

# From Russia with Love, Part 2

Sherri Weiler



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[This continuation of the three-part series on Russian art song that began with Glinka and Dargomyzhsky resumes with Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky.]

## MUSSORGSKY

**M**ODEST PETROVICH MUSSORGSKY (1839–1881) is one of the most charismatic and original personalities in the entire world of Western music. He has an almost “anti-musical spirit [which] manifests itself mainly in his near lack of concern for beauty,”<sup>1</sup> while still displaying an impressive talent for composition. Like many nineteenth century Russian composers, Mussorgsky was born to wealth and property. On the family estate, some 250 miles southeast of St. Petersburg, the young Mussorgsky loved to listen to the Russian folktales told by his nurse and liked to illustrate them musically at the piano before he had acquired even the most basic set of pianistic skills. He began music lessons with his mother at the age of six and made rapid if nondescript progress for his social class; at the age of 10 he was enrolled in an elite secondary school in St. Petersburg, where he was able to further his piano study. In 1852, at age 13, he entered a boarding school for prospective military cadets, a training and career path very common for young men of his breeding. During his time at the academy his musical gifts were often on display at balls and other events, and he published his first composition, the *Porte-enseigne Polka* for piano, in his first year of study.<sup>2</sup>

In 1856 he graduated from the cadet academy and was commissioned as an officer of the Preobrazhensky Regiment, the preeminent corps of the Russian Imperial Guard, traditionally led by the Tsar himself. Borodin, who met Mussorgsky in late 1856, described the young composer “as an elegant piano-playing dilettante.” Later that same winter, Mussorgsky was introduced to Dargomyzhsky and began attending musical evenings in the latter’s home; this led in turn to his introduction to Cesar Cui, “another young military officer who dabbled in composition.”<sup>3</sup> By December 1856 he had met Balakirev and begun composition lessons with him. One of his first studied compositions was his 1857 song “Where Are You, Little Star?” (*Gdye tiy, zvyozdochka/Где ты, звёздочка*), set to an 1840 poem of Nikolai Grekov. Rather simplistic, but set in an F# minor melismatic folk style (*pro-tyazhnaya*), the song is an excellent first choice for singers new to Russian song. The stylistically similar, very beautiful “Hebrew Song” (*Yevreiskaya pyesnya/Еврейская песня*) was written in 1867. A personal favorite of mine,

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with poetry by Lev Mey, this song is more musically sophisticated yet still suitable for initial Russian repertoire study. Other early songs include “The Joyous Hour” (*Vesyoliy chas*/Весёлый час), a drinking song, and a pair of *romansy*: “Tell Me Why, Darling” (*Otchevo, skazhi, dusha-dyevitsa*/Отчего, скажи, душа-девица) and “The Leaves Rustled Sadly” (*List’ya shumeli unila*/Листья шумели уныло).

After only two years in the military, and with very little musical preparation and experience, Mussorgsky resigned his commission, determined to make a career in music. This was inspired largely by his new circle of friends: Balakirev, Borodin, and Cui. Later, with the addition of Rimsky-Korsakov, the group would become known as the “Russian Five,” pioneers of the Russian nationalist school. (In Russian, this influential group is called the “Mighty Handful” (*moguchaya kuchka*/Могучая кучка). Unfortunately, Mussorgsky’s timing was not good: with the liberation of the serfs by Tsar Nicholas II in 1861, the family’s estates were devastated and the musical scion slowly slid toward “urban poverty.” He had to take a clerical post, which proved to be insufficient to maintain his standard of living, but at least afforded him the opportunity to compose on a daily basis. It also had the effect of swiftly and severely removing him from the ranks of the landed gentry. Mussorgsky never blamed his downward spiral on the abolition of serfdom; instead, he sought to develop an independent aesthetic doctrine, and desired to create “an art of radical innovation.” His texts in both song and opera evinced a realism that reflected the patterns of spoken Russian.<sup>4</sup> This trait made him very popular among singers, but not so much with orchestral musician: they “resented [his] unconventional methods and unusual style in which speech-inflection governed the vocal lines.”<sup>5</sup>

His mature songs contain wonderful examples of intense emotional commitment (*Songs and Dances of Death* [*Pyecni i plyaski smerti*/Песни и пляски смерти], great humor (“The Goat” [*Kazyol*/Козёл, *Going Mushrooming*/Па грибий/По грибы], and peasant life, from which he either drew pictures of deep suffering and almost inconsolable grief or became a keen observer of man’s foibles (“Darling Savishna” [*Svyetit Savishna*/Светик Савишна], “Mischievous Fellow” [*Ozornik*/Озорник], and “The Orphan” [*Sirotkka*/Сиротка]).

