Here’s an old story I must have heard a hundred times growing up in a family of Yiddish-speaking émigrés from the Russian empire, many of whom had been members of radical organizations in the old country and joined similar organizations in America. My family had both Socialist and Communist members, and as you must know, Socialists and Communists hated one another far more than they hated capitalists. I had relatives on both sides when Socialists and Communists would try to break up each other’s meetings with heckling that often ended up in brawls. According to the old story, told with relish from both perspectives, the police were breaking up one such brawl; a cop had his nightstick poised above the head of one of the brawlers, who looked up and said, “But officer, I’m an anti-Communist.” “I don’t care what kind of Communist you are,” said the officer as the billy club came down.

That’s how I feel about “non-nationalist” Russian music. I don’t care what kind of nationalist you are; as long as we see nationalism as the issue dividing Russian musicians, we are still in the ghetto that nationalist discourse has created for us. The ghetto is especially evident here because we have chosen to speak only about Russian opera at this conference, and that means that our question is still “How Russian is it?”—the baleful question that I identified, and tried to shake, a decade and a half ago in Defining Russia Musically. That book, of course, did not succeed in shaking the baleful question, because it, too, was almost wholly devoted to

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music by Russian composers and therefore succeeded, at best, in merely adding a
new wing to the ghetto.

In the Oxford History of Western Music I tried to shake it by spreading Rus-
sian composers as evenly as I could through the volumes devoted to the nine-
teenth and twentieth centuries. Russia makes its debut, it is true, in a chapter called
“Nations, States, and Peoples,” which sounds suspiciously like a euphemism for the
old ghetto of “nationalism.” But Russia’s company in that chapter consisted of Ger-
many and France, and my purpose was to show that nationalism spread to Russia
with westernization. In the next chapter, on virtuosos, I gave a lengthy descrip-
tion of Liszt’s first recital in St. Petersburg, replete with comments from Glinka, as
related by Stasov, together with a retort to Glinka from another St. Petersburger,
quoted by Stasov (and by me) in the original—that is, in French.3 The purpose
was to make Russia (or at least St. Petersburg) seem a normal—which is to say, an
unmarked—venue for European music-making.

In the chapter given in part to Chopin, Russia figured as the oppressor nation
against which Chopin’s nationalist sentiments were directed, and in a chapter
called “Slavs as Subjects and Citizens” Russia was contrasted with the Czech and
Moravian lands, with Smetana and Balakirev as the protagonists. The purpose
there was chiefly to show how national character is assigned to music—by audi-
ences as well as composers, sometimes in the presence of folklore, but sometimes
without its benefit. In the chapter following those on Wagner and Verdi, called
“Cutting Things Down to Size,” Russian realism, exemplified by Musorgsky’s Boris
Godunov and Chaikovsky’s Eugene Onegin, is juxtaposed with French opéra lyr-
ique, verismo, and operetta. In the last chapter of the nineteenth-century volume,
symphonies by Borodin and Chaikovsky are discussed alongside symphonies by
Bruckner, Dvořák, Amy Beach, César Franck, Saint-Saëns, Elgar, Vaughan Wil-
liams, and Sibelius. One thing I knew I would do from the moment I conceived
the book, before I even sat down to write the medieval chapters, was to make Alex-
ander Serov one of the main spokesmen of the New German School. I admit that
I was delighted to give myself a pretext for sneaking into the text a picture of the
man to whom I devoted most of my doctoral dissertation, and in full conscious-
ness that mine would surely be the only English-language general history of music
in which Serov’s name would even appear in the index.4

But the larger purpose, I hope, is clear: it is, to use a term that feminist histori-
rians coined, to “mainstream” Russian music and musicians into the general narra-
tive. Serov, like Anton Rubinstein, was accepted during his lifetime as a cosmopol-
itan figure abroad (though for a Russian the term “cosmopolitan” is never without
complications); and he was considered an authentic spokesman for the progressive
faction in European musical politics at midcentury. That made him a terrific vehi-

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34

NON-NATIONALISTS, AND OTHER NATIONALISTS
mounted on behalf of women composers, since representing them disproportionately can distort the historical picture in a fashion that actually weakens the main political point of feminist scholarship: namely, that women have been not merely excluded from the historical account but denied the access and opportunities that would have enabled them to earn their place within it.\(^5\)

But that is hardly the case with Russian music, which since the days of Rubinstein in the nineteenth century, and Sergey Diaghilev in the twentieth, has been extremely prominent in the European and American performing repertoire even as it has been minimized and ghettoized in historiography. Of course that minimization-cum-ghettoization is a legitimate and necessary part of the story one has to tell, but so is the prominence, amounting at times to veritable crazes. For example, in *Modern Composers of Europe*, a survey published in 1904, Arthur Elson (1873–1940), a Harvard-educated writer who eventually succeeded his father, Louis C. Elson, as music critic of the *Boston Advertiser*, but who at the time was working as a math and science teacher at a prep school, proclaimed, in the topic sentence of the book’s final paragraph: “There seems little doubt that Russia is to-day the leader of the world of music.” He then proceeded to justify the claim by disposing of possible rivals one by one:

While Wagner to some extent checked development in Germany, because his great achievements were difficult to equal, the national school in Russia, working along similar lines, has made an advance that is shared in by all her composers, and that is leading to continually new progress. The wealth of her folk-lore and poetic legends is an added incentive, and the material has all the charm of novelty for the nations of Western Europe. Germany still has much to say, but it is not so entirely new; France has gone astray for the moment in a maze of weird harmonic effects; Italy, but just awakened from a long sleep, has hardly mastered the new musical language; England and the Netherlands are almost too civilized for the best results; Bohemia has lost some of her greatest leaders, while in Norway Grieg belongs almost to a past generation. Russia, however, is at the height of her activity, and in the next few years the Western world, already familiar with some of her triumphs, will probably be forced to grant her the homage due to the most musical nation in the world.\(^6\)

By the time Elson wrote these words, “Russomania” had been growing for decades in England and America, “having taken off in the 1880s,” Tamsin Alexander tells us, “when left-leaning literary circles became enamoured by the elusive ‘Russian Soul’ via the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.” And while that enthusiasm for Russian culture and its mystique reached music and theater a little later than it did literature, owing to the greater weight, and consequent inertia, of the infrastructure that needed to be mobilized on behalf of the performing arts, it unquestionably achieved the proportions of a frenzy by the time Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes began their industrial-strength export campaign.

