

Five Operas and a Symphony

R U S S I A N L I T E R A T U R E
A N D T H O U G H T

Gary Saul Morson, Series Editor

BORIS GASPAROV

*Five Operas and
a Symphony*

WORD AND MUSIC IN
RUSSIAN CULTURE

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To C.

Melodies without the subject meaning are to me like butterflies or beautiful flamboyant birds that burst into the open air before our eyes, making us ever chase them and want to grasp them; the melody, however, soars in the heaven like a spirit, evoking the best in ourselves by challenging us to follow it.

— Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Learning*

Papageno (*pointing ruefully at the lock on his mouth*). Hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm.

Tamino. The poor fellow may be telling about his punishment, that his speech is gone.

Papageno. Hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm.

Tamino. I can do nothing but pity you, for it's not in my power to help.

Papageno. Hm hm hm hm —

Tamino. I can do nothing —

Papageno. — hm hm hm hm —

Tamino. — but pity you —

Papageno. — hm hm hm hm —

Tamino. — for it's not in my power to help.

Papageno. Hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm hm.

— Mozart-Schikaneder, *The Magic Flute*

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Introduction: In the Shadow of Literature

Ein Tauber, der sähe, und ein Blinder, der hörte, wer hätte mehr von der Oper? Jener bei der französischen, dieser unstreitig bei der italienischen.

A deaf man watching, or a blind man listening—which one would get more from an opera? The former from a French one, the latter, indisputably, from an Italian.

—Johann Gottfried Herder, *Über die Oper*

Russian music has a characteristic sound. A reasonably experienced listener instantly recognizes the distinct “Russianness” in a piece of Russian art music, from Yevstignei Fomin’s *Land Coachmen at the Post Station* (1787) to Sofia Gubaidulina’s *De profundis* for bayan (1978); the few exceptions only confirm the rule, since they are obviously deliberate. The same can be said of Russian traditional folk and modern popular songs, as well as of the liturgical singing of the Russian Orthodox Church. The phenomenon is not unlike one’s being able to recognize a “Mediterranean landscape,” whether it is actually situated in Greece, in the Caucasus, or in California. True, the elements of the Russian musical landscape prove to be as elusive as they are tangible. Not only do all the features of melody, harmony, rhythm, and instrumentation that we are ready to recognize as generically Russian belong to European musical

culture at large, but some of them were consciously borrowed by Russians from various Western musical cultures (Italian and German, in most cases), although the borrowed material underwent adaptation when transplanted onto Russian musical soil. And yet the pronounced Russianness of the musical voice is inseparable from its universal emotional appeal. There is something cozily expressive in this music; it seems to be always striving to reach out to its listeners, to appeal to them directly, even when it falls into a cantankerous or sarcastically subversive mood.

There is a price to be paid for this aural comfort. The listener's response tends to be direct and unreflective, in line with the perceived nature of this musical voice. Broader intellectual issues concerning the place of Russian music of different epochs vis-à-vis aesthetic and philosophical trends in Russian and Western culture at large, therefore, are, if not totally superfluous, at least not as pressing as, say, in the case of German musical classicism, romanticism, and modernism. Russian music, no matter the genre and aesthetic provenance, assumes a collective image whose very wholeness signifies an implicit exclusion from the rest of the aesthetic world. In this sense, the fortunes of Russian music have been different not only from those of any major Western European national musical tradition but from Russian literature as well. For us Tolstoy is, first and foremost, "the writer" in a universal sense, a towering presence in the realm of nineteenth-century psychological prose. Schubert, for all the poignantly national character of his music, stands in our perception first of all as the key figure in the transition from the classical to the romantic style. But when one considers Musorgsky or Chaikovsky, the "Russian" Stravinsky or Shostakovich, awareness of his identity as a Russian composer serves as the primary identification mark. Consider the habitual dissection of Stravinsky's musical self into "Russian" and "non-Russian" halves or the beaten path of discussions about which of the nineteenth-century Russian composers was more or less Russian. In Richard Taruskin's succinct formulation, "Verdi and Wagner are heroic individuals. Russians are a group."¹

Fiercely promoted by the ideologues of the Russian school in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hammered on by the cultural policy of "official nationality" of the Soviet period, and diligently emulated by many Western musical critics in the past, the idea of the collective identity of Russian music has established itself as both a formidable intellectual tradition and a sheer listening habit. One can see its consequences in the gap that exists between technical studies of the language of this music, on one hand, and interpretive criticism dedicated to works by Russian composers, on the other.

