COMPOSERS AS STORYTELLERS:
THE INEXTRICABLE LINK BETWEEN LITERATURE AND MUSIC IN 19TH CENTURY RUSSIA

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Ashley Shank
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COMPOSERS AS STORYTELLERS:
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Ashley Shank
Thesis

Approved: ___________________________________________  Accepted: ___________________________________________

Advisor  Dr. Brooks Toliver
Interim Dean of the College  Dr. Dudley Turner

Faculty Reader  Mr. George Pope
Dean of the Graduate School  Dr. George R. Newkome

School Director  Dr. William Guegold
Date
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CHAPTER I

OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECULAR ART MUSIC IN RUSSIA

Introduction

As an avid listener of Russian music I often noticed the tendency of Russian composers to produce music that tells a story, often a specifically Russian story. This proclivity is evident not only in vocal works such as solo songs or opera, but in the story choice for ballets and programmatic instrumental works.

I sought to understand why Russians were so attracted to storytelling. As Richard Taruskin says in the introduction to his article, “Some Thoughts on the History and Historiography of Russian Music:” “We are simply curious to know and understand the music we love as well as we possibly can, and eager to stimulate interest in it.”¹

Historically, Russia (and later the Soviet Union) has been dominated by totalitarian regimes and the flow of information into and out of the country has often been strictly controlled. The setting apart of Russian music (and the Russian arts as a whole) has helped create its mystique. But, in the opinion of musicologist Richard Taruskin, it has also marginalized the music. The music of Russian composers has become defined by how well it fulfills a stereotypical set of stylistic traits.² As Taruskin says: “Verdi and


Wagner are heroic individuals. Russians are a group.” He elaborates on this perception in the preface to his seminal book on Russian music, *Defining Russia Musically*.

It is a myth of otherness. Tardy growth and tardier professionalism, remote provenience, social marginalism, the means of its promotion, even the exotic language and alphabet of its practitioners have always tinged or tainted Russian art music with an air of alterity, sensed, exploited, bemoaned, asserted, abjured, exaggerated, minimized, glorified, denied, reveled in, traded on, and defended against both from within and without. From without Russian music was (and is) often preemptively despised and condescended to (witness the vagaries of Tchaikovsky’s critical reception), though just as often it has been the object of intense fascination and of occasional cults and crazes (witness the same Tchaikovsky’s ineradicable presence in the concert hall, or the Diaghilev-ignited craze that launched Stravinsky’s spectacular career.) From within the world of Russian music there has been a great tendency to celebrate or magnify “difference,” in compensation for an inferiority complex that was the inevitable product of its history, but just as often in sincere certainty of Russia’s cultural, even moral superiority and its salvific mission.

Russian music has thus been held apart and—to borrow Taruskin’s term—“consigned to the ghetto.” But in actuality the Russian intelligentsia, (of which authors and composers were members), were highly cosmopolitan and saw themselves as part of the European community. Many of the trends we associate with Russian music were not the result of some unique and original expression but rather were important trends across Europe during the nineteenth century. Nationalism, program music, and the interest in orientalism/exoticism, all had their origins in Western Europe. Russians then took these models and made them personal and national forms of expression.

In this paper I argue that the inclination to produce music that tells a story can be attributed to the close development of the Russian literary and musical traditions during the nineteenth century as the small educated class (specifically in St. Petersburg and later

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4 Taruskin, *Defining*, xiv.
Moscow) sought to create arts that were not only equivalent in quality to those produced in Western Europe but reflective of their personal aesthetics, expressive of their growing feelings of nationalism, and acceptable to their totalitarian state.

In Chapter One I will discuss the unique socio-political situation in which the arts developed in Russia. A special emphasis will be placed on the influence of nationalism as it developed during the nineteenth century and the effect of censorship by the monarchy. In Chapter Two the close relationship between literature and music while they developed in Russia will be discussed. The unique environment in which high arts were created in Russia by a small group of educated individuals and their influence on each other, (both personally and on the art), will be underscored. Of particular importance in this chapter is the development of the “Russian soul.” In the final chapter, “Musicians as Storytellers,” the importance of storytelling in Russian music will be discussed. Examples will be given of the specific Russian programs on which Russian composers based their musical works.5

The Introduction of Secular High Art

First, some background information as to why Russians sought to create a national idiom in literature and music and the obstacles they faced in doing so will be helpful.

Little exchange with Western Europe occurred prior to the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1533-84). The powerful Orthodox Church successfully opposed the growth of secular music well into the seventeenth century. Pictorial evidence of skomorokhi (jongleurs) exists, but the Russian Church persecuted them, believing they were inspired

5 These programs included works of Russian literature/poetry, fairytales, and historical events. When I write of “Russian” programs, I mean Russia in the Imperial sense of the nineteenth century.
by the devil. As a result, secular instrumental music did not develop gradually as in Western Europe because there was no use of musical instruments in the Orthodox Church and the instruments of the minstrel tradition were ordered destroyed. The music and instruments were not completely expunged; they continued to flourish in isolated rural communities.6

Medieval Russian literature was written in the Old Russian language or in Church Slavonic. Most works of this time were religious in character, particularly stories of the lives of the saints; an example of this is “Life of Alexander Nevsky.” Bylïnas, oral folk epics which combined the pagan and Christian traditions of Russia, were also popular.

Beginning with Peter I, (Peter the Great who ruled from 1682-1725), Russian rulers sought to modernize—which ultimately meant Westernize—Russia.7 During the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796) an interest in folk life and lore began to “convert this burgeoning national consciousness into a more specifically nationalistic


7 Andrew Wachtel writes, “When Peter the Great began to pursue his crash program of modernization and Europeanization at the beginning of the eighteenth century, his primary goal was to make Russia militarily, economically, and socially competitive with the Western powers. Cultural competitiveness appears to have been of no concern; indeed, Peter was clearly suspicious of intellectual activity that lacked obvious practical utility. Nevertheless, as has proved to be the case in every modernizing country, it turned out to be impossible to import Western technical achievements without also adopting Western cultural practices. The irony of Russia’s subsequent development, however, is that in the long run it appears that Russia succeeded in catching up to the West solely in the cultural sphere, particularly in the areas of music and literature. It is only in this sphere that, after a necessary period of apprenticeship, the Russians have consistently been able to maintain at least an even balance of trade, exporting finished cultural products more or less equal in value to those they have imported. Undoubtedly, and for good reason, it is not Russian scientists and social, economic, or political thinkers who are recognized in a positive fashion outside Russia but rather writers like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev, and composers like Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich. Wachtel, “Introduction” in Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature, and Society. Ed. Andrew Baruch Wachtel. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998. xi-xvi, ix.
This included the development of a Russian literary language different from Church Slavonic, the collection of folksongs, and a growth in the interest of Russian history.

Russia was essentially two nations: the small educated classes who spoke French and were educated either in Europe or by European tutors, and the peasantry, who were largely illiterate. The Russian gentry included 440,000 people in 1811. This included the dvoryantsovo (gentry) and the members of the priesthood. The remaining 17.5 million people in Russia were peasants. Most peasants were uneducated and 10.5 million were serfs. Again, Richard Taruskin succinctly explains this social phenomenon:

To begin with, Russian national consciousness was an aspect of Westernization. The same eighteenth century that witnessed the Petrine reforms and their aftermath—the construction of an Italianate “window on the West” atop the Neva marshes at the cost of untold thousands of indentured lives, the adoption of “German” technology and the quasi-militarization of civilian life in the name of the bureaucratic “service state,” the importation and imitation of foreign artifacts of every description—was also the century in which the cultivated Russian elite first established a national literary language distinct from the archaic ecclesiastical idiom, first wrote up the national history, first began to look upon the livers of those indentured lives as repositories of a tradition worth knowing and preserving. At a time when the inhabitants of the Russian countryside thought of themselves simply as “Christian folk” (krest’yanye) or “the Orthodox” (pravoslavnïye) and would never have dreamed of claiming their barin (the owner of the land to which they were confined by law) as their countryman, the most enlightened (that is, Enlightened) and Westernized barins were already thinking of their “souls,” together with themselves, as constituting the narod, the Russian “people.” In the words of Prince Antioch Dmitriyevich Kantemir (1709-44), Russia’s first belletrist in the modern Western sense and author of an influential “Letter on Nature and Humanity,” noble and serf were united by “the same blood, the same bones, the same flesh.”

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9 Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music*, 356. The Russian system of nobility during the early 19th century was quite confusing. All university graduates were considered titled, however their titles were non-hereditary.

1812 was a defining time in the emergence of the Russian nation and nationalism. Napoleon was on the way to Moscow and Count Rostopchin, governor of Moscow, felt it was necessary to take on a non-military role and “influence the spirit of the people, arouse it, and prepare it for every sacrifice needed to save the fatherland.”\textsuperscript{11} Posters were delivered to Muscovites’ homes and read aloud in the surrounding towns and village. His posters constructed “an image of a Russian fit to withstand Napoleonic forces.” He describes a strong, hardy people (as contrasted with the small, fashionable French) among whom even the women will fight to defend their homes, describes past military victories, and the strength of the Russian church. This seems to have evoked patriotism in the upper classes who realized they shared more culture with the invaders than the hardy peasants of Rostopchin’s description.\textsuperscript{12} Frolova-Walker observes that the only characteristic that was clearly revealed in Rostopchin’s description was endurance, and that “French refinement was losing out for the first time to the Russian coarseness.”\textsuperscript{13} But Russian identity was still not formed; during the 1820’s interest in it was “idealistic, superficial and fleeting.” As V. Panayev noted, “the majority of our so-called fashionable society…was distinguished by their utter frivolity, their absence of all culture, their constant chattering in French, their successful master of the external forms of European dandyism, and the reading of the novels of the Pol de Coque.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Frolova-Walker, \textit{Russian Music}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{12} Frolova-Walker, \textit{Russian Music}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{13} Frolova-Walker, \textit{Russian Music}, 5.
Nikolay Karamzin’s *History of the Russian State* (published 1818-1826) was commissioned by the government and “met a great need for historical understanding—more accurately, a longing for national self-affirmation; the assurance that Russia had a solid history and played an active role on the international stage.” At the same time, members of the gentry class began to write in the contemporary Russian language. Early authors included Prince Antiochus Kanemir, Vasily Trediakovsky, Gavrill (Gavrillo) Derzhavin, Mikhail Lomonosov, Alexander Sumarokov, and Denis Fonvizin. These men wrote poems, plays, and fables. Several also composed opera libretti for Italian composers living in Russia. Alexander Radishchev and the aforementioned Nikolai Karamzin wrote philosophical and historical texts that further crystallized a sense of national identity.

Taruskin states “the secular fine art of music came late to Russia. To all intents and purposes, its history there begins in 1735.” Empress Anne (Anna Ioannovna reigned 1730-40) established the first permanent opera troupe in Russia in 1735. This began the dominance of foreign musicians that would last until at least the 1860’s. Foreign musicians were dominant and the Imperial court and nobility paid them high salaries. The highest position at court, that of Kapellmeister was held by a foreign musician including several notable composers: Raupach, Manfrendini, Galuppi, Traetta, Paisello, Sarti, and Cimarosa. The development of high culture only impacted a small

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16 Taruskin, *Defining*, xi.

portion of the population. Richard Ridenour explains the beginnings of secular art music in Russia:

When secular art music first appeared in Russian society in the seventeenth century, it arrived not as an organic outgrowth of the rich tradition of Russian folk and church music but as an import from the West. The following two centuries witnessed the gradual spread of a taste for operatic and concert music in Russia, the development of native musicians to supplement or replace performers and teachers, and finally the emergence of native composers capable of making original contributions to the art.\(^\text{18}\)

The performances at court did not affect the wider culture of Russia; as Taruskin goes on to explain:

The practice of European art music had little or no role to play in the formation of Russian national consciousness, which did not even begin to be a factor in Russian culture until the reign of Catherine the Great was well under way. It was only the spread of Europeanized mores and attitudes beyond the precincts of the court, and the increased Russian presence in Europe following the Napoleonic wars, that really rooted European high culture in Russian urban centers and led beyond receptivity to actual Russian productivity in the European arts.\(^\text{19}\)

Outside of foreigners in high positions, the only individuals who pursued music as a profession were serfs. Nobles began to compete to have the best serf companies of actors, singers, and musicians. Talented serf children were identified at a young age and trained either in Russia, or in exceptional cases abroad, by European musicians. Music produced in Russia at this time, whether by foreigners residing in Russia or by native Russian musicians, consisted of copies of the dominant Italian operatic style. The first Russians to produce European art music were Maxim Sozontovich Berezovsky (1745-77) and Dmitriy Bortnyansky (1751-1825).\(^\text{20}\) Both were the children of serfs from the same

\(^\text{18}\) Ridenour 5.

\(^\text{19}\) Taruskin, *Defining*, xi.

\(^\text{20}\) Taruskin, *Defining*, xii.
village in the Ukraine and were trained in Italy. Each composed Italian-style opera serie; however neither man’s operas were performed in Russia. In Russia, both are known for their sacred choral concertos, and each man served as choirmaster of the Imperial Court Chapel. Danill Kashin (1769-1841), was born a serf and trained as a musician. He was liberated in 1798 and led an active life in Moscow, directing concerts, composing, publishing a musical journal, and collecting folksongs. These men are representative of the first generation of Russian musicians, men of low birth, trained by European musicians, either in Russia or Italy, who practiced their art in “conditions of indentured, quasi-military service.”

The growth of industry led many peasants to move to the cities. In St. Petersburg traditional folk music was combined with European art songs and dances. The new genre was known as rossiyskaya pesnya, or “Russian song” because the texts were in Russian. Instead of the traditional heterophonic folk harmonizations these songs generally were notated with Western style chordal accompaniments. The first collections of folksong were published at the end of the eighteenth century. These were available in Western

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21 Taruskin, Defining, xii.

22 The success of these men is exceptional. Serfs trained as musicians, though sometimes attaining remarkable skills, were still considered mere servants. Many found their unique social situation difficult to deal with, they were highly educated but still members of the lowest social class. One virtuoso violinist was once required to play the same concerto for three hours by his master, when he asked for a break he was flogged in front of the guests. He then went to the kitchen and chopped off the fingers of his left hand with a knife, reportedly saying “Damnation to talent when it brings no freedom from slavery.” Another story is of two serf brothers (a cellist and violinist) in the service of the Vonliariarskys. When the cellist became somewhat famous in St. Petersburg he was recalled to the estate, and along with his brother, forbidden to leave. Richard Stites, “The Domestic Music: Music at Home in the Twilight of Serfdom,” Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature, and Society. Ed. Andrew Baruch Wachtel. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998: 198.

23 Taruskin, “Defining,” xii.

24 Maes 15.
Europe as Rossini, Hummel, and Beethoven used songs from the collection by Nikolai Lvov.25

Nicholas I and the Rise of the Noble Dilettantes

The reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855) is often referred to as “thirty years of stagnation”26 Despite Nicholas’ controls, this is the era in which Russians finally produced secular arts equal to their Western European counterparts and began to crystallize theories of national identity.