Minimization came with the professionalization of Anglophone musicology at the hands of the German Jewish refugees who poured into the United
Kingdom and the United States with the rise of National Socialism (or, in some cases, like that of my own Professor Paul Henry Lang, who was neither German nor Jewish but emphatically *mitteleuropäisch*, slightly in advance of it). Their loyalty to German culture was only intensified by exile, which fostered the conviction (altogether congruent with that felt and expressed by Arthur Lourié on behalf of *russkoye zarubezh’ye*, the Russian cultural diaspora, in chapter 7 of this book) that they, rather than the thugs who had expelled them, were the bearers of the fatherland’s “true” or “pure” culture, whence the zeal with which they set about rebuilding their institutional environment on Anglophone turf and communicating its mores, a nervous overemphasis on canonicity prominent among them, to a new cohort of pupils and disciples—a task that included the construction of the ghetto for “other” musics in which we were once confined. But here I will stop pressing my attempts to counter the old habits of my profession, happily no longer as firmly entrenched as they once were. As you can imagine, the account of twentieth-century music in the Oxford History, replete with Stravinsky and Shostakovich, Rachmaninoff and Prokofieff, Schnittke and Gubaidulina, offered manifold opportunities for mainstreaming, but to go on offering my own work as an example may, if it gives an impression of self-interest, lessen the effectiveness of the argument. Nevertheless, the example is relevant to my point that we need to look for other contexts into which to place Russian music if we want to accord it an appropriate position within the historical narrative and counter the essentialist assumptions that have demeaned it—above all, the dogma that the authenticity or legitimacy of Russian music depends on its Russianness, however that quality is defined.

There are so many other contexts, after all, into which Taneyev’s *Oresteia*—the centerpiece around which the present conference has been built—might have been inserted. We could have had a conference on operas after Aeschylus, or after Greek drama generally. In that case, Taneyev would have taken his place in a distinguished lineage that might have gone all the way back to the Florentine *camerata*. (Of course, I would not have been invited to that conference.) It could have been a conference on mythological opera, in which case the Wagnerians would have invaded, so I can understand why we didn’t go that route. How about a conference on opera in the decade after Wagner? There would have been many prominent Russian works to feature alongside those by Germans, Frenchmen, and Italians. How about a conference about leitmotifs in and out of opera? Or on one-opera composers? (Taneyev would have fared pretty well against Franck and Schumann, but then there’d be Beethoven.) How about operas published by Belyayev? (In that case Taneyev would be in counterpoint with Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin, thus crosscutting the factitious divide between nationalists and “non-nationalists.”) By now I’m reaching, obviously, but I hope you will agree with me that the old factitious divide didn’t do Russian music any good.
Not that I don’t sympathize with the effort to give “non-nationalists” their due. There is only one thing worse than being confined to a ghetto, after all, and that is being judged a bad ghetto citizen, which is how Chaikovsky is usually portrayed in non-Russian textbooks, to say nothing of Rubinstein or other “cosmopolitan” figures. In the most recent such textbook published in America, which, following recent trends in textbook publication, has very little continuous text but consists in the main of bite-sized verbal clumps, there is an opening that presents, on facing pages, a lightly annotated listing of “Major Composers of the 19th Century,” grouped by countries. Although the breakdown thus emphasizes nations, the issue of national character is explicitly raised in only three of the nine groups: Spain, Russia, and the United States (not Scandinavia, not Great Britain, not even Bohemia). And only in the paragraph devoted to Russia is the matter presented as contentious. I’ll quote approximately the first half of the paragraph, silently omitting parenthetical information like dates or cross-references. It reads:

Mikhail Glinka was one of the first Russian composers to gain international fame. While studying in Italy as a young man, he experienced “musical homesickness,” the desire to hear music that was distinctively Russian. His two great operas, A Life for the Czar and Ruslan and Ludmila, inspired several subsequent generations of Russian composers, including the group known as “The Five”: Mily Balakirev, César Cui, Alexander Borodin, Modeste Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Many Russian composers considered Tchaikovsky too foreign in training and outlook to belong to this group of nationalists.9

Only a Russian composer, in this as in every such book, makes news by not fetishizing his nationality. In the more extended verbal clump that provides a “Composer Profile” for Chaikovsky, we read that he “embraced his Russian heritage but did not make a display of it, unlike some of his contemporaries, who made a point of writing explicitly nationalistic music.”10 One could easily multiply assertions of this kind to illustrate the degree to which being “explicitly nationalistic” has become a normative or default assumption about Russian composers. Notice in this case, for example, that Chaikovsky has to be explicitly pardoned for his deviation from the norm with the assurance that despite everything he “embraced his Russian heritage” after all. I really have no idea what the author meant by that; it makes sense only as a preemptive defense against some kind of implied McCarthyite or Zhdanovite attack (so I guess I do understand it at that); but it strangely parallels the statement one paragraph earlier that Chaikovsky “acknowledged his homosexuality privately but otherwise kept it concealed for fear of public condemnation.” It was something else about which one could say that Chaikovsky “embraced” it but “did not make a display of it.”

