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# The Russian Five

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Abstract:

This paper will explore Russian culture beginning in the mid nineteenth-century as the leading group of composers and musicians known as the *Moguchaya Kuchka*, or The Russian Five, sought to influence Russian culture and develop a pure school of Russian music.

Comprised of César Cui, Aleksandr Borodin, Mily Balakirev, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, this group of inspired musicians, steeped in Russian society, worked to remove outside cultural influences and create a uniquely Russian sound in their compositions. As their nation became saturated with French and German cultures and other outside musical influences, these musicians composed with the intent of eradicating ideologies outside of Russia. In particular, German music, under the influence of Richard Wagner, Robert Schumann, and Johannes Brahms, reflected the pan-Western-European style and revolutionized the genre of opera. In particular, Wagner's operatic works *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Der Ring des Nibelungen* cycle both revolutionized opera as the composer experimented with chromaticism, tonality, and lyrics. Many of these changes found their way into the compositions of Russian composers.

In contrast to the members of the *Moguchaya Kuchka*, their academically trained contemporary Pyotr Tchaikovsky held a very different perspective about the purpose of music and embraced the Western musical elements. Despite their differing musical aesthetics and compositional styles, the *Moguchaya Kuchka* cultivated a distinct and rich Russian culture for the arts through the incorporation of classic folk elements and local village traditions. These

composers utilized local elements of tonal mutability, heterophony, the whole tone scale, and raw intervals of fifths, fourths, and thirds to set themselves apart from Westernized musical harmony. The Russian's use of parallel fifths, fourths, and thirds directly contrasted the rules set by Western music and their frequent use of other compositional techniques furthered the divide between Russian music and the west. The musical compositions of the *Moguchaya Kuchka* directly opposed Westernization and strengthened official nationalism within the Russian Empire through the incorporation of traditional folklore, local village traditions, and the promotion of their Tsar as a supreme political leader. In particular, the works of Balakirev, Cui, and Mussorgsky all established cultural pride and contributed towards Russian nationalism. Through studying the works of three of these influential composers and the cultural context surrounding their lives, one can gain a better understanding of both the essence of Russian Official Nationalism in the nineteenth-century as well as an enriched understanding of the music that was prevalent in Russia and compositional techniques employed to achieve a unique sound.

#### Understanding the Russian Landscape and Official Nationalism:

Rooted in a rich Eastern Slavic heritage, Russia stands as a country that has developed for centuries despite frequent political and social unrest. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Russia progressed rapidly economically, politically, and industrially. Saint Petersburg, founded by Peter the Great in 1703 on land taken from Sweden, was established a decade later as the capital of the Russian Empire and thus became the cultural epicenter for the developing nation. This monumental success would remain as Peter the Great's greatest legacy. Significant turmoil, however, shrouded that nation. Emerging out of medieval Muscovy into a

thriving modern Russia thrived under the influential leadership of Peter the Great.<sup>1</sup> As Tsar, Peter the Great, a Westernizer striving for progress, served as a clever diplomat whose focus on modernizing Russia became supremely important as he sought territorial gains, military improvements, and a revamp of the outdated Russian government. In many ways, the leader borrowed ideas from Western culture, but his tyrannical leadership resulted in a general distaste for him amongst Russian citizens. Following Peter the Great's death in 1725, the Russo-Turkish War broke out against the Ottoman Empire followed by the infamous and costly Seven Years' War in 1757. The country's economic state relied on agricultural success as working class citizens became burdened with high taxes and heavy workloads. From this, the image of the common Russian man emerged. Weighed down by life, death, work, and persecution Russian citizens clung to traditions and national pride. The works of famous Russian author, Fyodor Dostoyevsky often depicted the plight of the commoner in Russia through detailed literary works discussing deeper ideas of existentialism and theology as they faced turmoil, poverty, and oppression.

In spite of its struggles, depressions, and long inter-ethnic tensions, a formidable and powerful nation developed, boasting a rich culture of artistic prowess. Music, literature, folklore, and nationalistic pride became central elements of the nation. Following the spark of imperial expansion under the reign of Tsar Peter the Great, Russia progressed, conquered, fought, and strove to compete as a major world power alongside European nations. This era of modernization and westernization advanced the military, government, economy, and artistic culture leading into the mid eighteen-hundreds. By the 1850s, however, despite modernizations and the growth of

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Emergence of Russia* (London: English University Press Ltd, 1950), 2.

