

Role of the Folk Songs in the Russian Opera of the 18th Century

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Spring 2011

Abstract of the work

The last decades of the 18th century were a momentous period in Russian history; they marked an ever-increasing awareness of the horrors of serfdom and the fate of peasantry. Because of the exposure of brutal treatment of the serfs, the public was agitating for big reforms. In the 18th century these historical circumstances and the political environment affected the artists. The folk song became widely reflected in Russian professional music of the century, especially in its most important genre, the opera.

The Russian opera showed strong links with Russian folklore from its very first appearance. This factor differentiates it from all other genres of the 18th century, which were very much under the influence of classicism (painting, literature, architecture). About one hundred operas were created in the last decades of the 18th century, but only thirty remained; of which fifteen make use of Russian and Ukrainian folk music. Gathering of folk songs and the first attempts to affix them to paper were made in this period.

In course of only twenty years, from its beginning until the turn of the century, Russian opera underwent a great change: it became into a fully-fledged *genre*.

Russian opera is an important part of the world's theatre music treasures, and the music of the 18th century was the foundation of the mighty achievements of the second half of the 19th century, embodied in the works of Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov.

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*“The song is the soul of the people”
Words of the great educator Radishchev*

1. The Nature of the Russian Folk Song

“The roots of Russian folk music date as far back as to the middle of the first millennium AD, when Slavic tribes settled in the European part of the present territory of Russia. Those tribes were famous for their love and mastery of music, singing and dancing, according to Byzantium and German manuscripts. [...] The music of *Kievan Rus*, the first Russian state formed in the 10th century, was not homogeneous, much like the tribes that made up the country. It included Finno-Ugric, Turkish and other prototypes besides Slavic ones. Very old are the guttural singing traditions of Siberia and the Far East. To date, regional and ethnic (pre-national) traditions are evident in Russian folklore. Thus, folk singing traditions of the Northern, Western, Southern and central regions, as well as settlements in the basins of the big rivers of Oka, Volga and Don, have their own distinct features. The majority of folk songs still sung today have pagan roots influenced by Christian rites.”¹

First Score Collections of the Folk Songs

Trutovsky’s Collection (1770)

With the Westernization under Czar Alexei (ca. 1660), Czar Peter the Great² and his successors began to cultivate their own music entirely in the fashionable Western style, but the old Russian heritage was not forgotten. Folk songs were utilized for whatever purpose was at hand, mangled and mutilated, but also thoroughly enjoyed.

The reign of the Empress Elisabeth (1741-1762) has been called the “*age of song*”. There was an influx of the folk song into Moscow, together with old dance rites. Folk songs have been transcribed into modern notation. Instrumental accompaniments were

¹ “History of Russian Folk Music”, as seen on 15. 1. 2011, <http://www.russia-ic.com/view/culture_art/music/folk_music/>

² Peter I the Great or Pyotr Alexeyevich Romanov, was tsar of Russia from 1682 to 1725. He transformed Russia from an isolated agricultural society into an Empire on a par with European powers. Peter traveled across Europe (sometimes in disguise to avoid being recognized) and educated himself in western culture and science, then returned to Russia and introduced military, civil and social reforms to make Russia more like European. He succeeded in conquering land on the Baltic Sea, where he founded St. Petersburg. A gateway to Europe, St. Petersburg became the new capital of Russia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_the_Great> and <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D1%91%D1%82%D1%80_I>

used not only in the folk songs, but also in the singing of sacred music. This spirit was the cause that the “discovery of the folk” took place in 18th century Russia. Trutovsky’s³ *Sobranie raznykh pesen* (Collection of Simple Russian Songs, 1770), assembled by Mikhail Chulkov (1734-1792). In 1776 it was followed by a new printed anthology which included the tunes, *Sobranie russkikh prostykh pesen s notami* (Collection of Simple Russian Songs with Music).

