

Against Germanic Reasoning: The Search for a Russian Style of Musical Argumentation

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Symphonic development in the technical sense is just like German philosophy – all worked out and systematized . . . When a German thinks, he reasons his way to a conclusion. Our Russian brother, on the other hand, starts with the conclusion and only then might amuse himself with reasoning. That's all I have to say to you about symphonic development.

Mussorgsky¹

Russia provides us with one of the earliest examples of a nationalist music school, and, as many would agree, this school became the most ambitious, productive and influential of all, for the Russian intelligentsia came to see music as a vital tool of nation-building, second only to literature in this respect. It is hardly surprising, then, that in Russia the historiography of this music is primarily a mythology of musical nationalism. Russian critics and musicologists have sustained and encouraged these myths almost throughout the past century-and-a-half, due to the intellectual, and later political, dominance of nationalism in its bourgeois and Stalinist forms; the only brief hiatus occurred in the second and third decades of this century, when a cosmopolitan modernism was in the ascendant, eventually to be stifled by Stalin. But much more puzzling is the fact that Western critics who were not bound by such ideological constraints and obligations served, more often than not, as mouthpieces for this same nationalist mythology. While the Russians were preoccupied in constructing an identity for themselves that was self-consciously in opposition to the characteristics of Western music, Westerners indulged themselves in constructing an exotic quasi-oriental identity for Russian music, happily reproducing Russian nationalist mythologies for their own purposes.

Had Glinka produced at least one complete symphony, the history of nineteenth-century Russian music could have been very different. Instead of discussing the problems which dogged Russian efforts to work within this

genre, we might instead be musing upon the special predilection of the Russian mind for symphonic argument. While Glinka's operas and programmatic orchestral works were enthusiastically mined by succeeding generations of nationalists, he failed to leave even a single example of the symphony to posterity, so that his would-be disciples found themselves stranded, bereft of any authoritative Russian symphonic model. Worse still, the absence of any Glinka symphony was no mere oversight on the part of the older master, but the result of intractable problems which he had already encountered. As Glinka confessed:

I had written the first part of the Allegro and the beginning of the second part of [my] Cossack symphony in C minor (Taras Bul'ba). I was unable to continue with the second part, which I found unsatisfactory. When I gave the matter some thought, I found that the development of the Allegro (Durchführung, développement) I had begun in the German manner, while the general character of the piece was Little Russian. I discarded the score, and Pedro [his secretary] destroyed it.²

What are we to make of this? Firstly, we must understand that Glinka was well able to write a development based on established methods (as his early sonata-based works testify) – the difficulties did not lie here. Secondly, he perceived these methods to be an inalienable characteristic of German music, incompatible with the Russian or other local colours he was attempting to evoke. Thirdly, the project he mentions would not in any case have inaugurated a grand tradition of Russian national symphonies, for the intended character of the work was 'Little Russian'; that is, Ukrainian. His problems with indelibly German development techniques would equally have arisen had he wished to compose a symphony in his Spanish style. But successive generations of Russian composers unanimously ignored this last qualification, and transformed Glinka's rather casual remark into a polemical cornerstone of musical nationalism. As Glinka, now posthumously a national hero, was elevated to ever more rarified heights, his every word was presented in the form of an ordinance for future generations.

Let us now examine the origins of the problem symphonic development posed for Russian composers. We must return to that watershed in Russian music history, the 1836 premiere of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, for it was from this moment on that music could be regarded as a possible vehicle for Russian nationalist discourse. As a newcomer, music had to learn from the experience of the main player in the nationalist game, literature.

From the earliest stirrings of nationalism in the eighteenth century, the Russian language received the greatest attention, and the state of literature was in time understood to reflect the state of the nation. In the course of the next hundred years, owing to the conscious efforts of men of letters, a new, more monolithic Russian national language grew out of many diverse

dialects; a multi-volume dictionary and a systematic grammar of the language were published, and the lexical set was expanded, so that it traversed the centuries from ancient epic to modern science. The borders between rural and urban, oral and written, and low and high began to dissolve, and after a century of development in this manner Pushkin's great example finally ensured that it was seen to be fit even for the most exalted works of literature. By the 1830s, cultural nationalism was taking stock of its achievements, constructing a pantheon for its heroes; Pushkin was accordingly mythologised, even within his own lifetime, as the first national poet and the founding father of Russian literary language. It was not long until Glinka was hailed as music's Pushkin, the first national composer and the founding father of Russian musical language; this endowed the next generation of composers with a consciousness of their weighty responsibilities to the nation.

The possession of an uncontaminated, ordinary language was the most important nation-defining criterion in early nationalist writings. It was claimed that such a language was a natural phenomenon guaranteeing the organic unity of a nation, and that this irreplaceable heritage had to be protected from the dilution of foreign borrowings and developed only from its source. Music appeared no less plausible a subject for such rhetoric. The natural phenomenon in this case was the whole body of folk music found among the Russian-speaking peoples, viewed as a monolith, without regard for the many significant regional differences that would exercise the ethnomusicologist today.

This is the 'mother tongue' of Russian composers, who, protecting it from harmful foreign influence, were to develop it carefully into a national language of art music. If an original language possesses not only its original vocabulary but original syntax and grammar as well, then national music should not only draw its melodic material from folksong but also should use national metres and rhythms, national harmony, and supposedly original methods of development of its material.³ And it is at this point that Glinka's rejection of Germanic development, if presented as a nationalist statement, can be brought into play. A composer who wants to speak Russian in his music, not only ought to use the vocabulary of his nation (folksong or folk-inspired material) but also make sure that his musical grammar is not contaminated by foreign constructions (such as Germanic symphonic development). This is how a myth was born, a myth about the possibility and even the imperative of specifically Russian thematic procedures.

