Understanding Cultural and Nationalistic Impacts of the *moguchaya kuchka*

Austin M. Doub
Cedarville University

Understanding the historical, social, and cultural background of Russia during the mid-nineteenth century provides valuable insight into the growth and development of nationalism in the arts. The musical compositions of the so-called *moguchaya kuchka* (Mighty Five) directly opposed the growing westernization within the Russian Empire and supported Official Nationalism by the incorporation of traditional folklore, local village traditions, and promotion of their Tsar as a supreme political leader. In particular, the works of composers Balakirev, Cui, and Mussorgsky established cultural pride and contributed to Russian nationalism. Through studying the works and cultural context of these three influential composers, one can gain both a better understanding of the essence of Russian Official Nationalism in the nineteenth century and an enriched appreciation for the prevalent Russian musical styles and compositional techniques that were employed to achieve a unique "Russian" sound.

Understanding the Russian Landscape and Official Nationalism

Rooted in a rich Eastern Slavic heritage, Russia as a country has progressed for centuries despite frequent political and social unrest. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Russia rapidly developed in economy, politics, and industry. Emerging from medieval Muscovy into a forceful modern power, Russia thrived under the influential leadership of Peter the Great.[1] As Tsar, Peter the Great served as a clever diplomat whose focus on modernizing Russia

[1] Benedict Humphrey Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Emergence of Russia* (London: English University Press, 1950), 2.

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became supremely important as he sought territorial gains, military improvements, and a revamp of the outdated Russian government. In many ways, the leader borrowed ideas from western culture, but his tyrannical leadership resulted in a general distaste for him among Russian citizens. Following Peter the Great's death in 1725, the Russo-Turkish War broke out against the Ottoman Empire, followed by the infamous and costly Seven Years' War in 1757. Because Russia's economic state relied on agricultural success, working-class citizens became burdened with high taxes and heavy workloads. From this period, the image of the common Russian man emerged: a man weighed down by life, taxes, work, persecution, and death, yet still clinging to traditions and nationalistic pride.

Despite Russia's struggles, depressions, and history of inter-ethnic tensions, a formidable and powerful nation developed, boasting a rich culture of artistic prowess. Music, literature, folklore, and nationalistic pride became central elements of the nation. Following the spark of imperial expansion under Peter the Great's reign, Russia progressed, conquered, fought, and strove to compete as a major world power alongside European nations. This era of modernization and westernization advanced the military, government, economy, and artistic culture leading into the mid-1800s. By the 1850s, however, the vast majority of Russia's citizens still lived in rural villages despite the modernization and the growth of Russian cities. Exactly 100 years after the death of Peter the Great, during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855), a movement known as Official Nationalism took shape, emphasizing Russian orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationalism.

Ernest Gellner provides a simple and effective definition of nationalism in a broad sense: "Nationalism is essentially the transfer of the focus of man's identity to a culture which is mediated by literacy and an extensive, formal education system."[2] While embodying key elements of nationalism including national pride, patriotism, and devotion, Official Nationalism stood as a complex cultural identity for Russia. This unique breed of nationalism arose, in part, due to the heavy reliance upon the Russian Orthodox Church as the primary source of education and religious beliefs. All forms of nationalism rely upon the shared traits of blood, cultural cohesiveness, and common land. In nineteenth-century Russia, the citizens and working class pulled together, supported

[2] Ernest Gellner, "Nationalism," *Theory and Society* 10, no. 6 (1981): 757, doi:10.1007/bf00208267.

common beliefs, and shared in the collaborative struggle of daily lives filled with strife and drudgery. Meanwhile, the landscape grew, cities arose, and ingenuity blossomed as western cultural elements were introduced to Russia. Despite the benefits of westernization, a unique school of thought arose as some intellectuals, caught up in the national phenomenon, believed that western ideas would taint the "purity" of Russian culture.

