

Research on Rimsky-Korsakov compositional style

Subject: The Arts -- Music

Research Question: How does Rimsky-Korsakov promote Nationalism in his compositional style?

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Abstract

Many music scholars believe that Russians are among the best national music composers. National music began in Russia around 1830 and it was characterized by emergence of folk rhythms, folk dances and folk songs. Before then, Russians mainly listened to French and Italian Opera. However, Russian national music was not truly appreciated until 1865 when Rimsky-Korsakov produced his first composition because Russian operas that composed in the native motifs from 1830's did not do well enough to compete with the European artists. Therefore, I intended to explore how Rimsky-Korsakov promoted Nationalism in his compositional style in his four pieces of work, *The Golden Cockerel Suite*, *Scheherazade*, *The Snow Maiden Suite* and *Capriccio Espagnole*.

I approached this investigation using the following methodology:

1. I used both primary biographical data and secondary sources to understand Rimsky-Korsakov's cultural background and compositional style he employed in the four main symphonies in terms of the inspiration behind his style and the socio-political setting in which he did his work.
2. I conducted analysis, investigation, discussion and evaluation of the artist's actual music to gain an understanding of the methods Rimsky-Korsakov used in the selected

compositions. Eventually, I also looked at the role the artist played in influencing music compositional techniques, being that he was a musical trainer and editor.

3. I reached a definite conclusion based on the outcome of the investigation. The investigation demonstrated that Rimsky-Korsakov's compositional style was mainly influenced by his family background that made him familiar with both the Russian military culture and music. He was such a patriotic citizen of his country that he chose to use his great music talent in the navy instead of venturing in performance. This is the same spirit that informed his nationalism portrayed in his compositions. The aspect of culture portrayed in his compositions is the ancient Russian paganism and established social strata. Lastly, Rimsky-Korsakov influenced the work of more than 250 artists who attended his classes and he is acknowledged as the father of nationalistic music in Russia.

Introduction

Musical nationalism began in the 19th century when political movements were being formed in different parts of the world to fight for independence from colonialism. ¹It was a movement characterized by preference of native music elements like rhythm, dances, folk songs as well as the application of nationalist ideas in poetry, operas and other musical genres. ²During this era,

¹ Morrison, Simon. "The semiotics of symmetry, or Rimsky-Korsakov's operatic history lesson." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13.3 (2001): 261-293.

² Taruskin, Richard. "Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov." *Music Theory Spectrum* 33.2 (2011): 169-185.

new nations were being born in the West and the resistance against dominance by foreigners inspired artists to reject European classical music compositions, especially of French, German and Italian origins.

The topic of my investigation is: How does Rimsky-Korsakov promote Nationalism in his compositional style? This essay investigates how the compositional styles Rimsky-Korsakov used in his music promoted Russian motifs and music ideas. This topic suits my investigation because I have great interest in purpose and meanings of classical music. Before beginning to write a song, an author clearly sets out the meaning they want to pass across and the rationale for creating the work.

The Early Life of Rimsky-Korsakov

Rimsky-Korsakov was born in 1844 in Tikhvin, Russia³. Rimsky-Korsakov is especially known for vivid orchestrations that both descriptively painted the scene and suggested the mood.

Besides being one of the most celebrated Russian composers of the 19th Century, he was also an editor and a teacher⁴. His interest in music can be attributed to his background, given that his mother was a piano player. He began to take tutorials on composition rudiments and the piano by the age of 15 at the naval academy in St. Petersburg.

Figure 1: Rimsky-Korsakov

³ Naroditskaya, Inna. "Russian Rusalkas and Nationalism: Water, Power and Women." *Music of the Sirens* (2006): 216-249.

⁴ Halbe, Gregory A. *Music, drama and folklore in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Opera Snegurochka [Snowmaiden]*. Diss. The Ohio State University, 2004.



