

MILY BALAKIREV

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Mily Alexeyevich Balakirev was born on 2 January 1837 and died on 29 May 1910. He was an outstanding Russian pianist, conductor and composer known for promoting musical nationalism and his encouragement of more famous Russian composers, notably Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.



He began his career by extending the fusion of traditional folk music and experimental classical music practices which had begun by Mikhail Glinka. After a nervous breakdown and consequential sabbatical, he returned to classical music but did not generate the same influence as before.

In the late 1850s and early 1860s and with the critic Vladimir Stasov, Balakirev brought together a group of composers now known as The Five, the others being Alexander Borodin, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

Balakirev was the only professional musician of the group. He expounded his musical beliefs which continued to influence their thinking long after he left the group in 1871, and he encouraged their compositional efforts. He could be dictatorial, and the results of his influence were several works which established these composers' reputations individually and as a group. He performed a similar function for Tchaikovsky at two stages in the latter's career, in 1868–9 with the Fantasy Overture *Romeo and Juliet* and in 1882–5 with the *Manfred* Symphony.

As a composer, Balakirev finished major works many years after he had started them; he began his *First Symphony* in 1864 but completed it in 1897. However, his oriental fantasy *Islamey* for solo piano was composed quickly and remains popular among the best of pianists. However, his slowness in completing works for the public robbed him of credit for his inventiveness.

Balakirev was born at Nizhny Novgorod, into a poor clerk's family. He received his first lessons in music from his mother and, at the age of four, was able to reproduce tunes on the piano. His non-musical education began at the Nizhny Novgorod Gymnasium. When he was ten, his mother took him to Moscow during the summer holidays for a course of ten piano lessons with Alexander Dubuque, a pupil of the Irish composer John Field. After his mother's death, Balakirev was transferred from the Gymnasium to the Alexandrovsky Institute, where he was a boarder. Balakirev's musical talents did not remain unnoticed, and he soon found a patron in Alexander Ulybyshev who was considered the leading musical figure and patron in Nizhny Novgorod and owned a vast musical library and was the author of a biography of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Balakirev's musical education was then placed in the hands of the pianist Karl Eistrach, who also arranged the regular musical evenings on the Ulybyshev estate. Through Eistrach, Balakirev was given opportunities to read, play and listen to music and was exposed to the music of Frédéric Chopin and Mikhail Glinka. Eistrach and Ulybyshev also allowed Balakirev to rehearse the count's private orchestra in rehearsals of orchestral and choral works.

When Balakirev was only 14, he led a performance of Mozart's Requiem. At 15, he was allowed to lead rehearsals of Ludwig van Beethoven's First and Eighth Symphonies.

His earliest surviving compositions date from the same year and these were the first movement of a septet for flute, clarinet, piano and strings and a Grande Fantasie on Russian Folksongs for piano and orchestra.

Balakirev left the Alexandrovsky Institute in 1853 and entered the University of Kazan as a mathematics student, along with his friend P.D. Boborikin, who later became a novelist. He was soon noted in local society as a pianist and was able to supplement his limited finances by taking pupils. His holidays were spent either at Nizhny Novgorod or on the Ulybyshev country estate at Lukino, where he played numerous Beethoven sonatas to help his patron with his writing a book on the composer. Works from this period include a piano fantasy based on themes from Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*, an attempt at a string quartet, three songs which would eventually be published in 1908 and the opening movement of his First Piano Concerto, the only one completed.

After Balakirev completed his courses in the late autumn of 1855, Ulybyshev took him to St Petersburg, where he met Glinka who considered Balakirev's compositional technique defective; he thought highly of his talent, encouraging him to take up music as a career. Their acquaintance was marked by many and various discussions and Glinka passing several Spanish musical themes to Balakirev, and with Glinka entrusting the young man with the musical education of his four-year-old niece. Balakirev made his debut in a university concert in February 1856, playing the completed movement of his First Piano Concerto. This was followed a month later with a concert of his piano and chamber compositions. In 1858, he played the solo part in Beethoven's Emperor Concerto before the Tsar. In 1859, he had 12 songs published. Nevertheless, he remained in extreme poverty, supporting himself mainly by giving piano lessons, allegedly sometimes nine a day, and by playing at soirees given by the aristocracy.

The deaths of Glinka in 1857 and Ulybyshev the following year left Balakirev without influential supporters. Nevertheless, his time with Glinka had sparked a passion for Russian nationalism leading him to adopt the stance that Russia should have its own distinct school of music, free from Southern and Western European influences. He had also started meeting other important figures who would assist him in this goal in 1856, including César Cui, Alexander Serov, the Stasov brothers and Alexander Dargomyzhsky. He now gathered around him composers with similar ideals, whom he promised to train according to his own principles. These included Modest Mussorgsky in 1858; Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in November 1861 and Alexander Borodin in November or December 1862. Together with Cui, these men were described by noted critic Vladimir Stasov as "a mighty handful", but they eventually became better known in English simply as The Five.

