

# Program Notes: St. Petersburg

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

## MIKHAIL GLINKA

(Born May 20/June 1, 1804, Novospasskoye, near Yelnya, Smolensk district, Russia; died February 15, 1857, Berlin)

**Trio pathétique in d minor for Clarinet, Bassoon, and Piano**

**Composed:** 1832

**Published:** 1878, Moscow

**Other works from this period:** String Quartet in F Major (1830); *Gran sestetto originale* in E-flat Major for Piano and String Quintet (1832); *L'iniquo voto* for Soprano and Piano (1832); *Symphony on Two Russian Themes* (1834); **Capriccio on Russian Themes** in A Major for Piano, Four Hands (1834)

**Approximate duration:** 15 minutes

Russian classical music's point of origin is more straightforwardly identifiable than that of perhaps any other region. While schools of composers, aesthetic movements, and other broad phenomena have coalesced to define German, Italian, French, and other musical traditions, Russian classical music begins with the early nineteenth-century composer Mikhail Glinka.

Rooted from a young age in Russian peasant, liturgical, and other musical traditions, Glinka was captivated by music by his early adolescence. Hearing the Finnish-born composer Bernhard Crusell's Clarinet Quartet when he was ten or eleven years old pointed Glinka unequivocally towards his vocation. He would go on to encounter the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Cherubini, and others from Western Europe throughout his teenage years.

In 1828, Glinka set off for Italy, where he met Donizetti and Bellini and was subsequently drawn to Italian opera. (He also met Mendelssohn on these travels; chemistry between the two was apparently poor.) Glinka mastered the Italian operatic idiom, but by 1833, he found himself dissatisfied with composing in a style that felt alien. He endeavored from this point forward to compose "in a Russian manner" and thereby find his voice.

With a fundamental grasp of the lingua franca of Western European composers, Glinka, largely self-taught, cultivated a musical language that integrated a Russian character with classical and operatic styles. "As Pushkin assimilated elements from West European literatures and naturalized them in Russia by means of his choice of subject matter," writes Russian music scholar Stuart Campbell, "so Glinka drew on the musical mainstreams of his day and acclimatized them in Russia." The idiom Glinka developed would be a guiding light to virtually all subsequent nineteenth-century Russian composers, encompassing the nationalist set known as the Five or the Mighty Handful (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov), Tchaikovsky, and others; his greatest works are considered foundational to the Russian repertoire. Tchaikovsky credited Glinka's seven-minute orchestral **fantasy** *Kamarinskaya* with containing the entire Russian symphonic school, "just as the whole oak is in the acorn."

Glinka's *Trio pathétique*, scored for the unusual combination of clarinet, bassoon, and piano, dates from 1832, when the twenty-eight-year-old composer was studying in Milan and still emulating Italy's operatic composers. The work's published title is a bit misleading: though cast in the unsmiling d minor, the trio is an exuberant work. Indeed, the **Allegro moderato's** second **theme**, in less severe B-flat major, is utterly cheerful. The ensemble's palette of timbres has much to do with its character, with clarinet and bassoon evoking bell-like laughter in their upper **registers**. The work proceeds **attacca** into the bright-eyed **scherzo** and then into the warm **Largo**, both brim-

ming with operatic lyricism. The finale, marked **Allegro con spirito**, serves as an epilogue, reprising earlier musical ideas.

Under the spell of **bel canto** Italian opera, Glinka produced a *Trio pathétique* markedly less despairing than the literature's more famous *Pathétiques* (Beethoven's Piano **Sonata** in c minor, **op. 13**, and Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony). Perhaps Glinka had an unrequited love on his mind while at work on the trio—he wrote on the autograph manuscript, "I have known love only through the pain it brings." If so, the work's optimistic character convincingly conceals his heartache.

## ANTON ARENSKY

(Born June 30/July 12, 1861, Novgorod, Russia; died February 25, 1906, near Terioki, Finland [now Zelenogorsk, Russia])

**Quartet no. 2 in a minor for Violin, Viola, and Two Cellos, op. 35**

**Composed:** 1894

**Other works from this period:** *Six Children's Pieces* for Piano, op. 34 (1892); Piano Trio no. 1 in d minor, op. 32 (1894); *Twenty-Four Characteristic Pieces* for Piano, op. 36 (1894); Four Studies for Piano, op. 41 (1896)

**Approximate duration:** 25 minutes

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a set of nationalist composers seeking to follow Glinka's example, working towards the development of a distinctly Russian school of music. These composers, led by Mily Balakirev (see below), were primarily self-taught and drew from Russian folk song and other sources for musical material. A review of a concert in 1867 featuring music by Glinka, Balakirev, and others proclaimed, "May God grant that [the audience]...may forever preserve the memory of how much poetry, feeling, talent, and ability is possessed by the small but already mighty handful of Russian musicians." Balakirev and his disciples—Aleksandr Borodin, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov—thereafter became known as the Mighty Handful (or, more simply, the Five).