A wealth of studies by Russian musicologists describe in great detail the elements of musical language that constitute the peculiar features of Russian

musical sonority.² Such studies typically emphasize indigenous idiosyncrasy, downplaying Western parallels to or the Western origin of many features perceived as trademarks of Russian musical style. While contributing to an understanding of the concrete parameters of musical texture typical of this musical tradition, these works, in a more general way, perpetuate the myth of musical Russianness as some magic substance flowing from folk music directly to all the composers of the land. No wonder that in spite of the high level of technical sophistication of many such works, they rarely surface in the context of Western studies of Russian music.

At the same time, one can note a certain predilection of music critics and the public, in Russia and in the West, to become mesmerized by the human features of a composer if the composer in question is Russian. This is not to say, of course, that a composer's personality, worldview, and life circumstances are irrelevant for understanding his music. But there is something particularly annoying in the remarkable persistence with which discourse about Russian music gravitates toward the mind-set "menschliches, allzumenschliches" — the attitude whose proponents Osip Brik once characterized as "maniacs passionately seeking the answer to the question, 'Was Pushkin a smoker?'"³ This is the other side of the preoccupation with the expressive qualities of Russian musical sonority at the expense of broader issues of genre, discourse, and historical ramification. The perceptual gap left by the ghettoization of Russian music that sets it apart from music *per se* — "music" without a modifier — tends to be filled by personal and ideological trivia rather than aesthetic and historical analysis.

The time has passed (one hopes) when Beethoven's deafness or Mozart's angelically subhuman infantilism — or Dostoevsky's epilepsy or Tolstoy's family trouble, for that matter — served as a comprehensive frame into which the entire oeuvre could be fit. But what comes to mind when one remembers Russian composers is the Musorgsky of Repin's portrait — a disturbed genius in the throes of the lethal drunkenness that consumes his life and his work; Chaikovsky the repentant homosexual, his hyperemotional music pouring out from the somber depths of his soul, his whole path as an artist inextricably enmeshed in dark rumors about the circumstances of his death;⁴ Shostakovich the lifetime dissident and victim of Stalinist persecution — or Shostakovich the conformist *and* the victim of persecution — a composer whose music has become virtually inaccessible as an aesthetic phenomenon, thanks to everybody's burning desire to decipher what it is "really" about; or the grandeur and eccentricity of all those charming and outrageous Russian émigré musicians. Looking at Repin's portrait of Musorgsky from a more sober perspective, one could see in it a sign of the painter's precocious tilting toward expressionism

(posing, typically for Russian art of that time, as an unrelenting realism) rather than an iconic depiction of the composer's personality and work. If we had a picture of Schumann in the depths of his affliction, chances are small that we would seek in it an elucidation of his musical style. Schoenberg, Béla Bartók, and Richard Strauss were as deeply affected, each in his own way, by the political turmoils of the 1930s and 1940s as was Shostakovich; Puccini hailed the advent of Mussolini in the same superficial way as Stravinsky. But in the case of Western composers these circumstances do not grow so large in our eyes as to obstruct our view of their oeuvre (or do so only rarely); the Russians are less fortunate.

Much has been done recently to confront this peculiar situation and to address Russian music as an aesthetic phenomenon the way one addresses any major European musical or literary tradition, including, in the latter case, the Russian one. Richard Taruskin, in spite of some polemical excesses in his writing, deserves the lion's share of credit for this effort. In his *Defining Russia Musically* Taruskin exposed many features of musical style that had been perceived as characteristically Russian since the second half of the nineteenth century as products of musical cross-pollination. According to Taruskin, for such composers as Glinka and Chaikovsky as well as for Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, the relation between Russian and non-Russian musical elements remained as fluid as the relation between German and Italian was for Bach or Mozart. In another book Taruskin built a bridge between the two aspects of Stravinsky by showing the persistent features of musical discourse that underlay the composer's oeuvre, whether it sounded Russian or not.⁵ One can also cite recent works about Musorgsky,⁶ Chaikovsky,⁷ and Shostakovich⁸ in which these composers have been discussed in the context of the broader cultural and aesthetic trends of their times. Another welcome development in this direction was the appearance of studies showing Wagner's overpowering presence in Russian culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — crucial evidence of Russian musicians' involvement, their frequent protestations notwithstanding, in an intense aesthetic dialogue with their Western counterparts.⁹

These pioneering works, most of which have appeared in the past decade, have made it possible to address the question of the peculiarity of the Russian musical tradition in broader historical and aesthetic terms and to approach Russian music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an integral part of the European aesthetic process. The very difficulty with which studies of Russian music shift their focus away from the emphasis on its anthropologically peculiar attire, however, constitutes an interesting phenomenon in itself. The question is not whether this music has a characteristic

tone—it does; it is, rather, why in this case the tone has become such an overpowering issue, capable of overshadowing consideration of the different aesthetic trends, ideological concerns, and cultural environments that Russian composers reflected and to which they responded in their art.