The Decembrist’s launched their revolt on the day Nicholas I ascended to power. Furthermore, his father, Paul I, had been assassinated.27 The events of his childhood and advent of his rule seemed to greatly affect him. Nicholas I earned a reputation as a conservative ruler and censorship was commonplace and stringent. Nicholas ordered that Russian replace French as the official language at court functions and introduced policies to spread the language and customs to the non-Russian areas of the empire.28 On April 2, 1833 his Minister of Education, Gergey Ulvarov, distributed the official doctrine of

25 Maes 15.
26 Maes 12.
27 The policies of his father, Paul I, were quite unpopular with the aristocracy. Paul was convinced people were plotting to assassinate him. On March 23, 1801 Paul was murdered after he refused to sign his abdication. He was then struck with a sword, strangled, and trampled. His son Alexander I, (age 23) was in the castle at the time and reportedly told by one of the assassins “Time to grow up! Go and Rule!” Nicholas I became Tsar after the premature death of his brother Alexander who died unexpectedly while in Southern Russia for his wife’s health. Rumors persisted for many years that he had not if fact died, but that he had disappeared to become a hermit in the wake of plots against him. Unknown to all but a few individuals, his brother Constantine had abdicated the throne in 1822. Upon learning this, Nicholas required the oath of allegiance be sworn to him. The Decembrist’s seized the opportunity and revolted. Nicholas brutally suppressed the rebellion. The surviving leaders were executed and many others sent to exile in Siberia.
Nicholas’ rule: “orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality.” A common Russian history textbook of the time describes the character of the Russian people as consisting of:

…profound and quiet piety, boundless devotion to the throne, obedience to the authorities, remarkable patience, a lucid and solid intelligence, a kind and hospitable soul, a gay temper, courage amidst the greatest dangers, finally, national pride which had produced the conviction that there was no country in the world better than Russia, no ruler mightier than the Orthodox Tsar.²⁹

Interestingly, it was this time period in which noble dilettantes began to produce literary works and musical compositions equal to their European counterparts.³⁰ The “fathers” of Russian poetry and music (Pushkin and Glinka) and their contemporaries were members of the aristocracy. Although many took their art very seriously it was not their formal occupation, nor would the pursuance of such an occupation have been socially acceptable at this stage in Russian cultural development. Instead, most of the literati and composers held posts in the government as was expected of someone of their social status.³¹

Some background on the unique education and situation of the Russian aristocratic class will help the reader understand the unique environment in which Russian music and literature/poetry developed. The aristocratic classes of Russians were a uniquely multilingual/multicultural group. The Russian aristocracy often absorbed and


³⁰ Pushkin’s career had started a few years earlier, however most of his works fit within the reign of Nicholas I.

³¹ For example in order to have A Life for the Tsar performed Glinka had to renounce any financial claims to it. In return he received a diamond ring, “glory”, and a long standing financial claim was finally resolved in his favor. (Gasparov 26) Tchaikovsky also commented on how the lack of opportunity to be a professional musician affected the quantity of Glinka’s output. He wrote to Grand Prince Konstantin Konstantinovich “Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann created their immortal compositions exactly in the same fashion as a shoemaker makes his shoes, i.e. by working day to day, and mostly in order. Had Glinka been a shoemaker rather than a barin [gentleman], he would have written fifteen operas instead of two (excellent as they are), and ten or so wonderful symphonies on top of that. I almost weep with frustration when I think what Glinka could have given to us had he not been born into the gentry milieu of the time before the liberation of the serfs.” Qtd. Gasparov 23.
intermarried with the aristocracy of dominated nations. Russian aristocrats often traveled and studied abroad. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the official language at court was French. As a result members of the upper class were fluent in French, often achieving greater fluency than in their own language.

These men were often educated at the Lycees, secondary schools modeled on the French system of education. Latin was studied as a basic at these schools; educated Russians generally studied the language either in schools or privately for four to eight years. Greek myth was also studied (although generally in translation). The study of languages was common and the poets of Russia often held degrees in philology. Well-bred gentleman studied drawing and painting, attended the ballet and opera, and learned dancing (as it was an important social grace).

The recitation of poetry was a test of intelligence in Russian institutes of higher education. The educated classes read the great masterworks of Western Europe, often in the original language, and later in translation. Given the intensely Francophile culture of the upper classes, French literature and philosophical thought were well known. Voltaire, Rousseau, Hugo, and the French Symbolists were all influential. Among the German Romantics, Schiller, Goethe, and Heine were popular. Italian verse was also quite popular, particularly Dante and Petrarch. Interestingly, although very few Russians read English, Shakespeare and Byron became very popular in translation. Later in the century Edgar Allen Poe had a strong influence on a small group of poets and musicians.


33 Friedrich 15.
The poets Zhukovsky and Lermontov were particularly active as translators of German and French literary works into Russian. In terms of Russian literature and history, aristocratic Russians were exposed to epics (such as the Igor tale), songs, and historical documents in order to give them a “high level of historical consciousness.” These stories were often read in the original Old Russian. The texts of the Russian Orthodox service and the stories of the lives of the saints provided inspiration and source material for Russian authors, poets, and musicians.

I will use Glinka and Pushkin, who are recognized as the fathers of Russian music and poetry, as examples of the Russian aristocratic man. Pushkin was nicknamed the “Russian Shakespeare,” while the critic, Hermann Laroche described Glinka as “our Musical Pushkin.” Author Maxim Gorky said “The giant Pushkin is our greatest pride and the fullest expression of Russia’s spiritual strength; next to him stands the magician Glinka.

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) was a member of long-standing noble families. On his mother’s side he was descended from German and Scandinavian nobility and was also the great-grandson of Gannibal, an African prince raised at the court of Peter the Great. The Russian Pushkin family could trace its noble lineage to the 12th century. Pushkin was part of the first graduating class of the Imperial Lyceum at Tsarksoe Selo. Pushkin was known to love opera, ballet, and evidently received high grades in his dance

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34 Friedrich 287-88.
35 Friedrich 287-88.
36 Qtd Frolova-Walker, Russian Music, 52.
37 Qtd Frolova-Walker, Russian Music, 52.
classes at the Lycee. His amazing fluency in French was commented on by his classmates at the Lycee who nicknamed him the “Frenchman.” He was also strongly influenced by the writings of Voltaire. He was a lover of Italian opera, fluent in Italian and particularly influenced by the sonnets of Petrarch. His fondness for Italian culture may, in part, be attributed to the time he was stationed in Odessa, which at the time was an Italianate city.

Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857) was born into a noble family with a tradition of military service. He was educated first at a school for noble children in St. Petersburg and later, from 1830-34, he lived in Italy and Germany and studied composition. Glinka was “A true product of the cosmopolitan Russianness; he was fluent in French, German, Italian, and Spanish and knew some English and Persian. Although the written Russian of his memoirs was wonderfully elegant, his Russian pronunciation retained some clumsy provincialisms; on top of that he rarely started a phrase in Russian without finishing it in French.”

As discussed earlier, the early efforts by Russians to produce literature and music were imitations of European models. However, in the years following their victory over Napoleon, upper class Russians sought to distance themselves from the French culture they had adopted and create a Russian culture. According to Olkovksy, as early as his

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38 Friedrich 9.
39 Friedrich 63.
40 Friedrich 4.
41 Friedrich 63.
42 Friedrich 63.
43 Gaparov 35.
graduation from the school of jurisprudence in 1843, Vladimir Stasov recognized the struggle:

One thing was clear to Stasov, Russian cultural life struggled between two forces: the dominance of western European cultural influences in the capital and the dominance of the indigenous Russian culture in the rest of the country. Stasov recognized the fact that native talent was not inferior to talent in Western Europe. This was not the problem. The problem was how to raise Russian culture to the “European level” and to make it universally recognized as being equal.  

Comments made about Glinka’s status support this opinion. Taruskin writes:

What makes Glinka a founding father has most of all to do with his being not “formulator of Russian musical language,” whatever that may mean, but rather with the fact that he was the first Russian composer to achieve world stature. In short, with Glinka Russian music did not depart from Europe, but precisely the opposite- It joined Europe.

Tchaikovsky would seem to concur with this assessment. He wrote of Glinka as being “On a level (Yes! On a level!) with Mozart, with Beethoven, or with anyone one chooses.”

Russian authors made a clean break with pre-Petrine literary genres. By the 1820’s Russian Poets were producing works of equivalent quality to those in Western Europe. Issues with translation delayed the exportation of Russian literature to the West. However, it quickly gained a revered status in Russia. Wachtel says, “Literary works were seen as the central expression of the national essence, and writers were

44 Olkovsky 25.
45 Gerald Seaman refers to him as such in his History of Russian Music Vol. 1.
46 Taruskin, “Some Thoughts,” 324. It seems likely that Glinka would agree with Taruskin’s assessment as Glinka himself did not value national character in music above all, he was interested in technique, learning, and improving his craft. Stasov and later, Soviet writers, have indoctrinated him as an example of extreme nationalism.
48 Wachtel x.
unofficially accorded the status of national heroes and prophets.”

Gogol once said of Pushkin, “In him, Russian nature, the Russian soul, the Russian language, and the Russian character have been reflected.” The first generation of what is known as the “Golden Age” of Russian poetry/literature included Pushkin, Ostrovsky, Zhukovsky, and Gogol. During this time, native literature really began to develop, although it was not always positively received. Lermontov’s *Masquerade*, Gogol’s *Inspector General*, Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*, and Gruboevod’s *Woe from Wit* initially “experienced disheartening fates.”

Musicians made a less clean break with traditional genres than the literati. They often incorporated folk music into classical works. Also, due to the lack of quality musical education in Russia it took longer for Russian musicians to produce works of equivalent quality to those produced in Western Europe. However, the composers of the “dilettante” generation, (which included Glinka, Alexey Verstovsky, Mikhail Vielgorsky, and Alexander Dargomïzsky) eventually produced works equal to their European counterparts, even if recognition of this fact would take many years.

Russian musicians were not given the same recognition as authors. Despite this lack of recognition, music had more influence on the day to day life of Russians, as anyone could experience music but only the small educated class could read literature. Gogol described the importance of music to the Russian people:

Show me a people with more songs, Ukraine buzzes with songs. All along the Volga, from its source to the sea, along the whole train of barges, boatman’s...
songs ring out. The pine logs of every Russian peasant hut are cut with a song. Bricks are tossed from hand to hand with a song as cities sprout like mushrooms. Peasant women diaper their babes, Russians marry and are buried with a song. All travelers, noble and non-noble, fly along to the song of their coachmen. By the Black Sea a beardless swarthy Cossack with black mustaches loads his pistol while singing an old song, while at the other end, floating on an ice floe, a Russian harpoons a whale singing all the while.\textsuperscript{52}

Music seems to have permeated all levels of Russian culture. Although a career as a musician was not socially acceptable for a nobleman at this time, young men and women were taught music as an important social grace. Music making was important in the homes of the gentry, of which the first generation of composers and authors were a part. The ability to play the piano and sing was expected of young women. This expectation was similar to the expectations on young women throughout Europe. The guitar was also quite popular as an accompanying instrument in Russia.\textsuperscript{53} The importance of musical skill in nineteenth century Russia is reflected in the novels of the time. Few Russian novels were without a scene in which a young woman was depicted making music.\textsuperscript{54}

“Like the ball, home performance was a well-established practice of chaste interactions among the sexes, the compliments and blushes being as much a part of the performance as the movement of the hands or the vocal chords.”\textsuperscript{55}

Even the Imperial family participated in this type of music making. During the 1830’s Nicholas I and his family held twice-monthly small family gatherings at the Imperial Palace for which Lvov wrote pieces, the Empress played piano, and Nicholas played the trumpet. Lvov also accompanied the daughters on violin and choral

\textsuperscript{52} Wachtel xi.

\textsuperscript{53} Stites 192. This is supported by the existence of many Romances scored for voice and guitar.

\textsuperscript{54} Stites 192.

\textsuperscript{55} Stites 192.
performances were given. According to Lvov, one day in 1833, the empress, a few
friends, and the children were singing “God Save the Tsar.” Nicholas heard and came
downstairs crying with joy.\textsuperscript{56} Outside of the home, the Imperial family and aristocracy of
St. Petersburg spent vast amounts of money on musical performances. St. Petersburg
quickly became a favored stop for the most famous European virtuosos. Robert and
Clara Schumann, Liszt, and Berlioz all visited St. Petersburg.

Opera was the most important performing art in St. Petersburg. The city had two
permanent opera companies, the Italian and the Russian. The Italian Opera was well
funded by the imperial family. The best Italian singers sang the title roles and the
orchestra was excellent. Nicholas I supported the Italian Opera in such a generous
manner in order to increase the international prestige of St. Petersburg. Faddey Bulgarin,
the tsar’s chief spokesman, said:

\begin{quote}
Let’s admit it: without an Italian opera troupe it would always seem as if something were missing in the capital of the foremost empire in the world! There would seem to be no focal point for opulence, splendor, and cultivated diversion. In all the capitals of Europe the richest accoutrements, the highest tone, all the refinements of society may be found concentrated at the Italian opera…Consequently, [the Italian Opera] not only satisfies our musical cravings but nourishes our national pride.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

The Russian Opera, though managed by the same directorate of the Imperial Theaters,
was not nearly as well funded. From 1843-1859 the Russian Opera performed in a
building that originally housed a circus.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Stites 192.

\textsuperscript{57} Maes 32.

\textsuperscript{58} The Circus Theater burnt in 1859, when a new theater was built for the Russian opera only three Russian operas were among the sets listed as the first priority to be rebuilt. They were Glinka’s \textit{Ruslan and Lyudmila}, and \textit{A Life for the Tsar} and Verstovsky’s \textit{Rogneda}. The other operas were mainly Italian, along with a couple of French grand operas.
Symphonic concerts, also under control of the directorate of the Imperial Theaters, only occurred during Lent when opera performances were not allowed. The St. Petersburg Philharmonic Society was founded in 1802. However, by the 1850’s, the standard of performance was quite low and the repertoire consisted mostly of excerpts from popular Italian operas. The Concert Society, founded in 1850, put on three concerts during Lent. The repertoire was quite conservative, with the most modern works consisting of Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

The struggle for recognition of Russian secular arts began in the generation of the noble dilettantes and came to a peak and finally resolution in the next generation as the musicians (mainly of St. Petersburg) waged a campaign to gain recognition as professionals and to have their music heard and valued by the concert going public. However this would not be an easy task:

Public tastes overwhelming favored foreign music. This was understandable. Russian society had been taught by its rulers, since the beginning of the eighteenth century, to extol anything foreign and to denigrate anything Russian. French cultural dominance was particularly apparent from the middle of the eighteenth century until modern Russian literature was born in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In music and painting Italian influence predominated well into the nineteenth century.