Russian music during this period was catalyzed by a dialectic between the Mighty Handful's nationalist autodidacticism and a yen for Western professionalization, led by the brothers Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein. Anton Rubinstein, one of his generation's foremost pianists as well as a noted composer and conductor, founded the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1862, where Tchaikovsky became his prized pupil; Nikolai founded the Moscow Conservatory four years later and recruited the newly graduated Tchaikovsky to serve on the faculty.

Despite their divergent philosophies, the nationalist camp nevertheless interfaced with the conservatories. Rimsky-Korsakov later taught at St. Petersburg, where his students included Anton Arensky—the inheritor, therefore, of both his teacher's nationalist soul and the Rubinsteins' technical standards. Arensky graduated in 1882 with a gold medal and was immediately appointed professor of **harmony** and **counterpoint** at the Moscow Conservatory, where his students included Rachmaninov, Scriabin, and Reinhold Glière; his relocation to Moscow moreover brought him into the social and professional circles of Tchaikovsky and Sergei Taneyev.

Arensky's output reflects a broad range of influences, both classically Western and traditionally Russian. His Piano **Concerto** betrays a fascination with Chopin, and the Piano Trio no. 1 in d minor, op. 32, audibly nods to the d minor Trio of Mendelssohn. Elsewhere in his catalogue, as in the Quartet in a minor for Violin, Viola, and Two Cellos, op. 35, elements of Russian folk song and liturgical music emerge.

\*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 94.

Arensky composed the quartet in 1894 *in memoriam* Tchaikovsky, who had died the previous year. As befitting a work mourning the loss of a beloved mentor figure, the quartet exudes a deeply felt melancholy, nostalgia, and, at its end, exultation, in celebration of a national hero. The quartet moreover reflects, in subtle and sophisticated fashion, Arensky's particular Russianness.

The work's opening theme is based on Russian Orthodox chant: it is homophonic and **parlando** (that is, as if approximating speech), and its peculiar instrumentation lends the music a dark solemnity. The *Moderato* steadily builds from this intrinsically Russian foundation to a rhapsodic **polyphonic** texture. Near the **movement's** end, each instrument plays **double-stops**, creating the illusion of a string octet.

The quartet's second movement pays most explicit homage to Tchaikovsky: it is a set of **variations** on Tchaikovsky's "Legend," from his *Songs for Children*, op. 54. The melody, simple yet richly evocative, could be a Russian folk tune. Here, Arensky honors Tchaikovsky—specifically, his gift as a melodist—via seven reverent variations. Each features the main theme, often disguised and reharmonized in strikingly ingenious ways, a testament to Arensky's rigorous technical training. A delicate **coda** returns to the opening theme, played first in shimmering **harmonics**. A specter of the first movement reappears, and fragments of Tchaikovsky's theme are recalled before the movement ends with stark **pizzicati**.

The finale begins with a deeply voiced chant, taken from a Russian Orthodox funeral mass. After the movement's prayerful opening, Arensky constructs a **fugue**—that most cerebral of Western musical forms—based on a Russian folk melody, "Slava," emblematic here of the composer's (and the quartet's honoree's) heritage. (Beethoven quotes the same melody in his Quartet in e minor, op. 59, no. 2, in honor of the Russian Count Razumovsky, who commissioned the work.) This festive tune was commonly heard at the coronation of the tsar—an association surely not lost on Arensky while commemorating his musical idol.

