

Sergei Rachmaninov and Russian Musical Orientalism

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Orientalia was the title of a slender début anthology of verse, published in 1913, by Marietta Shaginyan (1888–1982), a promising Symbolist poet of Armenian descent, born and educated in Moscow. Shaginyan dedicated *Orientalia* to the great Moscow Neo-Romantic composer, pianist, and conductor Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943), who was then about forty, married to Natalia Satina, with two daughters. The composer and the poet conducted a surprisingly tender and candid friendship, almost entirely through letters, from February 1912 through June 1917. Biographers agree that their relations were indeed platonic (the only female admirer who seriously threatened the Rachmaninovs' marriage, according to Julian Haylock, was the young soprano Nina Koshetz). Rachmaninov had dedicated his setting of Pushkin's poem *The Muse* (Op. 34) to Shaginyan in 1912, inscribing it to her not by her real name, but by the



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pseudonym with which she had signed her letters to him from the very start, “Re,” after the musical note. She would always be “Re” to Rachmaninov, despite his learning her real name after only a few months. Rachmaninov relied on “Re” to recommend poems for him to set on two occasions, for *Fourteen Songs* (Op. 34) in 1912, and for *Six Songs* (Op. 38) in 1916. It was in a letter to “Re” that the composer confessed that he worked better with sad texts than with happy ones: “The light, happy colours do not come easily to me!”

Yet Rachmaninov does not seem to have considered setting to music any of “Re’s” own verse from *Orientalia*, although it contained plenty of dark, inviting, and exotic drama: tragic nostalgia for the poet’s—wholly fictional—childhood in her native rural Armenia, her eagerness to fight alongside the “Slavic liberators” in the First Balkan War, her longing to welcome a stranger on a bed covered with

a golden leopard’s skin in the Persian city of Shiraz... The two friends’ “Orientalisms”—their artistic preoccupation with “Eastern” motifs and modes of expression—were evidently incommensurate in degree or perhaps not synchronized. And this asynchrony is characteristic of all relations between sweeping “isms” that are ostensibly common to Russian literature and Russian music.

Russian *literary* Orientalism arises in two major waves. The first is a Romantic wave coinciding with the expansion of the Russian Empire eastward and southward into the Caucasus and its challenge to the Ottoman Empire during the reigns of Nicholas I and Alexander II (classic expressions are the Gypsy and Caucasus works of Pushkin and Lermontov, richly influenced by Lord Byron). The second is a fin-de-siècle Neo-Romantic (or Symbolist) wave, with its ecstatic prophecies to both Russia herself and the West of a coming savage “Pan-Mongolism” (classic expressions in poetry are Vladimir Solovyov’s “Ex Oriente

Lux” [1890] and Aleksandr Blok’s *Scythians* [1918]). Russian *musical* Orientalism first coalesces into a system of themes and related musical devices, as does Russian musical “nationalism” itself to a considerable extent, in Mikhail Glinka’s *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842). Thereafter, the composers of the Petersburg-based “Balakirev Circle,” following the example of Mily Balakirev himself in such works as the astonishing “Oriental fantasy” *Islamey* for solo piano (1869), firmly establish the element of Orientalism as a pillar of the new “national style.” The Balakirev Circle’s publicist and ideologist, Vladimir Stasov, in a famous survey, *Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art* (1882), affirms the centrality of musical Orientalism to efforts by the Glinka-Dargomyzhsky-Balakirev line to establish Russia’s national musical identity. These composers “have shared the general Russian attraction for all things Eastern”:

And this is hardly surprising, since so much that is Eastern has joined the mainstream of Russian life and lent it such a special, characteristic coloring. To see in this only a strange whim or caprice on the part of Russian composers (as our critics have often done) is absurdly shortsighted. (Trans. Richard Taruskin in his *Music in the Western World* [1984, p. 393]).

In the West, Sergei Diaghilev's "Saisons Russes" in Paris, beginning in 1909, encouraged a tendency to identify Russian music with Orientalism by highlighting such fare as the *Polovtsian Dances* from Aleksandr Borodin's opera *Prince Igor* (1869–87).

But there was a rival grouping in Russian 19th-century art music: the Moscow-based, more frankly European and German-oriented grouping that coalesced around Nikolai Rubinstein's Moscow Conservatory, the Taneyev-Tchaikovsky-Zverev line that included Rachmaninov and the contemporary composer whom Rachmaninov told "Re" that he admired the most, Nikolai Medtner. It was here, in his close association with the lyrical, sumptuous melodism of Tchaikovsky—his examiner at the Conservatory and personal idol—that Rachmaninov would be labeled an "eclectic," an "epigone," old-fashioned, and out of step with modernism. What role does Orientalism play on this branch of Russian musical history? What role could Orientalism have played in Rachmaninov's oeuvre and outlook? Surely not the central one imagined by Stasov for his ethnographically adventurous and receptive Russian nationalists?

