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# **The Mighty Handful: The Effect of Nationalistic Music on Post-War Russia**

## **Introduction**

In the year 1856, the Treaty of Paris was signed, effectively ending the Crimean war. The Russian Empire was conquered by the Ottoman Empire and with this defeat came a realization for many Russian elites that the country was in dire need of some fundamental changes in order for Russia to be competitive with other first-world countries. Speaking of the war, Grand Duke Constantine, son of Tsar Nicholas the first, said: “We cannot deceive ourselves any longer; we must say that we are both weaker and poorer than the first-class powers, and furthermore poorer not only in material terms but in mental resources, especially in matters of administration.” (Kennedy, 1987, 219). In the same year, Russian composers Mily Balakirev and César Cui began the meetings for what would eventually turn into a group of five nationalistic Russian composers called “the Mighty Handful.” In the following years, Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov would join Balakirev and Cui. These five composers were young, self-trained amateurs, and unlike the more elitist composers like Tchaikovsky, they were considered to produce more authentically Russian music. In a time when Russia was still reeling from the defeat in the Crimean war, a nationalistic source of music was necessary to rally the public. The Mighty Handful’s goal was to create true Russian music that was free of influence from German, Italian, or other European music forms, and to continue the work of an earlier Russian composer Mikhail Glinka, commonly considered the founder of Russian music. Glinka wrote many nationalistic pieces that highlighted the triumphs of the Russian people. Glinka’s most famous opera, *A Life for the Tsar*, tells the tale of Ivan Susanin, a patriot of Russia who died during an invasion of Poland (Osborne, 2007). Glinka’s work is known as a benchmark in Russian music, from which music is either known as “pre-Glinka” or

“post-Glinka”. Glinka was the first Russian composer to gain notoriety within his own country. These five composers wanted to continue and perfect the nationalistic genre of music, and through this, the Mighty Handful was created.

In a post-war society, citizens often look towards music to help them through a difficult time in which the country is trying to come back from the losses received as a result of the war. At this time, Russian society was realizing that the country had fallen behind other first world countries and needed a way to boost its citizens morale. Mily Balakirev was dedicated to creating music that sounded distinctively “Russian,” and when the Russian population was questioning the country’s worth, music that reminded them that Russia can be great without relying on musical influences from the rest of the world was crucial. Nationalistic music uses musical motifs and folk tunes to be reminiscent of a specific country or region. The Mighty Handful’s style of nationalistic music supported the nation through a time of rediscovery and rebirth after a devastating loss in the Crimean War. Music is a unifying factor that can help people feel represented, and because the Mighty Handful represents such a strictly Russian form of music, the natives of Russia can feel empowered and supported by the artists in the country.

### **History of the Crimean War**

The cause of the Crimean War dealt with the rights of Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was in decline at this point in history, and both Britain and France were not willing to let Russia gain power due to the Empire’s decline. While the French supported the rights of Roman Catholics, Russia supported the Eastern Orthodox Church, whose members lived primarily in the Balkan Peninsula, the Middle East, and Soviet Countries (Meyendorff, 2019). One major motive of fighting was over control of the Church of the Nativity, the church now located in the spot where Jesus was born. This conflict between the

Orthodox and the Catholics became so heated that the monks belonging to both churches often had physical altercations over not only this conflict, but many others (Figes, 2011, 6). Though the Churches came to an agreement, both Nicolas I and Napoleon III would not back down from the conflict. To appease Russia and France, Britain created a compromise that both countries would agree to, but when the Ottoman Empire demanded changes to the compromise, Nicolas I renounced the deal and prepared for war. The Ottoman Empire, with the support of France and Britain, declared war in October 1853 (Meyendorff, 2019). After three years of fighting, and the threat of Austria entering into an alliance with the Ottoman Empire, Russia entered peace negotiations. The end of the Crimean war led to a change in Russian institutions. Their loss in the war revealed to them that changes needed to be made to their government, as well as education and the military. These reforms are the events that culminated into the Russian Revolution and Civil War in 1917 (Encyclopædia Britannica 2019). There are several references to the Crimean war in more modern literature and music, including Sir Alfred Lloyd Tennyson's 1854 poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, which details the failed cavalry charge during the Battle of Balaclava, and the subsequent Iron Maiden song titled "The Trooper", which was based on Tennyson's poem (Vintage Heavy Metal 2020). Though these pieces are much of what the public often thinks of when they hear of the Crimean war, an unrecognized effect of the war was the creation of a group of Russian nationalist composers who strove to unite the Russian people with their music.