The Rise of the Russian School and Musical Professionalism

Stewart Campbell cites the ascension to the throne of Alexander II as an event that would help foster the advancement of music in Russia:

The sense of liberation from previous rigidity and tight control, the encouragement of initiative and innovation, and the modernizing reforms of the

59 Maes 32.

60 Maes 32.

61 Maes 32.

62 Olkovsky 85.
1860’s brought new dynamism into Russian life, as we may observe in the setting-up of the Russian Musical Society with its conservatories and the Free School of Music around the beginnings of the 1860’s.  

According to Ridenour, “the greatest inequity in St. Petersburg’s musical life in 1860 was not the predominance of the Italian over the Russian opera or of operatic over instrumental music, however, but the almost complete domination of public musical activity by foreign music and musicians.”

The rise of musical professionalism coincided with the age of the Russia novel and authors such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, and Gonchorov. After 1880, poetry resurged in importance and the poets of what would be known as the “Silver Age” of Russian poetry became active.

The second generation of Russian composers consists of the composers known as the so-called “Mighty Handful” (or “moguchaya kuchka”) who sought to establish a “Russian” school of composition. Outside of the Kuchka, other members of this generation include Rubenstein and Tchaikovsky, as well as the late careers of Serov and Dargomïzhsky. In this generation are the last of the aristocratic art-musicians. However, following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 all of these musicians had to support themselves financially.

During this time, the field of art criticism began to develop. Serov and Stasov emerged as critics in 1847. Many composers/critics pursued both occupations (in fact

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64 Ridenour 13.

65 Stasov coined this term in an 1867 article in which he asserted that these musicians (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Musorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov), had risen from dilettantism to professionalism.
Stasov was the only major critic who did not compose). Odoyevsky and Laroche are best known as critics, but also composed, while in addition to composing, Borodin and Tchaikovsky were active critics. Cui although recognized as a member of The Five was also far better known as a critic than composer.

The 1860’s-1880’s were the decades during which the long-held desire for opportunities as a musical professional for Russians finally became a reality. Russian social structure had long prevented music becoming an acceptable occupation. As Gogol explained in “The Overcoat,” “In our country, you must state a person’s rank first.”

Francis Maes describes stratification of Russian society:

In the remarkable Russian system of social precedence, everyone occupied a fixed rank, or chin, that depended on one’s family, education, and profession. Originally the system, which Peter the Great introduced to encourage people to enter the service of the state, relied on personal merit as a means to join the hierarchy and to rise within it. However, the system grew more complicated as titles were given to the higher ranks and became hereditary for the highest ranks. In the nineteenth century, the resulting hierarchical system was responsible for fierce bureaucratic rivalry, a situation that Gogol ridiculed with unrivaled wit.

In his 1861 article, “About Music in Russia,” Rubenstein argued for the need for a conservatory. He complained that the government didn’t grant musicians the same privileges as other artists and only members of the nobility could afford to dabble in music. He asks, “But can music really be left in the hands of such people, who see in it only a means of killing time?” The article did not result in the support he hoped for.

66 Maes 33.

67 Maes 33.
Instead, it offended Glinka and others who were members of the nobility and also desired greater opportunities for musicians.\textsuperscript{68}

In 1859 Rubenstein founded the Russian Music Society in St. Petersburg, at the time a series of symphonic and chamber music concerts. However, his ultimate goal was to open a conservatory at which Russians could receive a musical education equal to that anywhere in Europe and that could grant the rank of free artist to musicians. The St. Petersburg Conservatory opened in 1862 followed by the Moscow Conservatory in 1866. As a result of Rubenstein’s efforts Russian musicians could receive an education equal to any other conservatory on the continent and Russia would soon surpass other nations in producing talented performers (particularly pianists and violinists.)\textsuperscript{69} Graduates of the conservatory were granted the rank of “free artist” (\textit{svobodnïy khudozhnik}), a rank equal to a midlevel civil servant.\textsuperscript{70} Tchaikovsky was the first Russian-born musician to benefit from this establishment. Taruskin describes him as “Russia’s first composing professional, and the very first native musician to achieve a position of esteem in Russian society without the advantage of blue blood or a prestigious sinecure, and without being a performing virtuoso.”\textsuperscript{71}

Balakirev and Stasov, as ideologues of The Five, advocated self study and originality. They took great issue with the foreign dominated faculty of the conservatory.

\textsuperscript{68} Ridenour 28. Rubenstein’s complaints were justified. As early as the 18\textsuperscript{th} century trained painters, sculptors, and actors could earn the title “free artist” which gave its holder exemption from the poll tax, military recruitment, and the right to live anywhere in the country. Furthermore, musicians at this time had no more rights than a peasant. Music teachers in an academy or a musician in the court theater received only the status of a “menial functionary in government service.” If a nobleman wanted to become an employee of the theaters he would have to renounce his noble rank. (Ridenour 17)

\textsuperscript{69} Taruskin, \textit{Defining Russia}, xi.

\textsuperscript{70} Taruskin, \textit{Defining Russia}, xii.

\textsuperscript{71} Taruskin, \textit{Defining Russia}, xiii.
Balakirev founded the competing Free Music School. The school emphasized singing and was open to people from a wider range of society.

Representatives of the two groups battled to obtain dominance in the press and for control of the performing groups.\textsuperscript{72} The members of the Kuchka and Rubenstein all sought to be able to support themselves as musicians and have their craft recognized as a professional art. Raynor states that the social history of music gives us an idealistic view of musicians:

[our view] has been so completely dominated by the nineteenth-century conception of art as a pure activity, occupying only the higher strata of its creator’s consciousness and unaffected by such lower strata as those which reckons up the bills and consider the possibility of paying them, that we do not consider the composer’s relationship to the musical world in which he must…secure performance and publication.\textsuperscript{73}

By the 1880’s Russia was exporting music that was seen as equal in quality to its Western European counterparts. In one of his articles in 1883, Stasov quoted a German critic who wrote “without a doubt, young musical Russia will soon become a dangerous competitor for Germany in the fight for first place in music.”\textsuperscript{74} By 1889, Russians finally seemed to have achieved independence from Italian operatic dominance. Cesar Cui wrote, “operatic matters now stand with us on a higher plane than in Western Europe.”\textsuperscript{75}

\textbf{Nationalism}

Feelings of Nationalism and the desire to create unity and national pride became very important during this time. Russia had been humiliated in the Crimean War (1853-}
56) and the “conflicting cultural inferiority-superiority complex in Russia inspired both political figures and artists alike to attempt to cement Russia’s position on the world scene through the promotion of her culture.” 76 Taruskin further cites the pervasive patriotic propaganda following the Emancipation, and especially the Polish uprising of the early 1860’s (as well as the many plots against and attempts on the life of the Tsar) as leading to the “cultivation of native Russian art as an instrument of state ideology.” 77 During the period of the Emancipation of the serfs, interest in history was considered “an intellectual duty.” 78 Chernyshevsky commented in 1856 in his Sketches on Gogol’s Period of Russian Literature that “in order for any human endeavor to succeed it must reflect the needs of society.” 79

Maes asserts that in order to further cement the cultural significance of their work artists associated their work with “important cultural currents.” This obviously included nationalism. The presence or absence of national character was a useful weapon in the musical propaganda war. Maes continues, stating that a composer’s “civic sense” was exhibited in works that somehow expressed “national feelings or aspiration.” 80


77 Taruskin, Defining Russian, 205. There were attempted assassinations of Alexander II in 1866, 1871, and 1880 prior to the successful plot by the People’s Will Party in 1881. They killed Alexander II with a bomb.

78 Maes 101.

79 Qtd. Olkovsky 140.

80 Maes 10.
Russians’ desire to create a feeling of national spirit resulted in an “increasing xenophobia and especially after the Balkan Wars, an increasingly imperialistic one.” Taruskin explains how this was so that unless scholars explain to the Western public, they will never understand the physical vastness of the country nor the amazing diversity of social classes and indigenous peoples and musics.

Russian nationalism is unique in that Russia was not striving for national independence as in Poland or Finland or seeking to create a country like Italy. Russia was already a powerful and independent nation. Russians were taking a country with a long history and attempting to create a culture and national character, as opposed to other lands where they had a long history of culture and tradition of fine arts but wished to be recognized as a nation. Fuller concurs with Taruskin in stating that while other parts of Europe developed an interest in nationalist music during this time Russia was unique in that they were working not for freedom as a state but artistic freedom from the dominance of western culture, “though many in the upper classes had accepted it freely, Western cultural colonialism of Russia was challenged in the development of Russian nationalist music.”

Arts Policies and Censorship

Russia has always been a totalitarian state and governmental control and censorship played a huge role in the development of the arts. Richard Taruskin comments on this phenomenon:

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82 Taruskin, “Some Thoughts,” 331.
83 Taruskin, “Some Thoughts,” 331.
84 Fuller 34.
From the standpoint of the Russian state, which of course defined Russian patriotism, things looked rather different, and the story is indeed (and more explicitly than ever) one of appropriation—and of the outright political exploitation of art, one of the overriding, reciprocally defining themes in the history of music as an art in Russia. And yet the appropriation and exploitation are never complete; slippage and leakage of meaning—hence contests over meaning and actual thematization of meaning—are collectively another perennial theme of that history. Russia is one country where there has never been the luxury of unmediated response. There can be no evading hermeneutics when treating art within those heavily patrolled frontiers.  

Furthermore, most literati and composers held some sort of government post. As a result it seems logical that they would have an interest in their changing society and comment on it in their respective artistic endeavors. Friedrich writes:

The political engagement or at least interest of our Russian poets and the polarization of politics versus musicality was, of course, shaped and influenced by historical circumstances: Russia’s imperialistic and colonial expansion, in which the aristocrats and intellectuals were heavily involved; the frequent wars, notably the Napoleonic and Crimean ones and the First World War; the polemicized debates among the Russian intelligentsia about the social problems that culminated in the Great Reforms of the 1860’s and, after, in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917; and, finally, the social, political, and intellectual consequences of the most rapid industrialization in world history.

Wachtel comments that there was a virtual absence of non-fiction political discourse in Russia, as the censors did not allow its publication. Historiography and historical plays were often used to test political and social ideas. As Vissarion Belinsky put it, “We

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86 Friedrich 258.
87 Wachtel 17. The writings of Alexander Radishchev (1749-1802) are a notable exception. His *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* described the socio-economic conditions in Russia. Catherine the Great first sentenced him to death for the work. But later, after a period of torture, commuted the sentence to banishment in Siberia. He was freed by Paul I in 1797. He was employed by Alexander I, helping revise Russian law. However, he was unsuccessful in enacting his desired reforms. In 1802 he committed suicide by drinking poison.
question, nay we interrogate the past for an explanation of our present and hint of our future.”<sup>88</sup>

Literati and Poets were frequent victims of government persecution as the message of written work is much more explicit than the message in a musical composition. Many Russian authors were punished in various ways for writing works that were in violation of the government’s policies. More mild punishments could range from publishing bans to confinement to one’s estate or transfer to a less desirable post, but severe sanctions such as hard labor and death were frequently ordered. 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian poet Osip Mandelshtam said, “Poetry is respected only in this country-people are killed for it. There’s no place where more people are killed for it.”<sup>89</sup> In his case it turned out to be true, and the statement was also true in the nineteenth century.

Vasily Zhukovsky, from his posts as tutor to the tsar’s family and a government censor, was able to help usher through literary and musical works that may have otherwise not been produced. He also worked on behalf of fellow poets who were in danger of receiving strong punishments from the government.<sup>90</sup>

Several poets produced works that had political undertones or were even overtly political. Pushkin, particularly early in his career, produced works that commented on a variety of political issues including the treatment by the Russian state of ethnic minorities such as the Gypsies or commenting on the stringent social stratification of society in Eugene Onegin.<sup>91</sup> Friedrich asserts that his use of “folkloristic musics was partly

<sup>88</sup> Qtd. Maes 101.
<sup>89</sup> Qtd. Wachtel xi.
<sup>90</sup> Friedrich 245.
<sup>91</sup> Friedrich 70.
motivated by the populist aspects of his political ideology.” Mikhail Lermontov was arrested, court martialed, stripped of his officer’s rank, and sent into combat (where he ultimately earned hero’s honors) after criticizing Russian society for Pushkin’s death.  

Not all poets, however, sought to inject political or national meaning into their work. Asafney Fet said, “A work of art in which there is meaning [by which he meant social or political meaning] does not exist for me.”

For most of the nineteenth century the musical arts were under control of the crown. From 1803-1882 the government controlled all theaters. As of January 1, 1846 all privately sponsored public concerts were forbidden during the theater season. Only during Lent, when the Imperial Theater was closed, could private organizations or individuals arrange public concerts. Tsar Nikolai I enacted stringent opera bans almost immediately upon his ascension to the throne in December of 1825. He banned rescue operas of the type popular in Revolutionary France, outlawed operas with any “overtly antityranical plots,” and forbade all operas with biblical plots of any religion (this supported the Orthodox Church rules against secular depictions of religion.) After 1848, even at the Russian opera, all operas had to be performed in their original language. The Imperial Theater Directorate, which was a department of the ministry of  

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92 Friedrich 71.

93 Friedrich 246. Interestingly, Lermontov himself was involved in two duels after Pushkin’s death and ultimately died as a result of the second.

94 Friedrich 111.

95 Ridenour 6. This of course meant that private individuals could not put on operas as dramatic performances were not permitted during Lent.

96 Taruskin, Defining Russia, 193.

97 Taruskin, Defining Russia, 193.
the Imperial Court, controlled the two Petersburg opera companies. The Italian opera was well funded and imported the best performers. The Russian opera at which, until the edicts of 1848, Russian performers performed mostly European operas in the Russian language, was far less supported. The theatrical regulations of 1827 forbade the imperial theaters to pay a Russian singer or actor more than 1143 rubles for a year and a full pension required twenty years of service.\textsuperscript{98} In contrast, salaries at the Italian opera often exceeded 10000 rubles per season for leading singers with some making more than 20000 rubles.\textsuperscript{99} These regulations affected the St. Petersburg drama and ballet companies and the Imperial Theater in Moscow.

Many rules restricted the depiction of royal characters on the stage. In 1837 a decree was issued stating that no royals could be portrayed on stage (in theater it extended to only members of the Romanov dynasty, in the other arts it covered historical royals.) This caused great difficulty in the genre of historical opera. For example, when Rimsky-Korsakov wished to have the character of Ivan the Terrible in \textit{The Maid of Pskov}, the censors forbade it. When he inquired as to why this was impossible the response was “and suppose the tsar should suddenly sing a ditty; well, it would be unseemly.”\textsuperscript{100} Some exceptions and compromises were made during the more relaxed reign of Alexander II. However regulations were again tightened during the reactionary reign of Alexander III. The government control of musical performances retarded the development of Russian music. There were few opportunities for the music of Russian

\textsuperscript{98} Ridenour 8.

\textsuperscript{99} Ridenour 8.