Led by appointed education minister Count Sergey Uvarov, a widespread decree in 1833 sparked the top-down brand of nationalism within the progressing country. Unlike the grassroots movements of nationalism that arose throughout Western Europe, Russia's education decree specifically stated that the "common obligation consists in this, that the education of the people be conducted, according to the Supreme intention of our August Monarch, in joint spirit of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationhood."[3] This new developing brand of Official Nationalism went beyond mere national or cultural pride, as the government sought to push toward total unity and an adherence to these three core values. Visual artists including Viktor Vasnetsov, Ilya Repin, and Ivan Bilibin worked toward the promotion of Russian culture alongside their literary counterparts Nikolay Nekrasov and Aleksey Tolstoy. Musically, the members of the *moguchaya kuchka* stood as promoters of a distinct Russian sound free of outside influence. Spurred on by their rich heritage, this band of innovative composers arose and sought to capture elements of rural Russian life, to build national pride, and to prevent western ideals from seeping into their culture. As educators and cultural influencers, these musicians subscribed to Official Nationalism.

Five of the most influential and prolific composers with this stance were Mily Balakirev, Alexander Borodin, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Each of these individuals combatted westernization within the artistic landscape of Russia through their performances, compositions, writings, critiques, and teaching. Though each was successful independently, the group became known as The Mighty Five, or *moguchaya kuchka*, as they all worked to fight westernization under the leadership of Tsars Nicholas I and Alexander II. While unrecognized at the political level, nationalist ideals were reflected by each composer through distinct styles as they worked to represent the life of the working class, folk traditions, and patriotism.

[3] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 3, *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241.

Among the works of these composers, a variety of genres was utilized to cater to the national efforts, including opera, which was originally an Italian genre. In the hands of these masterful artists, each genre brought the ideals of Official Nationalism to fruition. In particular, opera's powerful combination of lyrics, music, costume, and scenery allowed composers to develop detailed musical dramas with interwoven political elements and national support. For this reason, Mikhail Glinka, the first widely recognized Russian composer, undertook the writing of a Russian opera that sought to create "a romantic national mythology, a sense of the present based on a remodeled past."[4] Each composer in the group endeavored to establish Official Nationalism despite differing compositional styles, techniques, and genres. In order to better grasp the impact the *moguchaya kuchka* had on Russian life and Official Nationalism, it is important to consider each composer and inspect his compositions for strains of Russian culture.

Balakirev: Contemporaries, Education, and the Russian Folk Idiom

A founding member of the composition group, Mily Balakirev's immense cultural impact can be seen through his influence on his musical contemporaries, his educational efforts, and his incorporation and utilization of the Russian folk idiom. As a leader and mentor within the *moguchaya kuchka*, Balakirev offered counsel and compositional advice to his counterparts while actively promoting nationalism within his country through outside avenues. As author M.O. Zetlin notes, "Balakirev could not be satisfied with only creative work, which even then did not flow from him in strong uninterrupted stream. He longed for action and to influence others…he needed followers and disciples."[5] He achieved this mentorship role by taking Mussorgsky as a private student prior to the official establishment of the *moguchaya kuchka* as a group. Outside of the Five, however, the composer also regularly corresponded with and influenced Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Among Russian thinkers, writers, scholars, and musicians, some stood by the westernizers, believing that certain outside elements could, when blended with preexisting Russian culture, result in positive and beneficial changes. Tchaikovsky, one such musical figure, did not oppose the use of western musical ideas within his musical compositions

[4] Taruskin, *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, 241.
[5] M. O. Zetlin, "Balakirev," trans. Olga Oushakoff, *The Russian Review* 4, no. 1 (1944): 75, doi:10.2307/125356.

and performances. Tchaikovsky received much criticism from the purely Russian school for many of his compositional endeavors; however, this did not prevent Balakirev from collaborating and corresponding with the outsider. Brown remarks, "The greatest service Balakirev rendered Tchaikovsky was to foster his growth to the full musical individuality achieved in *Romeo and Juliet*."[6] Balakirev served as a pivotal member of the *moguchaya kuchka* as he sought to disciple his contemporaries rather than merely critique or combat their compositional styles. Despite their differing views regarding cultural influence on Russian music, Balakirev fostered Tchaikovsky's "expressive growth," giving him "the confidence to venture on an original, personal path of musical development."[7] While Balakirev often struggled to be an effective teacher, his associations, connections, and compositional prowess affected not only the fellow members of the *moguchaya kuchka* but also their outlying contemporary, Tchaikovsky. As a result, Tchaikovsky reconciled the stricter nationalist teachings of Balakirev to his own cultivated musical style, as he frequently composed dark, somber works that exemplied Russian culture, futility, and melancholy.