A second justification of this myth soon followed, now at the deeper level of national character; this was pithily stated by Mussorgsky in the epigraph at the head of the present essay. Now, it seemed, a Russian composer embarking on a development section had to be true not only to his material but also to his national self. Mussorgsky's idiosyncratic language makes it difficult to convey the range of possible meanings he

might have intended. Here is the epigraph once more, as rendered by Richard Taruskin:

When a German thinks, he reasons his way to a conclusion. Our Russian brother, on the other hand, starts with the conclusion and then might amuse himself with reasoning.

Taruskin's version is elegant, but rather interpretative – perhaps of necessity, given the obscurity of Mussorgsky's language. The reader might, however, find the following translation useful for comparison; I have sacrificed elegance here for the sake of a more literal rendering:

When a German thinks, he first expatiates [or rambles, waffles], then delivers the proof. Our Russian brother first supplies the proof [or perhaps better: gets to the point straight away], and then amuses himself with waffling.

Taruskin's verb 'reason' is rather more flattering to the German than Mussorgsky's '*razvodit'*'; Russian in fact lacks any lexical item equivalent to the concept of *ratio* or reason, and the verb Mussorgsky has chosen evokes the aimless spreading of water. The point of the comparison was primarily to dissuade Rimsky-Korsakov from developing his material in ways that seemed distinctly Germanic to Mussorgsky. And he was, of course, always happy to mock German ways (this had become a minor Russian tradition – a well-known example is to be found in the farcical portrayal of German generals in *War and Peace*). But we can also see this quotation to be a symptom of the anti-rationalistic sentiments commonly found in nineteenth-century Russian writings. One can perceive here one hundred and fifty years of Russia's jealous observation of her civilised and prosperous Western neighbours.⁴ Russia's failure to compete with the West on Western terms was only too obvious, and reflection upon the fact generally left Russians embittered. But Russia's emerging national consciousness soon devised a way of escaping this humiliation: what Russians took to be the values of the West, they portrayed as vices; and conversely, they made the opposite of each Western virtue into a Russian value. Western rationality, creative initiative, worship of success and so on were exaggerated so much as to appear pathological, while Russian intuition, contemplation and underachievement were offered as their healthy counterparts. Perverse as this may seem, it allowed the Russian nation to develop a pride in itself, and indeed formed a basis for Slavophile thought. The Slavophiles went on to construct an ideal image of original innocence (rather than mere ignorance) in pre-Petrine Russia, under the wise ministrations of the Eastern Church. Ivan Kireyevsky, the most eminent of the Slavophiles, called upon Russia to return to its true path:

In the West, theology became rational and abstract, while in the Orthodox world it retained the inner integrity of the Spirit; in the West the

forces of intellect are split, while here there is a striving for a live totality; *here you have mind moving towards truth through a logical chain of ideas, here, a striving for truth through the inner elevation of consciousness towards cordial integrity and intellectual concentration*; ... there you have scholastic and juridical universities, while in ancient Russia there were monasteries of prayer that enjoyed a concentration of the supreme knowledge within their walls.⁵

The classical, pagan world which Russia did not inherit is essentially *the triumph of formal reason over everything else* inside and outside the human being – of pure, naked reason, based on nothing but itself ... the Roman church is distinguished by the same triumph of rationalism over ... supreme spiritual insights ... The Inquisition, Jesuitism – all traits of Catholicism are the fruit of the same formal intellectual process ... That same Protestantism that Catholics reproach for its rationality can be traced back to the rationalism of Catholicism. In this last triumph of formal intellect over faith and tradition a sharp mind could already see the entire destiny of Europe [as unfolded up to the] present: ... the new philosophy ... industrialism as a foundation for society, philanthropy based on calculated self-interest, a system of education based on stimulating envy, Goethe, the crown of new poetry ... who kept changing the notion of beauty like Talleyrand his governments [etc., etc.]⁶

Of course many of Kireyevsky's Russian contemporaries thought the very things he condemned should characterise any civilised modern society. It seems that symphonic development fell into the same category. Our aim here is to find out if Russian composers ever managed to devise any alternative.

The example of a clearly non-Germanic structure usually cited is Glinka's symphonic fantasy *Kamarinskaya*, the work based on two folk-songs whose far-from-obvious melodic resemblance is developed through a chain of ostinato variations. The idea, fresh enough in itself, of reconciling two contrasting entities acquires additional interest from its choice of thematic material, which was given rather than composed. Although the next two generations of Russian composers claimed to be playing by the *Kamarinskaya* rules when they produced numerous overtures and fantasies on Russian or foreign themes, they never recaptured the tautness of Glinka's structure, nor its independence from Germanic methods of development. Not only was the brilliance of Glinka's musical pun never reproduced, but while the double-variation form he created was self-sufficient, they had to reach out for the crutches of sonata allegro, as in Balakirev's Overture on Three Russian Themes and *Russia*, or in similar works by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov.⁷ In Rimsky-Korsakov's Piano Concerto, a Russian folk theme is indeed used as the basis for a chain of variations, but these are unabashedly Lisztian in character and technique – an indication of the fact that by this stage (1884) any type of variation form, and not merely the characteristic changing-

background type created by Glinka, was accepted as a token of Russian-style thematic treatment.

