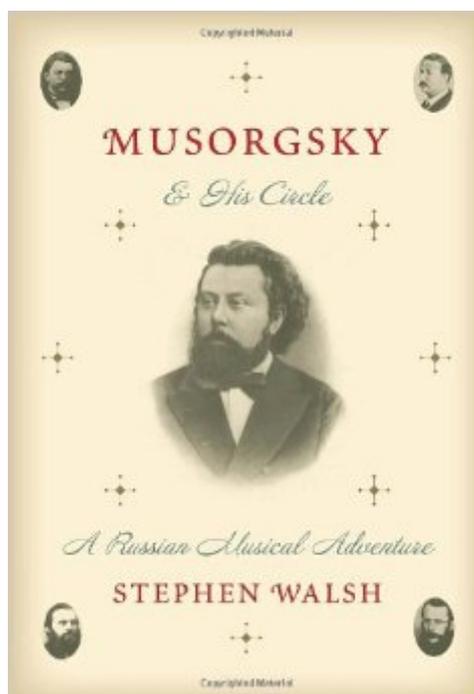


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Musorgsky And His Circle: A Russian Musical Adventure



Synopsis

The emergence of Russian classical music in the nineteenth century in the wake of Mikhail Glinka comprises one of the most remarkable and fascinating stories in all musical history. The five men who came together in the Russian capital of St. Petersburg in the 1860s, all composers of talent, some of genius, would be "in spite of a virtual lack of technical training" responsible for some of the greatest and best-loved music ever written. How this happened is the subject of Stephen Walsh's brilliant composite portrait of the group known in the West as the Five, and in Russia as *moguchaya kuchka* "the Mighty Little Heap. Friends, competitors, and creative intellectuals whose ambitions and ideas reflect the ferment of their times, Mily Balakirev, César Cui, Alexander Borodin, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, and "most important of all" Modest Musorgsky, come wonderfully to life in this extended account. The detail is engrossing. We see Borodin composing music while conducting research in chemistry (he would jump up and run back to the laboratory to make sure nothing had burnt out or boiled over there, meanwhile filling the corridor with improbable sequences of ninths or sevenths); Balakirev tutoring Musorgsky (Balakirev could not remedy the defects in his pupil's character, but he could confront him with works of genius); Cui doggedly producing operas during breaks from his career as a military fortifications instructor. Musorgsky asserts his independence, moving from writing songs and the showpiece *Night on Bald Mountain* to the magnificent *Boris Godunov*, meanwhile struggling against poverty and depression. In the background such important figures as Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolay Chernyshevsky shape the cultural milieu, while the godfather of the *kuchka*, critic and scholar Vladimir Stasov, is seen offering sometimes combative support. As an experienced and widely skilled musical scholar and biographer (his two-volume life of Stravinsky has been called "one of the best books ever written about a musician"), Stephen Walsh is exceptionally well-placed to tell this story. He does so with deep understanding and panache, making *Musorgsky and His Circle* both important and a delight to read.

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Customer Reviews

In the last 20 years it has suddenly become cool to write about 19th century Russian Music - long dismissed as anti-intellectual, gimcrack and populist by the (usually Germanic) music scholars, writers such as Richard Taruskin, Marina Frolova-Walker, David Brown, Edward Garden and more have devoted serious study to the tradition, and put it in context, and shown how remarkable this body of music is. Stephen Walsh has impeccable credentials in this field, having written in depth studies of Stravinsky and Bartok in particular. What one does get from this painstakingly researched book is the emergence of a body of work from absolutely nowhere, in a country with no art music tradition, a brand new conservatoire, and almost no concert series, and how, in a generation, the composers highlighted (the 'Mighty Handful' - Musorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev and Cui) forged a Russian nationalist style which sowed the seeds for an explosion of music-making. The retelling of these birth pangs makes for compelling reading, as do the roots of the ideology of creating a national style, and the frictions of this very disparate group of creators forced to appear as a united vanguard for a new world of music. I also liked how the account is chronological, switching back and forth from the creative endeavours of each composer. There are many perceptive insights into the chronic lack of basic training that is the strength and paralyzing weakness of this bunch, which resulted in several very well known torsos being left (the operas Prince Igor and Khovanshchina above all) and a sense of incredible promise, talent, and in fact, genius, frittered away and wasted.

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