\textsuperscript{100} Maes 46.
composers to be performed. Russian opera, and particularly the careers of Glinka and his generation, were further retarded by an 1848 decree forbidding the Italian Theater to stage any Russian operas.\(^{101}\)

After the end of the crown monopoly in 1882 industrialists established private theaters and this granted composers more freedom to produce works that did not fit the imperial model. For example, Nicholas II vetoed Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Sadko* simply because he preferred “something a bit merrier.”\(^{102}\) The increase in fairytale operas over historical/tragic operas can be attributed to tightened censorship in the wake of the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. According to Taruskin the “safest course was a retreat into fantasy.”\(^{103}\) Rimsky-Korsakov did just that in the late 1890’s and early twentieth century.

Perhaps most prominent among the capitalist entrepreneurs was Mitrofan Belyayev, a lumber magnate and avid chamber musician. He established symphonic concerts open exclusively to Russian composers, chamber music series, and a chamber music competition for composers (funded by Belyayev in perpetuity.)\(^{104}\) In addition, he

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\(^{101}\) Gasparov 56. This ban was enacted in response to complaints about wasted subscription fees following the staging of a poor opera buffa by the amateur composer Feofiakt Tolstoy.

\(^{102}\) Maes 174.

\(^{103}\) Taruskin, *Defining Russia*, 84.

\(^{104}\) The Belyayev chamber evenings commissioned 30 string quartets, which according to the Grove Dictionary, was rare outside of Belyayev’s circle. The scarcity of solo and chamber music by Russian composers (i.e. what is generally absolute music) can be attributed to the preferences of Stasov and Balakirev who encouraged program music and discouraged absolute and chamber music as being “German.” Not all Russian composers, or even members of the Kuchka, followed this guidance. Borodin was a cellist and loved to play chamber music. He composed two string quartets, a string sextet, and a piano quintet generally modeled on the works of Mendelssohn. According to Maes, (pg 72) the fact that he clung to his preference even in the company of the kuchka, so hostile to chamber music, speaks to his independence of mind.” Tchaikovsky, of course composed significant quantities of music. Rimsky-Korsakov attempted to compose chamber music but found it did not appeal to him (Maes 170-1).
established a publishing house in Germany to print the music of Russian composers. This provided them the protection of international copyright, a concept that was ignored in Russia. Many works were written for the symphonic series that began in 1885, including Rimsky-Korsakov’s three best known works, *Russian Easter Overture*, *Capriccio Espagnol*, and *Scherazade*.  

Music, literature, and poetry were greatly affected by the social developments in the nineteenth century as Russian artists sought to gain recognition of their work as valuable. The following chapters will illustrate the close ties between these arts as they developed among a small group of people. Furthermore, the impact of the strong pressure from the government and members of the arts community to glorify the state will be discussed. As Stites observes of music (which is equally applicable to the other arts);

Music is a “cultural form”—that is, a collection of texts and a product of crystallized culture. Like other cultural forms, it functions in a social field and is part of a “culture” in the anthropological sense of the word.

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105 Maes 173.

106 Stites 187.
CHAPTER II
MUSIC AND LITERATURE AS A CULTURAL DUET

For the scholar who examines Russian cultural history, the parallel development of literature and music is striking; indeed, one could go so far as to call it a duet (to use musical terminology) or a dialogue (to use the fashionable literary term).  

Cross-Pollination

Authors and musicians interacted on a daily basis. The intelligentsia of St. Petersburg had an active salon culture and in this environment authors read their latest works, composers played excerpts of recent composition, and attendees discussed the arts and culture and acted as critics of each other. There were several notable salons in St. Petersburg and the attendees often overlapped. Perhaps the first significant salon was hosted by Prince Vladimir Odoevsky. He began his “Saturdays” in the late 1820’s. They fell off in the 1850’s, but were later revived in Moscow.  

Prince Odoevsky was a member of the Pushkin circle along with fellow litterateurs, journalists, and publishing entrepreneurs.  

In 1836 the Kukonik brothers began a salon referred to as “The Brotherhood” or the “Committee.” Nestor Kukonik was an author famous for writing dramas (bratiya). The members of this all male circle were generally working bureaucrats (similar to

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107 Wachtel x
108 Stites 194.
109 Campbell xii.
Schubert’s group in the 1820’s). The “musical-literary evenings” became all-nighters for the inner circle and one scholar referred to the salon as the “Petersburg bohemia of the 1830-1840’s.” On a special evening in 1842 when Liszt, Dargomízsky, and the Vielgorsky brothers were in attendance Glinka gave a tribute to Liszt in which he was quoted as saying “the intelligentsia of this world are one big family, a Gypsy Boheme…” Stites describes the circle as resembling “a guild of artists with its guild pleasures; ritual, excess, male bonding, and conviviality that sometimes turned into drunken orgy.” The central group at these gatherings was the Kukolnik’s, Glinka, and the painter, Karl Bruillov. They saw themselves as embodying the arts; a cartoon was even made about the three. Other main members of the Brotherhood were Prince Odoevsky, Belinksy, and Bulgari. The libretto to Ruslan was worked out at these evenings. Members contributing to the libretto included the minor poets Konstantin Bakhturin, Valerian Shirkov, Kukonik, Glinka, Nikolai Markovich (a part time historian, poet, and musician), and Mikhail Gedoenov (the son of the director if the Imperial theaters). During the 1850’s the Stasov family held “Sundays” during which piano playing and singing occurred. These were attended by scholars, poets, artists, writers,

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110 Gasparov 28.
111 Qtd. Stites 195.
112 Qtd. Stites 196.
113 Stites 195.
114 Stites 195.
115 Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848) was a literary critic with Westernizer tendencies. He was often in conflict with the tsarist government for his political views. He was editor of two major literary magazines Notes on the Fatherland and The Contemporary. Faddey Bulgarin (1789-1859) was a journalist and author. But is best known as a paid agent of the tsarist police and used his papers to spread government propaganda.
116 Gasparov 28.
musicians, and architects. Dmitry Stasov (1828-1918) was a lawyer and advocate of the arts and helped form the Russian Musical Society. Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906) was discussed earlier in the paper as an influential music/art critic. Nadezha Stasov (1822-1895) was an advocate of women’s rights and education. She helped found the St. Petersburg Higher Women’s Courses.

In addition to the above circles Delvig, Zhukovsky, the young Genonov, Fedor Tolstoy (Academy of Fine Arts), and Anton Rubenstein also hosted salons. The salons helped bridge the gap from private to public concerts in St. Petersburg. The extravagant homes of Alexey Lvov and the Vielgorsky brothers were particularly important in this transition.

Alexey Fyodorovich Lvov (1798-1870) was an Army general, courtier, virtuoso violinist, and the court choir director from 1837-1867 (the onset of deafness forced him to retire.) Although a composer of opera, concertos, and vocal works, Lvov is most famous as the composer of the Russian national anthem, “God Save the Tsar.” Stites describes it as “an anthem in the spirit of church, people, and army.” Within Russia, Lvov only performed privately (he was not permitted to play in public because of his high military rank). However, he concertized abroad (for free), often as a trio with Franz Liszt at the piano and Matvey Vielgorsky on cello.

Lvov’s concerts were much more serious affairs than the more social gatherings at Kukonik’s and others. Beginning in 1835 weekly string quartet events occurred at which the audience listened rather than talked. Full symphonic concerts were given in

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117 Olkovsky 6. The father of the Stasov family, Vasili, was a famed architect and well connected with the royal family.

118 Stites 192.
the grand hall, this led to the concert society in 1840 to promote symphonic music especially Beethoven and to give Russian musicians more opportunities to perform. The concert series lasted three years and produced three concerts during Lent each year.

The Vielgorsky (also Wielhorski, Wielkorski, or Viyel’gorskiy) brothers also hosted twice weekly salon and music center during the 1830’s-40’s. The brothers were of Polish origin. Matvei (1796-1866) was an accomplished cellist and Mendelssohn dedicated his D Major sonata to him.\(^\text{119}\) Count Mikhail (1788-1856) was a court dignitary who composed romances, a symphony, and an opera. He studied with Cherubini and was friends with Beethoven. Mikhail Vielgorsky acted as a booking agent like Salomen in England, however due to his station he did not accept a fee.\(^\text{120}\) Liszt, Berlioz, the Schumann’s, and Viardot all performed at the Vielgorsky residence. Symphonic performances with up to 300 people in attendance featured the Viennese symphonists. Their home was the site of the Russian debut of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.\(^\text{121}\) \textit{A Life for the Tsar} was also rehearsed in their home. A contemporary remarked that the Vielgorsky home acted as “an original, live, multifaceted academy of the arts.” Writers, artists, and musicians interacted (generally speaking French) and influenced each other.\(^\text{122}\)

The salons of Russia’s intellectual elite were full of men who were active in both literature and music. Richard Ridenour says:

\(^{119}\) Taruskin, \textit{Defining Russia}, xiii.

\(^{120}\) Stites 194.

\(^{121}\) Stites 194.

\(^{122}\) Stites 194.
To compose music “on the side” was considered not just a respectable pastime for a Russian nobleman, but actually almost a distinguishing characteristic of a certain level of culture…But along with this went the understanding that of course any nobleman would be in government service; exceptions were made only for those who owned sufficient serfs to be able to live nobly without any profession.123

Examples of such men abound. Prince Vladimir Odoevsky wrote short stories (which often had musical themes), studied piano with John Field, composed a few pieces, and was one of the first Russian musical critics. Leo Tolstoy was an accomplished musician and amateur composer (his Waltz in F is his only surviving composition). Tolstoy once said “music is the shorthand of emotion.”124 Mikhail Lermontov, best known for his poetry, was skilled on the guitar, violin, and balalaika. He was also described as playing the piano “excellently.”125 Gavrill (also Gavrilo) Derzhavin, Denis Fonvinzin, and Ivan Krylov are all known to have performed music in public. On the other side of the spectrum many composers also wrote poetry. Borodin and Musorgsky composed the poetry for some of their own song texts.

Members of the salons contributed to the formation of each other’s works. They often suggested works to each other, or worked collectively on opera libretti. As previously mentioned, the members of the Kukonik circle worked collectively on the libretto to Ruslan. Zhukovsky was highly involved in the formation of Glinka’s first operatic masterpiece, A Life for the Tsar. The libretto for A Life for the Tsar was something of a collaborative effort. The story was originally suggested to Glinka by Vasily Zhukovsky, poet and tutor to the future Tsar Alexander II. Zhukovsky provided

123 Ridenour 17.

124 I was unable to find the direct source of this quote. However, it appears on numerous internet lists of Tolstoy quotes.

125 Friedrich 103.
Glinka with text on which to base the opera (this included several historical accounts and early poetic retellings including one by Sergei Nikolaevich Glinka, a distant cousin of the composer), but did not volunteer to write the libretto.\textsuperscript{126} It has been suggested he was too busy to work on the libretto; however Glinka claimed in his \textit{Memoirs} that the poet did not wish to sublimate himself to a composer.\textsuperscript{127} Instead, Glinka began collaborating with the young poet Vladimir Sollogub (at Prince Odoevsky’s suggestion). However, this was an unsuccessful collaboration as Sollogub became frustrated when Glinka wanted him to fit verse to existing music. The project was continued at Zhukovsky’s suggestion by Baron Georgy Rozen, a German who was secretary to Alexander Romanov (the future Alexander II). Rozen was adept at fitting verse to the already composed music despite the frequent changes in meter. Finally, Zhukovsky contributed the verse for the opera’s epilogue. Hodge sees the refusal of Zhukovsky and Sollogub to “subjugate” themselves to the composer as foreshadowing “the battles for aesthetic prestige that would take place on a much wider scale over the next several decades, as Russian music ascended and Russian poetry was eclipsed.”\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{126} According to Hodge likely among these sources was Kondratii Ryleev’s poem “Ivan Susanin” from a cycle of 25 \textit{dumy}, short ballads devoted to history making Russians. However, this could not be mentioned as an official source because Ryleev was a Decembrist (and the only poet executed after the 1825 uprising), and his works were banned. Thomas P. Hodge, “Susanin, Two Glinkas, and Ryleev: History-Making in A Life for the Tsar,” \textit{Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature, and Society}. Ed. Andrew Baruch Wachtel. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998: 10.

\textsuperscript{127} Hodge 5.

\textsuperscript{128} Hodge 6.
Zhukovsky was friends with Glinka and the poet Aleksey Pleshcheev (Pleshcheyev) and the three mutually inspired each other’s work. In the late 1830’s Dargomizsky considered Lucrezia Borgia as the subject for an opera. However, Zhukovsky (who was also a government censor), explained that it could never be produced and suggested Dargomizsky instead write an opera on Hugo’s Esmeralda. After the premier of Serov’s Judith, the poet Apollon Grigoryev wrote to him, “write an opera about your own people, something of your own has more vitality than anything foreign.” Grigoryev and the pochvenniki (Dostoyevsky, Ostrovsky, and Yakov Polonsky) shared this viewpoint. They believed Russia needed to “continue to grow in an organic way: that old traditions such as autocracy and orthodoxy were essential for the good of the nation.” Polonsky suggested Rogneda as the subject of his next opera and Dostoyevsky and Apollon Maikov helped fashion the libretto.

The Russian Soul in Literature and Music

Prior to the 1840’s no firm concept of the Russian “soul” or defining characteristics of the Russian cultural identity seem to have existed. Several examples illustrating this point exist in the philosophical and anecdotal writings of the time. Peter Caadaev wrote about the absence of a Russian national identity (narodnost’) in Letters on the Philosophy of History (published 1836):

We have never marched with other peoples. We do not belong to any of the great families of the human race; we are neither of the West nor of the East, and we

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129 Friedrich 43. Note: Pleshcheev’s poetry has been set to music by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, among others.

130 Taruskin, Defining Russia, 193.

131 Maes 98

132 Maes 98.
have not the tradition of either. Placed, as it were, outside of time, we have not been touched by the universal education of the human race…We are alone in the world, we have given nothing to the world, we have taught it nothing.  

Pavel Annekov also wrote of this phenomenon when he lived in Berlin during the 1830’s:

Every Russian newcomer was wryly asked by his fellow-countrymen (those who had already lived several years in this centre of German learning) whether he wished to stay in it, and if so, what exactly he intended to become: a true noble German (der trueu, edle Deutsche) or a vain, eccentric Frenchman (der eitle alberne Franzose). There could be no question of his wanting to remain a Russian, because Russians as such did not exist: there were registrars, assessors, advisors of all possible kinds, the landowner, officers, students who spoke Russian, but a positively Russian type, an independent and active personality who would not crack under the strain had not yet been born.

