

Notes from the Conductor

With its beautiful melodies and pyrotechnical orchestral displays, this selection of great Russian music is an exciting program, and I'm looking forward to joining the members of the Philharmonic of Southern New Jersey in performing for our audience. Personally, I've always loved Russian music, and was lucky to have had several Russian violin teachers when growing up in Australia. The last piece on the program, "Marche Slave" by Tchaikovsky, was the first piece by a major composer that I conducted, at my high school in Melbourne.

–Reuben Blundell

Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka (1804-1857)

Overture, "Ruslan and Ludmilla" Opus 5

The opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, from which this overture is drawn, begins with a royal wedding feast. In his memoirs, Glinka wrote that the overture's energetic opening was inspired by a wedding reception he attended, especially the "clattering of knives, forks and plates." The second melody, introduced by the bassoons, violas and cellos, is sung by our hero, Ruslan, during his quest to reclaim his beloved Ludmilla after her kidnapping from their wedding dinner by the evil giant Chernomor. The three-and-a-half-hour opera is a colorful tour of Russian folk story themes, with Ruslan meeting a wizard with his own romantic problems, and an encounter with the decapitated head of Chernomor's brother!

As a composer, Glinka set out to raise the profile of authentically Russian music, drawing on folk music influences. He would inspire "The Mighty Handful" of five Russian composers, which include Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin, and he was recognized by his hometown of Novospasskoye, which renamed itself Glinka in his honor.

For *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, Glinka's librettist was to be Alexander Pushkin, who had set out to elevate the Russian language, considered lower class, with a body of masterful poetry and plays. Glinka and Pushkin's plans would seem a perfect fit, but for Pushkin's proclivity for duels of honor in the court, which led to his untimely death, at 37, before their libretto could be realized.

Reinhold Glière (1875-1956)

Russian Sailor's Dance, from "The Red Poppy"

Glière's celebrated Soviet ballet, *The Red Poppy*, depicts a love story between a Russian ship captain and a local dancer, in a Chinese port in the early 20th century. The young dancer, Tao-Hua, falls for the captain (literally named Soviet Captain in the story) because he has shown compassion to the "Coolies," the cruelly overworked dockhands. She loses her life for refusing to follow her orders to kill the captain.

To be fair, there was a lot of exploitation of the Chinese by British and other foreigners at the time. However, the politics in this story are completely over the top, from the villainous British commander named “Sir Hips,” to Tao-Hua’s dying act, handing a red poppy to a young girl, which represented the Soviet goal of liberation of the world’s workers through communism. Nonetheless, Glière composed some truly beautiful music, and the very catchy (and popular) Russian Sailor’s dance.

From 1920, the Ukrainian-born Glière taught at Moscow’s conservatory, while writing music in a Romantic vein, exploring the music of the more exotic Soviet republics, and mostly staying out of the way of the politics which made life so difficult for Shostakovich and other Soviet composers.

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887) ***Polovtsian Dances, from “Prince Igor”***

On the way to becoming the author of more than 40 scientific publications, Borodin was told by his chemistry professor that he should think less about music: “You can’t hunt two hares at the same time.” We are lucky that his professor was wrong, although he may have completed “Prince Igor” had he been a more focused composer: he spent the last 18 years of his life composing and abandoning the opera.

Vladimir Stasov, the music critic who had invented the term “The Mighty Handful,” suggested Borodin use the 12th century story of Prince Igor’s failed military expedition as an opera subject. The *Polovtsian Dances* takes place in the camp of the victorious Polovtsians. Their leader, Khan Konchak, treats the captured Prince Igor and his son to entertainments—a ballet of slaves accompanied by a chorus singing the beauty of their lands, among other things. (Outside of operatic performances, the chorus is usually omitted.)

Borodin’s sudden death came from a heart attack at a raucous party in Moscow, where he’d just danced a waltz, wearing Russian national dress (dark red shirt, blue trousers, high boots). Destiny was less kind to the victorious Polovtsians—although they beat the Russian Prince Igor, the Mongols led by Ghengis Khan crushed their empire less than thirty years later, in 1223.

Dmitry Kabalevsky (1904-1987) **Overture, “Colas Breugnon,” Opus 24**

Kabalevsky is particularly well known for this piece, his “Gallop” from *The Comedians*, and a number of pieces played by many young piano students.

“Colas Breugnon” was first performed in 1938, a dangerous environment for composers: in 1936, Pravda (or “Truth,” the journalistic mouthpiece of Stalin) had published its threatening article, “Muddle Instead of Music,” about Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth*.

Here Kabalevsky chose a more family-friendly story, with its hero, Colas Breugnon, a working-class wood-carver in Burgundy who outsmarts the exploitative and corrupt Duke. The overture is filled with the energy of the young Colas Breugnon in his adventures.

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)
Russian Easter Festival, Opus 36

Like the other members of “The Mighty Handful,” Rimsky-Korsakov’s profession was outside music: he was a naval military officer. During the early 1860s, his musical studies were interrupted by a three-year tour of duty onboard an imperial navy ship: his travels included a visit to Niagara Falls!

Rimsky-Korsakov’s gifts as an orchestrator are legendary—this piece and the other major work from 1888, *Scheherazade*, are a triumph in imaginative orchestral color. In *Russian Easter Festival*, Rimsky-Korsakov celebrates the melodies of Russian Orthodox religious chant with brilliant orchestral effects.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Marche Slav, Opus 31

Tchaikovsky had major successes in every genre in which he composed: operas, symphonies, concertos for piano and for violin, and ballets such as *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*. He also wrote great concert-pieces, which have remained fixed in the repertory, such as *Romeo & Juliet*, *The 1812 Overture*, and this piece, *Marche Slav*, or “Serbo-Russian March,” as he originally named it. Tchaikovsky composed it for a Red Cross benefit concert, when Russians were filled with solidarity for neighbors Serbia and Macedonia, which were at war with Turkey at the time.

With great skill, Tchaikovsky took two Serbian melodies, as well as the Russian national anthem, *God Save the Tsar*, and gave them the full symphonic treatment. *Marche Slav* has brooding introspection, soaring lines, dramatic sequences of rising tension, bombastic strength, and a big, loud ending. It was a big success in Moscow in 1876, and it’s still a favorite of audiences around the world.

-- Notes by Reuben Blundell

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