

Musorgsky - Night on Bald Mountain

Musorgsky planned to compose a work related to the subject of *St John's Night on Bald Mountain* as early as 1858. At first he thought it would be the subject of an opera, inspired by a grotesque scene taking place on St John's Eve (23rd June), which would form a whole act in the opera. Musorgsky took inspiration from Baron Mengden's drama *The Witch*. While this opera never materialised (like so many of Musorgsky's ideas), he went on to work on another opera called *Salammbô* and two themes from this (again uncompleted) opera went into the final version of Musorgsky's tone poem.

At first, the piece was apparently created in the form of a fantasy for piano and orchestra, strongly influenced by Liszt's *Todtentanz*. Musorgsky went on to create the first version of *Night* in a creative short burst, completed on St John's Eve itself in 1867! The programme of the work is described by the composer himself in a letter to Rimsky-Korsakov:

"On the twenty-third of June, on the eve of St. John's Day [Midsummer Day] was finished, with God's help, St. John's Night on Bald Mountain—a musical picture with the following program: (1) assembly of the witches, their chatter and gossip; (2) cortege of Satan; (3) unholy glorification of Satan: and (4) witches' sabbat. The score was written directly on white without a draft— it was begun on the tenth day of June, and by the twenty third there was joy and triumph. The composition is dedicated to Mili [Balakirev], according to his own orders and. needless to say, with my personal pleasure."

Balakirev sadly rejected the work, plunging Musorgsky into depression. However, he remained convinced about its merit and refused to change it substantially according to Balakirev's wishes, conceding to him only:

"I shall only change a lot in the percussion parts, which I have abused."

Goodness knows what was in the percussion parts originally, as they are still pretty busy in the 1867 version you will hear this evening!

Musorgsky went on to revise *Night* as an interlude in the unfinished opera *Mlada*, which he collaborated with Rimsky-Korsakov, Cui and Borodin on. It became quite a different piece, however, being scored for vocal soloists and chorus and orchestra. There is no remaining score of this second version.

Musorgsky reworked the score again for another opera project, *Sorochintsi Fair*, that remained incomplete at the time of his death. There's a recent Naxos release of an arrangement/completion of this opera that is really worth a listen. A piano vocal score remains for this version and it is this version that Rimsky-Korsakov most likely based his famous version on, containing as it does the calm ending with church bells. Leopold Stokowski famously created a very similar version for the Disney film *Fantasia*.

There is no such calm end in the original (and, in my view, best) 1867 version. It's rough, primitive-sounding and I just love the unconventional orchestration and harmonies that seem to anticipate Stravinsky's elemental *Rite of Spring* from decades later. Rimsky's version helped the piece to become known to the public but in the last decade or so the original version has made a comeback in the concert hall and recordings. I am particularly indebted to the late Claudio Abbado, who recorded the original version firstly with the

London Symphony Orchestra in the 1970s and then again with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in the 1990s. Abbado was a great (and fairly lonely!) advocate for Musorgsky and the original version of his works and his recordings have been a source of great enjoyment and inspiration for me over the years.

Programme note by Peter Marks

Borodin - In the Steppes of Central Asia

Born in St. Petersburg, the result of a liaison between a Georgian nobleman and a Russian woman 38 years his junior, Alexander was legally registered as the son of Porfiry Borodin, one of his biological father's serfs. He remained technically a serf until made free by his father at the age of seven. This origin precluded Borodin from formal education, but his father provided a large house and support for his mother, and she arranged private tutors for their son.

Borodin went on to study at the Medical-Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg, becoming a doctor at a military hospital on graduation. After a year in this post, he was able to pursue his real love, chemistry, taking a three-year post-doctoral position at Heidelberg followed by a period in Pisa. During this time his childhood interest in music was revived. He became a friend of Mussorgsky and met a young piano virtuoso, Ekaterina Protopopova, who became his wife in 1863. They had no children but adopted three daughters.

By now, he had returned to the Academy as a Professor of Chemistry. He continued research alongside his lecturing, working on hydrocarbons, aldehydes in particular. Perhaps his best-known result, concerning bond-forming between carbon atoms, was reported to the Russian Chemical Society in 1872. He had discovered the aldol reaction, still widely used to this day. The intertwined lives of researcher, teacher and composer, along with a bout of cholera, were beginning to sap Borodin's energies but he nevertheless found time to campaign for women's rights. His particular contribution was to set up medical courses for women. Beginning in 1872, they were among the first offered anywhere in the world. To his great sorrow, they lasted little more than ten years, being banned by Tsar Alexander III, who reversed many reforms permitted by his more liberal father.