Despite lacking educational prowess, Balakirev held strong opinions on musical education, particularly on maintaining a "pure" school of Russian music. Fighting tirelessly to oppose German influences in art and culture, Balakirev and his cohorts established the Free School of Music. He served as conductor, coordinator, and director of this small program, which offered instruction in improvisation, concertizing, and piano among other topics. While during the 1800s Russia was attempting to refine its culture and cultivate a sense of national pride, German composers simultaneously led a growing movement of National Opera in Berlin, as artists such as Richard Wagner revolutionized that culture. Balakirev feared German influence in Russian culture and worked with the Russian Musical Society (RMS) to oppose any outside influences in order to properly preserve a "pure" Russian sound consisting of folk-influenced compositional techniques.

Founded in 1859 with the help of the famous pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein in the growing city of Saint Petersburg, the RMS served as a cultural society dedicated to the preservation of Russian musical ideas and the fostering of young musical talent under the leadership of

[6] David Brown, "Balakirev, Tchaikovsky and Nationalism," *Music & Letters* 42, no. 3 (1961): 233, doi:10.1093/ml/42.3.227.
[7] Ibid.

informed instructors. Balakirev was pivotal in maintaining a rigid musical education for younger Russian musicians. His cultural appreciation and outside perspective was largely negative as he "equally disliked the Germans, the Jews, and the Poles."[8] The Free School program attempted to rid Russian music of outside influence by influencing a small part of the population with a hands-on educational system for young musicians. This educational reform stemmed, in part, from Uvarov's decree.

Having grown up in a poor clerk's family and studied piano under his mother, Balakirev embodied the struggle of the working-class Russian people. The idealized gritty Russian life, wrought with struggle, hardship, and turmoil, was all too familiar to the artist. With a limited education, Balakirev lacked traditional training in counterpoint and harmony, resulting in a looser approach to composition than many conservatory-trained musicians of his time. Despite this, the young musician excelled at the piano and boasted impressive improvisational abilities which drove his free compositional process. Underprivileged and lacking a traditional education, the adolescent Balakirev began to form his outlook on Russian culture and his distaste for outside influences through acquaintance with Glinka and Vladimir Stasov, an influential critic. Balakirev is said to be "a romantic reactionary, a misanthrope, and an individualist. He too, however, under the influence of Stasov and the entire spiritual atmosphere of the times, absorbed many ideas, emotions, and prejudices of the intelligentsia."[9] Balakirev sought to encourage the national mythology that Official Nationalism so desperately sought to achieve while holding to his individualist tendencies.

Musically, Balakirev returned to his roots and cultural upbringing with his creation of the 1866 *Collection of Russian Folksongs*. While the collection is perhaps less explicitly patriotic than the larger works of Mussorgsky, Glinka, and Borodin, (*Boris Godunov*, *Life for the Tsar*, and *Prince Igor*, respectively) this served as a relatable set of pieces for the common man that cultivated cultural pride and expressed the struggle within the working class. A relatively new influence on music, folksong anthologies became prominent in the 1700s and were a prevalent part of culture by Balakirev's lifetime. In his article on Russian folksong, Gerald Seaman writes that "interest in folksong was widespread. The leading

[8] Zetlin, "Balakirev," 71.
[9] Ibid.

writers and poets turned to it as the most important source of Russian poetry and literary language."[10]

Russian folk tunes, which embodied many characteristics of life and culture, peaked in importance and popularity in the 1870s as composers turned to the poetic volumes as influence for their compositions. Konstantin Trutovsky, Eugenie Lineff, and other contemporary artists, for example, composed musical poetry with harmonized folk melodies in an attempt to connect with the majority of Russian citizens. Balakirev's *Collection of Russian Folksongs* consisted of forty works for piano and voice. Additionally, the composer's *Thirty Songs of the Russian People*, which was composed between 1898 and 1900, stood as a collection of accessible folk song harmonizations that addressed various aspects of Russian legend and lore. Inspired by the rise of poetic and folk popularity, Balakirev effectively composed within the folk idiom; thus, his compositions related to similar works of the time period. Despite his limited and unstructured musical education, Balakirev sought to fight German influence within the RMS and established the Free School to combat outside ideology in the arts.

