From ‘revolutionary’ to ‘progressive’:

Musical Nationalism in Rimsky-Korsakov’s Russian Easter Overture

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“Can Byelayev’s circle be looked upon as a continuation of Balakirev’s? Was there a certain modicum of similarity between one and the other and what constituted the difference, apart from the change in personnel in the course of time? The similarity indicating that Byelayev’s circle was a continuation of Balakirev’s circle (in addition to the connecting links, consisted of the advanced ideas, the progressivism, common to the both of them. But Balakirev’s circle corresponded to the period of storm and stress in the evolution of Russian music; Byelayev’s circle represented the period of calm and onward march. Balakirev’s circle was revolutionary; Byelayev's, on the other hand was progressive.” (Rimsky-Korsakov, My Musical Life, p. 286)

“Who had changed, who had advanced – Balakirev or we? We, I suppose. We had grown, had learned, had been educated, had seen, and had heard; Balakirev, on the other hand, had stood stock-still, if, indeed, he had not slid back a trifle.” (Rimsky-Korsakov, My Musical Life, p. 286)

By the time Rimsky-Korsakov wrote his “Russian Easter” Overture for Byelayev in 1888, the kuchka group, a group of five St. Petersburg composers which was once considered as “revolutionary” in its aesthetic ideal, was scattered. Musorgsky was no longer among the living, Borodin’s creativity came to a halt with his Prince Igor left unfinished, Cesar Cui no longer counted as a composer. Balakirev, although still a collaborator of Rimsky-Korsakov for their joint duties in the Imperial Court Chapel, was not only socially diverged from his younger colleague for his enmity towards Byelayev, but also had undergone some kind of ideological transformation himself.¹ Despite all these changing circumstances, this period

¹ In his recently translated monograph A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskay to Babi Yar, Mae provides vivid account on Balakirev ideological transformation during the 1880s: “When Balakirev resumed his musical activities in the 1880s, he began by revising his earlier work. In 1884 he retouched the “symphonic picture” 1,000 Years, which Besse & Co. published in 1890 as a “symphonic poem” under the title of Rus. The
represented one of the most productive phases of Rimsky-Korsakov’s career as a composer of romantic nationalism (as can be seen in the production of his three best-known orchestral works: Sheherazade, Capriccio espagnol and the “Russian Easter” Overture.) While the music of “Russian Easter” Overture shows a continuation of the kuchka ideal in its arrangement of liturgical themes which follows the design and structural plan of Balakirev’s Second Overture, Rimsky-Korsakov’s experience in the Byelayev’s circle, as he explicitly expressed in his writings, offered himself creative impulses in the progressive direction.

This paper aims to identify both the ‘revolutionary’ and ‘progressive’ features in Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Russian Easter” Overture. By comparing musical features that represent a continuation of the kuchka ideal against the “progressive” ones that represent the composer’s detachment from the past, it will provide a “new picture” of the stylistic development of the composer’s musical language during this time period. This “new picture” represents the current musicological thinking on Russian music history which rejects the old assumption about the dichotomy of national music and its fixed ideological expression, but considers “the personal development of composers against the complex background of their times and to inconsistencies in their work that reflect those complexities.”

In order to identify the “revolutionary” features in “Russian Easter” Overture that represents a continuation of the kuchka ideal, it is necessary to both understand the meanings of the description “revolutionary” and the kuchka ideal. To do so, it is necessary to first understand the ideology behind the group’s formation, that is, the ideology of Balakirev, its initiator and mentor. Ironically, historical accounts leading up to the group’s formation conclude that the

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use of the Old Slavonic name for Russia was a clear sign of Balakirev’s ideological change of direction: from a tribute to progress, the work had been turned into a Slavophile glorification of Russia’s idealized past … When we consider that Balakirev’s Second Overture [the original title for Rus] in its original form had been composed under the influence of Herzen’s radical populism, we gain some idea of the ideological distance Balakirev had traversed.” (Francis Mae, A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 168.)

