

Oriental Elements in Russian Music and the Reception in Western Europe: Nationalism, Orientalism, and Russianness

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1. Introduction

Russia's position between East and West is significant in art music. As a part of modernization or Europeanization under Peter the Great, Russia imported art music from Europe. Since then, at least until the 1830s, art music in Russia was imported European music. Only after Glinka, a Russian composer of the first half of the nineteenth century, in particular in the time of the Russian Five¹ (a group of Russian nationalist composers of the second half of the nineteenth century), did Russian "national" music emerge. Since then, in a similar manner to Russian history of thought, there has been a dichotomy between Westernizers and Nationalists (Slavophiles) in the history of music; Anton Rubinstein, the founder of Saint Petersburg Conservatory, and Tchaikovsky were and are still regarded as Westernizers as opposed to the nationalist School of the Russian Five. Composers of the Five devoted all their energies to establishing Russian national music. At the beginning of the twentieth century, their works were exported to the West by Diaghilev, the impresario of the Ballets Russes, and enthusiastically received as "oriental" and "barbaric." On the other hand, Diaghilev did not give an important position to the works of Tchaikovsky. This paper is not a presentation of research results, but a preliminary consideration. It explores the relationship between nationalism, orientalism, and Russianness.

2. Universalism and Nationalism: Before and after Glinka

Russia imported art music from Europe as a part of Peter the Great's modernization or Europeanization. Since then, at least until the 1830s, the greater part of art music consisted of Western works. In the works of Mikhail Glinka (1804-57), both nationalism and orientalism in music evidently emerged. He was born into an aristocratic family, and had no need for employment. Namely, he was a typical dilettante musician of aristocratic background. After a few piano lessons with John Field (1782-1837), he traveled to Italy in 1830 to study vocal composition, and later turned to Siegfried Dehn in Berlin. During his stay in the West, he had the idea of writing a Russian opera. Returning from Europe, he wrote *A Life for the Tsar*.

At least until the 1830s in Russia, the idea was that art music was not national, but comprised only folk songs. According to American musicologist Richard Taruskin, "It is true that among the "enlightened" aristocracy of the period (and of course not only in Russia), a "national" style could

¹ "Moguchaia kuchka" (Mighty Handful) in Russian.

only mean an uncultivated or a rustic style" (Taruskin 1996, 197). In other words, they thought that art music was universal rather than national.

After Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar* was successfully premiered in 1836, however, the writer and music critic Odoyevsky (1804-69) remarked that

it became clear that this opera was going to provide an answer to a question which is of vital importance to the arts in general and to the arts in Russia in particular—namely that of the very existence of Russian opera, Russian music and, ultimately, the existence of national music. (Campbell 1994, 2-3)

This remark clearly demonstrates that there were people who were skeptical about the existence of national music. Nevertheless, this is the time when Russia's national consciousness was awakening and when the first national anthem was officially established under Tsar Nicholas I.

Glinka's second opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), less successful than *A Life for the Tsar*, was considered to be the first example of orientalism in Russian music. The opera is based on the 1820 poem of the same title by Alexander Pushkin and built on a binary opposition between the terrestrial world (Ruslan, Lyudmila) and the supernatural world (Chernomor). In Act 4, set in Chernomor's magical gardens, there is a trio of oriental dances (Turkish, Arabian, and Caucasian (the 'Lezginka')). This fairytale opera had an influence on the composers of the Five. In particular, after the model of this opera, Borodin, one of the composers of the Five, would write the opera *Prince Igor*.

3. Emerging Nationalism and Orientalism in Music: The Russian Five

The music world of Russia reached a turning point in the 1860s, which was characterized by the nationalization (Russianization) of music. On the one hand, nationalism in music was a question of the Russianization of musicians. For, in Russia in those days, the majority of musicians were foreigners, aristocratic dilettantes, and serf musicians. On the other hand, as a matter of course, nationalism in music was a question of the Russianization of musical compositions.

The nationalization of musicians was accomplished through the establishment of conservatories in centers of the Russian Empire (Saint Petersburg, 1862; Moscow, 1866). The Saint Petersburg Conservatory was founded by pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein, and the Moscow Conservatory was founded by pianist Nikolai Rubinstein (brother of Anton). Tchaikovsky was one of the first graduates of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, and he was also one of the first faculty members of the Moscow Conservatory. Accordingly, he was a symbol of the new system of higher musical education.

The nationalization of music compositions was consciously initiated by composers of the Russian Five after the example of Glinka. They were Balakirev, as leader, Cui, Borodin, Musorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov. Except for Balakirev, they were all amateur musicians and had other jobs, although Rimsky-Korsakov later assumed a position in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory (1871).