One can see a certain paradox in the position that music holds in the national cultural consciousness and in everyday life. On one hand, the nation is very musical. One has only to remember the innumerable touching scenes in Russian literature and films in which characters swoon to the sounds of music, mostly that of an indigenous provenance—a peasant song, a church chorus, piano playing, the voice of a diva.¹⁰ On the other, when pressing philosophical, social, psychological, or aesthetic problems are raised, music usually takes a back seat not only to literature but, at least in the twentieth century, also to the visual arts. When one thinks of such phenomena in the cultural history of the past two centuries as efforts by Romantic and neo-Romantic writers, philosophers, and historians to grasp the essence of the national character and to define the messianic “Russian idea,” the advent on Russian soil of major aesthetic trends such as Romanticism, realism, symbolism, and the avant-garde, the quest for the social answerability of art, the critique of the rationalism and individualism of Western epistemology and ethical thought raised by Russian philosophers, and the reflection of this critique in the works of Russian writers and painters, Russian literature, literary criticism, and avant-garde painting come forward as the primary aesthetic vehicles through which those ideas and concerns were articulated. Russian music took part in every important cultural trend, but it was a part whose intellectual and aesthetic underpinnings had already been shaped by literature. Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* was received with enthusiasm as a musical proclamation of Russian “nationality” (*narodnost*) that responded to the ideas developed by writers, literary critics, and philosophers during the preceding decade. The uncompromising quest for realism in music, proclaimed by Dargomyzhsky in the 1850s and ardently followed by the young Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov in the 1860s, was clearly derived from Belinsky’s definition of the natural school in the 1840s and the subsequent affirmation of the superiority of reality over art by Chernyshevsky. At the time of their appearance, Stravinsky’s “Russian” ballets attained more worldwide fame than the works of any contemporary Russian avant-garde writer or artist (with the possible exception of Kandinsky); yet Stravinsky’s role in shaping Russian modernist culture was minor compared with that of Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely, Velimir Khlebnikov, Viktor Shklovsky, or Kazimir Malevich.

There was one major exception to this trend: Scriabin. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the cult of Scriabin reached truly messianic

proportions, comparable to the cults of Pushkin and Tolstoy. In his article “Scriabin and the Spirit of the Revolution,” ostensibly finished one day before the October revolution (if one believes the date of writing, given as October 24, 1917), Ivanov portrayed Scriabin’s death in 1915 as an apocalyptic event, an omen that portended a rupture in the history of the world.¹¹ This phenomenon, however, typical of the neo-Romantic revival of the cult of the spirit of music by the Russian symbolists, was doomed to remain, in the larger historical perspective, an isolated episode. By the 1920s avant-garde literature and literary theory resumed their intellectual leadership, summoning painting and cinema as their principal allies. While fully retaining its ability to elicit an overwhelming emotional response (one need only remember the reception of Shostakovich’s Fifth and Seventh Symphonies), music retreated once again from Scriabin’s claim that it was the defining spiritual force and resumed its habitual role as the expressive voice.

One feature of Russian music that reflects its dependence on literature is the remarkable persistence with which opera composers relied on works of the national literary pantheon for their subjects. In the nineteenth century at least, this trend set Russian opera apart from that of other nations. Of course, many Western operas from this period drew their subject matter from famous works of literature, but typically, composers chose works from a national literature other than their own, written in a different language. Rossini and Verdi took inspiration from Shakespeare, Schiller, and Alexander Dumas *films*; Gounod and Massenet followed Goethe; Beethoven’s *Fidelio* used the drama by J. N. Bouilly; Wagner relied on early mythology and medieval novels rather than on modern literature. Even in such cases as Bizet’s *Carmen* and Massenet’s *Manon*, the literary original, although belonging to the same national tradition, was a work in prose, which meant that its text was thoroughly transformed in the libretto. I am not aware of any significant Western European opera prior to Debussy’s *Pelleas et Mélisande* and Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* that not only adopted the plot and characters of a well-known work of literature but derived the libretto directly from its text. The latter practice, however, was typical for Russian composers, who unhesitatingly used classical works of national literature as the basis for their music. Pushkin in particular, in his established symbolic role as the ultimate embodiment of the national spirit, was ubiquitous in the operatic canon, represented by Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmila*, Dargomyzhsky’s *Mermaid* and *The Stone Guest*, Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, Chaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*, *Mazeppa*, and *The Queen of Spades*, Cui’s *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, *Mozart and Salieri*, and *The Golden Cockerel*, Rakhmaninov’s *Aleko* and *The Covetous Knight*, Nápravník’s *Dubrovsky*, Lourié’s *A Feast in Time*