During the 1830’s and 1840’s Russian thinkers sought to define the Russian character. They based their thoughts on the theories of Rousseau, Herder and other Western European thinkers. Herderian romantic nationalism posits that nations have their own distinctive character and that this character can be found in its folksong. The aristocratic classes, with their limited contact with the peasant class, were generally only aware of one genre, the protyazhnaya (literally stretched-out song). The popularity of this song can be attributed to the fact that this genre is the least connected to labor or ritual and could be sung by any person at any time. The songs were trademarked by their irregular rhythm, variable tempo, asymmetrical phrase structure, frequent melismas, and unstable tonality. This genre was the focus of the attempt to define musical

133 Qtd. Olkovsky 36.
136 Maes 17, 65. This unstable tonality was known as peremennost’. In this technique, the lower neighbor to the tonic often served as a secondary tonic.
Russianness until midway through the 19th century.\textsuperscript{137} N.A. Lvov collected the first substantial anthology of Russian folksong, and although aware of a wider range of Russian folksong, created a hypothesis that agreed with the perception of the more limited urban literati:

Perhaps this collection will not be without usefulness even for philosophy itself, which seeks to draw conclusions about national character from folksong. Taking into account the minor modality of the majority of protyazhnïye songs, which…comprise the characteristic Russian song, philosophy will perceive, of course, the tenderness and sensitivity of the Russian people and also that inclination of the soul to be melancholy.\textsuperscript{138}

This genre served as a model for form for poets of the Golden Age (this will be discussed in more detail later.) Frolova-Walker feels the appeal of the protyazhnaya can be attributed to the fact that the mood allows the listener to “pity the peasant and himself at the same time, the two distinct worlds becoming one Russian nation in his imagination.”\textsuperscript{139} Pushkin wrote, “From a coachman to the best poet,/ We all sing gloomily.”\textsuperscript{140} A.N. Radishchev wrote:

Those who know the sound of Russian folksongs will admit that there is something in them signifying a grief of the soul. Nearly all of these songs are in the minor mode. One ought to learn how to set the style of government according to this disposition of the people’s ear. It is here that the soul of our people is to be found.\textsuperscript{141}


\textsuperscript{140} Frolova-Walker, “‘All Russian,’” 133.

\textsuperscript{141} Frolova-Walker, “‘All Russian,’” 133.
Many more expressions of this opinion survive. The music critic F. Russo wrote in 1882 that the most striking feature of the songs was their character, “part solemn, and largely gloomy, piercing, filled with some deep fatalistic grief, or monotonous lays.”

Bodyansky turned the genre into an adjective while describing “the distinguishing feature of north Russian songs is a profound gloom, the utmost oblivion, submissiveness to fate, a kind of expanse and smooth proyazhennost (stretchiness).”

Even Glinka, a man who was well aware of a greater variety of Russian folksong, commented on the stereotype:

We inhabitants of the north feel differently with us, it is either mad boisterousness or bitter tears…our melancholy Russian songs are children of the north which we have, perhaps, taken over from the east. The songs of the Orientals are just as melancholy, even in gay Andalusia.

Nicholai Gogol’s book Dead Souls (1842) is often seen as the first literary work to portray the character of the Russian people. The troika spinning into the unknown is used as a metaphor for the stretched-out quality of the protyazhnaya: “as the songs’ expanse stretches out, so too do the expanses of Russia, and the expanses of the Russian soul.”

Gogol writes in his ode to Russia:

But what is that incomprehensible, mysterious force that draws me to you? Why does your mournful song, carried along your whole length and breadth from sea to sea, echo and re-echo incessantly in my ears? What is there in that song? What is it that calls, and sobs, and clutches at my heart? What are those sounds that caress me so poignantly, that go straight to my soul and twine about my heart? Russia! What do you want of me?

145 Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 133.
146 Qtd Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 133.
Through the rest of the century authors attempted to define the character of the Russian people in their works. Frolova-Walker describes the development of the Russian character in literature:

The first characteristic Gogol attributed to the Russian was mysteriousness; and this was constantly upheld by later writers. Other traits were added in subsequent literature. With Goncharov came a perverse pride in idleness, contemplation as opposed to Western moderation; with Chekhov, the cult of underachievement as opposed to the Westerner’s worship of success. All these efforts cumulatively formed the tragic Russian soul. And there was also Chernishevsky’s aesthetics, which sacrificed form for the sake of content, just as Russia’s poor outward appearance held a rich internal life within. Literature as we know, at times influences life more than life influences literature. Proust called this “a nation’s self-plagiarism,” and spoke of ‘nations which persevere in their faults and indeed intensify them.’

Other characteristics of the tragic Russian soul as developed in literature include

Dostoyevsky’s illustration of Russians “driving to extremes, in opposition to the moderation and caution of the west.”

Those looking at Pushkin’s oeuvre were often troubled by the stark contrast between the “Russian Soul” and his work which was “full of happiness, light, and brilliance.” After all, he had been mythologized as the father of Russian poetry. Gogol solved this problem in the 1850’s when he wrote, “Pushkin is an extraordinary phenomenon, perhaps the unique phenomenon of the Russian spirit: it is the Russian at

147 Marina Frolova-Walker, “On ‘Ruslan’ and Russianness,” Cambridge Opera Journal Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 1997): 33. Chernishevsky’s aesthetics also create another interesting example of cross-pollination. His book, Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality was published in 1855. Russian composers, particularly the members of the Balakirev circle, were often criticized for their lack of understanding of musical forms and counterpoint. Maes (p56) asserts that Balakirev used Chernishevsky’s aesthetic as a way to legitimize the lack of technical language and instead think of it as a spontaneous expression of emotion.

the stage of development he may reach in two hundred years.”149 Frolova-Walker further elaborates on this issue, “Gogol inaugurated the era of a Russia that we know all too well; Pushkin and Glinka gave us a Russia we have never experienced.”150

The literary characteristics of the Russian soul became so pervasive in Russian society the characters in Goncharov’s novel Oblomov became common comparisons for Russian identity. Oblomov is a Russian gentleman who dreams of great things but is ultimately passive and idle. Although he is weak and idle the reader is meant to sympathize with him because inside his inactive body is a great soul. He is contrasted with his German friend Stoltz. Stoltz is very active but portrayed as cold and tedious. He has a healthy exterior but is empty inside. Ultimately Oblomov loses the girl he loves to Stoltz because he is too afraid to act. Goncharov turns the Russian vices into virtues.

These literary characters/stereotypes of German/Russian individuals were actually used in the arguments between Rubenstein and Balakirev. Rubenstein was a hard working German who was an ardent traditionalist and sought to professionalize music, and although recognized as a brilliant pianist, was generally considered a mediocre and unoriginal composer and average conductor. Balakirev, on the other hand, advocated originality but was frequently not where he needed to be. Borodin commented on this and seems to be alluding to the Gonchavorian archetypes. He wrote in a letter to his wife October 3rd 1868:

I am really cross with Balakirev: his concerts are so close, and there are various intrigues against him, while Rubenstein is in St. Petersburg and there is a strong party that wants to offer him the post of conductor again. And Mili Alexeevich (Balakirev)-that Slavonic character is sitting somewhere in the Caucasus. Damn

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Music in Poetry: Sound and Form

Music influenced the verse and structure of some Russian writers. This is often evidenced in their choice of poetic structure; sonnets, bagatelles, and other poetic forms associated with music are frequently employed. However, Paul Friedrich asserts that the association goes even further than just poetic structure:

What is striking about Russian poetry from the mid-eighteenth century through the great modernists is the salience and occasional dominance of music and musicality—of concerns with the music of language, the musical impulse in poetry, and the musical dimensions of the mind and the world.\textsuperscript{152}

Many poets attempted to incorporate musical sounds into their verse. Friedrich introduces several ways in which a poet can do this. The first is keying, which he describes as the repeated use, often to begin lines or stanzas, of a vowel sound. Next, is mirroring, a technique in which a word or phrase is reflected by a corresponding one with roughly the same sounds in the opposite or scrambled order. Alliteration and assonance and the use of musical rhythms in the poetic structure are also methods of creating musical sounds in poetry. Finally, he describes the variation method in which one of three factors, tempo (speed), dynamics (loudness), or pitch (melody), is altered while the others remain constant. He equates this method to a modulation or sequencing in music.\textsuperscript{153} Poetic examples of these techniques abound.\textsuperscript{154} I will provide a few examples

\textsuperscript{151} Qtd. Frolova-Walker, “All Russian” 137. Another example of this the pervasiveness of the stereotype can be found with Rimsky-Korsakov. Later in his career, having gained exceptional fluency as a composer, Rimsky-Korsakov frequently apologized for completing commissions ahead of schedule.

\textsuperscript{152} Friedrich 5.

\textsuperscript{153} Friedrich 66.

\textsuperscript{154} For a complete explanation of these techniques and their use in Russian poetry of the 18th-20th centuries please see Paul Friendrich’s book \textit{Music in Russian Poetry}. 

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here. Pushkin’s “The Demons” uses folk rhythms as poetic structure. Konstantin Balmont’s 1897 “anapestic masterpiece” entitled “Chords” emphasizes the sounds of the words in order to correlate the subjects—“the chords of music, chords of language.”

Ivan Krylov was a skilled violinist and chamber musician, in addition to being a writer of 203 fables. In his 1811 work, “The Quartet” he combines the two by writing a fable in which the characters interact in a conversational way as in chamber music.

Vasily Zhukovsky (1783-1852), along with Konstantin Batyushkov, cofounded what Friedrich describes as:

The Peculiarly Russian tradition of explicit and intentional musicality, more specifically here, of melodiousness, or, yet more specifically, of what Pushkin dubbed “harmonious precision.”

This relationship manifests itself in their works in several ways. A large portion of Zhukovsky’s poems are called “songs” or “ballads” (many of which were later set to music). Glasse explains that Zhukovsky created a:

Melodic system based on intonational patterns and rhythmic mobility. A musical design is seen in the very composition of a poem…devices of melodization consist of interrogative and exclamatory intonation with complicated inversions and repetitions (anaphora, refrain) and variations linked to syntactical patterns as the melody swelled and subsided with the needs of the musical suggestion.

155 Friedrich 61.
156 Friedrich 5.
157 Friedrich 38.
158 Friedrich 43.
159 Qtd Friedrich 44.
Friedrich further asserts that the idea of “harmonious precision” is “inextricably connected with his role as the founder of Russian Romanticism.”

Song forms influenced the poetic structure of some poet’s works. Pushkin, Anton Delvig, Nikolai Tsiganov, and Alexey Koltsov all composed protyazhnaya. Alexey Koltsov (1809-1842) is notable for his knowledge and use of a wider range of song genres as an influence for his poetic structures. Koltsov was the son of a wealthy cattle dealer of Voronezh in south central Russia. He did not receive a quality formal education, as his controlling father expected him to assume a role in the family business and travel with the herds. At 16, he purchased a volume of poetry by the minor poet Dmitriev and was inspired to write his own works. During a business trip to Moscow he met Belinsky who acted as a friend and patron, assisting him in publishing his works. Koltsov’s unique social position allowed him to interact naturally with the peasant classes but also move in higher social circles because of his wealth. Belinksy described Koltsov as a “completely Russian human being” and stated that his poems portrayed a distinctly Russian character.

What is unique about Koltsov’s work is his depiction of peasant lives from their perspective using authentic Russian and Cossack folksong forms. He accurately depicted “the pluses and minuses of their lives, the symbols of their courtship and aging, the music and poetics of peasant work- and the human consequences of serfdom.” Most of his poems are songs and laments, and along with Pushkin, he is credited with moving

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160 Friedrich 44.
161 Maes 17.
162 Friedrich 90.
163 Friedrich 90.
Russian poetry from a superficial glorification of the folk to a “psychologically and sociologically deeper and more realistic view of peasant life.” An example of his work is a poem entitled “Song,” written from the point of view of a young girl who was forced to marry an old man she hates. His poems and message seem to have resounded with Russian composers. By 1950 his poems had been set more frequently than any Russian poet. Tonkov calculated that from 92 of his poems, 300 composers had produced 700 romances and songs, while Ivanovo lists 102 poems as being set to music some more than twelve different times. Composers who set his verse include Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Dargomîzsky, Musorgsky, and Rubenstein. The peasant classes seem to have felt an affinity for his poetry as well, and many of his songs were absorbed into the popular repertoire of folksongs.

Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) is another poet whose works were eventually assimilated into the “minimal repertory of folksongs of literary origin.” His “Cossack Lullaby” and “Out I’m Going on the Road Again” are examples of songs which achieved this unique distinction. Lermontov’s “Song of the Merchant Kalashnikov” (1837) is an imitation of the Russian folk epic genre, the bylîna, this genre was always sung to the

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164 Friedrich 90.
165 Friedrich 92.
166 Friedrich 93.
167 Friedrich 93.
168 Friedrich 96.
169 Friedrich 96.
accompaniment of instruments. During Lermontov’s time they were generally performed with accompaniment from the balalaika, an instrument Lermontov played.\footnote{Friedrich 97.}

The works of Asafany Fet (1820-1892) are noted for their “dense symbiosis between word and melody.”\footnote{Friedrich 105.} Although strongly influenced by German culture (his mother was German, he attended German boarding schools as a child, and was strongly influenced by Goethe and Heine) he was most significantly influenced by the Russian folk and Gypsy music he heard in Moscow taverns.\footnote{Friedrich 105.} While studying philology at the University of Moscow, Fet, along with fellow poets Nikolay Nekrasov and Apollon Grigoriev (also a noted critic), frequented the taverns of Moscow and listened to the music. They formulated the theory of “pleasurable sorrow” in which the sadness brought on by unrequited love can actually develop into a pleasure. They felt this feeling is what produced the beauty of Gypsy singing.\footnote{Friedrich 105.} At least 177 of his “songs” and poems had been set to music by 1977. Borodin and Tchaikovsky were among the 19\textsuperscript{th} century composers who set his texts.\footnote{Friedrich 109.}

Fet was a firm believer in the link between music and poetry. He once said, “without a musical attitude/orientation (nastroenie) there is no work of art.”\footnote{Qtd Friedrich 109.} In 1868 he further elaborated saying: “Poetry and music are not only related, but inseparable. All the ageless poetic works from the prophets to Goethe to Pushkin inclusive are in reality
musical work songs." Tchaikovsky seems to feel he was quite successful in his aims, remarking, “Fet at his best, leaves the boundaries of poetry and steps boldly into our province…he is not just a poet, but a poet musician." The musicality of Fet’s language seems to be quite specific to the Russian language and as a result he is one of the least translated of the great Russian poets.

His friend Nekrasov shared many of the same aesthetics and Prince Mirsky wrote of him, “Of all the Russian poets of the nineteenth century he was the only one who was genuinely and creatively akin to the spirit of popular songs; he did not imitate it-- he simply had in him the soul of a popular singer.” Nekrasov’s poetry is noted for his use of folk rhythms and colloquial speech. Friedrich feels that of all Russian poets Nekrasov was most attuned to the music of all the levels of Russian society and with the exceptions of Koltsov and the 20th century poet Esenin, was the most effective at conveying the form of folk music and poetry.

Sometimes the experience of watching a musical production provided inspiration for a new story. Gogol’s St John’s Eve was inspired by Weber’s Der Freischutz and his story A May Night, or the Drowned Maiden was influenced by Stepan Davídov’s Lesta and the Russian version of Ferdinand Kauer’s singspiel Das Donauweibchen. Pushkin wrote his version of the Don Juan legend, The Stone Guest, after seeing Mozart’s opera.

\[176\] Qtd Friedrich 109.

\[177\] Qtd Friedrich 109.

\[178\] Friedrich 109.

\[179\] Qtd Friedrich 113.

\[180\] Friedrich 114.

\[181\] Maes 18.
Don Giovanni. Unlike Mozart, however, he focused exclusively on the tragic elements of the story. Aleksandr Blok, whose career would span the last years of the nineteenth century into the 20th was influenced not only by vocal/dramatic works but by the instrumental works of Scriabin, Rubenstein, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, and Musorgsky.

