

Modest Mussorgsky and “The Five” who created Russian Music – by Hugh Ferguson

Five young composers found each other in St. Petersburg in the 1860's and discovered that they were driven by a common cause: the creation of a uniquely Russian classical music identity. Only one of the five, Mili Balakirev, had any significant musical training. The others — Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, César Cui, and Modest Mussorgsky — were amateurs, self-taught and proud of it.

Tchaikovsky, their contemporary, was at that time actively composing and widely recognized. But he was not included in the group. The Five (as they came to be known) considered him too steeped in German musical methods to represent the true Russian spirit.

The polar opposite to Tchaikovsky was Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881). The most passionate, most original, and most unfortunate of the group, he is generally regarded as the one who had the greatest influence on the later course of Russian music.

Born into a wealthy land-owning family 250 miles south of St. Petersburg, Mussorgsky had his first piano lessons at age six, and three years later was able to perform a John Field concerto at a family gathering. At age 13 he was enrolled in the Cadet School of the Guards in St. Petersburg, where his piano-playing made him popular: at parties, he would play dances interspersed with his own improvisations. But it may also be that it was at the Cadet School that he first fell prey to alcohol addiction. The director, a general Sutgof, was said to be exceedingly pleased “when a cadet returned from leave drunk.”

Mussorgsky was graduated at age 17 and received a commission with the Russian Imperial Guard. He met another officer, 22-year-old Alexander Borodin, while serving at a St. Petersburg military hospital. Borodin later remembered, “Mussorgsky was at that time a very callow, most elegant, perfectly contrived little officer: brand-new, close-fitting uniform, toes well turned out, hair well oiled and carefully smoothed-out, hands shapely and well cared for. His manners were polished and aristocratic. ... His carefully-chosen words were interspersed with French phrases and rather labored. He showed, in fact, signs of a slight pretentiousness; but also, quite unmistakably, of perfect breeding and education. He sat down at the piano and, coquettishly raising his hands, started playing, delicately and gracefully, bits of *Trovatore* and *Traviata*, the circle around him rapturously murmuring ‘*Charmant! Délicieux!*’”

Mussorgsky's friendship with Borodin — and his skill at the piano — quickly led to a widening circle of musicians. When he met Balakirev, he soon realized he could learn from him. Balakirev was happy to oblige, later remembering:

" ... I explained to him the form of compositions, and to do this we played through both Beethoven symphonies [as piano duets] and much else (Schumann, Schubert, Glinka, and others), analyzing the form." Up to that point Mussorgsky had known nothing but piano music.

Soon after beginning his studies with Balakirev, Mussorgsky resigned his commission in order to devote himself entirely to music. For the rest of his short and troubled life, despite interminable extended interruptions and setbacks, despite never having a home of his own, despite chronic indigence and a losing battle with alcoholism, that is what he strove to do. As Harold Schonberg put it:

“Of the group, he was the most original and the most uncompromising: He lived only for music, and perhaps he drank so much because he never could achieve his vision. Certainly nothing but alcohol interfered with his quest. ... [He] lived only to get on paper the sounds that were in his mind.”

The “Mighty Handful,” as they were sometimes called, were mutually supportive. As Schonberg describes it: “Lacking books, lacking basic knowledge, they ... would get whatever scores they could, from Bach through Berlioz and Liszt, playing through them, analyzing their form, taking the pieces apart and putting them together again.... They criticized one another's works, helped one another compose, ... As Borodin wrote, ‘In the relations within our circle, there is not a shadow of envy, conceit or selfishness. Each is made sincerely happy by the

smallest success of another.”

For Mussorgsky, with the backing of talented colleagues and a wealthy family, the 1860's began auspiciously enough. In the winter of 1860-61, his compositions included an Allegro in C for four hands, a duet transcription in C minor of his C# minor Scherzo, the beginnings of two movements of a Symphony in D, and an 'essay in instrumentation', *Alla marcia notturna*.