My favorite illustrations of the spurious newsworthiness of non-nationalism in a Russian composer are two. One is Robert P. Morgan’s remark that “curiously,
Skryabin was not himself nationalist in orientation.”

The other concerns the protagonist of our conference, Sergey Taneyev, and it is something I'll never forget because it gave me my first impulse to topple the national question from its privileged position in Russian music studies, more than a quarter of a century ago. At a meeting of the Society for Music Theory, the reader of a paper on Taneyev's treatise of 1909, *Podvizhnoy kontrapunkt strogoj pis'ma* (Invertible Counterpoint in the Strict Style), went out of his way to inform the audience that Taneyev's compositions were “without conspicuous nationalistic elements.”

When I asked him why he felt it necessary to state this negative “fact,” especially in the context of a strict counterpoint text, he replied that it answered “a natural question” about a Russian composer. Natural. That got me thinking seriously, for the first time, about the pitfalls of essentialism.

But if we want to fix the blame for this situation, the name that should head the bill of indictment will not be that of any feckless Western textbook writer, but a name revered in Russia to this day. Any Russian will know that I am about to summon Vladimir Vasil'evich Stasov to the dock. It is he, more than anyone else, who made the distinction between nationalist and non-nationalist in Russian music not only factitious and contentious, but also invidious. It is to his writings that we must look first to isolate the bacillus we need to extirpate. He wrote so voluminously that sampling his rhetoric could be an endless endeavor, so I will limit myself for the most part to his last testament, the grand summation called *The Art of the Nineteenth Century* (*Iskusstvo XIX-ogo veka*), first published in abridged form in 1901 as a supplement to the arts journal *Niva* and reissued in full five years later (very shortly before Stasov's death) in the fourth volume of his collected works. I will be quoting from the text as given in the third and last volume of the lavish edition of Stasov's *Selected Works* that was issued by the Soviet publishing unit *Iskusstvo* in 1952, in the wake of the so-called *Zhdanovshchina*, when Stasov's writings were recanonized because they were seen to favor the xenophobic arts policies of the Soviet government in the early years of the Cold War.

This huge final survey, *The Art of the Nineteenth Century*, sums up the seventy-seven-year-old Stasov's sublimely inflexible views at their final stage of cemented-ness, and at a point where he could portray the whole century whose art he had witnessed as if it were a single static and highly polarized entity. Its second great advantage is that it was Stasov's universal synopsis, uniting his views on Russian and European art and placing the former, the Russian, within the context of the latter, the European. And of course the place to look, in order to see the polarization of Russian and non-Russian within the Russian milieu, will be Stasov's farewell characterizations of his perennial *bêtes noires*, Rubinstein and Chaikovsky.

The linkage of names was not just a matter of Stasovian rhetoric. Rubinstein had been Chaikovsky's mentor, and what brought them together, hence what they had most in common, was their affiliation with the St. Petersburg Conservatory,
Rubinstein as its founder and first director, Chaikovsky as a member of its first graduating class. This is our signal that the issue of nationalism was inextricably tangled up, both conceptually and strategically, and especially in the mind of Stasov, with the issues of education and professionalization. Indeed, during their lifetimes, Chaikovsky and Rubinstein would never have cast their differences with the composers now thought of as the Russian nationalists in any other terms than those of professionalism, and this was true of their antagonists as well.

We know this now above all from their letters. There is the now-famous letter from Chaikovsky to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, sent from Italy late in 1877 (or early 1878, N.S.), in which, at her request, he cast a withering eye over the whole moguchaya kuchka, the Mighty Bunch whom Stasov had christened as such a decade before. "All the newest Petersburg composers are very gifted persons," he allowed, "but they are all infected to the marrow with the worst sort of conceitedness and with a purely dilettantist confidence in their superiority over all the rest of the musical world." Immediately he excepted Rimsky-Korsakov from this generalization, because Rimsky-Korsakov was, in Chaikovsky's words, "the only one among them to whom it occurred, five years ago, that the ideas propagated by the circle had really no foundation, that their contempt for schooling, for classical music, their hatred of authorities and standards were nothing more than ignorance." We all know why this happened to Rimsky-Korsakov: he had been appointed to the faculty of the hated conservatory (something about which you can learn only with the greatest difficulty if Stasov is your source). As for the rest, Cui, in Chaikovsky's description, "cannot compose otherwise than by improvising and picking out on the piano little themellets supplied with little chords [melodiyi, snabzhyonniye akkordikami]." Borodin's "technique is so weak he cannot write a line without outside help." Musorgsky actually "shows off his illiteracy, is proud of his ignorance, slops along any old way, blindly believing in the infallibility of his own genius." As for Balakirev, who at the time Chaikovsky was writing was in a period of withdrawal, Chaikovsky admitted that "he has enormous gifts, but," he then had to add, "they are lost because of some fateful circumstances that have made a saintly prig out of him."

As we see, "How Russian is it?" was not Chaikovsky's question. And neither was it Musorgsky's question when he wrote equally disparagingly to Stasov, almost exactly four years earlier, about a visit from "the worshipers of absolute musical beauty," which left him with "a strange feeling of emptiness." This is the letter in which Musorgsky keeps referring to Chaikovsky as Sadyk-Pasha, the nom de plume of his namesake, the Polish (some say Ukrainian) patriot and orientalist writer Michal Czajkowski (1804–86). Chaikovsky and Musorgsky met at Cui's apartment while Chaikovsky was visiting St. Petersburg in connection with staging his opera The Oprichnik. Chaikovsky listened to a medley of pieces by Cui and Musorgsky, including recently composed items from the revised Boris Godunov. He responded, according to Musorgsky, with some patronizing advice: "a strong
talent . . . but dissipated . . . would be useful to work on . . . a symphony . . . (en forme, of course)."