## MILY BALAKIREV

(Born December 21, 1836/January 2, 1837, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia; died May 16/29, 1910, St. Petersburg)

### Octet for Winds, Strings, and Piano, op. 3

**Composed:** 1855–1856

**Published:** 1959, Moscow

**Other works from this period:** String Quartet, op. 2 (1854–1856); First version of Fantasia on Themes from Glinka's *Zhizn' za tsarya* for Solo Piano (1854–1856); *Tri zabitiikh romansa* (*Three Forgotten Songs*) for Voice and Piano (1855); Romance for Cello and Piano (1856)

**Approximate duration:** 13 minutes

As a child, Mily Balakirev demonstrated promising musical aptitude and enjoyed the support of Aleksandr Ul'ibishev [pronounced Uluh-BYShev], the most prominent musical figure and patron in his native city of Nizhny Novgorod. Ul'ibishev, the author of books on Mozart and Beethoven, introduced the young Balakirev to music by those composers as well as by Chopin and Mikhail Glinka. In 1855, Balakirev traveled to St. Petersburg, where Ul'ibishev introduced him to Glinka himself. Glinka became a consequential mentor to the eighteen-year-old pianist and composer.

That year also saw numerous important concert appearances for Balakirev. In February, he performed in St. Petersburg as the soloist in the first movement of a projected piano concerto; later that spring, also in St. Petersburg, he gave a concert of his own solo piano and chamber compositions. (Balakirev's early successes as a pianist culminated in 1858 with a performance of Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto for the tsar.)

Balakirev's rise to prominence among St. Petersburg's musical elite continued. In 1856, he met the composer César Cui, the influential critics Alexander Serov and Vladimir Stasov, and other important figures. Glinka's death the following year was a personal blow, but an emerging generation of musicians meanwhile coalesced around Balakirev. The talented amateurs Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Aleksandr Borodin gravitated towards him as a mentor figure. This set of composers (along with Cui), led by Balakirev and known as the Mighty Handful, would represent a dominant force in Russian musical life over the latter half of the nineteenth century (see above).

Balakirev's Octet for Winds, Strings, and Piano, op. 3, dates from this consequential period in the composer's rise to prominence. Scored for flute, oboe, horn, violin, viola, cello, bass, and piano, the Octet was apparently projected to be a large-scale, multimovement work, but only the first movement (performed in this concert) and fragments of a scherzo survive. It also marks one of his sole chamber works. (Relative to their academically oriented contemporaries, Balakirev and his set created little chamber music. Opera, orchestral music, and songs provided more apt vehicles for their nationalist concerns; chamber music was mainly the purview of Tchaikovsky, Taneyev, and others.) The work may be a revision of an earlier septet for flute, clarinet, string quartet, and piano, now lost. Aside from this Octet, Balakirev's chamber music comprises only an unfinished string quartet and the Romance for Cello and Piano, which was completed by Sergei Lyapunov.

The Octet begins with a dramatic, declamatory statement. The work's varied instrumentation as well as Balakirev's incisive handling of voices inject this inclement music with cinematic color. The plaintive second theme, introduced by the piano, may be based on a Russian folk song. The clouds gradually part as the theme proceeds, and the **exposition** ends on a sunny note. The **development** section begins hesitantly: a single horn note hangs suspended above quiet string pizzicati and halting piano fragments. This soon erupts into a full-throated development of the exposition's thematic materials. Following a standard **recapitulation**, the Octet ends with a brief but powerful coda.

## DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

(Born September 12/25, 1906, St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975, Moscow)

### Impromptu for Viola and Piano, op. 33

**Composed:** Completed May 2, 1931, Leningrad

**Dedication:** Alexander Mikhailovich

**Other works from this period:** *The Bolt*, op. 27 (ballet) (1930–1931); *Lédi Makbet Mtsenskogo uyezda* (*Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*), op. 29 (opera) (1930–1932); Twenty-Four Preludes for Solo Piano, op. 34 (1932–1933); Piano Concerto no. 1 in c minor, op. 35 (1933); Cello Sonata in d minor, op. 40 (1934)

**Approximate duration:** 2 minutes

This performance marks the West Coast premiere of Dmitry Shostakovich's Impromptu for Viola and Piano, op. 33, composed in 1931. The work, previously lost, was discovered in 2017 in the Moscow State Archives among the effects of Vadim Borisovsky, violist of the Beethoven Quartet, with whom Shostakovich enjoyed a fruitful partnership throughout his career. The manuscript bears a dedication to Alexander Mikhailovich, violist of the Glazunov Quartet.

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## DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

*From Jewish Folk Poetry, op. 79*

**Composed:** 1948

**First performance:** January 15, 1955, with Nina L'vovna Dorliak, Zara Dolukhanova, Alec Maslennikov, and the composer at the piano

**Other works from this period:** Detailed in the notes below

**Approximate duration:** 25 minutes

Following the 1917 October Revolution, Vladimir Lenin's populist ethos that "art belongs to the people" was bastardized by the autocratic Stalin regime to justify co-opting the arts into Soviet propaganda. Stalin banned any avant-garde activity across the arts: the **twelve-tone** music of the Second Viennese School, the modernist works of Bartók, and even most of Stravinsky's music were all seen as products of capitalist decadence and consequently forbidden.

