

5-26-2011

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Tchaikovsky and The Russian Five's Contemporary Relevance:
How Selected Works of 19th Century Russian Composers
have Influenced Popular Culture of the West

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Introduction

“You know I have a weakness: as soon as I have any money I squander it in pleasure. It is vulgar, wanting in good sense—I know it—but it seems in my nature. Where will it all lead? What can I hope from the future? It is terrible to think of. I know there will come a time when I shall no longer be able to fight against the difficulties of life. Until then I will do all I can to enjoy it.”

-Except from a letter, Tchaikovsky (1861)

In this paper I offer an observation to the listening habits of American culture and the undeniable connection between the music of the Romantic Era in Russia. While the music of many countries and varying eras is very well represented in the “Classical Music” mindset of America, there seems to be a link between the Russian Romantic works and our modern culture. Many customs that Americans take as a norm stem from the musical works of these composers, even if they don’t directly know that it is their work; in fact many don’t even know at all that the music was written by a Russian.

The quote that I cited above is from a letter that Tchaikovsky wrote to his sister when he was only 21 years old. While this might not be all that uncommon for someone in our day to be that existential at such a young age, the fact that Tchaikovsky wrote it down in a letter to his sister in the year 1861 when Russia was going through the Emancipation Reform is interesting indeed. He saw the uprising of the serfs and reflected that in his own being. This introspective thinking about the way one interacts with the world and what will be left after you die is a very modern approach to immortality. While he thought that he would be lost in the air of forever, this couldn’t be further from the truth. His works are celebrated as some of the world’s greatest masterpieces.

The event that really got me thinking about this was discussion I had with my sister over the Christmas holiday. We were sitting down to dinner at my father’s house

and we were listening to the “Classical Mix-tape” as he likes to call it, and the *1812 Overture* by Tchaikovsky was heard. My sister asks: “What is this song? *The 1812 Overture* isn’t it? It always makes me feel patriotic.” I reply with, “You know this was written by a Russian, right?”

“Oh, I know that. It’s just that it is used very often when dealing with very American things. I hear it nearly as often as *Stars and Stripes Forever* or *Hail to the Chief* when a commercial tries to be gung-ho American.”

This exchange made me think of how many other examples I could cite where Russian music is prevalent in American Culture and an average person might think that this was a song written for America, by an American. Sousa wrote everything, right? I made a point to ask other members of my family and friends how much they know about the music they were hearing around them. Many of them could identify a song when prompted, but could not tell when it was written, for what reason(s), or by whom.

When one hears Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite* on a commercial during the Christmas season for their local retail store or an ad for the ballet itself, do they question why a Russian’s music is used to accentuate an American tradition?

When I started to collect examples for my research, one tradition stuck out in my mind due to my personal connection to it: the attendance of a performance of *The Nutcracker Ballet* during the Holiday season. I am no exception from this rule. My family attends the *Nutcracker* at the Pacific Northwest Ballet, and has every year for the past 10 years and we have no intention to cease this in the foreseeable future. In addition to seeing the ballet, my sister (a different one than I previously mentioned) purchases a nutcracker doll, much like the same doll that is the namesake of the ballet. While I don’t

think much of her purchase of another doll, I can't complain as it does add to the décor of the house around December.

The structure of this paper is a bit unorthodox. I will not directly delve into the crux of the matter, but rather work to understand where the music comes from first. I will address the background of the works before their effects on American Culture as I feel that 'the who' and 'the why' of the music is as important as the when and why. Understanding where the music came from and why it was written, how the composer felt about writing this piece, what they were going through when they were writing, and perhaps the political climate in the world in which they lived gives a better context for the music than any extent of analysis might bring forward. Getting to the root of a situation helps one better understand and develop a basis for discussion.

The sole purpose of my paper is to illustrate the connections between the works of Russian composers that have been dead for over 90 years or more and their prevalence in western culture, mostly in America. The works cannot speak for themselves when placed out of context, but knowing the background of the composers will allow for fuller knowledge and understanding of the pieces, and perhaps why they are so strongly imbedded in our culture.

Chapter 1:

The Russian Empire:

From the End of the Napoleonic Wars to the Russian Revolution of 1917

“History has now confronted us with an immediate task which is the most revolutionary of all the immediate tasks confronting the proletariat of any country. The fulfillments of this task, the destruction of the most powerful bulwark, not only of European, but (it may now be said) of Asiatic reaction, would make the Russian proletariat the vanguard of the international revolutionary proletariat. And we have the right to count upon acquiring this honorable title, already earned by our predecessors, the revolutionaries of the seventies, if we succeed in inspiring our movement, which is a thousand times broader and deeper, with the same devoted determination and vigor.”

-Lenin, *What Can Be Done? "Criticism in Russia"* 1901

The time frame between the fall of Napoleon and the start of the Russian Revolution, while spanning very close to one-hundred years, contained some of the most important moments in Russian History. During this time there lived the six great Russian composers of the Romantic Era. The events that unfurled as they matured as both people and musicians heavily impacted their works. The six composers that had a major impact that were from Russia during this time were Mily Balakirev, Cæsar Cui, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Many of the works of these men are so powerful and ingrained in our culture that we can easily forget that they are from pre-soviet Russia over a century ago.

As Napoleon’s armies marched across Europe in the early nineteenth century, he set his sights on a new goal, to raze the capitol of Russia and seize control. The previous alliance between the two countries failed after the Russian nobility was stressed to break the agreement stemming from the Congress of Erfurt, and Napoleon sought to exploit the weakness then presented by Alexander I. Napoleon then amassed his army of nearly

450,000 men and started its march towards Moscow. The French Army met heavy resistance every step of the way. The Russians employed various guerilla warfare techniques to out-manuever the large French battalion, including hit and run tactics, avoiding the full force of the French Army in a front-on battle (which Napoleon thought would prove to be decisive in the outcome of the war), and ‘scorched earth.’ ‘Scorched Earth’ refers to a warfare technique where an army will burn or destroy any materials that might be considered useful for the opposing force, or to be used as a distraction or smoke-screen. A modern example of this would be when the Iraqi Army set the oil fields on fire to limit visibility for the invading Coalition Forces.

Eventually, the Russian Army would meet the French forces in a face-to-face battle just before they reached Moscow. In this battle, named the Battle of Borodino, the two armies faced each other and both sides took massive casualties. Napoleon’s army lost 35,000 men and the Russians casualties counted upwards of 44,000. While this was the full frontal, army-to-army battle that Napoleon had hoped for, it was far from the victory he had once thought. Napoleon recounts the battle, “the most terrible of all my battles was the one before Moscow. The French showed themselves to be worthy of victory, but the Russians showed themselves worthy of being invincible.”

Napoleon’s army marched on into Moscow, expecting a full surrender by Alexander I and negotiations of peace. What he found, however, was a city set aflame with prisoners loose on the streets. After occupying the burning city for a month, the French Army began their trek back. While the resistance the French Army had faced on the way to Moscow was the Russian Army; on the way back they faced a much more daunting foe - Mother Nature. The French Army got caught in Russia’s notoriously

vigorous winter. Unprepared for the cold and the wet that followed, many of Napoleon's men fell ill with hypothermia or pneumonia. Of the force of 450,000 men that marched on Moscow, less than 40,000 returned to France. Russian casualties counted less than 150,000 for the entire conflict. The official end of the French campaign in Russia was December 14, 1812.

This victory over the massively superior French Army and the resulting retreat from the country was the inspiration for Tchaikovsky's Festival Overture, or better known as *The 1812 Overture*. While Tchaikovsky was not alive during this event (he would be born nearly thirty years later in 1840), this event was told throughout all of his schooling and placed as a great moment in Russian History and what ultimately would influence him to write such a dynamic piece.

After the victory over Napoleon, Russia set up culture with a slight exclusion of influences from the west. It was enough that Russia had a hard time adopting the changes that were being brought about by the Industrial Revolution. This possible gap of power between Russia and the other industrializing countries of Europe frightened the tsar of the time, Alexander I, and he proposed some constitutional changes to influence industry, but no changes were applied.

