

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 27 April 2024
1.00pm

Balakirev Day

Nicholas Walker piano

Mily Balakirev (1837-1910)

Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor (1900)
Mazurka No. 6 in A flat (1902)

Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857)

The Lark from *A Farewell to St Petersburg* (1840) arranged by
Mily Balakirev
Do not say: *Love passes away* (1834) arranged by *Mily Balakirev*

Mily Balakirev

Chant du pêcheur (1903)
Witches' Dance (1856) completed by *Nicholas Walker*
Au jardin (1884)
Nocturne No. 2 in B minor (1901)
Waltz No. 7 in G sharp minor (1906)
Dumka 'Complainte' (1900)
La fileuse (1906)

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Brilliant pianist, improviser, noted conductor and selfless champion of other composers, Balakirev is surprisingly little known today. Yet as leader of the Russian composers known as 'The Mighty Handful' – Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky, Borodin and Cui – he strongly influenced not only their works but also those of Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky, setting the standard by which others were judged. He neglected his own composing, however, some works existing for years only in his head as piano improvisations.

In the 1870s, after suffering a number of setbacks resulting in a deep depression, he worked as a clerk for the Warsaw Railway; in 1883 he was appointed to the post of Director of the Imperial Chapel Choir, but heavy administrative duties meant that by the time of his final creative flowering (1900-10) many of his earlier champions had died, and Balakirev himself had ceased to give public concerts. His style was no longer cutting edge, and most of his output fell into obscurity almost as soon as it was written.

Balakirev's 1899 meeting with publisher JH Zimmerman proved a great stimulus to his final creative outpouring. During the last eleven years of his life Balakirev composed two thirds of his piano music, as well as songs, choral works and orchestral music (including the wonderful Second Symphony).

The publication of the fantasia on Glinka's *A Life for the Czar* (1899) prompted him to consider revising some of his other early works. The incomplete scherzo from his early octet and the first movement of the Piano Sonata Op. 5 provided themes which gave birth to the **Scherzo No. 2**, one of his finest compositions. The work is grand in scale and orchestral in conception, the opening being actually marked 'quasi corno', the last line 'quasi oboe'. A subsidiary theme is played over the sort of long pedal bass beloved by Balakirev in his orchestral compositions, the harmonies with such pedal notes sometimes threatening to pull in opposite directions in the manner of Sibelius.

The **Mazurka No. 6** opens with an exotic melody redolent of a muezzin's call to prayer – Balakirev's time in Kazan, where he briefly studied mathematics, and his travels in the Caucasus would have exposed him to such sounds. The rhythms and the shifting sense of key give the music a heady perfume, interrupted by two brief and more energetic episodes. Unusually, it ends with a virtuosic krakoviak, another Polish folk dance but in duple time.

Balakirev enormously admired Glinka and made several transcriptions, including *The Lark*, which dates from 1864. Quintessentially Russian, the melody of this beautiful song is wreathed in arabesques of birdsong, the lark's cadenza captured with Messiaen-like accuracy. The transcription (1903) of Glinka's charming, but somewhat conventional, song, '**Do not say: Love passes away**', raises the work to new heights in a virtuoso texture rich in chromatic detail, imbuing it with much more full-blooded passion.

The *Chant du pêcheur* has an air of solitude. A simple guitar-like accompaniment supports a lonely melody of

great beauty, while the more chromatic, oriental sounding, harmonies in certain phrases recall Balakirev's own *Song of the Golden Fish* (1860).

The manuscript of the *Witches' dance* (1856) tantalisingly stops after two pages, half-way through the middle section. The shimmering, fairy-tale texture, so Russian, prompted me to complete the work.

Between *Islamey* (1869) and the *Dumka* (1900), Balakirev wrote little, withdrawing from public life. In the late 1870s he began to emerge from a breakdown and by 1883 had been appointed Director of Music of the Imperial Chapel, again leaving little time for composing. *Au jardin* (1884), subtitled 'Idyll-Etude', is dedicated to the German pianist Adolf von Henselt, famous for his beautiful tone and greatly admired by Balakirev. This tribute reveals Balakirev at his best: a touching but unsentimental melody, rich piano writing, and many pedal points combined with ingenious but unforced chromatic harmony.

The haunting first section of the **Nocturne No. 2** (1901) gives way to a splendid vision, redolent of Musorgsky's *The Great Gate of Kiev*, though this magnificent second theme has perhaps more in common with the sentiments behind Balakirev's song 'Starless midnight coldly breathed' (known as 'A Vision' in English), a setting of a Slavophile poem by Khomyakov in which the poet dreams of a solemn Orthodox service in Prague's Roman Catholic cathedral. The **Waltz No. 7** (1906) is one of Balakirev's last pieces. After an improvisatory introduction the main theme appears with a strong, almost Romani character and some stamping accents that, combined with stirring pedal points and a vivid orchestral character, give this waltz an heroic or epic quality. The way in which the middle section is recalled in the coda is particularly exciting.

The 'dumka' – 'a little thought' in Ukrainian – is a type of melancholic epic ballad. The genre became popular after Mykola Lysenko, Ukrainian composer and ethnomusicologist (1842-1912), published a paper and gave an illustrated lecture in St Petersburg in 1874. Balakirev's *Dumka* (1900) has the characteristic juxtaposition of touchingly sad passages with more cheerful episodes. The main theme, a quintessentially Russian melody, combines with a plethora of ornamental detail and improvisatory elements, such as the experimental strumming of the introduction and the cadenza-like passages, to create a feeling of the endless Russian landscape and the timelessness of village life.

La fileuse or 'The spinner' (1906) has the virtuosic spark not usually expected from an older man. The opening theme, filled with melancholy, is underpinned by brilliant passage work evoking a spinning wheel. The piece ends with a joyful flourish as if the final threads are spun. Once again Balakirev excels in altering the harmonisation of a melody to produce strikingly different emotional colour.

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