### **Beginnings of the Mighty Handful**

The name the Mighty Handful was not originally used to describe Balakirev, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Cui. Instead, it was first used by music critic Vladimir Stasov, in an article titled *Mr. Balakirev's Slavic Concert*, in which Stasov praised the composers

whose works were then being performed (Abraham, 1985, 112). These composers included Mikhail Glinka, Alexander Dargomyzhsky, Mily Balakirev, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The Mighty Handful was very rarely referred to by the name they are known for today, and if so it was often used ironically, even by its own members. They were a loose confederation of musicians with common motivations, without the need for a title. The group began forming in 1856 with the last member, Borodin, joining in 1862. Though they are grouped together, each of the five composers had vastly different compositional techniques that covered many different genres and styles. This is part of what made their music so effective as a complete Russian sound, the stark contrast between their music meant there was something for everyone to enjoy. These five composers began their careers as amateurs, each of them had lived separate lives before taking up music. They were from various backgrounds and had been chemists, naval officers, foresters, and soldiers in the Imperial Army of Russia (Figs, 2002, 112). Because they had all held other careers before they were composers, this helped their music feel more “authentic” to other Russian citizens who could better relate to Russian composers who had had a similar life experience to them. The Mighty Handful focused their music on the working class by using folk music and church bells in their works. When music lovers listen to a skilled composer, it is common to feel a connection to the composer, feeding off their music to improve themselves and evolve as a person. With their past lives as typical working-class Russian citizens, the Mighty Handful had a sense of familiarity that other more career composers could not deliver. This is in comparison to composers who came out of such music conservatories as St. Petersburg Conservatory, like Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky and other composers from the conservatories were often considered elitists, and many considered Tchaikovsky’s music not *Russian* enough (Botstein, 1998). Though these composers were considered not

*Russian* enough and shunned by members of their own social group, they were often considered “too Russian” by the rest of the music world. Tchaikovsky was, as he told his Patroness Nadezhda von Meck, “Russian to the marrow... saturating myself from earliest childhood with the inexplicable beauty of the characteristic traits of Russian folk song, so that I passionately love every manifestation of the Russian spirit.” (Cooper, 1945). Even though Tchaikovsky himself identified as a core Russian composer, there were others who considered him “too westernized” as part of his training at the conservatory. Many of these critics were purists, who did not want Russian music to be influenced by anything but Russian ideas. They believed that by using these other styles they were tainting the Russian identity of the music. Despite these critiques of Tchaikovsky, one member of The Five, Mily Balakirev, sought to assist Tchaikovsky in his compositions. Despite their different ideologies, Tchaikovsky took Balakirev’s Russian-centric musical style into account, creating dark, lugubrious pieces to reflect Russian culture (Doub 2019). Balakirev was a strong proponent of musical education, especially when it came to teaching “pure” Russian music. Balakirev, along with some colleagues, created the Free School of Music. Due to a similar movement in Berlin by German composers such as Richard Wagner, Balakirev worked with the Russian Musical Society to prevent outside influences from Germans or other sources. (Doub 2019).

Though the group’s goal was to create authentic Russian music, the members of The Five were not of Russian descent. Cesar Cui was French, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov were Polish-Lithuanian, Borodin was Georgian, and Balakirev claimed to be of Tatar descent, a Turkish ethnic group that typically resides in areas of Russia, but is not considered to be a part of “Russia Proper,” a region centered on Moscow from which the native Russians reside (Vasmer, 1986, 289). Though the Five all identified as Russians and were Russian citizens, their social

identity was not that of a native Russian. Though they did not last long, Balakirev left music for a period in the 1870s, and after this, the group came to an end, they put in place some pivotal music styles and themes that brought forth a whole new generation of not only Russian composers, but also several French symbolists, including Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy.

