

CHAPTER TWO

Pushkin and Russian Music

Pushkin is immortalized not only through his written word, but also through the myriad of musical interpretations of his writings. He is popularized through a genre known as *romances* (or *romans*)¹ as well as through classical compositions. In fact, two hundred and sixty four poems by Pushkin have been set to music in the form of *romances* or classical compositions and over one hundred operas have been inspired by these themes (Friedrich 1998, 62).

Before *romances* were popularized, however, Russian folk-songs dominated Russian musical culture to such an extent that Gerald Seaman claims that “Understanding the nature of Russian folk-song is imperative for anyone making a study of Russian music. Folk-song is the basis of a great deal of the so-called Russian ‘Classical’ music of the nineteenth century...” (Seaman 1967, 1). Although the primary focus of this study is not to chronicle every aspect of the development of Russian music, it is important to consider its early roots because they greatly influence several composers important to this study, including Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813-1869), Andrei Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), and Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky (1840-1893). For Pushkin, folk-song also proved an invaluable source for stylizing his poetry. Together, composers and poet made great use of early Russian folk music.

Ritual songs, *obryadovye pesni*, may be traced to pagan cultures. Usually the songs refer to nature and equate human beings to some aspect of the natural world. Tchaikovsky incorporates such a work into his Piano Concerto in B-flat Minor and into his Pushkin-based work, *Eugene Onegin*.

Several composers incorporated ancient wedding songs into their operas. Early Russian weddings lasted several days and included a time of mourning for the bride, who was expected to perform rituals lamenting her loss of freedom. While the bride’s family performed these laments, the groom’s family entertained with gay songs and tunes. These wedding cycle songs are represented in Dargomyzhsky’s Pushkin-based *Russalka* and in several of Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas.

Mussorgsky incorporated another type of Russian folk-song into *Boris Godunov*, called *bytovye* songs. These songs are connected with the everyday existence of Russians and Pushkin integrated such a song in his poem *The Winter Road*.

The predecessor of Russian *romance* originated among the myriad of cultural groups that inhabit Russian territory. The most prevalent of these folk song genres is the *byliny* or *stariny*, as they are sometimes called. They are epic ballads that appear in the tenth and eleventh century. While the content of the *byliny* is quite varied, one popular theme is the struggle of the young Russian state as it asserts itself. Mussorgsky incorporated one of these *byliny* into his Pushkin work, *Boris Godunov*, which will be explored in later in this chapter.

In general, *byliny* fall into two major categories; the *odnogolosnaya* (monophonic or solo), and the *mnogogosnaya* (polyphonic or choral). The former is considered “Northern” and is usually more rhythmic than melodic, while the latter is considered more “Southern” and emphasizes melody as well as rhythm. Although less prevalent, a third type of *byliny* exists, the comic *byliny*. These are called *byliny-novelly* and are used, as comedy is used in most cultures, to make social comment (Seaman 1967, 3-13).

Another well-known folk song genre to emerge was the Historical Song (*istoricheskaya pesnya*). Early examples of this type can be found in the fourteenth century, but it was most prevalent during the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century. Gerald Seaman noted that:

The principle difference between *byliny* and historical songs lies in their texts, those of the historical songs giving a less fanciful, more factual account of occurrences and events. The texts are shorter and the three-fold repetition, characteristic of the *byliny*, is employed less consistently. Like the epic ballads most of the historical songs reflect the historical past (Seaman 1967, 7).

Many historical songs referred to the peasant uprisings at the beginning of the seventeenth century and were unfavorable to the crown. Peasants during this time were reluctant to allow collectors to record their songs in writing for fear of punishment or censorship. Therefore, they sometimes employed self-censorship and changed the characters from rebels to robbers, or other less potentially offensive character types.² Pushkin used such a song in his story *The Captain's Daughter*. Up until the early

nineteenth century it was rumored that this particular song was the favorite of Pugachev, the rebel leader during the reign of Catherine the Great (Seaman 1967, 7).³

Although historical songs became less prominent during the nineteenth century, they were still created through the World War II. They were displaced by the rise of the Russian *romances*. These “Russian songs”, or *romances* as they will be referred to in this study, appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century at court and in upper class homes in St. Petersburg. At first they reflected their folk-song heritage, but gradually changed into a more romantic style, reflecting the tradition of “classical” Western Music. As the genre developed the musical accompaniment became more complicated.⁴ Later folk-songs included dance rhythms.

These *romances* were also products of the emergence of Russian songs in opera, and were often called Russian art-songs. Opera performances during the reign of Catherine II (1761-96) frequently included “Russian songs” and helped to popularize this emerging genre (Abraham 1985, 1-2). These songs reflected a Ukrainian influence, which began the incorporation of European melody into Russian song. Simultaneously, the interest in sentimental pastoral poetry of this time contributed to the increasing popularity of “romance” in general (Asafiev 1953, 47).

The terms *romances* and *romans* prove difficult to define. Stuart Campbell notes that “*Romans* is the word usually employed in Russian when the equivalent of an art-song, a *Lied* or a *melodie*, is meant” (Campbell 1994, ix). However, he concurs with the term *romance* as its foreign translation.

Another Russian music expert, Gerald Abraham asserts that there are two types of Russian *romances*: 1) the term *romans*, which usually applies only to songs in French; and 2) *russkaya pesnya* – or “Russian songs,” which are similar to folk-songs. The difference between these two types of song is often blurred, with each genre borrowing from the other. No matter what term is used, in many cases these songs are based on “re-styled folk tunes” (Abraham 1985, 5).

Numerous other types of *romances* existed including the *protyazhnyya*, a lyrical folk-song that was significant for its influence over emerging Russian poets. During Pushkin’s era the cultural elite discovered this type of folk-song and were impressed by

its “astonishing poetry and musical originality” and many poets, including Pushkin, incorporated its unique attributes into their writings (Maes 2002, 17).