But the real testing-ground for Russians was, of course, the symphony itself: was their cast of mind original enough to change the course of the genre, which had acquired a certain rigidity by the time they approached it? Indeed, there exists a distinct, immediately recognisable Petersburg style in the symphonies of Borodin, Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov and the younger Glazunov. What, then, was the original, or paradigmatic, Petersburg symphony? Cui spoke thus of Rimsky-Korsakov's First Symphony:

It is Russian because only a Russian could have written it, because there is no trace of musty Germanic stuff, but both the ideas and their development could have emerged only here [in Russia].⁸

Just to what extent this was wishful thinking is demonstrated by Rimsky-Korsakov's later remark, made after he had edited and re-orchestrated the symphony in the 1880s:

What a shameful work it was, not in the youthfulness of its ideas, but rather in its total incompetence! O Russian school! O Stasov! O Balakirev!⁹

And 'O Cui!' we could well add, since Rimsky-Korsakov's frank assessment of his first magnum opus is perhaps not overly harsh. Much more seminal for the New Russian School were the first symphonies of Balakirev and Borodin. Although nearly thirty years separate the dates of their completion (Borodin's in 1867, Balakirev's in 1893), both symphonies passed through Balakirev's workshop at the same time – indeed, Balakirev was responsible for a large proportion of the finished products his pupils turned out at this time. Balakirev's St Petersburg archives demonstrate that all the material for the first movement of his own symphony was ready in the 1860s:¹⁰ the first 246 bars underwent little revision, and it is most likely that the remainder of the highly original structure was planned out at this stage, since the other fragments to be found in the 1860s sketches appear in the same keys that we find in the finished work. And Balakirev was, of course, playing his work to his younger friends and discussing it at the very time when Borodin was working on his own first symphony.

A comparison of Balakirev's and Borodin's first movements brings out obvious similarities:

- Both movements are replete with motivic-thematic work, so that there is hardly any contrast between expository and developmental writing.
- Both the first and second subjects within each movement are closely related.
- Both are remarkable for the number of pedal-note passages (usually on V) which appear in both expected and unexpected places.

- Both seem to deviate from conventional sonata form more than any other sonata movement in Russian music of the time (including earlier and later works of their own).

The approach to symphonic development in Balakirev's workshop was lively and ingenious; clever motivic and contrapuntal tricks guaranteeing symphonic sophistication were encouraged, but the form itself was not subject to any inherited doctrines (and, indeed, Balakirev did not know the A. B. Marx schemes at that stage). As Rimsky-Korsakov observed:

A certain kind of musical fragment or period was held in greatest esteem, such as preparations, extensions, short but characteristic phrases, dissonant progressions (but not of the enharmonic kind), sequential growths, abrupt closures, etc.¹¹

In effect, Balakirev was teaching his friends how to build symphonies from the material of the striking and inventive themes they had brought to the workshop, to be honed and admired there; their work was to be filtered through Beethoven, Schumann and Liszt, whose music was the staple diet prescribed by Balakirev. But we must pause to ask: can this be reconciled with the aesthetic and moral scorn Mussorgsky displayed for Germanic approaches to symphonic development?

In order to answer this question, we look now at the form of both these first movements, for this was the aspect which has always been considered least Germanic; if we then discover that even in this respect Germanic models were being followed, we will be able to judge how distant were Mussorgsky's sentiments from the compositional procedures of his colleagues. Borodin's First is marginally the simpler of the two, so we shall discuss it first. Its recapitulation is followed by a second development, which reworks the sections of the development proper, presenting them in a different order; this gives the old material a new dramatic profile. Framed by a slower introduction and coda, the allegro falls into two halves (see Figure 5.1).

Another curious feature is the absence of any closing section in such an expansive and thematically rich exposition. Later, we encounter a majestic build-up leading to a grand cadence; this passage might easily have served to end the exposition, but instead it appears in the middle of the development, and the cadence itself is in the distant A major (bars 166–204). This build-up is reproduced at the end of the entire movement in the tonic E flat (bars 455–483), embedding the tritone Eb – A in the structure of the movement. This relationship is unorthodox but clear, and is thrown into relief by the vagueness and ambiguity of the movement's tonality elsewhere. For example, the structure of the secondary area of the exposition is elusive; it is probably best to interpret the exposition on a three-, rather than two-key model, the initial Eb being succeeded first by Bb and then g.¹² Another unusual feature is that, in the recapitulation, the secondary area is

not straightforwardly transposed, but introduces some unexpected keys once again, while the interval of transposition varies. All these strategies are indeed surprising and indicate a serious re-thinking of sonata procedures. But are they unprecedented?

Figure 5.1. Borodin, First Symphony, first movement.

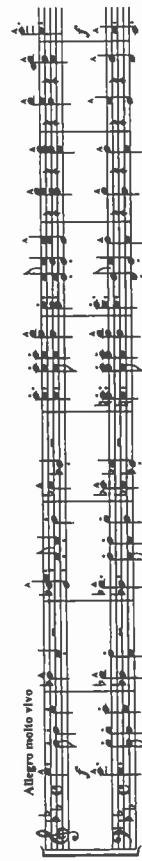
Introduction	Exposition	Development
slow bar 1	fast	
eb	54 91 115 131 152 166 204 233	
	Eb Bb D Bb-g g V of A-Ab Ab-Db-	
[a]	a b c d [ad] a d(e) ad, c, b	
	Recapitulation	Development 2
	301 338 362 378 407 427 448	fast slow
	Eb Eb Cb D-b-c Ab ped. V of 483 513	V of Eb
	a b c c d ad e a	on c Es
		Coda
		[ad]

a = main theme; b = transitional theme; c = "introduction" to "secondary" theme
d = "secondary" theme; e = "episode"

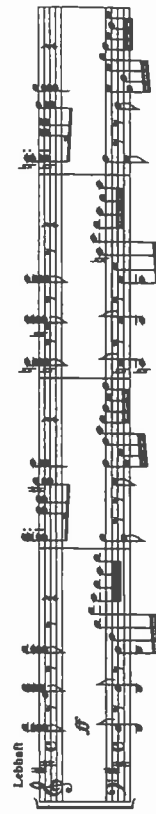
Note. Square brackets indicate that material from the designated theme is used, although that theme is not presented in its original form.

