CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*Natasha’s Dance, or Musical Nationalism*

In book 2 of *War and Peace* Tolstoy transports us to the Russia of our dreams in his delightful account of the hunt in the copse at Otradenoe and of the nocturnal outing in the troika—the moonlight over the snow-covered plain, the wintry silence broken by the jingle of the bells, the swish of the runners, and the crunch of the snow. After the hunt, “Uncle,” a congenial distant relation of the Rostovs, invites Nikolai and Natasha to his country house. They spend the evening savoring tempting delicacies, vodka, and balalaika music. “Uncle” picks up his guitar. The two young Rostovs are entranced by his playing. And then:

“Uncle” rose, and it was as though there were two men in him, one of whom smiled a grave smile at the merry fellow, while the merry fellow struck a naïve, formal pose preparatory to a folk-dance.

“Now then, niece!” he exclaimed, waving to Natasha the hand that had just struck a chord.

Natasha flung off the shawl that had been wrapped round her, ran forward facing “Uncle,” and setting her arms akimbo made a motion with her shoulders and waited.

Where, how and when could this young countess, who had had a French *émigrée* for governess, have imbibed from the Russian air she breathed the spirit of that dance? Where had she picked up that manner which the *pas de châle*, one might have supposed, would have effaced long ago? But the spirit and the movements were the very ones—inimitable, unrepeatable, Russian—which “Uncle” had expected of her. The moment she sprang to her feet and gaily smiled a confident, triumphant, knowing smile, the first tremor of fear
which had seized Nikolai and the others—fear that she might not dance it well—passed, and they were already admiring her.

Her performance was so perfect, so absolutely perfect, that Anisy Fiodorovna, who had at once handed her the kerchief she needed for the dance, had tears in her eyes, though she laughed as she watched the slender, graceful countess, reared in silks and velvets, in another world than her, who was yet able to understand all that was in Anisy and in Anisy’s father and mother and aunt, and in every Russian man and woman.¹

Tolstoy is a masterful writer. His powers of persuasion sweep us along. The charm of the above scene is so compelling that we barely notice that the writer has conjured up something highly improbable. How can the graceful countess possibly perform a dance she has never learned, that is not part of her social milieu? It is true that from the beginning of the nineteenth century folk music and folk dancing had become part of urban life in St. Petersburg and Moscow, a great many peasants having moved into the cities, bringing their customs with them. But the aristocracy had kept its own culture distinct from theirs. The gulf is well illustrated in Chaikovsky’s opera The Queen of Spades. In the second act several aristocratic young ladies make so bold as to dance to the strains of a folk tune, whereupon their governess rebukes them sharply: “Fi, quel genre, mesdames!” For Tolstoy, however, the question of how Natasha might have come to know the dance she performed is moot. As he puts it, her movements were “inimitably, unteachably Russian.” In the passage quoted above, Tolstoy thus introduces the reader not only to the welcoming warmth of a Russian country house, but also to the very heart of an ideology.

Tolstoy was voicing his faith in the Russian communal spirit. Book 2 of War and Peace revolves around the deep-rooted communal ties of the Russian family. In books 3 and 4 he extends these ties to embrace the entire Russian nation. This national spirit is adumbrated in the scene described above. Natasha and Anisy belong to different social worlds: the first is a young countess, the second a housekeeper. Yet the difference in their social and cultural backgrounds does not affect their deep affinity. In her dance, Natasha reveals her bond with her compatriots.

This is precisely the crux of the nationalist idea: all members of the nation share a single national identity. They are related. Their solidarity is more fundamental than the etiquette and values their social status bestows on them, and is clearly reflected in language, music, and dance.

