

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

1844 - 1908

Thirty years after Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, the first truly Russian opera, no Russian composer had yet written a symphony. Mily Balakirev, who had taken upon himself the responsibility of creating a new Russian national music, assigned the task to a young naval cadet who showed a talent for composition. Although he had almost no idea what he was doing — he had never studied harmony and was only vaguely aware of symphonic development — the cadet took his assignment very seriously and carried the manuscript of his symphony along with him on a two-year training cruise around the world. But naval duties came first. When he returned — now as Midshipman Rimsky-Korsakov — the piece was still unfinished. Balakirev took him firmly in hand. Leading young Nikolai almost step by step, he saw to it that the first Russian symphony was finally completed and performed by the end of 1865. The public response was quite enthusiastic.

That was not the last time Rimsky-Korsakov went in over his head and got away with it. A few years later the new director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory asked him to become Professor of Composition and Orchestration and conductor of the student orchestra. Although by now half a dozen of his works had been performed, Rimsky-Korsakov was still largely composing by feel and had never conducted at all. But he accepted the job and managed to learn as he taught, usually staying at least a few pages ahead of his students. It helped, he remarked, that he was probably the best student in the Conservatory.

Up to then, Rimsky-Korsakov was still uncertain whether to make the navy or music his career. In 1873 he was appointed Inspector of Navy Bands, a civilian post within the Navy Ministry, and music finally won out for good. But he was once again unprepared. He realized that the bandmasters he was supposed to oversee knew far more about their instruments than he did. This time he spent a summer trying to teach himself to play the trombone, the clarinet, the flute and so on. He failed as a performer, but succeeded as a composer: he eventually became one of the masters of nineteenth-century orchestration.

All this study gave Rimsky-Korsakov definite advantages as a composer, but it also estranged him from the others of the "Mighty Five"; Balakirev and Mussorgsky especially felt that too much knowledge of Western European technique might impair a Russian composer's sensitivity to his own national music. Rimsky-Korsakov tried to overcome this shortcoming with still more studying: he collected and published numerous Russian folk songs. But he also felt that his study of musical technique had given him a discipline the others lacked. "Owing to deficient technique," he wrote, "Balakirev writes little, Borodin slowly, Cui perfunctorily, Mussorgsky untidily and often nonsensically . . . Although . . . I consider them far more talented than myself, I don't envy them at all."

Both discipline and technique kept him going when the others might have dried up. After his first impromptu successes, Rimsky-Korsakov spent several years turning out what he claimed were musical compositions but were really nothing more than technical exercises. But when a spurt of inspiration came, he was ready: in the late seventies and early eighties he wrote two operas, *May Night* and *The Snow Maiden*, the *Legend* for orchestra and a *Sinfonietta on Russian Folk Themes*. The next ten years were once again mostly busy work, largely on behalf of dead friends and his own past: Rimsky-Korsakov edited and orchestrated the works Mussorgsky had left behind at his death, rewrote his own early symphonies, worked on a harmony textbook, helped complete Borodin's *Prince Igor*. Then in a single year, from the summer of 1887 to the summer of 1888, he wrote his three greatest orchestral works, a summation in a way of everything he had taught himself about composition and orchestration: the *Capriccio Espagnol*, *Sheherazade* (unquestionably his most famous piece) and the *Easter Festival Overture*.

The next fallow period was probably the worst in Rimsky-Korsakov's life. As he neared fifty, his two youngest children died; for months he could do nothing; he immersed himself in philosophy rather than music. Even when he forced himself to begin composing again, the work was mostly mechanical. "How strange!" he wrote to a friend. "It seems that I'd rather orchestrate than compose." But the orchestration gradually brought him back to composing. In the last dozen years of his life, he wrote eleven of his fifteen operas. He finished *The Golden Cockerel*, his best and still his most popular opera, only a year before his death.