Russian Music: Week 1

Beginnings: Glinka through Rubinstein

Church Music
Folk Music
Maxim Berekovsky
Mikhail Glinka
Anton Rubinstein
Russia was a latecomer to the world of European concert music.
There are two primary reasons for that.
The Christian Tradition

Unlike Western Europe, Russia did not develop its church music from the Roman tradition. Instead, Christianity came to Russia in 988 from Byzantium, the seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which had a different musical tradition altogether, including different basic musical materials.
The Mongol Empire

During a period of some of the richest development in Western art music—the high Middle Ages through the high Renaissance—Russia was a conquered territory of the Mongol Empire from 1240 to 1480.

By the time the Muscovite princes had shaken off the Mongol (Muslim) overlords, Byzantium and all of the former Eastern Christian territories had fallen to the Ottoman Turks—and thus Russia had become an isolated Orthodox Christian power, and saw itself as apart from both the Roman (Western European) and Byzantine Christian territories.
Peter the Great

He ruled from 1672 through 1725 and expanded his territories into a major European power.

His cultural revolution brought about a Westernization of Russian intellectual culture, based on Enlightenment philosophy.

And of course he founded the city of St. Petersburg, which became (and still is) an important nexus for Russian culture and one of the world’s great cities for art and music.
The composers who began exploring concert (Western) music in the 18th century had a deep and broad musical tradition from which to draw; they were not in any way limited to the imported Western music of Mozart, Haydn, Bach, and Beethoven.
Orthodox Plainchant

Peaceful Light

Russian Patriarchate Choir
Anatoly Grindenko, leader
Orthodox Plainchant

The Eastern Orthodox plainchant tradition is at least as varied and far-reaching as is the Roman-based Western tradition.

This plainchant performance begins with a *psalm tone*—a single note that establishes the text, and is then followed by the chorus in unison throughout, much as we would hear in a Roman plainchant.

However, it is much more rhythmically alert and varied than is standard Western plainchant singing, with its fluid rhythms and lack of clear beats.
Traditional folk song

Ne veljat Mashe
(They Don’t Let Masha)

Dmitri Hvorostovsky, bass-baritone
Russian Folk Songs

Some of the characteristics of Russian folk songs are:

Irregular meter (i.e., 5’s instead of 4’s or 3’s)
Varied phrase lengths
Narrow ranges (i.e., not too many notes)
Use of non-Western scales such as pentatonic (5-tone) or whole-tone
They Do Not Let Masha

A sad tale of unrequited love, sung by a solo singer.
Ne velyat Mashe za re...
Za rechen’ku khodit’,
Ne velyat Mashe molo...
Okh molodchika lyubit’.

Chto molodchika molo...
Moloden’kogo,
Nezhenatogo, kholo...
Oh, kholosten’kogo.

They do not let Masha walk across the ri...
Walk across the river,
They do not let Masha to love a you...
To love a young man.

A man who is you...
So young,
A bachelor, unmarri...
Oh, unmarried.
Traditional folk song

Down the River Mother

Volga

Arranged by Alexander Sveshnikov
Patriarchal Choir, Moscow
Ariadna Ryabakova, Director
Nikolai Lvov and Russian Folk Song

At the same time that Western Europeans were delving into their heritage of folk song, Nikolai Alexandrovich Lvov (1751–1803) began studying, gathering, and collating the rich folk song traditions of Russia and the surrounding territories.

His activities, as well as his followers, led to a rich outpouring of folk song harmonizations and arrangements that continue to exert a strong influence on Russian music and its composers.
Down the River Mother Volga

An arrangement such as *Down the River Mother Volga*, created by 19th century composer Alexander Sveshnikov, starts with a folk song, but then harmonizes it in a choral style that applies the harmonic language of 18th-century Europe to this timeless melody.

The end result is haunting and exquisitely beautiful.
Maksym Berezovsky

Liturgy VII: The Lord’s Prayer

Vidrodzhennya Chamber Choir
Mstislav Yurchenko, director
Maksym (Maxim) Berezovsky
1745–1777

This Ukrainian musician was sent by Catherine the Great to Italy to study with the famed pedagogue Giovanni Battista Martini—everybody called him Padre Martini—in Bologna. (Martini taught Mozart and J.C. Bach, among others.)