Russian cities, the vast majority of the Russian nation still lived in rural villages. Spurred on by their rich heritage and their nationalistic pride, a band of innovative composers arose who sought to capture elements of rural Russian life, build national pride, and prevent western ideals from seeping into their culture. Exactly 100 years after the death of Peter the Great, under the reign of Tsar Nicholas I, which lasted from 1825 until 1855, a movement known as Official Nationalism took shape which emphasized orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationalism.

Ernest Gellner, in his instructive work *Theory and Society*, provides a simple and effective definition for nationalism in a broad sense when he says, "Nationalism is essentially the transfer of the focus of man's identity to a culture which is mediated by literacy and an extensive, formal education system."<sup>2</sup> While embodying key elements of nationalism including national pride, patriotism, and devotion, Official Nationalism stood as a complex cultural identity for Russia. This unique breed of nationalism arose in part due to the heavy reliance upon the Russian Orthodox Church as the primary source of education and religious beliefs. All forms of nationalism rely upon the common and relatable traits of blood, cultural cohesiveness, and soil, a common land. In Russian at this time, the citizens and working class pooled together and supported their common beliefs and shared in the collaborative struggle of daily lives of strive and drudgery. Meanwhile, the citizens of Russia reinforced nationalism as its landscape grew, cities arose, and ingenuity blossomed. This, due in part to Westernizers bringing cultural elements and progress to Russia, led to a divide as influencers worked without a collective goal in mind. Despite the benefits of Westernization within culture as the country expanded and progressed, a certain school of thought arose as some intellectuals, caught up in the national phenomenon, believed Western ideas would taint the purity of Russian culture. Visual artists

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest Gellner, "Nationalism," *Theory and Society* 10, no. 6 (1981), 757.

including Viktor Vasnetsov, Ilya Repin, and Ivan Bilibin all worked toward the promotion of Russian culture alongside their literary counterparts Nikolay Nekrasov and Aleksey Tolstoy. Musically, the members of the *Moguchaya Kuchka* stood as promoters of a distinct Russian sound, free of outside influence, in their nation.

Independently, a number of musicians arose within the nation and began fighting for the preservation of purity within their culture. Five of the most influential and prolific composers with this stance were Mily Balakirev, Alexander Borodin, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Each of these individuals, whether through their performances, compositions, writings, critiques, or education combatted Westernization of the artistic landscape within Russia. While successful independently, the group became known as The Mighty Five, or *Kuchka*, as they all worked to fight westernization under the leadership of Tsars Nicholas I and Alexander II. While unrecognized on the political level, the nationalist ideals were reflected by each composer through distinct styles as they worked to represent the working class, the struggle of daily life, folk traditions, and patriotism. Among the work of these composers, opera, originally an Italian genre, served as the primary compositional method utilized in conveying official nationalism and in rallying the patriotism for the history of the Tsars. Due to its powerful combination of lyrics, music, costume, and scenery, composers could tell detailed stories through these musical dramas and interweave political elements and support throughout the performances. Each composer in the group endeavored to establish nationalism despite their differing compositional styles and use of a variety genres. In order to better grasp the impact the *Moguchaya Kuchka* had on Russian life and official nationalism, it is important to study each composer and inspect their compositions for strains of Russian culture.

Balakirev: Contemporaries, Education, and the Russian Folk Idiom

A foundational member of the composition group, Mily Balakirev's immense cultural impact can be seen through his influence on his musical contemporaries, his educational efforts, and his incorporation and utilization of the Russian folk idiom. As a leader and mentor within the *Moguchaya Kuchka*, Balakirev offered counsel and compositional advice to his counterparts while actively promoting nationalism within his country through outside avenues. "Balakirev could not be satisfied with only creative work, which even then did not flow from him in a strong uninterrupted stream. He longed for action and to influence others... he needed followers and disciples."<sup>3</sup> He achieved this discipleship role by taking Mussorgsky as a personal student prior to the official establishment of the *Moguchaya Kuchka* as a group. Outside of the Five, however, the composer also regularly corresponded with and influenced Pyotr Tchaikovsky, who stood as an outsider to the closed group.