If we were to single out the one composer whose influence in Borodin's First is paramount, this would undoubtedly be Schumann. Some of the symphony's Schumannisms are readily discernible on the surface, e.g. the main theme of the finale, see Example 5.1a and 5.1b for comparison; but the debt to Schumann is also evident at a deeper level.

Example 5.1a. Borodin, Symphony No. 1 (Finale)



Example 5.1b. Schumann, Symphony in D minor (Finale)



Borodin was introduced to Schumann's music by his wife-to-be (a fine pianist) at the most romantic time of his life; a few years later, Borodin would have been reacquainted with the piano sonatas in particular when they were studied within Balakirev's circle. And it is in these three works that Schumann's most daring experiments with sonata form may be found. Only recently have these unorthodox forms received the analysis they deserve, first and foremost in the work of Linda Roesner, who termed them 'parallel forms'.¹³ Their most important feature is their restatement of all the development material after the recapitulation, a procedure endowing the whole with a bipartite structure (the second part is a mere transposition of the first). Roesner gives several examples of this: the rejected version of the finale of the Second Sonata (*presto passionato* in g), and the outer movements of the Third Sonata; she also shows that a similar principle was involved in the construction of the piano Fantasia's outer movements. To this list the finale of the First Sonata can be added; indeed, it would seem to be an extension of the parallel principle on two levels: each half of the finale itself contains two sections (see Figure 5.2). But in tonal terms the parallelism is not fully consistent due to the change of the transposition interval (a minor third between Eb and C, a tritone between A and Eb, and, finally, a perfect fourth between f# and b).¹⁴

Figure 5.2. Schumann, First Sonata, finale.

1	2	3	3a	2a	1	2	3	2b	Cad	dev	epi-	retr
A	a	Eb	Eb	V of Eb	eb	A	f#	A	--f#	A	sode	f#
1	2	3	3a	2a	1	3	2b	Cad	dev	epi-	etr	1+
A	a	Eb	Eb	V of C	C	Eb	c	Eb	--c	b	sode	coda
												Fis

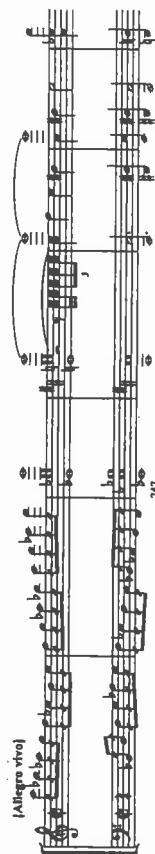
Note. Most of the themes are represented here by numbers, since treating them according to sonata or any other form would be artificial; however, some gestures are so obviously sonata-generated that naming them by function - cadential closure, start of 'development', episode, retransition - is most appropriate.

It seems most likely that Schumann's piano sonatas (above all, the F sharp minor) were the inspiration behind Borodin's experimentation in his First Symphony. Two stages of Borodin's structure hint at the 'parallel' principle: the tritone relationship at the core of it is a literal reproduction of Schumann's central pair of keys in the finale of Op.11, and the idea of a shifting interval of transposition can be traced back to the same source. Moreover, while Schumann's 'parallel' forms can be reduced to neat symmetrical tonal diagrams (see Roesner),¹⁵ there are also certain signs of tonal symmetry in Borodin, even apart from the tritone A-Eb: the secondary area in the exposition outlines D-Bb-G (a g-minor triad, a major third up

from the tonic Eb), and in the recapitulation it is Gb[F#]-D-B (a b-minor triad, a major third down from the tonic).

Let us now examine the other work in question: the first movement of Balakirev's First Symphony. This has puzzled commentators for nearly a century now and, although it was judged to be inspired and convincing,¹⁶ and although its unorthodox form has received a lucid account,¹⁷ no attempt has been made to trace the source of its structural oddities beyond the whim of the composer. Yet I think the key to the form of the first movement lies in its intended programmatic content, which can be deduced from Balakirev's remark in the margins of the incomplete piano score from the 1860s: 'the descent of the Holy Spirit'. This remark is attached to the passage which can now be found at bar 247 of the published score (the fortissimo arrival at an Eb major triad; see Example 5.2).

Example 5.2. Balakirev, Symphony No. 1, first movement, The descent of the Holy Spirit



It is precisely at this point that the 1860s score breaks off. We may suggest that, although Balakirev's programme for the symphony was never completely revealed, it does not mean that he discarded it. The E flat major climactic chord, then, stands as a turning-point: what was a more than conventional sonata allegro up to this moment completely changes its course, and we can explain this change with reference to the event mentioned by Balakirev in the score. Without exercising too much interpretative licence, it would seem obvious enough that 'the descent of the Holy Spirit' must bring about some radical *transformation* of everything that precedes. And this is exactly what happens in the completed score (Balakirev returned to the composition in the 1890s). The climax of bars 247-255 does not remain triumphant, but immediately slips from the E flat major triad to a half-diminished seventh stating the 'secondary' theme, which up to this moment was characterised by its interrogative and plaintive intonation and thus could be seen as representing a subjective, lyrical human element. The descent of the Holy Spirit, the meeting of man with God, brings confusion, fear, trembling, awe - and, in conveying this, Balakirev's climax can be compared with similar moments in Beethoven's Ninth or Schumann's Third.