Mussorgsky set at least 15 of his songs to his own words; his most favored poet was Arseny Arkad’yevich Golenishchev-Kutuzov.

Mussorgsky died in 1881 with nearly every major orchestral composition begun left unfinished. The vast majority of his works that we know today were highly edited, even rewritten, by his friend Rimsky-Korsakov. Consequently, only his 50 songs freely represent him as he truly was. In retrospect, “Mussorgsky was hardly the untutored, unsophisticated genius he was considered to be during his lifetime . . . rather, he was one of the most perceptive and sophisticated composers” ever known in Western music.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, it was his alcoholism that led to his inability to complete his compositions, that depleted his capability to work hard, and that left him in loneliness and poverty at his death. Simultaneously, he was “the most strikingly individual Russian composer” of his era and became “an avatar of modernism for . . . Debussy and Ravel.”<sup>7</sup>

## TCHAIKOVSKY

Pyotr Illich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) was the second son of a mining engineer whose search for work left the young Tchaikovsky’s first decade in turmoil. It was also the decade where he was introduced to music and poetry. His brother Modest wrote a seminal biography of the composer in the early twentieth century in which it is reported that Pyotr read in both French and German at the age of six.<sup>8</sup> In this volume Modest also relates the memories of the family’s governess, Fanny Dürbach.

When she left the family in 1848, she kept Pyotr’s copybooks: except for two prayers in Russian, Tchaikovsky wrote in French, on secular and metaphysical topics precocious for any child and remarkable for a seven-year-old living in rural Russia at mid-century. Among other projects he wrote a poem, “The Heroine of France,” and began a history of Joan of Arc. Dürbach found the young Tchaikovsky endearing if easily offended from benign causes. She told the oft-quoted anecdotes: of Pyotr’s kissing the map of Russia and spitting on the rest of Europe except for France, which he covered with his hand; of his upset nerves after long improvisations at the piano; and of his sleeplessness when he could not rid his mind of music.<sup>9</sup>

The death of Tchaikovsky’s mother when he was only 14 followed a period of illness and upheaval, during which he had changed boarding schools and lost a

favorite teacher. He entered the School of Jurisprudence and stayed there from 1852–1859. His classmates during these teen years remembered him as fairly unremarkable, compared to the fame he achieved in his adult years. However, the school provided instruction in both singing and instrumental music; Pyotr studied choral singing and was a soloist in important church services. He wrote literature, considered composing an opera, and wrote his first surviving song, “My Genius, My Angel, My Friend” (Мой **geniy**, мой **angel**, мой **druk**/ Мой гений, мой ангел, мой друг), op. 6, no. 1 to a poem of Afanasy Fyvet.

After graduating from the School of Jurisprudence, he began work with the Ministry of Justice; but work was only “work.” Music was beginning to be his life. Tchaikovsky toured Western Europe between July and September 1861, working as a translator for one of his father’s business associates. This trip affirmed his affinity for European culture, and eight more European sojourns transpired before his marriage in 1877.

He began study at the new St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1862 and graduated in 1865; while there he studied flute, organ, and piano, in addition to theory and composition. His piano teacher, Anton Rubinstein, introduced him to many influential musicians. It was Rubinstein who taught Tchaikovsky about discipline: to quickly sketch out the complete musical idea, then work every day until its “sacred nature” was fully expressed. When in September 1865 Anton’s brother Nikolai Rubinstein came to St. Petersburg to recruit a theory teacher for music classes in Moscow, Tchaikovsky was offered and accepted the position. He moved to Moscow in January 1866, and in September the Moscow Conservatory, which now bears his name, was opened. During the following decade he secured his professional status, encountered the Russian Five, and began to formulate his own sense of compositional style within this framework.<sup>10</sup>

It is not the intention of this article to give an analysis of Tchaikovsky’s life; much has been written analyzing his presumed homosexuality and how that affected his music, his marriage, and his everyday life in a repressive society. It has even been suggested, by an article first appearing in the 1980s, that Tchaikovsky’s death was an intentional, self-induced arsenic poisoning. By the 1990s this theory was challenged by the “painstaking

scholarship of Aleksandr Poznansky.”<sup>11</sup> Yet the debate continues, and we will likely never know the complete truth.

What we do know is that Tchaikovsky was the first composer of “a new Russian type, fully professional, who firmly assimilated traditions of Western European . . . mastery . . . In a deeply original, personal and national style he united the symphonic thought of Beethoven and Schumann with the works of Glinka . . . and transformed . . . music into matters of Shakespearean elevation and psychological import.”<sup>12</sup>

That is a very impressive legacy, indeed.