It is this symbiotic relationship between Russia’s new poets and Russia’s past musical history that is important for this work, not the correct definition of Russian early song. Regardless of contradictory definitions, the term *romances*, in Russian music, seems to describe compositions that blend the simplicity of Russian folk-song with European romantic musical conventions (Leonard 1957, 63-64). For the purpose of this paper, this simplified definition is sufficient.

It is not surprising that *romances* derived from peasant folk-songs. With the rise of industrialization, rural workers migrated to the cities and began to both spread and lose their folk traditions (Seaman 1967, 25). At the same time, easier travel allowed non-Russians (particularly Westerners) to visit Russia. These foreigners brought their own cultural identity and past-times, which included music. Also, Russians who visited the West returned to their native land with Western ideas. Russian folk-songs began to assimilate Western musical qualities, just as poetry reflected their writers’ exposure to the West.

What makes *romances* different from Western folk-songs is the fact that Russian folk-songs reflect Russia’s unique position globally and politically. Russia is literally “caught” between East and West. It is part European and part Asiatic, as well as part Occident and Orient (Leonard 1957, 369). Much of Russia’s folk music is melancholy reflecting the country’s paranoia, which is well founded. Few countries have been invaded as many times and by as many different ethnic groups as Russia. These diverse ethnic groups leave behind their cultural traditions further enriching Russia’s base for artistic development.

Another unique aspect of Russian folk-song was that it derived from Byzantine roots instead of, for example, Celtic, Greek, Roman or Anglo-Saxon (Swan 1973, 22). While Western folk-songs may have pagan roots that have been influenced by the Catholic Church and Protestant sects, Western European music generally reflected Christian values. In contrast, however, Russia’s folk-songs were shaped by a myriad of religions. In this work, the merging of folk-song into a new musical form will be considered within the more western areas of Russia, in particular St. Petersburg. Here of

course, the predominant forces in the shaping of Russian music were the Russian Orthodox Church and the imperial court (Asafiev 1953, 111).

Because of its separation, both geographically and philosophically, from the Catholic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church avoided the upheavals of the Western Reformation.⁵ As a result, the Russian Orthodox Church appeared to wield more influence over the daily lives of Russians during the nineteenth century:

The centralized art of the ancient Russian cities, both musical and pictorial, was connected with the Church, and not for purely devout reasons. Religious life was firmly organized, religious art, begotten of Byzantine and Byzantino-Slav impacts, acquired at once its firm, constructively solid and lasting forms. Religion carried with it culture, education, and guaranteed the unity of the state. It was but natural that art, too, followed in the trail of the most organized cultural force. Besides, religious music was the art of written tradition, while all the secular art lived and was passed on purely orally, just as the folk music of all other countries (Asafiev 1953, 111).

However, as in Western Europe, by the nineteenth century musical composition was more secular. Emerging composers began to turn their attention to new sources of inspiration, which included native poets.

Politically, too, at this time Russia was unique. It was an autocracy, not a constitutional monarchy or other form of democracy. Censorship was prevalent and the institution of serfdom⁶ was still practiced. The tsar, Nicholas I, was accepted as ruling by Divine Right, thus uniting the Orthodox Church and the government.

Napoleon's invasion and subsequent loss at the hands of the Russians played a significant role in westernizing the Russian empire. His defeat afforded Russia new respect from its Western allies. The repelled invasion also stimulated the growth of Russian nationalism and an appreciation for native Russian culture (Bakst 1966, 41).

Here, again, Russia adopted a Western concept, but with a decided twist. Nationalism in Russia borrowed the ideas of preserving and protecting national ideas. However, the purpose was not to build a strong nation state, but to prop up the autocratic government. Nationalism was given lip service, but was used as a rationale for stopping change. While Nicholas I officially adopted nationalism as part of Russia's ideology, he used it as justification for the existence of class distinction and for expansion of the

empire. Specifically, he and his noble supporters did not want the serfs emancipated because of the social and economic upheaval it would cause.

The adoption of the doctrine of Official Nationality in 1833 declared that all Russians must adhere to the principles of orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. This means in effect that “The combination of orthodoxy and autocracy constituted the essence of Russian nationality” (Maes 2002, 13). Here, again, was another complication unique to Russia. With a country as vast in size as Russia, and as diverse culturally, classifying a “national” identity was problematic. Patriotism was rampant and justified Russia’s desire for expanding and strengthening its empire. This resulted in “an aggressive form of nationalism, entailing the forced Russification of ethnic minorities and national expansion at the expense of other peoples” (Maes 2002, 13).

It was ironic that Russian culture was both enriched and isolated by its dealings with the West. On the one hand, Russian writers and composers were borrowing heavily from Western European thought and methodology while tenaciously developing a sense of unique national identity. Visitors to Russia brought Western ideas to the country while the more mobile Russian elite, who were able to travel to Western Europe, were exposed to new concepts which were assimilated upon their return to Russia (Seaman 1967, 114). While Pushkin never received tsarist permission to leave his native Russia, he managed to borrow writing techniques and ideas from non-Russian sources through contact with these travelers and his own readings.

It was through these various methods that Russian artists begin to develop a Russian form of Romanticism. However, this Romanticism was not merely imitative - - it used Russia’s unique geography, ethnic diversity and passionate population to expand upon the Western basis of romanticism. Again, Pushkin’s influence was heralded as “significant in the development of vocal lyrics, romances, and operas - - musical genres connected with poetry. The content and variety of vocal forms in music were determined by the influence of Pushkin’s art” (Bakst 1966, 42).

According to Stuart Campbell “No Russian poet has inspired our composers so often as Pushkin. His short poems have served as texts for innumerable romances, and his large-scale works as the subjects for operas, beginning with Glinka” (Campbell 1994, 248).⁷ Campbell also asserted that while Pushkin’s popularity with composers resulted

from his genius, it was how this genius was represented that was significant. His genius was seen “in the unfailing clarity and precision of his ideas, in the remarkable conciseness of his expression (particularly important for music, which always prolongs the spoken word) and lastly in the relaxed lightness and music of his peerless verse” (Campbell 1994, 249).

