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RUSSIAN MUSIC AND TOLSTOY'S VIEWS ABOUT IT



A CARTOON OF HIMSELF BY MODEST PETROVITCH
MOUSSORGSKY

("What Shakespeare was in dramatic poetry, that was
Moussorgsky in vocal music," says Claude Debussy)

COMPARED with that of other nations, Russian music has but a short history, yet the claim has been made for it that "it depicts the true type of a Slav, the melancholy, simple, and hospitable *mujik*, with more fullness of color and virility than, for instance, the German or Italian compositions depict the representative types of those nations." This view is expressed by Mr. Ivan Narodny in *Musical America*. In his opinion,

Russian music as a whole is a true mirror of the Slavic racial character, its life, passion, gloom, struggle, despair and agony. One can almost see in its turbulent or lugubrious chords the rich colors of the Byzantine style, the half Oriental atmosphere that surrounds everything with a romantic halo, gloomy prisons, wild mountains, wide steppes, luxurious palaces and churches, idyllic villages and the lonely penal colonies of Siberia. It really visualizes the life of the empire of the Czar with a marvelous power.

To the average West-European, Russian music "sounds sometimes too realistic, sometimes too gay, sometimes too symbolistic, sometimes too sad, and is often lacking in unity and technic." But that is the very nature of the Russian mind and emotions.

Every Russian artist, be he a composer, writer or painter, hates to become artificial and intentionally puts in his creation all the naïveté and inspiration of his race without polishing it too much. One can see this so distinctly in most of Tschaikowsky's symphonies, in the songs of Moussorgsky and in his opera, "Boris Godunow."

On the other hand, Russian music, more than any other of its arts, expresses the peculiar temperament of the nation, which is just as restless and unbalanced as its life. A Russian emotion is stirred only when it is gripped with something extreme, be it too sad or too gay, too glaring or too somber, so that everything must express pathos and joy to the very limits. The most typical in this respect are probably Rubinstein and Tschaikowsky, the one more Oriental, the other more Slavic.

Mr. Narodny, on the occasion of a visit to Yasnaya Polyana, once heard a discussion between Tolstoy and Rimsky-Korsakow concerning the compositions of Rubinstein and Tschaikowsky who had been guests of Tolstoy. Tolstoy had asked Rimsky-Korsakow's opinion of the two composers in question. The conversation which ensued was in substance as follows:

Russian Music

"I look at them as introducers of Orientalism into our music," said the great composer. "We are a semi-Oriental race, a bridge between the West and the East, and I think they are our pioneers in representing that peculiarity. But do you know anything of Modest Petrovich Moussorgsky, who did in music what Shakespeare did in dramatic poetry? He is a real giant."

"I am surprised to hear it," replied Tolstoy. "He played some of his songs to me, but they seemed rather primitive and too realistic."

"Well, that's his power," said Rimsky-Korsakow. "He is a great self-made man and will be appreciated only in the future. The trouble with him is that he created his music two hundred years ahead of his time."

"But we were speaking of Rubinstein and Tschaikowsky," interrupted Tolstoy. "I like them both in their ways, but for some reason I prefer Rubinstein. Tschaikowsky's melancholy is often terrific and makes me hate myself."

"I thought you were fond of tragedy."

"Not in music," replied Tolstoy. "Rubinstein stimulates my imagination, but Tschaikowsky stirs up my emotions and makes me look hopelessly at life and fate. An artist should not deprive a man of the last spark of hope but give him hope. I think that makes us so passive and brooding, while, for instance, Anglo-Saxons and Germans are active and their art is stimulating."

"Leo Nicholaievitch, I think you are right. But what do you think of our modern musical realism?"

"I don't care for it," replied Tolstoy. "You are less realistic than anyone else of our modern

composers, especially your friend, Moussorgsky; that's why I like you most. But for some reason Wagner and Beethoven remain my most favored musical gods. I like beautiful harmonies and chords free from any dissonance. I like the Wagnerian melody or the solemnity of Beethoven."

"That may be why you are so religious and look at art without ethical foundation as a degenerator of humanity. You want art and religion combined, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Tolstoy. "I want all our churches and monasteries to be transformed into public opera houses, concert halls and theaters. Why should they be six days empty and dead while on the seventh they are half filled with old men and women or curious children. Our clergy has put a premium on the temples and everything connected with them. Religion is made a sport and art is a sport. I want them combined, that's all my tendency. All art must be uplifting, inspiring and free of charge for all humanity. I am too old to start a campaign in this respect, but I hope it will come."

"Wasn't that also Tschaikowsky's idea? I understood that you said to Tschaikowsky that you did not like the idea of opera in its present form."

"I said so," admitted Tolstoy. "But I did not mean to abolish opera entirely, as the newspapers commented. I merely would like to see it transformed into a musical play, with prose in between, which is more natural. I like realism on the stage."

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