Lvov-Prach’s Collection (1790)

The first anthology of Russian songs, which calls its contents folk songs (*narodnye pesni*), was collected by Nikolai Lvov⁴ and Ivan Prach⁵ in 1790. A Collection of Russian Folk songs with Their Tunes (*Sobraniye narodnykh russkikh pesen s ikh golosami*), is a magnificent compendium of one hundred Russian folk songs in various genres. It is a major event, for it returns to easy accessibility a cultural document of the first magnitude. Lvov’s activities on behalf of folk lyric and folk epos took many forms. He confected an original *bylina*⁶ about the heroic warrior Dobrynia of ancient legend.

³ Vasily Fyodorovich Trutovsky (1740–1810) a Ukrainian folk song collector, gusli player and composer, who lived in Russia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasily_Fyodorovich_Trutovsky>

⁴ Nikolai Alexandrovich Lvov (1751-1803), a noble landowner and world traveler with multifarious artistic and scientific interests. He was a member both of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, and the maintainer of a famous artistic salon. Lvov cultivated a wide circle of distinguished friends, among them leading poets, artists and musicians.

⁵ Jan Bogumir Prác or Johann Gottfried Pratsch (d. ca. 1818) was a Bohemian from Silecia, who settled in St. Petersburg in the 1770s and supported himself as a piano teacher for a fashionable girls at the Smolny Institute. He was a coauthor of the *Collection of Russian Folk Songs with Their Tunes* who transcribed sheet music, and is thus known as Lvov-Prach collection.

⁶ *Bylina* is a traditional Russian oral epic narrative poem about the exploits of heroes, which was based on a story or a remarkable event in Russian history. The word *bylina* is derived from the past tense of the verb “to be” and implies “something that was”. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bylina>> and <<http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D1%8B%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%8B>>

Andante № 24. 1.

Sostenuto.

Бу со ко — — — — — со ка.тѣ бу — — — со-

ко — — — — — со.ка.тѣ — — — — — со.ка.тѣ — — — — — Бу со ко со-

ка.тѣ — — — — — со.му — — — — — ѣто бу.со.ко — — — — — со.ка.тѣ —

2. 4. tempo

Sheet music to “Vysoko sokol...” recorded by Nikolai Lvov, transcribed by Jan Prach.⁷

Lvov collaborated with Yevstigney Fomin⁸, who was the greatest Russian composer of his generation. They worked on a singspiel called *Yamschiki na podstave* (The

⁷ 1806 edition (first edition 1790), Facsimile of 1806 edition reproduced in: Taruskin, Richard, “Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays”, Princeton, 2001

⁸ Yevstigney Ipat'yevich Fomin (1761-1800) was sent to the Petersburg Academy of Arts at the age of six, where he studied clavichord under Buini and composition under Sartori and Raupach. Finishing brilliantly at the Academy he went in 1782 to Bologna where he studied under the famous composer and theoretician Padre Martini (among his students - Niccolò Jommelli, Johann Christian Bach, Mozart and many other great masters of European music). In 1784 he returned to St. Petersburg where he worked until his death. In 1796 he was appointed as a “répétiteur of opera parts”. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yevstigney_Fomin> and <<http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD,%D0%95%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B3%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B9%D0%98%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%8C%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87>>

Coachmen at the Relay Station), which opens with a pair an imitation of folk songs of the type known *protiazhnaya*.

Russian Folk Song *Protiazhnaya*

Protiazhnaya (“prolonged” folk song) is “a unique genre of old Russian folk songs and is remarkable for its broad development of melody, to which its profound textual content and overall emotional impact are intimately bound. The subject matter of these songs is highly varied and rich, developing out of a deep lyricism.”⁹ The breadth of melody of *protiazhnaya* Russian songs is closely connected to the text. The texts of these songs are usually voluminous; their forms are quite simple, bipartite “with lines of relatively narrow syllabic count, such as eight, five plus five and eleven syllables.”¹⁰

Example 1

A

I Ekh, da, spo - ka - cha - li - sia go - ry, go - ry, do - ly,

II Spo - ka - cha - lis go - ry, do - ly,

B

I Spo spo - trias - la - sia mat' sy - ra ze - mlia, da,

II Spo - trias - la - sia mat' ze - mlia,

C

I Spo spo trias - la sia mat' ze - mlia.

II Spo - trias - la - sia mat' ze - mlia.

