

# **PERFORMANCE PRACTICE ISSUES IN RUSSIAN PIANO MUSIC**

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**by**

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**Submitted for the degree of  
MASTER OF CREATIVE ARTS**

**February 2003**

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the rapid growth of musical culture in Russia. This resulted in a large repertoire of piano music — ranging from miniatures to virtuosic etudes and sonatas. Growing out of the nineteenth century romantic tradition, and highly influenced by the social conditions of the time, Russian composers developed a distinctive style which closely reflected their culture, personalities and ideologies.

There are several approaches to studying performance practice. One is to study the interpretations of other pianists. While this does have many advantages, it has not been adopted in this paper as it has one flaw: it still fails to capture the distinctive language of these composers. Rather, the paper will study the social and musical influences on the composers, and, more importantly, their philosophies about pianism and the purpose of music. This will be related to interpretative issues in the works.

The repertoire has been divided into four areas. The paper commences with a study of the miniature, which is valuable in finding the ‘essence’ of a composer’s musical language expressed on a small scale. Here, the ‘elementary’ considerations in performance practice will be studied. The second chapter discusses etudes. This is useful in gaining an insight into composers’ conception of technique, and how this relates to performance practice. The third chapter deals with music that has extra-musical themes. This provides opportunity for a more detailed cultural and biographical study of the composers. To represent the large-scale repertoire of Russian composers, the sonata will be studied. Here, a detailed analysis of the composers’ musical language and its relationship to expression will be discussed.

# PERFORMANCE PRACTICE ISSUES IN RUSSIAN PIANO MUSIC

## INTRODUCTION

There is something distinctive about Russian piano music from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Compared to the West, the musical culture of Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century was undeveloped. Russia lacked the court patronage which had greatly encouraged the development of instrumental music in the West. It was 1802 before Russia formed its first orchestra. Music was generally “looked down on for being ‘proletarian’”.<sup>6</sup> Rimsky-Korsakoff’s father stated that “music should be regarded merely as a pleasant pastime, preferable to cards or drinking.”<sup>7</sup>

Russian culture changed under the rule of Tsar Alexander II from 1855. The most significant change was the move to abolish serfdom. Culturally, this had wider implications. The historian Platonov wrote

There was a whiff of softness and tolerance characteristic of the monarch (Alexander II). Petty press constraints were removed; the universities breathed more freely; society showed a more vigorous spirit; it was said that the sovereign wanted truth, enlightenment, honesty, and a free voicing of views.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, the arts grew rapidly: Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*, and Dostoyevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment*. Central to this culture was the escalation of the Slavophile-Westerniser debate. On one hand, the Five (Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Cui, and Borodin) were concerned primarily with promoting a distinctive ‘Russian’ culture. Their focus, in general, was on the social function of music — in their piano repertoire this is represented by a large body of miniatures, often programmatic, usually suitable for performance by amateurs (which, after all, is what the Five technically were). On the other hand, a distinctly more cosmopolitan musical scene was being established — particularly by Anton and Nicolas Rubinstein, the founders of the Moscow and St. Petersburg conservatories (established in the 1860s).

Culture was encouraged by the maecenases (wealthy patrons of artists). Celebrations would be held for the launch of new works. Faubion Bowers describes:

Guests ‘trans-cognacked’ or ‘trans-champagned’ themselves, meaning

<sup>6</sup> Faubion Bowers, *Scriabin*, second edition (New York, 1996), p.51.

<sup>7</sup> Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakoff, *My Musical Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1936. Cited in: *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Platonov, *Istoriya Rossiya*, Petrograd, p.701. Cited in: Alfred Swann, *Russian Music and its Sources in Chant and Folk-Song* (London, 1973), p.73.

they drank to unconsciousness, in Mussorgsky's words. String quartets and their performers were launched in alcohol, like ships christened in champagne.<sup>9</sup>

Belaieff, for example, was a Russian timber merchant who, after hearing 17-year-old Glazunov's *First Symphony* in 1882, decided to set up a publishing company. This later expanded to include planning concerts of works published by the firm. Glazunov, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Liadoff, Borodin, Taneyev and Scriabin were a few of the composers supported in the early days of Belaieff's company. Another prominent patron of culture was Solodovnikov, who funded the present Moscow Conservatory (which cost 200, 000 rubbles).

Also vital to the encouragement of culture were teachers such as Zverev, who supported young pianists, providing free board and daily lessons. Apart from being given a musical education, students were also given a cultural one: they were required to learn French and German, dancing, manners, and be familiar with literature (they were not allowed to mention the title of a book unless they had read it). They attended Italian opera at the Bolshoi, and gave private concerts in Zverev's house each Friday evening to guests such as Tchaikovsky, the Rubinstein, Kashkin, and Gutheil. Zverev's pensionaries included Scriabin and Rachmaninoff.

Contrasting to this cultured society was the politically unstable conditions of Russia. People feared attending a command performance at the opera house in case an assassination attempt was made on the monarch. Russia faced famine in the 1890s. This was followed by the increasingly harsh social effects of the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions, and the communist regime.

It was in this culture that Russian composers found that 'distinctive voice' which we associate with Russian music. Composers "demanded from their art an answer to the complicated and painful questions of existence. Through their art they wanted to understand themselves and their times."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bowers, op. cit., p.42.

<sup>10</sup> Andrey Olkhovsky, *Music Under the Soviets* (Connecticut, 1975), p.17.