In 1825, Nicholas I, Alexander I's younger brother, ascended to tsardom. This change was not met with acceptance throughout the entirety of Russia. Nicholas I's appointment to the throne sparked an event called the Decembrist Revolt. The Decembrist Revolt was caused in protest to Nicholas I's new crown, after the original successor to the throne, his older brother Constantine, removed himself from the line of succession.

Thirty years following the failed revolt (1885), Nicholas I died and his son, Alexander II came to take the throne. As he came to the throne, there were cries out from around the country for widespread reform. Alexander II's greatest move was to follow through on a new law that caused the emancipation of the serfs, thus freeing them from indentured servitude. This was a major turning point in Russian history, with modern comparisons to the abolitionist movement during the American Civil War. Alexander sought to "abolish serfdom from above rather than wait for it to be abolished from below through revolution." This move to emancipate the serfs in Russia eliminated the monopoly of power that the aristocracy had held for so long. With all the newly freed serfs, industry in urban centers flourished with the surge of new laborers.

Alexander II was not a peaceful leader, however. Russia invaded northeast China between 1858 and 1860, as well as selling land to the United States in 1867, which is now the state of Alaska. In the late 1870s, the Russian Army fought the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans for Bulgarian and Siberian independence. It wasn't until 1877 that Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire and proceeded to invade. Within the year, the Russian Army was at Constantinople and working on peace treaties. The one that finalized the cease-fire was the Treaty of San Stefano. The principle point of the treaty was to make Bulgaria an autonomous nation after five-hundred years of Ottoman rule.

Alexander II was assassinated by a terrorist organization in 1881 and his son, Alexander III, rose to the throne. Alexander III believed that shutting off "subversive" influences of Western Europe that Russia could have its glory restored.

Alexander III was succeeded by Nicolas II, his son, in 1892. Many important events mark Nicolas II's reign between his ascension in 1892 and his resignation in 1917.

The Industrial Revolution came to full swing under Nicolas II in a big way. The wealthy, industrial capitalists in Russia at the time sought a way to advance to the ways of the more efficient and profitable Western European style of production. They also looked to increase profits while maintaining a low cost of production. This separation between the ideals of urbanization and maintaining the rural style came to a head when two vastly different and opinioned groups formed. The Social Democrats, who supported the teachings of Marxism, sought for more urbanization while the Socialist-Revolutionaries believed that the land should be divvied among those who worked it.

These two groups eventually evolved into the moderate Mensheviks and the radical Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks, which were led at this time by Vladimir Lenin, believed in a small, elite, group of revolutionaries to seize power by force.

In 1904, Russia went to war with Japan over contested land in the southeast corner of the Russian Empire. After a few decisive defeats, it became painfully clear that Russia could not win. Russia lost the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and in January of that year, a major demonstration convened outside the residence of the tsar. Feeling threatened in his estate, the tsar ordered the Cossacks (privatized police service) to open fire on the crowd, killing hundreds of demonstrators. The backlash from this massacre was massive, starting the Russian Revolution of 1905.

When WWI started in 1914, Russia entered the war with patriotism and gusto, in order to defend the Serbs from the invading force. By 1915, however, food and munitions shortages, surmounting inflation back in Russia, and worker strikes caused Nicolas II to leave Russia for the warfront, leaving Alexandria, his wife, to act as the leading power in his absence. While Nicolas was away Alexandria was influenced by Grigori Rasputin,

much to Nicolas' disdain. Rasputin was ordered to be assassinated to retain the honor of the royal family. March 1917, a worker strike in St. Petersburg caused nearly all production in the city to shutdown after only one week. With the political capital of Russia under siege from within, Nicolas had no choice but to step down on March 15, 1917. In the vacuum of power left behind, a provisional government was constructed and it maintained a tentative peace with loyalists to the former tsar. That peace did not last.

As the start of the Russian Civil War came to a head, the eventual rise of the Soviet-Communist Party was inevitable. The rise of this party would lead the world into nearly endless conflict. Fighting from within, the growing powers on their borders and the threats from abroad all culminated in the Cold War stalemate with the United States that lasted nearly fifty years (1947-1991). The Cold War ended less than twenty years ago (1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union) and caused Russia to be only a shell of its former glorious self: the Russia that once defeated the mighty Napoleon.

The great events during this time defined what composers would come to live in and write. The composers who lived during this time took these moments in time and derived some of the greatest music, both for Russia and the rest of the world. The greatest turmoil creates the most graceful art, from the ashes of desperation comes the most profound muses, and from deepest depth of conflict comes the greatest resolution.

Chapter 2:

The Russian Five

“I possess a letter dating from that time which moved me deeply. Rimsky-Korsakov was overcome by despair when he realized that he was following a road which led to nowhere. He began to study with such zeal that the theory of the schools soon became to him an indispensable atmosphere.” “In spite of [Balakirev’s] great gifts, he has done a great deal of harm.” “Moussorgsky plays with his lack of polish—and even seems proud of his want of skill, writing just as it comes to him, believing blindly in infallibility of his genius.” “...because blind fate has led [Bordin] into the science laboratories instead of a vital musical existence.” “Cui is a gifted amateur. His music is not original, but graceful and elegant; it is too coquettish—‘made up’—so to speak.”

-Excerpts from a letter Tchaikovsky wrote to his patron

During the Romantic Era of music, spanning roughly between 1815 and the start of the twentieth century, there lived a group of musicians in Russia that proclaimed themselves to be the “new era” of music. This group, which had many pseudonyms including the *Russian Five* and the *Mighty Five*, came from a belief that the music made by the nation of Russia should reflect the real people of Russia, not the conservatory teachings of dead Germans. This group directly defied the works of the ones who wrote, taught and were being taught in the conservatories around Russia, citing that real Russian music comes from the struggle that “we [the Russians] all share.”

The Russian Five, as the name suggests, was a group of five composers from all distinctly different backgrounds, all with the fond belief that the music they were writing was superior to that of the ‘learned’ composers. The members of the group were Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), Cæsar Cui (1835-1918), Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) and Alexander Borodin (1833-1887). These men wrote a lot of music, much of it to be considered the pinnacle of Russian Nationalist

music. Some of their works have heavily influenced the world far beyond what they would have even imagined at the time.

While these composers directly defied the subject matter taught from a conservatory of music, they were all part of another school of music, the Free Music School in Russia. Balakirev was the founder of the school in St. Petersburg and he holds an interesting history of his own.

Balakirev was born in 1837 in the city of Nizhny-Novgorod. His mother first taught him to play piano before he was sent away from home to learn piano from Alexandre Dubuque and theory from German musician Karl Eisrich in Moscow. Eisrich put Balakirev in touch with Oulibishev, the author of a book on Mozart. Through Oulibishev, Balakirev got his first taste of performing major works on piano as he performed on Oulibishev's estate on a nearly nightly basis. In 1885, Balakirev traveled to St. Petersburg where he was introduced to Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857, Russian Composer) and was encouraged by the composer to continue his musical studies.

It was 1856 when Balakirev made his debut as a composer; he performed the first movement from his own work, a piano concerto, in St. Petersburg. His first show in Moscow was of *Overture on the Theme of 3 Russian Songs* in 1859.

In 1863, Balakirev organized a musical group in St. Petersburg called the Balakirev Circle. The main focus of this group was the "production of national propaganda of Russian music to oppose the passive imitation of classical German compositions, which at the same time exercised a commanding influence in Russia." (96) At the same time, he founded the Free School of Music, which regularly gave concerts that included the works of German composers that he fought so hard to resist.