But before long, in bar 271, the confusion is strikingly resolved in the new key of B major, where we encounter the first of the transformed characters, the movement's main theme (cf. Example 5.3).

Example 5.3. Balakirev, Symphony No. 1, first movement

The image displays musical notation for three themes from Balakirev's Symphony No. 1, first movement. Each theme is shown in two versions: 'Original version' and 'Transformed version'.
 - **Main theme:** The original version is in G major, featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The transformed version is in E major, maintaining the same rhythmic pattern but with a different harmonic context.
 - **'Secondary' theme:** The original version is in G major, characterized by a more melodic, flowing line. The transformed version is in E major, with a similar melodic contour but altered harmony.
 - **Closing theme:** The original version is in G major, featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The transformed version is in E major, maintaining the same rhythmic pattern but with a different harmonic context.

It has acquired an up-beat and an appoggiatura, and has become softer and gained an ascending profile. It is important to note that we never hear the main theme again in its original form: its transformation is irreversible. In bar 291 there is another entry, and now the character seems to be genuinely new: it is a theme introducing a new rhythmic figure and a bold octave leap, while before the music moved in crotchets and quavers and favoured conjunct motion (I still recall my first impression that this was out of style). But since we have now left the world of the exposition, we are in B major (a heavenly key in relation to the earthly C?) and we should not be surprised at this new theme of unreserved joy. Bars 318–330 introduce the transformed (with a different stress pattern and re-harmonised) closing theme, which confirms the key of B major and convinces us that what we have just heard was a kind of second exposition. Will there be a development to follow? Indeed, we hear the secondary theme in its original form (still complaining and asking questions) combined with the main theme in its new guise and moving in a regular developmental sequence. But in bar 350 it arrives at a dominant pedal of E major and we are about to witness its *gradual* transformation into an affirmative character – this time it happens before our eyes – and the transformation is complete by bar 368; once again, the transformation is irreversible. A fugato on the dotted-rhythm theme brings us to a dominant pedal of C major in bar 400 (retransition?), then the motto comes in, participating in the build-up, and in bar 433 we finally return to C major for a recapitulation, so to speak, which reproduces the closing theme, the main theme and then the secondary theme in that order, all in their new, transformed guise. The movement ends with a fast triumphant coda, arriving at the climax in a chorale version of the motto (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3. Balakirev, First Symphony, first movement.

Bar	Section	Key	Material
bar 1	Introduction	C	Two motives: A (also functioning as motto) and B
26	1st subject	C	Main theme a (based on A)
62	2nd subject	e-eb...G	'Secondary' theme b (based on B)
130	closure	D of G - G	closing theme c (based on A)
153–	'false start' of development	Eb...D of C	c, then A
190	proper start of development	C-a -D of C-C	a developed
247	climax	Eb	
248			climactic b
271	'2nd exposition' theme 1	--- D of h D of H	a* (a transformed)
291	theme 2	H	d
318	closure	H	c* (c transformed)
330–		gis-cis-D of H /ii of E	b-a*, gradually transforming into b*
368	theme 3	E	b*
384	retransition	E--- D of C	fugato on d and motto (A)
430	'recapitulation'	C	c*, then a*, then b*
499	Coda	...C	material of c, b, then A as chorale

The thick line indicates the end of the 1860s score.

As with Borodin's First, it is possible to trace this form to Western sources. Apart from the obvious influence of Lisztian principles, the form more specifically brings to mind Schumann's D Minor Symphony. Being a cross between a symphonic cycle and a one-movement work, it has a most unusual first allegro, which can be properly understood only in relation to the whole of which it forms a part. It starts with a deceptively conventional sonata exposition, even with repeats, but then goes astray in the development, introducing two new themes, one march-like, one lyrical, as if it is the exposition of a new sonata movement. There is no recapitulation of the original exposition material, although it is permanently present in accompanimental textures: instead, the return to the tonic features the new lyrical theme transformed into a march as a grand closing gesture (which is similar to Balakirev's procedure).

We have so far found that large-scale symphonic forms, starting from the respective first symphonies of Balakirev and Borodin (two of the best candidates), fail to sustain nationalist claims that they represented uniquely Russian forms; let us now see whether any unique Russian approach might nevertheless emerge from an examination of smaller scale techniques, of

shaping phrases into larger periods. One of the most obvious traits of the Petersburg composers in this respect is the use of repetition on different levels, from single motives or 2-bar phrases to whole paragraphs: a characteristic example would be the first movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sinfonietta*. This feature won a mixed response from critics – here, for example, is Taneyev's sour response to Glazunov's First Symphony (1881):

Its shortcomings are those of Glazunov's teachers: a lack of *experience in form*, much as Cui displayed in his *Tarantella* (for example, the first section of the development consists of numerous repetitions of an 8- or 12-bar phrase with a modulation at the end, which is every time the same – a close on the dominant chord, then a crescendo and resolution of the dominant onto a triad – this, being repeated several times in a row, is rather tedious); an *inability to construct long periods*, which are replaced by the most intolerable mannerism of the Petersburg composers, that endless and meaningless repetition of a one- or two-bar motive, resulting in something importunate, tiresome and evincing in the listener not merely boredom, but boredom coupled with animosity, an impression of something laborious and impotent.¹⁸