⁹ Beliaev V. M., Krader, Barbara, “The Russian Protiazhaia "Prolonged" Folk Song” *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council, Vol. 1*, London, 1969, as seen on 22. 12. 2010, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/767638>>

¹⁰ see footnote 7

This song is about a fugitive, who takes a boat across the famous Lake Baikal in Siberia, “The Mountains and the Valleys Rocked.”¹¹ The strophic form of the song is two lines, alternating eight and seven syllables.

Spokachalis’ gory, doly,
Spotriaslasiya mat’zemlia.

The mountains and the valleys rocked,
Mother earth was shaken to the core.

The first example shows the original transcriptions with the added syllables in the text. The repetition of the second “purified” line creates a tripartite type of couplet in ABC form. This example can serve as an illustration of essential changes in the structure of the melody.

Kirshin’s Collection (1833)

A special place among the collections of the 18th century song is taken by *Sbornik narodnykh pesen* (A Collection of Russian Folk Songs), created in the mid-1700s in Western Siberia. The collection existed only in manuscript until it was published without the tunes in 1804 under the title *Drevnie rossiyskie stikhotvoreniya, sobrannye Kirsheyu Danilovym* (Ancient Russian Poems, Collected by Kirscha Danilov¹²). It represents almost all the major *byliny* of the Russian epos, historical and lyrical songs and spiritual verses. The collection brought *byliny* to the attention of Russian readers of the 19th century and was highly esteemed by Alexander Pushkin, Vissarion Belinsky, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Maxim Gorky.

2. Historical Events and Circumstances Leading to the Evolution of the National Composer School

In the development of Russian music it is easy to distinguish few periods, each of them corresponding to a certain stage of economic and political development. The last decades of the 18th century were a momentous period in Russian history in that they marked an ever-increasing awareness of the horrors of serfdom and the fate of peasantry. Because of the exposure of brutal treatment by cruel landowners and the

¹¹ “Russkiye narodnye pesni Krasnoiarskogo kraia”, Part I no. 2., Moscow, 1959

¹² Kirill Danilovich, a skomorokh (itinerant performer)

exploitation of the serfs, the public was becoming more self-aware and agitating for big reforms. This spirit was the cause that the “discovery of the folk” took place in 18th century Russia. Commencing in 1773, the year of Pugachev’s rebellion, an unbroken series of literary productions with the theme of the Russian peasantry’s fate appeared.

“The paradoxical fact is that Russian consciousness was an aspect of Westernization. Russia before Peter the Great was essentially in the Dark Ages. The 18th century witnessed the Petrine reforms and their aftermath – the construction of Italianate “window on the West” atop the Neva marshes. The eager adoption of “German” technology [...], the wholesale importation from abroad of cultural artifacts – this was the century in which the cultivated Russian elite first established a national literary language distinct from the archaic ecclesiastical idiom, first wrote up the national history. At a time when population of the Russian countryside thought of themselves simply as a *krest’ianye* (“Christian folk”) or *pravoslavnye* (“the Orthodox”) and would never have dreamed of claiming their *barin* (the landowner to which they were confined by the law). But the most enlightened [...] and Westernized *barins* were already thinking of their “souls”, constituting themselves and the *narod*, the Russian “people”. [...] The idea of a national identity vouchsafed by language, customs, religion and history was an imported concept Westernized Russia made its own in its ambitious bid for international recognition – it was the inevitable product of increased exposure to foreign influence.”¹³ All these circumstances influenced the works of such writers as Fonvizin¹⁴, the satirist Krylov¹⁵, the revolutionary Radishchev¹⁶, and the aristocratic liberal writer Knyazhnin¹⁷. In addition it made the fantastic flourishes of national culture, avowedly nationalist and anti-Western.