As an instructor and of magnetic personality, Balakirev inspired his comrades to improbable heights of musical creativity. However, he vehemently opposed academic training, considering it a threat to the musical imagination. In his view it was better to begin composing right away and learn through that act of creation. This line of reasoning could be argued as a rationalization to his own lack of technical training. He had been trained as a pianist and had to discover his own way to becoming a composer. Rimsky-Korsakov eventually realized as much but still gave Balakirev his due.

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. An excellent pianist, a superior sight reader of music, a splendid improviser, endowed by nature with a sense of correct harmony and part-writing, 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. Then, too, he was a marvellous critic, especially a technical critic. He instantly felt every technical imperfection or error; he grasped a defect in form at once.

Balakirev had the musical experience that the others in The Five lacked, and he instructed them much as he instructed himself by an empirical approach, learning how other composers solved various problems by sifting through their scores and seeing how they addressed those challenges. While this approach may have been helpful for Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov writes, it was not so helpful for individuals completely different in nature from Balakirev or who matured as composers at different intervals and in a different manner.

Balakirev's eventual undoing was his demand that his students' musical tastes coincide exactly with his own, with the slightest deviation prohibited. Whenever one of them played one of his own compositions for Balakirev, Balakirev would seat himself at the piano and show, through improvisation, how he felt the composition should be changed. Passages in other people's works came out sounding like his music, not their own. By the late 1860s, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov stopped accepting what they now considered to be his high-handed meddling with their work, and Stasov began to distance himself from Balakirev. The other members of The Five also became interested in writing opera, a genre Balakirev did not consider highly, after the success of Alexander Serov's opera *Judith* in 1863, and these members gravitated toward Alexander Dargomyzhsky as a mentor in this field.

The formation of The Five paralleled the early years of Tsar Alexander II, a time of innovation and reform in the political and social climate in Russia. The Russian Musical Society (RMS) and the musical conservatories in St. Petersburg and Moscow were all established at this time. While these institutions had powerful champions in Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein, others feared the influence of German instructors and musical precepts into Russian classical music. Balakirev's sympathies and closest contacts were in the latter camp, and he frequently made derogatory comments about the German "routine" which, he believed, came at the expense of the composer's originality.

Balakirev was outspoken in his opposition to Anton Rubinstein's efforts. This opposition was partly ideological and partly personal. Anton Rubinstein was at that time the only Russian able to live on his art, while Balakirev had to live on income from piano lessons and recitals played in the salons of the aristocracy. At stake was a viable career in music as artistic director of the Russian Musical Society. Balakirev attacked Rubinstein for his conservative musical tastes, especially for his leaning on German masters such as Mendelssohn and Beethoven, and for his insistence on professional musical training. Balakirev's followers were similarly outspoken. Mussorgsky, for instance, called the St Petersburg Conservatory a place where Rubinstein and Nikolai Zarembo, who taught music theory there, dressed "in professional, ant musical togas and pollute their students' minds, then seal them with various abominations." There was also a petty, personal side to Balakirev's attacks. Rubinstein had written an article in 1855 that was critical of Glinka. Glinka had taken the article badly, and Balakirev likewise took Rubinstein's criticism personally. Moreover, Rubinstein was of German and Jewish descent, and Balakirev's comments were at times anti-Semitic and xenophobic.

The pro-Conservatory followers publicly called The Five "amateurs", a justified charge, as Balakirev was the only professional musician of the group. To counteract these criticisms and to aid in the creation of a distinctly "Russian" school of music, Balakirev and Gavril Lomakin, a local choirmaster, founded the Free School of Music in 1862. Like the RMS, the Free School offered concerts as well as education. Unlike the RMS, the Free School offered music education at no charge to students. The school also emphasized singing, especially choral singing, to meet the demands of the Russian Orthodox Church. Lomakin was appointed director, with Balakirev serving as his assistant. To raise funds for the school, Balakirev conducted orchestral concerts between 1862 and 1867, while Lomakin conducted choral ones. These concerts offered less conservative programming musically than the RMS concerts. They included the music of Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, Glinka and Alexander Dargomyzhsky, and the first works of The Five.

Balakirev spent the summer of 1862 in the Caucasus, mainly in Essentuki, and was impressed enough by the region to return there the following year and also in 1868. He noted down folk tunes from that

region and from Georgia and Iran and these tunes would play an important part in his musical development. One of the first compositions to show this influence was his setting of Alexander Pushkin's "Georgian song", while a quasi-oriental style appeared in other songs. In 1864, Balakirev considered writing an opera based on the folk legend of the Firebird, a subject upon which Igor Stravinsky would later base his ballet, but abandoned the project due to the lack of a suitable libretto. He completed his Second Overture on Russian Themes that same year (1864), which was performed in April at a Free School concert and published in 1869 as a "musical picture" with the title 1000 Years.