Balakirev traveled to the Czech Republic in 1867 and met up with many Czech composers at this time, and invited them to have their pieces played in Russia with Balakirev conducting. On May 24, 1867, he held a concert at his Free Music School that included works by the Czech composers and the compositions by Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Balakirev himself. This concert moved Vladimir Stasoc, a musical critic, to praise the composers, "...that Russia, too, had its 'mighty little company' of fine musicians." (97)

Balakirev became enthralled by the mystique of music that stemmed from Moslem Lands, Persia and the Far-East. In 1869, he wrote a fantasy for piano, titled *Islamey*, that contained some techniques that rivaled the "transcendental studies" of Liszt. Other members of his school followed suit with works of their own - Rimsky-Korsakov with *Scheherazade* and Borodin with *In the Steppes of Central Asia*. Balakirev was always seen as a leader to his peers, and even when Rimsky-Korsakov served in the Russian Imperial Navy, the two men maintained a correspondence in which Balakirev would give Rimsky-Korsakov advice on composing his works.

Between 1872 and 1882, he discontinued the Free Music School to work as an administrator for a railroad company. Upon his return to the school he conducted the premiere of a symphony by Glazunov, a 16-year-old Russian composer (1865-1936).

Over the next few years, Balakirev finished a number of pieces that had been left unfinished before then, including his *Symphony in C*, which took him 33 years to write. The work was finally performed in 1898 at his Free Music School. This was also his last appearance as a conductor.

In the waning years of his life Balakirev became “increasingly unsociable and morose.” He became detached from Rimsky-Korsakov when Rimsky-Korsakov took a job as an advisor to Belaiev, the “wealthy publisher who ceased to support the Free School headed by Balakirev, and instead sponsored a series of Russian Symphony concerts in 1886.” (97)

Balakirev made an enormous impact on Russian music during this time, in part due to his patriotic conviction that could have rivaled Germany at its most veracious moments.

Cæsar Cui, another composer from the Free Music School, held a background that was much less typical for a composer than Balakirev. Cui’s father was a French soldier that remained in Russia after Napoleon’s invasion who married a Lithuanian noblewoman and the two settled in Vilnius. Cui’s father worked as a French teacher. Cæsar himself learned notation from copying the works of Chopin, notably his mazurkas, and Italian operas by other composers. In 1849 he sought professional assistance in learning to compose but nothing came of it till very later. Cui left for St. Petersburg in 1850 and entered the Engineering School in 1851 and the Academy of Military Engineering after that in 1855. After his graduation in 1857 he worked as a topographer and expert on fortification. Balakirev and Cui meet in 1856 and the two worked on bettering Cui’s composing.

Cui had a long career as a music critic after his stint in the military. He started this in 1864 when began to write for the *Vedomosi* from St. Petersburg as well other papers; he continued to be a music critic until 1900.

As an objective source on musical knowledge, however, Cui fell flat. He was used to the sounds of Schumann and Chopin, and as a result many of his contemporaries received a very poor reception from Cui. “He opposed Wagner, against whom he wrote vitriolic articles; he attacked Strauss and Reger with even greater violence.” But most importantly he was “critical towards Tchaikovsky.” (377) While Cui was considered to be part of the “Mighty Five,” this title might have been thanks to him being grouped with the other composers.

Alexander Borodin, born in 1833, was the bastard child of a Georgian prince, and as custom dictates, he became a serf under the prince. Borodin’s mother was a wife to an army doctor and retained his last name. Borodin received a good education at a young age that included music. From a very young age he could speak multiple languages and play the flute and piano. He would often play 4-hand piano works of arrangements of Haydn’s and Beethoven’s symphonies. By the time he has 14, he was already composing. His first work was a piece for flute, string trio and piano based on the theme from *Robert le Diable*.

At the age of 18 (1851), Borodin went off to medical school in St Petersburg at the Academy of Medicine. By the time he graduated in 1856, he had developed a strong liking for chemistry, and decided to join the staff of the academy as an assistant professor. In two years, he earned his doctorate. Though he was deeply preoccupied by his scientific pursuits, he still found time to compose music.

Borodin met Balakirev in 1862 and formed an instant friendship with the man. Borodin also met the music critic Stasov, the one who would cement his identity as one of the “Mighty Five.” Borodin met Balakirev and the other members of the Free Music

School during their exploration of the sounds from the mid-east and the far-east, and his compositions mimic that.

The process in which Borodin wrote was slow and rough compared to his peers in the Free Music School. Many of his works were incomplete at the time of his death, and were later edited by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov. One of best known works was his opera, *Prince Igor*, that was a setting of the story of the “famous Russian medieval chronicle *Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, only to be truly completed posthumously by Rimsky-Korsakov.” (216)

Modest Mussorgsky, another composer in the Free Music School and a member of the Russian Five, lived a life very similar to that of Balakirev, in that he was trained as a musician from a very young age. At the age of 10 (1849), Mussorgsky left for St. Petersburg to be taught piano by a professional, rather than his mother who had been teaching him before. When he only 12 he entered the cadet school of the Imperial Guard, all the while composing a piece titled *Porte enseigne Polka*, that was published after he graduated 4 years later (1856). Mussorgsky met Cui and Balakirev in 1857, as well as Vladimir Stasov, the main financial force behind the Free Music School, who convinced him to become a professional composer.

Mussorgsky attempted to learn and write in the classical style of Beethoven and Schumann, but he always seemed to want to achieve “new shores” as Mussorgsky himself put it. (1280) While he had to take up a normal job between 1863 and 1867 in order to help his family back home, he continued to compose, but many of his works during this time went unfinished. He looked to Stasov and Rimsky-Korsakov for help during this time as he wanted to keep writing. Mussorgsky felt that he was only half-

educated in the ways of music, yet he maintained the “firm faith in the future of national Russian musicians.” (1280)

In 1869, Mussorgsky took up another job, this time in the forestry service. The stresses of his life caused him to start drinking heavily and to have epileptic episodes. The composer died weeks after his 42nd birthday, with much of his work either incomplete or too rough to publish. Rimsky-Korsakov edited many of his works so they could be performed posthumously.

One of Mussorgsky’s works that has impact on the culture of the west was his set of piano pieces titled *Pictures at an Exhibition (1874)*. The paintings that originally inspired Mussorgsky to write the music were made by Viktor Hartmann. These paintings were reproduced by San Francisco-based art and music critic Alfred Frankenstein. In his July 1939 article in *Musical Quarterly*, Frankenstein uses Mussorgsky’s music as a muse to make a new painting. Another of Mussorgsky’s works that has had an influence in the west is his *Night on Bald Mountain*. The vivid use of dynamics and tension and the percussive and foreboding sound created allowed for the animators at Disney to use it in their 1940 major motion-picture *Fantasia*.

The remaining member of the Russian Five was Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and he is the most influential of them to the current state of music with his numerous editions to his peers’ works, many posthumously, and the nature of his own works.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was born on March 18, 1844 in a small town named Tikhvin, near Novgorod. As a young boy, he took piano lessons from local teachers in his hometown. At the age of 12 (1856) he left for St. Petersburg to attend the Naval School. While attending the Naval School, he took piano lessons from a professional musician in

St Petersburg, Theodore Canille. Canille was the man who introduced Rimsky-Korsakov to Balakirev, Cui and Borodin. After Rimsky-Korsakov graduated from the Naval School in 1862, he served two and a half years aboard the *Almaz*, a clipper in the Imperial Navy. While on the trip, Rimsky-Korsakov kept writing music and sent letters to Balakirev discussing his compositions. He returned to Russia in the summer of '65 and relocated to St. Petersburg where he spent the rest of his life. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote so much while on his tour that in December of the year he moved to St Petersburg, he had his First Symphony performed at the Free Music School with Balakirev directing the piece.