As discussed in the introduction, music making was an integral part of the home life of the Russian aristocratic class. As a result music making is frequently depicted in Russian novels. Countless examples of characters making or listening to music are depicted in Russian literature, while it was unusual for a Russian author to depict a character reading. In The Singers, a short story by Turgenev, a man witnesses a singing contest at a rural inn, the winner performs a protyazhnaya that makes him weep. Fictional characters also discuss the celebrity of famous opera singers of the day, as in Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina and Turgenev’s A Nest of Gentryfolk.

182 Wikipedia

183 Friedrich 147. One must add the note that his strongest musical influence came from Bizet’s opera Carmen, however it was the Gypsy music that he found most appealing.

184 Wachtel xi.


186 Wachtel xii.
CHAPTER III
STORIES IN MUSIC

The most easily observed relationship between music and literature is of course captured in the title of this paper, composers as storytellers. In this chapter I will discuss three musical genres: opera, song, and programmatic orchestral works, (I will include ballet music in this category), illustrating the ways in which composers conveyed stories that were not just fantastic fairytales but tragedies with emotions that expressed the Russian tragic soul. In fact, many scholars would argue, and I would agree, that Russian composers and literati partook of every major artistic movement during the nineteenth century.187

With few exceptions, Russian composers chose the text for their songs and opera librettos from the literature of their own countrymen. Furthermore, many composers set the text exactly as written or had assistance in fashioning the librettos from authors and poets. This proclivity was in stark contrast to their Western European counterparts who tended to use professional librettists and foreign or mythological texts.188 Gasparov comments on this phenomenon:

187 Gasparov xvii. Gasparov in particular clearly articulates this argument. He explains that “Russian music took part in every major cultural trend in Russia but generally a decade behind the writers.” For example, Dargomizsky’s desire for realism during the 1850’s (he set the text of his operas word for word and tried to maintain the natural patterns of speech) came from the theories of Belinsky in the 1840’s. A Life for the Tsar came from the thinkers of the previous decade and their interest in history. One could write a paper regarding the literary and musical examples of Sentimentalism, Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, and Symbolism, in nineteenth century Russia.

188 Wachtel xiii.
I am not aware of any significant western European opera prior to Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* that not only adopted the plot and characters of a well-known work of literature but derived the libretto directly from its text. The later practice, however, was typical for Russian composers, who unhesitantly used classical works of national literature as a basis for their music.\(^{189}\)

An examination of the source materials for Russian composers confirms this assertion. Of Rimsky-Korsakov’s fifteen operas all have their source in Russian literature or legend. Tchaikovsky composed seven operas on Russian subjects (of ten total).\(^{190}\) Nine of Rubenstein’s thirteen operas used Russian sources (Rubenstein was of German/Jewish heritage and composed some operas in French and German during his travels and residency abroad.) All four of Borodin’s operas use Russian source material (although none of his operas were truly complete). Two of Serov’s three operas were Russian in origin, the other biblical. Interestingly Cui, while a huge proponent of the ideals of Stasov and the music of the other members of the kuchka, was the least Russian in his choices. Only seven of his fifteen operas have Russian stories as the basis for the libretti. Cui tended toward French literary sources as his subject matter, which may not be surprising given that he was half French.

\(^{189}\) Gasparov xviii. He also discusses the phenomenon of the musical works superseding the literary works in the consciousness of the public, as in Pushkin/Tchaikovsky’s Eugene Onegin. He also comments on the idea that the transformation of literary works into musical ones (often more than a generation apart) was “more than just genre transposition” but the act of transporting “a national classic into a different epoch, giving it a second life under totally different historical, aesthetic, and psychological circumstances. Familiar situations and characters, firmly entrenched in the national memory, receive new meaning in the new context.” (Pg xii)

\(^{190}\) An interesting aside; of Tchaikovsky’s three non-Russian operas, two were stories that were well known in Russia through their translations by Zhukovsky, *The Maid of Orleans* and *Undine*. Friedrich observes that Tchaikovsky seems to have enjoyed Zhukovsky’s translations, as two of his ballets also come from stories translated by Zhukovsky, *(Swan Lake* and the *Nutcracker)*. He also set at least one of his original poems to song.
Russian composers seem to show a preference for narrative poems and dramas in verse which allowed for direct use of text.\textsuperscript{191} Following the example of Dargomîzsky with \textit{The Stone Guest}, Musorgsky attempted to use Gogol’s text intact for \textit{The Marriage} (which he ultimately abandoned).\textsuperscript{192} In the nineteenth century Pushkin, Gogol and Lermontov were the authors most frequently set as opera librettos.\textsuperscript{193} Furthermore, when choosing inspiration for programmatic orchestral works and ballets they most often looked to the fairytales, historical events, and literature of their own culture.

The poems and stories of Alexander Pushkin are the most frequently set works by Russian composers. Russian poet Georgiy Ivanov compiled lists of musical settings of Russian poems, and states 264 of Pushkin’s poems have been set by Russian composers.\textsuperscript{194} Gerald Seaman feels there are several reasons for this proclivity. First, the characters are given well defined physiological profiles, which is very helpful for opera. Second in \textit{Eugene Onegin}, \textit{Mozart and Salieri}, and \textit{Boris Godunov} the text is distributed clearly between characters, resulting in a ready-made libretto. Next the rapid scene changes allow for use of contrasting music. The oft-cited musicality of Pushkin’s language is another reason. His use of humor, irony, and frequent musical allusions also help further his appeal. His work tends to reflect his native land, Russian winter with troikas, folk customs and superstitions, and descriptions of Caucasus gypsies. Gerald Seaman offered his opinion as to why composers were so attracted to the verse of Pushkin as a musical source. He wrote:

\textsuperscript{191} Gasparov xix. Several scholars cite this as an example of musicians attempted realism.
\textsuperscript{192} During the 20\textsuperscript{th} century many 19\textsuperscript{th} century novels were used as opera libretti including \textit{War and Peace}, \textit{Dead Souls}, \textit{The Gambler}, \textit{The Enchanted Wanderer}, \textit{Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk}, and \textit{Bela}, and many others. Gasparov xix.
\textsuperscript{193} Wachtel xiii.
\textsuperscript{194} Friedrich 62.
[the] Freshness and sparkle of Pushkin’s language, with its frequent employment of folk expressions and novel turns of speech…extraordinary vividness of his verse fairytale such as Tsar Sultan, with its magical content-the fabulous island, the magic squirrel, the thirty bogatyr emerging from the sea, to say nothing of the beautiful Swan-Princess, who’s beauty ‘eclipses the day’-are something unique in world literature, and it is not surprising that intensely nationalistic composers such as Rimsky-Korsakov, who sought to find an element that emphasized Russia’s individuality should seize upon these remarkable compositions for their inspiration.195

Cui wrote in a review of Eugene Onegin on November 4, 1884 that Pushkin’s poems had served as models for “innumerable romances” as well as eleven operas.196 Cui goes on to list four major Pushkin works he feels should be made into operas, The Fountain of Bakhchisar’ı, Angelo, A Feast in Time of Plague, and the Stories of Belkin especially The Captain’s Daughter.197 Cui felt the popularity of his verse lay in Pushkin’s clearly delivered ideas, concise expression (which he felt was very important in song, which prolongs the spoken work), and the lightness and musicality of his verse.198

Gogol and Lermontov were also quite popular as sources for musical subject matter. Gogol’s stories were set as operas by Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, and in the 20th century Shostakovich and Schendrin, and his stories even became programmatic instrumental works. Lermontov’s verse was particularly popular as the basis of song. His Song of the Merchant Kalashnikov and The Demon became operas by Rubenstein.


196 Qtd. Campbell 248. He lists Glinka’s Ruslan and Lyudmilla, Rusalka and The Stone Guest by Dargomizsky, The Prisoner of the Caucasus by Cui, Musorgsky’s Boris Godunov. Three settings of Mazepa (Shel’, Tchaikovsky, and Davidov[unfinished]), Eugene Onegin, Count Nulin and the Gypsies by Lishin (and later 17 other operas and at least 6 ballets), and The Little House at Kolomna’ by Solov’yov.

197 All would be set by 1911. Illinsky set the Fountains of Bakhcirasay in 1911, Angelo…Cui would set A Feast in Time of Plague and The Captain’s Daughter.

198 Campbell 248.
Marina Frolova-Walker has discussed extensively the dichotomy between the Russian tragic soul of literature and the exotic fairytales of stereotypical Russian music.\textsuperscript{199} She says that by 1900 Europeans felt they had codified the traits of Russian literature based on reading Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov.\textsuperscript{200} She cites a description by the Englishman Edmund Wilson in 1943 who described the traits of Russians in his book \textit{A Window on Russia}. He said Russians are “(1) formless and unkempt, (2) gloomy, (3) crudely realistic, (4) morbid and hysterical; and (5) mystical.”\textsuperscript{201} She states that the musical picture of Russia in the West, as presented by Diaghilev from 1907 onward, was based on the works of Glinka, the Five, and their pupils. She describes it as “exotic, brilliant, and more often fantastic than realistic, and mostly festive rather than gloomy.”\textsuperscript{202}

She argues that the foundations of both stereotypes were laid in 1842 when Gogol’s \textit{Dead Souls} and Glinka’s \textit{Ruslan and Lyudmila} both appeared. There are many similarities between the works, foremost among them being that both are epics and the main character can be construed as Russian in nature.\textsuperscript{203} However, “\textit{Dead Souls} satirized the horrors of the Russian present but promised a glorious future for Russia symbolized

\textsuperscript{199} One can find her discussions on this topic in the sources cited in the Bibliography.

\textsuperscript{200} Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 131.

\textsuperscript{201} Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 131.

\textsuperscript{202} Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 131. The Diaghilev stereotype is certainly true. Diaghilev actually loved Tchaikovsky but knew his works would not appeal to the Parisian public, who at the time were obsessed with exoticism. Therefore he handpicked the works he felt would be the most successful, not works that were necessarily reflective of Russian music as a whole.

\textsuperscript{203} Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 131.
by the flying Troika going into the unknown, while *Ruslan* glorified Russian might and celebration.\textsuperscript{204} She continues:

A flying troika and a wedding feast have many opposing properties: movement on one hand versus stability on the other, loneliness versus community, melancholy versus rejoicing, a future unknown versus confidence in the future, interrogation versus affirmation, and so on. While according to the literary image Russia could not fail to sense its inferiority beside the achievements of the West, the image constructed by Glinka presents Russia as the centre of the known world.\textsuperscript{205}

She goes on to ask how Russian composers and literati conceived of such conflicting concepts of Russianness when both were determined to realize the national character.\textsuperscript{206} Frolova-Walker asserts that Stasov and the Kuchka idealized Glinka, and in particular *Ruslan*:

For them, to be a Russian composer was to follow Glinka, and so the genres of epic or fairy-tale opera, overtures and fantasies on Russian and foreign themes, and plots from pre-Petrine or even pre-Christian Russia were mined endlessly in the effort to conserve the momentum established by Glinka. The Five looked to peasant song as an aesthetic and ethical ideal, which they took to be free of passion, or drama, or any kind of Romantic sensibility; this inevitably placed heavy restrictions upon their range of expression. Only Musorgsky and, outside the influence of The Five, Tchaikovsky sometimes departed from this pattern: they alone touched upon conflict and tragedy, and adopted contemporary subject matter.\textsuperscript{207}

Frolova-Walker goes on to assert that with the exception of Tchaikovsky, romanticism passed Russia by.\textsuperscript{208} To support her thesis she quotes from an 1891 letter from Rimsky-Korsakov to the critic Semyon Kruglikov: “Do you know what Russian

\textsuperscript{204} Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 131.
\textsuperscript{205} Frolova-Walker, All Russian 132.
\textsuperscript{206} Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 131.
\textsuperscript{207} Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 132.
\textsuperscript{208} In her article, “On Ruslan and Russianness” Frolova Walker writes, ”Musorgsky and Tchaikovsky are two exceptions, of course, the former being in tune with Dostoyevsky’s psycho-extremism, the latter ‘updating’ the emotional world of the Russian romance and thus to some extend evoking a ’pre-Ruslan state of the musical ‘Russian spirit.””
music lacks? It lacks soul. Now Beethoven has a mighty soul. Beethoven is the best, the most wonderful of composers.”

In my opinion, Frolova-Walker is quite correct. There are many operas and programmatic orchestral works that depict fairytale stories. However, I would assert that if one examines a wider range of both literary and musical works, music and literature do not diverge as much as one might think. Many composers and authors worked in a wide range of genres. Pushkin wrote fairytales, drama, and comedies. Gogol was not only the author of *Dead Souls* but he also wrote a collection of stories inspired by his childhood in the Ukraine and stories told to him by his mother. Tchaikovsky, to use Frolova-Walker’s example, wrote light fairytale ballets and symphonic works that are most certainly part of the Romantic tradition. I would assert that the wide variety of story/program choice reflects the diversity of the country, exotic, tragic, patriotic, fairytales, etc. Mikhail Dunavsky said:

> There are poets who are strikingly many sided, whose creation is an entire world wherein is combined the lyrical, the tragic, and the epic, the popular ethnic, and the private, the historical, and the contemporary. Such were Pushkin, Heine, Lermontov. Such was Blok.

I would argue so are Glinka, Musorgsky, Rachmaninoff, Rimsky-Korsakov and many other Russian composers. Just as the writers and the musicians were multi-dimensional, so is the country (as was discussed in Chapter 1).

**Opera**

As Russian composers worked to create operas of a genre and quality that would gain popularity in the Italian dominated musical life of St. Petersburg, three genres

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209 Frolova-Walker, “All Russian,” 133.
210 Qtd Friedrich 145.
emerged. The first were operas with historical or patriotic themes glorifying the Russian state. The second were tragic operas, and the third, fairy-tale operas. Most operas overlap categories given that whether tragic or fairytale, they incorporate nationalistic themes. This can be attributed to several factors. First, nationalism was at its highest in the second half of the nineteenth century across Europe, and Russia was no exception. Second, Russians, as discussed earlier, were consciously working to establish a national identity, and glorifying their heritage was part of this new identity. Finally, as the state controlled the theaters, and thus all opportunities for performance until 1882, an opera which glorified the state greatly increased the chances of performance. Soviet musicologist Boris Asafyev wrote of Ruslan (although the statement is equally applicable to many Russian operas):

In a country where the will of despots was creating a great power, at least on paper, and where the rural masses lived with their own culture, and not an import, it was difficult for national consciousness to emerge, for state goals and political principles to be justified… It is no wonder that Ruslan as a national-state epic proved to be a work rich in material, saturated in the juices of the Russian land in all its vastness, but poor ideologically, even though warmed by the blood of the heart.

