakov received little recognition abroad. However, his fifteen operas are the largest collection of Russian operas composed for Russian consumption.³⁰ All of these operas are part of active repertory in Russia, but only *Le Coq d’Or*, his final opera, is regularly performed internationally. He also studied and created arrangements for a number of other Russian operas. Rimsky-Korsakov showed an aptitude for music at a young age. However, he did not pursue a musical education as he spent a

²⁸ Leonid Sabaneev and S. W. Pring, “Rimsky-Korsakov.” *The Musical Times* 69, no. 1023 (1928): 403-405., 404.

²⁹ *On Russian Music*

³⁰ Richard Taruskin, *On Russian Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 166.

short amount of time in the navy after graduating from the College of Naval Cadets in St. Petersburg in 1862. Before his three year trip with the navy, his piano teacher introduced him to Mily Balakirev who recognized his talent for composition and instructed him to compose a symphony. Under the direct influence of Balakirev, Korsakov finished the symphony in 1865. Korsakov went on to compose several works under the influence of Balakirev and earned his place in the Mighty Kuchka. Rimsky-Korsakov can be considered to be the most prolific member of the Mighty Kuchka and his operas in particular encompassed the spirit of Russian folklore and history.³¹

Russian legends and folk tales are reflected in Rimsky Korsakov's operas *Snegurotchka* (Snow-Maiden, 1882) and *Sadko* (1894); and Russian history in *Tsarskaya Nevesta* (Tsar's Bride, 1893). He wrote operas to two fairy tales by Pushkin, *Tsar Saltan* (1899) and *Zolotoy Petushck* (The Golden Cockerel, 1906.)³²

Korsakov was influenced by Balakirev during his tutorship and he adopted the belief that Russian folk music and history was an important aspect of writing Russian nationalistic music. He initially practiced a militant approach to nationalism as reflected by the music of the Kuchkists. "He was self-taught and had avoided the rigorous training that in Germany or France was a matter of routine."³³ However, Korsakov's ideology shifted when he was asked to teach as a professor of harmony at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1871. He had no formal training whatsoever as the Mighty Kuchka and Bakalirev in particular did not find a musical education necessary for creating nationalistic works. Bakalirev believed that a music education was not only useless to composition, but that it also hindered a composer's ability to compose nationalistic music that properly defined the country and its people. However, as Rimsky-

³¹ Nicolas Slonimsky, 7.

³² Nicolas Slonimsky, 7.

³³ Nicolas Slonimsky, 26.

Korsakov began teaching music theory, he quickly realized the gaps in his own musical education and began learning alongside his students. Korsakov realized that the method of composing without training taught by Balakirev was inefficient and he complained of his inability to work in a professional manner: “I work inefficiently; I set down wrong notes on paper; I seem to be unable to fix a relatively simple rhythmic idea, and at times cannot find the right interval without trying out the melody on the piano. While copying the final draft I cannot remember even a couple of bars correctly, and have to follow the original note for note...”³⁴

Korsakov’s realization and subsequent musical education marked a radical change as his ideology shifted away from the Kuchkist’s strict anti-academic nationalism. Despite abandoning the anti-academic stance of the Bakalirev circle and studying Western musical techniques, he remained devoted to Russian nationalistic music through the incorporation of folk tunes and their melodic characteristics into his own music. For example, Russian folk music is characterized by asymmetrical rhythms with 5/4 being particularly favored. In the first act of opera *Sadko* Korsakov uses a compound meter of 11/4 inspired by the asymmetrical rhythms of folk tunes.³⁵ The other Kuchkists and Glinka also incorporated Russian folk songs into their music, but they focused predominantly on the folk genre of the *protiyazhnaya* dance song, while Korsakov branched out to other genres of Russian folk music. After composing the opera *May Night* in 1879 he was drawn to “calendar songs” which were songs written for specific ritualistic occasions. He was interested by these songs because they reflected rural customs and the pantheistic world of folk rites. Rimsky Korsakov wrote that he

Was captivated by the poetic side of the cult of sun-worship, and sought its survivals and echoes in both the tunes and the words of the songs. The pictures of the ancient pagan period and spirit loomed before me, as it then seemed, with

³⁴ Nicolas Slonimsky, 27.

