

Study on nikolai rimsky korsakov history essay



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Nikolai Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov was born March 18, 1844 in Tikvhin. Born to a noble family, he received his first education at home. There, he showed great aptitude in practically every area of his education. However, he showed an incredible talent for music. He began playing with the piano at age five, and completed his first compositions at the age of ten (BIGBOOK 400). Directed by his older brother's wishes, he entered the St. Petersburg Naval College in 1856. Whilst enrolled there, he developed a love for opera, and began observing works such as Donizetti's Lucia, Glinka's A Life for the Tsar, and Meyerbeer's Robert le diable (BIGBOOK 400). His piano teacher at the time, Fyodor Kanille, also greatly affected him by showing him Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann (Frolova-Walker 1063). In 1861, he became acquainted with Mily Balakirev, who became something of an informal teacher for him. He also introduced him to the critic Vladimir Statsov and the new composers Modest Musorgsky, and Cesar Cui. This affirmed his place in the Five, a legendary group of 19th century Russian composers that worked closely early in their lives and became the core of the Russian style of composition. At the time, though it was clear he had great talent, he had little knowledge of theory and his piano skill was imperfect. Despite this, Balakirev directed him to compose a symphony (BIGBOOK 400). However, in 1862 he was required to serve a three-year tour of duty aboard the Almaz. After three years of boring peacetime service, he returned to St. Petersburg in 1865. Thankfully for him, his duties occupied only a few hours out of the day, so he had the energy to resume composition; he was able to publish his first symphony. Fittingly, it was premiered at Balakirev's Free Music School, with Balakirev as the conductor (Frolova-Walker 1064). Soon after this, he completed two more symphonic works, Sadko and Antar. The former is a

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symphonic poem about a Russian folk hero, which employs use of the whole-tone scale and octatonic scales. The latter is set in the Middle East and employs many of the devices of orientalism found in his later works. He also composed his first opera, *The Maid of Pskov*, during this period (BIGBOOK 400).

1871 was an important year for Rimsky-Korsakov, for this is the year he decided to accept a professorship at the newly-formed St. Petersburg Conservatory. Unfortunately, this alienated him from the rest of the Five, who, being amateurs, felt that the teaching of composition should not be institutionalized (Frolova-Walker 1063). In his autobiography, Rimsky-Korsakov reflects modestly on this decision. He felt that he was too eager in accepting so venerable a post while he himself had so little training.

However he did not waste the opportunity to learn. He wrote, “ Thus having been undeservedly accepted at the Conservatory as a professor, I soon became one of its best and possibly its very best pupil (Rimsky-Korsakov 103). Indeed, he embarked on a routine of exercises, fugues, and chorales between 1874 and 1876. As part of this struggle for improvement, he learned to conduct. Also, the Navy created the post of Inspector of Naval Bands for him, providing a stimulus for him to learn more of the wind instruments and further develop the skill of orchestration he began with his earlier symphonic works. Though this extremely diligent course of study and self-improvement brought newfound technical ability, it did not necessarily make for better compositions. His *String Quartet in F Major* was criticized by both the Five and Tchaikovsky as being dry and without emotion (Frolova-Walker 1063). Despite this, he felt it necessary to revise all his works written

before 1874, even those that were well-received. This task of “ perfecting” his earlier works would continue throughout all of his life (BIGBOOK 401). Despite the fact that not all of his compositions during this period were successful, *The Snow Maiden*, an opera based on a Russian folk tale, was one of his greatest critical successes.

In the 1880s, Rimsky-Korsakov found himself suffering from a bit of writer’s block, and so he took to editing the works of others. When Modest Musorgsky died in 1881, Rimsky-Korsakov collected all of his manuscripts and essentially finished the unfinished ones. Even Musorgsky’s famous *Night on Bald Mountain* is heavily influenced by Rimsky-Korsakov, as the composer left no definite version (BIGBOOK 403). Also, he further extended his influence on Russian music by teaching his own generation of students. His pupils included Alexander Glazunov and Anatoly Lyadov. Also, he wrote a textbook on orchestration that was widely used. Indeed, he proved his immense talent at orchestration with three symphonic pieces written in this period of his life: the *Spanish Capriccio*, *Russian Easter Festival Overture*, and *Seherezade*. Today, these pieces are the base of his reputation in the West (Frolova-Walker 1064). At the time, he was very proud of these masterpieces, though he did not see them as what would become his legacy (BIGBOOK 403).