On his return he was charged with modernizing the more traditional Russian church music with Italianized music, very much in the late 18th-century tradition.
A sickly son of a noble family, Glinka practiced the musical life of a wealthy, gifted amateur. He had a chance to meet some of the leading European composers of the 1830s, such as Berlioz and Mendelssohn, but he realized that his destiny was to create an indigenous Russian concert music—precisely what we would now call as *nationalist* music.

As such, Glinka has rightfully gone down as the father of Russian concert music. His two operas, *Ruslan and Ludmilla* and *A Life for the Tsar* were only modestly successful in their day but have gained significant popularity since.

Glinka spent his last two years in Paris. He died unexpectedly in 1857 from complications following a minor ailment.
What Glinka did was to draw upon characteristics of all the varieties of indigenous Russian music he had heard from his earliest years, not with the condescension of the sophisticate who wants to be “folksy,” but with the perfectly natural ease of a musician for whom folk-song was as deeply rooted and as valid an experience as more cultivated music.

David Brown, *Mikhail Glinka: A Biographical and Critical Study*
Mikhail Glinka

Kamarinskaya

William Steinberg, conductor
Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
Recorded 1958
The Two Melodies: 1 - Wedding Song
The Two Melodies: 2 - Kamarinskaya (Dance)
Introduction  Wedding  Transition  Dance  Wedding  Transition  Dance  Coda
Mikhail Glinka (text: Alexander Pushkin)

I Recall a Wonderful Moment

Dmitri Hvorostovsky, bass-baritone
Ivari Ilja, piano
The Russian Schubert

Glinka is renowned for art songs, fine lieder in the Western tradition but based on Russian texts.

In this lovely strophic song, Glinka sets Pushkin’s wistful text with Schubertian grace, including Schubert’s signature technique of repeating the last line of each stanza.
Mikhail Glinka

A Life for the Tsar: Epilogue

Bolshoi Opera
Alexander Lazarez, conductor
A Life for the Tsar

Glinka’s first opera isn’t absolutely the first Russian opera, but it’s the first one to remain in the repertory of not only Russian companies, but the world’s opera stages.
It tells the story of peasant Ivan Susanin, who gave his life so as to lead a Polish army on a false search and thereby protecting Mikhail Romanov from being capture.

Thus Mikhail became the first of the Romanov tsars.

During the Soviet era the opera was named *Ivan Susanin* and was given a somewhat re-written libretto to remove the tsarist elements. Nowadays it is performed in its original version.
We’ll see and hear the final epilogue, a choral number in a march rhythm, celebratory and joyous.

It was probably this final chorus that led to *A Life For the Tsar* becoming the mandatory season-opener for the Imperial Theaters up until the Revolution.
Glinka did not invent the Russian style, but he made Russian music competitive. Through him, Russia could for the first time join the musical West on an equal footing, without excuses, as a full-fledged participant in international musical traditions, and a contributor to them. The old bromide that Glinka liberated Russian music by turning away from the West has it just backward. Liberation came from facing and matching, not retreating.

Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*
Anton Rubinstein

1829 – 1894
About Rubinstein

❖ One of the greatest pianists of all time
❖ Founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory
❖ Tchaikovsky’s teacher
❖ Prolific composer, although not a particularly “nationalist” one.
❖ His works, once popular, have fallen out of the repertory.
Symphony No. 5 in G Minor, Op. 107 “Russian”

Horia Andreescu / George Enescu State Philharmonic Orchestra
The last movement is delightfully racy...But Rubinstein managed to take the bloom off attractive tunes. [He] was incapable of recognizing any modes other than major and minor.

Gerald Abraham
Anton Rubinstein

Symphony No. 2 “Ocean”

Horia Andreescu
George Enescu State Philharmonic Orchestra
Felix Rubinstein

- Rubinstein’s “Ocean” Symphony owes its style and overall mood to Felix Mendelssohn.
- It has Mendelssohn’s lightness of touch and superb craftsmanship.
Here’s a bit of the first movement, with paintings by William Turner