Cui: Music Critic and Russian Cultural Activist

Within the collective, perhaps the least remembered or praised member of the *moguchaya kuchka* is César Antonovich Cui. Unlike his companions who championed immense works of Russian grandeur, Cui contributed to his cause largely through literary efforts. An impactful music critic and Russian propagandist in Belgium and France, Cui actually lacked Russian heritage. As the son of a captured French officer who was forced into Napoleon's regime, Cui embraced his Russian home throughout his life but also regularly drew inspiration from French authors including Victor Hugo, Jean Richepin, and Alexandre Dumas. Despite his lineage, Cui's efforts in journalism and composition undoubtedly aided Russian nationalistic efforts. Serving as a critic for the *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti* from 1864 until 1877 (this first Russian printed newspaper was established in 1702), the composer and writer wrote in full support of the Russian government, promoted government agendas, and tore down compositions which utilized westernized compositional influence. As a professional, Cui taught as a professor at the Academy of Military Engineering, and as a civilian, he

[10] Gerald Seaman, "Russian Folksong in the Eighteenth Century," *Music & Letters* 40, no. 3 (1959): 254, doi:10.1093/ml/xl.7.253.

composed music and wrote prolifically. As a disciple of Balakirev, Cui worked tirelessly to promote the ideals and aesthetics of the *moguchaya kuchka* and to tear down any opposition to the group, such as western ideas that began creeping into musical compositions within the country. Cui targeted the compositions of Tchaikovsky with particularly "rough critical treatment."[11]

Interestingly, within his volume of ten operas, few focus on Russian themes. *A Prisoner in the Caucasus*, Cui's first operatic work, served as his most "Russian" composition. Based on Alexander Pushkin's poem, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, the opera was composed and revised in three versions, partly due to its poor orchestration and inadequate length. Originally, the composition stood as a two-act work before Balakirev orchestrated an overture and Cui revised the production to consist of three acts. Despite its somewhat messy compositional process, this operatic work stands as Cui's most important and substantial musical accomplishment. The opera promoted Russian ideals across the nation as it was performed in Saint Petersburg as well as smaller venues nationwide. The work was inspired by Pushkin's narrative poem about a Byronic Russian officer, his inner conflict with his elitist lifestyle, and his longing to escape to Caucasia for serenity and freedom. Not only was Pushkin's poem a tremendous success and a favorite among the Russian population, the narrative paired well with the expressive and impactful genre of opera, resulting in a powerful conveyance of Russian life and struggle.

In addition to Cui's large-scale works, perhaps his greatest compositions arose in the form of short works for the piano. His piano miniatures "look back nostalgically to the past, intimate rather than public."[12] While reduced in scale, these works reflected upon elements of common Russian life with a certain degree of fondness. In the hands of Cui, the miniatures achieved simplicity, accessibility, and relatability, which effectively communicated the composer's pride for his nation and his longing to maintain its authentic cultural identity. These works each embody folk influences that reflect the simplicity of the Russian working class. Though Cui's piano miniatures may seem unassuming for a man so set on promoting his culture, they successfully express a particularly

[11] Brown, "Balakirev, Tchaikovsky and Nationalism," 227.
[12] Ates Orga, "César Cui: 25 Preludes for Piano, op. 64," Naxos Records, Naxos Digital Services, 2019, https://www.naxos.com/mainsite/blurbs_reviews.asp?item_code=8.555557&catNum=555557&filetype=About%20this%20Recording&language=English#.

earnest and honest nature, unlike many of his other compositions. In his Op. 105 *Miniatures*, for example, the composer provides twenty brief works which prove to be effective pedagogical pieces. One uncategorized four-hand keyboard composition was dedicated to his grandson, reinforcing the nostalgic nature of his writings.