The link between the matter that actually divided Chaikovsky and the kuchkisty, on the one hand, and the spurious question of nationalism that has dominated the discourse of Russian music since their time, on the other, was again provided by Stasov, originally in an article opposing the establishment of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, which appeared in 1861 in a reactionary, xenophobic newspaper called the Northern Bee (Severnaya pchela), an organ of bilious merchant-class opinion, which would have been a strange place for a liberal intelligent like Stasov to be writing on any other subject. His opposition had been provoked, along with that of Balakirev and even Alexander Serov, by some rash comments made by Anton Rubinstein during his campaign to mobilize support for the institution, among them tactless comments on the failure of Russia to produce any significant composers, this at a time when Glinka and Dargomizhsky, who were then still alive, had produced between them three operas that had succeeded on the stage, and in which Russian musicians could take justifiable pride, and when Glinka, at least, had made an international reputation. This gave the opposition a pretext to cast Rubinstein's activities as unpatriotic, a charge that resonated easily with Rubinstein's dubious ethnicity. Although there were many aspects to his anti-conservatory tirade that were out of Stasovian character, he never retreated a step from it over the course of his career. (Retreat would have been more out of character for him than anything else.) He reprinted large extracts from it in his most famous essay on Russian music, namely the fourth chapter of his 1882 survey Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art; and he recycled the odious charges a full forty years later in The Art of the Nineteenth Century, where he wrote:

Not long before the opening of the St. Petersburg Conservatory voices were raised in the press against the necessity of such institutions at the present time generally, and in Russia particularly. For Russia it would be sufficient, said the protesters, to follow the example of Glinka and Dargomizhsky with regard to composition. Neither of them had ever gone to musical schools; they had developed independently, apart from the traditions and customs of European musical guilds. It would have been better if all the musicians of Russia went in their footsteps. These voices were Serov's and mine, and it would seem that in these protesting opinions there was a measure of truth, because in a few years the results given by our conservatories turned out to be the same as those always given by all conservatories: an inclination toward workaday musicianship on the part of performers and composers alike; the forgetting of the main, essential tasks of musical artistry and its transformation into a mere livelihood; the proliferation of external, pretentious technical display to the detriment of art; in sum, the decline of robust feeling and common sense, the deterioration of taste, and base submission to tradition and authority.

Stasov went on for a while in this familiar vein, and then came the modulation that interests us here:
Having made himself the director of our main conservatory, the Petersburg one, Anton Rubinstein brought to it, first of all, all his personal artistic tastes and ideas and, in the second place, all the tastes and ideas of the German conservatories he knew. He believed blindly in them, and beyond their horizon he knew nothing and saw nothing. He was a pianist of genius, amazing, profound in spirit and in poetry, than whom no one stood higher except, of course, his comrade and contemporary Liszt, whose like the world in all probability will not soon see again. But Rubinstein’s tastes and ideas were very narrow and circumscribed. By nature he was an ardent Mendelssohnian and somewhat retreated from this cult only in his late years, not so much out of inner conviction as in response to the later opinion of Mendelssohn that took hold in most of Germany. . . . His own compositions, extraordinarily prolific, revealed a very middling and unoriginal talent, . . . and although he had an enormous success in Russia with his Demon, a rather weak opera (apart from its colorful oriental dances) and a few mediocre romances (which included, however, the truly delightful “Persian Songs”), still, in the final analysis, his works never aroused any significant response anywhere. The national tendency he did not admit and did not like. All his ideas and tastes he implanted in his conservatory. In it they reigned eternal with majestic force, and reign there to a significant degree to this day. 18

The conservatory having been associated through Rubinstein with opposition to “the national tendency,” the stage has been set for Chaikovsky, who, Stasov wrote, “was born with a great and rare talent, but who unfortunately was trained at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in its earliest, that is, its most inauspicious time, during the unlimited dominion and spell of Anton Rubinstein.” This was bad not only for Chaikovsky but for Russia:

Chaikovsky’s musical career lasted more than a quarter of a century. For practically all this time he went from success to success and was soon recognized, both at home and abroad, as the greatest musical talent in Russia, a talent equal to Glinka, and in the opinion of many, even higher than Glinka. That opinion was mainly conditioned by the fact that Chaikovsky, although a sincere patriot and a zealous devotee of all things Russian, did not carry in his musical nature the “national” element and was from head to toe a cosmopolitan and eclectic. 19

The pages that follow are fascinating to read, as Stasov piles up evidence that contradicts his assertions (some of it from letters to von Meck that had been published only in the few years since Chaikovsky’s death), only to sweep it all away with mantra-like repetitions of his claims. Anyone who knows Stasov’s writings knows that they give new meaning to the word “closed-minded,” but his performance here reaches peaks probably unequaled in his own output, or in anyone’s. Stasov’s ideas about what constitutes “the ‘national’ element” remain in this last testamentary piece what they were before, as laid out in Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art in the form of four points: (1) the absence of preconception and blind faith; (2) the use of folklore as source material; (3) the oriental element; (4) an
extreme inclination toward program music. From this one could easily divine the list of exceptional Chaikovsky works that Stasov cites (just as one could have guessed the two exceptions noted in his brief unsympathetic survey of Rubinstein’s output, in both cases “oriental”). Since The Art of the Nineteenth Century was written more than seven years after Chaikovsky’s death, the list here is the most complete one that Stasov ever drew up. It includes the Scherzo à la russe for piano, the finale of the Second Symphony, the andante of the “third” [recte: first] quartet, the choruses in the first act of Eugene Onegin “and parts of the wetnurse’s role in that opera,” the finale of the Fourth Symphony, “and perhaps some other things.” And that, Stasov concludes, was the secret of Chaikovsky’s success. It was a matter of pandering collusion with the critic’s other perennial whipping-boy, the lazy and ignorant Russian public:

The Russian public, long since corrupted in its musical tastes by the Italian opera and other pernicious and banal elements, were sorely burdened by the New Russian School and its creations. And when Chaikovsky appeared in the arena, a talented cosmopolitan and eclectic, who did not threaten to drag anybody toward anything particularly “national,” everyone was gladdened and contented. Past the Verzhbolovsky station [i.e., the Polish border] there was even less demand for the national. Chaikovsky suited Europe to a T.