While Taneyev assigns such repetition to a simple lack of ability or training, others see in it an original method of developing ideas. A rather curious defence of the Five's symphonic argumentation is found in the writings of Mikhail Gnesin from the 1940s and 1950s. He attempted to portray the trait not so much as truly national, but as socially progressive and therefore of special value for Soviet audiences. What Taneyev criticised as an 'intolerable mannerism of endless repetition' (with Tchaikovsky's approval), Gnesin hailed as the 'analytical method' akin to that of the sciences. Here is Gnesin's description of the Five's method:

Creative work begins ... with the scrupulous selection of a meaningful and expressive thematic germ (idea) ... Thematic repetitions (constantly re-evoking the idea) guard against the intrusion of elements that are not directly relevant to the design, or those that would neutralise it. Melodic and rhythmical variants of the theme in different sections of the work, enriching it with important and sometimes unexpected details, allow us the better to perceive the main contours and foundations of the theme. Ever-changing harmonic progressions surrounding the theme present it every time in a different light. Textural variety contributes to the commentary on the theme. Transferring the theme into different keys sharpens our perception of it, causes us to hear it in a new environment, and also strengthens our impression of it by increasing the number of its appearances. All of these are different ways of *analysing the theme* ... Making sure that every new statement of the theme (or every new section of the work) is not lacking in richness when compared to the previous one is as natural as searching for more and more convincing arguments while proving some point.¹⁹

By shrewd wording Gnesin introduces the *theme* as a natural object. This metaphor would work to some extent only for literally quoted folk tunes as something one may indeed select and then analyse. But the rest of the thematic material used by the composers in question was of their own invention – their pride in their artistry never allowed them to efface their own authorship. There seems to be much less sense in analysing their own creations than given objects, and thus Gnesin's justification for substituting the new and striking word 'analysis' for the traditional 'development' or 'variation' falls apart. And he himself sometimes turns from the analysis metaphor to the traditional 'argument' one. But beware: the Five's argument, according to Gnesin, is totally different from the style of argument found in Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, for these latter felt free to abandon the main theme and create 'associative' or 'nearly accidental' thematic connections, justifying them at a later stage: 'they were not at all afraid of their conceptions being metaphysical', Gnesin says. For those who are not sufficiently familiar with Soviet rhetoric, 'metaphysical' was a swear-word, opposed to 'dialectical' and meaning, according to Gnesin, 'a lack of grounding in the objective study of life processes'. Gnesin's idea is clear: Beethoven and Tchaikovsky lose this round, while the Five win because they employed a more 'realist' method. (I present this to the reader as a sample of the contorted arguments used in defence of the Five's nationalism during the Soviet period, and not as a coherent or interesting argument in its own right.)

If we move from Soviet Russia to the West, we find that Gerald Abraham, like Gnesin, regards the Petersburg tendency towards repetition as a special viable 'method' (rather than a lazy and tedious mannerism); but, unlike Gnesin, he is not so much interested in locating these musical methods within the categories of Soviet dogma; rather, he finds them truly Russian, or, even better, 'semi-oriental', arising from that non-Germanic mentality promoted by Mussorgsky. 'A love of monotony, of endless repetitions' can be explained by the Russians' inspiration from oriental art, or indeed by the Russian mind's 'natural affinity with Eastern mentality'.²⁰ Borodin's mind in the first movement of his Second Symphony seems to return again and again to the same point, viewing it from different angles, instead of moving definitely forward from one position to another in the Western way; his 'semi-oriental mentality is never more fully revealed than in this movement'.²¹ And in general:

For real intellectual understanding of Russian music one almost needs an entirely new set of postulates. The Russian mind is essentially so naive, naive even in ingenuity ...²²

Now the first Russian symphony which adopted the repetitive manner in a thorough-going fashion was Borodin's First (Balakirev's First began in this manner, but did not sustain it after the first-movement exposition). The first allegro seems to be propelled by the omnipresent syncopated motive,

just as we find so often in Schumann. Most of Schumann's allegros are monorhythmic, as determined by their first bar, and in their turn they can be traced to Schumann's youthful fascination with Beethoven's Seventh. When we read some of the critical accounts of Schumann's symphonies, it is hard to miss their kinship with Taneyev's complaints about the Petersburg composers:

If you examine [Schumann's] orchestral pieces closely, you will find that he was often forced to repeat single bars or groups of bars in order to spin out the thread further, because the theme itself is too small for such continuation. Sometimes even the theme itself is formed through the repetition of this or that phrase. On account of these . . . rhythmic repetitions, his larger pieces for the orchestra naturally become monotonous.²³

It seems natural to suggest, then, that the Petersburg school was influenced by Schumann's symphonic allegros at least as much as by the ostinato variations of Glinka's *Kamarinskaya* (the only source normally given for 'Russian repetition'), if not to a greater extent. The principles of *Kamarinskaya* may have been emulated elsewhere, perhaps in slow movements or finales, but not in first movements. And so another 'deeply national' trait can be traced back to Germany.