He started creating his first symphony with the help of Mily Balakirev, a composer of renown with amazing musical culture, after they first met in 1861. He left the naval academy in 1862 and embarked on a marine journey to the West. He did not complete the symphony until 1865 when he came back to St. Petersburg at the age of 21⁵. It was later successfully performed in December the same year. The symphony was followed by *Fantasy on Serbian Themes* composed in 1867. It was in the concert where he performed the second music that music critic Vladimir Stasov endorsed his music as one of native Russian compositions. ⁶The new term used for this genre was (*moguchaya kuchka*), which quickly gained popularity and historical records were written attributing it to Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky, César Cui, Aleksandr Borodin, and

⁵ Taruskin, Richard. "Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov." *Music Theory Spectrum* 33.2 (2011): 169-185.

⁶ Taruskin, Richard. "Catching Up with Rimsky-Korsakov." *Music Theory Spectrum* 33.2 (2011): 169-185.

Balakirev. Together they came to be known as *The Five*. Of them all, Rimsky-Korsakov was the most learned and the most talented.

Understanding Rimsky-Korsakov's Compositional Style

Rimsky-Korsakov's work stood out because of the superior Russian prosody and simple elegance he employed in his music. He had a very personal approach to Russian tradition in his compositions⁷. Members of the five practiced folklore mainly by creating dance songs drawn out from traditions. Their songs had a lot of rhythmic flexibility, tonal ambiguity and irregular phrase structure. However, Rimsky-Korsakov preferred "calendar songs", which were composed for definite traditional occasions. His greatest interest in folk music was the connections with the traditional culture. Hence both his own songs and those he did with The Five comprised local culture and reflected the ancient religious Slavic beliefs and pantheistic rites. In his writings, he acknowledged that he was inspired by the poetic aspects of the religion of sun-worship. Therefore, the words and the tunes he employed in his composition endeavored to perpetuate and reflect the pagan practices.

He got clear perceptions of the old pagan times that strongly drew him to the ideas of antiquity. These cultures ultimately had tremendous influence in the kind of work he did as a song writer. The composer's interest in the folklore was increased by the cultural studies done by

⁷ Halbe, Gregory A. *Music, drama and folklore in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Opera Snegurochka [Snowmaiden]*. Diss. The Ohio State University, 2004.

of Alexander Afanasyev.⁸In particular, *The Poetic Outlook on Nature by the Slavs*, which was the standard literature by this author became the main source of pantheistic inspiration for Rimsky-Korsakov's. He first made use of the thoughts Afanasyev expressed in *May Night* and even contributed to Gogol's story with calendar songs and folk dances. Later, he did the same for *The Snow Maiden*, in which he even added ceremonial dances known as *khorovodi*. The work of Rimsky-Korsakov gained recognition among Slavicists and music scholars as folklore art that influenced the relationship between religions like Christianity and paganism.

Rimsky-Korsakov drew great inspiration from Balakirev who started composition years ahead of him. Since he was not a trained song writer, he contemplated abandoning music many times but Balakirev persuaded him to keep on composing and consider enrolling for formal music studies⁹. Balakirev even gave him lessons on the techniques whenever he was off duty at the navy. His interest in Russian antique cultures can also partly be attributed to Balakirev who challenged him to venture into criticism, literature and history.

Balakirev was a great artist that highly valued nationalism music. He significantly determined Rimsky-Korsakov musical taste and compositional techniques.¹⁰He also contributed to Rimsky-Korsakov's breakthrough in musical composition because he helped him create the first musical piece that helped to highlight his style and philosophy.

⁸ Leet, Gregory Nicholas. *The Compositional History, Critical Reception, and Musical Style of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's Servilia and Pan Voyevoda*. Diss. Columbia University, 2002.

⁹ Naroditskaya, Inna. "Russian Rusalkas and Nationalism: Water, Power and Women." *Music of the Sirens* (2006): 216-249.

¹⁰ Leet, Gregory Nicholas. *The Compositional History, Critical Reception, and Musical Style of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's Servilia and Pan Voyevoda*. Diss. Columbia University, 2002.

Analysis of Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade

In Scheherazade the first movement begins with a grim bass motif. It is written in stressing notes E-D-C-B on a descending scale. This stands for the personality of the bossy Sultan as the first theme illustrates below. The notes are followed by a number of chords similar to the ones at the beginning of *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, and then a leitmotif representing the traits Scheherazade, who is the woman telling the story. ¹¹The second theme below is the representation of the sensuous winding and tender violin solo tune with a harp accompaniment.