Lucky bastard! These complaints weren’t even true at the time Stasov composed his self-pitying grumble, and his grumbles became ever less pertinent as time went on. But leaving that contradiction unrefuted for the moment, let us press on to some even bigger contradictions. In all of Stasov’s vast output, he mentions our own Sergey Ivanovich Taneyev, to my knowledge, only once, and that single mention comes toward the end of The Art of the Nineteenth Century, where Stasov strains for a proper valediction. Surveying the present scene as of 1901, Stasov finds some good words for everyone, even if they contradict the gloom and doom of his fulminations only a few pages earlier. Thus:

The number of musical figures who have received their education at the St. Petersburg and Moscow conservatories has been very considerable. From both have emerged several good pianists from the classrooms of the great Russian artists Anton Rubinstein (in St. Petersburg) and his brother Nikolai (in Moscow), and they have become the pedagogues and propagators of the Russian pianoforte school. There have also emerged from these conservatories many teachers and performers, both vocalists and instrumentalists, so that in the course of the past quarter century all of our choruses and orchestras have been basically staffed with Russian singers and musicians—and that is one of the best and most significant results of the conservatories’ operation. The Moscow Conservatory has produced from its midst several musicians of remarkable talent and influence, at once composers, performers, and pedagogues. Such, in particular, are Taneyev, Scriabin, and Rachmaninoff. Among the works of Taneyev that are distinguished by great technical mastery, energy, ele-
gance, and superb expressivity are the opera *Oresteia* (1894), two quartets, and a
symphony.\footnote{22}

That is all Stasov ever had to say about Taneyev. After a similarly skimpy and
dutiful recital of the merits of Scriabin and Rachmaninoff, Stasov turns northward
and, despite the direction of his gaze, grows warmer. “But the advantage, both in
terms of quantity and, at times, also in quality has always been on the side of the
St. Petersburg Conservatory. Without doubt, this has depended above all on the
fact that at the head of its musical faculty there stood such a great and independent
artist as Rimsky-Korsakov.” After a glowing rundown of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *cur-
riculum vitae*, Stasov begins handing out accolades to Rimsky’s offspring: “Many
of the best pupils of this great teacher have themselves subsequently become not
only remarkable composers, but also conductors and teachers. Thus the benign
tradition of the independent Russian school has been wholly preserved. Chief
among them are Akimov, Antipov, Arensky, Artsibushev, Blumenfeld, Wiholt,
Grechaninov, Ippolitov-Ivanov, Sokolov, Cherepnin, and others.” Following this
list of greats there is a colossal paragraph in which each of them is provided with
a résumé and a list of works.

To sort out all the double standards whereby these protégés of Rimsky-
Korsakov (or more accurately, protégés of Mitrofan Belyayev, the timber-magnate
Maecenas thanks to whom their works were published and performed) could be
described as preservers of “the independent Russian school” and its four-point
checklist of characteristics (particularly the first of them, that is, skepticism of aca-
demic routine) would be tediously anticlimactic, and of course it’s been done.\footnote{23}
But Stasov is just getting started. The next major subdivision of *The Art of the
Nineteenth Century* is devoted to the work of Lyadov and Glazunov, whom Stasov
describes without evident qualm as “the most important artists and composers
of the most recent period”—and remember, the survey from which I am quoting
had not only Russia but all of Europe as its purview.\footnote{24} A survey that had begun
boldly, eighty large-format pages back in the edition from which I am quoting,
with Beethoven, and with Stasov’s assertion that “architecture and music are the
two arts that have blossomed more robustly, richly, and extensively than all the rest
in the course of the nineteenth century[, and] music has surpassed even architec-
ture in the strength and breadth of its flight and the mightiness of the means it has
attained,”\footnote{25} has culminated in Lyadov and Glazunov, and with a renewed affirma-
tion that “music has done and achieved the most of all” the arts in the nineteenth
century, because it was the youngest of the arts and had only in the nineteenth
century managed to hit its stride.\footnote{26}

Stasov is left with Lyadov and Glazunov as the greatest of the great because the
rest of Europe had in his unhappy view become enmeshed in decadence. That is
the main reason why he had to make his peace with the conservatories, whose sins
by century’s end had come to seem to him to be lesser evils. The way in which his mammoth survey fizzles amid dizzy proclamations of triumph is in its tragicomic way an effective epitaph to the New Russian School and to the century in which it flourished; and yet Stasov managed to bequeath his prejudices about Russian music to the twentieth century, both in and out of Russia. This is a story very much worth telling, and I will outline it here as far as I am able at this point to detect its outlines.

In the first instance, Stasov bequeathed his prejudices to the West through his disciples, notably Rosa Newmarch, who carried them to an Anglophone readership at the exact moment when the arts of Russia began their steep ascent in popularity. In his recent, very interesting study of Newmarch, Philip Ross Bullock strives hard to vindicate her contribution to the literature on Russian music against what he correctly sees as my “comprehensive attempt to challenge the dominance of the writings of Vladimir Stasov,” an attempt of which this essay is obviously a component. Bullock seeks to vindicate Newmarch by challenging my contention that her writings transmit Stasov’s doctrinaire and intransigent views without significant change, and that one of those views that she helped significantly to propagate was the view that Russian composers were to be divided into the very unequally valued camps of “nationalist” and “non-nationalist.”

