

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 27 April 2024
7.30pm

Balakirev Day

Nicholas Walker piano

Mily Balakirev (1837-1910)

Piano Sonata in B flat minor (1900-5)

*I. Andantino • II. Mazurka. Moderato •
III. Intermezzo. Larghetto • IV. Allegro non
troppo, ma con fuoco*

Berceuse (1901)

Réminiscences de l'opéra *La vie pour le czar* (1899)
based on *Mikhail Glinka*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Cavatina from *String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130*
(1825-6) transcribed by *Mily Balakirev*

Mily Balakirev

Tamara (1867-82) transcribed by *Nicholas Walker*
Gondellied (1901)
Islamey (1869, rev. 1902)

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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 work but also that of Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky, setting the standard by which others were judged. He neglected his own composing, some works existing for years only as piano improvisations.

In the 1870s, after suffering setbacks resulting in deep depression, he worked as a clerk for the Warsaw Railway; in 1883 he was appointed 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. Their style no longer cutting edge, most of his compositions fell into obscurity almost as soon as written.

One of Balakirev's earliest compositional plans was for a Russian symphony, exploring the concept of Rus in her geographical, poetical and political aspects. As Tatiana Zaitseva details, the movements depicted Rus, Novgorod, Russian mythology, a fairy garden complete with Firebird and a celebratory finale. Balakirev never wrote the symphony, but elements of the plan survive, in particular in the **Piano Sonata in B flat minor** (1905).

Two partly unfinished sonatas (1855 and 1856) share the same key and a mazurka with the 1905 sonata, but the 1905 version is really a completely new composition. This lengthy gestation was owing to Balakirev's fervent desire to create something truly Russian.

The first movement is a very original combination of fugue and sonata form. Detail is piled upon detail in an almost medieval fashion, inspired perhaps by the iconostases of Orthodox Christianity. The brilliant *Mazurka* dates from 1900, and is a complete re-composition of the mazurkas of 1855-6 on an operatic scale. A contemplative *Intermezzo* leads into the finale, a movement of incredible energy resembling a Ukrainian *gopak*. The movement dies away peacefully in a most striking manner, as Russia herself stretches endlessly eastwards through steppe, taiga and forest.

Balakirev's note on the title page of the *Berceuse* (1901) reads: 'A mother tenderly sings a lullaby to her son. The child sleeps, but a bad dream frightens him and he awakens, crying. The mother sings again and the child falls asleep, lulled by a delicious dream of golden butterflies fluttering around him to the tinkling of little silver bells.' Every detail of this is captured perfectly.

Balakirev published his **fantasia on Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*** in 1899. Ivan Susanin, the doomed hero, was leader of the resistance against the Poles during the early 17th Century. Balakirev uses to great effect the trio where Susanin's daughter and her fiancé plead to be allowed to marry. Balakirev's version has marvellous balalaika effects and scales representing falling snowflakes. The ensuing

polonaise – in which Susanin, having relented now that Moscow has elected a new Tsar, invites all the villagers to the eve-of-wedding celebration – Balakirev treats in a colourful and exciting virtuoso manner.

The transcription of the *Cavatina from Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 130* (1859) is one of two Beethoven transcriptions, evoking the richness of a string quartet and preserving the tension of the melodic lines.

In August 1863 Balakirev travelled to the Caucasus through the Dar'yal Gorge. 'The majestic beauty of the splendid countryside there and ... the beauty of the tribes living in that land' impressed him deeply and inspired the idea of a large orchestral work.

He began the work, which he called *Tamara* after the poem by Lermontov, but the setbacks of the early 1870s meant that he did not resume it until 1876, and it was finally finished in 1882. The poem tells of the Georgian Queen Tamara, angelically beautiful and demonically wily, inhabiting a tower in the gloomy Dar'yal Gorge through which the River Terek roars. The tower light through the night mists entices a traveller to seek refuge there. On hearing Tamara's voice he is overwhelmed; he is received into her chamber where she, seductively dressed in brocade and pearls, awaits her guest with goblets of wine. The ensuing scene is the conjunction of a wedding night and funeral feast. Dawn ends the orgy; only the roaring river is heard, while the waves hurry away a silent corpse.

The work reflects the poem in a masterly way, from the ominous opening, the entry into the castle, the portrait of Tamara, through the episodic and increasingly wild dances, to the moment where the traveller is cast into the Terek, followed by the beautiful and sensuous ending. Inspired by Balakirev's own improvised performances of the work according to Rimsky-Korsakov, I have set out to recreate it in pianistic textures redolent of Balakirev's own piano style.

St Petersburg, where Balakirev lived most of his life, is full of canals and this gondola song or *Gondellied* (1901) has a strong Russian flavour. Two pushes on the pole form the introduction to a plaintive melody and the music flows in a totally naturalistic way.

Balakirev's visit to the Caucasus, Russia's 'window to the Orient', provided the inspiration for his single most demanding and influential work. Based on two themes – a vigorous dance and a soulful Armenian melody – and subtitled 'Oriental Fantasy', *Islamey* is a stunning evocation of the ethnic and cultural melange of the region. Every accent, slur and dynamic is marked with the greatest care and not a note is superfluous: the transformation of the soulful Armenian melody into a *gopak* is masterly, and the harmonic language is implicit in the themes themselves, resulting in both exotic chromaticisms and 'barbaric' fourths and fifths of great originality.

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