Dmitry Shostakovich and his contemporaries were forced to respond in their music to the state's rigorous cultural demands. In 1948, the Communist Party published a Resolution on the State of Russian Music, which officially charged Shostakovich and other leading composers with "antidemocratic tendencies that are alien to the Soviet people and its artistic tastes [and composing works] strongly reminiscent of the spirit of contemporary modernistic bourgeois music of Europe and America." The resolution demanded that composers guilty of Western formalism reform their wayward artistry; each had no choice but to publicly prostrate themselves before the government. Shostakovich wrote in response, "I am deeply grateful for...all the criticism contained in the resolution...I shall with still more determination work on the musical depiction of the images of the heroic Soviet people."

Shostakovich composed the song cycle *Iz yevreyskoy narodnoy poëziy* (*From Jewish Folk Poetry*), op. 79, for soprano, alto, tenor, and piano, just months after the Communist Party's resolution. The cycle of eleven songs, setting Russian translations of Yiddish texts taken from a Jewish folk song collection compiled in 1947, constituted a dangerous expression of solidarity with Russia's Jews at a politically fraught time. In the wake of the resolution, "Shostakovich may well have been trying to have it both ways," surmise the Shostakovich scholars Laurel Fay and David Fanning, "composing a piece which fulfilled official desiderata for folkloristic composition, yet speaking obliquely of solidarity with oppressed communities." In any event, *From Jewish Folk Poetry* was only heard privately until 1955; it was one of several of Shostakovich's works—including the Fourth and Fifth String Quartets, the Fourth and Tenth Symphonies, the Violin Concerto, and the revision of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*—whose political undertones made public performance impossible until the Khrushchev Thaw, when, following Stalin's death, censorship was relaxed.

The cycle begins with the unsparingly tragic "Plach ob umeršem mladence" ("Lament for a Dead Child"). Above a dirge-like piano accompaniment, soprano and alto keen, "Sun and rain, light and haze. Fog has descended, the moon has dimmed. What did she bear? A boy, a boy...And where did they bury him? In the grave." The following song, "Zabotlivyye mama i tjojta" ("Thoughtful Mother and Aunt"), is more equivocal in its harmonic character, dancing between bright major and foreboding minor shadings. (Shostakovich claimed that he was drawn to the "jolly melody on sad intonations" characteristic of Jewish folk music. This predilection is in evidence elsewhere in his oeuvre, as in the well-known Second Piano Trio and Eighth String Quartet.) The song likewise sustains a rhythmic ambiguity, fluctuating between 2/4 and 3/4 time.

The alto sings the distressed "Kolybelnaja" ("Cradle Song"); Shostakovich's music does nothing to sugarcoat the text: "My son, most beautiful on earth, my flame in the darkness. Your father is in chains in Siberia, held prisoner by the tsar!" An equally desperate sad-

ness suffuses "Pered dolgoj razlukoju" ("Before a Long Separation"), a duet between soprano ("Oh, Abram, how can I live without you!") and tenor ("Oh, oh, Rivochka, give me a kiss, girl!").

The cycle's emotional gravity does not relent. The soprano carries the stark "Predosterezhenije" ("Warning"). Pallid **octaves** in the piano underpin "Broshennyj otec" ("The Deserted Father"). "Hop, hop, even higher! A goat eats the straw from the roof!" the tenor sings caustically in "Pesnja o nuzhde" ("Song of Need"). The tenor again narrates the aptly frigid "Zima" ("Winter")—"My Sheyndl lies in bed, the sick child with her. Not a stick in the frozen hut, and"—here, soprano and alto join with haunting vocalise—"the wind howls outside the walls."

The final three songs—"Khoroshaja zhizn" ("The Good Life"), "Pesnja devushki" ("Song of the Girl"), and "Schastje" ("Happiness")—are creations of deadly sarcasm. "I am happy on the farm. You hear, my life is complete!" sings the soprano in the penultimate song. The cycle's finale asserts: "And I want to tell the entire country about my good fortune!" Shostakovich's music provides a bitter emotional subtext, and these brave words ultimately ring false.