Bullock focuses his defense of Newmarch on the matter of Chaikovsky, a composer for whom Newmarch certainly did evince a greater sympathy than did Stasov. After all, she undertook to abridge and translate Modest Chaikovsky’s giant biography of his brother as *The Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky* in 1906, the year of Stasov’s death at the then very venerable age of eighty-two. Bullock quotes a letter in which Stasov, still frantically active at the very end of his life, congratulates Newmarch on the book’s appearance but reminds her that in his opinion Chaikovsky “never has been, or will be, one of the great men of art” and apologizes for frankly expressing “these views if they do not coincide with your own.” But in noting what he calls the “context of reception”—that is, in noting that Newmarch wrote for an audience whose expectations did not match Stasov’s—Bullock accounts sufficiently for their differing estimates of Chaikovsky’s ultimate importance (and I fully agree that time has vindicated Newmarch rather than Stasov with respect to Chaikovsky). The questions remain, however, whether Newmarch’s actual description of Chaikovsky differed from Stasov’s, and whether it helped spread Stasov’s views on the nature and importance of nationalism in Russian art.

I think the answer to the first question is No, Newmarch’s description did not differ in any significant way from Stasov’s; and the answer to the second question is Yes, Newmarch did indeed spread the view that the main factor distinguishing Chaikovsky and a host of other composers in his historiographical orbit from those whom Stasov would have described as the “great men of art” was indubitably the matter of nationalism as defined preeminently by Stasov. I would go fur-
ther still and propose that Newmarch was the main carrier of this notion into the twentieth-century discourse of music history and that we are still laboring in her wake, even those of us who wish to vindicate the “non-nationalists.”

First of all, Stasov never called Chaikovsky a bad or an unimportant composer, so Newmarch's interest in him did not in itself contravene the Stasovian canon. If you will forgive me for yet one more quotation from *The Art of the Nineteenth Century*, immediately after all the caveats and reservations Stasov leveled at Chaikovsky and his reputation, he added this:

> But be all that as it may, the huge dissemination and fame of Chaikovsky were in many ways completely justified and legitimate. He was so talented, so strongly endowed with the ability to fill his music with grace and beauty, and withal so strongly equipped to affect the listener with his mastery of form and the subtle qualities of his colorful and elegant instrumentation, that he could not help having an uncommonly strong and charismatic influence on great masses of listeners.  

If there is irony here, it is directed at the listeners, not at Chaikovsky. Now here is the beginning of the chapter on Chaikovsky in *The Russian Opera*, Rosa Newmarch's most important work on Russian music:

> Typically Russian by temperament and in his whole attitude to life; cosmopolitan in his academic training and in his ready acceptance of Western ideals; Tchaikovsky, although the period of his activity coincided with that of Balakirev, Cui, and Rimsky-Korsakov, cannot be included amongst the representatives of the national Russian school. His ideals were more diffused, and his ambitions reached out towards more universal appreciation. Nor had he any of the communal instincts which brought together and cemented in a long fellowship the circle of Balakirev. He belonged in many respects to an older generation, the “Byroniacs,” the incurable pessimists of Lermontov's day, to whom life appeared as “a journey made in the night time.” He was separated from the nationalists, too, by an influence which had been gradually becoming obliterated in Russian music since the time of Glinka—I allude to the influence of Italian opera.

The very first sentence in Newmarch’s chapter thus insists on Stasov’s factitious and invidious distinction; and the rest does not matter, so far as we are today concerned. We may disagree over the nature of Chaikovsky’s Western affinities. For Stasov, the implication was that Chaikovsky was German in orientation owing to his conservatory training at the hands of Rubinstein. Newmarch cites the Italian opera—surprisingly, since she knew many of his letters intimately, having translated them, letters that affirm over and over again that his main enthusiasm was for contemporary French music (the music of Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Bizet, Delibes), the influence of which shouts loudly from virtually all his works.

And was Newmarch’s take on Chaikovsky quite as “adoring” as (following Stasov himself in a grumpy letter to an even grumpier Balakirev) Dr. Bullock
implies it to have been?\textsuperscript{32} This is from the last paragraph in the same chapter from Newmarch’s \textit{The Russian Opera}:

Tchaikovsky’s nature was undoubtedly too emotional and self-centred for dramatic uses. To say this, is not to deny his genius; it is merely an attempt to show its qualities and its limitations. Tchaikovsky had genius, as Shelley, as Byron, as Heine, as Ler-montov had genius; not as Shakespeare, as Goethe, as Wagner had it. As Byron could never have conceived “Julius Caesar” or “Twelfth Night,” so Tchaikovsky could never have composed such an opera as “Die Meistersinger.”\textsuperscript{33}

Oh well, two can play this game. Let’s imagine \textit{Eugene Onegin} by Wagner. Now we can snicker. But in saying that “opera is the one form of musical art in which the objective outlook is indispensable,” and that “Tchaikovsky had great difficulty in escaping from his intensely emotional personality, and in viewing life through any eyes but his own,” Newmarch was again distinguishing him invidiously from his nationalist confreres, who, like Shakespeare, could reflect in their art not only themselves but “humanity” at large.\textsuperscript{34} Her view of Chaikovsky self-evidently continued to inform that of Chaikovsky’s wordiest biographer, David Brown.\textsuperscript{35}