The first Overture on Russian Themes was written in 1857/9 and is a fine work for a composer in his early twenties. It begins with a slow folk song The Sliver Birch which tops and tails an Allegro moderato in sonata form. The folk song theme is that of the finale of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony but Balakirev's treatment is more remarkable and subtle. It is not a pot-pourri of Russian themes but an amalgamation of Russian folk songs with sonata form.

The Symphony no 1 was begun in 1864. By 1866 he had written about a third of the opening movement and sketched the final based on Russian folk songs. He resumed work on the symphony in the 1890s finishing it in 1897. The first movement has a slow introduction from which is derived the first subject while the second subject is derived from the flute and violas in bar 5. Some have said that there is a suggestion of Boris Godunov here. The scherzo et in A may suggest Mendelssohn but it is Russian and has a touch of melancholy. The third movement is an andante and the finale an allegro moderato,

In 1866, Balakirev's Collection of Russian Folksongs was published. These arrangements showed great insight into the rhythm, harmony and types of song, although the key signatures and elaborate textures of the piano accompaniments were not as idiomatic. He also started a Symphony in C major, of which he completed much of the first movement, scherzo and finale by 1866. Even at this point, however, Balakirev had trouble finishing large works; the symphony would not be finished until decades later. He began a second piano concerto in the summer of 1861, with a slow movement thematically connected with a requiem that occupied him at the same time. He did not finish the opening movement until the following year, then set aside the work for 50 years. He suffered from periods of acute depression, longed for death and thought about destroying all his manuscripts. He was still able to complete some works quickly. He began the original version of Islamey in August 1869, finishing it a month later. Nikolai Rubinstein premiered the "oriental fantasy," which Balakirev considered a sketch for his symphonic poem Tamara.

Tamara may be his finest work. It tells of a beautiful sensual woman who gives men her sexual delights then has them murdered and thrown into the river Terek. The orchestration is quite superb. It is based on verses by Mikhail Lermontov a Russian with Scottish ancestry. Balakirev's masterpiece dates from 1876 to 1879 and proved to be a major influential work. The opening Allegro depicts a deep gorge in the Caucasus movement where the river Terek 'roars in the gloom'. On a crag in a tower lives the princess Tamara very beautiful and evil. She is portrayed by two themes pagan and oriental. Hapless travellers to the castle are enticed on her couch... lips meet, fingers explore and savage noises are heard thorough out the night. As dawn approaches two climaxes are reached with a terrific clash on the tam tam and the lover is thrown from the battlements. The introduction is repeated with the rushing of the river. Nothing can be compared to Balakirev's exotic savagery and Romantic lushness. Works like Rimsky Korsakov's Scheherazade are pallid in comparison.

Balakirev also intermittently spent time editing Glinka's works for publication, on behalf of the composer's sister, Ludmilla Shestakova. At her behest, he travelled to Prague in 1866 to arrange the production of Glinka's operas there. This project was delayed for about a year due to the Austro-Prussian War. The Prague production of A Life for the Tsar under the direction of Bedřich Smetana reportedly horrified Balakirev, with Balakirev taking issue with the musical tempos, the casting of various roles, and the costumes saying "it was as though Smetana was trying to turn the whole piece into a farce." Five weeks of quarrels, intrigues by Smetana and his party, and intensive rehearsals

followed, with Balakirev attending every rehearsal. Balakirev suspected Smetana and others were influenced by pro-Polish elements of the Czech press, which labelled the production a “Tsarist intrigue” paid for by the Russian government. He had difficulties with the production of *Ruslan and Ludmilla* under his direction, with the Czechs initially refusing to pay for the cost of copying the orchestral parts, and the piano reduction of the score, from which Balakirev was conducting rehearsals, mysteriously disappeared. Biographer Mikhail Zetlin writes, “It is hard to say, nowadays, whether Balakirev’s suspicions were fully justified or whether they were partly due to his own high-strung disposition”. However, *A Life for the Tsar* and *Ruslan and Ludmilla* were successes. Balakirev’s lack of tact and despotic nature created considerable ill feelings between him and others involved and he and Smetana no longer were speaking to each other.

During this visit, Balakirev sketched and partly orchestrated an Overture on Czech Themes. This work would be performed at a May 1867 Free School concert given in honour of Slav visitors to the All-Russian Ethnographical Exhibition in Moscow. This was the concert for which, in his review, Vladimir Stasov coined the phrase *Moguchaya kuchka* (Mighty Handful) to describe *The Five*.

Balakirev encouraged Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin to complete their first symphonies, whose premieres he conducted in December 1865 and January 1869 respectively. He also conducted the first performance of Mussorgsky’s *The Destruction of Sennacherib* in March 1867 and the Polonaise from *Boris Godunov* in April 1872.

When Anton Rubinstein relinquished directorship of the RMS concerts in 1867, Balakirev was suggested to replace him. The conservative patron for the RMS, Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, agreed, provided Nikolai Zarembo, who had taken over for Rubinstein at the St Petersburg Conservatory was also appointed, along with a distinguished foreign composer. The choice of Berlioz as foreign conductor was widely lauded, but Balakirev’s appointment was seen less enthusiastically. Balakirev’s uncompromising nature caused tension at the RMS, and his preference for modern repertoire earned him the enmity of Elena Pavlovna. In 1869, she informed him that his services were no longer required.