Figure 2: Scheherazade first and second themes



Rimsky-Korsakov explained that the unity phrase that appeared to be representing Scheherazade's husband at the point where the suit begins looks like a datum but in the story, Scheherazade's spouse can't come in here. Thus, the composition is based on free musical data development. The formation of orchestral suite has to be seen in multiple movements closely held together by its community of motives and themes while at the same time giving fairy story pictures and background character designs.

¹¹ Seshagiri, Urmila. *Race and the Modernist Imagination*. Cornell University Press, 2010

Rimsky-Korsakov used to contrast keys which in the initial movement, strongly relates C and E major. Together with clear orchestration of simple melodies, lyrical notation, assembled rhythms and talent, they enabled the composition of Scheherazade. Unity is achieved between the movements through brief intros in all the four¹². In addition to the introduction, movement three has an intermezzo. The violin solo and another theme close to it come at the end of the fourth movement and they represent Scheherazade. Such usage of the themes of the sea to end a suite is believed to be influenced by the author's initial career as a naval officer.¹³ The calm coda concluding the last movement is a representation of Scheherazade who finally gets permission to have a peaceful sleep after she manages to persuade the Sultan.

As a native Russian work, the score used a piccolo, flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons, horns, timpani, tuba bass drum, tam tam, snare drums, strings and a harp. This explains why it is very popular. The work has original and piquant tunes, amazing orchestral spectrum, and a soft oriental flavor. These features were mostly absent in the main orchestral compositions of the era. Moreover, it communicates directly without interference of quasi-symphonic issues of structure and texture.

This piece had great connection with the fairy tales, Sinbad but Rimsky-Korsakov intentionally went for vague titles for the movements to avoid their association with any tale or voyage in specific. However, the author mentions something about adventure of Prince Ajib in connection with the last movement, initially named as finale. Later, he edited the work, changing the titles

¹² Leet, Gregory Nicholas. *The Compositional History, Critical Reception, and Musical Style of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's Servilia and Pan Voyevoda*. Diss. Columbia University, 2002.

¹³ Seshagiri, Urmila. *Race and the Modernist Imagination*. Cornell University Press, 2010

altogether with a view that his composition should have been regarded by the listeners as mere Oriental-themed symphony that gives the sense of some kind of fairy tale. He also explained that even in the second edition, he did not do away with the name Scheherazade since it evoked thoughts of fairy tale adventures of the east and Arabian Nights in the minds of the listeners.

The movements in this song allude to some central aspect of Russian oral literature. The first movement was related to The Sea and Sinbad's Ship. This was played on E-major and E-minor keys and it comprised of a number of tunes that in general included forms of A B C A1 B C1. Each part of this movement is really unique but they share a number of aspects of tune figures that cut across, bringing them together as the movement. In form, ¹⁴this movement is not far from the classical symphony but it is even much closer to the collection of motives brought out in *Antar*, which was a piece previously composed by the same author.

The second movement, *Kalandar Prince* was played on B minor and it was based on some kind of a ternary variation and theme that can be defined as a fairy tale¹⁵. The only change on these variations is realized through accompaniment that stressed the author's character in the piece. The section had such simple musical structure that its orchestral brightness and clarity came out boldly. Within the overall line of rhythm is quick section of muted trumpet and trombones that emphasizes both structural and tonal variations in the motifs of the fanfare.

The third movement bring into mind The Young Prince and The Young Princess, which is played on the G major. In consideration of the overall musical composition and structure, this ternary

¹⁴ Seshagiri, Urmila. *Race and the Modernist Imagination*. Cornell University Press, 2010

¹⁵ Leet, Gregory Nicholas. *The Compositional History, Critical Reception, and Musical Style of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's Servilia and Pan Voyevoda*. Diss. Columbia University, 2002.

movement was perhaps the simplest. Its outer parts have rhythmic content while the inner parts allude to the ideas of Tamara. Nevertheless, all the sections of the movement share the same motif and tempo, and the movement has an overall fast coda to the inner ideas, hence it is nicely balanced.

