

Notes on the Program

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Prelude to *Khovanshchina*

Modest Musorgsky; orch. Rimsky-Korsakov

Blessed with hindsight, modern music lovers have little difficulty seeing that Modest Musorgsky was one of the two most extraordinary Russian composers of his time, the other being Tchaikovsky, who was born just a year later. It was not so obvious to his contemporaries. Like many of his composing countrymen, he was not at first involved with music professionally. After attending a military academy, he served in the army and then proceeded toward a predictable future in the Russian civil service, as a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Communication, beginning in 1863, and then in the Department of Forestry starting in 1868.

It was during those years that he fell in with the circle of young musical aspirants surrounding the composer Mily Balakirev and the critic Vladimir Stasov, a group that was fascinated with exploring Russian nationalist themes. In 1867 Stasov coined the nickname *moguchaya kuchka* — famous in posterity as “The Mighty Handful” — in a review referring to composers whose works figured on a concert for a pan-Slavic convention. Originally the term was meant to embrace a wide swath of Russian composers, not just the nationalists of the newest generation, but before long its usage was focused on the famous five, which in addition to Balakirev and Musorgsky included César Cui (an officer in the Russian Army Engineering Corps, also active as a critic, and a particular protégé of Balakirev’s), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (a midshipman at the Imperial Naval Academy), and Alexander Borodin (a chemist associated with the Academy of Medicine). What this assortment of military

and scientific professionals lacked in doctrinaire musical training they made up in enthusiasm, and under Balakirev’s coaching they began developing a distinctly Russian style of late Romanticism that was distinct from Tchaikovsky’s more mainstream European mode of composition.

Even in his own time, Musorgsky was considered something of a *naïf*, a primitive whose musical visions managed to shine through despite his technical shortcomings. This view was reinforced by his colleague

IN SHORT

Born: March 21, 1839, in Karevo, in the Pskov district of Russia

Died: March 28, 1881, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Work composed: the opera *Khovanshchina* from 1872 to 1880; the manuscript of its Prelude is dated September 16, 1874. The orchestration performed here was made in 1883 by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov [1844–1908].

World premiere: The opera *Khovanshchina*, in Rimsky-Korsakov’s edition, was first presented on February 21, 1886, by the Musical Dramatic Circle in Kononov Hall, St. Petersburg, Eduard Goldshsteyn, conductor.

New York Philharmonic premiere: April 1, 1914, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: June 7, 2013, at the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts, Greenvale, New York, Joshua Weilerstein, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 5 minutes

Rimsky-Korsakov, who went to well-intentioned lengths to make Musorgsky's works palatable to audiences of the time. Musorgsky was overtaken by alcoholism, and after he died (a week after his 42nd birthday) Rimsky-Korsakov completed a number of scores his friend had left incomplete and revised quite a few others that he feared other listeners would find as objectionably coarse as he did. As a result, those of Musorgsky's works that were remembered — including the operas *Khovanshchina* and *Boris Godunov* and the tone poem *A Night on Bald Mountain* — were known principally through “corrected” versions by Rimsky-Korsakov.

Khovanshchina is a vast, complicated saga about political factions and aristocratic successions in 17th-century Russia, particularly revolving around the accession of Peter the Great to the imperial throne. Russia had celebrated the bicentennial of Peter's birth in 1872. In the wake of the national “Petermania,” Musorg-

sky began compiling a notebook of relevant information that he used for the libretto he created through the rest of the decade. Not until 1879 or 1880 did the composer manage to put together an almost-complete copy of the text and even that lacked an ending. Musorgsky left the opera incomplete and unorchestrated at his death. Rimsky-Korsakov prepared the first performing edition of the work, which he published in 1883 in a five-act structure. That was the version employed for the opera's premiere, in 1886, by St. Petersburg's Musical Dramatic Circle (a.k.a. Amateur Musical-Dramatic Club). The opera's Prelude was meant to set the scene by depicting dawn over the Moskva River. Its music returns later in the opera, with great dramatic significance.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, timpani, tam-tam, harp, and strings.

Touching up *Khovanshchina*

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was the first to bring *Khovanshchina* to a completed state, and his colorful orchestration remains popular to this day. Nonetheless, other well-known hands would also work over this score. Igor Stravinsky and Maurice Ravel collaborated on a revision based on Rimsky-Korsakov's edition, which was used for a production directed by Serge Diaghilev in 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris. (Of that effort, only Stravinsky's finale seems to have survived.) In 1952 Dmitri Shostakovich created orchestrations of several scenes that had been omitted from Rimsky-Korsakov's edition; this new version was used for a production by the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad, in 1960, and was then revived in Moscow in 1963. During that delay of nearly a decade Shostakovich produced a new orchestration of the entire opera, which was used in a 1959 film version.

Costume designs for the 1913 production of *Khovanshchina*, directed by Serge Diaghilev