In 1871 Rimsky-Korsakov was hired by the St Petersburg Conservatory of Music as a professor of composition and orchestration, even though “he was aware of inadequacy of his own technique.” (1516) He held this position till his death in 1908. While teaching there, he also took up a private student, Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971). Stravinsky famously set off a riot with in Paris in 1913, with the debut his work, *The Rite of Spring*. Rimsky-Korsakov left his position in the Imperial Navy in 1873, but stayed as the inspector to the military orchestras, until his position was dissolved in 1884. While not particularly gifted in the art of conducting, he did work as one. His directing debut was at a charity concert in 1874, for the victims of a famine. This instance was also the premiere of his 3rd Symphony. He worked as the assistant conductor for the Court Chapel from 1883 to 1894, in which he led both choirs and orchestra. After a few years of experience in conducting that he gained from the Court Chapel and the Navy, Rimsky-Korsakov was invited to conduct the annual Russian Symphony Series from 1886 until 1900. He attended a few other important events in which he was the conductor. For example, he conducted in a series of concerts in Paris in 1889 that played exclusively

Russian music; he conducted at a very similar event, again in Paris, in 1900. His last event outside of Russia was a 1907 concert in Paris, where he conducted works that were considered historical to Russia. These works included some of his own, as well as those by Glinka, Balakirev, and Tchaikovsky.

Politically, Rimsky-Korsakov was a very outspoken man. He openly showed his disgust for the czar, and the power-structure it stood for. He fought against the government censors when they attempted to censor the libretto to one of his own operas, *The Golden Cockerel* (libretto written by Pushkin, 1799-1837). The uncensored work was only performed after the Revolution of 1917. While not particularly aggressive on his stance, he did openly support the Revolution in 1905, and because of this, he briefly lost his tenure at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Rimsky-Korsakov's revolutionary thinking and gusto made him a focal point of support and bravado for nationalism, even after his death.

Rimsky-Korsakov was never away from composing. As a member of the Russian Five, Rimsky-Korsakov was deeply involved in all their works, either as an advisor or editor. For example, after Mussorgsky's death in 1881, Rimsky-Korsakov took many of his manuscripts, including Mussorgsky's now famous opera *Boris Godunov*, and made the works ready for publication. (1516) Rimsky-Korsakov's adaptations and edits of his peers' works have cemented him in the core of what is Russian Nationalist music.

Rimsky-Korsakov's greatest contribution to the culture of the west is his piece *Flight of the Bumblebee*. While the piece itself was meant to be only an orchestral interlude to an opera, it is used everywhere. Very often, it is used if one wants to convey a feeling of being "frantic" or "a busy-bee," as the quick passage of the 16th notes gives

this impression. The image being personified by the music is often viewed as being on the precipice of falling apart. This notion brings up a certain irony to it, as in order to perform the piece requires a certain calm and tranquility of mind to play that quickly.

The Russian Five, the group of composers out of St Petersburg during the Romantic Era, changed the world of music as we know it. They showed that even without the conservatory teachings of people long ago, you can compose music that speaks to the people. One more major composer came from Russia during the time of these five men. While he didn't start any new music schools or turn the musical world on its head from an early age or defy all notions of what music is with his works, he did make the biggest impact of any Russian composer. Tchaikovsky simply wrote music, but the music he wrote was so profound that no composer has come to match it since.

Chapter 3:

The Life and Works of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

“The Americans think the first moments suffers from ‘the lack of a central idea around which to assemble such a host of musical fantasies, which make up the breezing and ethereal whole.’ The same critic discovered in the finale ‘syncopation on the trills, spasmodic interruptions of the subject, and thundering octave passages’! Think what the appetites these Americans have: after every performance, Bulow was obliged to repeat *the entire finale!* Such a thing could never happen here.”

–P. Tchaikovsky (Excerpt from a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov)

One name sticks out when discussing Russian music from the 1800s:

Tchaikovsky. His works are known as some of the standards in the Classical Music spectrum. He wrote the music to *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* ballets, the Overture-Fantasy *Romeo and Juliet*, and a Festival Overture for the Exhibition, better known as the *1812 Overture*. Many of Tchaikovsky’s pieces are well known by people both inside and outside of the realm of education about the composer. His works are often played in their entirety when they are a focal point of a concert; more often, however, his works are used in an excerpt in various media, including, but not limited to commercials, Saturday morning cartoons, video games and major motion pictures.

Pyotr (Peter) Ilyich Tchaikovsky is the most prolific and well known Russian composer from the Romantic Era, spanning well over eighty Opus numbers, three full ballets, nearly a dozen operas, six symphonies, four orchestral suites, and many concert pieces, solo and chamber music, and arrangements of the works of other composers. His works are heard in nearly every venue of western culture.

On May 7, 1840 Pyotr (Peter) Ilich Tchaikovsky was born to Alexandra Andreyevna (mother) and Ilya Petrovich Tchaikovsky (father), in the small town of Votkinsk. Ilya Petrovich was educated at the School of mining Engineers, from which he

graduated in 1817 at the age of twenty-two. Ilya Petrovich reached the recognition of a silver medal before being appointed to the Mining and Geological Department. While he did not receive many promotions within the department (only obtaining the rank of lieutenant-colonel), he was lecturing for the Scientific Committee of the Institute of Mining Engineers at the age of only thirty.

In his private life, he was known for his virtues and the straightforwardness of his character. “Benevolence—or more correctly speaking, a universal affection—was one of his chief characteristics. In youth, manhood, and old-age he loved his neighbor, and his faith in Him remained unshaken. His trustfulness knows no limits; and even the loss of his entire fortune, due to misplaced confidence, did not avail to make him suspicious of his fellow-men.” (M. Tchaikovsky, 3)

Considering his profession, it holds a slight irony that Ilya Petrovich did not care much for the visual art or science; but he did hold an interest in drama and music. He played flute as a youth, but did not continue later into life.

In 1827 Ilya Petrovich married Maria Carlovna Kesier and had one daughter, Zinaida. Soon thereafter, Maria passed away and Ilya remarried in 1833. With his second wife, Alexandra Andreievna Assier, Ilya had six children, five boys and one girl. The boys were Nikolai, Ippolit, and twins Anatol and Modeste, and Pyotr (Peter) Illich; and the girl, Alexandra.

There is very little known about Tchaikovsky’s mother, however Modeste Tchaikovsky, one of her sons, gives a first-hand account of her:

“As early as 1816 she was left motherless, and was brought up in a Female Orphanage, where she completed her education in 1829. The instruction in this school appears to have been excellent. Alexandra

Andreivna had a thorough knowledge of French and German. In addition, she played a little and sang nicely. A satisfactory education for a girl who had neither means nor position...unlike her husband, was rather reserved and chary of endearments. Her kindness, as compared to his universal amiability, seemed somewhat austere, and showed itself more frequently in act than in speech.”

The lasting effects of Alexandra on the composer himself were quite profound, “Peter had implored her to accept a regular allowance, which she absolutely refused. ‘I am content with I have,’ she told him; ‘as far as I can be, after the heavy blows fate has dealt me, I am happy.’” (6) Her acceptance of what you’re given and to be proud of that gift shows up in actions of Peter later in life. While not particularly overt or obvious in the actions or works of Peter, the mannerisms and the writing of Peter’s letters show this pride; perhaps this is the root of Tchaikovsky’s Nationalism.

Peter’s relationships with his siblings were not really critical to him as a growth as a person and a composer with one great exception, his brother Modeste. Peter and Modeste shared quite a bit in common and often leaned on each other for support. The letter correspondence between the two reveals some very intimate details about both of the men.

In a letter that Peter wrote to both Anatol and Modeste Tchaikovsky when Peter was twenty-six years old, he tells him about his creeping depression that is slowly consuming him and how it is effecting him as a whole, “my journey, although sad, is safely over. I thought about you the whole way, and it grieved me to think that lately I had overshadowed you with my own depression, although I fought hard against it. Do not, however, doubt my affection even if I do not

always show it outwardly. (69)” This letter shows the affections that Peter held towards Modeste. Even in his darkest moment of depression, Peter felt that his brother’s affliction was more important than his own. In the very same letter, Peter goes on “I hug you both. Do not cease to love me. Give my remembrances to everyone. Write! I will write again soon. I have just written to Dad. You must also do so.” This further illustrates Peter’s love for his family, even if it isn’t thoroughly tangible.

