

## **Russian Icons**

by René Spencer Saller

Born in 1833 and 1840, respectively, Aleksandr Borodin and Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky were contemporaries. Both men died in St. Petersburg, suddenly and unexpectedly, at the age of 53. Although they knew each other somewhat, they moved in different circles.

Borodin, a prominent professor of chemistry, moonlighted as a member of the *Moguchaya Kuchka*, or "Mighty Handful": five influential composers who dominated St. Petersburg's musical culture from the mid-1860s until the early 1880s. Besides Borodin, "the Five," as they were often called, comprised Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky, César Cui, and Mily Balakirev. Only Balakirev had the luxury of composing full-time; the others had day jobs. Borodin, the illegitimate son of a Georgian prince, published major treatises on acids and aldehydes.

Tchaikovsky, by contrast, was so high-strung and self-punishing that he seldom found satisfaction outside of music, and sometimes even music failed to console him. At 12, he was sent off to boarding school by his bourgeois parents, who insisted that he study law. He spent the next seven years at the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, bored, miserable, and tormented by shame about his sexual orientation. (In 19th-century Russia, being gay was a serious crime as well as a grievous sin.) At 21, while employed by the Tsarist Ministry of Justice, he signed up for a class on music theory. A year later, he enrolled at the newly established St. Petersburg Conservatory.

After graduating in 1865, Tchaikovsky accepted a teaching position at the Moscow Conservatory. In his free time, he composed operas, symphonies, tone poems, string quartets, and piano works; he also wrote perceptive (and often scathing) music criticism. In 1878, a mysterious benefactress, Nadezhda von Meck, promised him a generous annual stipend, which allowed him to stop teaching. Increasingly famous, he traveled the world as a conductor, but he always maintained a strict composition schedule.

## **Musical Chemistry**

After Borodin died at age 53, from a sudden brain aneurysm, a monument was erected in his native St. Petersburg. The statue honored his achievements as a research chemist; his music was admired by connoisseurs but still mostly unknown to the general public. His most ambitious work, *Prince Igor*, remained unfinished at his death. His friends Alexander Glazunov and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov relied on their memories and Borodin's towering piles of papers to complete the opera, a monumental effort at which Borodin had been plugging away, on and off, for the past 18 years.

For an amateur composer, Borodin had unusually strong melodic instincts, a knack for vivid orchestration, and a disciplined work ethic. Like all his best work, the score for *Prince Igor* exhibits a staunch nationalism enlivened by exotic touches. Based on a scenario by Vladimir Stasov, Borodin's self-penned libretto involves a medieval Russian prince who is defeated by barbarian invaders, the Polovtsians, and held captive until he makes a daring escape.

*Prince Igor*, Borodin explained, is “essentially a national opera, interesting only to us Russians, who love to steep our patriotism in the sources of our history, and to see the origins of our nationality again on the stage.” An inveterate researcher, he studied the culture of the region, particularly its musical traditions. His musical portrait of the Polovtsians incorporates not only authentic Caucasian tunes but also melodies inspired by North Africa and the Middle East.

Rimsky-Korsakov later wrote that Glazunov reconstructed the overture from his memory of Borodin's piano version, but this account is complicated by Glazunov's own testimony. "The overture was composed by me roughly according to Borodin's plan," Glazunov explained in his 1891 memoir. "I took the themes from the corresponding numbers of the opera and was fortunate enough to find the canonic ending of the second subject among the composer's sketches. I slightly altered the fanfares.... The bass progression in the middle I found noted on a scrap of paper, and the combination of the two themes... was also discovered among the composer's papers. A few bars at the very end were composed by me."

## **Desire and Destiny**

Tchaikovsky's three ballets, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*, are fairy tales made flesh: tender and violent, ethereal and primal. All three scores operate on multiple levels. They create an otherworldly backdrop for the dancers—a sonic set, if you will—and also dramatize their rich interior lives: their unspoken desires and compulsions, their stubborn destinies. Although the sumptuous sound-painting makes the ballets ideal for the concert setting, the music is always driven by character.

Tchaikovsky completed his first ballet, *Swan Lake*, in 1876, but composition truly began in 1871, when he devised a short domestic ballet for his sister Alexandra's daughters. He may have based the scenario on an 18th-century collection of German folk tales, but the exact sources are unknown. At any rate, when he received a commission from the Imperial Theater in Moscow, he proposed a full-length treatment of the same subject he'd used to entertain his nieces.