As we have just seen, nationalist claims that symphonies could be written in Russian amounted to little or nothing. Of course, we have a lot of Russian symphonic music which is original, striking and fresh, but we owe it to the talented and inventive minds of individuals such as Borodin and Balakirev, rather than to some mysterious 'Russian Spirit' speaking through them. Yet it seems that some Western critics are prepared to support the nationalist myths of a Russian musical language, and a Russian Spirit, and would probably be totally lost without it. This trend started with Gerald Abraham, who accepted such claims at face value:

Russian musical language had to grow from itself, or rather (if I may mix metaphors) to form its own channel. Traditional methods would have corrupted the purity of the young growth and perhaps even stifled it altogether.²⁴

Abraham, as we have seen, also had a clear picture of the naive Russian mind, defying the forward thrust of Germanic argument. But strangely, his critique of Glazunov, seemingly strengthening the 'Russian Spirit' theory ('nothing ever happens to those ideas . . . the flow of music never gets anywhere . . . there is no growth, not even a sense of direction'), is supposed to prove that 'Glazunov learnt to speak music with a Russian accent, but not to think musically in Russian'.²⁵ Abraham's notion of authentic Russianness seems so diffuse that we can only suppose that he awards or withholds it according to his personal tastes rather than according to any concrete musical properties he observes.

It would be pointless to revive these views, had they not remained in currency up to the present today. David Brown, at the end of his *Tchaikovsky*, attempted to 'put the finger on the very essence of Russian creativity'.²⁶ The key to it he found in the concept of 'inertia', which he drew from Goncharov's celebrated novel, *Oblomov*; now, for Russians, the eponymous hero is characterised by 'laziness' or 'idleness', but this would preclude many of the applications which Brown wants to make, as we shall see (indeed, some of the composers concerned were, if anything, industrious to a fault).²⁷ From 'inertia', which Brown takes as a key concept for the understanding of Russian history in general, he proceeds to folksong as 'the clearest clue to the characteristics of a nation's musicality', and finds it 'a concentric, not an onward moving creation', evolving 'as a series of variations against a simple protoshape'.²⁸ Even if we could grant that Brown managed to find a single song expressing this supposed national character among the repertoires of thousands of diverse local traditions, is variation against a 'protoshape' a characteristic only of Russian folksong? Many geographically remote traditions across the globe contain songs in a narrow vocal range, rotating around a set of three or four pitches – clearly they cannot all partake of Russian inertia.

Next, inevitably, *Kamarinskaya* comes into play – 'a decorative, not an organic creation . . . static rather than dynamic'.²⁹ A number of other observations on Russian national characteristics are made, including, for some reason, Russian proficiency in chess; 'why not figure-skating?' which Russians dominate as well, we might ask. But of course, this would be difficult to trace back to the supposed Russian inertia which the examples were designed to confirm. We might have imagined that this inertia gave birth to the 'static' music of Borodin or Glazunov, but then, to our surprise, we find that Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* is offered as the end product.³⁰ It would be hard to believe that any listener could have failed to perceive the tension and suspense of this symphony's first movement. The tension is strong enough to override both the break between the first and second subjects and the rounded form of the second subject itself: the suspense of the narrative is too powerful to be dissipated by any deviation. Only strong prejudices can force one to make a connection between this music and Russian 'inertia'; in this case, two prejudices are at work: the presumed intrinsic difference of Russian music in general from the Germanic mainstream, and the traditional bias in Western musicology against Tchaikovsky the symphonist. This bias is encapsulated in the words of Martin Cooper: 'they [Tchaikovsky's symphonies] may be fine music but they are poor symphonies'.³¹ This view seems a little too old-fashioned to be reiterated in the twenty-first century: it stems from the tradition, in the nineteenth century, of evaluating all symphonies according to a single paradigm; namely, the Beethoven symphony.³² This paradigm may do justice to Brahms, but, even within the Austro-German symphony, it serves Bruckner

and Mahler badly; since no one at present would think of judging Bruckner or Mahler by 'strict academic tests'... [that is] the manipulation of sonata form in the appropriate movements'³³, why should Tchaikovsky still be made a victim of this outmoded approach?

Western perceptions of the Petersburg symphonies (by Borodin, Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov) were equally shaped by the application of the Beethovenian symphonic paradigm, be it wittingly or unwittingly. Yet the Five and their successors were no devout followers of Beethoven, although they wanted to buy into the prestigious tradition he represented, to emulate it and, if possible, to outshine it. Indeed, they took the most prestigious genre within German art music – the symphony – but sought, as their model, the most recent examples of that genre from the hand of a leading German composer. It was their misfortune (as far as their long-term reputation was concerned) to choose Schumann as their model symphonist, for, eminent though he indeed was, his symphonies came to be regarded as relatively marginal to his *oeuvre* and to the history of the genre at large. In this way, the marginalisation of their symphonies by Western critics was to some extent conditioned by their choice of Schumann as a model.

The clouding of Russian music history by nationalistic mythologies was not, therefore, merely a later accretion from music historiography, but began with the composers themselves. The stories they created to account for the authentic derivation of their music from the depths of the 'Russian Spirit' worked so powerfully upon their imagination that they soon appeared unable to distinguish between the facts of their compositional processes and the fictions they had so colourfully woven for a public willing to believe. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge the existence of a large gap between the history of their nationalist rhetoric and the history of their compositional practices. On the one hand, we have the myth of Russian music following the route mapped out in *Kamariinskaya*, we have Mussorgsky's stance against Germanic reasoning and Cui's over-zealous praise of Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Russian' developmental procedures. On the other hand, the two examples discussed earlier, from Balakirev and Borodin, both pivotal for the development of Russian nationalist music, certainly did not constitute a revolt against the German symphony; quite the contrary, for they reveal a profound understanding and ingenious assimilation of the Schumann model.

