

“THE FAMOUS FIVE”



Introduction

Before I get into the details of each composer and their musical works, and to understand why they were regarded as so important in the development of Russian music it will be necessary to give you a little Russian political history.

Nationalism

Russian Nationalistic feelings were awakened during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars (1789-1814). In Russia resistance to Napoleon aroused the citizens' sense of National Identity. War was fought by soldiers drawn from the general population, not by mercenaries as before; Patriotic feeling was intensified, too, by Romanticism, which glorified love for one's national heritage. This was happening all over Europe particularly **SMETANA** and **DVORAK** from Bohemia, **GRIEG** from Norway and **SIBELIUS** from Finland.

Russian Folk Music

♪ The most distinctive national music arose in Russia, where folk songs pervaded daily life. A Russian music critic of the nineteenth century wrote:- *“Every muzik, carpenter, bricklayer, doorkeeper, cabman, every peasant woman, laundry-maid and cook, every nurse-maid, all bring their folk songs of their villages with them to Petersburg, Moscow and to every city, and we hear them the whole year round”*

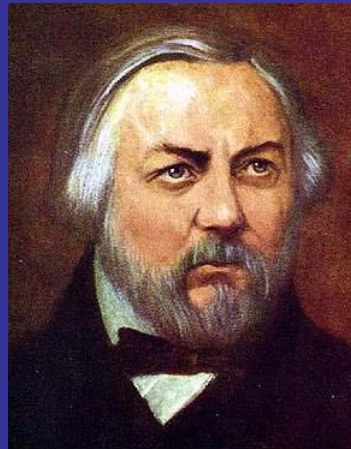
Russian Folk Music

- 🎵 Russian folk music sounds different from that of Western Europe. Ancient church modes were used (with eight tones within an octave and different patterns of whole and half steps) rather than major or minor scales. They also tended to be in irregular meter. 5/4 time instead of two, three, four, or six time..

The Emergence of Russian Music

Before 1800 there were no important Russian Composers.

The Aristocracy imported Italian and German composers. But in the early 1800s a composer emerged who is considered to be the Father of Russian music: **MIKHAIL GLINKA** (1804–1857).



The Emergence of Russian Music

It was only in the 1860s that a true “school” of national music came into being. This coincided with the flowering of great national writers (**DOSTOEVSKY AND TOLSTOY**) and artists.

The “school” was founded by five young men in St. Petersburg. They criticised each other’s works and asserted the necessity of breaking from some of the traditional techniques of German, Italian and French.

The Famous Five

Remarkably, all but one began as amateurs; most had non-musical jobs and only composed in their spare time. At first the only professional musician was **MILY BALAKIREV (1837- 1910)**. The others were **CESAR CUI (1835- 1918)** an Army Engineer, **ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887)** a Chemist, **NIKOLI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844-1908)** a Naval Officer, and **MODEST MUSSORGSKY (1839- 1881)** a Civil Servant.

Mily Balakirev

It is **Balakirev's** fate to be best remembered as the driving force behind Russian music in the late 19th Century rather than as a composer. This should not obscure his own music, even though by his concern for other composers he limited his own output. He was associated from an early age with Russian musical scholars and composers, mostly notably **Glinka** who inspired in him a mission to promote a distinctly Russian style. By 1860 he was fortunate enough to know **Borodin, Rimsky Korsakov, Mussorgsky** and **Cui** with whom he formed the "mighty handful" and whose mentor he became.

Mily Balakirev

A complicated and difficult man, he seems to have been as much a dictator as an inspirer, but there is no doubt his work as a critic and a taskmaster was invaluable especially for such composers as **Borodin** and **Mussorgsky**. Later he performed much the same role for **Tchaikovsky** and others.

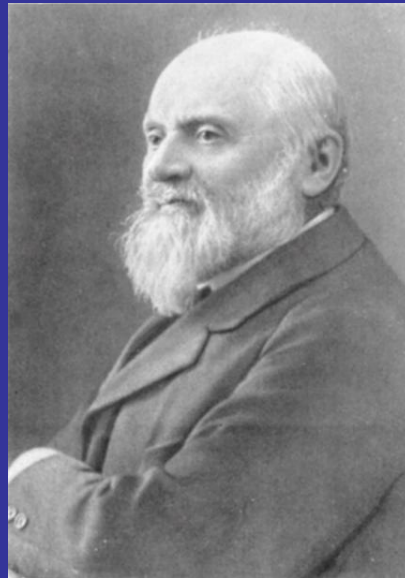
Mily Balakirev

The music he did have time to write was distinguished, combining the authentic Russian qualities of *Glinka* and *Borodin* with a more Western European structure as in his tone poem *Tamara* and the two Symphonies he finally completed in his “retirement” in 1895. He was a brilliant pianist: his best known piece is the formidable *Islamey* of 1869.

Mily Balakirev

extracts from

- ♪ *Islamey an Oriental Fantasy*
- ♪ *Andante - from Above the Proph*



Cesar Cui

Cesar Cui was born in Vilnius in 1835 the son of a French officer in Napoleon`s army, who stayed behind after the retreat from Moscow. Married a Lithuanian and took employment as a teacher of French. **Cui** spent his earlier years in his native city, where he was able to take lessons in harmony and composition from **Stanislaw Moniusko**, one of the leading Polish composers of his generation, it was natural that Cui`s own first attempts at composition emulated **Chopin**.