Among Russian thinkers, writers, scholars, and musicians some stood by the Westernizers and believed that certain outside elements could, when blended with preexisting Russian culture, result in positive and beneficial changes. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, one such musical figure who followed this train of thought, did not oppose the use of Western musical ideas within his musical compositions and performances. Tchaikovsky received much criticism from the purely Russian school for many of his compositional endeavors; however, this did not prevent Balakirev from collaborating and corresponding with the outsider. "The greatest service Balakirev rendered Tchaikovsky was to foster his growth to the full musical individuality achieved in *Romeo and Juliet*."<sup>4</sup> Balakirev served as a pivotal member of the *Moguchaya Kuchka* as he sought to disciple his contemporaries rather than merely critique or combat their compositional styles. Despite their

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<sup>3</sup> M. O. Zetlin and Olga Oushakoff, "Balakirev," *The Russian Review* 4, no. 1 (1944), 75.

<sup>4</sup> David Brown, "Balakirev, Tchaikovsky and Nationalism," *Music & Letters* 42, no. 3 (1961): 233.

differing views regarding cultural influence on Russian music, Balakirev fostered Tchaikovsky's "expressive growth" giving him "the confidence to venture on an original, personal path of musical development."<sup>5</sup> While Balakirev often struggled to be an effective teacher, his association, connections, and compositional prowess not only affected the fellow members of the *Moguchaya Kuchka*, but also their outlying contemporary, Tchaikovsky. As a result, Tchaikovsky reconciled both the stricter nationalist teachings of Balakirev and his own cultivated musical style as he frequently composed dark, somber works exemplifying Russian culture, futility, and melancholy.

Despite lacking educational prowess, Balakirev held strong opinions on musical education and, in particular, on maintaining a pure school of Russian music. Fighting tirelessly to oppose German influences in art and culture by denouncing his colleagues Anton Rubinstein, Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich, and other Mendelssohnian-styled composers, Balakirev and his cohorts established The Free School of Music. He served as conductor, coordinator, and director of this small program which offered instruction in topics including improvisation, concertizing, and piano. While Russia in the eighteen-hundreds was attempting to refine its culture, and cultivate a sense of national pride, German composers simultaneously led the growing movement of German National Opera in Berlin as artists such as Richard Wagner revolutionized their own culture. Balakirev feared German influence in Russian culture and worked with the Russian Musical Society (RMS) to oppose any outside influences in order to properly preserve a pure Russian sound consisting of folk influenced compositional techniques.

Founded in 1859 with the help of the famous pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein in the growing city of Saint Petersburg, the RMS served as a cultural society dedicated to the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

preservation of Russian musical ideas and the fostering of young musical talent under the leadership of informed instructors. The composer was pivotal in maintaining a rigid musical education for younger Russian musicians. Balakirev's cultural appreciation and outside perspective was largely negative as he "equally disliked the Germans, the Jews, and the Poles."<sup>6</sup> The Free School program attempted to rid Russian music of outside influence by influencing a small part of the population with a hands-on educational system for young musicians. Having grown up in a poor clerk's family and studied under his mother, Balakirev embodied the struggle of the working class Russian people. The idealized gritty Russian life, wrought with struggle, hardship, and turmoil, was all too familiar to the artist. With a limited education, Balakirev lacked traditional counterpoint and harmonic training resulting in a looser approach to composition than many conservatory trained musicians of his time. Despite this, the young musician excelled at the piano and boasted impressive improvisational abilities which drove his free compositional process. Underprivileged and lacking a traditional education, Balakirev met Mikhail Glinka, the first widely recognized Russian composer, and Vladimir Stasov, an influential critic, as an adolescent and began to form his outlook on Russian culture and his distaste for outside influences. "He was a romantic reactionary, a misanthrope, and an individualist. He too, however, under the influence of Stasov and the entire spiritual atmosphere of the times, absorbed many ideas, emotions, and prejudices of the intelligentsia."<sup>7</sup>

Musically, Balakirev returned to his roots and cultural upbringing with his creation of the 1866 *Collection of Russian Folksongs*. While perhaps less explicitly patriotic than the larger works of Mussorgsky, Glinka, and Borodin, including *Boris Godunov*, *Life for the Tsar*, and

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<sup>6</sup> Zetlin and Oushakoff, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

*Prince Igor*, this collection served as a relatable set of pieces for the common man which cultivated cultural pride and expressed the struggle within the working-class. A relatively new influence on music, folksong anthologies became prominent in the seventeenth-hundreds and were a prevalent part of culture by Balakirev's lifetime. "The interest in folksong was widespread. The leading writers and poets turned to it as the most important source of Russian poetry and literary language."<sup>8</sup>

Russian folk tunes, embodying many characteristics of life and culture, peaked in importance and popularity in the 1870s as composers turned to the poetic volumes as influence for their compositions. Trutovsky Lineff and other contemporary artists composed musical poetry with harmonized folk melodies in an attempt to connect with the majority of Russian citizens. Balakirev's *Collection of Russian Folksongs* consisted of forty works for piano and voice. Additionally, the composer's *30 Songs of the Russian People* composed between 1898 and 1900, stood as a collection of accessible folk song harmonizations addressing various aspects of Russian legend and lore. Playing off the rise of poetic and folk popularity, Balakirev effectively composed within the folk idiom and thus related to similar works of the time period. Despite his limited and unstructured musical education, Balakirev sought to fight German influence within the RMS and established The Free School to combat outside ideology in the arts.