Here we arrive at a cluster of paradoxes and critical disagreements. Rachmaninov was certainly no amateur ethnomusicologist of the Russian Empire's frontiers, like Balakirev and Borodin. It would indeed seem that Rachmaninov's musical imagination veers toward (1) strictly Russian elements, such as the famous four tones of the iron church bells of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod, or the Orthodox *Znamenny* (neume) chant, an enthusiasm he shared with his friend, the musicologist Alfred J. Swan, and (2) strictly Western inspirations, such as Dante (*Francesca da Rimini*, Op. 25, 1905), the Italian Arcangelo Corelli's variations on the Spanish *La Folia* (Op. 42, 1931), the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (*Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29, 1909), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" (*The Bells*, Op. 35, 1913), or Paganini (*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43, 1934), to say nothing of Rachmaninov's obvious regard for Bach, Chopin, Schubert, and Mendelssohn. And consequently we might expect the decidedly few

explicitly "Oriental" outings in early Rachmaninov to confirm a certain skepticism toward Russian musical Orientalism as a whole expressed not only by the "shortsighted" contemporary critics mentioned by Stasov, but by the great musicological encyclopedist Gerald Abraham in his study of 1939, *On Russian Music*:

For the most part the authentic oriental melodies in [the music of Borodin, Balakirev, and Rimsky-Korsakov] are simply tunes which they heard by chance and which caught their fancy.... [Oriental music] appealed to them, not because it touched a responsive note in themselves, but because it was so un-Russian.... Broadly speaking, the oriental element in Russian music is purely external and decorative.

The same skepticism, only expanded to include not only Orientalism, but Russian "national" music and indeed any programmatic music per se, might be justified further in light of Rachmaninov's remarks to the magazine *The Etude* in 1941:

In my own compositions, no conscious effort has been made to be original, or Romantic, or Nationalistic, or anything else.... My music is a product of the temperament, and so it is Russian music; I never consciously attempt to write Russian music, or any other kind of music... What I try to do... is to say simply and directly that which is in my heart when I am composing... (Haylock, *Sergei Rachmaninov: An Essential Guide* [1996], 84).

And yet it was none other than Rachmaninov's musical Orientalism that largely occasioned a lively debate on the pages of *The Cambridge Opera Journal* starting in 1992 between the dean of Western scholars of Russian music, Richard Taruskin, and Marina Frolova-Walker, on Russian Orientalist *topoi*, or markers, and their interpretation. That debate has in effect adjourned to the two scholars' respective books, Taruskin's *Defining Russia Musically* (2001) and Frolova-Walker's *Russian Music and Nationalism* (2007). In his 1992 article "'Entoiling the Falconet'..." Taruskin takes Rachmaninov's setting of Pushkin's "Ne poi, krasavitsa, pri mne" ("Oh, do not sing...") from *Six Songs*, Op. 4 (1892) as a prime example of the "sign language of Russian Orientalism in a highly developed form," tracing that language historically through Borodin to Glinka. The musical vocabulary of that language consists of "close little ornaments and melismas," a drone bass, augmented seconds, a frequently

descending, “snaking” chromatic accompanying line, the English horn timbre, and especially “iconically erotic” melodic “undulation” between the fifth and sixth degrees, which he characterizes as a figure evoking Oriental sexual languor or, in Russian, *nega*. Frolova-Walker in turn finds Taruskin’s Oriental “*nega* figure” essentially equivalent to a favorite melodic device crucial to the “Five’s” national Russian sound as a whole, in contexts far broader than Oriental thematics, which she terms the “Kuchka pattern.” She, too, finds her paradigmatic example in Rachmaninov, this time, in the opening theme of the second movement of the *Piano Concerto No. 4* (Op. 40, 1926, rev. 1941). A Russian musicologist based at the Astrakhan State Conservatory, Dilbar Rakhimova, has written numerous articles and a recent dissertation on the specificity and evolution of Rachmaninov’s Orientalism. Rakhimova pictures the composer’s “Russian music about the East” as isolated but explicit in his early period (the 1892 opera *Aleko, Oriental Dance* [Op. 2, 1892], *Capriccio on Gypsy Themes* [Op. 12, 1894]), but thereafter increasingly integrated and in his émigré period, even merged into a musical manner that is at once Russian and Eastern, and expressive of the composer’s nostalgia for his lost homeland.

Rachmaninov’s musical Orientalism of necessity participates in the paradoxical, unstable, “borderline” position of Russian culture as a whole in any discussion of East versus West. If Russia for the Symbolists was a sphinx, she is also a Janus figure, with a European face, and, as Blok put it in *The Scythians*, an Asiatic one. An authority like the music historian Yury Keldysh insists on distinguishing Russianness from the Orient, and would have objected to Rakhimova’s idea of a highly internalized Eastern element in Rachmaninov’s musical personality. He writes in his 1973 biography: “on the whole, [Rachmaninov’s] Eastern colorings are highly conventional. *Many passages sound completely Russian*” (*Rakhmaninov i ego vremia*, 429, italics mine). At the same time, investigators of Russian musical Orientalism cannot escape the conclusion that such Orientalism is always far more a matter of clichés and fantasies regarding the East as Russia’s cultural “Other” than it is of well-founded ethnographic knowledge. As Edward Said wrote of Western cultural Orientalism as a whole in his classic study, *Orientalism* (1978), in a dictum cited approvingly by Taruskin: “Orientalism overrode the Orient.”