

INDISPENSABLE 19TH CENTURY RUSSIAN COMPOSERS: Aleksander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, Nicolai Rimsky Korsakoff, Cesar Cui, and Mili Balakireff.

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19th CENTURY RUSSIAN MUSIC: INDSPENSABLE?

In discussing Russian music, which is so strongly characterized by its nationalist strains, we ought to look at how, where, and when that music was written, and how the day-to-day events of the society in which it was created affected it.

During the life spans of Russian 19th century composers, wars were fought, revolutions won, territories were conquered. The Decembrist Revolution threatened to bring the country to its knees, the Serfs rebelled, and their uprising was brutally quelled. Napoleon invaded Russia, reached Moscow, and, within weeks, his forces were pushed back to France, with a total loss of human life on each side of over half a million.

Throughout it all, Russia, as much encroached upon as doing its own aggressive form of encroaching, expanded its hold on neighboring territories and waged war against several sovereign nations. Tragically this continues to this day.

By the end of the reign of Tsar Nicholas I in 1855, the Russian Empire encompassed over 7.7 million square miles, with roughly one fourth of that huge territory sparsely inhabited by over 100 million people, giving the Russian Empire the world's third largest population in mid-19th century.



Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Dagestan in the East, Manchuria, and Mongolia beyond, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in the Northwest, Ukraine to the South, were all far removed in ethnicity and culture from the language, religion, and culture of Moscow and St. Petersburg. A centralized government found it increasingly difficult to maintain control over such a vast land mass: the Georgians and Latvians and Serbians and Turkic peoples were allowed to retain certain customs under the appearance of a relaxed tolerance on the part of Moscow.

Meanwhile ethnically Russian composers found sources of inspiration in both the chants of the Ancient Orthodox Church and in the exotic melodies from all four corners of the Russian Empire.

Mili Balakirev (pr: **Me-lee-Bah-lah-kee-reff**) brought together the composers known as ***The Mighty Five***: **Aleksander Borodin**, **Modest Mussorgsky**, **Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakoff**, and **Cesar Cui**, with **Balakireff**, the only professional musician of the group acting as their mentor.

The Islamic and Asian songs that the inhabitants of Tatar nations sang left their imprint on the music of those five Russian composers.

Unfortunately, except for the occasional **Mussorgsky** or **Rimsky-Korsakoff** selection, the repertory of American orchestras does not expand more often to include rarities by these and other Russian composers.

MUSIC FEATURED IN TODAY'S LECTURE

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887) – *In the Steppes of Central Asia*

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881) – *The Great Gate at Kiev* from *Pictures at an Exhibition*

César Cui (1835-1918) - *Orientale*

Mili Balakireff (1837-1910) - *Russia*

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) – *Russian Easter Festival Overture*

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**Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)**

The steppes of Central Asia cover an enormous geographical territory. Their weather ranges from infernally hot summers to long, dark winters during which the temperature drops well below zero degrees and stays there.

The inhabitants of this region are resilient people, fiercely proud, independent, and nomadic.

**Alexander Borodin** (pr: **Boh-ro-deen**), one of *The Mighty Five*, along with Mili Balakirev, Modest Mussorgsky, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakoff, and Cesar Cui, ethnically Georgian, physician and chemist by profession, and a composer by avocation, dedicated himself to creating originally Russian music, rather than imitating Western European composers than imitating Western European composers.



*“In the silence of the monotonous steppes of Central Asia is heard the unfamiliar sound of a peaceful Russian song. From a distance we hear the approach of horses and camels and the bizarre and melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A caravan approaches, escorted by Russian soldiers, and continues safely on its way through the immense desert. It disappears slowly. The notes of the Russian and Asiatic melodies join in a common harmony, which dies away as the caravan disappears in the distance.” – Alexander Borodin*

*In the steppes of Central Asia* <https://youtu.be/Dq4bOmxKVQQ>



**Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)**

**Modest Mussorgsky** (pr: Moh-desst Moo-sorg-skee) also a member of *The Mighty Five*, also strove to achieve a uniquely Russian musical identity, often in deliberate defiance of the established conventions of Western music.

Civil servant by day, composer by night, and a tormented alcoholic, **Mussorgsky** was inspired to write *Pictures at an Exhibition* by an exhibition of drawings and watercolors of his friend, the artist **Victor Hartmann**.

On April 4, 1866, **Tsar Alexander II** narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in the city of Kiev. A competition was ordained for the design of a great gate to commemorate "the event of April 4, 1866."



From *Pictures at an Exhibition* here is Mussorgsky's musical depiction of

*The Great Gate at Kiev* <https://youtu.be/FncXqa14ANE>





**César Cui (1835-1918)**

Russian composer, high ranking officer in the Imperial Army, music critic, Roman Catholic, born in Lithuania to a French-Polish family, César Cui (**pr: ceh-zahr coo-ee**) was a champion of the “new” kind of music: Russian in sound and in spirit, or, in the case of ***Oriente***, exotic and Near-Eastern in sound.



***Oriente*** <https://youtu.be/UDx-kRbXoCU>



**Mili Balakireff (1837-1910)**

**Mili Balakireff** (pr: mee-lee bah-lah-kee-reff) – the only truly professional musician of the *Mighty Five* composed slowly and methodically, at times working for years on a single composition. *Russia*, a richly orchestrated and brief tone poem is one of his better-known pieces.

**Balakireff** was born into a wealthy aristocratic family with Tatar (Turkic) and Boyar ancestry, ethnic-cultural roots that are present in his bold music.



**Tatar family**

*Russia* <https://youtu.be/ig00oZ7fxgY>





Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov



Russian Easter Celebration

**Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (pr: nee-coe-lie reem-skee kore-sah-koff) (1844-1908) Composer, conductor, naval officer, arguably the most popular of *The Mighty Five*, was a self-taught master of orchestration some of whose compositions— the *Russian Easter Festival Overture* among them — are staples of the classical music repertoire.

*Russian Easter Festival Overture* <https://youtu.be/9YF4hMFfSig>