#### Cui: Music Critic and Russian Cultural Activist

Within the collective, perhaps the least remembered or praised member is César Antonovich Cui. Unlike his companions who championed immense works of Russian grandeur or provided compositional aid and inspiration, Cui contributed to his cause largely through

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald Seaman, "Russian Folksong in the Eighteenth Century," *Music & Letters* 40, no. 3 (1959), 254.

literary efforts. An impactful music critic and Russian propagandist in Belgium and France, Cui actually lacked Russian heritage. The son of a captured French officer, forced into Napoleons regime, Cui embraced his Russian home throughout his life and identified completely with Russian culture, but also regularly drew from French authors including Victor Hugo, Jean Richepin, and Alexandre Dumas. Despite his lineage, Cui's efforts in journalism and composition undoubtedly aided Russian nationalist efforts. Serving as a critic for the *St. Peterburgskive vedomosti*, the first Russian printed newspaper established in 1702, from 1864 until 1877, the composer and writer wrote in full support of the Russian government, promoted government agendas, and tore down compositions which utilized westernized compositional influence. As a professional, Cui taught as a professor at the Academy of Military Engineering, and as a civic, he composed music and wrote prolifically. As a disciple of Balakirev, Cui worked tirelessly to promote "the ideals and aesthetics"<sup>9</sup> of the *Moguchaya Kuchka* and tear down any opposition to the group including Western ideas that began creeping into musical compositions within the country. In particular, Cui targeted the compositions of Tchaikovsky, a cultural outsider, with particularly "rough critical treatment."<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, within his volume of ten operas, few focus on Russian themes. *A Prisoner in the Caucasus*, Cui's first operatic composition served as his most "Russian" composition. Based on Alexander Pushkin's poem, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, the opera was composed and revised in three versions due in part to its poor orchestration and inadequate length. Originally, the composition stood as a two-act work before Mily Balakirev orchestrated an overture and Cui revised the production to consist of three acts. Despite this somewhat messy compositional

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<sup>9</sup> Ates Orga, "César Cui: 25 Preludes for Piano, Op. 64," *Naxos About this Recording*.

<sup>10</sup> Brown. *Balakirev, Tchaikovsky and Nationalism*, 227.

process, this operatic work stands as Cui's most important and substantial musical accomplishment. The opera promoted Russian ideals across the nation as it was performed in Saint Petersburg as well as smaller venues nationwide. The work was inspired by Pushkin's narrative poem about a Byronic Russian officer and his inner conflict with his elitist lifestyle and his longing to escape to Caucasia for serenity and freedom. Not only was Pushkin's poem a tremendous success and a favorite among the Russian population, the narrative paired well with the expressive and impactful genre of opera resulting in a powerful conveyance of Russian life and struggle. In addition to Cui's large scale works, perhaps his greatest compositions arose as short works for the piano. His piano miniatures "look back nostalgically to the past, intimate rather than public."<sup>11</sup> While not large scale, these shorter works reflected upon elements of common Russian life with a certain, unmatched fondness. Without boasting virtuosity or grandeur, these miniatures, in their simplicity, effectively communicate the composer's pride for his nation and his longing to maintain its pure cultural identity. While brief, these works each embody folk influences reflect the simplicity of the Russian working class. These works seem counter intuitive for a man set on promoting his culture, but they each express a particular earnest and honest nature unlike many of his other compositions despite their lack of cultural influence. In his Op. 105 *Miniatures*, for example, the composer provides twenty brief works which are learnable by even an amateur and prove to be effective pedagogical pieces. One particular uncategorized four-hand keyboard composition discovered was dedicated to his grandson, reinforcing the nostalgic nature of his writings. Despite his father's heritage, Cui, steeped in Russian culture, worked consistently to promote Russian culture. In particular, Cui's literary presence stood as his most impactful method of cultural promotion, development of

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<sup>11</sup> Orga, *Naxos About this Recording*.