Pushkin contributed to forming a uniquely Russian musical style, ironically, by borrowing from Western cultural tradition. Although Russian writers during Pushkin’s era had steered away from writing in the archaic Church Slavonic language, Russian language still did not lend itself easily to a comfortable literary style (Maes 2002, 12). Pushkin looked to other languages in order to understand their writers’ success in developing new literary genres. He learned to read English by studying Shakespeare and Byron and practiced their rhythm patterns with his Russian writing (Larvin 1948, 140). His exploration with new rhythm and rhyme patterns helped other Russian writers break from their Neo-classical roots and start writing in a manner more conducive to musical accompaniment.

As mentioned previously, folk-songs were routinely re-styled to create the new genre of *romance*. This restyling of tunes to accommodate the lyrics coupled with the fact that early Russian poetry is pseudo-classical and not ideally suited for use as lyrics hampered the efforts of composers in the early 1800’s. Furthermore, most composers at this time were amateurs struggling to master their own art. Pushkin, through his new style of writing, helped the progress of Russian music and as Gerald Abraham noted “from the first the composers recognized the challenge of fresh rhythms and metres” which Pushkin’s works offered (Abraham 1985, 5).

Romances led the way for the development of singularly Russian vocal and musical compositions. A natural result of this development was the emergence of Russian opera, with Russian based music, themes and characters. Russian opera came into existence some time after Italian opera, but brought with it a national consciousness that paralleled the social issues of the time in Russia.

Another factor made the development of Russian opera unique from the development of its Western counterparts. For Russian opera, composers borrowed

extensively from Russian literary texts. This differed sharply from the development of opera in the West because:

In this regard, we can detect a fairly strong difference between the situations in Russia and Western Europe. Whereas Western European composers most frequently worked with professional librettists or adapted foreign and mythological texts for their operas, Russian composers, with surprisingly few exceptions, appropriated literary texts by major Russian writers for their librettos (Wachtel 1998, xiii).

Russian composers, the majority of whom were amateurs until the mid 1800s, had little experience with professional librettists and wrote operas on subjects with which they were familiar.

Pushkin's borrowing from the West was similar to Russia's adoption of Western ideas; he used what he could, but was influenced, also, by the unique characteristics of Russia. In other words, Pushkin informed his writing techniques with elements of Western style, but faced censorship, isolation, and a conservative ideology terrified of change, while simultaneously identifying with a budding (if challenged) national identity. Pushkin's professional life, itself, reflected the conditions of Russia.

Despite these challenges, it was clear that Pushkin was a major contributor to the emergence of a Russian national consciousness. His poetry, although popularized through *romances*, was further utilized for more formal musical presentation, specifically opera. "No one contributed more to nineteenth-century Russian nationalism than Pushkin" not only through his immediate impact as a writer, but because "For a hundred years Russian composers would use Pushkin's stories, poems, and plays with the same avidity that the romantic composers of the West went to Byron, Goethe and Shakespeare (Leonard 1957, 38).

Yet again, despite Pushkin's passionate nationalism, he was influenced by sources outside of Russia. Paul Friedrich noted that "Pushkin's voice, while felt to be quintessentially Russian, draws directly or deviously on many foreign systems" (Friedrich 1998, 62). Pushkin was often exposed to foreign operas, particularly Italian ones. Friedrich asserted that Pushkin's musicality was so entwined with Italian language and culture that they could not be separated. French was the second language to greatly influence Pushkin, as much for the authors' enlightenment concepts as for their writing

styles. He was also fluent in Latin and studied the writings of English authors. In effect, he used the linguistic nuances and rhythms of Italian, French, Latin and English to inform the musicality of his own work.

Through the study of these languages and the perfection of his own techniques, Pushkin broke new ground for Russian musical compositions, particularly in the area of opera. His writing was so musically clear that, when speaking of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, "Tchaikovsky felt that the music for his opera of the same name had been 'dictated'" (Friedrich 1998 62-63).

In order to illustrate Pushkin's contribution to Russian opera, it is important to look at the roots of its evolution. Opera was not new to Russia in the nineteenth century. Italian opera companies visited both capitals beginning in 1731. Most operas were performed in Italian, however. Finally, in 1755 an opera was sung in Russian by native speakers. A rudimentary form of Russian opera began to develop during the last part of the eighteenth century and over one hundred operas were written based primarily on Russian folk tunes. Like *romances*, these early operas show a direct link to early Russian music. Few of these operas survive today.

Although these works were written in Russian, most were composed by foreigners. Even those composed by native Russians in the vernacular merely reflected the Italian model (Montagu-Nathan 1914, 5). Furthermore, because they were sung by amateurs they were very simplistic. In 1772 the first Russian opera by a native composer appeared; *Anyuta*. The libretto by M. Popov, still exists, but the music has been lost (Seaman 1967, 93-95).

It was not until the 1830s that an identifiable Russian opera emerged. Two factors contributed to the birth of Russian opera; Pushkin's writings and Glinka's music. It is impossible to overstate the magnitude of Pushkin's influence on Russian opera. His writing skills, innate musicality and choice of subject matter provided Russian composers with the tools they needed to create a new form of Russian musical composition. In order to appreciate this contribution, a brief chronological review of operas based on Pushkin themes is provided. Works with particular significance will be examined in greater detail in Chapters Five and Six. These include Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* and *Eugene Onegin*.

When considering Russian opera it is impossible to separate Pushkin from Mikhail Glinka. Campbell notes in his forward that “Pushkin and Glinka played parallel and contemporary roles as the fathers of Russian literature and music respectively, though Pushkin is the far more substantial figure” (Campbell 1994, xii). Like Pushkin, Glinka derived a Russian music base by studying Western music and was influenced by the rise of Western romanticism. He was more fortunate than Pushkin in that he was allowed to travel and was able to learn about Western musical composition first-hand. Glinka was also more fortunate in that he was less hampered by tsarist censorship.