For Tolstoy, national identity is no cultural artifact but a basic reality, a product of nature, one might say. And although the scene above
refers to dancing, Tolstoy thinks in the same way about music, as is shown by a slightly later passage: "‘Uncle’ sang as the peasant sings, with the full and naive conviction that the whole meaning of the song lies in the words, and that the tune comes as a matter of course and exists only to emphasize the words. This gave the unconsidered tune a peculiar charm, like the song of a bird."2

"The song of a bird" equates with the voice of nature and is therefore "good." Tolstoy calls folk music naive and unconsidered. Peasants do not think about how their tunes ought to sound; that takes care of itself. Nature alone can create music of any worth, simply by doing her work. There is therefore no such thing as musical creation by man. It is well known that in his later, moralistic phase, Tolstoy rejected Beethoven's and Schumann's music. His short story "Kreutzer Sonata," based on Beethoven's violin sonata by the same name, is a poisoned tribute to be sure, suggesting nothing less than that art music can unleash criminal passions. Tolstoy thought infinitely more of the song of the Volga boatmen. No wonder, then, that tears filled his eyes when he heard Chaikovsky's First String Quartet.3

That folk music springs straight from nature and that Russian music "can be breathed in with the Russian air" is a nineteenth-century idea. Folk music seemed a world apart from everything that European art music stood for. It went without saying that the two should be considered fundamental opposites, their difference reduced to the simple distinction between nature and culture.

What do we think about this matter nowadays? Modern people tend to take a more global view of music than was true in the 1800s. Although profound differences of opinion still prevail about what is natural in music and what is culturally determined, it now seems clear that the division does not lie where it was drawn in the nineteenth century. Folk music cannot be reduced to a natural expression of feelings, in opposition to the more formally fashioned art music. Folk music, too, is the result of structural thinking. It has its own rationale. A case in point is the Russian protyazhnaya, a splendid form of melismatically decorated song set to poetry of great expressive power and lyrical intensity. There is no doubt that the protyazhnaya was the type of folk song that Tolstoy had in mind when he wrote the above passages.

Tolstoy's view of folk music was not original; rather, it echoed the realistic and utilitarian vision of art presented by Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernishevsky in his influential The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality (1855). A work of art, Chernishevsky said, must be an objective ren-
dering of reality. But how can music satisfy that demand? According to Cherniševsky, by allowing itself to be guided by natural song. Cherniševsky equated folk song with "natural singing," which wells up spontaneously from the emotions. "Artificial singing," by contrast, is the province of the prima donna.

In what relation does this artificial singing stand to natural singing? It is more deliberate, calculated, embellished with everything with which human genius can embellish it. What comparison can there be between an aria of an Italian opera and the simple, pale, monotonous melody of a folk song! But all the training in harmony, all the artistry of development, all the wealth of embellishment of a brilliant area, all the flexibility and incomparable richness of the voice of the one who sings it cannot make up for the absence of the sincere emotion that permeates the pale melody of a folk song and the ordinary, untrained voice of the one who sings it not from a desire to pose and display his voice and art, but from the need to express his feelings.\(^4\)

The idea that folk music is a product of nature played an important part in the rise of musical nationalism, and it was part of the complex of ideas at the root of romantic nationalism. In the German Romantic movement, the folk song was considered an expression of the "purely human." Instead of being universal, however, that expression was thought to vary from one nation to the next. Folk song was considered a reflection of the particular mystical characteristics of a people and to go back to times immemorial. In this scheme, the division of mankind into nations was a natural fact. Every nation was said to have its own deep-rooted identity, its "national soul." Folk music was believed to be the clearest expression of the national character, a typical feature enshrined in every nation.

This interpretation of the meaning of folk music became dogma for nationalistic music ideologists. A natural outgrowth of this way of thinking was the idea that a nation's music is not created but "discovered," inasmuch as music reflecting the national character has always existed in folk song. Composers simply have the task of unveiling that character, of refining it, and of raising it to a higher artistic level. Their main concern must be to listen carefully and to polish the rough musical voice of their people.

Nationalistic musical thought had a strong influence on the historical picture of nineteenth-century music. This is particularly true of the music that appeared outside the dominant musical nations, that is, outside Germany, France, and Italy. The label "national schools," which was generally applied to the peripheral musical countries, is a sign of national-
ist thinking in itself. These “national schools” were for a long time judged almost exclusively by nationalist criteria; even today this habit continues, in that we spontaneously expect to discover the “typically Spanish” or “typically Russian” in the music of those countries.