As Peter was finishing his time in the military as civil service, he was debating to follow this as a career or continue his musical training at the conservatory. In possible opposition to the growth of his musicianship, he was on the cusp of getting promoted. In a letter that he wrote to his sister, Alexandra, “I am getting on well. I hope soon to get a raise, and be appointed ‘clerk for special duty.’ I shall get an additional twenty roubles to my salary and less work. God grant it may come to pass!” (40) In the same letter, Peter expresses both his ambitions and fears of pursuing music as a profession,

“I think I have already told you that I have begun to study the theory of music with success. You will agree that, with my rather exceptional talents (I hope you will not mistake this for bragging), it seems foolish not to try my chances in this direction. I only dread my own easy going nature. In the end my indolence will conquer: but if not, I promise you that I shall do something. Luckily it is not yet too late.”
(40)

Peter was torn to either serve his country at a meager civil servant job or follow his blossoming passion for music. Modeste gives first hand account of the way his brother acts in accordance to both the love of his country and his love of music:

“I recollect having made two discoveries at this time which filled me with astonishment. The first was that the two ideas “brother Peter” and “work” were not necessarily opposed; the second, that besides pleasant and interesting music, there existed another kind, exceeding unpleasant and wearisome, which appear nevertheless to be more important of the two. I will remember which what persistence Peter Ilich would sit at the piano for hours together playing the most ‘abominable’ and ‘incomprehensible’ preludes and fugues. My astonishment knows no bounds when he informed me he was writing exercises.” (40-41)

Tchaikovsky was a master of splitting his time up efficiently so he could both pursue his civil career and his evolution as a musician. “[He] devoted many hours to the study of the classical composers,” yet maintaining the “the chief aim of his existence,” his job. (41)

During the summer of 1862, the job that he pined for (as described in the letter to his sister) opened up. With “extra zeal and diligence,” he wanted to prove to his boss that he was the correct candidate for the job. Much to his distress, he was passed over and “[h]is indignation...knew no bounds, and there [was] little doubt that this incident had a great deal to do with his resolution to devote himself entirely to music.” Small details that alter the course of history, one change to a person’s life or a plan that didn’t come to fruition -- forever change the world. Akin to the metaphor about a butterfly’s wing beats, the minor detail about Peter’s life that he didn’t get the job and decided to spend more time on his music, forever altered the world as we hear it. What would the world be like if there was no *Nutcracker Suite* or *1812 Overture*?

As Peter went on with his ambition of pursuing music, he did so much as to put his whole weight behind it, even quitting his job, “[e]arly in 1863, Tchaikovsky resigned his place in the Ministry of Justice, and resolved to give himself entirely to music.” (44) Peter wrote another letter to his sister detailing how serious he was about pursuing music,

“I will not explain to you... what my hopes and intentions really are. My musical talent—you cannot deny it—is my only one. This being so, it stands to reason that I ought not to leave this God-sent gift so uncultivated and undeveloped. For this reason I have begun to study music seriously.” (44)

Herman Laroche, a musical writer and critic from St. Petersburg, gives an account of the years that Peter spent in St. Petersburg Conservatory, “at the conservatory...the curriculum consisted of the following subjects: Choral Singing, Solo Singing, Pianoforte, Violin, Violoncello, and Composition. Of all these subjects Tchaikovsky studied the last only.” (45) While at the conservatory, Peter formed a deep connection with one of the teachers, Nikolai Zarembo. Under Zarembo Peter studied harmony, counterpoint, church modes, form and instrumentation. Zarembo made an interesting observation about Peter’s opinions about German composers, “[Zarembo] was actually an enthusiastic admirer of Beethoven’s later period; but he stopped short at Beethoven, or rather at Mendelssohn...Tchaikovsky, who was more disposed towards empiricism, and by nature antagonistic to all abstractions, did not admire Zarembo’s showy eloquence, nor [his] structure of superficial logic.” (48) Tensions rose between the two men and was not helped by “the fact that Zarembo most frequently cited the authority of Beethoven, while, following the example of his master, Marx, he secretly—and sometimes openly—despised Mozart. Tchaikovsky, on the contrary, had more respect than enthusiasm for Beethoven, and never aimed to following in his footsteps.” (49)

In the summer of 1864, Tchaikovsky was assigned to write an overture on the subject of *The Storm* by Ostrovsky. Alexander Ostrovsky was a Russian playwright, living from 1823 to 1886. Tchaikovsky’s adaptation and orchestration to the play was

considered many things, among them, “Heretical.” (50) Tchaikovsky’s orchestration was very unusual for the time, built with tuba, English horn, harp and tremolo with violins in divisi, among other aspects, that were considered alien and very foreign at the time. Tchaikovsky’s teacher had a very strong stance on what he had just created, “[n]ever in the course of my life have I had to listen to such a homily on my sins as I then endured vicariously.” (50) After the presentation of *The Storm*, Anton Rubinstien, one of the founders of the Conservatory and another teacher of Tchaikovsky, addressed one of Tchaikovsky’s classmates, Herman Laroche, about the performance, “with unconscious humor, Rubinstien asked: ‘How dared you bring me such a specimen of your own composition,’ and proceeded to pour such vials of wrath upon my head that apparently he had nothing left for the real culprit, for when Peter Ilich himself appeared a few days later, the Director received him amiably, and only made a few remarks upon the overture.” This was not the last time that Tchaikovsky’s music, while he was still in school, had negative thoughts placed upon them by his teachers and peers.

Before Tchaikovsky could graduate from the conservatory, he had to do one final setting of a play into orchestration. He chose a setting of Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*. Friedrich Schiller was a German poet and playwright, living from 1759 to 1805. Tchaikovsky’s assignment was issued directly from the Director of the conservatory and was meant to be played at the ‘prize distribution,’ which was held at the end of each school year. The piece was presented to a large crowd that held several influential people, including “the pupils of the Conservatoire in the presence of the Directors of the Russian Musical Society, the Board of Examiners, the Director of the Court Chapel, and the Capellmeisters of the Imperial Opera.” Among those in attendance, the composer himself

was not there; he did not attend the premier to “avoid the *viva voce* examination, which ought to have preceded the performance.” (62) Director Rubinstein was “exceedingly displeased, and threatened to withhold Tchaikovsky’s diploma until he submitted to this public test” (this test being in front of a large, public crowd). However, this did not follow through as Tchaikovsky had already received his diploma before the performance, and also earned a silver medal. Despite this, the piece did not win over the crowd. The director was not impressed with the performance, and refused Tchaikovsky’s request that it be performed by the Russian Musical Society, claiming that “he could only agree on condition that ‘great alterations’ were made in the score.”

Members of another music school were in attendance to the performance. This school happens to include some of the members of the Russian Five: Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov and Cui. This school reviewed this piece with even less approval; Cui later wrote on this piece “In a word, I will only say that composers of the caliber of Reintaler and Volkmann will probably rejoice over Mr. Tchaikovsky’s cantata, and exclaim, ‘Our number is increased.’” Conversely, Laroche had a very different view on the work, he was one of the few to see it in a positive light: “I will tell you frankly that I consider yours is the greatest musical talent to which Russia can look in the future. Stronger and more original than Balakirev, loftier and more creative than Serov, far more refined than Rimsky-Korsakov.” This would not be the first time that Tchaikovsky would come to butt heads with the Russian Five. Also, unfortunately, this would be the last time that Tchaikovsky and Laroche would see eye-to-eye on Tchaikovsky’s music, and in their friendship.