Pushkin and other *romance* writers greatly influenced Glinka’s creative process and he, too, developed a sense of professionalism about his craft that was previously unknown (Seaman 1967, 155). He also studied Russian culture and investigated Russian language which greatly enhanced his ability to create Russian opera. In fact, it was Pushkin who suggested that Glinka “learn the Russian language from Moscow women engaged in baking communion bread “(Bakst 1966, 71). This comment emphasized that the Russian language was a second one to many educated Russians, who preferred to use French. French was preferred because Russian was emerging from its Church Slavonic roots, but had not become established as a national and generally accepted language:

For the development of a national language, it was essential that there be a generally accepted language in which the works could be written. Church Slavonic was too archaic and too closely associated with a specifically ecclesiastical culture for the post-Enlightenment world. The secular language of the chancelleries was not suitable, either, for Peter’s reforms in technology, war and public administration had created great linguistic confusion. Words and expressions imported wholesale from Swedish, Dutch, and German enriched vocabulary, grammar, and syntax but also dislocated them without any systematization of the innovations. Polite society increasingly used French, the language of diplomacy and ideally suited to witty and refined conversation (Hosking 2004, 269).

However, Russians were concerned with developing a national language. In 1783 The Russian Academy was founded to standardize the language and issued an authoritative dictionary. After Napoleon’s invasion in 1812, the use of French became less popular (Hosking 2004, 270). The need for a national language was even more acutely felt and Pushkin and Glinka reexamined the native language and began to incorporate it successfully into their works.

Glinka's first opera was *A Life for the Tsar* which premiered in St. Petersburg in 1836. Many Russian musicologists considered this performance as the birth of Russian opera. Although heralded as the first truly Russian opera, it met with little success among the court aristocracy. Glinka's next opera was *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, based on Pushkin's early poem (1820) of the same name. Pushkin agreed to help Glinka with the libretto, but was killed before the composer finished the work. Glinka took five years to finish the opera and it was first performed on December 9, 1842. This opera, too, was not critically acclaimed at its premiere and was not performed again until after Glinka's death. Tchaikovsky explained that "Ruslan was not an operatic masterpiece. It was only a magical spectacle accompanied by excellent music, too difficult for execution" (Bakst 1966, 61). Similar to other artistic creations breaking new ground, *Ruslan* was not heralded as important until later, when it was recognized for its originality and departure from Italian opera conventions (Bakst 1966, 58-60). Part of *Ruslan's* initial failure rested with the fact that numerous people had their hands in the development of various scenes. It took five librettists to serve as substitutes for "the single hand of Pushkin" (Montagu-Nathan 1914, 21). Also, the music was composed in short bursts with pieces of it performed in concerts before the premiere of the opera thus robbing it of any surprise or recognition of originality (Seaman 1967, 163). Problems continued through the very opening of the production because the score was edited, the scenery and the conductor were poor and the cast weak (Leonard 1957, 48). The problems with the production alone were substantial but, in addition, Italian opera predominated in St. Petersburg at the expense of the developing Russian opera. Nicholas I in 1843 established an Italian opera company in St. Petersburg to elevate Russian prestige in European eyes, thus denying the nascent Russian opera of a home and supporter (Maes 2002, 24-25).

Not all critics found *Ruslan* objectionable. Writing in 1842, O.I. Senkovsky declared that his initial reaction to the opera was that it was tedious. However, he explained that the more times he saw the production, the better he was able to appreciate it and acknowledged it a masterpiece before it became popular to do so (Campbell 1994, 14).

Ruslan and Ludmilla, despite its initial failure, is now considered one of Glinka's masterpieces. It was also important because it continued the tradition of Russian epic

fairy tale opera, and laid the groundwork for the creation of a Russian national opera. These operas drew upon national subjects from Russian traditional tales with the overriding principle of the triumph of good over evil. For the purpose of this paper, *Ruslan* is significant because movement and dance play a large role in it (Asafiev 1953, 8). *Ruslan* is also important because, through Pushkin's retelling of this simple Russian folk tale, he makes it great literature (Bakst 1966, 65-66).

For both Pushkin and Glinka, *Ruslan* was a significant work; it was Pushkin's first publicly published work; and it was considered Glinka's masterpiece. *Ruslan* not only served as Glinka's legacy, but it "was a far more Russian work and much of it could not have been written by anyone but a Russian." Furthermore, it was considered a "pioneer work of nationalism and it created almost at one stroke the essential style of modern Russian music" (Leonard 1957, 50). Hence Pushkin, through the genius of Glinka, directly contributed to a new form of Russian music.⁸

Dargomyzhsky was noted for two operas and one opera-ballet based on Pushkin themes: *Russalka* also known as *The Water Nymph* produced in 1855; *The Stone Guest* (1847); and, *The Triumph of Bacchus* (1848) (Debreczeny 1997, 175).⁹ Dargomyzhsky, who outlived Glinka, approached his operas based on Pushkin differently. He developed a Russian expressive declamatory style or melodic recitative. In this way the artistic realism of Pushkin became artistic realism in music. In other words, while Glinka used Pushkin to produce grand opera with fully developed music in the classical style, Dargomyzhsky relied more on the inflection of Pushkin's verse for his compositions (Asafiev 1953, 12-13). Through his work, the intonation of Russian speech became the intonation of Russian music. In essence, Dargomyzhsky was endeavoring to create a new type of *romance* - - a vocal monologue "full of dramatic tension in which the music reflected the poetic speech" (Seaman 1967, 216).

In particular, *Russalka* was important because of its use of folk idiom, characters and music. It was based on Pushkin's unfinished poem, but modified to include more folk elements. However, it was not exclusively Russian in nature. It followed many conventions of typical French opera including the incorporation of ballet *divertissements* based on the French salon model (Seaman 1967, 220-221). What does set this work apart was the composer's ability to produce a "genuine, profound dramatic tension" without

pretension (Campbell 1994, 55). As happened with *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, *Russalka* met with both praise and criticism and it was not until much later that the work was heralded as a major achievement for Russian music (Montagu-Nathan 1914, 35-36). Part of the criticism of *Russalka* derived from the fact that it was a hybrid composition.