2 Ibid, p.xii.
basis of the kuchka ideal was not an ideological one (i.e. Russian nationalism versus Westernism) but rather an aesthetic one (i.e. modernism versus conservatism). Precisely speaking, the formation of the Five can be seen as Balakirev’s reaction against Anton Rubenstein, the German trained Russian pianist of an international standing, who saw the future of Russian music in terms of “professionalization under the sponsorship of the aristocracy and the stewardship of imported teachers and virtuosos.” Balakirev, a largely self-taught composer, was aesthetically influenced by Glinka when the two met in 1855. According to his sister’s memoir, Glinka told her, “Balakirev is the first person in whom I have found views so similar to my own in all things concerning music… and I tell you that in time Balakirev will be a second Glinka.” Glinka’s most important legacy for Balakirev was the method of “composing like a Russian:” rather than grafting Russian folk tunes on the established forms of Western music in a superficial manner as many Russian composers did in his time, Glinka attempted to create an original musical language by preserving the folk material in its most authentic way, inventing themes that imitated the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic idiosyncrasies of Russian popular song. Glinka’s approach was unprecedented, as Ridenour commented “[Glinka] pushed beyond the conventional boundaries of harmony and form that the most advanced Western composers of his day were just beginning to expand and created a personal style marked by daring harmonies, dynamic and flexible rhythms, and bright, pure orchestral colors.” In this sense, Glinka provides an aesthetic basis on which Balakirev’s “revolutionary” style was formed. According to Stasov, the vocal art critic of the time as well as the aesthetic adviser of Balakirev, the New Russian School embodied the following four characteristics: the absence of preconceptions and of blind faith; an oriental

5 Ridenour, p.75.
6 Ibid., p.76.
element; a pronounced preference for programmatic music; and the quest for a national character. The first point implied that rejection of academicism and of fixed musical – that is, Western – forms. The second sprang from contacts with eastern nations inside the Russian empire. The third reflected an aesthetic approach that was considered “revolutionary” and anti-academic at the time. The last point involved the incorporation of folk music. These four principles defined the *kuchka* ideal that marked a split between a national camp (represented by the Five) and a cosmopolitan camp (represented by Rubinstein and his successors) in Russian music history.

The subject matter, or its program, of the Overture represents the *kuchka* ideal in its purest sense. Apart from the musical arrangement of liturgical themes of *obikhod*, a collection of the most important and most frequently used canticles of the Russian Orthodox Church, this old religious subject matter is combined with the social traditions in creating the work’s programmatic contents. In The Chronicle of My Musical Life, Rimsky-Korsakov provides the program of the “Russian Easter” Overture:

> “In this Overture were thus combined reminiscences of the ancient prophecy, of the Gospel narrative and also a general picture of the Easter service with its “pagan merry-making.” The capering and leaping of the Biblical King David before the ark, do they not give expression to a mood of the same order as the mood of the idol-worshippers’ dance? Surely the Russian Orthodox chime is instrumental dance-music of the church, is it not? And do not the waving beards of the priests and sextons clad in white vestments and surplices, and intoning “Beautiful Easter” in the tempo of *Allegro vivo*, etc., transpose the imagination to pagan times? And all these Easter loaves and twists and the glowing tapers – how far a cry from the philosophic and socialistic teaching of Christ! This legendary and heathen side of the holiday, this transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled, pagan-religious merry-making on the

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7 Mae, p.8.
By combining Russian folklore, Christian and pagan practices in its programmatic content, Rimsky-Korsakov provides a image of religious practice that is particularly unique to Russia: “Folk religiosity in fact constitutes a syncretic religion, referred to as “double faith.” When Russia was converted to Christianity, the Slavic rites, rather than disappearing, in many cases were simply fitted into the new Christian rituals.⁹

The formal structure of the Overture reveals a close resemblance to Balakirev’s Second Overture, with its unorthodox sonata-allegro form on two modal themes, framed by a slow introduction and postlude on a third, and the entire structure based on a third-relation as tonal axis. The development section employs what Taruskin termed “contrapuntal-collage techniques,” combining two themes contrapuntally. Apart from the unorthodox formal scheme which represents the kuchka ideal in its rejection of academicism and of fixed musical forms, its harmonic language is also “revolutionary.” There is a conscious avoidance of the dominant harmony both in a cadential as well as a structural way (i.e. dominant prolongations, a device commonly used in Western symphonic works of the time.) For example, the E of the liturgical theme (mm. 4-5) in Dorian mode is harmonized with minor V chord (with C#), and the final cadence leads to the major IV (G major chord) (Ex. 1):

