Inspired by Culture

Celebrating the Music of the Slavs

by Robert Rival

Zdravstvuyte, which in Russian means “hello”, is a bit of a mouthful for the English speaker. But consonant clusters roll off the tongue of the 315 million speakers of Slavic languages. These include Russian and Ukrainian (East Slavic); Czech, Slovak and Polish (West); and Serbo-Croatian (South).

The Slavic peoples trace their ancestors to the Slav tribes which settled much of central and eastern Europe in the early middle ages. By the 11th-century these tribes had undergone Christianization, and as individual national states emerged over the last millennium, all at some time or other were subjugated, invaded or occupied by foreign empires.

Yet, despite common origins and parallel paths toward independence, what stands out among Slavic peoples and their cultures, not least in their musical traditions, is an incredible richness and diversity. It is this cultural wealth that the TSO evinces in its three-concert Slavic Celebration in November 2010. Represented are ten of the greatest Slav composers from the 19th-century to the present: Russian composers Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Stravinsky; Czech composers Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček, and the young rising star Mařatka; and Polish composers Chopin and Lutosławski.

Diversity extends to the genres selected: a march; an overture to an opera; concertos for viola, cello and piano; two suites, one from a film score, another from a ballet; a mass; and two symphonic poems on nationalistic themes, one inspired by a river, the other by a warrior.

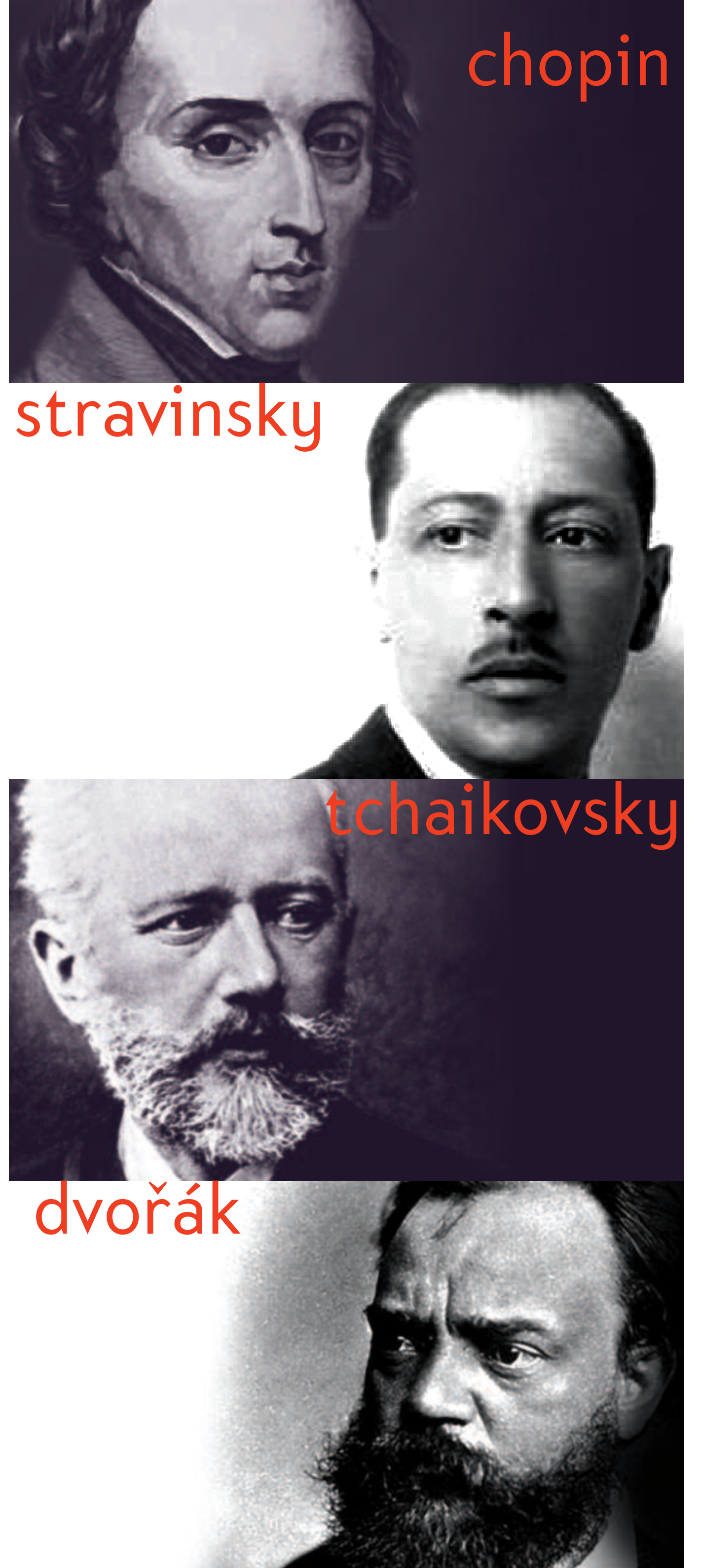
Owing to geography, language, culture, and its adoption of the Eastern Rite in the late 10th-century, Russia, the largest of the Slavic countries, developed independently from the West for much of its existence. Peter the Great, who reigned 1682-1725, steered a new course, however, with Western-inspired reforms. He not only imported Europe's science and technology but also its culture. Foreign musicians performing foreign music thus came to dominate Russian musical life well into the 19th-century.