³⁵ Nicolas Slonimsky, 28.

great clarity, luring me on with the charm of antiquity. These occupations subsequently had a great influence in the direction of my own activity as a composer.³⁶

From this moment, Korsakov developed a pantheistic perspective in which he took a poetic outlook on nature. He developed a profound and religious reverence of Nature which was demonstrated in the beautiful resonances and colouristic revelations of his music.³⁷ In his opera, *Snegurotchka* he makes use of “calendar songs” and other ceremonial dances in the folk tradition. This pantheistic view contributed to Korsakov’s nationalism because pantheism and mysticism were considered to be Russian traits. “In this pantheistic temperament of his, in this peculiar mystical pantheism, we have a most characteristic Slav trait. The mysticism of the Slav is very deeply tinged with pantheism, and the idea of God-Nature is very near, very closely related to, the general Russian sentiment.”³⁸ Therefore, Rimsky-Korsakov’s embrace of pantheism in folk music serves as the root of his nationalism.

Nationalism was a widespread and important phenomenon effecting composers in Russia in the nineteenth century. Modest Mussorgsky, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov each contributed to nationalism in a unique way. Nationalism in Russia was created as the intellectual aristocrats created literature, artwork, and music that reflected the folk culture of the general population. The *Mighty Kuchka* played a large role in nationalism as they incorporated the *protyazhnaya* folk genre into their music to reflect the sorrowful and gloomy mood found in Russian literature. Musorgsky took a literal approach to nationalism that was demonstrated through his use of folk music and emphasis of realism in his musical compositions. Tchaikovsky contributed to musical nationalism by mixing Western musical characteristics from

³⁶ Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925), 166.

³⁷ Leonid Sabaneev, 404.

³⁸ Leonid Sabaneev, 404.

his training with Russian characteristics. His introspection allowed him to share music that he considered to be Russian in nature with the rest of Europe. Rimsky-Korsakov began as a strong nationalist under Balakirev's school of thought, but eventually shifted to adopt a nationalistic approach that was more similar to Tchaikovsky's approach. His pantheistic temperament allowed him to incorporate nationalistic folk culture and rites into his music. Each of these three composers contributed to nationalism in varying degrees. Regardless of their nationalist influence, it is evident that every Russian composer was affected by nationalism.

Bibliography

Brown, David. "Balakirev, Tchaikovsky and Nationalism." *Music & Letters* 42, no. 3 (1961): 227–41.

Curtis, Benjamin. *Music Makes the Nation* Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008.

Dahlhaus, Carl. *Realism in Nineteenth-Century Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Archives, 1985.

Frolova-Walker, Marina. *Russian Music and Nationalism: from Glinka to Stalin*. London: Yale University Press, 2007.

Helmets, Rutger. *Not Russian Enough? Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Opera*. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2014.

Lee, Hyun-Jong. "The Evolution of Lyricism in Modest Musorgsky's Compositional Style as Evidenced in *Songs and Dances of Death*." Phd Diss., University of North Carolina, Greensboro, 2011.

Lloyd-Jones, David. Review of *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue*. *Notes* 50, no. 3 (1994): 908–11.

Maes, Francis. *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Nathan, M. Montagu. *A History of Russian Music - Being an Account of the Rise and Progress of the Russian School of Composers, with a Survey of Their Lives and a Description of Their Works*. Worcester: Read Books Ltd, 2013.

Rabow-Edling, Susanna. *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012.

- Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. and Mark D. Steinberg. *A History of Russia, 7th ed.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. *Russian Identities: A Historical Survey.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Rimsky-Korsakov, Nikolai. *My Musical Life.* New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925.
- Ruud, Charles and Marina Soraka. *Becoming a Romanov. Grand Duchess Elena of Russia and Her World.* Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015.
- Sabaneev, Leonid and S. W. Pring. "Rimsky-Korsakov." *The Musical Times* 69, no. 1023 (1928): 403-405
- Slonimsky, Nicolas and Electra Yourke. *Nicolas Slonimsky: Russian and Soviet Music and Composers.* Abingdon: Psychology Press, 2004.
- Taruskin, Richard. *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Taruskin, Richard. *On Russian Music.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.