A trademark of The Five was a reliance on Orientalism. Though it would seem this would take away from their goal of authentic Russian music, it became an identifier for not only the group but for Russian music as a whole. The term “Oriental,” though outdated, is known in today’s terms as referring primarily to Asian countries, while the Middle East is usually referred to as a separate entity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term oriental also referred to the Middle East, where many of the Oriental pieces written by the Mighty Handful were set (Maes, 2002, 82). Some of the most famous pieces by the Five are based on Oriental themes, such as Rimsky-Korssakov’s *Scheherazade*, named after the female storyteller in *One Thousand and One Nights* who told a new story every night to prevent her monarch husband from killing her (Marzolph, 2007). Balakirev wrote a piece called *Tamara*, which tells the story of an evil seductress who lures men to her tower in the gorge of Daryal (a region of the Caucasus), kills them, and throws them into the River Terek. This narrative uses native music of the Caucasus, a region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea occupied by the modern-day countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and part of Russia to emulate the setting of the story (Maes, 2002). These pieces, though both create a sound that is often not associated with Russia, have become a pinnacle of the Russian genre. The vast contrast between Oriental music and western music was just what was needed to distinguish Russian music from the music of the rest of Europe. This also gave Russian composers an opportunity to discuss otherwise taboo subjects through Orientalism. Politics and other themes that were once disapproved of became more accepted,

and it was even used by Alexander II to express Russian supremacy as the empire grew and changed.

### **Russian Nationalism**

Along with the Russian movement for a new type of music, many other countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned toward folk songs and themes for their new music to differentiate themselves from other countries. Russian nationalism went even farther to separate themselves from the rest of the Western world. Russian officials, led by the education minister Count Sergey Uvarov, created an education decree that stated, “Common obligation consists in this, that the education of the people be conducted, according to the Supreme intention of our August Monarch, in joint spirit of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationhood.” (Dahlhaus 1989). The Russian officials created this movement specifically to preserve Russian ideals. The nationalist movement in Russia followed a movement called the Slavophile movement, an institution based on the idea that the Russian Empire should resist the influences of Western Europe in Russian culture (Encyclopædia Britannica 2013). Slavophiles believed that Russia’s contemporary society did not represent the ideal society, creating a movement of change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a part of this movement that the Mighty Handful began their work of creating a genre of Russian-centric music.

This focus on Russian ideals directly contradicted many of the feelings Russian citizens had after the Crimean war. The Russian people felt a change needed to be made after the abysmal loss. However, Slavophiles doubled down on the classic ideas of Russian culture that would keep these ideals from being affected by western culture. It would seem this dissonance would cause the Slavophile movement to become unpopular with the Russian public during the aftermath of the Crimean War, but this movement worked directly into a person’s desire for



comfort and familiarity in times of trouble. A person's identity is often directly related to music, and the music an individual listened to when they were younger often holds more value.

Therefore, music that is inherently "Russian" would bring back fond memories for the majority of the Russian citizens in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This would also strengthen the morale of the Russian people, reminding them of a time when things were better.

The Mighty Handful included village songs, church bells, and lyrical peasant songs in their music, what Glinka referred to as "the soul of Russian music" (DeVoto, 1995). These themes are often used in nationalistic music from around the world, borrowing from the music of the past that was passed from generation to generation. Though the Slavophile movement was about keeping Russia inherently "Russian," and preventing western influences from changing Russian culture, the Mighty Handful did not write music as it was written previously. The Mighty Handful used Russian nationalism to create a new version of the music that both encapsulated the essence of the Russian people, and establish a new sub-genre of music.

### **The Appeal of a Familiar Tune**

The trends of the Slavophile movement seem to directly contradict the need for change in the Russian public, but in reality, the work of the Mighty Handful and other Slavophile artists was creating a new genre out of the existing Russian music. It is a common phenomenon: the more someone listens to a type of music or a specific song, the more familiar it feels and eventually it becomes boring, mundane. Elizabeth Margulis wrote in her novel *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*, "If we keep revisiting the same place again and again and again, we never learn, so there is a competing drive to explore and find new things (2014)." These familiar songs become trivial and the individual finds the need to discover new music that brings back the feeling of euphoria and excitement a new artist can bring. This boredom leads people to

experiment with new artists and genres in order to discover one that gives people the same dopamine response that listening to a favorite song gives individuals.