of *Plague* and *Blackamoor of Peter the Great*, and Stravinsky's *Mavra*. Gogol is a not-so-distant second, with Musorgsky's *Marriage* and *The Fair of Sorochintsy*, Chaikovsky's *Cherevichki*, Shostakovich's *The Nose* and the fragment *The Gamblers*, and Shchedrin's *Dead Souls*. Lermontov is represented by A. Rubinstein's *Demon* and Ostrovsky by Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden* and Serov's *The Power of Evil*. Most of the literary-operatic projects of the nineteenth century were based on narrative poems and dramas in verse, which allowed direct use of the text. The principle of textual faithfulness to the original was affirmed in Musorgsky's radical experiment in *Marriage*, which used Gogol's prose intact, a highly unusual case for the time. In the twentieth century, when prosaic discourse became more common in opera, the way was opened for major nineteenth-century Russian novelists to be lavishly represented on the operatic stage including Tolstoy in Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, Turgenev in Ippolitov-Ivanov's *Asya*, Dostoevsky in Prokofiev's *The Gambler*, Leskov in Shchedrin's *The Enchanted Wanderer* and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*,¹² and Lermontov in Anatoly Aleksandrov's *Bela*, all of them permeated with direct borrowings from the literary prototype.

This practice received a theoretical affirmation in the doctrine of musical realism put forth in the 1850s by Dargomyzhsky, who challenged music to cast off the artificiality of invented melodies and to pursue "truthfulness" of expression by following the genuine intonations of speech. His efforts to abolish conventional melodies in favor of a continual recitative-like musical declamation were not very far from Wagner's contemporary reform of musical drama — or, for that matter, from Vincenzo Galilei's encouragement of "noble abstention from melody," which catalyzed transformation of the vocal concerts of the *Camerata* into a vocal presentation of dramatic action — the *opera* — in early seventeenth-century Florence. What was curious in Dargomyzhsky's reasoning was the absolute authority granted to the word. His famous maxim — "I want the sound to express the word; I want truth" — has been endlessly repeated by Russian and Soviet champions of the realist aesthetic without any consideration of the peculiarity of this unhesitating identification of truth with the word. What was more curious was Dargomyzhsky's decision to affirm his views by writing an opera after Pushkin's *The Stone Guest* without altering or omitting a single one of the poet's words. Pushkin's romantic drama in verse, featuring the highly stylized story of Don Juan and wrought in literary and musical allusions (a close kin to contemporary works for the theater by Alfred de Musset), may strike an outside observer as an unlikely vehicle for the uncompromising pursuit of reality in music. Yet neither Dargomyzhsky nor his enthusiastic followers in the next generation took notice of this seeming contradiction. His principles and their embodiment in his opera were

championed by V. V. Stasov and embraced by the young Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov as examples for their own early operatic projects. After the composers eventually drifted away—in fact, very far away—from the 1860s ideal of musical faithfulness to the truth, they continued to exhibit at least a token loyalty to the Dargomyzhsky-Stasov line. After all, Dargomyzhsky only followed the lead of such champions of realism among literary critics as Chernyshevsky and Pisarev, who, in their disquisitions about the primacy of reality over art, invariably resorted to images taken from literature when they needed an example of the hallowed reality they championed. Critics did not see any irony in treating the familiar literary characters and situations or aphoristic lines of poetry that their memory obediently offered to them as representations of the reality whose cherished model they admonished the writers and artists to follow.

The dependence, both ideological and textual, of Russian music on national literature and literary consciousness gave rise to a peculiar tradition of bemoaning the “desecration” of literary classics by composers. This tradition, which persisted from Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmila* to Stravinsky’s, Shostakovich’s, and Prokofiev’s ventures onto literary terrain, survived all changes of taste and ideology. Even operas that virtually superseded their literary prototype in the national cultural memory, such as *Boris Godunov* and *Eugene Onegin*, drew acid remarks from critics and the public for their treatment of their literary originals. One can notice a peculiar pattern of widespread elation surrounding a major composer’s decision to write music after a classic—as was the case, for example, with Glinka’s Pushkin project—followed by the inevitable groans about the disfigurement of that classic when it appeared in its new operatic attire. Typical are complaints about subtleties of the original being lost or its coherence destroyed; rare are attempts to assess what the music of such an opera might add to our perception of the meaning of the work.¹³