As mentioned above, in the history of Russian music, Anton Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky were, and are, widely regarded as Westernizers as opposed to the Five. In fact, Balakirev was opposed to professional training like that gained in conservatories. Rubinstein, for his part, rejected the idea of national music. For him, “national music existed exclusively in folk song and folk dance” (Maes 2002, 53). As Alexander Famintsyn (1841-1896), a professor of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory,² has stated:

Many people seem to think that we already have Russian instrumental music and even call it "national." But is music national just because it uses as themes for composition trivial dance tunes that automatically remind one of disgusting scenes in front of a saloon?... This only shows that our composers have completely failed to distinguish between national music and rustic folk music.... If the kernel from which an entire composition grows is not refined, then the work itself cannot be refined.... In no case can it serve as a model or ideal of instrumental music in general. But then today most of our composers scarcely seek the higher ideals. (Ridenour 1981, 150)

| | Professional training | National music | Musical taste in general |
|------------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| The Five | Disturbing | Positive | Progressive |
| Rubinstein, etc. | Essential | Negative | Conservative |

In comparison with Tchaikovsky who was conservatory-trained, Taruskin notes the attitudes of the Five towards composing. “Because of their outsider, nonprofessional status, members of the Balakirev circle [the Five] had no choice but to claim legitimacy on the strength of their ethnicity. They promoted a myth of Russian authenticity from which the conservatory was by definition excluded” (Taruskin 2010a, 786). In other words, they thought that professional training was a kind of Westernization, and if they did not receive it, then they were authentic Russian.

In the meantime, composers of the Russian Five used folk material extensively in their music. In addition, they composed many works with oriental elements. Balakirev's symphonic poem *Tamara*, Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*, Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite *Scheherazade*, and the dance of the Persian slave girls in Musorgsky's opera *Khovanshchina* are examples of Russian orientalism in music (all these works would be used in performances of the Ballets Russes or the Saisons Russes). As Francis Maes states, "In the West, orientalism is among the best-known aspects of Russian music, so much so, in fact, that it is widely considered a feature of the Russian national character" (Maes 2002, 80).

Why were Russian composers obsessed with orientalism? Taruskin points out two aspects. “In the first place, Russia was engaged throughout the nineteenth century in imperialistic expansion into Islamic territories,” first in the Caucasus and later in Central Asia. Unlike the British Empire, the Russian Empire, like the Ottoman and the Hapsburg Empires, was “formed by

² Later, he was satirized by Musorgsky (1839-1881) in his song "Rayok" along with N. I. Zarembo, F. M. Tolstoy, A. N. Serov, and Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna.

a continual process of aggrandizement into bordering territories. It occupied a single enormous landmass, and its various peoples intermingled (and intermarried) to a much greater degree than in the Western European empires.”

Secondly, “The orientalist trope with which they filled their music distinguished them from the composers of Western Europe, and gave them a means of competing with the older, more established traditions of European music” (Tarusukin 2010a, 392).

4. Diaghilev and Russian Music

There is yet another reason why orientalism is so readily identified with the Russian national character. At about the turn of the twentieth century, Russian music first came to the attention of the Western public in Paris. Presented chiefly with oriental works, the Parisians, unprompted, considered them to be "typically Russian." Understandably so: to them, Russia herself was part of the mysterious East, of oriental "otherness." (Maes 2002, 80-81)

Diaghilev is a Russian impresario, well known for organizing the *Saisons Russes* and the *Ballets Russes*, through which he had great influence on ballet, dancing, and the visual arts. However, it should be noted that many Russian musical works were presented to the Western public by him. For example, Mussorgsky’s two operas *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina* were introduced to Western audiences by Diaghilev for the first time. So, why did he present “chiefly oriental works”?

In 1906, Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) organized an exhibition of Russian art in Paris, which was at the beginning of the *Saisons Russes*, an unusual export campaign for the Russian arts. In 1907, he organized five Russian music concerts in Paris, and in 1908, presented a production of Musorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov* with Fyodor Chaliapin in the title role. Finally, in 1909, he presented Russian operas and ballets in Paris, and their tremendous success led him to organize a permanent ballet company called *Les Ballets Russes de Diaghilev*.

