

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844-1908)

"Procession of the Nobles" from *Mlada*

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon; 4 French horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, percussion, harp; strings

Performance time: 5 minutes

Russian classical music flowered in the mid- to late-19th century, championed by a group of composers variously known as "the five," "the mighty five" and "the mighty handful." They included Alexander Borodin, Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky and their leader, Mily Balakirev. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was not early in joining them, but he is now acknowledged as the most accomplished, and he proved to be the most influential—mentoring a succession of Russian composers up to Stravinsky. He is also the most popular among today's listeners, and in the "Procession of the Nobles" from *Mlada* we can hear why. His compositions are brilliantly atmospheric, with remarkable mastery of orchestral texture, glistening harmonies and exotic color.

Rimsky-Korsakov's flair for medieval times and faraway cultures was fueled in childhood by letters from his seafaring brother Voin, and when he finally earned his own naval commission, he devoured the experience of foreign travel with a passion that remained with him and pervades his music. The hugely ambitious *Mlada*, couched in ancient history and mysticism, is often called "Wagnerian" in scope. And opera fans can readily hear a connection between the vivid "Procession of the Nobles," which opens the second act of *Mlada*, and the entrance of the burghers, which opens the second act of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. In both of these marches we hear the pomp of aristocrats making their way into a festival setting.

NOTES

"Polovtsian Dances" from *Prince Igor*

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes (2nd doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 French horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, percussion, harp; strings

Performance time: 14 minutes

Considering the enduring distinction Alexander Borodin achieved in his second career, we could wish he had not been so successful in his first, as a physician. Then, perhaps, we

would have more of his richly melodic music to enjoy more than 130 years after his death. The explosively energetic "Polovtsian Dances" from his opera *Prince Igor* are among a handful of standard-rep compositions that he produced. But they are not merely the work of a gifted amateur; Borodin was an accomplished pianist and cellist who had composed music since childhood, then resumed advanced musical studies as an adult.

Prince Igor is in the tradition of monumental Russian operas that treat historical subjects without flinching at the violence and grimness of Russia's past. Set in the 12th century, the opera focuses on the reign of Prince Igor Severski, his son Vladimir, and their corrupt rivals. Borodin worked on this epic work for almost 20 years, and though he never finished it, the opera exists today in workable performing editions that have impressed audiences and critics at the world's leading opera houses. But the suite of dances from *Prince Igor* has been popular in concert halls far longer than the opera itself. Listening to their brilliant orchestral textures and folk-like melodies, it's no surprise that they fit into the drama as festive dances presented as political pageantry. They fairly burst with energy, and have an irresistible appeal. The idea of excerpting dances from musical dramas gained acceptance through the popularity of this virtuosic suite

1812 Overture, Op. 49

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 French horns, 2 cornets, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, percussion; strings

Performance time: 13 minutes

It just wouldn't be summer without the *1812 Overture*, would it? With its martial airs, thrilling cannon fusillades and chimes of victory, it holds a special place in the American concert repertory.

But it is actually a musical immigrant. Its themes and their story line are Russian to their very core.

Aural spectacle gets no more spectacular than this suspenseful narrative overture. As musical storytelling it is so vivid that we can smell the gunpowder as it limns the progress of contending forces, building tension with long crescendos. Melodic themes entwine and shift balance as if battling for control. New elements introduce themselves softly as if they were distant, then grow louder as if drawing near.



PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY
(1840-1893)

Though American listeners have staked out the *1812 Overture* and made it their own, the year 1812 in its title has nothing to do with our own War of 1812; it actually references Napoleon's catastrophic march toward Moscow and Russia's successful defense at the Battle of Borodino. As the overture opens, a plaintive choir of cellos and violas represents the people of Russia in their homes and churches as the invasion and their suffering escalate. Those brass-borne strains of the French national anthem, "La Marseillaise"? Those are the bad guys. They are countered by louder strains of the Russian anthem "God Save the Czar." And, of course, by the Imperial Army and its cannons—16 shots in all.

After the battling and the cannon fire, the initial hymn tune returns to the whole orchestra and triumphant church bells ring out. They remind us that it is not the army or the czar but the Russian people who are the hero of the *1812 Overture*—as they are in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 depicting the siege of Leningrad, and in Mussorgsky's populist opera of czars and political intrigue, *Boris Godunov*. The common people as hero: now, there's a democratic value that any patriotic American music lover can appreciate.

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