¹³ Taruskin, Richard, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 43, No. 1, page 162-163, Berkeley, 1990, as seen on 22. 12. 2010, <<http://www.jstor.org/sable/831411>>

¹⁴ Denis Fonvizin (1744-1792) is considered to be the most distinguished Russian playwright of the eighteenth century, mostly known by his satirical comedy *Nedorosl'* (The Minor, 1782) and his play *Brigadir* (The Brigadier, 1792). <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denis_Fonvizin>

¹⁵ Ivan Krylov (1769-1844) Russia’s best known fabulist, whose literary career began in 1783, when he sold a comedy called *Philomela*. He used the proceeds to obtain the works of Molière, Racine, and Boileau. Krylov’s statue in the Summer Garden (1854-55) is one of the most notable monuments in St. Petersburg. It is also the first monument erected to a poet in Eastern Europe. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Krylov>

¹⁶ Alexander Radishchev (1749-1802) a Russian political writer. Although being a noble man, he pursued a career as a civil servant, in which he met people from all social classes. Influenced by writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he wrote *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), in which he describes examples of social injustice. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Radishchev>

¹⁷ Yakov Knyazhnin (1742-1791) Russia’s foremost tragic author during the reign of Catherine the Great. Knyazhnin’s contemporary success was based largely on his witty comedies *The Braggart* (1786) and *The Cranks*

The Age of Enlightenment: “Discovery of the Folk”

The Russian Age of Enlightenment was a period in the 18th century in which the government began actively encouraging the proliferation of the arts and sciences. This period gave birth to the first Russian university, library, theatre and public museum. The ideas of the Russian Enlightenment were first espoused by the “learned *druzhina*” of Peter the Great. During the reign of Peter’s daughter Elizaveta Petrovna¹⁸ the ideas of the Enlightened Absolutism found their way into Russia. Elizaveta's favourite, Ivan Shuvalov, was an ideal enlightened courtier: he was instrumental in the establishment of the Moscow University and the Imperial Academy of Arts, which would spawn the careers of most intellectuals active during the last quarter of the 18th century. Shuvalov was also the patron of the greatest Russian polymath — Mikhail Lomonosov¹⁹ — who left his mark on various branches of natural science, religious philosophy, poetry, and fine arts.

Catherine the Great and Her Role in Fostering the Arts

Catherine the Great²⁰ played a key role in fostering the arts, sciences, and education in Russia, especially during the first years of her reign. Her patronage furthered the evolution of the arts in Russia more than that of any Russian sovereign before or after her (an interesting fact that she was not of Russian origin). Famous for her cordial relations with Voltaire and Diderot, she founded the Hermitage Museum, Free Economic Society and the Imperial Public Library — three pioneering institutions which aimed at spreading education and enlightenment in Russia.

(1790). The latter revolves around the theme of favoritism, of the unexpectedly quick rise in rank, which was topical in Catherine's reign, and considered risqué. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakov_Knyazhnin>

¹⁸ Elizaveta Petrovna was the Empress of Russia (1741–1762). She encouraged Lomonosov's establishment of the University of Moscow and Shuvalov's foundation of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. She also spent exorbitant sums of money on the grandiose baroque projects of her favorite architect, Bartolomeo Rastrelli, particularly in Peterhof and Tsarskoye Selo. The Winter Palace and the Smolny Cathedral remain the chief monuments of her reign in St. Petersburg. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizaveta_Petrovna> and <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%95%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B0_%D0%9F%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B0>

¹⁹ Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-1765) a Russian polymath, scientist and writer, who made important contributions to literature, education, and science. Among his discoveries was the atmosphere of Venus. Lomonosov was also a poet, who created the basis of the modern Russian literary language. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Lomonosov>

²⁰ Catherine II (1729-1796) also known as Catherine the Great (German: Katharina die Große), was born in Stettin, Pomerania, Germany. She reigned as Empress of Russia from 1762 after the assassination of her husband, Peter III, shortly after the end of the Seven Years' War until her death in 1796. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_the_Great> and <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%95%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0_II>

3. **Reflection of Folk Songs in the Most Important Genre of Russian Music in the 18th Century**

In the 18th century the historical circumstances and the political environment affected not only writers, poets and scientists, but also musicians. The folk song became widely reflected in Russian professional music of the century, especially in its most important genre, the comic opera. From its very first appearance in 1779, it showed strong links with Russian folklore. This factor differentiates it from all other genres of the same period, which were very much under the influence of classicism (painting, literature, architecture). About one hundred operas were created in the last years of the 18th century, but of these the music of only thirty remained; of which fifteen make use of Russian and Ukrainian folk music. Although several of the composers of the 18th century in Russia were foreigners, nevertheless, they made use of folk material in order to give their music national coloring. In some cases of non-Russian composers living in Russia, they did not even know the Russian language, but employed folk melodies simply as thematic material, being indifferent to their aesthetic, semantic and rhythmic properties.