The striking similarities between the supposedly Russian traits of the Petersburg symphonies and the devices found in Schumann's symphonies prompt us to question the validity of this perceived Russianness. Is the repetitive character of a Rimsky-Korsakov symphony evidence of his non-Western mentality or did it stem from his strong concern about motivic-thematic coherence, a concern that he and his compatriots shared with Schumann? All too often, Western musicologists have not looked

beyond the myths represented by the first option, simply because these suit their preconceptions about the exoticism of Russian music. And so the myths invented by Russian composers in the nineteenth century are perpetuated and rechannelled according to the purposes of a very different audience.

Notes and References

- 1 Mussorgsky's letter of 15 August 1868, as translated in Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Tradition: A Biography of Works Through 'Maestro'* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996), Vol. 1, p. 137.
- 2 From the letter to Kukol'nik of 12 November 1854, quoted in A. Orlova, *Glinka's Life in Music: A Chronicle*, trans. R. Hoops (Ann Arbor, 1988), p. 597. There was as yet no established Russian term for what we call a 'development' section, hence Glinka's parenthetical inclusion of the German and French terms, which his Russian contemporaries would have been sure to recognise.
- 3 In this essay I shall only discuss the issue of development, since the problems of folksong as 'mother tongue' and 'national' harmony were touched upon in my article 'On Russian and Russianness', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 9, 5 (1997), pp. 21–45.
- 4 See Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge MA., 1992), pp. 190–274.
- 5 I. V. Kireyevsky, 'O kharaktere prosveshcheniya Yevropii i yego otnoshenii k prosveshcheniyu Rossii', *Moskovsky sbornik* (1852), quoted in N. Troitskaya, 'Ot yevropeiskogo romantizma k pravoslavnomu votserkovleniyu', in *Russkaya tsivilizatsiya i sobornost*, ed. Ye. Troitskiy (Moscow, 1994), p. 106.
- 6 I. V. Kireyevsky, *Kritika i estetika* (Moscow, 1979), pp. 147–53.
- 7 Richard Taruskin, 'How the Acorn Took Root', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 6, 3 (1983).
- 8 Cui's letter to Rimsky-Korsakov of 27 December 1863, see N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Polnoye sobranie sochineniy: Literaturnye proizvedeniya i perepiska* (Moscow, 1955–82), Vol. 5, p. 254.
- 9 Rimsky-Korsakov's letter to Kruglikov of 23 February 1884, see N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Polnoye sobranie sochineniy*, Vol. 8a, p. 136.
- 10 Most of the relevant material can be found in the Manuscript Department of the Russian National Library, Fund 410, the Archive of the St Petersburg Conservatoire and the Manuscript Department of the Russian Institute for Arts History.
- 11 N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Letopis' moey muzikal'noy zhizni* (Moscow, 1982), p. 30.
- 12 The idea of a three-key exposition was brought into the workshop by Balakirev (see his letter to Rimsky-Korsakov, 24 April 1862, published in N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Polnoye sobranie sochineniy*, Vol. 5, p. 18). Balakirev's model was Schumann's Third Symphony (first allegro); Schumann, in turn, borrowed the idea from Schubert.
- 13 Linda Correll Roesner, 'Schumann's "Parallel" Forms', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 14, 3 (1991), pp. 265–78.
- 14 Charles Rosen came to similar conclusions in his *Sonata Forms* (New York and London, 1980), pp. 296–310.
- 15 Roesner, 'Schumann's "Parallel" Forms', pp. 272, 274, 277.
- 16 Gerald Abraham, *On Russian Music* (London, 1939), pp. 185–6.
- 17 Edward Gardiner, *Balakirev: A Critical Study of His Life and Music* (London, 1967), pp. 324–6.
- 18 Taneyev's letter to Tchaikovsky of 9 September 1882, see P. I. Tchaikovsky, and S. I. Taneyev, *Pis'ma* (Moscow, 1951), p. 85.

- 19 M. F. Gnesin, *Misli i vospominaniya o N. A. Rimskom-Korsakove* (Moscow, 1956), pp. 77–8.
- 20 Gerald Abraham, *Borodin: The Composer and His Music* (London, n.d.), pp. 20–1.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 22 Gerald Abraham, *Studies in Russian Music* (London, n.d.), p. 9.
- 23 Felix Weingartner, *The Symphony since Beethoven*, trans. M. B. Dutton (Boston, 1904), extracts reprinted in *Schumann and his World*, ed. Larry Todd (Princeton, 1994), pp. 375–84 (p. 377).
- 24 Abraham, *Studies in Russian Music*, p. 30.
- 25 Abraham, *On Russian Music*, pp. 236–40.
- 26 David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study*, Vol. 4 (London, 1991), p. 424.
- 27 On the role of this concept in the construction of Russian national identity, see Marina Frolova-Walker, 'All Russian Music is So Sad: Two Constructions of the Russian Soul, Through Literature and Music', paper given at the IMS Congress (London, 1997), proceedings to be published by Oxford University Press.
- 28 Brown, *Tchaikovsky*, p. 422.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 425–7.
- 31 Martin Cooper, 'The Symphonies', in Gerald Abraham (ed.), *The Music of Tchaikovsky* (Port Washington, 1969), p. 24.
- 32 See more on this in Sanna Pederson, 'On the Task of the Music Historian: The Myth of Symphony after Beethoven', *Repercussions* 2 (1993), pp. 5–30.
- 33 Cooper, 'The Symphonies', p. 24.