The week after Balakirev’s dismissal, an impassioned article in his defence appeared in *The Contemporary Chronicle*. The author was Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Balakirev had conducted Tchaikovsky’s symphonic poem *Fatum* and the “Characteristic Dances” from his opera *The Voyevoda* at the RMS, and *Fatum* had been dedicated to Balakirev. The appearance of Tchaikovsky’s article may have been calculated, since he knew Elena Pavlovna was due in Moscow, where he lived, the day the article was to appear. He sent two notes to Balakirev, the first alerted him to Elena Pavlovna’s planned presence in Moscow, and the second thanked Balakirev for criticisms he had made about *Fatum* just after conducting it. Balakirev’s immediate response was positive and enthusiastic.

This exchange of letters grew into a friendship and a creative collaboration over the next two years, with Balakirev helping Tchaikovsky produce his Fantasy-overture *Romeo and Juliet*. After *Romeo and Juliet*, the two men drifted apart as Balakirev took a sabbatical from the music world. In 1880, Balakirev received a copy of the final version of the score of *Romeo* from Tchaikovsky, care of the music publisher, Besel. Delighted Tchaikovsky had not forgotten him Balakirev replied with an invitation for Tchaikovsky to visit him in St Petersburg. In the same letter, he forwarded the programme for a symphony, based on Lord Byron’s poem *Manfred*, which Balakirev was convinced Tchaikovsky “would handle wonderfully well.” This programme had originally been penned by Stasov for Hector Berlioz. Tchaikovsky had initially refused, but two years later changed his mind, partly due to Balakirev’s continued prodding over the project. The *Manfred* Symphony, finished in 1885, became the largest, most complex work Tchaikovsky had written at that time. As with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Fatum*, Tchaikovsky dedicated the *Manfred* Symphony to Balakirev.

When Lomakin resigned as director of the Free Music School in February 1868, Balakirev took his place. Once he had left the RMS, he concentrated on achieving attendances for concerts of the Free

Music School. He decided to recruit popular soloists and found Nikolai Rubinstein ready to help. Elena Pavlovna was furious. She decided to raise the social level of the RMS concerts by attending them personally with her court. This rivalry caused financial difficulties for both concert societies as RMS membership declined and the Free Music School continued to suffer from chronic money troubles. Soon the Free Music School could not pay Balakirev and had to cut its 1870-71 series short. The RMS then scored the coup de grâce of assigning its programming to Mikhail Azanchevsky, who also took over as director of the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1871. Azanchevsky was more progressively-minded musically than his predecessors, a staunch believer in contemporary music and Russian contemporary music in particular. For the opening concert of the RMS 1871-72 season, he had conductor Eduard Nápravník present for the first public performances of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* and the polonaise from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. This implicit recognition of Balakirev's ideas made his own concerts seem both unnecessary and redundant.

Balakirev then hoped that a solo recital in his hometown of Nizhny Novgorod in September 1870 would restore his reputation and prove profitable. Neither happened. He played to an empty house, and the profits of the recital amounted to 11 roubles. Added to these professional troubles were the death of his father in June 1869 and the financial responsibility for his younger sisters resulting from it.

In the spring of 1871, rumours circulated that Balakirev had suffered a nervous breakdown. Friends who visited him found no trace of his former self. In place of his former vivacity, energy and drive, they found him silent, withdrawn and lethargic. Borodin wrote to Rimsky-Korsakov that he wondered whether Balakirev's condition was little better than insanity. He was especially concerned about Balakirev's coolness toward musical matters, and hoped he would not follow the example of author Nikolai Gogol and destroy his manuscripts. He took a five-year break from music, and withdrew from his musical friends, but did not destroy his manuscripts. Instead he stacked them neatly in one corner of his house. In his mental state, he neglected to give up his post as director of the Free Music School, and the directors of the school were at a loss as to what to do. He finally resigned in 1874 and was replaced by Rimsky-Korsakov. Nikolai Rubinstein offered him a professorship at the Moscow Conservatory but he refused, stating that his musical knowledge was basically empirical and that he did not have enough knowledge of music theory to take on such a position. Financial distress forced Balakirev to become a railway clerk on the Warsaw railroad line in July 1872.

In 1876, Balakirev slowly began re-emerging into the music world, but without the intensity of his former years. Stasov wrote to Rimsky-Korsakov in July that Balakirev was busy composing his symphonic poem *Tamara* but still did not wish to see any of his old musical circle, "for there would be talks about music, which he would not have under any circumstances. Nevertheless he inquires about everything with interest..." Balakirev also began sending individuals to Rimsky-Korsakov for private lessons in music theory. This paved the way for Rimsky-Korsakov to make occasional visits to Balakirev. By the autumn these visits had become frequent. Also, Ludmilla Shestárova asked him to edit Glinka's works for publication, in conjunction with Anatoly Liadov and Rimsky-Korsakov.

