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Moguchaya Kuchka
The Mighty Handful

Borodin
Balakirev
Mussorgsky
Rimsky-Korsakov
Cui
Stasov
… all the best Russian musicians have been very skeptical of book learning and have never approached it with the servility and the superstitious reverence with which it is approached to this day in many parts of Europe.

Viktor Stasov
The young Petersburg composers are very gifted, but they are all impregnated with the most horrible presumptuousness and a purely amateur conviction of their superiority to all other musicians in the universe.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Public Enemy No. 1, According to the Handful:
Rubinstein is not a Russian composer. He is only a Russian who composes.

César Cui
Mily Balakirev

1837 – 1910
Balakirev was born to a noble family and, like many Russian musicians of this generation, was not particularly troubled by the business of making a living.

He was the Five’s strongest proponent of a purely Russian style of music, one based deeply on folk music, and one that showed less European influence than was the case with composers such as Rubinstein.
Balakirev, who had never had any systematic course in harmony and counterpoint and had not even superficially applied himself to them, evidently thought such studies quite unnecessary.... he possessed a technique partly native and partly acquired through a vast musical erudition, with the help of an extraordinary memory, keen and retentive, which means so much in steering a critical course in musical literature.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
Mily Balakirev

Overture No. 1 on Three Russian Themes

Evgeny Svetlanov
USSR State Orchestra
Balakirev’s Overture is one of the earlier of the “Five” compositions based on Russian music—it’s almost a manifesto of how to incorporate Russian folk tunes into symphonic compositions.

Of the three Russian tunes that he combined into this Overture, two of them are familiar due to having been used in works that are nowadays quite familiar:

*In the Fields There Stands a Birch Tree*: Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4 Finale
*At the Feast*: Stravinsky “Petrushka” final scene

We’ll hear the central section of the work, focusing on these two melodies.
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

1844 – 1908
He is the only one among them [the Handful] who discovered...that the doctrines preached by this circle had no sound basis, that their mockery and denial...was nothing but ignorance...He began to study with such zeal the he suddenly went over to the cult of musical technique. Either he will turn out a great master, or be lost in contrapuntal intricacies.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Major Rimsky-Korsakov Works

❖ Capriccio espagnol
❖ Scheherazade
❖ Symphony No. 2 Op. 9, “Antar” (1868)
❖ Operas
  ❖ The Golden Cockerel
  ❖ The Tale of Tsar Sultan
❖ Sadko
❖ The Snow Maiden
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Scheherazade
Sultan Sahkhirar, convinced of the perfidy and faithlessness of women, has vowed to execute each of his wives after the first night; but the Sultana Scheherazade saved her life by the fact that she was able to occupy him with her stories, which she told him over 1001 nights so that, roused by curiosity Shakhriar continually put off her execution and finally completely abandoned his intention. Many wonders Scheherazade told him of Sinbad’s voyages at sea, of the wandering Kalender princes, of the knights turned into stone, of the great bird Rul, of the evil geniis, of the pleasures and amusements of the eastern rulers, of the ship dashed to pieces on the magnetic rock with the bronze horseman and much else, quoting the verses of poets and the words of songs, weaving story into story and tale into tale.
All I had desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as symphonic music, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders and not merely four pieces played one after the other and composed on the basis of themes common to all the four movements. Why, then, if that be so, does my suite bear the name, precisely, of Scheherazade? Because this name and the title The Arabian Nights connote in everybody’s mind the East and fairy-tale wonders; besides, certain details of the musical exposition hint at the fact that all of these are various tales of some one person (who happens to be Scheherazada) entertaining therewith her stern husband.

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov
Mastery

❖ Rimsky-Korsakov’s mastery shows in both his derivation of his themes from two seed ideas, as well as his very carefully worked-out and consistent sonata form.
Themes

❖ Theme #1: The Sultan
❖ Becomes the basis for the Primary Theme, two of the Transitional Themes, and the Closing Theme
Themes

❖ Theme #2: Scheherazade
  ❖ Solo violin cadenzas
  ❖ Her theme provides the basis for the Second Transitional Theme and the Secondary Theme.
“Overture” Sonata Form

❖ Classical sonata form without a Development section, but with an Introduction and a Coda.
❖ Also sometimes called sonatina form
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Scheherazade I - The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship

Kiril Kondrashin, conductor
Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
Introduction

**Sultan’s Theme**

*Orchestra unison, fl: clarinets, bassoons, trombones, tuba, strings*

**Woodwind Choir**

Direct quote from Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream Overture*

**Scheherazade’s Theme**

Solo violin; triplet rhythms
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Symphony No. 2, Op. 9

