

Polovtsian Dances (from *Prince Igor*)
Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)

Ignoring the warning given by his mentor—“You make a mistake if you chase two hares at the same time”—Alexander Borodin managed to make a name for himself in two radically different professions. Born the illegitimate son of a prince, Borodin was a gifted musician from childhood who composed his first flute concerto at the age of 13. But, for a child of the Russian nobility, a career in music just wasn’t an option. And so at 16, Borodin entered the St. Petersburg Medical Surgical Academy.

A brilliant and enthusiastic medical student, he continued to compose and perform in chamber ensembles while pursuing his degree. After graduating (with “exceptional distinction”) he continued his devotion to both fields, becoming a professor and internationally renowned scientist in experimental chemistry and, in his spare time, establishing himself as one of “The Mighty Five”—five Russian composers that specialized in Romantic national music.

Borodin once wrote, “In winter I can only compose when I am too unwell to give my lectures. So my friends, reversing the usual custom, never say to me, ‘I hope you are well’ but ‘I do hope you are ill.’” His dual career meant that large works often took years to finish, if they were finished at all. Borodin’s friends, including influential composers Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, were always there, propelling Borodin along.

In 1869 he started preliminary work on the opera *Prince Igor*, based on a Russian national legend set in the 12th century. The story tells of the 1185 invasion of Prince Igor’s hometown by the Polovtsi—a nomadic tribe led by Khan Kontchak. Borodin called *Igor* an opera of Russian national pride and its portrayal of the invading tribe as uncivilized heathens is an obvious reflection of that. The Polovtsian Dances are mostly drawn from the end of the second act, from a scene in which the captive Prince Igor is treated to a series of wild, exotic, primitive dances by Polovtsi slaves. The dances were finished by 1874 and were performed on their own under the guidance of Rimsky-Korsakov—a constant champion of the opera during its development.

What would have been, and arguably still is, Borodin’s greatest work was largely unfinished at his death in 1887. He had worked on it, on and off, for more than 18 years, at one time writing to a friend, “I cherish the hope of carrying through my opera to the last measure, but I often laugh at myself. I get on slowly and at long intervals.” Rimsky-Korsakov made a last ditch effort in 1885 to help Borodin complete his massive undertaking—organizing the music and helping to fill in patches in the composition himself. But it wasn’t until Borodin’s death that the opera was finished.

Rimsky-Korsakov, along with another nationalistic composer of Borodin’s circle, Glazunov, brought the manuscript together. Glazunov recreated from memory the Overture, played for him by Borodin but never written down. The opera had its premiere in St. Petersburg on October 23, 1890. As might be expected, there was, and is, a fair bit of debate as to Borodin’s true intentions—would he be happy with the final version as put together by his friends? Probably. Was it, through the interventions of two greater composers, improved beyond the abilities of

Borodin? Probably. Nonetheless the piece went on to diverse success: As an opera, it remains in active use in Russia. The Polovtsian Dances continue to work very well for orchestras and dance companies (they were first choreographed by Sergei Diaghilev in 1909). And a number of Borodin themes live on as the basis for the Broadway musical *Kismet*.

Clarinet Concerto Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

The clarinet was still the new kid on the block during Mozart's day. By all accounts the composer adored the instrument whose unsurpassed ability to evoke the human voice brought a new vibrancy into the classical orchestra. The clarinet was created in the 18th century—the very earliest versions came out at the start of the century, about 50 years before Mozart's birth. The German instrument maker Johann Christoff Denner redesigned a reed instrument from ancient France called the 'chalumeau' by adding more keys to give it a full playable range. From there, a variety of improvements and tinkering continued by instrument makers, but also by those who most fully appreciated what was possible—the early clarinetists.

Like all new technical creations, this one wasn't quite nailed down all at one time—the instrument Mozart wrote this concerto for was a new version designed to combine the playability of the early clarinet with the stronger, lower voice of its predecessor, the basset horn. Its inventor, the renowned principle clarinetist in the Viennese Court orchestra, Anton Stadler, commissioned this piece for the new instrument. Stadler played a crucial role in early clarinet literature. It is Mozart's friendship and high regard for Stadler that resulted in Mozart's masterpieces for this instrument and its rich contributions to so many of his orchestral works. Those early pieces, in turn, helped sell the clarinet to other composers. As Franz Joseph Haydn said, it was Mozart who "taught us how to compose for the clarinet".