In 1881, Balakirev was offered the directorship of the Moscow Conservatory, along with the conductorship of the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society. Perhaps keeping in mind his experience with the St Petersburg branch of the Russian Musical Society years earlier, he declined the position. Instead, he resumed the directorship of the Free School of Music. In 1882 he finished *Tamara* and revised his "symphonic picture" *1,000 Years* two years later, retitling it *Russia*. In 1883, he was appointed director of the Imperial Chapel and Rimsky-Korsakov eventually became his assistant. He held this post until 1895, when he took his final retirement and composed in earnest. Between 1895 and 1910 he completed two symphonies, a piano sonata and two movements of his *Second Piano Concerto*, along with republishing his collection of folk-song arrangements.

While Balakirev resumed musical Tuesday gatherings at his home in the 1880s, it was music patron Mitrofan Belyayev who became a fixture of the Russian classical music scene at this time. Some

composers, including Alexander Glazunov and Rimsky-Korsakov, initially attended these meetings. However, Balakirev's modest gatherings eventually proved no match for Belyayev's lavish Friday gatherings, nor could he compete with the commissions, prizes and performances that Belyayev offered. Balakirev did not take advantage of Belyayev's services in these areas, as he felt that they promoted both inferior music, and lowered the quality of Russian music. Musicologist Richard Taruskin asserts that another reason Balakirev did not participate with the Belyayev circle was that he was not comfortable participating in a group at which he was not at its centre. The exception to this was Balakirev's collection of folk songs, to which Belyayev bought the rights after the death of the songs' initial publisher. Otherwise, Balakirev remained without a publisher until 1899, when he met the St Petersburg music publisher J.H. Zimmermann. It was through Zimmermann's efforts that Balakirev prepared several works for publication, including his two symphonies.

Unlike his earlier days, when he played works in progress at gatherings of The Five, Balakirev composed in isolation. He was aware that younger composers now considered his compositional style old-fashioned, except initially for Glazunov, whom he brought to Rimsky-Korsakov as a prodigy, and his later acolyte Sergei Lyapunov, Balakirev was ignored by the younger generation of Russian composers.

The Symphony no 2 in D minor dates from 1900 to 1908 and Sergei Lyapunov premiered it in St Petersburg in 1909. Two abrupt chords usher in an allegro in sonata form. The second subject is in D flat, a key favoured by the composer. The second movement is a scherzo alla Cosacca was written earlier and intended for the Symphony no 1. It is a pulsating movement. The slow movement is a Romance in F, the theme of which appears in the rhythmic final which is a polonaise vastly superior to the polonaise in the finale of Tchaikovsky's Symphony no 3.

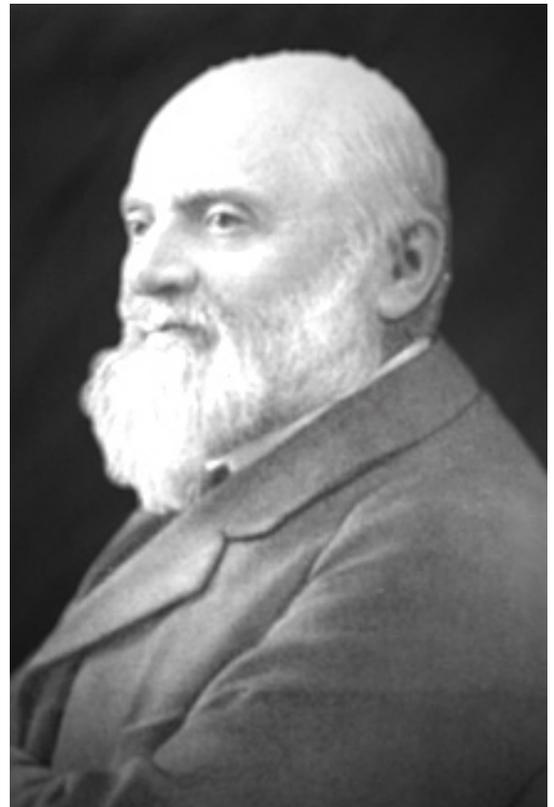
Balakirev died on 29 May 1910 and was buried in the Tikhvin Cemetery at the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in Saint Petersburg.

Balakirev apparently never married nor had any children since none is mentioned in biographical sources. In his earlier days he was politically liberal, a freethinker and an atheist; for a while, he considered writing an opera based on Chernishevsky's nihilistic novel *What is to Be Done?* In the late 1860s he frequented a soothsayer to learn his fate with the Russian Musical Society. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote of these sessions, "Balakirev, who did not believe in God, became a believer in the Devil. The Devil brought it about that subsequently he came to believe in God too... The soothsaying... cast a terror upon him".

