

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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## Symphony No. 2 in B minor

### Alexander Borodin

Alexander Borodin was born to a Russian prince and his mistress, and following the custom in such circumstances, he was officially registered as the progeny of one of the prince's serfs. Nonetheless, the prince saw to it that young Alexander received an excellent education. Music and science especially appealed to him. After earning a doctor of medicine degree from the St. Petersburg Academy of Medicine and Surgery, he became a research chemist specializing in aldehydes, the organic compounds used as solvents, perfume ingredients, and components to produce such plastics as Bakelite and Formica.

His non-working hours were given over to music — playing chamber music, conducting ensembles, and composing a small but choice catalogue of works. In 1862 he fell into the circle of the *Moguchaya kuchka*, the “Mighty Handful,” along with Mily Balakirev, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, César Cui, and Modest Musorgsky — a group also called the “Russian Five.” Many of Borodin’s masterworks reflect the group’s passionate embrace of folk sources, most especially his two symphonies (plus two fragmentary movements of a third), his “musical picture” *In Central Asia* (often called *In the Steppes of Central Asia* in English-speaking lands), and his opera *Prince Igor* (left incomplete at his death). Through a quirk of fate, he died an apparent peasant, just as he had ostensibly been born one; he dropped dead of an aortic aneurysm while dressed as a Russian peasant at a Carnival costume party at the Academy of Medicine and Surgery.

Borodin may have begun writing his Second Symphony in 1869 and concentrated on it from 1870 through 1873. During part of that

time he was also busy at work on *Prince Igor*; some of the material in the symphony seems to have begun in sketches for that opera. In the autumn of 1876, the Russian Musical Society showed interest in performing the new symphony, and Borodin was horrified to discover that his orchestral score of the first and last movements had gone missing. He had to orchestrate them anew before the piece could finally be premiered, in March 1877.

The first performance fell midway on the spectrum between failure and success. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote in his memoirs that the work’s sound came into being “principally under the influence of our talks about orchestration.” He expressed the opinion that “at this point our enthusiasm ran away with us,” and that “the B-minor Symphony was

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## In Short

**Born:** November 12, 1833, in St. Petersburg, Russia

**Died:** February 27, 1877, in St. Petersburg

**Work composed:** principally April 1870–May 1873, orchestrated 1875–76, revised in 1879; dedicated to Ekaterina Borodina, the composer’s wife

**World premiere:** March 10, 1877, in St. Petersburg, by the Russian Musical Society, Eduard Nápravník, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** February 5, 1897, Anton Seidl, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** February 12, 1999, at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey, Valery Gergiev, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 28 minutes

orchestrated too heavily, and the role of the brass was too prominent.” In the first performance, “the whole heaviness of this method of instrumentation was brought out.” Following the premiere, Borodin thinned out his scoring — particularly the brass parts — and the work was re-introduced in 1879, conducted by Rimsky-Korsakov.

Rimsky-Korsakov re-entered the saga of this symphony eight years later. Borodin had been preparing the orchestral score for publication when he died. Rimsky-Korsakov and fellow composer Alexander Glazunov took over the final editing and proofreading. Because Rimsky-Korsakov created posthumous adaptations of other composers’ works — or, in the case of *Prince Igor*, filled in expanses Borodin left empty — it was assumed that his editing of the Second Symphony was extensive. On the contrary, recent investigations have shown that his alterations were very slight, and that they almost entirely follow emendations that Borodin had already marked in his working manuscript.

The critic Vladimir Stasov, cheerleader for the Russian Five, said that Borodin had a program in mind for this symphony. The first movement would be a gathering of Russian warriors; the third, a *bayan*, or mythic bard; and the fourth, a “scene of heroes feasting to the sound of the *gusli* [a folk instrument of the zither family] amid the exultation of a great host of people.” (He gave no indication about the second movement.) The work became known as the *Bogatyrska-ya (Heroic) Symphony*, a nickname that has by now slipped away.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, harp, and strings.

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## Listen for . . . a Famous Motif

Borodin’s Second Symphony begins with a powerful outburst from the strings, a memorable motto that infuses the first movement:



This theme served as the secret signal for members of Les Apaches, a group of Parisian creative types whose membership included the young Maurice Ravel, a great Borodin fan; they would whistle the motif to each other as a greeting in the street.

In reviewing an 1885 performance, Borodin’s colleague César Cui, wrote:

Right from the start, the first unison phrase startles the listener with its originality and strength. The latter quality increases and reaches its upper limit after the middle section, at the return of the same phrase augmented twofold, halting on bleak, energy-filled chords. . . . In the first movement an atmosphere of grandeur is predominant, whereas humor prevails in the last movement. The first movement is like an everyday picture of some solemn ritual; the last movement is a vivid, motley, varied celebration of sparkling gaiety.