Of course Stasov was not alone in his characterization of Chaikovsky, nor was Newmarch the first to bring the notion west. There was also César Cui, a musical politician as partisan as Stasov and far less principled, who in his book \textit{La musique en Russie}, which had begun as a series of articles published beginning in 1878 in the Paris journal \textit{Revue et gazette musicale}, brought to French readers the prejudices of the New Russian School (which Cui had named as such, just as Stasov had somewhat later christened it the Mighty Kuchka). From Cui the French learned that “Chaikovsky is far from being a partisan of the New Russian School; he is sooner its antagonist.”\textsuperscript{36} But that is only because Chaikovsky was for Cui just a chip off of Rubinstein, and therefore an embodiment of conservatory cosmopolitanism—the antagonism, in other words, went the other way, from Cui and Co. to Chaikovsky, not from him to them. Remarkably, the ever clear-eyed Gerald Abraham, writing near the beginning of his career in collaboration with his mentor, Michel-Dmitri Calvocoressi, got this right. “The Conservatoire,” he wrote,

staffed entirely by teachers of foreign blood, had given [Chaikovsky] a sound education, a hearty contempt for those who had not had a sound education, and a warm dislike of people who were constantly attacking “Germans” and “Jews.” His idol was a German Jew and his bosom-friend a German-Russian. Added to this he was always quick to suspect hostility to his own work even where none existed, and Cui, the journalistic mouthpiece of the “handful,” had dismissed his [graduation] cantata with contemptuous sarcasm. It is not unnatural that although he had never met any of the “handful,” [Chaikovsky] regarded them as a hostile group, while, according to Rimsky-Korsakof, they on their side considered him “a mere child of the Conservatoire.”\textsuperscript{37}

The divine Gerry wrote that in 1936! How we have regressed since.
Unlike Stasov, moreover, Cui was a competitor, happy to concede to Chaikovsky the realms of chamber music and symphony, so long as it was clear that Chaikovsky could never compete with Cui as a composer for the stage. Bear in mind, of course, that as of Cui’s writing Chaikovsky had actually produced only two operas that had been staged, *The Oprichnik* and *Vakula the Smith* (the earlier version of what became *Cherevichki*). But who was Cui to be making such a judgment? At the time of writing he had had three operas produced: *William Ratcliff*, after Heine; *Angelo*, after Victor Hugo (a subject that would later serve as the basis for Ponchielli’s *La Gioconda*); and the insignificant one-act operetta *The Mandarin’s Son*. Between him and Chaikovsky, with operas to his credit on subjects from Russian history and Little-Russian fakelore, who was the cosmopolitan? We know, from a late memoir by Cui that has achieved wide exposure in America thanks to its incorporation into the music history text by Grout as revised by Palisca (and now by Burkholder),\(^38\) that as far as Cui was concerned the preoccupations of the New Russian School were far removed from what is usually thought of as nationalism. ("We carried on heated debates," Cui recalled, "in the course of which we would down as many as four or five glasses of tea with jam, we discussed musical form, program music, vocal music, and especially operatic form.")\(^39\) Not only that, but as Cui perversely loved to admit, he was ethnically half-French and half-Lithuanian, "without a drop of Russian blood."\(^40\)

Nevertheless, Cui launched his book with a chapter on Russian folk song, giving a pair of examples that would have been quite out of place in his own music (though perfectly at home in Chaikovsky’s *Vakula*), and ended that introductory chapter by stipulating that "it is in these national songs that most Russian composers have taken their principal inspiration, impregnating themselves with the spirit that reigns within them, or else using the melodies of national songs as themes in their vocal and instrumental works."\(^41\) This utterly hypocritical remark was strictly for the benefit of his French readers, for whom the likeliest appeal of the music Cui was trying to sell them was an exotic one that excluded Chaikovsky (as well as Cui himself, but he was assured of acceptance in France as a "mi-français"). And his calculation hit the mark, as we can see from the response of Alfred Bruneau, one of the most sympathetic of all French musicians toward the music of Russia, partly because he, too, was obsessed with questions of operatic form in his now forgotten settings of prose libretti by Zola. Having taken Cui’s bait, Bruneau was perhaps the first of the many Western writers who have dismissed Chaikovsky point blank for not being Russian enough: "Devoid of the Russian character that pleases and attracts us in the music of the New Slavonic school," he wrote, "developed to hollow and empty excess in a bloated and faceless style, his works astonish without overly interesting us."\(^42\) Without an exotic group identity, which is to say a ghetto identity, a Russian composer could possess no identity at all. Without a folkloristic or oriental mask, he was, as Bruneau says, "faceless."
Bruneau noted that Rubinstein and Chaikovsky remained popular in Russia, and thought this inexplicable. Diaghilev thought inexplicable the resistance to Chaikovsky in France and England, thanks to which he almost lost his shirt in 1921, when he produced *The Sleeping Beauty* in London, where (thanks to his then unappreciated spadework) it would later be so popular. To me it seems inexplicable that the relationship between “nationalism” (in quotes) and exoticism (sans quotes) was not obvious to these observers, let alone the fact that it depended on the angle of observation.

But oughtn’t it be obvious to us by now? A while ago I cited Gerald Abraham in 1936, with a more sophisticated take on the national question and the social divisions that produced it than we have come since to expect. Why have we been backsliding?

One reason remains the Diaghilev reason—let’s call it *Diaghilevshchina*—which persists. Russian music is still valued abroad for its exotic Russianness. Russian music is still purveyed by orchestras abroad in special Russian programs, Russian festivals, Russian seasons. When Shostakovich’s quartets are heard, except for the eighth, it is almost always in a cycle. But as I noted once when asked to write a program essay for a double cycle of Shostakovich and Beethoven, when the Shostakovich and Beethoven quartets are performed in a single sequence, Beethoven is the one who contributes the Russian folk songs. When will the individual Shostakovich quartets (I mean the ones that don’t ask to be decoded verbally the way the eighth one does) be as commonly programmed as the Bartók quartets, which used to be programmed only in cycles, and still occasionally are, but which have long since begun leading their own independent lives in concert programs.