Russia was not the only nation whose cultural self-consciousness was dominated by verbal discourse in general and its refined form, belles lettres, in particular. Perhaps a more powerful case of such dominance can be found in France, the home of the term “logocentrism,” whose influence on Russian literature and literary language was overwhelming at the time when Russian belles lettres assimilated the patterns and genres of modern Western culture. Russian logocentrism is peculiar in that it coexists with the singularly strong emotional response enjoyed by indigenous music. In a nation accustomed to looking at its writers with expectations of messianic proportions, music turns out to be the phenomenon that was truly inextricable from everyday life. From the cozy domesticity of popular songs to the sublime emanations of national spirit in its operatic and symphonic masterpieces, Russian music offers perhaps the most

immediate expression and affirmation of that national spirit. In this capacity, music invades literature, making familiar verses and characters inseparable from their musical doubles. Yet in a symbolic but by no means less powerful way music occupies a subservient, derivative position vis-à-vis the word.

With a few exceptions, cited above, one can speak of a certain literary bias in approaches to Russian culture. It has become a well-established habit to look at the writers of a certain epoch, their works, and their reception by contemporaries for clues concerning new trends, problems, and ideas that occupied the society at large in that epoch. Music is rarely considered to be a major factor. Its role is often confined to that of a voice whose texture may add certain emotional overtones to the cultural message carried by literature and literary criticism. Attempts to view music as a formative cultural force, to show cultural trends and patterns in the characteristic features of the music, are still rare. Again, in this regard one must cite Taruskin, whose analysis of the national features of Stravinsky's and Scriabin's music on a level deeper than that of its sound points in this direction.¹⁴ Still, the relation between the voice of Russian music and its message, in a broader historical and aesthetic sense, remains a problem that is wide open for investigation.

The exploration of this problem and of the impact it may have on the interpretation of individual musical works by Russian composers is the principal task of this book. I am convinced that, when viewed in this broader context, music can offer a unique testimony about its time, from its aesthetic and intellectual trends to its political tides and generational psychological shifts. This book tries to present a multidimensional panorama of Russian culture at different historical moments, viewed through the lens of national music. By the same token, a well-known musical work, when placed in a broad historical context, reveals fresh, sometimes unexpected aspects of its meaning; the interpretation of the music and the study of Russian cultural history become intertwined.

By means of this strategy the very dependence of Russian music on literature can become a useful heuristic tool. It is intriguing to explore the displacements that occur when a major work of literature or historiography — such as Pushkin's oeuvre or Sergei Solovyov's monumental survey of Russian history — becomes the subject of an opera written twenty to sixty years later by a composer belonging to a different generation and cultural stratum. The effect goes beyond that of genre transposition;¹⁵ it transports a national classic into a different epoch, giving it a second life under totally different historical, aesthetic, and psychological circumstances. Familiar situations and characters, firmly entrenched in the national memory, receive a new meaning in the new context. Sometimes the message carried by the music develops in a dialogue

with its literary prototype; sometimes it clashes with or supersedes it. These shifts in the meaning can tell us as much about the epoch to which the original narrative belonged as about the time of its operatic reincarnation.

I have chosen to focus on six well-known works of Russian music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmila*, Musorgsky's *Khovanshchina* and *Boris Godunov*, Chaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*, and Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony. Each work serves as a vantage point for a tableau reflecting a certain moment in Russian history: the building of the empire and growth of national consciousness in the time of Nicholas I (the 1830s and 1840s), the age of realism and populism (the 1860s and 1870s) and the religious and metaphysical reaction against them in the late 1870s, the advent of modernism (the 1890s), and the beginning of the epoch of high Stalinism (the early 1930s). Together, these snapshots add up to a coherent story of ideological and aesthetic trends as they evolved over more than a century, from Pushkin's time to the rise of the totalitarian mentality and aesthetic in the 1930s.

*Sound and Discourse:
On Russian National Musical Style*

An old Russian folk song is like water held back by a dam. It looks as if it were still and were no longer flowing, but in its depth it is ceaselessly rushing through the sluice gates and the stillness of its surface is deceptive. By every possible means, by repetitions and similes, the song slows down the gradual unfolding of its theme. Then at some point it reveals itself and astounds us.