His songs have had such an impact on my own understanding of and love for, Russian art song that I find it difficult to expound on this subject without becoming overly sentimental and flowery. Tchaikovsky’s songs are based primarily on German structures *à la* Schubert and Schumann, folk-style, gypsy songs, and a few on liturgical chant. His Opus 6, composed in 1869, contains the famous “None but the Lonely Heart” (Nyet, **tolka** tot, kto znal/ Нет, только тот, кто знал). The Russian poem by Afanasy Mey was transcribed from Goethe’s “Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt” in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. I would love to hear a recital program with a section consisting of several compositions set to this same poem: Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Mendelssohn-Hensel, and Beethoven all wrote lovely versions. The Russian would add a wonderful contrast to all that German!

There are several highly approachable songs in Tchaikovsky’s vocal offerings suitable to entry-level Russian singers. Although he rarely specified which voice type he wrote for, Tchaikovsky was concerned that his songs not be transposed, but sung as written. He composed several songs in the bass clef, a sure indication that a male lower voice should sing them. In a letter to his publisher P. I. Jurgenson concerning a complete edition of his songs, he wrote: “Dear friend! I have started reviewing my romances . . . To my mind, the complete edition must be authentic, rather than transposed for different voices, i.e., must be engraved as I wrote it . . . I’m utterly happy about the complete edition. ~Frolovskoe, November 3, 1890.”<sup>13</sup>

Another note of interest to the budding Russian singer: the vast majority of nineteenth century Russian poetry was written, grammatically speaking, in the masculine voice. Russian—unlike French, Italian, Spanish,

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German, or English—uses gender in past tense verb construction. For example, to express “I was” in Russian requires a change of verb ending to specify the gender of the speaker. A man would say: Я был/Я *biyl*; a woman would say: Я была/Я *biyla*. I was taught that Russian women singers are not in the least offended nor stifled by this, and that Russian women sing the masculine verb ending and think nothing of it, much in the way in English we default to “he” in speaking of animals whose gender remains unknown, or even the Deity.<sup>14</sup> Please note the entries for Op. 47, no. 7, Op. 60, no. 7, and Op. 63, no. 1, below, for an example of feminine-specific verb endings.

Op. 6, no. 4 (baritone)—“A Tear Falls” (*Slyeza drazhit*/Слеза дрожит)—poetry by Count Tolstoy. Range D<sub>3</sub>-F<sub>4</sub>. Tessitura fairly high, very lyric singing required.

Op. 6, no. 5 (soprano or tenor)—“Why?” (*Otchevo?*/Очего?)—poetry by Lev Mey. Range D<sub>4</sub>-A<sub>5</sub>. Medium tessitura, lyric with a dramatic ending section.

Op. 38, no. 3 (baritone) — “It Happened at the Ball” (*Sryed shumava bala*/Средь шумного бала)—poetry by Count Tolstoy. Range B<sub>3</sub>-E<sub>4</sub>. Medium tessitura, lyric character. Simple, wistful.

Op. 47, no. 7 (soprano or mezzo soprano)—“Was I Not Like a Blade of Grass?” (*Ya li v polye da nye travushka biyla?*/ Я ли в поле да не травушка была?)—poetry by Surikov after Shevchenko. Range B<sub>3</sub>-B<sub>5</sub>. Tessitura is medium; high and low notes are both extremes and only touched upon. *This is suitable only for an advanced singer, with dramatic potential!* This song is also an excellent example of Tchaikovsky’s use of *protyazhnaya*, or melismatic lament.

Op. 54, no. 5 (mezzo soprano or tenor)—“Legend” (*Lyegenda*/Легенда)—poetry by Pleshcheyev from an English source. Range D<sub>4</sub>-E<sub>5</sub>. Tessitura is medium. Tells a simple story of Jesus as a child. Joan Boytim uses the English version of this song in *The First Book of Mezzo-Soprano/Alto Songs, Part II*.

Op. 58, no. 6 (mezzo soprano or baritone)—“Only You Alone” (*Lish tiy adin*/Лишь ты один)—poetry by Pleshcheyev after Christiane Friederik. Range A<sub>3</sub>-F<sub>5</sub>. Tessitura is medium, with a lower extension. Quietly intense declaration of love.

Op. 60, no. 2 (any voice type)—“I Will Tell You Nothing” (*Ya tebye nichevo nyeh skazhu*/Я тебе ничего не скажу)—poetry by Anastasy Fyut. Range E<sub>4</sub>-F<sub>5</sub>. Tessitura is mid-range, but song is extremely lyric and should be sung with delicacy.