Dargomyzhsky used both formal elements of opera and the folk music of the composer's time. This hybrid nature, coupled with his extensive use of recitative, made his work unique for the time period, but inaccessible for some audiences (Asafiev 1953, 12).

Dargomyzhsky's second composition based on Pushkin, *The Stone Guest*, met with similar results. In *The Stone Guest*, Dargomyzhsky was particularly interested in the representation of human emotions. He made little change in the original text and the result was almost exclusively a declamatory musical recitative. This innovative style caused Balakirev's circle¹⁰ to call it a great achievement, but Tchaikovsky condemned it as "the sorrow fruit of a dry, purely rational process of invention..." (Bakst 1966, 85). *The Stone Guest* was devoid of ensemble or choral singing, and was based on dialogue only (Seaman 1967, 228). Regardless of its initial criticism, the work was considered a unique contribution to Russian musical literature (Bakst 1966, 86).¹¹

Campbell espouses that composing to Pushkin's verses, while tempting, presented many "perils". Specifically, "the more the poet's work has become the meat and drink of the reading public, the more his verses are known by heart, the more difficult it becomes for the public to be reconciled to the unaccustomed operatic garb in which it encounters its precious subject matter" (Campbell 1994, 245). This suggests a partial explanation as to why early Russian operas based on Pushkin themes were not entirely successful, and only recognized for their genius in hindsight.

Mussorgsky, born in 1839, started his formal musical career by composing songs that he called "compositions from Russian national life- -musical pictures of national individuality in song" (Bakst 1966, 124). His genius as both a musical dramatist and democratic realist was revealed in his work *Boris Godunov* based on Pushkin's play by the same name. He completed the opera in 1869 and submitted it to the imperial theatres which found it objectionable, in part because it lacked a major female role, and possibly because of its liberal national ideas. The imperial theatres officially rejected it in 1871. Mussorgsky reworked the piece, but theatre managements continued to refuse to produce

it. Instead excerpts were often performed at musicals in private homes. Finally, when one of the Maryinsky (Kirov) Theatre performers, Platanova, informed the management she would leave if the work was not produced, the director agreed to stage it in 1874 (Bakst 1966, 125).

Briefly, the play and opera are based, at least superficially, on an historical event in Russian history. Ivan the Terrible died leaving a simple minded son, Feodor, behind. Boris Godunov was chosen to serve as regent for Feodor, which he ably did for ten years. In 1598 Feodor died and Boris Godunov was elected to serve as tsar, but died himself in 1605 (Wachtel 1998, 24-25). Ivan the Terrible's other son, Dmitry, died in 1591 and Pushkin used the speculation that Tsar Boris might have been involved in the child's death to incorporate strife and conflict into the story. This interpretation of events allowed Pushkin to introduce a Pretender to the throne, establish Tsar Boris' guilty conscience, and emphasize the internal political turmoil that eventually resulted in a Polish invasion. Pushkin's gift as a master storyteller allowed for an interpretation of history that became so popular it is now widely assumed to be historical fact.

Mussorgsky used this very real person and his dilemmas to create a realistic musical drama, one that did not involve folk and mythical characters. He used the normal human voice with its intonations and the personality and emotions of a real person to bring his Tsar Boris to life. The result continued the evolution of Russian opera because "Mussorgsky's writing for voices, with its pauses and rhythmic divisions, grew from emotional necessities, not scholastic considerations. For this reason, his musical textures sound natural, delightful, new, and typically Russian" (Bakst 1966, 129). Pushkin had provided the ground work for more progress in creating a national musical identity that was clearly distinctive.

Mussorgsky's reworking of *Boris Godunov* in essence created two dramatically different versions. In addition Rimsky-Korsakov re-orchestrated certain sections after Mussorgsky's death, creating yet another version. All of these versions have been produced at some point in time. Mussorgsky's final version of 1874 is rarely performed. What is usually seen on stage is a combination of his original 1869 and 1874 published renditions. This confusion makes discussing *Boris Godunov* more complicated because it is not necessarily clear which version is being considered. Regardless of these issues,

Boris Godunov was a success in the composer's time and continues to be performed by opera companies in Russia and worldwide and serves as a milestone for Russian musical and dramatic composition (Maes 2002, 101-115).

In 1883, Tchaikovsky completed *Mazeppa* based on Pushkin's poem *Poltava* (1828).¹² This is considered an unimportant work of Tchaikovsky's middle period (Swan 1973, 130). *Mazeppa*, like other operas mentioned previously, was not initially triumphant. However, unlike the three operas discussed above, *Mazeppa* still has not received critical acclaim to this day and it is viewed as one of Tchaikovsky's mediocre works. Concerning this work, and others considered mediocre, Richard Leonard writes:

Many reasons have been offered for the wide gulf which separates the best and worst of Tchaikovsky's works. Excessive haste was certainly one reason for this failures; lack of self-criticism was another. Increasing neurotic tension in his later years and the deepening spells of melancholia also affected his art (Leonard 1957, 189).

In this particular case, it appeared that Pushkin's popularity and familiarity was less a contributing factor to the failure of a piece than the creator's own shortcomings.

Furthermore, Tchaikovsky inherited the work from another composer/musician; K. Davidov. Davidov began work on *Mazeppa* in 1875, but in 1881 sent the libretto to Tchaikovsky for completion.

As noted previously in the case of *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, too many people involved in the process, no matter how talented or sincere in their efforts, often produce a less acclaimed work. This may also be the case with Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa*.

Tchaikovsky proved much more adept at transferring *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades* to music and the stage. These works will be examined in Chapter Six.

A contemporary of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov also attempted to compose to Pushkin's writings. His first task was to score Dargomyzhsky's *The Stone Guest* in 1870. At that time he was unable to resolve the perceived problems with Dargomyzhsky's composition. Unhappy with his initial attempt, Rimsky-Korsakov readdressed *The Stone Guest* in 1902, but the outcome of this work is unknown (Abraham 1968, 146).