Cesar Cui

In 1851 Cui became a student at the Engineering School in St Petersburg, proceeding thereafter to the Academy of Military Engineering, where he studied from 1855 to 1857. These years brought important association with ambitious nationalist musicians, above all with **Balakirev**, who, with **Cui**, proved a powerful force in the creation of school of Russian music, in opposition to the cosmopolitan or allegedly German tendencies of composers such as **Rubenstein**, founder of the St Petersburg Conservatory.

Cesar Cui

Rubenstein in turn, found occasion to deplore the amateurism of **Balakirev's** immediate supporters, the group of five, nicknamed by their friend, the polymath **Stasov**, "The Mighty Handful".

Cesar Cui

Extracts from

♪ *Suite for Violin and Orchestra*

♪ *Suite No. 4*



Alexander Borodin

As with the other famous five **Borodin** was essentially an amateur composer in that his main job was that of a Doctor and a Surgeon. He was the illegitimate son of a Prince and graduated at the Academy of Medicine. His doctoral thesis was entitled "*On the Analogy of Arsenical with Phosphoric Acid*". Like **Musorgsky**, he was a amateur pianist with an urge to compose, and his teachers at the medical school would upbraid him for devoting so much of his time to music.

Alexander Borodin

In 1862 he succeeded to the professorship of the Academy and 10 years later played a leading role in establishing medical courses for women. Heart attacks and Cholera in 1882-83 seriously undermined his health, but it was entirely in character that in early 1887 he returned from an important academic engagement to attend a fancy dress ball at the Academy.

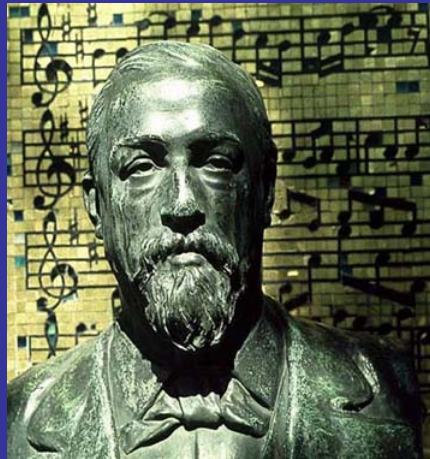
Alexander Borodin

Wearing a red shirt and high boots, Russia's national costume, he joined in the dancing in great good humour and high spirits. Then at midnight, as the festivities reached a climax, he fell back and within a few seconds died from heart failure.

Although he was regarded as a "Sunday Composer" he managed to compose the very famous opera *Prince Igor*, *2 Symphonies*, a *tone poem "in the Steppes of Central Asia"*, *two string Quartets* and a *piano Quintet*, *piano music* and *several fine songs*.

Alexander Borodin

- ♪ Second movement from *String Quartet No 2 in D Major*
- ♪ *In the Steppes of Central Asia*



Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Born into the aristocracy, he spent his early childhood on a country estate where he became acquainted with the Russian folk songs and church music that were to influence his work. The nephew of an Admiral he entered the naval academy in St Petersburg at the age of 12; three years later he started to study seriously the piano and composition.

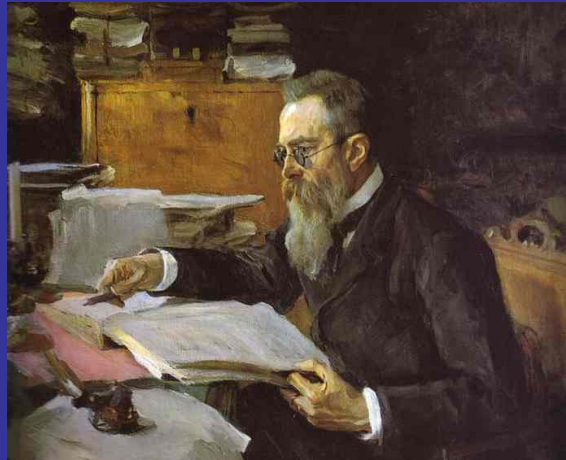
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

In 1861 he met *Balakirev* who encouraged him to write a Symphony. This was completed when he returned from a three year naval voyage (1862-65) and was successfully performed in 1865.

His association with *Balakirev* and other nationalistic composers led him to become one of the leading members of the “Famous five “
He is regarded as the founder of the Russian school of composition and his works considerably advanced Russian national music

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

- ♪ Extracts from *Fantasy on Russian Themes*
- ♪ Extracts from *Scheherazade*



Modest Mussorgsky

The son of a wealthy landowner, **Mussorgsky** was educated in a military academy, becoming an army officer at 17. After two years he left the army to devote himself to music. But the emancipation of the Russian Serfs in 1861 caused financial hardship to his family, and he had to find a job.

Modest Mussorgsky

He became a government clerk in St Petersburg and remained in that position from the rest of his life. Though an accomplished pianist, he had little training in composition. He taught himself, except for occasional advice from **Balakirev**. He was plagued by severe psychological problems and eventually became an alcoholic.

Modest Mussorgsky

When he died at 42, he left relatively few compositions. These include *Boris Godunov*, some songs, the Symphonic poem *Night on a bald mountain* and the piano piece *Pictures at an Exhibition* which **Maurice Ravel** later arranged for orchestra. His music was highly original and is imbued with the spirit of Russian folk music. His melodies reflect the rhythms, accents and pitch fluctuations of everyday Russian speech.

Modest Mussorgsky

♪ Extracts from
*Pictures at an
Exhibition*