Although he was to say composition was "a relaxation, a pastime which distracts me from my principal business", Borodin had begun to learn its skills from Balakirev soon after his return to the Academy. This was part of the coming together of a group of composers inspired by Glinka's desire to establish a truly Russian musical form. They were Mussorgsky, Balakirev, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and, the composer who coined their epithet "The Mighty Handful", Cui. Of the other four, only Balakirev started out in music; the rest developed as composers alongside military careers. Balakirev was to conduct the première of Borodin's *First Symphony*, with the initially unsuccessful second reintroduced in a revised form under the baton of Rimsky-Korsakov. The amateur status of Borodin as a composer may have left him unnoticed by non-Russian audiences had it not been that his work was heard by Franz Liszt, who subsequently presented his works throughout Europe.

By 1875, in only his early forties, Borodin's health began to fail and he was forced to give up academic work. *In Central Asia*, to use the original name, came about in 1880 as a commission to write a piece in celebration of the Tsar's silver jubilee and Russia's

expansion eastwards into the Steppes. As with Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, it was a victim of the celebrations being cancelled due to political unrest, but Rimsky-Korsakov saved it for later performance when it immediately found popularity.

The work, dedicated to Liszt, is not rooted in Borodin's travels but in those of Balakirev who had three times visited the Caucasus to collect folk music. He frequently played the themes he collected to his friends in St. Petersburg and Borodin found in them some of his inspiration.

Borodin wrote this description of In Central Asia:

In the silence of the monotonous steppes of Central Asia is heard the unfamiliar sound of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance we hear the approach of horses and camels and the bizarre and melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A caravan approaches, escorted by Russian soldiers, and continues safely on its way through the immense desert. It disappears slowly. The notes of the Russian and Asiatic melodies join in a common harmony, which dies away as the caravan disappears in the distance.

For the last three years of his life, despite his own increasing exhaustion, Borodin cared for his ailing wife. He somehow found time for a party in 1887 but collapsed and died during the evening. His grave lies in the company of others of The Five and of Tchaikovsky at the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St. Petersburg.

Programme note by Rod Berrieman, July 2018

Rimsky-Korsakov - Russian Easter Festival

The Russian title of this piece translates to "Bright Holiday", a name given in Russian folk speech to Easter, the most important time of the Orthodox calendar. The name originates not just from the celebration of Christ's resurrection, but also from the earlier pagan celebration of the coming of Spring.

As a child Rimsky-Korsakov had lived close to the monastery of Tikhvin where the sound of bells and the annual Easter celebrations made a lasting impression. He wrote of Easter morning service: "not in a domestic chapel, but in a cathedral thronged with people from every walk of life, and with several priests conducting the cathedral service...This religious and heathen side of the holiday, this transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled pagan-religious merry-making of Easter Sunday, is what I was eager to reproduce in my overture."

The overture is based on themes from the *Obikhod*, (the collected canticles of the Orthodox Church), evoking from the outset the chanting of an Orthodox service. It begins with *Let God Arise*. A solo cello later intones *An Angel Wailed*, before trombones echo the opening incantation. Each phrase is developed into wider orchestration. Suddenly the mood changes to one of excitement: horns and trumpets call, bells ring, the chant quickens to *Christ has Risen!* and the "unbridled merry-making" takes the overture to its triumphant close.

"Bright Holiday" was written in the same year as *Sheherazade*, during a period when Rimsky-Korsakov felt able to concentrate on his own works, rather than on realising part-

finished pieces by deceased fellow composers. (Both Glinka and Mussorgsky profited posthumously from his efforts and he collaborated with Glazunov on Borodin's legacy of uncompleted works). He was not to enjoy this freedom again until the decade before his own death, when he wrote most of his fifteen operas.

Programme notes by Rod Berrieman, July 2012

Balakirev - Symphony No 1 in C major

The first Russian composer to make his mark was Glinka; but in the 1860s and 1870s there came together five composers, dubbed the "Mighty Five", or "the Mighty Handful" – Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, and their leader Mily Alexeyevich Balakirev – whose concern was to establish a stronghold of Russian nationalist music.

Balakirev had a difficult life. He was born into poverty and grew up to be a fiery nationalist, tactless and despotic. Though he inspired and almost goaded his fellow members in the Mighty Handful, he himself found the composing did not come easily: he lost confidence in himself, and for about five years during the 1870s he gave up composing and worked as a railway official. From 1883 he worked as musical director to the Russian court.

The music Balakirev composed during his career often used Russian or oriental folk-music; his best known work is a fantasy for solo piano called *Islamey*. He worked on his *First Symphony* for much of his life, but its final preparation occupied him from 1893 to 1897. The first movement opens with a slow introduction, then the music becomes quick, using a speeded-up version of the introductory theme. The second movement is a *scherzo* of conventional design. The longish slow movement develops from a dreamy languorous oriental tune first given out on the clarinet. The *Finale* uses a Russian folk song, and builds to a fine climax.

Programme note by Philip Francis, September 2010