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THE MENTOR: RUSSIAN
MUSIC, VOL. 4, NUM. 18,
SERIAL NO. 118,
NOVEMBER 1, 1916

Henry Finck

**The Mentor: Russian Music,
Vol. 4, Num. 18, Serial No.
118, November 1, 1916**

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The Mentor: Russian Music, Vol. 4, Num. 18, Serial No. 118,
November 1, 1916 / H. Finck — «Public Domain»,

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Several Natural Questions

Q. – How big is Russia, and what is its population?

A. – The area of Russia exceeds 8,660,000 square miles, or one-sixth of the whole land surface of the earth. Its population is over 150,000,000 – or at least it was so before the war.

Q. – How many famous Russian composers are there?

A. – Less than a dozen.

Q. – How old is Russian music?

A. – Less than 150 years. Catherine the Great (1761-1796) was one of the first to encourage national music in Russia. Before her time the music performed in Russia was imported, and was largely Italian. Catherine caused productions of music by Russian composers. She supplied the libretto for one opera.

Q. – What is the origin of Russian music?

A. – Both the music and literature of Russia had a common origin – popular inspiration. The form and spirit of the music and literature were drawn from the legends and primitive songs of the people.

Q. – When did music in Russia become, in a real sense, national?

A. – Not until the first part of the nineteenth century. Composers had been trying for fifty years to establish a national movement in music, but it was not until the advent of Glinka and his opera, “A Life for the Czar,” in 1836, that the Russian school of music can be said to have been inaugurated.

Q. – Why were music and literature so late in coming to this great nation?

A. – On account of physical and human conditions. Russia is and has been a vast and absolute monarchy, consisting of millions of people held in subjection and ignorance, and with only a few great centers of civilization. Petrograd has been for years a city of brilliant cultivation, but in contrast to that there are countless towns, villages, and farms in which dwell millions of poor and ignorant people. It is only within the last century that Russia has wakened to a national consciousness and begun to shake off the grim, feudal conditions of the Middle Ages. In this new era the voice of music is first heard as a national expression.

RUSSIAN MUSIC

Michal Ivanovich Glinka

ONE

Michal Ivanovich Glinka at an early age showed that he possessed two characteristics that were to have a very important bearing on his whole life – an extremely nervous disposition and a lively aptitude for music. His grandmother, who was responsible for his early upbringing and who was an invalid herself, encouraged the first; while his father stimulated in the boy the second. Glinka, mollycoddled from childhood, never wholly succeeded in throwing off an inherited brooding tendency; but he became a wonderful composer and musician.

Glinka was born on June 2, 1803, at Novospassky, a little village in Russia. His father was a retired army officer and not particularly well off, but his mother's brother was fairly wealthy, and often when the Glinkas had an entertainment this brother lent them a small private band which he kept up. It was to this early association with music of the best class that young Glinka owed the development of his taste.

He spent his earliest years at home, but when he was thirteen he went to a boarding school in Petrograd, where he remained for five years, carefully studying music. It was in 1822, when he was only seventeen, that he composed his first music – one of his five waltzes for the piano. During these school years he paid attention to the other branches of education also, learning Latin, French, German, English and Persian, and working hard at the study of geography and zoölogy.

Glinka had a nervous breakdown in 1823, and he made a tour of the Caucasus, taking a cure in the waters there. On his return home he worked hard at his music, although as he had not then decided to devote his life to a musical career, his studies were somewhat intermittent. He went to Petrograd and took a position in the government department; but in 1828 his family gave him an allowance and he decided to devote himself to music alone. While at Petrograd he made many friends. However, he saw that a round of pleasure did not aid him in his music, so in 1830 he began his thorough musical education, leaving Russia for Italy, where he stayed for three years studying the works of old and modern Italian masters. His training as a composer was finally finished in Berlin.

Glinka returned to Russia in 1833, and was soon the center of an intellectual circle at Petrograd. It was one of these friends, Joukovsky, the poet, who suggested that Glinka compose an opera on the subject of the heroic patriotic deeds of the Russian hero, Ivan Soussanin. Baron de Rosen wrote the libretto for this work, which was called "A Life for the Czar," and which was first performed on November 27, 1836.

The plot of this opera was based on the following story: In 1613 the Poles invaded Russia and attempted to assassinate the newly elected Czar, Michael Romanoff. The Polish leaders, however, did not know where to find the Czar. Without letting him know who they were, they asked a peasant, Ivan Soussanin, to guide them to the monarch. Ivan, however, suspecting their designs, sent his adopted son to warn the Czar, and himself led the Poles to the depths of a forest from which they could not possibly find their way. The Poles, when they saw that they had been deceived, killed Soussanin.

This opera was the turning point in Glinka's life. It was a great success, and in a way became the basis of a Russian school of national music. The opera enjoyed extraordinary popularity. In December, 1879, it reached its 500th performance, and in November, 1886, a special production was given, not only at Petrograd, but in every Russian town that had a theater, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of its first performance. It was presented at two theaters in Moscow at the same time.