Another major turning point in his career was his observance of Wagner’s *Ring* during the season of 1888-1889. He and his old student Glazunov sat in on every rehearsal and analyzed the score. The two were struck by almost every aspect of the music, especially the orchestration, and were both changed forever by the experience (BIGBOOK 404). Rimsky-Korsakov, for <https://assignbuster.com/study-on-nikolai-rimsky-korsakov-history-essay/>

example, took up the libretto of the opera *Mlada*, the story of which is based on Slavic Mythology, and re-orchestrated it in Wagner's style. However, the traditional structure of the opera-ballet limited his ability to alter it (Frolova-Walker 1065). When he did this, he felt more of a sense of accomplishment even then after he had finished *The Snow Maiden*; at the same time, he experienced the same writer's block. Just as he had done before, he began revising the work of his colleagues, especially Modest Musorgsky. This time, he did not merely finish *Boris Godunov*, but he created an abridged version that removed the more experimental sound that the Five valued during their experiments of the 1860s, and replaced it with harmonies more concurrent with his mature taste. Today, he is seen as having obscured Musorgsky's most creative devices (BIGBOOK 404). Though he intended this version to merely be another interpretation and stand on its own, the fact that it was featured in a production in Paris in 1908 that became, "the foundation for Musorgsky's present-day reputation in the West" (Frolova-Walker 1063).

The last fifteen years of Rimsky-Korsakov's life were his most productive; he put out operas at a seemingly inhuman pace. He began with *Christmas Eve*, based on a Gogol story Tchaikovsky had previously written a piece for. *Sadko*, an opera based on the same story for which he had previously written a symphonic piece, was written concurrently with *Christmas Eve* (BIGBOOK 405). These two brought him great material success and the patronage of Savva Mamontov, a wealthy industrialist. Later, he collaborated with the librettist Vladimir Bel'sky on two operas based on Pushkin's folk tales: *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, and *The Golden Cockerel*. They also worked together on *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, considered by many to be his

greatest opera (Frolova-Walker 1065). In 1905, when the students rioted as part of the Revolution, Rimsky-Korsakov sided with them. As he himself says, “ If one were to believe the conservatives among the professors and the Directorate of the St. Petersburg Branch, I myself was possibly the head of the revolutionary movement amongst the student-youth” (Rimsky-Korsakov 346). Because of his high standing, he was extolled as a major figure-head by the revolutionary movement, and even received letters and donations from supportive peasants. He was consequently removed from his post at the Conservatory until Glazunov was made head of it, at which point he was reinstated. During the Revolution, he was too disturbed to compose, and instead set to writing his autobiography (BIGBOOK 406). After his death in 1908, he was buried in the Alexander-Nevsky cemetery, beside Musorgsky, Borodin, Statsov, and Glinka.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s legacy is not limited only to his triumphs in creating beautiful music; one biographer awards him these laurels:

It is no exaggeration to call Rimsky-Korsakov the main architect of the ‘ Russian style’ in music, a style which is instantly recognizable to a worldwide public today. The sheer volume of his heritage consolidated the common idioms of The Five by a dint of constant repetition; his completion and editing of his colleagues’ works established the concert repertory of Russian music; his professional toil ensured the continuity of the style into the following generation; he was also the first and most important exporter of the style to western Europe. (BIGBOOK 409)