His completed operas incorporating Pushkin themes include *The Golden Cockerel*, *Mozart and Salieri*, and *The Tale of the Tsar Saltan*, all based on poems by the same name. The first of these works, *Mozart and Salieri* (1897),¹³ appeared to have been an experiment. Rimsky-Korsakov set this tale (concerning the alleged murder of Mozart

by Salieri) to music without altering a word. The result was similar to that of Dargomyzhky's *The Stone Guest*; a work that was almost recitative and equally praised and criticized. The work was praised by Alfred Swan who called it a "genuine work of art. This inspiration lay in the exquisite verses of Pushkin...which Rimsky leaves without alteration, finding the exact musical counterpart for them" (Swan 1973, 158). However, Richard Leonard disagreed noting that *Mozart and Salieri* remained "unexpressive and doctrinaire, and little more than a curiosity" (Leonard 1957, 163).

Regardless, the orchestration of *Mozart and Salieri* was more involved than that of *The Stone Guest* and the vocal parts were more melodic in *Mozart and Salieri* than in *The Stone Guest* (Bakst 1966, 86). Rimsky-Korsakov's work on *Mozart and Salieri* helped him develop his own musical style by departing from the recitative mode.

Rimsky-Korsakov completed the more successful *The Tale of the Tsar Saltan* between 1899 and the year 1900, composed to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Pushkin's birth. It was a refined work and offered an even more melodic, orchestrated style. Both Pushkin and Rimsky-Korsakov stylized their work as a *skazka*, or folk tale. Rimsky-Korsakov even included a story-telling device, a brief *priskazka* (fanfare), at the beginning of each act to remind the listener to pay attention. It was presented in a folk tale realm, without any realistic criteria. Rimsky-Korsakov used folk-style tunes in his music to replicate children's songs, lullabies, the cries of street vendors, etc.

Like most folk tales, the story is complicated. In Rimsky-Korsakov's telling, three wicked women spread rumors about Tsar Saltan's wife and son, causing him to have them put in a barrel and cast out into the sea. They come ashore on a magical island where the son, Guidon, marries the swan princess and becomes ruler of the land. Guidon turns himself into a bumblebee to visit his father's kingdom unrecognized, where he stings the eyes of the wicked women while sailors tell the Tsar of the wonders of Guidon's island. Tsar Saltan visits the island and is reunited with his family, thus ensuring a happy ending. Guidon's bumblebee trip is the well-known "Flight of the Bumblebee" and further immortalized Pushkin's work with a recognizable tune (Maes 2002, 191-192). Pushkin's inspiration literally gave flight to another genre and elevates Russian opera as a recognized art form.

Rimsky-Korsakov was in his element here and showed a “refinement of workmanship and a child’s picture-book quality of intimacy and beguilement” (Leonard 1957, 164). The opera proved so successful that the composer arranged the work for an orchestral suite entitled *Little Pictures from the Fairy-tale of the Tsar Saltan*. Oddly enough, he did not include the most famous part of the score, “The Flight of the Bumblebee’.

With the success of *The Tale of the Tsar Saltan* Russian opera established itself as a viable entity and elevated Rimsky-Korsakov’s status, celebrating his new found style. His orchestration was recognized as “a new kind of orchestra: sonorous and transparent, but not in water colors. These colors grow and glitter like the designs on the old peasant embroidery” (Asafiev 1953, 27). Certainly this description showed Russian opera as different from the mainstream conventions of Italian and French opera, although it may resemble Wagner’s more epic Germanic style.

Despite its success, the work was criticized for being weak as a drama. But this very weakness allowed the composer to show his own brilliance. Pushkin sharply characterized his puppets and Rimsky-Korsakov, who preferred ethereal beings to human beings in his work, benefited from these characterizations (Abraham 1939, 126–127). Rimsky-Korsakov found inspiration in Pushkin’s poetry, but “must be given all the credit of having invented music...that conjures up such a world to the imagination, even without the help of scenery and poetry” (Abraham 1939, 124). In short, Rimsky-Korsakov’s ability to recollect folk-songs, aided by his own imagination and Pushkin’s poetry, helped to create a Russian opera masterpiece.

After *The Tale of the Tsar Saltan*’s success, his next three operas, none of which were based on Pushkin themes, met with little success.¹⁴ Finally in 1903, Rimsky-Korsakov established himself as a composer of note with a non-Pushkin work, *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*. However, his greatest masterpiece based on a Pushkin theme, *The Golden Cockerel* was yet to come. In the meantime, his successes were few. It seems that Pushkin served as a magical catalyst for Rimsky-Korsakov.

Rimsky-Korsakov’s uneven creativity, like Tchaikovsky’s, may be attributed to outside influences. Rimsky-Korsakov was greatly affected by Wagner’s publication of *The Ring of Nibelung* in 1889 and struggled to both imitate Wagner’s music and eschew

it. It was not until 1900 with the success of *The Tale of the Tsar Saltan* that Rimsky-Korsakov came into his own as a composer just to be derailed again. This time the composer faced political crises similar to those faced by Pushkin. The early part of the 1900s was a bleak time for Russia and its citizens because of political and social upheavals, which foreshadowed the revolution of 1917. By 1905 Russia was in an uproar because of its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Students at the conservatory where Rimsky-Korsakov taught participated in strikes, riots and more serious actions. Rimsky-Korsakov sympathized openly with the students and was dismissed. In addition his works were censored causing a public outcry.

Rimsky-Korsakov took his family to Italy for the summer of 1906, where he began work on his masterpiece, *The Golden Cockerel (Le Coq d'Or)*. This last of Rimsky-Korsakov's works was also revered as one of his best. *The Golden Cockerel*, completed in 1907, restored Rimsky-Korsakov's reputation as a "superb technician and serious scholar" with a strong creative power (Leonard 1957, 165). The composer died before witnessing the success of his work. Not only did *The Golden Cockerel* ensure Rimsky-Korsakov's place in musical history, it also set the stage for another masterpiece, Stravinsky's *Firebird* (Swan 1973, 159).