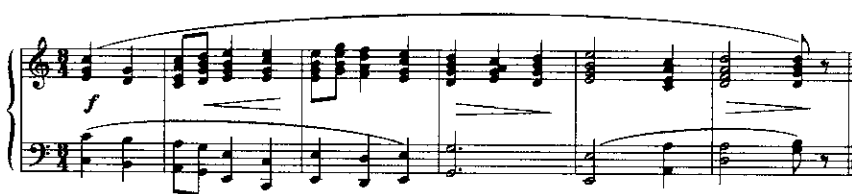
— Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*

The Russian folk melody “Glory” became popular in the nineteenth century, not least because of Beethoven’s use of it in one of the Rasoumoffsky quartets; it appears in op. 59, no. 2 in the middle part of the scherzo, marked in the score as “thème russe” (example 1.1a). The theme was subsequently used by Rimsky-Korsakov as the leitmotif of Tsar Ivan the Terrible in *The Maiden of Pskov* and *The Tsar’s Bride* and, most famously, by Musorgsky in the coronation scene of *Boris Godunov*. In Beethoven’s and Musorgsky’s works the theme appears as a chorale as well as in a contrapuntal elaboration. Let us compare the chorale harmonization given to the theme by Musorgsky (example 1.1b).

Beethoven and Musorgsky expand on the three principal functions of European harmony—tonic, dominant, and subdominant, based, respectively, on



1.1a. "Glory" (Beethoven, Quartet op. 59, no. 2, third movement)

1.1b. "Glory" (Musorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, Prologue)

steps I, V, and IV of the seven-note scale — by using chords build on peripheral steps. Beethoven uses a VI triad and Musorgsky uses II, III, and VI triads. Although any of these peripheral chords can appear in a Bach-style chorale, their sheer weight, particularly in the case of Musorgsky, exceeds the norms of harmonic style of European music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Beethoven reduces this peculiarity by using chromatic gestures that form secondary dominants to peripheral chords. The tension created by a secondary dominant resolves into a peripheral triad in the same way in which the principal dominant is resolved into the tonic; for instance, the chromaticized chord (with b-sharp) of the VII functions as dominant for the VI. When the scope of harmonies within the tonality expands, it happens by the affirmation of the fundamental dominant-tonic antinomy. Expanding tonality from within by applying its fundamental principle to more and more extenuated subsidiaries was the road of development taken by European composers throughout the nineteenth century. The level of expansion of tonality reached in this way by Wagner was such that it permitted him to maintain harmonic suspense virtually throughout an entire act of an opera by introducing another secondary dominant each time the resolution into the tonic is expected, before reaching the ultimate resolution.

Musorgsky's treatment of the theme is strategically different. He introduces peripheral chords bluntly, without preparation. They function as self-sufficient, independent members of the tonality whose appearance, like the appearances of the tonic and the dominant, is not beset by any special conditions. Establishing all peripheral chords on an equal footing with the principal functions results in decentralization of the tonality. Harmonic hierarchy is transformed into a harmonic family. A chord built on any step of the scale can appear after and be resolved into—or simply followed by—every other member of the family; each can freely assume a derivative form such as a sixth chord or a seventh chord.

The effect is that of a somewhat amorphous looseness. The coherence of musical form underwritten by the fundamental principle of the dominant-tonic relationship gives way to an improvisatory vagueness of direction in which the musical phrase coalesces. It undermines the “teleological” treatment of tonality according to which its development, no matter how far-reaching, is strategically directed toward resolution in the final cadence. The appearance of the tonic becomes anticlimactic—it is just one chord among the many that can follow and be followed by any of the family members; it can assume the shape of a seventh chord, sometimes even in the final position, as easily as a chord built on another step. The standard V–I cadence that signposts all conjunctions between segments of the musical form in Western music becomes no more than a transient episode, almost an accident. In the minor mode, the importance of the dominant-tonic sequence is further undermined by the prevalent use of the natural dominant instead of the harmonic one, thus removing the leading tone, which has the strongest gravitational pull toward the tonic.

The weakening of the tonic's reigning position, together with the fact that the scales of a major and its relative minor tonality (for example, C major and A minor) become identical owing to the use of the natural VII in the minor, produces a characteristic feature of Russian harmonic style: the so-called alternating tonality (*tonal'naia peremennost'*). Music can inconspicuously shift from the major to the minor and vice versa, without any modulating device that would make such a shift definitive. In fact, one can hardly say in which tonality one finds oneself at any given point. There is no proper cadence, no difference in the scale and the repertory of the chords between the two relative tonalities, so one can tell major from minor only by the relative weight, at a certain point, of chords that can be interpreted as the dominant and the tonic of either of the alternatives—a precarious balance indeed. Sometimes the tonal alternation involves more than two tonalities. A good example is the famous song “About the Tatar Captivity” (*Pro tatarskii polon*), which Rimsky-Korsakov harmonized in his collection of Russian folk tunes (following Balakirev's initiative)¹ and later used as the leitmotif of the Tatar invasion in *The*



1.2. "About the Tatar Captivity" (from Rimsky-Korsakov, *A Hundred Russian Folk Songs*)

Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh. Its theme perpetually wanders between G major, E minor, C major, and D minor; it can be tipped into any one of these by slight changes in harmonization (example 1.2).