Op. 60, no. 7 (mezzo soprano or soprano)—“Gypsy Song” (*Pyecn tsiganki*/Песнь Цыганки)—poetry by Polonsky. Range D<sub>3</sub>-E<sub>5</sub>. Tessitura is low; song is very *Carmen*-esque, and therefore gender-specific.

Op. 63, no. 1 (soprano)—“I Did Not Love You at First” (*Ya snachala tebya nye lyubiyla*/Я сначала тебя не любила)—poetry by Grand Duke Konstantin (Romanov). Range F<sub>4</sub>-G<sub>5</sub>. Tessitura is mid-range for a soprano, and is meant to be sung by a woman, given the feminine verb endings *сначала* and *любила*.

Op. 65 is a set of six French songs for medium voice. They were set to the original French poems of Paul Collin, Edouard Turquety, and Mme. A. M. Blanchecotte, and only later given Russian words to fit the music by Aleksandra Gorchakova.

Op. 73, no. 6 (soprano or tenor)—“Again, as Before, Alone” (*Snova, kak prezhdye, adin*/Снова, как прежде, один)—poetry by Rathaus. Range A<sub>4</sub>-G<sub>5</sub>. Tessitura is mid-range for a high voice. The song is dramatic and intense, and is the last song Tchaikovsky wrote. The musical picture painted here is one of stark agony. The poem describes a true dark night of the soul, and as such, I feel I must quote it here in its entirety. We may never know the truth of Tchaikovsky’s death, but it saddens me beyond measure to think this is where he found himself in his final days. And I must admit to transposing the song down to fit my mezzo voice. I trust Tchaikovsky has forgiven me, knowing how much I love him.

Снова, как прежде, один,  
Снова объят я тоской  
Смотрится тополь в окно,  
Весь озарённый луной  
Смотрится тополь в окно  
Шепчут о чём то листы  
В звёздах горят небеса  
Где теперь, милая, ты?  
Всё, что творится со мной,  
Я передать не берусь.

Друг! помолись за меня,  
Я за тебя уж молюсь!

I am alone again, as before,  
Again unbearable anguish oppresses my heart.  
The poplar is looking at my window  
Illumined by the moon.  
The poplar is looking at my window,  
The leaves are whispering about something,  
The sky is full of shining stars,  
Darling, where are you now?  
I am not able to tell all  
That is going on with me.  
Friend! Pray for me,  
I am already praying for you.

### NOTES

1. Nikolai Findeisen, *The Russian Art Song (Romance): An Essay on its Historical Development*, 1905, translated by James Walker (Nerstrand, MN: James Walker, 1993), 44.
2. Robert W. Oldani, "Musorgsky, Modest Petrovich," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/19468> (accessed May 22, 2014). This piece was believed lost and only rediscovered in 1947; nothing in it suggests the qualities of a mature composition.
3. Ibid.
4. Marina Frolova-Walker, "Musorgsky, Modest Petrovich," *The Oxford Companion to Music. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/e4642> (accessed May 22, 2014).
5. "Mussorgsky, Modest," *The Oxford Dictionary of Music\_prefix*, 2nd ed. rev . . . *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/e7105> (accessed May 22, 2014).
6. Isabelle Ganz Lipschutz, "A Study of the Songs of Modest Mussorgsky" (Master's thesis, University of Houston, 1968), 159.
7. Oldani.
8. Roland John Wiley, "Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Il'yich," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/51766> (accessed May 23, 2014).

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Geoffrey Norris and Marina Frolova-Walker, "Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Il'yich," *The Oxford Companion to Music. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/e6681> (accessed May 23, 2014).
12. Wiley.
13. Pyotr I. Tchaikovsky, "Tchaikovsky, Three Romances for Voice and Piano," *ZAO Musical Engravings Jurgenson* (Moscow: 2007), frontispiece.
14. Consider two poetic examples: The French songs "Mandoline" and "Ici-bas!" are gender neutral; either a man or a woman may sing them. Similarly, if my male student is singing Scarlatti's "Se Florindo è fedele," I simply change the name to "Florinda" to aid in gender specificity. In Russian lyrics, the verb forms normally would be masculine specific, but it is considered fine for women to also sing them as written without changing the verb; i.e., no need to change "Florindo" to "Florinda." Obviously, a character specific song would be an exception to this. A man would not sing any of Goethe's "Mignon" poetry in any language, for example, nor would a woman normally program Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* or *Winterreise*.