The last one, Festival at Baghdad has its setting in the sea and it begins with E minor and ends with E major. ¹⁶This is a movement that holds onto features of the preceding ones even though it also introduced a number of new motifs. For instance, it begins with an introduction then proceeds to the section of Vivace inspired by the theme of Sultan Shakhriar's before repeating the violin line of the main Scheherazade. It also repeats the fanfare theme to represent the ship wreck. ¹⁷There is repetition of tunes in such an ordered manner that the movement keeps a coherent flow with continuous symphonic suite instead of distinct movements. It portrays a last contrasting relationship of the common minor Schahriar motif to Scheherazade's main tonic cadence ends up in a peaceful, lyrical and fantastic way (Mirsky, 21).

Analysis of Rimsky-Korsakov's Capriccio Espagnol, Op. 34

¹⁶ Leet, Gregory Nicholas. *The Compositional History, Critical Reception, and Musical Style of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's Servilia and Pan Voyevoda*. Diss. Columbia University, 2002.

¹⁷ Mirsky, Prince DS. *Contemporary Russian Literature*. Wildside Press LLC, 2010.

Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol* is a celebration of Spanish tunes and religions the author liked. They also feature several flamboyant solos from various orchestral instruments. This work can be classified into short-term movements as *Alborada* whose theme is founded on a celebration Spanish dance that celebrates rising of the sun; *Variazioni* – a romantic and slow movement different from the rest; *Alborada* – a movement almost similar to the first one, except that it was in a distinct key; *Scene e Canto Gitano* which was a gypsy tune; and *Fandango Asturiano*- a vigorous Northern Spanish dance.

Figure 3: *Alborada, Scene e Canto Gitano and Fandango Asturiano* themes

I. Alborada

N. Rimsky-Korsakov

Vivo e strepitoso ♩ = 126

Piano

IV. Scena e Canto gitano.

in B.
Allegretto.
quasi Cadenza (D)
con forza

dimin. *criso*



The first movement of the melody begins with great energy. ¹⁸An Albaroda was a melody that came from a piece of instrument that Shepherds played at dawn. It was played on a bagpipe with tambourine accompaniment. Besides tambourine, any other befitting percussion instrument can be used.

The second movement starts with a horn section tune although Rimsky-Korsakov did not use the typical *Variazioni*. Instead, he went for a much slower but warmer variation of this melody. The horns are followed by diverse groups of instruments playing the very theme, though with a different aspect each time.

Alborada, the third movement is almost similar to the first one and it alternates between the soloist and the orchestra. However, this time the solo is different.

The fourth movement opens with a triangle melody and it also has a number of flashy parts containing other groups of instruments including horns, violin, and the harp. Scene e canto Gitano was based on a new scale that made it have a foreign look. The scene painted by the author is that of a novel with reminiscent orchestration and form.

¹⁸ Halbe, Gregory A. *Music, drama and folklore in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Opera Snegurochka [Snowmaiden]*. Diss. The Ohio State University, 2004

The orchestra then immediately jumps straight in to the last movement called Fandango Asturiano, in which there are some tunes used in the first four movements. This is courtship dance of Roman origin and is played on a guitar with accompaniment of castanets.

In terms of instrumentation, this piece used flutes, English horn, piccolo, horns, oboes, clarinets, tuba, trumpets, bass drums, tambourine, timpani, castanets, triangle, bass drum, strings and harps.

Analysis of Rimsky-Korsakov's The Golden Cockerel Suite

This romantic piece of art was first performed in 1908 and it comprised of four movements. Like all the others, this opera is a fairy tale too. The four movements are held together by both their dramatic and musical components. The artist's creativity in this music is unbelievable. Each time, his words bring out every single theme in a new perspective, portray a different picture and create a new mood. The song employs the same themes and motifs at different parts to express diverse scenes, actions and figures. ¹⁹The rhythmic fusion at its end intimately unites the feelings of both the antagonist and his wife Sheherazade in such a gentle way that one can see the Sultan's heart being softened by the tales. At the end of the musical narrative of the Orient are echoes of the woman's lovely theme.