The plot of *Swan Lake* involves a prince, Siegfried, who is supposed to choose a bride from a multicultural *mélange* of eligible ladies at a ball ("Danse russe"). Instead, he embarks on a swan hunt and falls helplessly in love with Odette, the snow-white Swan Queen. Odette and her companions were once beautiful maidens, but an evil sorceror has cursed them. They revert to their human forms at midnight and become swans again at dawn ("White Swan Pas d'action"). After being seduced by Odile, Odette's black-clad double ("Black Swan Pas de deux"), Siegfried rushes back to the forest to beg Odette's forgiveness. She sadly explains that the curse cannot be broken because of his mistake, and he hurls her crown into the lake, which triggers a supernatural tsunami. The sorceror is crushed beneath his destroyed castle, the lovers are united in death, and the swan maidens are liberated as the storm subsides.

*The Sleeping Beauty*, composed between December 1888 and September 1889, was based on a fairy tale by Charles Perrault, with a scenario by Ivan Vsevolozhsky. The plot concerns a young princess who is cursed to sleep for 100 years, until she is awakened by a prince's kiss.

Tchaikovsky felt uncharacteristically confident about his second ballet. "The subject is so ... suited for music," he wrote, "that in composing it I was utterly absorbed, and wrote with a fervor and passion that always result in a work of merit." Even after several performances, he remained proud of it: "*The Sleeping Beauty* may be the best of all my compositions, and yet I wrote it improbably quickly."

### **A Crisis of Confidence**

When Tchaikovsky finished composing *The Nutcracker*, in late 1892, he had about one year left to live. He was alive at the December premiere, but he might not have wanted to be. Early reviews were harsh, and Tchaikovsky was his own worst critic.

He hadn't really wanted the job in the first place. In early 1891, when Vsevolozhsky approached him about composing the score, Tchaikovsky declined the commission. Although he was willing to make another ballet with the choreographer Marius Petipa, his collaborator on *The Sleeping Beauty*, neither man liked the concept much. Petipa complained about the dearth of stage time for the prima ballerina, and Tchaikovsky found the entire story insipid: "I feel that it's completely impossible to reproduce musically 'The Konfitürenburg' (The Kingdom of Sweets)." He also resented Petipa's measure-by-measure instructions. "I am experiencing a crisis," he announced in a letter.

### **From Crisis to Completion**

Soon after taking the commission, Tchaikovsky accepted an invitation to visit the United States. When he returned home, he was depressed and exhausted. "The ballet is infinitely worse than *The Sleeping Beauty*," he despaired to his nephew. He complained of its "ugliness," griped that his brain was "empty," and swore that he wanted only to finish.

But eventually he produced a score that met his exacting standards. He made his deadline with months to spare, which allowed him to compile a suite of excerpts. He conducted the *Nutcracker* suite in St. Petersburg on March 19, 1892, about nine months before the premiere of the complete ballet.

### **Sensational Sounds**

Tchaikovsky's orchestration teems with oddball tonalities and striking combinations, such as the flutes that float over grumbling bassoons in the "Chinese Dance" and the candy-floss arabesques of the celesta in the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." About a year earlier, Tchaikovsky went to considerable trouble to procure this instrument, a recent invention that he heard in Paris and persuaded his publisher to purchase for him on the strength of its "divinely beautiful tone." He used it in a tone poem and was eager to deploy it in *The Nutcracker* as well. "I am afraid Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov might hear of it and make use of the new effect before I can," he confided in a letter. "I expect the instrument will make a tremendous sensation."

### **Dream Voyage**

Choreographers and directors have adapted Petipa's scenario in countless ways over the decades. Sometimes Clara, the young protagonist, is called Marie, and sometimes she is shown to be dreaming, which makes the entire second act a product of her subconscious rather than a supernatural event. From the moment Clara rises from her bed, the plot seems guided by the sort of dream logic we associate with Lewis Carroll or Franz Kafka.

In Act II, Clara and her Prince travel by sea to his kingdom, the land of sweets. Greeting the happy couple is the Sugarplum Fairy, who presides over a festival in their honor. It starts out with a United Nations of desserts: Spanish chocolates, with spicy castanets and bold brass; twittering, spinning teacups from China. With its swaying rhythms, sultry low reeds, and softly throbbing strings, "Arab Dance" supplies the expected Orientalism promised by the title, but it's no crude stereotype. Tchaikovsky derived the main tune from a Georgian lullaby, and something of the source material bleeds through: mysterious, serene,

suffused with a grave majesty.

Then it's one dazzling diversion after another. After a succession of Ukrainian folk-dancers, clowns, and dancing flowers, Clara and the Prince perform their own pas de deux against ardent strings and delicate harp. The famous "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy" follows, with its trademark celesta. The ballet culminates in a grand finale waltz and apotheosis. Depending on your preference, either Clara and the prince soar off in a reindeer-drawn sleigh, or Clara wakes up.

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