But when, in March of 1861, Russia's serfs were emancipated, it suddenly deprived Mussorgsky's family of half its estate. For the next two years, he was obliged to spend a great part of his time in the country, assisting his brother in the management of what remained of the family's holdings. And when he was done, he was still financially strapped, so that in December of 1863 he was forced to take a job as a civil servant at the Ministry of Communications.

He moved into a commune with five other men. Although it was a heady artistic and intellectual atmosphere, it was less than ideal for the essentially solitary occupation of composer. Then, in April of 1865, Mussorgsky's mother died, an event that's generally seen as having precipitated his first serious bout of alcoholism. The ensuing delirium tremens forced him, that autumn, to move out of the commune and into his brother's flat.

On 10 May 1867 he was dismissed from the Ministry. That summer, living in the country at his brother's house at Minkino, Mussorgsky occupied himself with piano transcriptions of movements from Beethoven's quartets. He also composed and orchestrated *Night on Bald Mountain*. Returning to St. Petersburg, he was brought up short when his mentor Balakirev criticized *Night on Bald Mountain* and refused to conduct it. It was never performed during Mussorgsky's lifetime.

The following year, 1868, Mussorgsky started working on his masterpiece, *Boris Godounov*. He was then living with friends and working for the Forestry Department. Despite those working conditions, he finished the score in fifteen months, in December, 1869. The next July found him negotiating for a production of the opera. Six months after that, on February 22, 1871, the opera committee of the Mariinsky Theater rejected it. Undaunted, Mussorgsky set to work revising and enlarging it, and completed this second version on July 5, 1872. It was finally accepted, but the first production did not take place until February 1874.

Boris Godounov marked the zenith of Mussorgsky's career as a composer, at least from the standpoint of public acclaim. A friend described the premiere: "During the winter, there were, I think, nine performances, and each time the theatre was sold out, each time the public tumultuously called for Mussorgsky." The triumph was overshadowed, though, by the critical drubbing he received in the press. Worse yet, the other members of The Mighty Handful had begun to drift away, and Mussorgsky felt increasingly isolated.

After *Boris Godounov*, Mussorgsky went through a profound psychic upheaval. His friends were alarmed by his compulsive drinking. Mussorgsky had turned into a dipsomaniac.

"This is horribly sad!" wrote Borodin. "Such a talented man and sinking so low morally. Now he periodically disappears, then reappears, morose, untalkative, which is contrary to his usual habit. After a while he comes to himself again—sweet, gay, amiable and as witty as ever. Devil knows what a pity!"

For a time Mussorgsky was able to maintain his creative output. His compositions from 1874 include *Sunless*, the *Khovanshchina Prelude*, and the piano suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Another friend, the artist Ilya Repin—who painted the unforgettable, haunting portrait of Mussorgsky in his last days, also painted the disintegration in words:

"It was really incredible how that well-bred Guards officer, with his beautiful and polished manners, that witty conversationalist with the ladies, that inexhaustible punster ... quickly sank, sold his belongings, even his elegant clothes, and soon descended to some cheap saloons where he personified the familiar type of has-been, where this childishly happy child,

with a red potato-shaped nose, was already unrecognizable... Was it really he? The once impeccably-dressed; heel-clicking society man, scented, dainty, fastidious? Oh, how many times V.V. [the critic Vladimir Stasov]: on his return from abroad was hardly able to get him out of some basement dive, nearly in rags, swollen with alcohol.”

He kept his civil service job for a time, but only because friends managed to get him transferred to a post where his music-loving superior treated him with great leniency. But in 1880 he was finally dismissed. In early 1881 he suffered four seizures in rapid succession. ... Repin painted the famous red-nosed portrait in what were to be the last days of the composer's life. A week after his 42nd birthday, he was dead.

After Mussorgsky's death, his friends prepared his manuscripts for publication and created performing editions of his unfinished works so that they could enter the repertoire. Most of the editorial work was done by Rimsky-Korsakov.

At the unveiling of a monument to him in 1885, the other members of The Five lifted the four corners of the veil.