Of his company’s repertoire, Accocela says the following:

Best-loved of all, perhaps, was the excerpt from Borodin's Prince Igor, with its booming chorus, that was used for the “Polovtsian Dances.” And it was precisely for its primitivist reverberations that it was loved. (Accocela 1984, 325)

(...) in general, those that seemed most primitive were most popular. The great favorites of 1909 were *the Polovtsian Dances* and *Cleopatra*; of 1910, *Scheherazade* and *Firebird*; of 1911, *Petrouchka*. Especially notable is the response to *the Polovtsian Dances*, as this was the company's most, undiluted example of opera-house barbarism. The ballet was an immediate hit; "The audience jumped and shouted for joy." (Accocela 1984, 328)

Prince Igor (*Knyaz' Igor'*) is an opera in four acts with a prologue, composed by Alexander

Borodin. The libretto by the composer was adapted from the *The Ipatiev Chronicle* and *The Lay of the Host of Igor*, which recounts the campaign of Russian prince Igor Svyatoslavich against the Polovtsy in 1185. Thus, this opera was built on a binary opposition between Russians and the Polovtsy (Turkic nomadic people). The famous “Polovtsian Dances” that take place in Act 2 are set in the Polovtsian camp. The Russian army is defeated; Igor and his son Vladimir are taken captive. Before the “Dances,” the Polovtsian leader Khan Konchak offers Igor freedom if he will promise not to wage war against him again, but he refuses. Konchak calls for entertainment for his guest, with dances and choral accompaniment, and offers any of his women slaves to him. These are the famous “Polovtsian Dances.”

As Alexandre Benois, one of the leading artists of the Ballets Russes, wrote in his reminiscences, “the fundamental charm of the Polovtsian Camp lies, of course, in Borodin's music.”

The skilful blending of design of Eastern and imaginary themes, the gradual expansion of sound and the wild insistent rhythm—all this is presented in a transparent and simple form, without sophistication but also without a trace of old-fashioned technique.... Our wild Russian primitiveness, our simplicity and naiveté had proved to be more progressive, more elaborate and more refined than all that was being created in Paris—the most cultured of cities!” (Benois 1977, 299-300)

The “Polovtsian Dances,” sensationally premiered with choreography by Mikhail Fokin (Michel Fokine) on May 18, 1909 (on the day of the dress rehearsal), continuously remained in the repertory of the Saisons Russes (the Ballets Russes).

As a matter of fact, in 1909, not only were the “Polovtsian Dances” presented. In fact, the whole of Act 2 of the opera *Prince Igor*, which ends with the “Polovtsian Dances,” was presented. In the first season of Russian ballet in London (1911), the last work played at Covent Garden on the eve of the coronation of King George V (June 21) was "Scenes and Polovtsienne Dances from *Prince Igor*." Nesta MacDonald concludes that

according to every single daily, evening and Sunday paper account, *the Polovtsian Dances* were a riotous success from the moment they were first seen at Covent Garden, and the audience was reported as applauding wildly. (MacDonald 1975, 34)

In *Prince Igor*, Russian elements are contrasted with Polovtsian elements. However, both elements were altogether generally received as “barbaric,” “savage,” or “oriental. For example, an English writer and critic Arthur Symons wrote of the Ballets Russes (not directly but through implication concerning the “Polovtsian Dances”):

The primitive and myth-making imagination of the Russians shows a tendency to regard metaphors as real and share these tendencies with the savage, that is to say with the savagery that is in them, dependent as they are on rudimentary emotions. Other races, too long civilized, have accustomed

themselves to the soul, to mystery. Russia, with centuries of savagery behind it, still feels the earth about its roots, and the thirst in it of the primitive animal. It has lost none of its instincts, and it has just discovered the soul. (Symons 1923, 287)

After all, “the Russians' brand of barbarism was frequently identified as ‘oriental’” (Accocela 1984, 332), and, as Frolova-Walker points out:

Western reception of Russian music, from Diaghilev onwards, failed to see the distinction between the "Russian" and the "Oriental" styles. This was partly because Western audiences lacked the experience of their Russian counterparts—they were unable to build up a repertoire of associations through operas that unmistakably presented the opposition between the Russian and the Oriental on stage. Nevertheless, the first misleading impressions could have been overcome with time, if it were not for the fact that Western audiences received Russian music itself as something exotic—as a product of the Orient. (Frolova-Walker 2007, 329)

5. Tchaikovsky and Nationalism, Russianness

In the repertoire of the Ballets Russes, works of Tchaikovsky were missing until 1921 when *Sleeping Beauty* in Paris was presented.³ An exception was the final (fourth) movement of the *Second Symphony* included in the divertissement *Les Orientales*, which premiered June 25, 1910 in Paris. This movement was written with a Ukrainian folk song “The Crane” under influence of Glinka's fantasy *Kamarinskaya* and was well received by composers of the Russian Five. That is to say, it was one of his most “nationalistic” and most joyous pieces of music.