Despite his father's heritage, Cui, steeped in Russian culture, worked consistently to promote Russian culture. In particular, Cui's literary presence stood as his most impactful method of cultural promotion, development of Official Nationalism, and the cleansing of westernized musical technique during his time in the *moguchaya kuchka.*

Mussorgsky: Capturing Common Russia

Modest Mussorgsky, born in 1839, embodied the concept of struggle. Despite his upper middle-class upbringing, the grassroots composer faced relentless challenges of poverty, drunkenness, depression, anxiety, and death throughout his tumultuous life. Despite his eventual popularity, Mussorgsky's compositions brought him little income during his lifetime. His now-famous *Pictures at an Exhibition* remained unpublished until five years after the composer's death. Nevertheless, the composer played a surprising role in capturing Russian emotion through his short and less idiomatic compositions.

Perhaps Mussorgsky's greatest contribution to Official Nationalism was his composition of *Boris Godunov*. This large-scale operatic work, based on Pushkin's play, was composed in 1869 before it underwent rigorous processing by censors. After its rejection, Mussorgsky drastically revised the opera before its performance five years later. Politically, this work proved to be monumental. The composer outlined and recreated Russia's dynastic struggles of the early seventeenth century while incorporating elements of Russian folk tunes and the working class. This composition, central to the Russian operatic canon, solidified Mussorgsky's role as a political visionary.

Following a hostile rejection of *Boris Godunov*, the gifted composer spiraled into a bout of depression and relapsed into alcoholism, resulting in a work that displayed both Mussorgsky's emotional ties to Russian culture and his weakened emotional state. While facing mental health issues, Mussorgsky clearly captures the darkened mood of Russia during the nineteenth century in his lesser known songs of *Sunless*. Broken into six movements, this 1874 composition focuses on a series of emotions,

anxieties, and loneliness that the composer faced. The first three movements, titled "Within Four Walls," "You Did Not Know Me in the Crowd," and "The Useless, Noisy Day Has Ended," each capture the composer's tendencies of isolation and distaste for human interaction while facing a bout of depression. While not necessarily characteristic of the entirety of Russia, this downtrodden mindset captures the overall cloud of struggle that the common citizen faced at the time. Drawing on the works of his literary friend, Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov, Mussorgsky wrote some of his finest melodies for this short set of songs. Aside from *Sunless*, Mussorgsky set his sights on composing a set of pieces in memory of a dear friend which would have lasting cultural and musical effects.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, composed in 1874 and later orchestrated by Maurice Ravel in 1922, effectively captured the folk genre within a unique series of piano compositions. Troubled by the unexpected passing of his close friend Viktor Hartmann, an architect by trade and a talented and prolific painter, Mussorgsky fell into a deep bout of depression, anxiety, and alcoholism. The following year, an exhibition that was organized in honor of the artist inspired Mussorgsky's gallery-walk composition as he commemorated his lost friend and sought to portray Russian life in a collection of piano works. The opening and stately "Promenade" announces the collection of works by utilizing key Russian intervals including open fifths and sets the scene of the composer's leisurely stroll from picture to picture. A prime example of folk influence can be seen in his piece "Gnomus," in which Mussorgsky portrays a crooked, malevolent gnome which appeared regularly in Russian folklore. The entirety of the set both pays homage to the composer's deceased friend and centers on elements of Russian life including the Great Gate of Kiev, Jewish culture, and characters of Russian tales. While slightly less direct than Cui's writings or Balakirev's educational and compositional contributions, Mussorgsky most successfully embodied Russian culture in his compositions, earning him a place in the *moguchaya kuchka*, and subsequently, in Russian history.

Official Nationalism emerged unlike any other brand of nationalism that the western world had ever seen, as the Russian nation progressed rapidly, facing both westernization and industrialization. The government's influence in the nationalistic efforts paved the way for the Russian Five to contribute in a powerful and effective way. By briefly looking into the works of *moguchaya kuchka* members Mily Balakirev,

César Cui, and Modest Mussorgsky, one can effectively capture these composers' contributions to nationalism within Russia. Balakirev's impact on his Russian contemporaries, his educational contributions, and his incorporation of the folk idiom all directly resulted in a "pure" school of Russian music and thinking. Cui's service as a critic, writer, and cultural activist led the prevention of westernization among certain Russian composers. Lastly, Mussorgsky, a commoner, captured the life and culture of Russia in his compositions as he wrote in the folk idiom and retold of past struggles within the nation. Through studying the works of these three mighty composers, one can effectively garner insight into Russian culture and development.

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