Laroche attended the premiere of one of Tchaikovsky's operas in 1869, *The Voyevode*. While the opera was very well received, and "[Tchaikovsky] was recalled fifteen times and presented with a laurel wreath," it was not without its mishaps. One of the vocal soloists, who had been kept up the previous night by painful abscesses on his fingers, nearly fell over on many occasions, and "if Menshikova (one of the other vocal soloists) had not supported him in her arms, the curtain must have been rung down," as reported in a letter Tchaikovsky wrote to his brothers. (102) The applause for the first show was considered "stormy," and the composer was reveled by his friends and specialists. Despite this, the opera was only to be performed five times and then never to be heard or performed again. The first words of criticism came from an unusual place, Laroche, who normally was very supportive of Tchaikovsky's works until now. Laroche's review of the opera wasn't scalding, in-fact it contained much praise, but it was more the tone of the review that miffed Tchaikovsky. "It was not only his 'faint praise' of this work, but the contemptuous attitude which Laroche now assumed towards Tchaikovsky's talents as a whole, which wounded the composer so deeply that he broke off all connection with his old friend." (143)

While Tchaikovsky might have broken off social ties with Laroche, Laroche still publicly defended Tchaikovsky's work against the much more hostile Cæsar Cui. After the premiere of one of Tchaikovsky's operas, *The Oprichnik*, St. Petersburg 1874, Cui reported some very harsh words about the work. "The text might have been the work of a schoolboy; the music is equally immature and undeveloped. Poor in conception, and feeble throughout, it is such as might have been expected from a beginner, but not from a composer who has already covered so many sheets of paper." Cui didn't stop there,

“Tchaikovsky’s creative talents, which are occasionally apparent in his symphonic works, are completely lacking in *The Oprichnik*. The choruses are rather better than the rest, but this is only because of the folksong element which forms their thematic material.” Cui continued further, “Not only will *The Oprichnik* not bear comparison with other operas of the Russian school, such as *Boris Godunov* (an opera by Modest Mussorgsky), for instance, but it is even inferior to examples of Italian opera.” Tchaikovsky eventually would return the favor, but not until nearly four years later (1877) and as an excerpt to a letter he wrote to his patron at the time.

“C. Cui is a gifted amateur. His music is not original, but graceful and elegant; it is too coquettish--'made up'--so to speak. At first it pleases, but soon satiates us. That is because Cui's specialty is not music, but fortification, upon which he has to give a number of lectures in the various military schools in St. Petersburg. He himself once me that he could only compose by picking out his melodies and harmonies as he sat at the piano.” (251-252)

Laroche’s review of the opera was much more forgiving than Cui’s and was more reminiscent of the way they interacted back at the Conservatory. “...Tchaikovsky’s opera does not bear the stamp of this doubtful progress, but shows the work of gifted temperament.” This return is further noted by “[t]he wealth of musical beauties in *The Oprichnik* is so great that this opera takes a significant place not only among Tchaikovsky’s own works, but among all the examples of Russian dramatic music.” (151)

The greatest irony of this was that the harshest critic of opera was the composer himself. Tchaikovsky wrote: “*The Oprichnick* torments me. This opera is so bad that I always ran away from rehearsals, to avoid hearing another note.”(152) He even spoke a

death sentence for his own opera, “it has neither action, style, nor inspiration. I am sure it will not survive a dozen performances, which is mortally vexatious.” The opera did better than Tchaikovsky’s predictions, by two performances. It played only fourteen times, while not meaning a great deal, “remember that not a single new opera of the Russian school—*Boris Goduvov* (Moussorgky), *The Stone Guest* (Dargomijsky), *William Ratcliff and Angelo* (Cui)—had exceeded sixteen performances, and many had only reached eight.” (152)

Tchaikovsky was often his own worst critic when discussing his works. Many of his now renowned repertoire was once perceived, by him, to be lack-luster and lacking “artistic value.” In a letter to his long-standing patron Nadejda Filaretovna von Meck (Meck was Tchaikovsky’s patron for thirteen years, from 1877 to 1890, allowing him to compose full-time), Tchaikovsky speaks his thoughts on two pieces he was working on:

“You can imagine, dear friend, that recently my Muse has been very benevolent, when I tell you that I have written two long works very rapidly: a Festival Overture for the Exhibition (*1812 Overture*) and a *Serenade* in four movements for string orchestra. The overture will be very noisy. I wrote it without much warmth of enthusiasm; therefore it has no great artistic value. The *Serenade*, on the contrary, I wrote from an inward impulse; I felt it, and venture to hope that this work is not without artistic qualities.” (390)

He thought that *The 1812 Overture*, at its very best, an exercise in orchestration. Perhaps the most recognizable piece by the composer, a piece which has been placed with numerous venues of culture, was thought of as a throw-away piece by the composer that held no merit. This is not the only time that he stated his feelings on *The 1812 Overture*. In a letter to fellow composer Eduard Napravnik (1839-1916), a Czech composer working and living in Russia, Tchaikovsky further states his feelings toward the piece,

“[c]ould you possibly manage to have [*the Festival Overture (The 1812 Overture)*] played? If you like I will send the score for you to see. It is not of any great value, and I shall not be at all surprised or hurt if you consider the style of the music unsuitable to a symphony concert.” (405) The music-listening public during this time had to awaken to the splendor that was *The 1812 Overture*. Numerous accounts tell stories of when the composer had his piece played to increasingly positive reviews as his life went on. At the *1812 Overture*'s premiere in 1882, the Overture was the finale to a large set of works, all by Tchaikovsky; one music critic noted something had fallen short of expectations. The works that were performed that evening were: *The Tempest*, Songs from *Sniegourochka*, the Violin Concerto, *The Italian Capriccio*, “Songs” and *The 1812 Overture*. The music critic stated, “the three movements of the Violin Concerto were so ‘somnolent and wearisome that one felt no desire to analyze it in detail. *The ‘1812’ Overture* seemed to him ‘much ado about nothing.’ Finally he felt himself obliged to state the ‘lamentable fact’ that Tchaikovsky was ‘played out.’” (425-426).

Fortunately, for the rest of the musical world, that critic was wrong. The next large showing of *The 1812 Overture* was in 1887 at the Nobles' Club in St. Petersburg. The response this time to the work was vastly different. “The hall was full to overflowing, and the ovations endless. The Press criticisms of the music, as well as of Tchaikovsky's conducting, proved colorless and common-place, but on the whole laudatory.” (528) Even Tchaikovsky's less than amiable “friend,” Cui had an altered viewpoint than his norm: “[he] expressed some approbation for Tchaikovsky as a conductor, although he again found fault with him as a composer.” (528)

One of the most notable concerts for the composer himself was not a premiere of a piece or a homecoming, but on the third night a performances in Prague. After meeting Dvorak a few days earlier, Tchaikovsky was invited to hold concerts at the local Opera House and he graciously accepted. The program included five of Tchaikovsky's works, topping it off with *The 1812 Overture*. "Of all these works the last-named (the Overture) excited the greatest applause. Tchaikovsky sums up his impressions as follows: 'Undoubtedly it was the most eventful day of my life. I have become attached to these good Bohemians...and with good reason! Heavens, what enthusiasm! Such as I have never known, but in my own dear Russia! A moment of absolute bliss;' forever the romantic, he concludes with "but only one moment." (551)

Tchaikovsky's sense of his own wonderment at his works is a mere ripple of what he will become. He would not be able to fathom the impact that his works would have on nearly every aspect of culture in a place thousands of miles away from his birth and in a time vastly different than his own. He may have come to understand what his works meant to the world, but only at a point in his life where he could sit back and enjoy the ride. He has written the music and it is forever sealed in ink.

As one looks to the future, one must heed the past. Tchaikovsky's works, along with the story of his life comes to a point with the closing statement from *Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky*:

"My work is finished. With this account of Tchaikovsky's last moments my task, which was to express the man, is not accomplished. To characterize the artist in every phase of his development, and to determine his position in the history of music, is beyond my powers. If all the documental and authentic evidence I have collected in this book should serve as a fundamental material for another writer capable of fulfilling such a task, the most cherished aim of all my efforts will have been attained."

Modeste's last words on the work that he compiled on his brother are not only testament to the love they shared, but a call to other authors to attempt to finish the work which he had started. Modeste's ultimate gifts of love were time and dedication, perpetuating his brother's music and keeping Tchaikovsky's musical legacy alive forever.

Chapter 4:

The Influence of Romantic Russia Music on Western Culture

As a culture we use music to accent everyday activities, often without knowing who wrote the music, or for what reason. We can hear the works by casually viewing a Saturday morning cartoon, or making a point to go out to a movie, or attending a ballet that shares the name of the work. All the while, we passively listen as the masterpieces wash over us. We have become accustomed to their place in these venues. This is highly unfortunate as the music that is lying right under the visual stimulus has so much to offer. We do not directly receive these gifts as we are too focused on what is right in front of us visually. It is a very rare occasion that the visual empowers the music; but when it does it has a magical effect.