Foreign Composers Working in Russia – Collaboration with Russian composers – Catherine II as a Librettist

An Italian composer **Francesco Araja** went to Russia together with a big Italian opera troupe in 1735, and spent 25 years in St. Petersburg. He was the composer of the first opera printed in the Russian language *Sila lyubvi i nenavisti* (*La forza dell'amore e dell'odio* - The Power of Love and Hatred). Araja wrote at least fourteen operas for the Russian Imperial Court, the majority of which were to Italian libretti. However, in 1755 Araja composed *Tsefal i Prokris* (Cephalus and Prokris), an opera in three acts to the Russian libretto by Alexander Sumarokov after the Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which enjoyed great success.

Catherine II was not only an opera fan, a patroness of the arts, music and theatre, but also a prolific opera librettist. She commissioned some well-known foreign composers to provide music for her texts. Catherine II was responsible for a number of libretti to Russian operas: *Fevey*, *Fedul* and *The Children*, *The Last Reign of Oleg*, etc. Catherine herself, being of German origin, had a poor knowledge of Russian

language. And possibly the true author was her private secretary Khrapovitsky, who worked out the Empress's ideas

The opera *Gore-Bogatyr' Kozemetovich* (Kozemetovich, The Woeful Knight) was based on a libretto by Catherine the Great, music written by a Spanish composer, Martín y Soler²¹, immediately after his arrival in Russia in 1789. For a composer so unfamiliar with Russian life and language, it is not surprising that folk music does not feature prominently in this opera. Nevertheless, in the overture three folk tunes are used, which appeared in the famous collection of Lvov-Prach. The choice of melodies employed in *Gore-Bogatyr'* gives a good example of foreign composers' manner of approach employing folk material in their music. The folk tunes themselves are very much of the same genre. When selecting the melodies, Martín made no contrast: his principal desire was to find themes which were well-proportioned, without unusual themes and rhythms.

Another opera with libretto written by Catherine II was composed in 1787 by Baron Vančura and called *Ivan Tsarevich*.²² The opera succeeded both from literary and dramatic point of view and contains some elements of folk character.²³ The opera has at least two original folk songs; one of them being very well known *Vo pole bereza stoyala*.²⁴

²¹ Vicente Martín y Soler (1754 –1806) was a Spanish composer of opera and ballet. Although relatively obscure today, in his own day he was compared favorably with his contemporary, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, as a composer of opera buffa. He has been called the Valencian Mozart. In 1788 Martín y Soler was invited to the Russian court at St. Petersburg, where he wrote three operas in Russian language, The Unfortunate Hero Kosmetovich (1789, libretto written by Catherine the Great), Melomania (1790), and Fedul and his Children (1791, with Vasili Pashkevich – see footnote nr. 22).

²² Ivan Tsarevich (John the Prince) is one of the main heroes of Russian folklore, usually a protagonist, often engaged in a struggle with Koschei. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Tsarevich>

²³ The plot of the opera: A whirlwind has carried off the Tsarevnas Luna and Zvezda, daughters of Tsar Arkhidey and Tsaritsa Darya. Ivan Tsarevich offers to seek his sisters. On the way he takes a cap of invisibility, automatic boots, and a hospitable table-cloth. Baba-Yaga tells Ivan Tsarevich that the magicians Medved'-Molodets and Morskoye Chudo-Molodets have carried off the sisters and directs the Tsarevich to them. He finds them, acquires one of the girls Tsar-Devitsa for his wife, having first killed the twelve-headed serpent. The tale ends with Tsarevich and Tsar-Devitsa's wedding.

²⁴ The same tune is used in the finale of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony.