⁹ Mae, p.188.
Another revolutionary feature is what Taruskin termed “tonal mutability”, whereby a tune seemed to oscillate between two equally stable points of rest, as it were two “tonics.” While Western composers of the time interpret this concept as the common-practice relationship of tonic to relative minor or major, Rimsky-Korsakov explore the tonal region of the lower neighbour to the tonic in the minor mode, the flat seventh. This can be seen in the Allegro theme of the Overture where the harmonies progress from D Dorian to C:
So far many “revolutionary” features have been identified, it is to this end that I now turn to the “progressive” ones of the Overture.
Mitrofan Belyayev, the patron of the group to which Rimsky-Korsakov belonged in the 1880s, was a timber merchant and capitalist entrepreneur who became interested in promoting musical arts after being deeply impressed with the achievements of the sixteen-year-old Glazunov. An amateur viola player and a chamber-music enthusiast, his patronage activities include Friday chamber music evenings at his home, two Russian Symphony Concert series, a publishing enterprise and several annual prizes for the purpose of supporting Russian art music. The major difference between Belyayev and Balakirev’s groups lie in the their hierarchical structures, as Rimsky-Korsakov pointed out: “The relations of the [Balakirev’s] circle to its head were those of pupils to a teacher and elder brother, relations that had grown weaker as each of the lesser ones grew older … Byelayev, on the other hand, was not the head, but rather the center of his circle.”

Moreover, the group was also variegated in its make-up: “It contained prominent composers of talent, and men of lesser gifts, and men who were not composers at all, but conductors, like Dutsch, for instance, or solo performers, like N. S. Lavrov.” It is under this democratic environment that Rimsky-Korsakov explored compositional techniques that departed from the kuchka ideal.

The first hint of the “progressive” feature can be found in its programmatic content: “This legendary and heathen side of the holiday, this transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday, is what I was eager to reproduce in my Overture … Of course in that program I did not explain my views and my conception of the “Bright Holiday,” leaving it to tones to speak for me.” Having undergone an intense self-educating program of harmony and orchestration after his acceptance of the teaching post at the St. Petersburg

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10 Rimsky-Korsakov, My Musical Life, p. 287.
11 Ibid., p. 286.
12 Ibid., p. 295.
conservatory in 1872, Rimsky-Korsakov became increasingly interested in exploring the timbral qualities of orchestral sound. Instrumental timbre in the introduction of the Overture shows the influence of the works of Debussy and Wagner, whose works he studied in the Byelayev circle (Ex. 3):

Ex. 3 Rimsky-Korsakov: “Russian Easter” Overture, op. 36, Section A, mm. 8-13.

Apart from expressive instrumental colors, melodic designs are chosen carefully so as to
match each kind of instrument idiomatically without losing the music’s national flavor (Ex. 4):

Ex. 4. Rimsky-Korsakov: “Russian Easter” Overture, op. 36, Section M (excerpt).

While the *kuchka* group aims to preserve harmonies in its most Russian and “authentic” manner, Rimsky-Korsakov uses them as a vehicle for expressing mood. Rather than providing a sense of harmonic progression for the surface melodic line, “unusual harmonies”, such as augmented triads, diminished chords and chromatic passage are reserved for musical passages depicting the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday (Ex. 5a), while simple chords and major triads are used for depicting bright mood of the Easter holiday (see Ex. 2 again):
To conclude, while the Overture presents both “revolutionary” and “progressive” elements that simultaneously represent Rimsky-Korsakov’s continuation of the *kuchka* idea and his detachment from the past, it is difficult to define a clear style that implies a new way of musical thinking. What lies behind this mature work is a deepen knowledge of musical
vocabularies which the composer obtained over many trials and errors, or, more precisely, experimentations; as Taruskin observed: “Rimsky-Korsakov, who reviled Debussy and Richard Strauss, and who never tired of exhorting his pupils to avoid the sort of anarchic decadence those names represented, never gave up his sense of himself as a “progressive” musician. He enjoyed experimenting with unusual harmonies – and the word “experimenting” is especially well chosen in his case, since his attitude toward musical innovation (“progress”) was naively scientific in the sense that it was obsessively rigorous and fatally systematic.”

Revolutionary or progressive, Rimsky-Korsakov’s music do changes in some way, he does not.

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13 Taruskin, p.83.
Bibliography


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