The two operas of Mikhail Glinka provide the archetypes for each operatic genre. A Life for the Tsar is both tragic and historical/patriotic, while Ruslan is a fairytale opera that also glorifies the might of the Russian empire.

Glinka’s A Life for the Tsar premiered November 27, 1836 at the Bol’shoi Theatre in St. Petersburg. Musicologist Iurii Keldysh states that A Life for the Tsar

\[211\] Within this group I will include a sub-group: Francis Maes names Gogolian comedy as a separate genre, however I feel that since they generally include fantastic elements they fit within the fairytale genre.

\[212\] Frolova-Walker, “Ruslan,” 43.
“marked the boundary between the past and future of Russian music.” Prince Odoevsky wrote in the first of his three “Letters to a Music-Lover” (he wrote one letter in each of the three weeks following the premiere): “With Glinka’s opera comes the appearance of what the Europeans have long sought but never found— a new element in art— and a new period has begun in the history of art: the period of Russian music.” Whether or not one agrees with these statements, *A Life for the Tsar* was groundbreaking in many ways. It was the first Russian opera to be sung throughout, and also the first Russian tragic opera.

*A Life for the Tsar* is not only a tragic opera but a historical opera as well. It tells the story of Ivan Osipovich Susanin who, in February or March of 1613, tricked a group of Poles who hoped to find the newly elected Tsar, sixteen year old Mikhail Romanov. Susanin agreed to guide them to the young Romanov, but instead took them into the snowy forest where they became hopelessly lost. Realizing they have been tricked, they torture Susanin to death, but he remains loyal and does not reveal the young man’s location (meanwhile he has sent his son to the actual location of the young Tsar to warn him). Mikhail ascends to the throne and the *Smuta* (Time of Troubles) ends. The opera was immensely popular with the Tsar and opened each season at the Russian opera.

Maes finds it ironic that *Ruslan* became the model for the kuchka. The opera was not successful, and left Glinka bitter. He left Russia frustrated with the lack of support.
and opportunities for Russian musicians. According to his sister Lyudmila he spit on the ground and said he hoped “never to see this vile country again.”

Ruslan and Lyudmila opens with the wedding feast of the title characters. A guest sings a bylïna about how the couple will face misfortune before a lifetime of love and happiness. During the feast Lyudmila is kidnapped and her father promises her hand and half his kingdom to the suitor who can return with her. The three suitors set out for the kingdom of her captor, the evil dwarf sorcerer Chernomor. Within the magical garden, Lyudmila resists the temptations of the garden and waits for Ruslan. Chernomor puts her under a sleeping spell and goes to fight Ruslan. Ruslan defeats Chernomor and obtains a magic ring from Finn to wake her. The two live happily ever after and Ratmir, his former rival for Lyudmila’s hand, marries his former captive Gorislava. The transformation of Ratmir into a good loyal friend and husband by the love of a good woman (Gorislava) is a further parallel between Western European operatic conventions and Russian opera. Witness for example the many versions of Faust in which Gretchen’s love and purity change Faust.

Ruslan, according to Boris Gasparov, is:

A reflection of omni-Russianess (imperial rather than Nativist sense) ability to accommodate Western European language, oriental colors, and a multitude of Slavic and Eurasian voices, a style that would conquer the world by absorbing it, later made it appealing to Stalin.

Marina Frolova-Walker has written in detail about how Ruslan has become a national epic:

215 Maes 30.
216 For more information about this phenomenon see Kramer, Lawrence. “Liszt, Goethe, and the Discourse of Gender.” Chapter 4 of Music as a Cultural Practice, 1800-1900.
217 Gasparov 35.
Russia has always presented itself in relation to the surrounding nations as an elder brother, with familial responsibilities and intimate ties... The fraternal love of Russia toward the other nationalities of its empire was always given much emphasis, lest anyone be inclined to see nothing but raw imperial might. Thus the finale of the opera promotes the tale of Ruslan and Lyudmila as a parable for Russia’s own carefully constructed self-image.218

Although ultimately disappointed with Ruslan, Serov wrote prior to the premiere:

Russian opera needs a magical subject—so as to uncover all the riches of our mythology and express the true Russian view of nature. If such a subject were to be developed with a true knowledge of the Russian spirit, with burning enthusiasm and if it were to meet today’s criteria for theatrical music—then a real path would be laid and the fate of Russian music would be decided.219

Below I will provide a few examples of each operatic genre. Again, much overlap will be evidenced in the classifications as most operas have nationalistic undertones. I will briefly summarize the plots of major works so the reader can clearly see how each opera exemplifies the categories and the how the subject matter demonstrates its “Russianness.”

Tragic Opera

Tragic Opera, without the combination with a historical story, is a genre in which Tchaikovsky is certainly dominant. His opera Eugene Onegin, based on Pushkin’s novel in verse of the same name, is perhaps the most widely performed of Russian Operas. The story is set in the 1820’s among provincial landowners. Tatyana, daughter of Madame Larina, falls in love with Eugene Onegin, who is from St. Petersburg. She writes him a letter declaring her love and he rejects her. She later marries a general and becomes a Princess and member of St. Petersburg’s high society. They meet again in this world and this time he is rejected and subsequently devastated. A subplot in this opera is that of

218 Frolova-Walker 42.
219 Maes 50.
Onegin and his friend Lensky. While at a ball, Onegin becomes bored and flirts with Lensky’s fiancée Olga. Lensky is offended and challenges his friend to a duel, in which Onegin kills Lensky.

Tchaikovsky maintains Pushkin’s use of colloquial speech for the different characters and reinforces this choice by also using music that would be associated with the characters’ social classes during the 1820’s. For example, he uses the waltz by a military band and the polonaise as symbols of autocracy and the high aristocracy and salon romances for the nurse (these were associated with the bourgeoisie/lower aristocracy).²²⁰

Tchaikovsky composed five other tragic operas. The Maid of Orleans is the story of Joan of Arc (also historical). Mazepa (which uses historical characters) is based on Pushkin’s Poltava. In the story Ukrainian Separatist Ivan Mazepa is married to a much younger woman, Maria. Her father is opposed to the marriage and exposes his plans to Peter the Great as a way of disposing of his son-in-law. The Tsar does not believe his allegations and Mazepa takes revenge on his father-in-law. He has him seized, tortured, and sentenced to death. He explains his ambitions for Ukrainian independence to Maria and she swears to support him. Mazepa loves his wife very much and cannot bear to tell her what sacrifice it will mean for her personally. Her mother, however, tells her and they rush to the dungeon, but are too late. Maria goes mad, and the opera ends quietly with her singing a lullaby in her madness. The Enchantress is the story of Natasha, a beautiful widow/innkeeper with a promiscuous reputation. No man is invulnerable to her charms, including the local prince and his son. Jealousy ultimately leads to death for many of the characters. In The Queen of Spades, also based on Pushkin, a young man

²²⁰ Maes 129-30.
named Hermann dreams of making a fortune gambling. He seeks the secret of a countess who knows which three cards will always win. However, the events that lead to his learning her secret also ultimately drive him mad. It also results in the girl he loves, Liza (the niece of the countess) committing suicide. Finally, *The Oprichnik*, is an opera about a young man, Andrey Morozov, who joins the *Oprichniki*, Ivan the Terrible's secret police, with the hopes of obtaining revenge on the Prince who defrauded his family of their fortune. However, his mother curses her son and he revokes his oath. Ivan agrees but tells him he must remain a member of the guard until his marriage. The Tsar invokes *ius primae noctis* and orders the bride to his bedchamber. Andre curses the tsar, and the Oprichniki use this as justification to murder him. They invite his mother to a “splendid celebration,” his execution. Maes describes the opera as using history as a background for a “romantic tragedy of fate, in which Ivan and the oprichniki are the tools of a destiny that threatens and eventually destroys two innocent lovers.”

Pushkin’s so called “Four Little Tragedies” were all made into operas. *The Stone Guest*, based on the Don Juan legend, was set word for word in 1872 by Alexander Dargomîzsky, in a concerted attempt to illustrate musical realism. In 1897, Rimsky-Korsakov made *Mozart and Salieri* into an opera. Again, setting the text almost word for word, the story follows the legend that Salieri poisoned Mozart out of professional jealousy. Cui, who had listed the story as a Pushkin text he felt should be made into an

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221 Maes 116
opera in 1884, did just that in 1900 when he set *A Feast in Time of Plague*.\(^{222}\)

Rachmaninoff completed the quartet when he scored *The Miserly Knight* in 1904.

**Historical/Patriotic Opera**

Most other tragic operas used real individuals rather than fictional characters (as in *Eugene Onegin*) or employed a historical group as a means of plot advancement (The Oprichnik). The reign of Ivan the Terrible (1533-84) and the Time of Troubles (1605-13) seem to have been particularly interesting to Russians in the late nineteenth century. Composing a patriotic opera that the tsar enjoyed could be quite beneficial to a composer; Serov, for example was granted an annuity from the state for *Rogneda*.\(^{223}\)

As already discussed, *A Life for the Tsar*, represents the archetype for this genre of Russian Opera. However, *Boris Godunov* by Musorgsky, (based on a Pushkin novel in verse of the same name), is probably the most successful. Boris Godunov is the link between the two popular time periods. Godunov was crowned tsar in 1598 after the Rurikodiv dynasty (of which Ivan the Terrible had been a part) died out. The opera is a fictionalized/embellished account of the events surrounding Godunov’s ascension to the throne and his ultimate downfall. In Musorgsky’s setting Godunov is haunted by guilt over having killed the young Dmitri, heir to the throne (this is not historically accurate as the child actually had no real claim to the throne and he most likely died of epilepsy). However this alteration in plot allows Musorgsky to create a very Shakespearean style story. Pushkin himself referred to the story as a “romantic tragedy.”

\(^{222}\) Qtd. Campbell 248.

\(^{223}\) Maes 98.
Musorgsky’s other opera, *Khovanshina*, concerns the time prior to the rise of Peter the Great. He combines historical events dealing with the Streltsi revolt of 1682 and the break, and subsequent oppression of the Old Believers with the Orthodox church over the reforms of the patriarch Nikon. During this time many old believers chose mass suicide by self-immolation, which is the event that ends Musorgsky’s opera. Caryn Emerson wrote about Musorgsky’s two operas:

*Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshina* are unusually disjointed and pessimistic, measured against the norms of the operatic canon at the time. The reasons are both structural and thematic. First, Musorgsky refused to utilize the conventional organizing principle for bringing nineteenth century historical opera to a close…he did not permit resolution on the erotic plane— that is, any mere consummation of love between the hero and the heroine- to resolve problems on the historical plain…Second, he resisted the temptation to end his operas with a big hurrah scene,…At the bleak empty pianissimo finales of Musorgsky’s opera, everything suggests an extreme pessimism about the destiny of Russia in the real world of historical times; not protected by God, not blessed with politically responsible subjects, the nation will have a genuinely open future, and that future is awful.\(^{224}\)

Rimsky-Korsakov composed two historical/tragic operas based on poems by Lev Alexandrovich Mey. The *Maid of Pskov* combines historical events, namely Ivan the Terrible’s campaign against Novgorod and Pskov in 1570 with romantic fiction. In the opera, Ivan realized the illegitimate daughter he never knew lives in the town of Pskov. He plans to spare the town and meets with Olga. However, the ending is tragic: her fiancé and his band of rebels attack the camp and (in the opera) Olga is killed when she jumps in front of a bullet intended for her fiancé.\(^{225}\) Ivan the Terrible is devastated at her death and Pskov falls. Maes says the epilogue provides the historical interpretation “the fall of Pskov was inevitable; it was God’s will. The laws of history cannot be altered by

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\(^{224}\) Emerson 23.

\(^{225}\) In the play she is distraught upon learning of his death and stabs herself.
the acts of men.” The Tsar’s Bride is another historical/tragic opera based on Mey’s work. The play is described as a “somber play with every kind of romantic element: jealousy, murder, magic potions, and madness.”

Fairytale Opera

Fairytale operas were always popular in Russia, but greatly increased in the later part of the century in the wake of tightened restrictions in the 1880’s.

Borodin’s opera, Prince Igor, begun in 1869 and left uncompleted at his death in 1887, is an excellent example of fairytale opera that also glorifies the state. The libretto, written by Borodin was based on the twelfth century epic, “The Lay of Igor’s Campaign.” The Russian Prince Igor is held captive at the court of the Kahn of Polovitsi, a race of nomadic warriors. Kahn Konchak wants Igor to enter an alliance with him so he can freely pursue conquests. Slave girls dance for Igor and he is invited to choose one (the famous Polevitisian Dances), but he resists. After he is free, his son marries the daughter of the Khan, thus assimilating the Polevitisians into the Russian people. Frances Maes describes the ideology of the opera:

Despotism, erotic fantasies, sensual temptation as a threat to rationality and vigor of the western male- all these oriental themes are present here…a classic example of an ideology legitimizing the military drive to the East; the theory of Western superiority on racial grounds over the eastern nations; giving Russia the right (or the duty) to subdue them. Rimsky-Korsakov composed several fairytale operas. He particularly favored this genre in the 1890’s and early 20th century. Sadko (1895-6) in based on a bylïna from the 12th century about a gusli player, Sadko, who becomes a rich merchant helped by the Sea

226 Maes 108.

227 Maes 81.
King and his daughter. In Sadko, Rimsky-Korsakov did something unique, according to Mariana Ritzarev:

What has been important for all types of Russian nationalism in every epoch is not only the setting of village against the city, but also the promotion of singing, the vocal expression, characteristic of Russian folklore as opposed to playing instrumental music. But Russian musical folklore was not always vocal. And Rimsky-Korsakov’s Sadko is a wonderful example, celebrating Russian pre-Christian instrumental folklore.

Another Rimsky-Korsakov opera based on bylïna is The Snowmaiden. The story for Kashchev The Deathless (1901-2) comes from a Russian fairy-tale. Kashchev The Deathless is a one-act opera about an old evil Wizard. The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya is a combination of two legends. Tale of the Tsar Sultan was composed in 1899 for the 100th anniversary of Pushkin’s birth. It is a stylization of a kaka, or folk tale, by Pushkin. In this story, the Tsar Sultan, has his wife and young son placed in a barrel at sea after her sisters spread a rumor that the child is a monster. They wash up on a magic island and the prince becomes ruler, marrying the beautiful swan princess. He misses his father, and turning himself into a bumblebee goes to visit him (the famous “Flight of the Bumblebee”). He stings the eyes of the wicked women. He overhears a sailor telling his father of the wonders of his kingdom. The Sultan decides to go visit, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The comedies of Nikolai Gogol also seemed to hold a special appeal to composers. Several of his stories were set as operas. Both Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov used the story Christmas Eve as a basis for operas. Rimsky-Korsakov’s bears the same name, while Tchaikovsky’s focuses on a different part of the story and is called

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228 The gusli is a plucked multi-stringed instrument.

229 Ritzarev 11-12.
Vakula the Smith. Rimsky-Korsakov set *May Night* and Musorgsky added *Sorochinski Fair*. All three stories are from a collection entitled *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*. The stories are set in Gogol’s native Ukraine. Another story from the collection, *St. John’s Eve*, will be mentioned later as the inspiration for Musorgsky’s *A Night on Bald Mountain*.