Indeed, a great many of his actions helped to ensure his legacy. His taking of a post at the Conservatory, though it alienated him from his friends, it put him in a position to heavily influence people like Glazunov, who would further define what it is to be a Russian composer. Also, those times when Rimsky-Korsakov experienced writer's block and went back into his colleagues' work to edit and complete it essentially caused him to leave his mark on almost all of the Russian music of his time. Part of the way he created the Russian sound within his own compositions is his use of Russian folk themes in his music, especially in his earlier works. His familiarity with them is shown in that he wrote harmonies for more than fifty of them. The main way he used them in his works, especially in his operas, was to provide a theme for the various pagan cults present in works like *The Snow Maiden*, *Mlada*, and *Christmas Eve* (BIGBOOK 410). However, later in his life Rimsky-Korsakov became disillusioned with the idea of Russian music being truly unique. He eventually grew to see the Russian style as merely another kind of local color; though it may have its own particular traits and flavor that make it distinct from other types of local color, the Five's original nationalistic intentions to create an entirely new kind of music that is truly Russian and entirely separate from Western convention was dismissed by Rimsky-Korsakov as absurd (BIGBOOK 410).

The most important part of Rimsky-Korsakov's legacy is, of course, his works; he composed a huge number of pieces, both instrumental and operatic. Though he was a prolific composer of operas, writing 15 in his life, Rimsky's operas have been largely ignored in the West. Though it is difficult to pin down precisely why this is the case, some have theorized that, despite

their innovative musical devices in well-written parts, they lack a certain dramatic effect. Despite the relative obscurity of his operas in the West, snippets of them have found their way into popular consciousness. For example, his famous “Flight of the Bumblebee” is originally from The Tale of Tsar Saltan (Frolova-Walker 1064). However, what he is truly remembered for in the West are his instrumental pieces of the late 1880s. Particularly, his Russian Easter Festival Overture and Scheherazade are still widely known and listened to. These two masterpieces of orchestration exemplify both Rimsky-Korsakov’s own style and, by extension, the Russian style.

The Russian Easter Festival Overture, as its name implies, makes heavy use of some uniquely Russian themes. For the most part, it is written in 5/2 time; in the end, it switches to 2/1 with some 3/1 mixed in (Easter Festival Overture). It should be noted that the vast majority of Rimsky-Korsakov’s orchestral music is programmatic. That is, it is music intended to evoke some kind of narrative (BIGBOOK 409). Another thing he made heavy use of was orientalism. Russian composers of the time were fascinated with the East, and used various melodies from Eastern music. In this piece, orientalism is mainly represented in that the piece is absolutely riddled with pentatonic scales, which are widely identified with Asian melodies. For example, pictured in Figure 1 is a violin cadenza from the beginning of the work that is based on this scale.

Figure 1. Violin cadenza from Easter Overture.

Such cadenzas are distributed throughout the piece and are played by a few different instruments. While its style is important, the programmatic aspect

of the piece is a perfect example of how Rimsky-Korsakov made program music. In his autobiography, he explains his thinking in writing the piece. It begins with a long, solemn introduction combining two Russian liturgical melodies: “ Let God Arise!” and “ An angel wailed.” This introduction represents the ancient wonder at Isaiah’s prophecy of the resurrection of the Messiah; the trumpet soli represents the voice of the archangel. Eventually, however, this gives way to more joyful, dance-like allegro with an intense, syncopated rhythm. The glockenspiel imitates the tolling of bells. This represents the “ pagan merry-making” of the spring festivals that the holiday of Easter arose from. Finally, at the climax of the work, “ the [Easter] theme, ‘ Christ is arisen,’ ... appeared amidst the trumpet blasts and the bell-tolling, constituting a triumphant coda” (Rimsky-Korsakov 249). This then shows the interaction between Christianity and pagan festival. He explains his vision in his autobiography:

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 morn of Easter Sunday, is what I was eager to produce in my Overture. (Rimsky-Korsakov 250)

At the time, he did not make any of this overtly clear. In the program, he merely wrote a short introduction and quoted a few New Testament passages. This work exemplifies many aspects of Rimsky-Korsakov’s style. Its melodies are based on oriental patterns and many different Russian Orthodox Church songs, and it has a complex program to it that represents

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the transition from the gloom of Christ's sacrifice to the more pagan festivities of Easter Sunday.

The Rimsky-Korsakov