¹⁹ Hodges, Wilfrid. "The geometry of music." *Music and mathematics: From Pythagoras to fractals* (2003): 91-111.

This song is ballet-opera that alludes to the song “The Fairy Tale of the Little Golden Cockerel” written by Alexander Pushkin in 1834²⁰. Rimsky-Korsakov was inspired to do this work by the political state of Russia at the time of the composition. It turned out to be a satirical libretto that reflected the real prevailing political state of the nation following its defeat in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905²¹. Apparently, Tsar Dodon as a character in the song, represents Tsar Nikolai II who had forcefully joined the war after Russians made attempts to stop him. Because of the sensitivity of its primary theme, the opera was outlawed officially by the political authorities. In 1908, his son Maximilian Steinberg and Alexander Glazunov developed an orchestral collection from the piece. ²²The duo’s work also had four sections that brought out the binding melodies and themes of the opera.

Several instruments are used together in The Golden Cockerel. Strings in it include double bass, cello, and violin. It also has a number of woodwinds including bass clarinet, a piccolo, oboes, flutes, English horns and bassoons. Its brass sound comprised of a tuba, trombones, trumpet, contralto, trumpets and French horns; while percussions included tam-tam, xylophone, drum, bass, cymbals, glockenspiel, tambourine, snare drum, triangle and timpani.

Analysis of Rimsky-Korsakov’s The Snow maiden

²⁰ Halbe, Gregory A. *Music, drama and folklore in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Opera Snegurochka [Snowmaiden]*. Diss. The Ohio State University, 2004

²¹ Mirsky, Prince DS. *Contemporary Russian Literature*. Wildside Press LLC, 2010.

²² Hodges, Wilfrid. "The geometry of music." *Music and mathematics: From Pythagoras to fractals* (2003): 91-111.

The song was an opera with four acts composed from one of Alexander Orlovsky's tales. It was first staged in 1882 at Saint Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater. ²³The opera combines fairy tale figures with real human characters i.e. Forest Sprite, Grandfather Frost and Bonny Spring. Forest Sprite is mainly highlighted in the Prologue before the story introduces human figures. ²⁴It tells a twisty romantic tale that has several opportunities for short other art forms such as dances, large-scale chants, lyrical ensembles and arias²⁵.

Rimsky-Korsakov endeavored to differentiate each character category musically. Therefore, many characters were assigned individual leitmotifs. Besides, the distinctions, the writer identified the townspeople with folk music.

It is introduced at the Prologue by Beautiful Spring, which is about Berendeya by night. Light of the moon can be seen illuminating topography of peaks covered by the snow, a river and thick forests. At the centre of all these is the palace of Tsar made with richly curved wood. There is a cock crow and though it's spring, there is unending cold in the land that has lasted 15 years from the time Snow Maiden was born. The second part of the opera is "The Procession of Tsar Berendey" which is such a slow stately march. The third movement is based on an act set in a forest clearing where people of the village dance in celebration of the spring. Finally, the fourth

²³ Morrison, Simon. "The semiotics of symmetry, or Rimsky-Korsakov's operatic history lesson." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13.3 (2001): 261-293.

²⁴ Mirsky, Prince DS. *Contemporary Russian Literature*. Wildside Press LLC, 2010.

²⁵ Naroditskaya, Inna. "Russian Rusalkas and Nationalism: Water, Power and Women." *Music of the Sirens* (2006): 216-249.

part is where Snow Maiden gets permission from Bonny Spring to fall in love and she declares that she loves Mizgir²⁶.

This opera uses a number of vocals to dramatize the tale. The voice of Tsar Berendey is tenor, the voice of the Spring Beauty is mezzo-soprano, the voice of Grandfather Frost is bass, and the voice of The Snow Maiden is soprano²⁷. Its chorus comprises of assorted silent roles that sound like gudok-players, gusili-players, bag-pipers, and birds.

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²⁶ Mirsky, Prince DS. *Contemporary Russian Literature*. Wildside Press LLC, 2010.

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