As you look at the music that is used in western popular culture to ‘accent’ certain events, or feelings, you see a few names of composers popping up quite often. You often hear pieces such as: *Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Barber (1910-1981), "O Fortuna Desperata," from *Carmina Burana*, by Carl Orff (1895-1982), "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from *Peer Gynt* by Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) and "Dance of the Knights" from *Romeo and Juliet* by Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953). These works might come up whenever it is appropriate for a ‘classical’ sounding piece to be used. However, there were some works that seemed to haunt me whenever I would hear them played outside the rigor of performance practice and formality. After some researching into these

works, I soon discovered that they are all composed by Russians who lived and worked in the Romantic Period.

The Russian Romantic composers have a striking impression on the popular culture of the west. It is to the point where some of their music is heard on an annual basis at some of the most patriotic events in the United States. This is slightly ironic considering that many of the composers believed in the nationalistic ideal that Russia is the best country on earth, Glory to the Motherland, and so-on. We can look at the Fourth of July, the entire Christmas holiday season, some of the most celebrated movies and television shows (and some not so celebrated) and one of the pinnacles of ballet performance, as examples of where music effects the event. One can observe that all these events have something in common: the music by Russian composers that is used.

I will be discussing how six different works by three different composers from the romantic era in Russia have been used, and have impacted portions of our current American culture. The selected works are: Modest Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*, and Pytor Ilich Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite Op. 71*, *Swan Lake Op. 20*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Festival Overture in E-flat Major Op. 49*, better known as *The 1812 Overture*. These works, while significant in each of their own right in the musical world, have impacted the popular culture of the west in a way that it is almost impossible to think of a world without them.

Disney's 1940 film *Fantasia* is known for pioneering many advances in animation, audio recording and the melding of the two. *Fantasia* is also the first time wherein the image viewed on-screen is meant to add to the music being heard, rather than

the other way around. Also, this was the first time that music was visualized and put into a motion picture format. The movie features seven different works by seven different composers spanning across the entire spectrum of classical music, from Bach's (1685-1750) *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor* to Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. The work that concludes the movie is a combination of Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* and Franz Schubert's (1797-1828) *Ave Maria*. The narrator of the film, Deems Taylor (1885-1966), says that these two pieces "are so utterly different in construction and mood that they set each other off perfectly." Taylor further says that the two pieces together depicts the conflict between "the profane and the sacred" while serving as an astute end to the movie.

The image that the Disney animators chose to make as the personification of Mussorgsky's music is a character known as Chernabog. Chernabog is constructed as a large, nocturnal, demon-like figure that sits upon the top of a mountain that has the power



Chernabog: Created by Walt Disney Pictures

to raise the spirits of the dead. The character has been titled as to be either the personification of "Satan himself," as said by Walt Disney, or to be the manifestation of the fears that we all share. In the movie, Chernabog summons the restless spirits from a nearby town to perform his demonic fire-dance, sacrificing a few souls to create more demons. At the peak of his power, Chernabog is only repelled by the coming of the morning and the sound of church bells off in the distance. Hearing the bells, he covers his face with his wings and retreats back into the mountain.

This frightening image of Chernabog stemmed directly from the animator's imagination and their interpretation of Mussorgsky's music. This image of Chernabog and the combination of the music to go with him has been cemented into our culture so that it is hard to find an instance where you will see Chernabog without also hearing Mussorgsky's music to accompany him. Chernabog's other appearances in Disney's products and features have been accompanied by *Night on Bald Mountain* playing behind him, such as in the 1991 featurette *50 Years of Magic-Best of Disney* or the 2002 videogame *Kingdom Hearts* made by Disney and Square Enix. Before *Fantasia* was released, the idea of a 'demon' that was a large, horned, winged beast with super-natural powers was already around; *Fantasia* further perpetuated this idea. The personification of the music into this beast is an unavoidable correlation in our culture.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* contains one of the most recognizable phrases in classical music. "The Love Theme" is a phrase that has been used in a multitude of instances spanning over many years of varied media. The phrase itself is only a few bars long, but it contains such passion that it is reasonable to see why it is used so often. The notation of the beloved phrase is as follows:

The image displays a musical score for the 'Love Theme' from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. The score is written for Flute (Fl.) and Oboe (Ob.) in a key signature of three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a 2/4 time signature. The first system shows measures 210 and 211. The Flute part begins with a rest in measure 210, followed by a melodic line in measure 211 marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and an *allegretto* (*a 2*) tempo. The Oboe part also has a rest in measure 210 and enters in measure 211 with a similar melodic line. The tempo marking *allegretto* (*a 2*) is indicated above the notes. The phrase concludes in measure 211 with the instruction *dolce ma sensibile*. The second system shows measures 212 through 215, where the Flute and Oboe play a sustained harmonic accompaniment. The final system shows measure 220, where the Flute part has a rest and the Oboe part has a melodic line.

The short phrase that is presented above is the first time that this theme is overtly heard in its entirety and is the focal point of the sound emanating from the orchestra. During the entire orchestral suite, this phrase is played many times, by many different instruments, but always returns to evoke the passion that is contained within.

The phrase can be heard in a multitude of delivery mediums encompassing everything from Saturday morning cartoons to blockbuster films. The use of the short passage is varied, but all instances of its use have a very similar theme that is meant to be conveyed: love. In the 1979 Bond-movie *Moonraker*, there is a scene in which the character named Jaws (portrayed by Richard Kiel [b. 1939]), one of the villains of the movie, meets eyes with an attractive woman. During this scene, the “Love Theme” is playing over the exchange and it adds dimension to a character that is otherwise a fairly flat Bond-Baddie. However, this scene without the music, be it either you can’t hear it or it is muted, is much different. Without the music playing over the scene, the expression on the actor’s face is almost lascivious.

Steven Spielberg (1946), famous for directing such films as *E.T.: the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Schindler’s List* (1993), was a producer at Warner Brothers where he helped create cartoons. Many of Spielberg’s cartoons from the early to mid-nineties, including *Tiny Toons Adventures* (1990), *Freakazoid!* (1995), *the Animaniacs* (1993), and *Pinky and the Brain* (1995,) all included Tchaikovsky’s “Love Theme” at multiple points during their run. These cartoons used the music to emphasize tender moments between characters. Sometimes the music was used in a ridiculous way, as some of the characters were farces in the first place and the use of this music only added to the allure of the character as a whole.

Nickelodeon, a rival cartoon production company to Warner Brothers, both has produced and is still producing cartoons that all include Tchaikovsky's "Love Theme."



Wanda and Cosmo: created by Butch Hartman

The cartoons *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991), *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999), and *the Fairly OddParents* (2001) have all used the "Love Theme," each utilizing the music in varying situations. In contrast to Warner Brother's Productions, the Nickelodeon cartoons go out of their way to emphasize why the music is being used in various situations. For example, in a 2001 episode of *the Fairly OddParents* titled *The Dream Goat/The Same Dream*, there is a scene where a lost goat is reunited with its mate, and the "Love Theme" is played over this reunion. It is used in a way where it is not human love that is being expressed, but something greater. As the characters of the show say: "Wanda: awww, Goat Love! Cosmo: they say it's the most honest love around." (Wanda is voiced by Susanne Blakeslee and Cosmo by Daran Norris.) This phrase indicates that all species share in the power that is love, and Tchaikovsky's music expands past the barrier that is the human experience to invoke the transcendental feelings that connect us all.

The "Love Theme" was included in a 2001 videogame by Maxis, *The Sims*. The use of the music is a bit silly and slightly inconsequential, but it is used when two 'sims,' or player controlled simulated people, kiss. The music plays over the short animation and it seems like a second thought about the nature of the music as it is almost sudden and jarring to the rest of the experience of



the game. However, it still adds to the tender moment that the virtual characters share and it adds a nice touch to whole environment of the game.