Cesar Cui, another member of Balakirev's group, or the Mighty Five,¹⁵ noted in 1884 that eleven operas based on Pushkin themes had been written by that time.¹⁶ He lamented that only five large-scale works remained to be transformed into operas. Cui chose one as his theme, and completed his Pushkin-based opera, *A Feast in Time of Plague*, between 1895-7. It was a one act opera including "dramatic scenes" and was finally performed in 1901 (Campbell 1994, 248.) Cui aspired to the grand opera and admired the operatic forms of Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) and Franz Liszt (1811-1886). Apparently, however, he was not particularly gifted in that area. Critics claimed that his genius lay in small forms, more suitable for the salon (Swan 1973, 78). In 1911, Cui tackled another Pushkin theme with his creation of *The Captain's Daughter*. In all, Cui composed nine operas, with two based on Pushkin themes. They were all considered critical failures, including his last opera, *The Fair at Sorochintzi*, produced in 1918.

As a result of the 1917 Revolution life was extremely chaotic in Russia at this time and it was no surprise that Cui's light operatic works were unnoticed. He died in

1918, the last survivor of the Mighty Five. Cui was not remembered for his music. He was, however, remembered for his propagandistic views that helped unite and identify an emerging Russian national music. Although his music was not considered nationalistic due to his extremely conservative opinions, he served as a spokesman for the Mighty Five and represented the progressive ideas of this group.

Yet another composer adopted a Pushkin theme for an opera, this time with more success. A young Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) was charged with the task of completing a one-act opera as part of his final examination. In 1892 he completed his opera, *Aleko*, based on Pushkin's poem, *The Gypsies*, spending just a few weeks on its composition. For his efforts he was awarded the gold medal of honor for composition from the Moscow Conservatory and graduated a year ahead of his class. The opera was produced in Moscow a year later and proved very successful (Leonard 1957, 82-83, 228-229).

While Pushkin's text stressed Aleko's independence and dignity, Rachmaninov's music emphasized Aleko's despair and crushing aloneness. In this tragic story, Pushkin tells of a young man who joins a gypsy group in order to experience freedom. He soon learns that universal freedom comes with a price. His love, Zemfira, expresses her independence and freedom by taking another lover. Aleko is enraged and kills Zemfira and her lover. The Gypsies, despite their abhorrence of codified law, will not tolerate such behavior and leave Aleko behind, shattered and alone (Bakst 1966, 256).

Rachmaninov began composition on another opera using a Pushkin theme only to be derailed by rising revolutionary fervor. In 1904 he completed work on an opera based on Pushkin's *The Miser Knight* (also called *The Miserly Knight*, *The Covetous Knight* and *The Avaricious Knight*). His work was interrupted when he was appointed as conductor for the Imperial (Bolshoi) Theatre in Moscow. Rachmaninov produced *The Miser Knight* during his tenure at the Bolshoi Theatre, but it did not meet with the success of his earlier, student work, *Aleko* (Leonard 1957, 232).

In *The Miser Knight*, which was a word-for-word composition of Pushkin's tale, Rachmaninov illustrated in his music an old man's passion for an inanimate object, gold (Maes: 194). He did not succeed, however, to "attain to a perfect reincarnation in music of Pushkin's verses, or to a complete preservation of his rhythms" (Asafiev 1953, 38).

The work was unusual for operatic format because it required only one actor/singer, the knight. Through this work, Rachmaninov further developed the declamatory principles found in Dargomizhsky's *The Stone Guest* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri* (Bakst 1966, 256).

It was odd that within the Imperial Theatre, which was sponsored and subsidized by the Tsar, Rachmaninov discovered a large number of dancers, musicians and stage hands that supported the concept of revolution. Distressed by the social changes he feared, Rachmaninov took his family first to Italy and then to Dresden (Leonard 1956, 232). In 1917 Rachmaninov moved to America and became an expatriate, but was still claimed by the Soviet leaders as a Russian composer. This was ironic because Rachmaninov yearned for the Russia the Bolsheviks destroyed, particularly the aristocratic life and emotional tie to the Russian Orthodox Church. While living in the United States, Rachmaninov supported his family as a concert pianist, to the detriment of his composing talents. In a 1933 interview he claimed that since being separated from his country he has been unable to compose as before (Maes 2002, 271-272).

With the completion of *The Miser Knight* all of Pushkin's "Little Tragedies" are transferred to a musical format (Maes 2002, 194).¹⁷ None of the tragedies fared very well with public opinion. The 1832 production of *Mozart and Salieri* failed because it was first produced as an overture for another work. Most of the audience arrived during the performance and was unable to hear the music. An 1854 production fared no better. *The Stone Guest* was first performed in 1847 and then removed from the program. In 1853 *The Miserly Knight* was a brief success, but the 1862 production of *The Feast During the Plague* was a complete failure (Debrecezy 1997, 175).

A contemporary of Rachmaninov and student of Rimsky-Korsakov, Anton Arensky (1861-1906), although a lesser known composer, was affected also by the need to set Pushkin to music. During the mid 1890's he composed choral music for *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* and produced a ballet to Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights*, also called *A Night in Egypt* in 1900 (Montagu-Nathan 1914, 258). As a follower and admirer of the "Mighty Five" and greatly influenced by Tchaikovsky, Arensky carried the torch for Russian composition into the twentieth century. Virtually unheard of in the West, his

name appears besides the recognized greats of his era. Perhaps his early death at the age of forty explains his obscurity.