Although Russian music predominantly uses the seven-note scale, the principle of alternating tonality links it with Far Eastern music based on pentatonic scales. A pentatonic melody also fluctuates effortlessly between what sounds to the European ear like major and minor.²

The first impression given by the Russian chorale in comparison with the German one is that of serene simplicity. The flexibility of conjunctions between chords and the absence, or at least the great reduction, of harmonic tensions and functional hierarchy come at the expense of excluding the chromaticisms and thus limiting the repertory of chords to those built on the diatonic steps. In this sense, the Russian chorale recalls the pre-tonal (modal) harmony of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries except for the extensive appearance of triads in inverted positions (six-three or six-four chords) and the free use of seventh chords based on all steps except the dominant seventh, which is avoided. This analogy inspired early champions of the re-introduction of the traditional Russian style into church singing in the second quarter of the nineteenth century after the thorough Europeanization it had undergone in the previous hundred years.³ In the 1830s Nikolai Potulov and others began composing church music in what they perceived as the Russian equivalent of Palestrina's style, which consisted exclusively of the triads of all steps of the diatonic scale, freely combined with each other (example 1.3).

Potulov's challenge to the Westernized stylistic canon established by Dmitry Bortniansky was greeted with enthusiasm by such a sensitive musical connoisseur as Prince Vladimir Odoevsky.⁴ Glinka's only attempt to write church music based on a traditional chant, "Let My Prayer Arise," also made use of this exquisite if limited musical language. The free distribution of the basic chords, however, constituted only one aspect of what at that time began to be conceptualized as the Russian harmonic style. The freedom with which the chords could join each other, the lack of definitive expectations for what was to follow, made it possible for chords to go astray, reaching areas outside the



1.3. Potulov, "Praise the Lord in Heaven"

initial diatonic scale. Adjoining chords could glide from one scale to another with the same lack of restrictions that characterized their combinations within one scale. This could be achieved the more naturally in that all traditional modal scales were treated as interchangeable; at any moment, what began in the alternating Ionian-Aeolian mode could slip into Dorian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Phrygian, or some mixture thereof. Such freedom allowed striking harmonic conjunctions to be presented point-blank, without any preparation employing secondary dominants. This is what happens in the development of Musorgsky's "Glory." After its initial serenely diatonic exposition, a segment of the chant appears in a modified form that features a conjunction of A minor and D major; repeated leaps between the tonalities whose tonics are separated by the interval of a tritone proceed with a remarkable nonchalance, without losing the effect of diatonic transparency (example 1.4).

In the introduction to *Khovanshchina*, Musorgsky takes an exquisitely simple theme through variations that feature, successively, the tonalities of E major / C-sharp minor, D major, F-sharp / C-sharp minor, F-sharp major, and G-sharp major — all joined to each other with few or no means of transition.

Another development prompted by volatile conjunctions and conflations of different tonalities consisted in creating exotic artificial scales. Glinka's introduction of the whole-tone scale as early as the late 1830s (Blackamoor's march in *Ruslan and Ludmila*), Rimsky-Korsakov's fondness for the octatonic "tone-semitone" scale (sometimes identified by his name), Musorgsky's use of a hyper-Phrygian scale with a lowered IV (later favored by Shostakovich), and Scriabin's "Promethean chord" and the new scale system it implied,⁵ followed by extensive experiments in scale-building by Nikolai Roslavets in the late 1910s, can be cited as the most conspicuous signposts along this road. A broadly acknowledged product of this development was the domain of exotic sonorities signifying the supernatural and the sublime — the characteristic sound of fairytale Russianness.