Romantic nationalism has become firmly rooted in our listening habits, and this quality applies especially to Russian music. The persistence of this historical view, which colors the reception and critical evaluation of Russian composers to this day, stems from the fact that we associate the idea of national character with folklorism and authenticity, which in turn are associated with liberal, “progressive” values. The resulting picture is highly idealized; it is based on the belief that the interest of composers in folklore reflects their concern with the lot of the common man. The music taken to be the most typically Russian is thus spontaneously associated with progressive social ideas: the bridging of the enormous gulf between the elite and the broad masses of the Russian people. This basic idea is prominent not only in Soviet aesthetics but also in Western music historiography.

In the Soviet version, nineteenth-century composers belonged to the progressive intelligentsia. Glinka, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov were turned into advocates of social and national emancipation, and Musorgsky was called a musical populist and a protorevolutionary. Even as conservative a composer as Chaikovsky was dragged into the progressive camp—Chaikovsky of all people, a man who had expressed his revulsion of communism quite unequivocally in a letter to Nadezhda von Meck:

What you have said about communism is entirely true. It is impossible to imagine a more senseless utopia, something more discordant with the natural qualities of human nature. And how dull and unbearably colorless life will surely be when this equality of wealth reigns supreme (if ever it does). Indeed, life is the struggle for existence, and if it is permitted that this struggle not be [i.e., if we allow that this struggle may cease to be]—then neither will there be life, merely senseless proliferation.5

The national element (what the Russians call narodnost') was assigned a central place in Soviet ideology, according to which art had to be socialist in content and national in form. Ever since, the folklorism of the nineteenth-century masters has been dogmatically associated with progressive ideas.

In the West, the artificial character of this picture was clearly appreciated, and the most blatant distortions—the obvious way in which Chaikovsky’s character had been twisted, for instance—were ironed out.
Yet even Western musicologists have continued to identify the idea of national character with progressive thought. In particular, Russian music with a “national color” is still associated with the emancipation of the Russian people. Cosmopolitan music, in contrast, is treated as the elitist, alien culture of the aristocratic minority.

Musorgsky, for example, was traditionally counted among the populists, as in this characterization by Michael Russ: “Musorgsky was the only true musical Populist. . . . The emancipation rendered him penniless . . . but he bore the common people no malice, and concern and interest in their character and qualities helped shape his unique musical style.” Cosmopolitan traits in the work of such composers as Chaikovsky, however, were branded as conservative and un-Russian. A typical example of that attitude is this comparison of Musorgsky with Chaikovsky:

The abandonment of bourgeois in favor of epic-popular themes thus appears as the unavoidable way out for the “Russist” Musorgsky, as his utopian and outsider’s cultural decision, spurning identification with the European culture of Petersburg, with its classical and salon melodies, with the line of development that led from Glinka to Chaikovsky and saw its showpiece in Eugene Onegin. . . . The contrast is one between the Russia of the millions of souls and that of a million cultured people.7

Even in the recent textbook by Dorothea Redepenning we still read:

I have tried to take seriously the national character and also the role of folklore in art music and to treat it as a central phenomenon of the musical development in nineteenth-century Russia. . . . Only in that way can it be made clear that the composers of the “Mighty Little Heap” [the circle of composers around Balakirev], and Musorgsky in particular, were not the “classicists” into which Soviet musicology had turned them; rather did national subjects and folklore in about 1860 to 1880 have a socio-critical, mutinous, and political dimension that the tsarist state considered a threat.8

That view is hardly tenable. If a direct link indeed exists between national character and progressive liberalism, how then can we explain that a nationalistic work such as Rogneda earned its composer, Alexander Serov, a life annuity from the tsar? And how can we reconcile the fact that the impetus for Chaikovsky’s most folkloristic opera, Vakula the Smith, came from court circles? Or how is it that Musorgsky’s Khovanshchina has the reputation of being an opera about the people when the people do not play even the most minor role in it?