Official Nationalism, and the cleansing of Westernized musical technique during his time in the *Moguchaya Kuchka*.

### Mussorgsky: Capturing Common Russia

Modest Mussorgsky, born in 1839, embodied the concept of struggle. Despite his upper middle class upbringing, the composer faced relentless challenges of poverty, drunkenness, depression, anxiety, and death. In many ways, the grassroots composer embodied the idea of struggle and turmoil within the Russian working class. Despite his eventual popularity, his compositions brought Mussorgsky little income during his lifetime. His infamous *Pictures at an Exhibition* remained unpublished until five years after the composer's death. Nonetheless, the composer played a surprising role in capturing Russian emotion through his short and less idiomatic compositions.

Perhaps Mussorgsky's greatest contribution to Official Nationalism was his composition of *Boris Godunov*. This large scale operatic work, based on Aleksandr Pushkin's play, was composed in 1869 before it went through rigorous processing by censors. After its rejection, Mussorgsky drastically revamped the opera before its later performance five years later. Politically, this work proved to be monumental as the composer outlined and recreated Russia's dynastic struggles of the early seventeenth century while incorporating elements of Russian folk tunes and the working class. This composition, central to the Russian opera canon, solidified Mussorgsky's role as a political visionary.

Following a hostile rejection of *Boris Godunov*, the gifted composer spiraled into a bout of depression and a relapse into alcoholism resulting in a work that both displayed Mussorgsky's emotional ties to Russian culture and his weakened emotional state. Mussorgsky, while facing mental health issues, clearly captures the darkened mood of Russia during the nineteenth century

in his lesser-known songs of *Sunless*. Broken into six movements, this 1874 composition focuses on a series of emotions, anxieties, and loneliness that the composer faced. The first three movements, titled “Within Four Walls”, “You Did Not Know Me in the Crowd”, and “The Useless, Noisy Day Has Ended” all capture the composer’s tendencies of isolation and distaste for human interaction while facing a bout of depression. While not necessarily characteristic of the entirety of Russia, this downtrodden mindset captures the overall cloud of struggle that the common citizen faced. Drawing on the works of his literary friend Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov, Mussorgsky wrote some of his finest melodies for this short set of songs. In essence, *Sunless* captures the complexities of Mussorgsky’s mental health battles through a palate of subtle colors, thin texture, and deep feeling.

Continuing on his portrayal of struggle and Russian life, Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, effectively captured the folk genre within a unique series of piano compositions. Composed in 1874 and later orchestrated by Maurice Ravel in 1922, Mussorgsky’s best friend Victor Hartmann, an architect by trade and a talented and prolific painter, passed away unexpectedly resulting once again in a bout of depression, guilt, and anxiety for the struggling composer. The following year, an exhibition, organized in honor of the artist, inspired Mussorgsky’s gallery walk composition as he commemorated his lost friend and sought to portray Russian life in a collection of piano works. The opening and stately *Promenade* announces the collection of works, utilizes key Russian intervals including open fifths, and sets the scene of the composer’s leisurely stroll from picture to picture. A prime example of this folk influence can be seen in his piece *Gnomus* from the collection in which Mussorgsky portrays a crooked, malevolent gnome which appeared regularly in Russian folklore. The entirety of the set both pays homage to the composer’s deceased friend and centers on elements of Russian life

including The Great Gate of Kiev, Jewish culture, and characters of Russian tales. While slightly less direct than Cui's writings or Balakirev's educational and compositional impacts, Mussorgsky most successfully embodied Russian culture in his compositions and thus earned him a place in the *Moguchaya Kuchka* and subsequently in Russian history.

Official Nationalism emerged within Russia as the nation progressed rapidly and faced Westernization and industrialization. By briefly looking into the works of *Moguchaya Kuchka* members Miliy Balakirev, César Cui, and Modest Mussorgsky, one can effectively capture their contributions to nationalism within Russia. Balakirev's impact on his Russian contemporaries, his educational contributions, and his incorporation of the folk idiom all directly resulted in a pure school of Russian music and thinking. Cui's service as a critic, writer, and cultural activist led the prevention of Westernization among certain Russian composers. Lastly, Mussorgsky, a commoner, captured the life and culture of Russia in his compositions as he wrote in the folk idiom and retold of past struggles within the nation. Through studying the works of these three mighty composers, one can effectively garner insight into Russian culture and development.

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