Song

As the earlier quotes from Gogol and others exemplified, Russia had a rich tradition of singing. Furthermore, performing of art songs, particularly the Romance, in the home held great potential for composers. As a result many Russian composers wrote significant quantities of song. For example, Tchaikovsky composed 104 songs, and Musorgsky 65. Glinka only composed songs until 1835 and wrote more than 60. Rimsky Korsakov also composed many songs and collected more than 100 folksongs. Cui composed more than 100 songs and Rachmaninoff almost that many.

The Romance/Romans was the most popular genre during the nineteenth century. These art songs comprised a wide variety of quality and styles. They had their origins in popular or urban love songs of the time known as *bytovio romans*—a song about real life. These songs were very sentimental, often set to texts by contemporary poets, and generally in the minor mode. The love songs portrayed a generally sad feeling of *toska* or a vague longing and regret very common in popular tunes. The Romance genre originated in the late 18th century and became exceptionally popular in the 19th. In the early to mid nineteenth century Glinka was the best known composer of Romances, but

\[230\] Stites 188.

\[231\] Stites 189.
Alexander Verstovsky (1799-1862), Alexander Aliabev (1787-1851, Alexander Varlamov (1801-1848), Alexander Gurilev (1803-1858), Daniil Kashin (1769-1841), and Mikhail Vielgorsky (1788-1856), were also significant composers in the genre. As discussed earlier, they set the poetry of their friends. During Pushkin’s lifetime more than 70 of his poems were set as song. Other favored poets in the Romance genre included Aleksey Koltsov, Nikolai Tsigenev, Zhukovsky, Pleescheev, and Lermontov.

Boris Astafiev, a well-known Russian music critic, wrote:

"Romance is a more sophisticated type of the “home,” salon song, the song that has become more intimate and sensitive in conveying the subtest tints of state of mind - personal lyrical sensations and this is why so closely knit together with lyrical poetry. The major aim of the composer is always to express most sensitively the poet’s message and enhance the emotional tone of verses by means of music.”

The realistic portrayals of individuals (particularly regular folk) in the poetry of Koltsov and others greatly influenced composers who attempted these same goals in song. Musorgsky is a particularly strong example of this aesthetic.

The songs of Modest Musorgsky will serve as an excellent illustration of the composer as a storyteller. Musorgsky was primarily a composer of song and opera. His early songs are generally Romances. During the 1860’s he composed a series of songs that were character sketches of regular people. Some, such as the scene between the holy fool and the young girl in “Dearly Savishna,” were based on events Musorgsky actually witnessed. Musorgsky’s interest in realism, or the musical portrayal of real life, was reflected in two ways: the “dramatization and imitation of spoken language.”

As discussed in the section on opera Musorgsky was influenced by Dargomizsky’s emphasis

232 Friedrich page unknown.

233 Maes 87.
on imitating the spoken word. I believe he was further influenced by the depiction of regular folk through the poetry of Koltsov and Nekrasov, several of which he set in the years proceeding these poems. Musorgsky composed his own text for these character sketches. Among them were “Dearly Savishna” (1860 in which a holy fool/village idiot (yaródivïy) pleads for a young girl’s love.) In “The Ragamuffin” (1867) street children mock an old woman. Censors banned the publication of “The Seminarian” (1866) in which a student recites verse while thinking about the priest’s daughter and how he will be scolded if caught looking at her too long. Musorgsky had the song published in Leipzig, but copies were confiscated at the border.\footnote{Maes 87-94.} A final example is “Gathering Mushrooms” (1867) in which a young woman fantasizes about having sex with a young friend and helping her old husband die by feeding him poisonous mushroom broth.

Maes notes that Musorgsky’s ability to incorporate sarcasm, musical parody, and social commentary is particularly remarkable. In the song “Rayok” (“The Peepshow”) he mocks the opponents of the Kuchka at Stasov’s request.\footnote{Maes 89.}

The ability to imitate spoken language is another remarkable trademark in his songs. Musorgsky could capture the speech and context, age, character, and social class of his subjects. Examples of this technique include “Dearly Savishna,” which is set in 5/4 meter with no breathing pauses for the singer to portray the monotone pleadings of the village idiot. Perhaps the finest example of this ability is his song cycle \emph{The Nursery} in which he delineates between the child and the nurse.\footnote{Maes 87-94.}

\footnote{Maes 87-94.}
Although criticized by Stasov, Musorgsky showed a return to vocal lyricism in his song cycles *Sunless* and *Songs and Dances of Death*. The return to vocal lyricism was not a drastic change, he had composed many lyrical pieces throughout his career including romances and protyazhnaya such as “Tell Me Why, Fair Maiden”, “Night”, and “Where Art Thou, Little Star.” These songs represent a partnership between Musorgsky and the poet Count Arseniy Golenishchev-Kutozov, who was an opponent of realism. Golenishchev-Kutozov and Musorgsky were roommates for fourteen months beginning in March 1874. The poems are very pessimistic in nature. Stasov attributed Musorgsky’s dark mood and alcoholism to his disappointments over the reception of Boris Godunov. However, most scholars feel it is more likely his downward descent was caused by his impoverishment following the emancipation of the serfs. His association with Golenishchev-Kutozov may have increased that aristocratic nostalgia. Richard Taruskin wrote of Musorgsky:

[Musorgsky] was not a “civic” artist. The voice that speaks from the *Sunless* cycle is that of a neurotically self-absorbed, broken-down aristocrat. That was Musorgsky by 1874. The voice that speaks from *The Nursery* is that of a pampered gentry brat. That, too, was a self-portrait, and a very nostalgic one. The peasant types that abound in his songs and operas of the 1860s are objectively drawn life-portraits motivated by Musorgsky’s peculiar scientific views of the period, not by any hint of sentimental identification. The portrayal of the crowd in Boris and (especially) *Khovanshchina* is unflattering. His reputation as a narodnik or radical democrat notwithstanding, the composer’s correspondence gives no hint of any such involvement. Belinsky, Chernishevsky, Pisarev-these names will be absent from the index to any collection of Musorgsky’s letters (save, of course, the editorial commentary).

237 Maes 189.
238 Maes 189.
239 Maes 169.
240 Qtd. Maes 169.
The people and cultures of the Russian empire have a diverse and unique heritage of ethnic, sacred, and even art music. The influence of folksong created a second example of cross-pollination in Russian music. Folksong influence was found in song, opera, and orchestral music. For example, protyazhnaya also influenced Tchaikovsky’s First Symphony. While not programmatic music (and thus not included in that chapter), fantasies on folksongs were very common among Russian composers. The archetype for this genre is Glinka’s Kamarinskaya (Glinka composed three Fantaisies pittoresques for orchestra influenced by Berlioz. Kamarinskya used Russian folksongs while the other two were based on Spanish songs.)

Kamarinskaya used a bylïna for the slow and the wedding song “Kamarinskaya” for the fast. The general form for this genre was to choose a slow and fast folksong. Also, as many folksongs were accompanied by an ostinato they generally had a sort of variations feel. Balakirev, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninoff, and others all composed in this genre.

Program Music

The orchestral music of Russia, particularly the exotic works popularized by Diaghilev in Paris, is generally the most recognized Russian music in the West. Program music was immensely popular during the nineteenth century, and Russia was not an exception to the rule. Russian composers wrote all genres of program music; the program symphony, tone poems, programmatic overtures and (when presented apart from the dramatic setting) dances from operas and ballets. The Five particularly revered Liszt,

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242 Tchaikovsky wrote in his diary June 27, 1888 that the Russian symphonic school was “all in Kamarinskaya, just as the whole oak is in the acorn.” Qtd. In Taruskin, “Defining Russian Musically”, 115.
Schumann, and Berlioz, all composers who wrote significant quantities of programmatic music.

We certainly see many examples of orientalism/exoticism in the orchestral works of Russian composers. The interest in the east and the exotic was widespread in the late nineteenth century. However, given the Russian empire’s vast size and multiple ethnicities, Russian composers could find exotic eastern subjects within the realm of Imperial Russia. Friedrich writes about this:

There was a great deal of contact between Russians and non-Indo-European peoples, be it enemies like the Turks, Chinese, and Japanese, or smaller nationalities and ethnic groups coming under the imperialist, expansionist, and generally colonial policies of the tsars: Finno-Ugric groups (Finns, Mari, Karelians, Mordvins, etc.); the Bashkirs and Kaymyks, and other Turkish, Tatar, and Mongo groups; the many nationalities of the Caucasus, notably the Chechans and the Circassians. Russian poets, often in connection with government service, had a significant degree of contact with these groups. Many examples of orientalism can be found in Russian orchestral works.

Borodin’s Polovetsian dances from the opera *Prince Igor* and *In the Steppes of Central Asia* are excellent examples. Balakirev’s tone poem *Tamara* (based on a poem by Mikhail Lermontov) tells the story of Tamara, a woman who seduces travelers to her tower beside the gorge of Daryal. She allows them one night of pleasure before killing them and flinging the bodies into the River Terek. His virtuosic piano work *Islamey* was intended to evoke the exotic beauty of the Caucasus. *Caucasian Sketches* by Ippolitov-Ivanov is also meant to evoke the Caucasus. The programs for Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Antar* and *Scherazade* are based on Arabian fairytales.

Many of the programmatic works also have political undertones. Borodin’s *In the Steppes of Central Asia* was composed in 1880 for the 25th anniversary of the reign of

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243 Friedrich 284.
Alexander II. According to Maes the work glorifies Tsarist conquest.\textsuperscript{244} Musorgsky’s work \textit{The Capture of Kars}, composed for the same event, commemorated one of the rare victories over the Turks in the disastrous Crimean War. Balakirev’s work, \textit{Russia} (also known as \textit{Rus’}, \textit{Second Overture on Russian Themes}, and \textit{1,000 Years}) was much revised. He began its composition in 1863 (it was then known as his \textit{Second Overture on Russian Themes}) but later made substantial revisions to the title and program to reflect his changing political ideology. Rubenstein composed overtures on historical subjects glorifying the Russian state in \textit{Donskoy} (which commemorates the Russian victory over the Mongols in 1380) and \textit{Ivan the Terrible} (1869).

Many orchestral works had literary associations. Balakirev composed his \textit{King Lear Overture} in a sonata form, very similar to the overtures of Beethoven.\textsuperscript{245} Tchaikovsky chose three Shakespeare works, \textit{Romeo and Juliet} (at the suggestion of Balakirev), \textit{The Tempest}, and \textit{Hamlet}. He also composed his \textit{Manfred Symphony} on Byron’s \textit{Manfred} (also at the suggestion of Balakirev) and \textit{Francesca da Rimini} on the 5\textsuperscript{th} canto of Dante’s \textit{Inferno}. These works are unusual in that they feature a non-Russian subject. However, many Russian composers used Russian literature as a basis for programmatic works. Rachmaninov composed the tone poem, \textit{The Rock}, in 1893, based on the Chekhov story, \textit{On the Road}. Musorgsky’s \textit{A Night on Bald Mountain} was inspired by Gogol’s story \textit{St. John’s Eve}.

Many programmatic works were not strictly stories but rather evocative of a mood or place. Rimsky-Korsakov’s \textit{Russian Easter Overture} is a great example of this, while having no explicit program, the work, based on liturgical melodies evokes the springtime

\textsuperscript{244} Maes 81.
\textsuperscript{245} Maes 64.
celebrations of pre-Christian Russian people. Rubenstein’s Symphony No. 2 is subtitled the “Ocean Symphony.” There is much debate as to whether the final three symphonies of Tchaikovsky have programs. Tchaikovsky sometimes supplied or altered programs after the fact. For example, after the performance of the Fourth Symphony he supplied Nadezia von Meck with a program for the work. There are vague descriptions of fate and other emotions in the drafts of the Fifth Symphony. The sixth is subtitled “Pathétique” although some feel it should actually translate as “Impassioned Symphony.”

Several works are considered evocative of the spirit of the Bogatir (Russian warriors of folk epics). The mood of Bogartirskaya sila (Strength of the bogatir’) conveyed weight, might and courage. Stasov applied this term to Borodin’s Second Symphony. He stated that Borodin told him the slow movement was the portrayal of an epic singer and the finale a joyful bogatir feast. According to Frolova-Walker, the use of solemn hymns and heavy dances in Glazunov’s symphonies, while not strictly programmatic have been interpreted as portraying pagan Russia. Bogatir’s are explicitly mentioned in the movement “The Bogatir Gate (at Kiev, the Ancient Capital)” in Rimsky-Korsakov’s Pictures at an Exhibition.

Musorgsky presents a unique form of program music (and another example of cross-pollination in the arts) in his Pictures at an Exhibition. This suite (originally for piano but later orchestrated) is a musical representation of a visual source, the paintings

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246 Maes
247 Frolova-Walker, Russian Music, 44.
248 Frolova-Walker, Russian Music, 44.
249 Frolova-Walker, Russian Music, 44.
of his friend, Victor Gartman (Hartmann). Very few examples of this type of programmatic work exist in all of classical music. There is another Russian example, Rachmaninoff’s *Isle of the Dead*. The work, composed in 1907, was inspired by a painting of the same name by the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin.

Although generally not exhibited in the most famous orchestral works of the nineteenth century, (outside the works of Tchaikovsky such as his later symphonies, *Romeo and Juliet*, and even *Swan Lake* with the death of the couple), the Russian tragic soul can be found in many orchestral works. Glazunov’s symphonic poem *Stenka Razin* tells the story of the leader of a Cossack uprising (Stepan Razin, also known as Stenka Razin) who was eventually drawn and quartered in Moscow. His *To the Memory of A Hero*, subtitled *Elegy for Orchestra*, is another example. The third movement of Borodin’s *Second Symphony* is also considered to be expressive of the Russian tragic soul. Also Rimsky-Korsakov composed *At the Tomb* in memory of Belyayev. During the 20th century the Tragic Soul will play an important role in the works of Shostakovich, Rachmaninoff and others.

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250 Maes 86.
CONCLUSION

Frolova-Walker relates an interesting anecdote at the end of her article, “All Russian Music is So Sad,” as to how the title came about. She explained that three of her students had preconceived notions as to what Russian music exemplified and no evidence to the contrary could sway them. One student was well read, and thought all Russian music was sad. The second had watched videos of Russian folksong and dance and all Russian music reminded her of the festive atmosphere, even the “Dies Irae” of Rachmaninoff’s *Third Symphony* could not sway her belief. Finally, a third associated Russia with cold and felt all Russian music, even Tchaikovsky’s, was cold. Frolova-Walker works to dispel preconceived notions about Russian music in her work. My hope is that this paper and the information therein will help the reader to examine his preconceived notions about Russian music and see beyond the stereotypes to the wide range of expression in Russian music. If one looks beyond the fantastic Diaghilev stereotype presented to fulfill the desires of the turn of the century Parisian public there is a wide range of music by Russian composers that reflects the vastness and diversity of a huge country.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