An important age in this discovery and exploration of music tastes is adolescence. Researchers working with Alzheimer's patients have discovered that even with advanced stages of memory loss, many of the elderly could still recognize and sing along to songs they heard when they were fourteen, an important age in the development of brain-behavior involving music (Levitin, 2019). An important aspect of music palatability is the feeling individuals get from it, and the experiences the music draws from them. Many people have a song or a genre that reminds them of their youth, and when they listen to that piece they feel safe and comforted by its nuances. This is the aspect of musical taste that the Mighty Handful was drawing on: a need to feel safe and protected in a time when the country was dealing with a loss and many things were not guaranteed. In order to create music that would appeal to the public, they needed to relate to the music the Russian public would have been used to, while also creating something new that would pique their interest. The rhythms, sounds, and timbre of traditional Russian folk music combined with modern composition technique (at the time) created a sound that was both new and familiar at the same time. The addition of Oriental themes and new techniques changed the familiar into a new genre, the new Russian music that the country could grow with and discover new ideas.

### **Impact of The Five**

The Mighty Handful had a great impact on many young Russian composers at the time. Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov were all teachers and influencers of the next generation of Russian composers, including Alexander Glazunov, Dmitri Shostakovich, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (Maes, 2002). Several of these

composers joined together with Rimsky-Korsakov to create a society of Russian musicians that would become a successor to the Mighty Handful, called the Balyayev Circle. This group drew off the folk-inspired work of the Mighty Handful but accepted the Western composition techniques the Five so strongly disapproved of to create a blended genre of the two contrasting techniques (Figes, 2002). Balakirev's creation of the Free School of Music helped teach and influence hundreds of young Russian composers to continue their plight of creating pure Russian music. In addition to these Russian influences, both Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy, two French symbolist composers took inspiration from the group's tonal language, which they included into several of their own works. Debussy cited the Russian Five with developing his taste for "ancient and oriental modes and for vivid colorations, and a certain disdain for academic rules" (Lesure, 2018). Many also consider Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* to be a direct influence on Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (or *Pelléas and Mélisande*). It has been cited that Debussy took from the Five an appreciation of "ancient and oriental modes and for vivid colorations, and a certain disdain for academic rules" (Lesure, 2018). The Mighty Handful's legacy stretches far past just these few composers, as their practice of using folk songs and oriental themes have become a staple in Russian music, and their composition techniques are studied and admired by composers all across the globe.

An agonizing defeat for the Russian people inspired them to strive for change, to create a new Russia that could keep up with the other first-world countries of the time. At the same time, a ragtag group of amateur composers strove to do the same thing, to create new Russian music to reflect the new Russia. The previous nationalist composers in Russia began the fight for Russian music, but were not successful in their plight. Mikhail Glinka was known as the benchmark for Russian composers, and strove to do what the Mighty Handful completed before he died, but was

not successful. Glinka was a great inspiration to Mily Balakirev, who decided to continue Glinka's mission with four others. What resulted was a group of five young men, all with various backgrounds and skillsets that changed the sound of Russia for years to come. Mily Balakirev, along with Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and César Cui created a new branch of Russian nationalism, with oriental and folk music inspiration that made it stand out from the music of the past. The Five were focused on the ideology of the Slavophile movement, a movement to keep Russia inherently "Russian" and prevent influences from the western world. The official nationalism movement of Russia helped propel them into the spotlight and gave them the audience to create a complete genre of Russian music. This reliance on Russian influences appealed to a public who grew up on similar music and created a comforting, welcome environment for the Russian people. The integration of oriental themes and new compositional techniques enriches the already existing music to create a new genre that is exciting and divergent from the rest of Europe and the western world. The Mighty Handful created a new Russian music that would help propel Russia past the devastating defeat in the Crimean war into an age of prosperity. Their music would influence young composers from all over Europe to imitate their unique style of composition and create music beyond the standard discography of western music.

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