

THE FIVE

INTRODUCTION

The Five, also known as The Mighty Handful, The Balakirev Circle and The New Russian School, refers to a circle of composers who met in Saint Petersburg, Russia in the years 1856-1870: Mily Balakirev (the leader), Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin. The group had the aim of producing a specifically Russian kind of art music, rather than one that imitated older European music or relied on European style conservatory training. The group defiantly adopted the name against enemies of Balakirev and the Russian critic Vladimir Stasov, including Academic Circles of the Conservatory and The Russian Musical Society. The Five is a reference to the group by the French “Les Cinq” (The Five). The name of Les Six, an even looser collection of French-speaking composers, emulates that of “The Five.”

FORMATION

The formation of The Five began in 1856, with the first meeting of Balakirev and Cui. Mussorgsky joined them in 1859, Rimsky-Korsakov in 1861 and Borodin in 1862. Not only were they young men in 1862 (ages 18-28) but they were also all self-trained amateurs. The Five were mainly from the minor gentry of the provinces. The group fell apart in the 1870's, partially due to Balakirev's withdrawal from musical life. They are all buried in Tikhvin Cemetery in Saint Petersburg.

MUSICAL LANGUAGE

The music of The Mighty Five was very different to that of the Russian Conservatoire. It is based on two distinct elements: sounds of Russian life (authentic sounds only heard in Russia) and a series of harmonic devices to create a distinct Russian style and colour different from Western music.

SOUNDS OF RUSSIAN LIFE

1. **Tonal Mutability:** Essentially a work without, or a distinct lack of, a tonal center. Shifting from one key to another (there are different ways to accomplish this) is called modulation which can disrupt the natural progression or flow in the harmony. This musical element is first seen more in Impressionism, it continues into the twentieth century (where it is called atonality, and more extreme examples can be seen)
2. **Heterophony:** A melody is simultaneously rendered by two or more performers in different variations. Essentially the work is improvised by the singers and ends in a single melodic line.
3. **Parallels:** Authentic Russian music uses a lot of parallel fifths, fourths and thirds (although parallel thirds are common in Western music) which creates a raw sonority and unpolished harmonies to that of Western music

HARMONIC DEVICES

1. **Whole Tone Scale:** A scale in which each note is separated from its neighbours by the interval of a whole step. Essentially, this scale has only 6 notes and omits the leading (or last) note.
2. **The Russian Submediant:** A harmonic pattern (in major mode) in which one upper part proceeds from the dominant (5th) chromatically (step wise) to the submediant (6th) while the other harmony parts remain constant
3. **Diminished or octatonic scale:** Any eight note musical scale (octa means 8). Usually this term refers to a scale in which the notes ascend in alternating intervals of a whole step and a half step, creating a symmetric scale. In jazz theory, it is called the diminished scale, because it can be conceived as a combination of two interlocking diminished seventh chords.

4. **Modular Rotation in Sequences of Thirds:** Using this allows the form of a musical composition to be shaped entirely by the content of the music
5. **Pentatonic scale:** This scale has only five notes in the octave, rather than seven found in the major and minor scales of Western music. It blends both a folk-melodic element with one that is Eastern (Middle East/Asia)

ORIENTALISM

This was a major element found in music of The Mighty Five. It became widely considered in the West as both one of the best known aspects of Russian music and a trait of Russian national character. Orientalism was not confined to using authentic Eastern melodies of more. Of more importance were the musical conventions added to these works. These conventions allowed for two things:

1. For music to be written on more mature subjects, such as political themes and erotic fantasies
2. Political expression (Russian Supremacy) of Empire Alexander II's reign

The direct effect on Russian Orientalism left its mark in nations both on the East and South sides of Russia.