Following his breakdown, Balakirev sought solace in the strictest sect of Russian Orthodoxy, dating his conversion to the anniversary of his mother's death in March 1871. The exact circumstances of that conversion are unknown, as no letters or diaries of his from this period have survived. Rimsky-Korsakov relates some of Balakirev's extremes in behaviour at this point—how he had "given up eating meat, and ate fish, but... only those which had died, never the killed variety"; how he would remove his hat and quickly cross himself whenever he passed by a church; and how his compassion for animals reached the point that whenever an insect was found in a room, he would carefully catch it and release it from a window, saying, "Go thee, dearie, in the Lord, go!" Balakirev lived as a recluse in a house filled with dogs, cats and religious icons. The exception to this reclusiveness was the musical Tuesday evenings he held after his return to music in the 1870s and 80s. He also became a political reactionary and "xenophobic Slavophile who wrote hymns in honour of the dowager empress and other members of the royal family."

Rimsky-Korsakov mentions that some of Balakirev's character traits were present before his conversion but became intensified afterward. This was true of his general intolerance of viewpoints other than his own, but especially so with his anti-Semitism. His attacks on Anton Rubinstein in the 1860s became petty and anti-Semitic, and Jews were not admitted to the Free School during his earlier directorship. However, it was after his conversion that he suspected everyone he disliked to be of Jewish origin,

and that he hated the Jews in general because they had crucified Christ. He became belligerent in his religious conversations with friends, insistent that they cross themselves and attend church with him. “All this medley of Christian meekness, backbiting, fondness for beasts, misanthropy, artistic interests, and a triviality worthy of an old maid from a hospice, all these struck everyone who saw him in those days”, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote, adding that these traits intensified further in subsequent years



Balakirev became important in the history of Russian music through both his works and his leadership. More so than Glinka, he helped set the course for Russian orchestral music and Russian lyrical song during the second half of the 19th century. While he learned from Glinka certain methods of treating Russian folk song instrumentally, a bright, transparent orchestral technique, something he also learned from the works of Hector Berlioz, and many elements of his basic style, he developed and expanded upon what he had learned, fusing it satisfactorily with then-advanced Romantic compositional techniques.

Unfortunately, the protracted composition of several works robbed Balakirev of the credit for their inventiveness. Pieces which could have won success had they been completed in the 1860s and 70s made a much smaller impact when they were introduced much later in the composer’s life. This was because they had been overtaken stylistically by the accomplishments of younger composers, and because some of their compositional devices were appropriated by other members of The Five, the most notable example of the latter is Rimsky-Korsakov’s Scheherazade, which was influenced by Balakirev’s symphonic poem Tamara. Another consequence was a tendency to overwork details, which robbed these pieces of freshness of inspiration and made them seem “overdone”.

Despite the protracted composition period, there was no discernible difference, especially in the two symphonies, between the sections completed in the 1860s and those written much later. Zetlin asserts that while there was no diminution of Balakirev’s creative talent, the reason for this lack of disparity was because Balakirev “had ceased to evolve” as an artist; he remained creatively at the point he had reached in the 1860s, “and his newest works seemed thus merely an echo of the past.”

Perhaps because Balakirev’s initial musical experience was as a pianist, composers for his own instrument influenced the repertory and style of his compositions. He wrote in all the genres cultivated by Frédéric Chopin except the Ballade, cultivating a comparable charm. The other keyboard composer who influenced Balakirev was Franz Liszt, apparent in *Islamey* as well as in his transcriptions of works by other composers and the symphonic poem *Tamara*. Lyapunov wrote a symphonic poem on the same theme and the contents are so similar as to be plagiarism.

Balakirev’s affinity with Glinka’s music becomes most apparent in his handling of folk material. However, Balakirev advances on Glinka’s technique of using “variations with changing backgrounds,” reconciling the compositional practices of classical music with the idiomatic treatment of folk song, employing motivic fragmentation, counterpoint and a structure exploiting key relationships.

Between his two Overtures on Russian Themes, Balakirev became involved with folk song collecting and arranging. This work alerted him to the frequency of the Dorian mode, the tendency for many

melodies to swing between the major key and its relative minor on its flat seventh key, and the tendency to accentuate notes not consistent with dominant harmony. These characteristics were reflected in Balakirev's handling of Russian folk song.

Since the musical views of *The Five* tended to be anti-German, it is easy to forget that Balakirev was actually well-grounded in German symphonic style, all the more impressive when it is remembered that Balakirev was essentially self-taught as a composer. His *King Lear* overture, written when he was 22, is not a symphonic poem in the vein of Liszt but actually more along the lines of Beethoven's concert overtures, relying more on the dramatic qualities of sonata form than on extra musical content.

With his *First Overture on Russian Themes*, Balakirev focused on writing symphonic works with Russian character. He chose his themes from folk song collections available at the time he composed the piece, taking Glinka's *Kamarinskaya* as a model in taking a slow song for the introduction, then for the fast section choosing two songs compatible in structure with the ostinato pattern of the *Kamarinskaya* dance song. Balakirev's use of two songs in this section was an important departure from the model, as it allowed him to link the symphonic process of symphonic form with Glinka's variations on an ostinato pattern, and in contrasting them treat the songs symphonically instead of merely decoratively.