“Antar”: III

Pierre Monteux / San Francisco Symphony
(RCA Victor DM-1203, recorded 1946)
Antar, an enemy of all mankind, has become a recluse in the desert. He saves a gazelle from a large bird. Weary from fighting the bird, he falls asleep exhausted. He dreams he is in the palace of the Queen of Palmyra. The queen, the fairy Gul-Nazar, was the gazelle Antar saved from the bird. As a reward, she permits Antar to fulfill three of life’s greatest joys — vengeance, power and love. He accepts these gifts with gratitude, then makes a request himself. He asks the queen to take his life if these pleasures become tiresome. He then falls in love with the queen. After some time, however, he becomes weary of his passion. The queen takes him in her arms, kissing him with such ferocity that his life ebbs away.
The third movement “Joy of Power” is a kind of triumphal march, with a subsidiary Oriental cantabile melody and a conclusion on Antar’s theme.
Antar Theme
Cantabile Theme
March Theme: Winds

March

Trio

Transition

March

Trio

Transition

March

Transition

Close
Alexander Borodin

1833 – 1887
Chemist
Composer
Family Man
Borodin’s Major Works

❖ Symphony No. 2 in B Minor (1876)
❖ *Prince Igor* (Opera)
❖ String Quartet No. 2
❖ On the Steppes of Central Asia
Borodin—aged fifty—Professor of Chemistry at the Academy of Medicine, also possesses talent, a very great talent, which however has come to nothing for the want of teaching, and because blind fate has led him into the science laboratories instead of a vital musical existence. He has not as much taste as Cui, and his technique is so poor that he cannot write a bar without assistance.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Alexander Borodin

Symphony No. 2 in B Minor: I

Gerard Schwarz / Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Primary Group (B Minor)

- Pa
- b
- a'

Transition (B Minor to D Major)

- Ta
- b

Secondary Group (D Major)

- Sa
- a
- b
- Ka
- b
- c
Primary Group (B Minor)

Transition (B Minor to D Major)

Secondary Group (D Major)

Primary Theme: Unisons
Modeste Mussorgsky

1839 — 1881
Certain of his colleagues initially ridiculed him as “a perfect idiot.” Even musicologist Gerald Abraham, an authority on Mussorgsky’s life and work, acknowledged that in terms of basic compositional technique “he was hopelessly limited, with remarkably little ability to construct pure music or even a purely musical texture.”

Scott Foglesong, unpublished program note, SF Symphony
His immense gifts were much more elemental in nature and just might have been diminished by the necessary restrictions of traditional conservatory training. Above all, he possessed an uncanny ability to translate words and pictures into music, and it is that compelling vividness that has given his work such remarkable staying power, while the products of his better-trained colleagues have mostly faded into obscurity.

Scott Foglesong, unpublished program note, SF Symphony
Modeste Mussorgsky

Pictures at an Exhibition

Leonard Slatkin, conductor
Nashville Symphony Orchestra
Mussorgsky and the artist Viktor Hartmann met sometime around 1870. Their mutual devotion to nurturing a native Russian art encouraged the blossoming of a solid friendship, cut tragically short when Hartmann died in 1873 at the age of 39, leaving a grieving Mussorgsky troubled by his apparent blindness to his friend’s deteriorating condition. A year later the influential critic Viktor Stasov helped to organize a showing of Hartmann’s works at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts. That exhibition inspired Mussorgsky to plunge into the composition of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, originally titled *Hartmann* as a memorial to the gifted young artist. Six weeks later the work was finished, although it was never to be performed publicly during Mussorgsky’s lifetime.

*Scott Foglesong, unpublished program note, SF Symphony*
Music lovers are sometimes unaware that Mussorgsky wrote *Pictures* for solo piano; its history of orchestral transcription runs deep.

*Scott Foglesong, unpublished program note, SF Symphony*
The Hut on Fowl’s Legs
(Stokowski orchestration)

The Great Gate of Kiev
(Gamley orchestration)

Leonard Slatkin / Nashville Symphony Orchestra
Modeste Mussorgsky

Boris Godunov: Coronation Scene

Robert Lloyd (Boris)
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden
Conducted by Valery Gergiev
Boris Godunov had a long and troubled compositional history, although Mussorgsky wrote the first version in a very short time.

Both his original and revised versions were rejected by the Imperial Theaters.

Several members of the Five saw to the performance of several scenes, in 1873. Their extraordinary success led to a production of the entire opera in 1874.

Numerous later revisions, and an edition by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, have kept the opera’s performance and publication history complicated.
This performance of the magnificent “Coronation Scene” is based on the 1872 version—Mussorgsky’s first revision—which has come to be the dominant version in most productions nowadays.