What is the antidote to Diaghilevshchina? Gergievshchina! Since the Soviet collapse legions of Russian musicians, with Generalissimo Valeriy Gergiev at their head, have invaded the West; and while at first they mainly brought their special repertoire with them (and that was great for me, since Gergiev’s San Francisco performances of Prokofieff and Rimsky-Korsakov gave me a lot of preview work), by now they are bringing us Verdi and Wagner and Beethoven and Mahler. And Chaikovsky.

But Diaghilevshchina has never been *just* Diaghilevshchina. The reason Russia has remained so stubbornly exotic has also had to do with its political and cultural isolation in the twentieth century. So Diaghilevshchina is really another Zhdanovshchina. As long as Russia remained a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, its arts needed to seem mysterious and enigmatic in order to seem authentic, or at least worthy of attention. “Everywhere, secrets,” John Updike’s character Henry Bech muses upon realizing that the weird Russian writing above the elevator door in his Moscow hotel merely reproduces the word étage. “French hidden beneath the Cyrillic.” What is Shostakovich *really* saying, we automatically wonder, assuming that to Russian ears the subtexts we struggle with are crys-
tal clear. (So why, then, did he end his life a Hero of Socialist Labor rather than a zek?) 45 What is Chaikovsky really saying, we automatically wonder, assuming that what delights our children every Christmas time at the ballet would corrupt them if they only knew. David Brown quotes Stasov’s preposterous claim that the big “Slav’sya” chorus at the end of A Life for the Tsar is “a melody composed entirely in the character of our ancient Russian and Greek church melodies, harmonized with the plagal cadence of the middle ages,” and assumes that Stasov’s Russian ears “really heard it this way.” 46

Americans like me, brought up during the Cold War, have a hard time regarding Russia as a normal place—and lately it’s become hard again. Behind its closed doors were unspeakable, unimaginable doings that made us constantly curious but also constantly guarded. Take away the veil, peek behind the curtain, see the place as normal, and what would remain of any interest to us? And yet at the same time, we who know Russia desperately wish that she would become less, well, interesting (as the Chinese say when they curse their enemies, “May you live in interesting times”). “A Russia in which Musorgsky no longer looks like a prophet is the Russia we all long to see”—those were the last words in my book on Musorgsky, published over two decades ago. 47 They were written in the bright dawn following the Soviet collapse, when that bland and beautiful fate seemed a possibility. It hasn’t happened yet. The last two decades of Russian history again have the makings of a great Musorgsky opera: Khodorkovshchina? Songs and Dances of Debt? Crimea and Punishment? Russia is still an object of morbid curiosity, and that is still good for business when it comes to selling books, or music.

But a Russia that looms not as a big Other but as a part of the common stash might turn out to be even better. Let Gergiev continue to play Mahler and Verdi until it no longer looks odd, let more Bullocks, Steven Muirs, Peter Schmelzes, and Simon Morrisons write the future’s books on Russian music, and maybe we won’t have to have any more conferences like this one.

NOTES

4. For the (autographed) picture of Serov, originally a gift from my dear friend Mike Beckerman, see ibid., 438.
6. Arthur Elson, Modern Composers of Europe: Being an Account of the Most Recent Musical Progress in the Various European Nations, with Some Notes on Their History, and Critical and Biographical Sketches
of the Contemporary Musical Leaders in Each Country (Boston: L. C. Page, 1904), 282–83. In the paragraph immediately preceding this one, Elson gives an interesting justification for his opinion: “Under the strict censorship of its corrupt government bureaucracy, free speech is repressed, and free thought even discouraged. The Russians, however, are a race gifted with imagination and feeling, and this must find its expression in some way. If literary freedom is checked, the people may turn to music with redoubled intensity.” Compare Nietzsche: “Music reaches its high water mark only among men who have not the ability or the right to argue” (The Wanderer and His Shadow, § 167).


8. See David Josephson, “The German Musical Exile and the Course of American Musicology,” Current Musicology, nos. 79 & 80 (2005): 9–53. For a most egregious example of ghettoization, see Alfred Einstein’s Music in the Romantic Era (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947), chap. 17 (“Nationalism”), with its blatantly racist comparison of the Russian musicians of the nineteenth century with “a savage people which comes into contact with European civilization and suddenly is placed in the position of using the achievements of a civilization it has not created, such as guns and ‘fire-water’” (302–3).


10. Ibid., 471.


13. That is, “New Style,” or according to the Gregorian calendar, by then in use everywhere in Europe except Russia.


17. V. V. Stasov, Izbranniye sochineniya (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1952), 3:744.

18. Ibid., 745.

19. Ibid., 745–46.

20. For a translation of this portion of Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art, see Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, eds., Music in the Western World: A History in Documents, 2nd ed. (Belmont CA: Thomson/Schirmer, 2007), 333–36.


22. Ibid., 750.


24. Quotations in this paragraph to this point are from Stasov, Izbranniye sochineniya, 3:750–51.

25. Ibid., 673.

26. Ibid., 755.


28. Ibid., 43.

29. Ibid., 3, 43.

34. Ibid., 360–61.
37. M.-D. Calvocoressi and Gerald Abraham, *Masters of Russian Music* (1936; New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1944), 266 (chapter “Peter Tchaikovsky,” signed G.A.). The “German-Russian” to whom Abraham referred was the critic Herman (or Gherman) Avgustovich Laroche, one of Chaikovsky’s closest friends in addition to being his champion in the press.
45. “Zek” (formed from the abbreviation zeh-KA [z-k] for zaklyuchyonnïy [“locked-up person” or inmate]) was Soviet slang for a Gulag prisoner.