The *Second Overture on Russian Themes* shows an increased sophistication as Balakirev utilizes Beethoven's technique of deriving short motifs from longer themes so that those motifs can be combined into a convincing contrapuntal fabric. As such it can stand on its own as an example of abstract motivic-thematic composition, yet since it uses folk songs in doing so, it can also be looked upon as making a statement about nationality. In this overture he shows how folk songs could be given symphonic dimensions while paying particular attention to the element of *protyazhnaya* or melodically elaborated lyric song. This type of song is characterized by extreme rhythmic flexibility, asymmetrical phrase structure and tonal ambiguity. Incorporating these elements meant employing the tonal instability of folk song in larger structures by relying on tonal indeterminacy. The structure of this overture departs from the classic tonal relationships of tonic and dominant, coming close to the tonal experiments of Liszt and Robert Schumann.

Like his contemporaries in *The Five*, Balakirev believed in the importance of program music, that is to say music written to fulfil a program inspired by a portrait, poem, story or other non-musical source. Unlike his compatriots, the musical form always came first for Balakirev, not the extra musical source, and his technique continued to reflect the Germanic symphonic approach. Nevertheless, Balakirev's overtures played a crucial role in the emergence of Russian symphonic music in that they introduced the musical style now considered "Russian." His style was adapted by his compatriots and others to the point of becoming a national characteristic. The opening of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* bears a close resemblance to the first theme of Balakirev's *Second Overture*, while Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia* begins with a dominant pedal extending over 90 bars in the upper register of the violins, a device Balakirev used in his *First Overture*. The opening of Tchaikovsky's *Little Russian Symphony* in its original form also shows Balakirev's influence.

Balakirev began his *First Symphony* after completing the *Second Overture* but cut work short to concentrate on the *Overture on Czech Themes*, recommencing on the symphony only 30 years later and not finishing it until 1897. Letters from Balakirev to Stasov and Cui indicate that the first movement was two-thirds completed and the final movement sketched out, though he would supply a new theme for the finale many years later. While he was delaying the finale to incorporate folk material, he was anxious to incorporate a new Russian element, somewhat religious in nature, into the opening movement. The symphonic design for this movement is highly unusual. The slow introduction announces the motif on which the *allegro vivo* is based. While the *allegro vivo* is a three part structure, it differs from sonata form in having an exposition, a second exposition and a development instead of the usual order of exposition-development-recapitulation. This means that

after the actual exposition, the thematic material is developed in two places, with the second exposition actually being an elaboration of the first. Formally, the process is one of progressive development, divided into three stages of increasing complexity. If this was how Balakirev had actually planned the movement in 1864, it would predate the late symphonies of Jean Sibelius in utilising this compositional principle.

Balakirev also further cultivated the orientalism of Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, making it a more consistent style. It appears in the *Georgian Song* of 1861, *Islamey* and *Tamara*. This style comprises two parts: a languorous vein of slow, sinuous melody with ornamentation and slow-moving harmonic progressions, contrasted with a more ecstatic vein marked by a *perpetuum mobile* at a fast tempo and rapid melodic contours over a slower-moving harmonic changes. This style on one hand evoked the mystery of the distant, exotic east with which Russia did not have direct contact, and on the other hand could also be used to refer to recently colonised areas of the Russian Empire,

Tamara may be considered Balakirev's greatest work as well as a touchstone of orientalism. Originally he intended to write a *lezginka* modelled after Glinka. However, he was inspired by the poetry of Mikhail Lermontov about the seductress *Tamara*, who waylays travellers in her tower at the gorge of *Daryal* and allows them to savour a night of sensual delights before killing them and flinging their bodies into the *River Terek*. Balakirev evokes both the poem's setting of the mountains and gorges of the *Caucasus* and the angelic and demonically seductive power of the title character. The narrative employs a wide musical range, with the composer supplying great subtlety within a satisfying structure.

LIST OF WORKS

Works with opus numbers

- Grande Fantasia on Russian Folk Songs, Op. 4, for piano and orchestra
- Islamey*, Oriental fantasy, Op. 18 (1869, revised 1902)
- Octet, Op. 3
- Overture on a Spanish March Theme, orchestra, Op. 6
- Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op. 1 (1855–1856)
- Piano Concerto No. 2 in E-flat major, Op. posth. (1861–1910, completed by Sergei Lyapunov)
- Piano Sonata No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 5
- Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 102 (1905)

