



The Russian Romantics — a music style that changed the world

Thursday, January 04, 2007

By **DAVID FOIL**
for **The Montclair Times**

If it had not happened, no one could have imagined anything so magnificent, so sensuous, so perfectly apt. Russian music found its identity, at long last, at the height of the Romantic age, in an explosion of genius that was as convincing as it was wildly improbable. This was not an august school of music, like the ones that had emerged to the west in Europe beginning two centuries earlier. The Russian school was suddenly just there, impatient and brimming with ideas, proud and exuberant, the workshop of visionary musicians who were essentially making it up as they went along.

Musicologists like to put Russian Romantic music in a box called "nationalism," but the new sound-world that emerged in the wake of the country's first great composer, Mikhail Glinka (1804-57), seems like much more than a historical fact. It transformed all of Western music. The Russian Romantic era in music ended a century ago, lasting about 70 years, but hardly a day goes by that its impact is not felt in the music we hear.

To define Russian Romantic music is virtually to start an argument, for it did emerge as a symbol of cultural identity and its development was shadowed with an ongoing debate about what really did constitute "Russian" music. You know it, perhaps, for its most predictable qualities — soulful melodies, kaleidoscopic colors, startling textures, a perfumed atmosphere and an all-pervading intensity that threatens to shake its foundations. Movie music, you might say — and the Russian Romantics did have a profound impact on composers who wound up in Hollywood in the golden age.

The miracle of Russian Romantic music is that it became, immediately, so difficult to describe. Was it the work of that tightly wound circle of composers who were Glinka's disciples, known variously as "The Mighty Five"? Was it the work of the most popular of all Russian composers, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, whom his compatriots derided for his European pretensions? Is it defined by the influence of folk melody and dance rhythms? Or Orthodox chant? Is it predominantly Asian? Or European? Is it pagan or holy? Is it all of the above? In three imaginative and sumptuous concerts, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's (NJSO) Winter Festival of Russian Romantic music will answer that question in the only way possible — the intoxicating sound of the music itself.

The dramatic birth of Russian Romantic music came in 1836, in one stunning event, when the 32-year-old Glinka premiered his opera "A Life for the Tsar" in St. Petersburg. Though he had studied in Europe and lived for a time in Italy and Germany, Glinka received his training in his native St. Petersburg, and he numbered among his friends the influential Russian poets Pushkin and Zhukovsky. "A Life for the Tsar" was about a peasant named Ivan Susanin who saved the life of the first tsar of the Romanov dynasty, a subject that Zhukovsky recommended to the composer. Glinka responded with a thrilling, irresistible opera that not only had a Russian subject — and a patriotic one — it had a score that sounded somehow like the music Russian people knew in their bones. We can only imagine the effect this had on the immense culture that was emerging in Russia in the 19th century. Glinka reaffirmed his discovery six years later with an even greater opera — "Russlan and Ludmilla," based on Pushkin's fairy tale — that incorporates elements of indigenous Asian music that filtered in from the eastern and southern reaches of the Russian Empire. There, simply, is the genesis: a cosmopolitan composer comes home and finds his true inspiration.

Glinka's impact was immediate, and his example inspired five remarkable and very different composers who represented the next generation — Mily Balakirev, Alexander Borodin, Cesar Cui, Modeste Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who constituted "The Mighty Five." Cui (1835-1918) was the oldest, and he outlived the other four, though he is the least interesting. Balakirev was the only professional musician in the group. If Rimsky-Korsakov became the most popular and enduring "name" of the five, Mussorgsky has emerged as perhaps the one truly visionary composer among them. Borodin was a chemist by trade, and he died when he was only 53, but not before writing some of the most beautiful and haunting music of the age.

"Russian-ness" was everything to these five composers, whether it was expressed through Rimsky-Korsakov's lush orchestral fabric or Mussorgsky's visceral and ear-bending sense of drama. Argumentative, difficult and proudly Russian, they even tended to each other: Rimsky Korsakov completed Borodin's opera "Prince Igor," unfinished at his death, and made a virtually glamorous version of Mussorgsky's stark, astonishing epic "Boris Godunov" that made the opera more palatable to audiences of the day. Mussorgsky's music, so uncompromising and original, has had to bear the good intentions of those who wanted to help it by smoothing away its rough edges. Though his genius is now recognized and allowed to speak for itself, Mussorgsky has benefited from these efforts, most notably Maurice Ravel's ravishing orchestration of his massive solo piano work, "Pictures at an Exhibition."

The influence of "The Mighty Five" is incalculable, literally and figuratively. Rimsky-Korsakov became a great teacher and eventually head of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, one of the great launching pads in Russian music. Among its graduates is Maestro Neeme Jarvi, the NJSO's music director who is conducting all the Winter Festival concerts.

Circling "The Mighty Five," of course, was Tchaikovsky, their contemporary in every way but a very different musician. The clichés about Tchaikovsky come thick and fast — principally, that he was too European for Russian tastes, and that his neurotic nature and homosexuality somehow feminized his music. This is nonsense. Tchaikovsky did take his cues from the European tradition: he adored Mozart, and he loved Italy and all things Italian. He did favor piercing, expressive beauty over anything that reeked of bombast and grandiosity — he once said that he would have traded all of Wagner's "Ring" for the pleasure of hearing one of Grieg's delicate little piano pieces — but few composers could effortlessly tap the raw musical power that was always at Tchaikovsky's disposal. He had little in common with "The Mighty Five," personally or professionally, except that he was every bit the Russian nationalist each of them was. If you think of his music only in terms of "The Nutcracker" or the more delicate moments from his exquisite ballet scores "Swan Lake" and "Sleeping Beauty," you miss the virility and imagination that inform his seven symphonies, his concertos for piano and violin, his vivid operas, and his achingly poetic, intensely Russian songs.

If Tchaikovsky had an artistic heir, it was Sergei Rachmaninoff, who emerged in the 1890s as a promising young composer — if, by no means, a sure thing. In fact, Rachmaninoff's first big break as an orchestral composer ended in complete disaster: the world premiere of his Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 13, a fierce, broodingly dramatic work that seems to have been sabotaged in its first performance by a conductor (Alexander Glazunov) who might have been drunk. Rachmaninoff was so wounded by the experience that he became blocked, remaining so until he was famously "cured" by hypnotic therapy around the turn of the 20th century and proceeded to write the beautiful, wistfully Romantic works that define him — the Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3, the Symphony No. 2 and much of his solo piano music. In fact, Rachmaninoff's early works — specifically, that benighted First Symphony, a craggy masterpiece that only recently has been given its due — are powerfully "Russian," both in musical materials and in their atmosphere.

If Rachmaninoff is the sunset of the Russian Romantic style, beyond him it would splinter in fascinating ways. Igor Stravinsky, a Rimsky-Korsakov student, carried the Russian Romantic style into a new age, and the eccentric Alexander Scriabin dialed up its intensity almost to breaking point. The end came with the Russian Revolution and ascendancy of contemporary composers such as Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich in the Soviet era. Despite the connection to Tsarist culture of the great Romantic masters, the Soviet establishment revered and honored them ... even if Glinka's "A Life for the Tsar" was revised and retitled "Ivan Susanin," to make it politically correct.

Such concerns now fade into political history. The music remains, as ripe and electrifying today as every cliché it has inspired — onion-dome churches, bubbling samovars, troikas gliding through moonlit snowscapes, stables and jewels, fantastic legends, pungent colors, fearless bravery and immense passion. It's the sound of a great culture, embracing life.

David Foil is a freelance music writer.

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