One final example of the use of Tchaikovsky's "Love Theme" is in modern television shows. One show from 2007, *Pushing Daisies*, used the short phrase in a scene where two characters kiss for the first time. Why this scene is important is because the



Ned and Chuck: Created by Bryan Fuller

main character of the show, Ned, portrayed by Lee Pace (b. 1979), has the power to bring dead things back to life with his touch. However, this power comes with a cost, if he were to touch said thing again, it would die permanently and could not be revived a second time. Ned shares this kiss with Chuck, portrayed by Anna Friel (b. 1976). This kiss is special because Chuck was brought back to life by Ned after Chuck was murdered in a freak incident. The two characters love each other very much, but they could not physically express their love, even by the simplest touch, or else Chuck would die. The solution was for them to kiss with a sheet of plastic wrap between them. The scene when they finally kissed was filled with dramatic tension only to be accompanied by Tchaikovsky's music. Such longing and passion for each other was capped so perfectly with the "Love Theme." This example of how the "Love Theme" phrase is so interconnected to how we perceive romance, it begs the question: "what other piece could be chosen?"

Swan Lake by Tchaikovsky also has had an impact on the popular culture of the west. The ballet itself is an important facet of the culture of dance, but what has had more impact was a major motion-picture. This movie had the ballet, and by consequence the music, at its core. This movie, *Black Swan* (2010), follows the ballerina Nina Sayers,

portrayed by Natalie Portman (b. 1981), as she attempts to gain the role of the Swan Queen in *Swan Lake*. Nina is conflicted as her personality fits perfectly for the role of the White Swan, but she cannot get into character for the Black Swan, who is her polar opposite. Tchaikovsky's music is used throughout the movie, both in Nina's preparation for the ballet, and also as excerpts used throughout the movie as motivic ideas for the original soundtrack. In a 2010 interview with *SoundWorks*, lead music supervisor to the film Clint Mansell claims that he used Tchaikovsky's music as a foundation to make his own music. Mansell often altered the original track by, "slowing it down, or speeding it up, or playing it backwards...playing around with it to get the mood I wanted." He later mentioned what it was like to work with the material: "there was surprisingly little editing that needed to be done; the depth of emotion in the original work is amazing." With the release of this movie, Tchaikovsky's music has seen a new audience that it wouldn't otherwise have received. With new people listening to the music everyday, it's going to stick to someone's heart and live there forever.

Tchaikovsky's *The 1812 Overture* is used in a multitude of places, often to embellish on patriotism for the United States. It is very rare to attend a Fourth of July event and not hear *The 1812 Overture* played at some point. While the piece does have a certain bravado to it that fits right in the nature of what it feels (should feel) like to be American, it has been adopted by other events to convey a sense of grandeur.

Mythbusters (2003) once had a myth pertaining to the playing of *The 1812 Overture*. *Mythbusters* is a show in which urban legends and grossly exaggerated rumors are put to the test, usually in the most outlandish way possible. They have a motto on the show: "if we can't solve it, we'll blow it up!" The episode in which *The 1812 Overture* is

mentioned is called *The Exploding Trombone*. The myth is that a trombonist in a military



Mythbusters: created by Peter Rees

band wanted to get ‘extra-bang’ in his performance of the finale, and decided to put a firecracker in his mute. As the firecracker went off, the bell split back like a banana peel and the slide went shooting off and hit a second violinist. After testing this, it turned out that it was nearly impossible to mimic the results. What is so important about this myth is not the destruction of an instrument, but rather the need to add even more explosions to an orchestral piece that calls for a cannon battery in the percussion section. This brings the very American notion to mind: “if it’s worth doing, it’s worth overdoing!”

There is another example of using *The 1812 Overture*, but the reason why it is used differs significantly. In the 2006 movie *V for Vendetta*, the title character V, blows up the British Parliament building while *The 1812 Overture* plays in the background. *V for Vendetta* tells the story of a one-man terrorist group attempting to up-seat the British government at an undefined time in the future. The use of *The 1812 Overture* in this movie is two fold. First, it is used as explosive background music behind the images of the parliament building going in flames. The second is the underlying theme of the music itself: that a small but determined force can overcome oppression and succeed. This seems oddly close to the ‘American Dream:’ the little guy can succeed if he tries hard enough. Normally, this means having a family and being able to support it, but in this case it’s blowing up a government building.

The last work by Tchaikovsky in this series is his *Nutcracker Suite*. Both the ballet and the music that accompanies it are common place during the holiday season in

America. Many shopping centers and retail stores use music from the suite to advertise during the holiday season. The music has been so ingrained in our culture that the instant you here *Russian Dance-Trepak* you think “lets take the kids to visit Santa!” Many advertisers have profited from the overuse of this work and our willingness to follow it and the Christmas spirit in which it stands. The music is used to sell everything from Butterball Turkeys to ornaments for the tree, and we sit idly by as this music is used for this.

However, there are instances where the music is celebrated as being a masterpiece in its own right. In the movie *Fantasia*, there is a segment where *the Nutcracker Suite* is



featured. In this feature, various flora and fauna imitate the dance moves of the ballet dancers to invoke the power of the music in a way that human dancers could not. The music that is used in this

situation are excerpts but it still gets the beauty of the music across and reaches an audience that would otherwise have not experienced it.

A production of the ballet itself has become a staple in many cities over the years since its release. For example, the Pacific Northwest Ballet (founded 1972) has had an annual showing of *The Nutcracker Ballet* for the past years, and due to strong attendance every year, it is a likely possibility that this tradition will continue for a long time.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Flight of the Bumblebee* is one of the more-used clips from Russian Romantic music. This isn’t because of the emotional depth of the music itself, but more of the numerous uses in popular culture and the arrangements therein.

Flight of the Bumblebee is marked by its rapid 16th note passages and brisk tempo;

because of this many people outside of the ‘classical’ music realm have seen it as the one of the more difficult pieces to play due to its speed. This challenge has attracted many people to this work to arrange it for themselves or to try to play it as fast as possible as a demonstration of their technique. An early example of this piece being used came before the advent of many aspects of visual culture. The 1936 radio show *The Green Hornet* had its theme song based on *Flight of the Bumblebee*. This song was an arrangement by Al Hirt (1922-1999); Hirt was a jazz trumpeter from this time. The song here was used to make the listening audience feel involved in the rambunctious actions of the title character. Hirt’s arrangement would be used again as the intro in a 1966 television show with the same name. This same theme would be used again in the 2003 film *Kill Bill Vol. 1*.

Incidentally, Disney’s *Fantasia* would have included this piece. However, it did not make the final cut. The original intention of the work was to be used as a way for the viewing audience to see the entire orchestra as if they inherited the point of view of a fly as it went buzzing around the players. The intended effect was to have the sound change based on where the ‘fly’ was in the orchestra and have the final recording reflect that. Unfortunately, this had to be scrapped in the cutting room because in order for the audio to work correctly any theater that showed *Fantasia* would have to install extra speakers and hardware for it to work out properly. For the sake of financial practicality in the Disney Corporation, it was the smart move to keep the segment out. What is important about this is that this idea was the precursor to Surround Sound, and this pushed the envelope of what the technology could do at the time, and forced it to make necessary changes.

One can only wonder what the world would be like if these composers never wrote these works. Even if they did, what happens if the works were destroyed or lost or misplaced by some other tragedy? What pieces of music would have stepped up and been chosen as the 'go-to' piece when dealing with these kinds of situations? Would it have been a work by another Romantic composer? People using the music might even pull all the way back to the Baroque era to use Bach's and Handel's works. It is hard to speculate on what the world would be like, as every minute change in the past has an exponential result on the future. One thing is for certain: the works by these Romantic Russian composers are a stand-by, stable construct in our culture. These musical foundations have not budged in the twenty-two years that I have been alive; I can say with confidence that the music of the Russian Five and Tchaikovsky will stand the test of time, and continue to be pillars of our culture.

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