With such a large volume of musical works based on Pushkin it does seem surprising that more of them are not familiar to Western audiences. Again, the unique political and geographic nature of Russia plays a part. Few Europeans and Americans traveled extensively in Russia during the nineteenth century. When they did travel to Russia, Western entertainment, such as Italian opera, was much in vogue, so their cultural exposure in Russia was largely that of Western Europe. Conversely, the Russians who traveled west generally enjoyed the cultural aspects of Western Europe, without exporting or espousing the virtues of Russian artistic talents. Furthermore, when Russian audiences preferred the work of non-Russian artists, it was difficult to promote native work. In short, Western audiences are not familiar with many of these Russian works because they are not widely enjoyed in the home country.

Even the names of many of the composers discussed above are unknown to Western audiences. With the exception of Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky, most non-Russian audiences are only familiar with composers who lived and worked outside of Russia, including Rimsky-Korsakov and Rachmaninov. Glinka is known to ballet and opera enthusiasts, but not generally otherwise, while Dargomizhsky, Cui and Arensky are virtually unheard of in the West.

However, the impact these composers had on the development of Russian music was staggering. Tchaikovsky is perhaps the best known and truly symbolic of Russian musical prowess. Glinka is known as the father of Russian opera. Both Rimsky-Korsakov and Cui were members of the greatly influential Mighty Five. Rachmaninov helped to bring Russian music to the West with his immigration, while Dargomizhsky furthered the development of Russian opera through his recitative style and Arensky served as a teacher to some of the finest composers. Finally, Mussorgsky brought a revolutionary form of Russian realism to his work.

The development of Russian compositions was partially based on Russian folk-songs, including Russian *romances*. As the *romance* became more sophisticated, composers began borrowing certain aspects that were uniquely Russian for their works. Of course they were influenced by outside forces, but concentrated on their own

interpretations of song and verse. The common link from *romance* to orchestrated works and operas was Alexander Pushkin. His influence was keenly felt and will be further explored with an additional examination of the operas *The Queen of Spades* and *Eugene Onegin* in Chapter Six. These works have been selected for closer inspection because they exist in current repertoires of the Maryinsky (Kirov) and Bolshoi operas and have also been transposed into ballets.

The above chronological review of known musical and operatic works based on Pushkin writings and themes illustrates the importance of Pushkin to the establishment of a uniquely Russian form of musical composition. Pushkin appears to be inseparable and invaluable to this process. Pushkin also serves as a source of inspiration for Russian ballet which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Notes for Chapter Two

¹ The genre (perhaps simultaneously) referred to as *romances*, *romans*, Russian art-song, Russian song, Russian folk-song and *protyazhnaya* is difficult to define, particularly for non-Russians. Brief explanations concerning these differing terms representing similar genres is included to help explain the genesis of Russian classical (and ballet) music.

² These include the Volga *burlaki*, or Volga boatmen, who are barge haulers made famous by the melodies collected by M. Balakirev (Seaman 1967, 7).

³ Gerald Seaman provides a musical example of this piece, which is considered an excellent example of its kind. Please see the musical appendix (Seaman 1967, 7).

⁴ Seaman asserts that there are two types of “Russian songs”: lyrical and sad; and, rhythmic and energetic (Seaman 1967, 128).

⁵ This is not to say that internal reforms in the Orthodox Church did not take place. Each subsequent Russian ruler made his/her impact on the Church, but not to the extent of the changes caused by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Western Europe. This is also not to say that Orthodox Christianity was the only religion in Russia. The vast Empire of Russia incorporates many ethnic groups and religions during this time. However, because the tsar was inseparable from the Orthodox Church, the power the church yielded was impressive.

⁶ The serfs were technically freed in 1861 (Treadgold 1995, 67)

⁷ These works include *Ruslan and Lyudmilla*, *Rusalka*, *The Triumph of Bacchus*, *The Stone Guest*, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, *Boris Godunov*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Count Nulin*, *The Gypsies* and three versions of *Mazepa* (Campbell 1994, 248.)

⁸ At the time of Glinka’s death in 1857, only one copy of *Ruslan and Ludmilla* existed. His sister Ludmila Ivanovna Shestakov, fourteen years younger than the composer, had two new copies made just prior to the original being destroyed in a fire at the Maryinsky Theatre. She campaigned until 1872 to have the work revived and is credited with saving this masterpiece from obscurity (Leonard 1957, 57).

⁹ In 1840 Dargomizhsky also writes a one-act opera ballet based on Pushkin’s *The Triumph of Bacchus*. The work is not produced until 1967 and met with little success. It has never been revived or published (Leonard 1957, 58-59).

¹⁰ Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), a composer, piano virtuoso, conductor, and teacher was the leader of the “Mighty Five”, sometimes called Balakirev’s Group or circle. These composers stressed the folk roots of Russian music and were very influential on the development of Russian classical music (Schwarz 1983, 3).

¹¹ *The Stone Guest* may also suffer from two many artists working on it. Dargomizhsky died in 1869 and Cesar Cui finished the work while Rinsky-Korsakov orchestrated it (Abraham 1936, 144-145).

¹² Mazepa, a Ukrainian rebel, joins forces with Charles XII against Peter the Great. Peter defeats Mazepa at the battle of Poltava. While Pushkin does justice to the battle and politics of this historical battle, his long narrative poem also centers on the love story between the aging Mazepa and his god-daughter, Mariya, whom he marries (Feinstein 1998, 172).

¹³ The first performance of *Mozart and Salieri* was given in a new private Moscow opera house in the Solodovnikov theatre. BorisAsafiev claims that this is the first proper artistic setting in Russia for Russian opera, combining the right unity of spectacle and music (Asafiev 1953, 29).

¹⁴ These include *Sevilia* (1900-01), *Kashchey the Immortal* (1901-02) and *Pan Voyevoda* (1902-03) (Leonard 1957, 164).

¹⁵ See footnote number ten.

¹⁶ See footnote number seven.

¹⁷ There are four works known as “The Little Tragedies”. As discussed earlier, each has been set to music by a different composer. They are Dargomyzhksy’s *The Stone Guest*, Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Mozart and Salieri*, Cui’s *A Feast in the Time of Plague* and finally, Rachmaninov’s *The Miser Knight*.