We cannot endow music with an ideological content unless we have a clear picture of the context in which it originated and was expected to function. The ideological development of a composition such as Ba-
lakirev's Second Overture on Russian Themes (1864) is a good example that ought to prevent us from jumping to hasty conclusions. The composer himself gave at least three ideological explanations of this work, a powerful piece of symphonic music based entirely on Russian folk-music themes. Musical nationalism in its purest form, you might think. But what did the work really signify? During its composition Balakirev was under the spell of the radical populist Alexander Herzen. From his London exile, Herzen tried to infuse Russian youth with political awareness through his journal Kolokol (The bell). His portrayal of the tidal wave of social unrest flooding across Russia and his slogan "to the people!" were famous. That slogan expressed precisely what Balakirev himself did by transcribing folk songs directly from the mouths of the people and then elaborating them symphonically. In 1869 he published the result, now with the programmatic title of 1,000 Years—a reference to the millennium in which the Russian state had emerged and established itself. A sound commercial ploy? Not altogether. For, in fact, the millenary existence of the state had been celebrated in 1862 (to mark the supposed foundation of Novgorod in 862 by the Varangian prince Rurik). From a letter of his friend Stasov of 17 December 1868 we gather that Balakirev and Stasov had given the work a fresh meaning. It was no longer the flood of social unrest they wished to portray, but three stages in Russian history: the ancient, the medieval, and the modern (the last illustrated on the title page with locomotives and telegraphs). In other words, the work was glorifying progress, painting an optimistic and melioristic picture of Russian history. No vestige of a revolutionary message was left. In 1884, Balakirev revised the overture, and four years later he published the work anew, now under the title of Rus, the Old Slavic name for Russia. "Rus" was a central concept of Slavophiles, who used it to refer to the old Russia before the reforms of Peter the Great—the Russia they considered as their ideal, and a romantic idealization strongly opposed by liberal and progressive thinkers. Now Balakirev spelled out his message quite specifically. The clash between three elements—the pagan period, the Muscovite state, and the autonomous republican system of the Cossacks—he said, had culminated in "the fatal blow dealt all Russian religious and national aspirations by the reforms of Peter I." In a letter to a Czech Slavophile, Balakirev wrote that he was trying "to depict how Peter the Great killed our native Russian life." He had effected a 180-degree turn from left populism via optimistic meliorism to pessimistic, right-wing reaction.

The example of Balakirev's Second Overture on Russian Themes
makes it clear that there is no direct link between his music, which re-
mained relatively unchanged, and his ideology, which changed dramat-
ically. Of course, it is always possible to argue that Balakirev himself did
not grasp the significance of his work or, worse still, was guilty of op-
portunism. However, the significance of a composition never lies in its
musical characteristics alone; it lies above all in the link between the com-
position and its context. The incorporation of musical folklore is not au-
tomatically bound up with liberal and democratic ideas: the impact of
nationalism can also be conservative or even reactionary, with the ro-
mantic glorification of the people having a role-affirmative function. In
the historiography of Russian music this distinction is too often neglected.
Dorothea Redepenning, for instance, refers to a restorative nationalism,
but places it entirely in the generation of composers working after 1880
(such as Glazunov, Lyadov, and Arensky). For the generation of Balakirev
and Musorgsky she does not challenge the progressive picture—with the
exception of Borodin’s *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, which she con-
siders the exception that proves the rule.

However important the role assigned to folk song by nationalistically
inspired historians of music, the national character of Russian music does
not stop there. The picture of what is typically Russian in music must be
filled in with other characteristics. What these are has been defined largely
by the views of Vladimir Stasov, one of the most powerful spokesmen of
the New Russian School. It was Stasov who created the myth of the
“Mighty Little Heap,” a nickname for the five composers of the Balakirev
circle (also known as the Mighty Five), namely Balakirev himself, Mu-
sorgsky, Cui, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov, a cohesive group that was
said to have remained loyal to liberal ideals—which, in fact, were merely
Stasov’s. Stasov’s characterization of the New Russian School has made
history; until recently, it had an almost exclusive hold on historiography.

According to Stasov, the New Russian School embodied the follow-
ing four characteristics: the absence of preconceptions and of blind faith;
an oriental element; a pronounced preference for programmatic music;
and the quest for a national character.10 The first point implied the re-
jection of academism and of fixed musical—that is, Western—forms.
The second sprang from contacts with eastern nations inside the Rus-
sian empire. The third reflected an aesthetic approach that was consid-
ered progressive and anti-academic at the time. The last point involved
the incorporation of folk music.

