

Ruslan and Ludmilla Overture **Michail Glinka (1804-1857)**

It is fascinating that Michail Glinka, made famous almost exclusively by this overture, was dubbed the 'father of Russian music'. Primarily, this is due to his historical position as being Russia's first composer of note. However, even this is not entirely true, there was Dmitri Bortnyansky (1751-1825) who is remembered for his contributions to the choral work of the Russian orthodox church. However, in the short period that Glinka was around - and in his even shorter list of works - it was his treatment of Russian words and, above all, Russian folk music in a vigorous and rich style that drew later composers to his music. It was, in part, the veneration of Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky which earned him this patriarchal title.

Brought up in comfort and financially secure, Glinka had little, if any, formal training as a musician, but delighted in the company of other musicians. On finishing his education in 1822 his father pressured him to join the foreign service, a pressure which he resisted, instead wandering the drawing rooms of St. Petersburg's elite as a musical dilettante. In fact, aside from a four year stint at the Ministry of Communications, itself an easy job, he led a generally easy life, travelling often.

From his early studies in Italy where he met with Donizetti and Bellini, the force of operatic form was his primary focus. When he returned to Russia there was comparatively no established symphonic music, and so his most celebrated works are a pair of operas, *A Life for the Tsar*, 1836 (aka *Ivan Susanin* in Russia) and *Ruslan and Ludmilla* 1842. Produced in St. Petersburg on 9 March, *Ruslan and Ludmilla* is a fantastical opera which blends the realm of mythical creatures with that of Russian history. Despite its unique role as the work that made him most famous, it is worth bearing in mind the place of this compositional style. One must remember that Glinka's first three works, up to age 22, were written when Beethoven was still alive, and the style to which he blossomed was part of that transition which is best personified by the music of Hector Berlioz. Even though the scoring remains traditional, the verve and vigor of the writing, masterfully orchestrated and blending old custom with new thought is perhaps just the template that could inspire compositional thought from Rimsky-Korsakov onward. The descending line in the trombones portraying the threat of the wizard Chernomor, towards the end of the overture is a presentation of the whole tone scale which, though not remarkable fifty years later, is quite a sensation for 1842.