This concerto was to be Mozart's last. Legend has it Mozart knew he was dying and wrote this as a "farewell to life" but there is no real evidence that is true. There is certainly a wonderful exploration of light and dark and the full expressive voice of the instrument. This is Mozart and Stadler taking the 'Basset Clarinet' (as Stadler called his invention) for an exhaustive test drive—just to see what it could do. The gift Stadler gave to Mozart in this and his other works for clarinet is a true understanding of what was possible—allowing the composer to reach the absolute limit of possibilities with an instrument other composers barely knew. The frequent shifting between major and minor keys and between upper and lower registers shows both the effortless genius of the composer and the full limit of the new instrument (which was to undergo more evolutionary changes and refinements in the decades and centuries to come) Softening the orchestra--the trumpets and oboe sit this one out--and layering in a warm sound showcases the clarinet's mesmerizing voice.

For all his service to the development of the clarinet repertoire, modern clarinetists still have a bone to pick with Anton Stadler—he lost the original manuscript. Other clarinetists of the time, not having Stadler's unique instrument or even an exact text of the part, had a sticky time of making the concerto work. Some of the passages were compromised to fit the instrument at

hand and, even today, a modern clarinet is not exactly what Mozart had in mind. The fact that the music survives and thrives in a world with another two-plus centuries to get to know the clarinet is yet another testimony to Mozart's magic.

Symphony No. 5 in D minor
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was written, in his own words, as "the creative reply of a Soviet artist to justified criticism". In short, the story is this: In January 1936, while writing his Fourth Symphony, Shostakovich opened the official Soviet newspaper *Pravda* to find a withering review of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. It was entitled "Muddle instead of Music" and called the opera "course, primitive and vulgar". This in no way reflected the jubilant audience reception the opera received for the more than two years it had been running. In fact, earlier official reviews had said such an opera "could have been written only by a Soviet composer brought up in the best tradition of Soviet culture." With the sudden switch of tenor in the critical review, Shostakovich saw the writing on the wall. He had somehow run afoul of the authorities—a precarious position that made him withdraw his recently completed Fourth Symphony and offer in its place his Fifth.

Completed in just three months (an amazing feat of compositional focus and energy), Shostakovich described the theme of the Fifth Symphony as "the making of a man". There has been much speculation as to how and why the composer got himself into trouble with the Soviet authorities and what the real meaning of his musical reply is—Shostakovich himself never elaborated on either. But it worked, politically and musically. Where the shelved Fourth Symphony (which was not performed for another 25 years) is somber and full of dark complexities, the Fifth is generally celebratory and altogether dazzling. The Symphony was a sensation from the moment of its premiere in November 1937. The ovation was said to last 40 minutes. Shostakovich was back in the good graces of the powers that be.

While full of surface cheer (the shift in the last movement from minor to major gives the piece its often-noted 'happy ending') not everyone was convinced the composer's humility was all that sincere. 1936 was the year Stalin's Great Terror began—in which millions were killed or disappeared—and it was while writing this symphony that one of Shostakovich's teachers was arrested and executed. Convinced his own arrest was near after the Communist Party issued a statement saying the composer was "playing a game that may end very badly", Shostakovich took to sleeping in hallways to spare his children the sight of seeing him arrested. Even (or especially) for an artist of his caliber, the need for caution was at least as compelling as the need for resistance or artistic integrity.

As Shostakovich himself said, this symphony is an artist's answer. Music, after all, can spin, link, bury, and weave many a subtle meaning—and the Fifth Symphony is not a simple piece. If the attack on him was meant as an attack against brooding, complex modernism, as most composers at the time believed, the popular solution of writing easy-to-understand, patriotic pieces was not the direction Shostakovich took. The Symphony is full of wrenching moments of

extreme beauty and tragedy, but they come in a clear, open language that never dwells in excess. The possible interpretations are many—irony, capitulation, a safe bet or a subversive challenge—but the music stands on its own. On hearing it, the Soviet novelist Boris Pasternak noted with admiration, “He went and said everything, and no one did anything to him for it.”