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Today's program includes works by three of the great composers of Russian romanticism, **Mikhail Glinka**, **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky**, and **Sergei Rachmaninoff**. Russia in the 19th century was a society in transition, consumed with nationalist fervor and a blossoming culture of literary and musical arts. Glinka's works in the first half of the century laid the foundation of a Russian musical language. After Glinka, a split occurred between the influential and outspoken circle of composers known as "The Mighty Five," who embraced a nationalist ethos and rejected formal training in Western musical practice in favor of a uniquely Russian musical sound and style. On the other side were composers including Anton and Nikolai Rubenstein and Tchaikovsky, who embraced Western influence and training and sought to express the Russian spirit through these inherited forms. Glinka's influence can be seen in aspects of Tchaikovsky's expressive language, such as his use of the melodic shapes and modes of Russian folk song, dance, and church music, decorative chromaticism, and a variety of new orchestral textures and colors. Rachmaninoff carried these lessons on into the 20th century, embracing Tchaikovsky's long, singing melodies and his incorporation of Russian elements into traditional Western musical forms such as the symphony and the concerto.

Mikhail Glinka

(1804–1857)

Overture to *Ruslan and Lyudmila*

Composed 1837–42

In the first half of the 19th century, large-scale musical performances in Russia focused on French and Italian operas, as well as orchestral works by composers including Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. With no organized system of music education in Russia, Glinka patched together his musical education through childhood piano and violin lessons, participation in the thriving amateur music circles of Saint Petersburg as a pianist, composer,

and singer, the study of orchestral and opera scores, travels in Europe, and ad hoc composition lessons in Italy and Germany. Prior to his exposure to Western concert music, Glinka had spent his early childhood at the family's estate in rural Western Russia immersed in the sounds of Russian church

Premiere

1842 – St. Petersburg
Imperial Bolshoi Kamenny Theatre

Instrumentation

two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings

Duration

4 minutes

music, folk song, and the clanging of the local church bells, all of which became fundamental sources of his melodic and harmonic compositional material. The staggeringly successful debut in 1836 of his first opera, *A Life for the Tsar*, established him as “the future of Russian music.” His second opera, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, was not as successful, despite moments of exceptional music including the

overture, which remains an audience favorite today. Of particular interest is the loud and dramatic descending whole-tone scale played by the low strings, bassoons, and trombones near the end of the piece. This music represents the character of the evil dwarf Chernomor, and the device of using the whole-tone scale to represent magical and dangerous elements became an essential component of both Russian and French music for generations.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

(1873–1943)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

Composed 1900–01

If Glinka was the first Russian composer of the Romantic era, Rachmaninoff was among the last. A child prodigy and world class composer, pianist, and conductor, he left his native Russia after the revolution in 1917 and lived the rest of his life in Europe and the United States, continuing to

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compose in his accustomed late Romantic style despite the Modernist trends around him. Tchaikovsky's profound influence on Rachmaninoff can be heard in the richly expressive melodies, conservative formal structures,

Premiere

1901 – Moscow, with
Rachmaninoff at the piano

Instrumentation

solo piano, two flutes, two oboes,
two clarinets, two bassoons,
four horns, two trumpets, three
trombones, tuba, timpani, bass
drum, cymbal, strings

Duration

33 minutes

and colorful orchestration with which Rachmaninoff developed his unique and distinctive compositional voice. In 1893, Tchaikovsky heard the twenty-year-old composer's one-act opera *Aleko* and expressed his enthusiastic approval, committing to conduct the work himself the following year. Tchaikovsky's unexpected death prevented this, but Rachmaninoff considered the older composer to be among his most important musical

influences. Following the disastrous premiere of Rachmaninoff's first symphony in 1897 under the incompetent baton of Alexander Glazunov, the composer suffered a severe bout of depression. After three years spent conducting but not composing, his family prevailed upon him to seek treatment from Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a therapist specializing in hypnosis who was also a highly accomplished amateur musician. Rachmaninoff described his hypnotic experience:

Day after day I heard the same hypnotic formula while I lay half asleep in Dahl's armchair: 'You will begin to write your concerto. You will work with great ease.... The music will be excellent.'
Incredible as it may sound, this cure really helped me.

He composed the second and third movements of his Second Piano Concerto in the following months and performed them himself to great acclaim in December 1900. The first movement was added the following year, and he dedicated the work to Dr. Dahl. The concerto has natural ease and beauty and a nuanced emotional narrative, with a darkly tormented first movement, *Moderato*, the warmly lyrical and poignant second movement, *Adagio sostenuto*, and the highly virtuosic third movement, *Allegro scherzando*, with

its rapturous second theme. This concerto is an audience favorite not only among Rachmaninoff's works but in the piano solo literature as a whole.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(1840–1893)

Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64 **Composed 1888**

Tchaikovsky was the most famous and celebrated Russian composer of the 19th century, producing emotionally stirring symphonies and operas and masterfully colorful and expressive ballet scores. His fifth symphony opens

darkly, with the clarinets and low strings intoning a motive which he said

represented "*complete resignation before Fate.*" This motive was inspired

by a passage from Act 1 of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, and it recurs in all four movements, creating a cyclical form.

Part of the beauty of the first movement

is the dramatic contrast between the weightiness of the opening motive, the rhythmic vigor and swirling figures of

the *Allegro con anima*, and the sweet

longing of its gently swaying second theme. The second movement features one of the great horn solos in the symphonic literature, and after an opening of heavenly calm, the music churns towards a war-like pronouncement of the fate motive in the trumpets. The charming Waltz of the third movement provides some respite from the drama, but the fate motive reappears softly near the end. This sets the stage for the *Finale*, which begins with the fate motive triumphantly recast in E Major, followed by a bombastic *Allegro vivace* and a grandiose conclusion.

Premiere

1888 – St. Petersburg, with Tchaikovsky conducting

Instrumentation

three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, strings

Duration

50 minutes

~By Nell Flanders, Assistant Conductor
Princeton Symphony Orchestra