The freedom of harmonic conjunctions exceeded not only the boundaries of a single scale but the very concept of the chord as usually understood. Freely evolving voices often give rise to nonchordal combinations that appear



1.4. Musorgsky, “Glory” (middle section)

alongside standard triads and seventh chords.⁶ Although in conventional harmony such combinations are allowed as transient states between two full chords, composers such as Musorgsky do not hesitate to use them as independent units alongside normal chords. The phenomenon of freely evolving voices proceeding together in a loosely coordinated manner is known as heterophony—something in between simple monophonic melody and polyphony. It is widely known among East Asian musical cultures⁷ (another instance of the Russian–East Asian connection, whose consequences are explored in Chapter 7). Unlike suspensions in normative harmony, which are expected to be resolved into the regular chord that has been suspended, heterophonic nonchordal combinations are free to come and go: they can be followed by the standard resolution, by another nonchordal combination, or by an unrelated chord. The crucial factor seems to be the smoothness of the movement of the voices, not the conventionality of the resulting harmonies.⁸ This smoothness, however, does not observe the rules of good voice-leading of standard harmony—it easily admits, for instance, parallel fifths or chromatic cross-relations between different voices in adjoining chords; these were the features of Musorgsky’s writing that Rimsky-Korsakov strove to correct, perceiving them as the errors of someone lacking formal training.

Musorgsky was the most radical of the nineteenth-century composers in his use of these techniques. Let us consider, for example, a passage from the duet between Feodor and the nanny in act 2 of *Boris Godunov* in which diverse six-four chords, seemingly representing vestiges of G and C major, follow one another freely (example 1.5a) and a brief phrase that comes somewhat later in the same scene that, if analyzed under the auspices of standard harmony, looks, at least in the beginning, like a patchwork of disparate tonalities and nonchordal combinations eventually coming to a cadence in E-flat major (example 1.5b).

Musorgsky was not exceptional in this regard, however. Chaikovsky once chastised an inexperienced composer for his excessive concern for the integrity of each chord: “[in your score, there are] always chords, chords, and chords,

I.5a. Musorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, act 2I.5b. Musorgsky, *Boris Godunov*, act 2

and besides, mostly the so-called *accords plaques* [chords in root position]. No unisons, no two-voiced counterpoints appear, even as an exception.”⁹ Coming from a composer who was often blamed for being insufficiently “Russian” and whom one cannot suspect of any sympathy for Musorgsky’s style, this statement testifies to the universality of this trend.

Wagner’s “Tristan” chord, whose hypertension resolves into a lesser tension rather than into a consonance, a device that could postpone the final resolution almost indefinitely, was viewed by the modernist aesthetic and ideology as the foremost symbol of the “crisis” of classical harmony, a musical counterpart of the Nietzschean crisis of traditional values.¹⁰ The Russian chorale, however, with its potential for dissolving tonal and chordal integrities, could be seen as an alternative path into modernity. It undermined the conventional musical order not by increasing tensions but by dissolving them. The strategies of expanding and eventually exploding the tonality — by making the inner logic of harmonic conjunctions increasingly complicated until the whole underlying order became thoroughly transformed or, by contrast, by loosening this logic to the point of total irrelevancy — ran on parallel courses in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both the Musorgskian tangential relation to classical harmony and the Wagnerian technique of exploding it from within had far-reaching potential that allowed them to be adopted by different strains of the musical avant-garde. If the principle of the Tristan chord led to the expressionist style of Richard Strauss and the early Schoenberg and, ultimately, to the development of atonal music,¹¹ then the inheritance of the Russian chorale can be seen in the loosening of harmonic functions by Debussy, in the extending of tonal harmonies by Shostakovich, and perhaps

Old prisoner

f

Oh, that Russian steppe sad and in - - fi - nite, naught but snow and death we'll

f

4 meet on it, our days...

dim.

p

1.6. Shostakovich, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, final scene

most radically in the tonal bricolage of Stravinsky's bitonality. Shostakovich in particular was able to employ the most radical harmonic conjunctions while retaining a clear continuity with nineteenth-century musical language. The chorus of convicts in the final scene of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* accommodates daring harmonic effects into a musical discourse bearing unmistakable marks of kinship with Musorgsky. In particular, one is reminded of another scene involving departure to Siberia: that of Prince Golitsyn in *Khovanshchina* (act 4, scene 2), in which the melody, persisting on the tones of two minor triads, and ostinatos in the bass sound like a diatonic prototype of Shostakovich's music (example 1.6).

We have seen that Beethoven's treatment of the *thème russe* largely conformed to conventional harmony or at least softened the theme's idiosyncratic harmonic potential. I think, however, that Beethoven had become aware of this potential and its far-reaching implications. Evidence for this can be seen in another movement of the same work: its finale. Although its main theme has nothing specifically Russian in it, its treatment strikingly resembles certain pages of twentieth-century Russian music, particularly Prokofiev's harmonic style. Having started in exuberant C major, the theme moves on to the B major seventh chord, as if preparing to modulate to E minor; then, however, without reaching E minor, it "straightens" itself up by the abrupt introduction of the