ВО ПОЛЕ БЕРЁЗА СТОЯЛА

Русская народная песня

Подвижно

Em Am Em/B B Em
Во по - ле бе - рё - за сто - я - ла,
G Am Em/B B Em
во по - ле куд - ря - ва - я сто - я - ла.
Am6 F#m7(b5) Em/B B Em
Лю - ли, лю - ли, сто - я - ла,
Am6 F#m7(b5) Em/B B Em
лю - ли, лю - ли, сто - я - ла.

The year 1791 saw the appearance of another imperial libretto. *Fedul s det'mi* (Fedul and his Children) was supposed to demonstrate the way of peasant life in Russia. Catherine tried to give more realism to her work by centering it around peasant characters and by employing rustic expressions. The opera is more a caricature than a true picture of peasant life. The music to *Fedul* was composed by Martín y Soler and Vasily Pashkevich²⁵, both of whom employed folk music.²⁶

Yet another opera was written in 1780 by foreign composer Herman Raupach²⁷ *Dobryye soldaty* (The Good Soldiers) with libretto by Kheraskov²⁸. The folk music

²⁵ Vasily Pashkevich (1742-1797) a Russian composer, singer, violinist and teacher. In 1783 he became a chamber musician in Catherine II's court and was appointed "Court Kapellmeister of ball music". He is known to be a composer of the operas *Neschast'ye ot karety* (The Misfortunes of Having a Carriage, 1779), *Skupoy* (The Miser 1782), *Fevey* (1786), *Fedul s det'mi* (Fedul and his Children, 1791) and to have edited the opera *Kak pozhyvyosh, tak i poslyvyosh* (As You Live, So Are You Judged, 1792.)

²⁶ This opera enjoyed a big success on the public stage in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Fedul, a peasant widower, with fifteen children wishes to marry a widow. One of his daughters starts singing a song popular at that period (written by Elizaveta before she succeeded to the throne). In this opera the music is a mixture of Russian color and reminiscences of Italian comic opera.

²⁷ Herman Friedrich Raupach (1728-1778) a German composer who became the assistant of Vincenzo Manfredini at the Russian Imperial Court Orchestra in St. Petersburg in 1755. In 1758 he was appointed a Kapellmeister and court composer in St. Petersburg. His *Alceste* (1758) is regarded as "the second Russian opera" (after Araja's *Tsefal i Prokris*, 1755). In 1762 Raupach left St. Petersburg for Hamburg and then Paris, where he met Mozart and improvised with him on harpsichord by four hands. Mozart arranged some movements from Raupach's sonatas for piano and string orchestra. Later Raupach returned to St. Petersburg, where he became the instructor of composition and singing at the Academy of Fine Arts from 1768 to 1778. The composers Dmitry

plays an insignificant role in this opera. It appears only once in a solitary aria in the form of a fragment from *Kamarinskaya*²⁹ and in the soldiers' choruses. What is special about this part is that although the characters are all soldiers, the music is written for mixed voices. – For instance Carlo Canobbio³⁰, who wrote the overture and the interlude to the opera *Neschastnoye upravleniye Olega* (The First Government of Oleg, 1791) – libretto written by Catherine II – used in the prelude of the third act the traditional of the *Kamarinskaya*, but altered its rhythm into that of a regular court menuet:



The first operas were essentially plays with musical inserts, where spoken scenes and dialogues played an important role. The principal themes of the libretti had five categories: *drama s golosami* (*Royana i Lyubim*), grotesque buffonade (*Neschast'ze ot karety*), folk vaudeville (*Mel'nik-koldun*), satirical comedy (*Skupoy*) and fantastic opera (*Ivan Tsarevich*).

4. 1779: Appearance of the First National Operas Prominent Native-born Russian Composers of the Period

The most important year in early Russian opera is 1779. Three operas of high quality appeared: *Mel'nik-koldun*, *obmanschik i svat* (The Miller Magician, Deceiver and Matchmaker), *Sanktpeterburgskiy gostinnyy dvor* (The St. Petersburg Bazaar) and

Bortniansky and Yevstigney Fomin were among his students. He died in St. Petersburg. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermann_Raupach>

²⁸ Mikhail Kheraskov (1733-1807), author of the *Rossiada*, an epic in the tradition of Homer and Virgil, describing conquest of Kazan' by Ivan the Terrible in 1552. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Kheraskov>

²⁹ *Kamarinskaya* is a Russian traditional folk dance, mostly known from Mikhail Glinka's overture *Kamarinskaya* in 1848.

