

## Chapter 22: Music in Eastern Europe and Russia: 1825–95

### I. Introduction

- A. Composers in Eastern Europe and Russia achieved new prominence in the latter half of the nineteenth century.
  - 1. The first nationalist composer from the Czech lands was Smetana.
- B. In Russia, there were two distinct musical movements: one promoted professional music culture along Western European lines, and the other sought to create a distinctively Russian, nationalist movement.
  - 1. Rubenstein and Tchaikovsky composed in Western European style.
  - 2. The composers dedicated to a distinctively Russian style were known as the “Mighty Five:” Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Musorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov.

### II. Bedřich Smetana: Czech composer

- A. The ideas proposed by the New German School influenced composers in other areas as well, notably Smetana (considered the first important nationalist composer from the Czech lands).
- B. Early life and work
  - 1. He was also a piano prodigy. As a young composer, he contacted Liszt, who assisted in the publication of some early works.
  - 2. In the late 1840s, Smetana hoped that Franz Joseph I would work for Czech autonomy, but the opposite happened, stifling Czech creativity.
- C. Travels abroad
  - 1. While the use of the Czech increased in the last half of the nineteenth century, Smetana’s music was not appreciated.
  - 2. He left Prague in 1856, moving to Sweden.
  - 3. He visited Liszt in Weimar in 1857 and joined the New German School.
- D. Return to Prague
  - 1. Smetana returned to Prague to write a Czech opera (for a competition) for a new national theater.
  - 2. Smetana wrote seven operas in different genres.
- E. Smetana’s *Má Vlast* and his later operas
  - 1. In the 1870s (when he went deaf), Smetana composed music that represents *českost*, including the cycle of symphonic poems entitled *Má vlast*.
  - 2. The most popular of these is *Vltava*, most commonly known by its German name “Die Moldau.”
    - a) Smetana painted musical pictures that represent possible events and aspects of the river itself.
    - b) He makes use of a fifteenth-century hymn that was familiar to audiences in the region.
    - c) Although he never quotes an actual folk song, the popular character of the music is appealing.
    - d) The main theme representing the river became the most popular theme Smetana ever composed. It has come to represent *českost*.
  - 3. Smetana’s comic operas were infused with folksy charm.

- III. Russian musical nationalism
- A. A pan-Balkan movement arose in mid-century, but Smetana was not interested in it.
  - B. During the mid-century, Russia saw turmoil in several areas, including the Crimean War and peasant rebellions. The result was censorship.
    - 1. Dissension also existed among Russian composers, who tended to fall into the camps forming in Germany.
    - 2. Balakirev aligned with the more progressive ideas.
    - 3. Rubenstein held to a more conservative line.
    - 4. Balakirev in response formed the New Russian School.
      - a) He gathered a group around him to defend Russian music against the Germans. This group, *kuchka* (bunch), is known as the “Mighty Five” or “Mighty Handful.”
      - b) They were Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Musorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov.
  - C. A new Russian music
    - 1. The *kuchka* built a school of Russian music on a foundation of folklore based on Glinka, who did not exactly use folk music.
    - 2. Balakirev studied folk songs to use as the basis for his works.
- IV. Modest Musorgsky’s realism
- A. Opera was the best genre in which to make Russian nationalist statements.
    - 1. Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* proved to be the heir to Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar*.
    - 2. He was one of the most progressive composers of the century and rejected all that Glinka had absorbed (the beauty of Italy and brains of Germany).
    - 3. Realism was the driving force for Musorgsky and a contempt for fine manners and convention and the falseness of the other musics.
    - 4. Rather than use poetic verse for the libretto, Musorgsky chose to imitate conversational speech.
    - 5. Because he was self-taught, he did not feel so tied to tradition.
    - 6. He also used “unvocal” intervals in melodic lines, further denouncing lyricism.
  - B. *Boris Godunov* and Russian history
    - 1. Historical themes were popular stories for operas in the nineteenth century.
    - 2. In the late nineteenth century, Russia was the only autocratic state in Europe.
    - 3. The tsar controlled everything and censorship was stringent.
    - 4. Russian art moved away from Romanticism toward realism, regarding beauty with skepticism.
  - C. The coronation scene
    - 1. The Prologue (coronation scene) is the most famous scene in *Boris Godunov*.
    - 2. Musorgsky widens the intervals in the melody to emphasize Boris’s discomfort.

3. Musical realism extends from the declamation of text to instrumentation and harmony.

D. Revising *Boris Godunov*

1. Musorgsky could not get *Boris Godunov* performed at first because there was no role for a prima donna.
2. Much of Musorgsky's music has been edited by other composers, most notably *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

V. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

A. Tchaikovsky was a pupil of Rubinstein. He was Russia's first great international musical celebrity.

1. Like his favorite composer, Mozart, he composed both instrumental music and opera, and he excelled at writing ballets.
2. His *Eugene Onegin* (also on text by Pushkin) is a tribute to Russian realism.
3. In *Onegin*, Tchaikovsky uses music associated with particular classes and their ideas of romance, making it revealingly intimate.

B. Tchaikovsky and nineteenth-century Russian symphonies

1. The two music camps each produced an outstanding symphonist in the 1870s.
  - a) For the *kuchka* it was Borodin.
  - b) For the conservatory composers, it was Tchaikovsky.

C. Fate in music: Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony

1. The Fourth Symphony marked a break with symphonic tradition in that it does not unfold based on a Beethovenian model, nor does it adopt the tight motivic structure seen in the symphonies of Brahms.
2. Instead of motives, Tchaikovsky uses expansive melodies, as well as reference to songs and dances.
3. Madame von Meck asked Tchaikovsky what the first movement meant, and he replied in a famous letter.

D. Tchaikovsky's life versus his art

1. Despite his homosexuality, Tchaikovsky accepted a proposal of marriage from Antonia Milyukova in 1877.
2. The resulting fiasco, in which Tchaikovsky fled the marriage, has been associated with the Fourth Symphony for years.
3. The correspondence with Madame von Meck supports an autobiographical reading of the Fourth Symphony.
4. Tchaikovsky used dance genres as a code in the Fourth Symphony.
5. Nonetheless, one must be careful not to read too specifically into such works, as the example of the Sixth Symphony shows.