Glinka had married in 1835, but misunderstandings arose which finally ended in a separation some time afterward.

His second opera, “*Ruslan and Ludmilla*,” did not appear until 1842. It did not appeal to the popular taste and was a dismal failure. Glinka thought that it was superior to his first, and he was bitterly disappointed at its failure.

In 1845 he made his first visit to Paris, and later he went to Spain. After two years in that country he returned to Russia, where he spent the winter at his home, and then went to Warsaw, remaining there for three years. In 1852 Glinka started for France, paying another visit to Berlin on the way. When, however, war broke out in the Crimea in 1854, he returned to Petrograd. While there he became interested in church music. In order to study this type of music he went to Berlin in 1856. This was his last journey. Early in January, 1857, the composer Meyerbeer arranged a special concert devoted to Glinka’s works. On leaving the hall the Russian contracted a chill. He died on February 15, 1857. Glinka was buried in Berlin. Three months later, however, his body was taken to its present resting place in Petrograd. A monument was erected to his memory there in 1906.

RUSSIAN MUSIC

Anton Rubinstein

TWO

There has been a curious uncertainty as to the date of Anton Rubinstein's birth. He was born on November 28, 1829, but due to a lapse of memory on the part of his mother, he always celebrated his birthday on the 30th of November. He was the son of a Jewish pencil manufacturer at Wechwotynetz, Russia, who later went to Moscow. In his autobiography Rubinstein tells of this migration: "My earliest recollections are of a journey to Moscow in a roomy covered wagon, undertaken by the three families, with all the children and servants, – nothing less than a tribal migration. We reached the city and crossed the Pokròvski bridge. Here we hired a large house belonging to a certain Madame Pozniakòv; it was surrounded by trees and stood near a pond beyond the river Iowza. This was in 1834 and 1835."

The mother of Rubinstein was an excellent musician, and she gave the young boy his first music lessons. In addition he had as a teacher a master of the piano named Alexander Villoing. To the end of his life Rubinstein declared that he had never met a better master.

When he was only ten years old Rubinstein made his first public appearance as a performer, playing in a theater at Moscow. Two years later he went to Paris, and roused the admiration of Liszt and Chopin by his playing.

After this Rubinstein traveled for some time in Holland, Germany and Scandinavia. In 1842 he reached England, where he made his first appearance, on May 20th. He made a brief visit to Moscow in 1843, and two years later went with his family to Berlin, in order to finish his musical education. There he made friends with Mendelssohn.

Then Rubinstein's father died suddenly. His mother and brother were forced to return to Moscow. Anton went to Vienna to earn a living. For nearly two years more he studied hard there, and then went on two concert tours through Hungary. The Revolution broke out in Vienna and prevented his return to that city, so he went to Petrograd, where he studied, composed and lived pleasantly for the next few years.

About this time he came near being exiled to Siberia through an unfortunate error of the police. He was saved from this by his patroness, the Grand Duchess Helene.

He composed several operas during the next few years; and he visited Hamburg and Leipzig and then went on to London, arriving there for the second time in 1857. He remained there for a short time and reappeared the following year, in the meantime having been appointed concert director of the Royal Russian Musical Society. In 1862 he helped to found the Conservatory at Petrograd. Of this he was director until 1867.

Rubinstein then traveled for some years, visiting America in 1872 – a tour which brought him \$40,000. So popular was his playing that he was afterward offered \$125,000 for fifty concerts; but he could not overcome his dread of the sea voyage. He returned to Russia from America, and after a short rest continued his concert tours. For the remaining years of his life he lived in turn at Petrograd, Berlin, and Dresden, devoting his time to concerts, teaching, and to composition. In 1885 he began a series of historical recitals, which he gave in most of the chief European capitals. Rubinstein died near Petrograd on November 20, 1894.

RUSSIAN MUSIC

Modeste Petrovich Moussorgsky

THREE

Moussorgsky's artistic creed might be summed up in one sentence – he was devoted absolutely to the principle of “art for *life's* sake.” This is quite the opposite of “Art for art's sake.” Moussorgsky looked on musical art not as an end in itself, but as a means of vital expression. He was a full-blooded realist, and his music throbs with life.

Modeste Petrovich Moussorgsky was born on the estate of his father at Karevo on March 28, 1839. His father was a man of moderate means, and the boy spent his first ten years in the country and in close touch with the peasants. This early environment inspired his later feelings of sympathy with the land and its people. Long before he could play the piano he tried to reproduce songs that he heard among the peasants. His mother was pleased at this, and began to give him lessons on the piano when he was still a young child. At the age of seven he was able to play some of the smaller pieces of Liszt. Sometimes he even improvised musical settings for the fairy tales that his nurse told him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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