³⁰ Carlo Canobbio (1741-1822) an Italian chamber musician who later became a member of the court orchestra at the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg. Apart from his work on *Oleg*, he composed two ballets and two symphonies, as well as several sonatas for guitar and violin. Most of his compositions are conventional and show little originality. <<http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%BE,%D0%9A%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BB%D0%BE>>

Neschast'ye ot karety (The Misfortunes of Having a Carriage), all of which make use of folk music.

The Miller Magician, the first Russian opera to achieve prolonged success, was performed for the first time in 1779. The text of the opera was written by Aleksandr Ablesimov³¹, a gifted playwright. He determined the musical form of *The Miller* by stipulating the employment of a number of well-known folk tunes of different genres, which were sung to his words. This guaranteed a huge success among his contemporaries. In terms of genre it is vaudeville. The opera consists of three short acts and the spoken dialogs are written in verse. The music was arranged in the first instance by Mikhail Sokolovsky, a violinist of the Moscow Russian Theatre, but has remained only in the popular version of Yevstigney Fomin. The precise part played by Fomin in writing or rewriting *The Miller Magician* is clear. His principal contribution lies in improvements of the orchestration. The success of the opera was enhanced by Fomin's overture in 1797, in which he revised the text and the music of the opera.

The greater part of *The Miller Magician* is based on authentic folk song material. The remaining items were written either in imitation of town folk song or in a musical style, which was typical of the 18th century in Russia. A folk tune rarely appears in developed form; usually it is borrowed from a folk song collection (very often without change of key) and is used in the first part of the song. It is then followed by a second section, sometimes in a quicker tempo, which is related to the first half by the use of identical musical figures. *The Miller* includes a *devichnik*³² scene. The melodies of *devichnik*, typical peasant wedding song at that time.

The first version of *Sanktpeterburgskiy gostinnyy dvor* (The St. Petersburg Bazaar) premièred in Moscow in 1779. Twelve years later in 1792 the opera reappeared in a second version under the title *Kak pozhyvyosh, tak i poslyvyosh* (As You Live, So Are You Judged). The music and libretto were probably written by the serf composer Mikhail Matinsky.³³

³¹ Aleksandr Ablesimov (1742-1783), contributor of many Russian journals and author of *Skazki v stikhakh* (Tales in Verse), editor of the satirical magazine *Raskashchik zabavnykh basen*.

³² *devichnik* – a party given by the bride-to-be to her girlfriends on the night preceding the wedding. This was an important event in the wedding ritual.

³³ Mikhail Matinsky, a serf of Count Yaguzhinky, was born in 1750 in the village of Pokrovsk, in the province of Moscow. He received general education in a secondary school for the *raznochintsy* (people not belonging to the gentry) at Moscow University and also in Italy. Matinsky was a teacher of geometry, history and geography at the Smolny Monastery. Like Borodin he was widely talented and in course of his life he was a dramatist, scientist and

The St. Petersburg Bazaar is brilliant from both literary and musical points of view. It shows a colorful picture of bourgeois life, in which not only the everyday language of merchants and street-sellers is used but also their musical cries. The weakest aspect of the opera is the plot, which is too weak to support a musical entertainment in three acts.

Of the two versions, only the music of the second has remained. Matinsky wrote the music to his own libretto, but there is no reference to his work as a composer, so he was possibly not the composer in the generally accepted sense of the word, but only the arranger of folk songs. The use of folk songs in the 1779 version is corroborated by their presence in the later version. Still not everything in the opera is based on folk material; the texts of the ensembles are too complicated to be folk songs. There are evidences that the music to the ensembles was composed not by Matinsky but by Vasily Pashkevich, who was a court musician and wrote music for different occasions. In *The St. Petersburg Bazaar* there are seven wedding choruses, all of which are based on folk melodies. In addition to the wedding songs, folk music is used in many parts of the opera – in choruses, solo parts as well as in the overture. The choruses, all of which appear to be based on original folk melodies, are remarkable in that not one of the tunes appears in any contemporary collection of folk songs.