Works with dates

- Reminiscences on Glinka's opera "A Life for the Tsar", fantasy (2nd version of Fantasy on Glinka's themes) (1854–1855, revised 1899)
- Scherzo No. 1 in B minor (1856)
- Overture on a Spanish March Theme, orchestra (1857)
- Overture on Three Russian Themes, orchestra (1858)
- King Lear* (*Korol' Lir*), incidental music Shakespeare's play (1858–1861, orchestra, revised 1902–1905)
- Polka in F-sharp minor (1859)
- Mazurka No. 1 in A-flat major (1861–1884)
- Mazurka No. 2 in C-sharp minor (1861–1884)
- Russia* (*Rus'*), Second Overture on Russian Themes, for orchestra, Symphonic Poem (1863–1864, revised 1884)
- Jota aragonesa* (after Glinka) (1864)
- "The Lark" ("Zavoronok"), transcription from a song by Glinka (1864)
- Symphony No. 1 in C major (1864–1866)
- Overture on Czech Themes "In Bohemia" ("V Chechii"), symphonic poem, orchestra, (1867, revised 1905)
- Tamara*, symphonic poem, orchestra (1867–1882)
- Islamey* (1869)

Au jardin (In the Garden), étude-idylle in D-flat major (1884)
 Mazurka No. 3 in B minor (1886)
 Mazurka No. 4 in G-flat major (1886)
 Nocturne No. 1 in B-flat minor (1898)
 Dumka (1900)
 Mazurka No. 5 in D major (1900)
 Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor (1900)
 Waltz No. 1 in G major “Valse di bravura” (1900)
 Waltz No. 2 in F minor “Valse mélancolique” (1900)
 Symphony No. 2 in D minor (1900–1908)
 Berceuse in D-flat major (1901)
 Gondellied in A minor (1901)
 Nocturne No. 2 in B minor (1901)
 Scherzo No. 3 in F-sharp major (1901)
 Tarantella in B major (1901)
 Waltz No. 3 in D major “Valse-impromptu” (1901)
 Suite in B minor (1901–1908)
 Capriccio in D major (1902)
 Mazurka No. 6 in A-flat major (1902)
 Nocturne No. 3 in D minor (1902)
 Spanish Melody (1902)
 Spanish Serenade (1902)
 Toccata in C-sharp minor (1902)
 Tyrolienne (1902)
 Waltz No. 4 in B-flat major “Valse de concert” (1902)
 Cantata on the Inauguration of the Glinka Memorial (dedicated to Mikhail Glinka), chorus and orchestra (1902–1904)
 Chant du pecheur (1903)
 Humoresque in D major (1903)
 Phantasiestück in D-flat major (1903)
 Rêverie in F major (1903)
 Waltz No. 5 in D-flat major (1903)
 Waltz No. 6 in F-sharp minor (1903–1904)
 Romance (transcription for piano solo of the second movement of Chopin’s first concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 11) (1905)
 La fileuse in B-flat minor (1906)
 Mazurka No. 7 in E-flat minor (1906)
 Novelette in A major (1906)
 Waltz No. 7 in G-sharp minor (1906)
 Impromptu (after Chopin’s Preludes in E-flat minor and B major) (1907)
 Esquisses (Sonatina) in G major (1909)

Undated works

Complainte
 Fantasia
 Overture on the Themes of 3 Russian Songs, for orchestra
 “Say not that love will pass”, transcription from a song by Glinka

Songs with dates

“Spanish Song” (“Ispanskaya pesnya”), for voice and piano (Forgotten Songs No. 3) (1855)
 “The Clear Moon has Risen” (1858)
 “The Knight” (1858) (20 Songs, No. 7)
 “Song of Selim” (“Pesnya Selima”) (1858) (20 Songs, No. 11)

“Hebrew Melody” (20 songs, no. 13) (1859)
“Over the Lake” (“Nad ozerom”), song for voice and piano (1895–1896) (10 Songs, No. 1)
“The Wilderness” (10 songs, No. 2) (1895–1896)
“I Loved Him” (“Ya lyubila ego”), song for voice and piano (10 Songs 1895-96, No. 5)
“The Pine Tree” (1895–1896) (10 Songs, No. 6)
“Nocturne” (1895–1896) (10 Songs, No. 7)
“Vision” (“Son”) (10 Songs, No. 2) (1903–04)
“7th November” (10 Songs, No. 4) (1903–04)
“The yellow leaf trembles” (“Pesnya: Zholty list”) (10 Songs, No. 8) (1903–04)
“Look, my Friend” (“Vzglyani, moy drug”) (20 Songs, No. 6) (1903–04)
“The Dream” (“Son”) (20 songs, No. 20) (1903–04)
“Dawn” (“Zarya”) (1909)

Undated songs

“Intonation”
“My Heart Is Torn” (“Tak i rvetsya dusha”), song for voice and piano (20 Songs, No. 9)
“Selim’s Song” (“Pesnya Selima”), for voice and piano (20 Songs, No. 11)
“The Crescent Moon” (“Vzoshol na nebo mesyats yasniy”), song for voice and piano (20 Songs, No. 5)
“Thou Art So Captivating” (“Ti plenitel’noy negi polna”), song for voice and piano (Forgotten Songs, No. 1)
“Toujours, on me dit ‘grand sot’”
“When I Hear Thy Voice” (“Slishu li golos tvoy”), song for voice and piano (20 Songs, No. 18)

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