The influx of foreigners was initially invigorating. But it also sparked a nationalist reaction. In 1836, Glinka, the father of the modern Russian school of composition, charted a new direction with his Russian-language opera *A Life for the Tsar*. Buoyed by its success, he quickly followed up with another, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, after Pushkin.

From Glinka, the baton of Russian musical nationalism passed to "The Five" — Cui, Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov — in the second half of the 19th-century. Tchaikovsky, meanwhile, stood apart. Though committed to cultivating Russian qualities in his music (he frequently deployed folksong), his Western-style conservatory training gave his work a polish often lacking in that of The Five's mainly self-taught members.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 impelled many musicians to flee their homeland. For Stravinsky, whose international reputation had already been secured by a string of groundbreaking scores composed for the Paris-based Ballets Russes — the first of these, *The Firebird* (1910), was based on Russian fairy tales and infused with folksong — the burden of exile was alleviated.

Prokofiev, too, left Russia due to the revolution, but after making a name for himself in the West, returned



in 1933. Received as a celebrity, he settled there permanently in 1936. One of his first Soviet commissions would also be his first film score, *Lieutenant Kijé*, a satirical fable about a soldier who does not exist.

Czech composers also began to strongly assert their national identity in the 19th-century, but did so under far more inhospitable conditions. Largely Protestant, the territories of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia had fallen to the Habsburg Empire in 1620. Forced to speak German, burdened with higher taxation, facing religious persecution and dim employment prospects, many musicians emigrated. Among them: Johann Stamitz, a key figure in the development of the pre-Classical symphony in Mannheim.

Yet Prague remained a major musical hub. The triumph of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* in Prague in 1786 led to the premières there of *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *La clemenza di Tito* (1791). But the 1794 staging of *The Magic Flute* — in a Czech translation no less — was an early and potent symbol of resistance to the suppression of the native tongue.

So effective was the Austrian attempt to stamp out Czech culture that even the great Bohemian patriot Smetana struggled to overcome his own deficiencies in Czech, having been raised and schooled in German. Like Glinka, Smetana made his first significant nationalist statement with an opera, *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* (1866). But he is best known for his cycle of six symphonic poems, *Má vlast* (My Fatherland), especially the second, "Vltava" (The Moldau), a portrait of the great river that flows through Prague.

Smetana's vision of a national art was not one rooted in folksong but one that incorporated contemporary compositional methods. And focused on building a new Czech repertory, he cared little if his works were performed abroad. Dvořák, 17 years his junior and no less a patriot, was, on the other hand, eager to share his work with the outside world. And the world — especially England and the United States — eagerly received it. Dvořák readily absorbed the influence of Brahms, with whom he became close friends, and whose subtle approach to the concerto form informs Dvořák's Piano Concerto (1876).

Dvořák's Moravian friend Janáček, like Smetana before him, saw in opera the opportunity to express a nationalist stance. His most popular opera, *Jenůfa*, was first staged in Brno in 1904. In the 1920s, while still writing operas, Janáček turned to sacred music: his *Glagolitic Mass* is set in Old Church Slavonic, a language long extinct.

Janáček, though deeply influenced by Moravian folksong, was also a Russophile. Among his several works inspired by Russian literature is the rhapsody *Taras Bulba*, after Gogol's novella about a 17th-century Cossack's battles against his Polish oppressors.

Rounding off the Czech presence in the TSO's Slavic Celebration is *Astrophonia*, a concerto for viola and orchestra by the young living composer Krystof Mařatka. A meditation on space and time, the work's very turning away from nationalist preoccupations in favour of more universal ones reflects a shift in attitude among Slavic composers of more recent generations.

Though Lutosławski, one of Poland's leading 20th-century composers, explored folk music in his early years, he became best known for developing a style that combines avant-garde techniques with emotionally expressive gestures. Such is the case in his dramatic Cello Concerto, completed in 1970.

That same year, Lutosławski published an essay, *Back to Chopin*, in which he revealed that his Polish musical heritage continued to beckon. "The world brought to existence in Chopin's works is full of infinite enchantments and unfathomable riches..." he gushed. "Despite its fantastic features, this world remains profoundly human: it is as deeply human as the intense, burning desire for the ideal."

Attacked by Sweden and Russia in the 18th-century, Poland ceded parts of its territory, beginning in 1772, until the little that remained in 1795 was divided among Russia, Prussia and Austria. Like their Czech brothers and sisters, Poles thus suffered foreign domination throughout the 19th-century, not achieving independence until 1918.

Before Chopin, most Polish composers wrote in the Classical style. Though Chopin left his homeland in late 1830, never to return, from his new base in Paris he turned Polish music into something of an international sensation with piano miniatures inspired by Polish folk dances (polonaises, mazurkas and krakowiaks). The dance rhythms also insinuated their way into his larger works, including both piano concertos of 1830.

In 1831, Schumann welcomed Chopin into the ranks of the greats when he famously exclaimed, "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!" But Schumann, not just moved by the Pole's brilliant virtuosity and melodic charms, was also sensitive to the music's political underpinnings. "If the mighty autocrat of the North knew what a dangerous enemy threatened him in Chopin's works," he wrote, in a veiled reference to Russia's suppression of a Polish rebellion that year, "he would forbid this music. Chopin's works are guns buried in flowers."

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