Russian music history was marked by a simple split between a national
camp—as defined by these four points—and a cosmopolitan camp. The
national camp consisted of the Mighty Five; the cosmopolitan camp included Rubinstein, Chaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff. Chaikovsky, for example, was considered to be less Russian than the Mighty Five inasmuch as his work followed classical forms, contained few oriental elements, and left little scope for programmatic musical treatment, and national character did not seem to be his greatest concern.

Stasov created his system in defense of the group with which he was associated. His view of the Russian national aspect of music must therefore be taken with a pinch of salt.

What, for instance, are we to make of orientalism? Is it truly a national characteristic, an inherent feature of Russian musicality? Hardly. In fact, the treatment of orientalism as a Russian national characteristic is as much the result of Stasov's *magister dixit* as it is the natural outcome of the success of orientalizing works by Russian composers in Paris during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Now, the fate of "oriental" Russian music had an ironic aspect. In 1909, when Sergey Diaghilev, the founder of the Ballets Russes, devised the program for his first Paris season, he was playing things safe. Shrewd businessman that he was, he came to Paris with a repertoire that was bound to appeal to the Parisians. From the work of Russian composers he chiefly selected oriental music, tying it to ideas of Eastern luxury and eroticism: the dance of the Persian slave girls in Musorgsky's *Khovanshchina*, Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*, complete with visual fantasies about Cleopatra and harem scenes. The Parisians were delighted, the money rolled in, and orientalism quickly came to be considered one of the national characteristics of Russian music—first in France and then throughout western Europe. That response was understandable. French culture had long had a strong penchant for orientalism, together with its ideological accompaniment: the sense that French ways were greatly superior to the admittedly brilliant but nevertheless barbaric customs of the remote and different world inhabited by distant Asiatic peoples. And to the French, Russia herself was quite distinctly part of that mysterious East. The irony of the situation is that the St. Petersburg composers, for their part, identified themselves with the European sector of their immense country: the feeling of superiority vis-à-vis the East played the same role in their culture as it did in western Europe. In their eyes, European Russia had reached a much higher level of civilization than the primitive Asiatic region of Russia. Thus Diaghilev was portraying Russian culture in a light these composers and the impresario himself did not condone.
Such relativizing comments, however, must not lead the reader to conclude that nationalism had been superseded, in Russia as well as in western Europe. Nationalism continued to be a powerful element of nineteenth-century intellectual life. Moreover, because music is an art form that often deliberately seeks bridges to existing cultural currents, music demanded a preeminent place in nineteenth-century culture. Musicians no longer accepted that their discipline was nothing more than a noble pastime. In Germany in particular, consistent attempts were made to have music treated as an independent form of high art. Although in Russia music did not at first enjoy an elevated cultural standing—Western music was considered an upper-class pastime, a sign of social status, no more—that situation altered in the 1860s, when Russian composers began to demand that the cultural significance of their music be recognized. They did so in part by associating their work with important cultural currents—including nationalism. A composer's civic sense was thus reflected in work that somehow expressed national feelings or aspirations. Nationalism also became a useful propaganda weapon: the most effective means of discrediting an opponent was to deny the national relevance of his music. If we plumb genuine motives for the conflicts between rivals, however, we find that they often lie at quite a different level: in musico-aesthetic differences, in professional rivalry, even in downright personal antipathy.

Russian music is no longer judged exclusively in terms of its national character. Such judgments constitute a form of essentialism, in that they reduce critical evaluations to a few fixed formulas. The idea that nationalism and progressive values go hand in hand has also been abandoned, a fact that sometimes leads to unpleasant surprises, for instance when we discover reactionary tendencies in works by Glinka and Musorgsky. A different, more complex approach, however, one that leaves behind the nationalistic clichés, gives rise to considerable gains, clarifying the real creative issues that were at stake and providing a more detailed insight into the relationship between music and society. Nothing is simple in Russian culture; its context is specific and unusual. To be sure, the charm of Natasha's dancing serves as a symbol: not of the Russian national character, but of the fascination that Russian music continues to exert.