The third opera to appear in the same year was *The Misfortunes of Having a Carriage*. The libretto was written by Knyazhin, and the music was composed by Pashkevich. Folk music plays a very little part in this opera; its only appearance is in the overture.

Employing Folk Songs in the Opera

In course of only twenty years, from its beginning until the turn of the century, Russian opera underwent a great change: it became into a fully-fledged *genre*. There is uncertainty concerning the choice of folk songs in the first operas by foreign composers living in Russia. However, in the works of the most gifted composers of this period – Pashkevich, Matinsky, Fomin – not only the collection of folk songs is more skillful and includes melodies written down by the composers themselves from real folk performers, the arrangements are made with care and understanding. In the

amateur composer. He was the first Russian musician who wrote his own libretto. He was an excellent linguist. He died in the 1820s.

works of these composers, attempts are made to suggest folk *podgolosnaya* polyphony. In the first Russian operas folk songs rarely underwent development in the course of the work. In later works folk themes are often introduced with varied orchestration or against “changing harmonic backgrounds”. Use of folk songs in ensembles is extremely rare. Sometimes folk coloring is detectable only in the overture of an opera; the rest of the work makes no use of folk material. However, this was more characteristic of operas written by foreign composers living in Russia, than in works of Russian-born composers.

Fomin as the Most Prominent Russian Operatic Composer of the 18th Century

Yevstigney Fomin is recognized as a key figure in early Russian musical theater. His compositions sum up the leading tendencies in music of the 18th century. Fomin’s understanding of folk music was unequalled until the time of Glinka.³⁴ He created the prototype of the “folk-chorus” opera which established the tradition of Russian opera.

Two operas by Yevstigney Fomin make use of folk music: a small ballet-opera, *Novgorodskiy bogatyr’ Boyeslavovich* (Novgorod Hero Boyeslavovich, 1786) and *Yamshchiki na podstave* (The Coachmen at the Relay Station, 1787).

The text of his small ballet-opera *Novgorodskiy bogatyr’ Boyeslavovich* (1786) was written by Catherine II. The libretto was based on authentic *bylina* material and describes the adventures of knight Vasily Boyeslavovich. The opera had the sub-title “An Opera Compiled from Fairy Tales, Russian Songs and Other Sources”. There are ballets in Acts I, II, IV and V, some based on folk melodies.

Yamshchiki na podstave (The Coachmen at the Relay Station, 1787), libretto by Nicolai Lvov. The plot of the opera is weak, but its merit lays in a lively portrayal of the coachmen, their customs, dialects and in most their songs.

In the handling of folk music Fomin takes the highest place among the Russian composers of the 18th century. His smooth-flowing melodic lines are incomparable

³⁴ Fomin composed about thirty operas including *Yamshchiki na podstave* (The Coachmen at the Relay Station, 1787), *Vecherinki* (Soirées, 1788), *Orfey i Evridika* (1792), *Amerikantsy* (The Americans; a comic opera, 1800), and *Zolotoye yabloko* (The Golden Apple; performed after the composer’s death in 1803). The most successful for decades was his opera-melodrama *Orfey i Evridika* to a text by Yakov Knyazhnin. His contribution to Russian operatic music is similar to Gluck’s to Italian operatic music.

and his arrangements are far more imaginative and far-sighted. One of the strongest features of Fomin's style is to handle freely and spontaneously a folk idiom.

Russian folk song is the foundation upon which Russian professional music is based. This was the only way to save national values from Westernization – using folk sources as a foundation. At the turn of the 18th century, Russian art suffered from lack of national identity. The author's opinion is that modern music of today has the same problem and the only solution is to go back to the nation's roots.

Russian opera is an important part of the world's theatre music treasures, and the music of the 18th century was the foundation of the mighty achievements of the second half of the 19th century, embodied in the works of Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov.

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