In 1908, when Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* was presented to Western audiences for the first time, Diaghilev first had a plan for a retrospective of Russian opera. In addition to a revival of *Boris Godunov*, his initial plan included Rimsky-Korsakov's *Pskovityanka*, Borodin's *Prince Igor*, Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, and Serov's *Judith*.

That Chaikovsky was absent from this veritable retrospective of Russian operatic achievement, and that Rimsky was to be represented by his earliest and most typically "kuchkist" [the Five] opera, speaks volumes about the nature of Diaghilev's plan and his (correct) reading of Parisian taste...the essential points—that in France, Chaikovsky was box-office poison and that the French valued Russian music above all for its exoticism—are manifestly true and easily corroborated. (Taruskin 1996, 545-546, 526)

Michel Calvocoressi (1877-1944), a French-born music critic and specialist of Russian music, and for a period, an assistant to Diaghilev, recalled his “earliest impressions of Russian music”:

I owe my earliest impressions of Russian music to Tchaikowsky's *Pathetic Symphony* and to Balakiref's

³ In London in October 1911, *Swan Lake* was staged; however, it did not remain in the company's repertory.

Tamara, both of which I heard in the middle nineties; the symphony I loathed, and *Tamara* struck me as a thing of haunting beauty, never to be forgotten. For quite a long time I used to think of it daily, as I did of Wagner's music, always with a thrill and longing to hear it again. Borodin's *Steppes of Central Asia*, his *Polovtsian Dances*, and his first String Quartet also created deep and lasting impressions—his symphonies, at that time, were not played in France, and it was much later that I got to know them. (Calvocoressi, 148)

Thus, he also preferred the Five to Tchaikovsky.

Walter Nouvel (Вальтер Федорович Нувель 1871-1949), music critic and secretary to Diaghilev, co-wrote with Arnold Haskell a biography of Diaghilev (Haskell 1935) and gave an account of his meeting with French composers Dukas (1865-1935) and d'Indy (1851-1931) around 1906 stating that

at this period, French musicians were enthusiastic about Russian music, but only for that of the famous Five, the so-called "kuchka" and its adepts. Tchaikovsky was loathed. They found him trivial and vulgar, and refused to see in him any Russian characteristics. It was in vain that I told them that we considered him to be the most national of our composers, that he alone knew how to render the soul of the Russian nineteenth century and find a spontaneous and sincere echo in the people, while the music of the Five was a somewhat artificial reconstruction of popular melodies, strongly Germanized by the influence of Liszt and Wagner. (Haskell 1935, 147)

| | French musicians | Nouvel |
|-------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Tchaikovsky | Trivial, vulgar | The most national |
| The Five | National | Germanized, artificial |

However, this was not his personal opinion. For example, later Stravinsky expressed sympathy for Tchaikovsky, so as to promote the production of *The Sleeping Beauty* (Taruskin 1996, 1532-1534).

However, is Tchaikovsky really “the most national” Russian composer? Taking into account Nouvel's claims, an argument of Frolova-Walker gives insight into where we should place Tchaikovsky in the history of Russian music.

According to Frolova-Walker, with Serov's *The Power of the Fiend*, Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin* presents “an alternative Russian musical style to that offered by Kuchka” [the Five].

Tchaikovsky's Russianness in *Onegin* is the musical portrait of the gentry of Pushkin's time; Serov's *Fiend* depicts the contemporary life of Russian merchants who inhabit the opera's literary source, a play by Alexander Ostrovsky. Both operas are remarkably homogeneous in style, and because their musical idiom was so familiar to audiences of Russian national opera than any Kuchka fantasy about the Russia of fairy-tales and epics. But given the environment created by Cui and by the critics who successfully propagated his views in the West, Serov and Tchaikovsky were now unsuited to be representatives of

Russia in the West, as Diaghilev was soon to find out. (Frolova-Walker 2007, 46)

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------|--|
| | | Depicting |
| The Five | Fantastic | The Russia of fairytales and epics |
| Tchaikovsky, Serov | Realistic | Nineteenth century (contemporary life) |

There is some truth in what she wrote. In fact, composers of the Five had a tendency to favor fairytales. They prefer the Russia that existed before Peter the Great, before the beginning of Westernization, to the Russia which came after him. The opera *Prince Igor* describes a twelfth-century Russia, *Boris Godunov*—the Time of Troubles (1605~13), *Khovanshchina*—on the eve of the holding of real power by Peter the Great.

They were nationalist in music indeed. However, this is not only the way of nationalism. Nationalism and exoticism were possibly opposite sides of the same coin for them because “for French composers, orientalism was exclusively a means of marking the other. For Russian composers, depending which way they were facing, orientalism could also be a means of marking the self” (Taruskin 2010a, 393).

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