

The Russian Submediant in the Nineteenth Century*

By Mark DeVoto

Can one speak of specifically Russian harmony, as distinct from German, Italian or French harmony? . . . Russian art-music grew up under peculiar conditions, partially isolated from contemporary Western music, mainly in the hands of composers who were (for good or ill) amateurs, closely linked with a folk-music marked by various tonal peculiarities. . . . Apart altogether from the fact that Russian musicians have always shown a peculiar intellectual interest in what we may call the curiosities of harmony and that two or three of them have been revolutionary innovators, it is hardly surprising that the harmonic style of the Russian school in general, and of the "mighty handful" in particular, bears an unmistakable stamp of what we may as well call "nationality."

Thus begins the final chapter, "The Evolution of Russian Harmony," of Gerald Abraham's *On Russian Music* (1939).¹ The quotation is a muted recognition that the music of Glinka and his successors possesses "national" harmonic individualities; few writers, however, have attempted to identify these individualities since Abraham thus made a tentative beginning. The present essay is another such attempt, limited to a single tonal function but exploring its many ramifications. This is the relationship of submediant to tonic, or in the larger sense of relative major and minor. Russian harmony significantly increases the importance of the submediant function in a major-mode context, by emphasizing the sixth degree as an adjunct harmonic factor to the tonic triad, and by promoting the submediant as an alternative tonal focus to the tonic function, even by merging the relative major and minor into a single superkey with two tonics. So important is this evolved submediant function that it becomes the basis of a prominent stylistic mannerism, even a distinguishing characteristic, in the works of Tchaikovsky and the Five (particularly Balakirev and Borodin). We can see this mannerism, which I call the Russian sixth, first emerging as an individual phenomenon in Glinka and Dargomizhsky,

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¹ Gerald Abraham, *On Russian Music* (New York and London: Scribners, 1939), 255-56.

later achieving full flower in Tchaikovsky and the Five, and eventually moving into Western Europe by the 1890s, at the same time that it disappears from Russia.

Example 1: Prototypical progression



1. Tonal and Modal Harmony

In the Western diatonic system the relationship of relative major and minor is as basic and intrinsic as the same key signature that is used for both; at the same time, it goes much further than mere notation or theoretical construct. (Even the notation of key signatures requires that the leading tone of the relative minor has to be indicated by an additional inflectional sign, and often this is necessary for the sixth degree as well.) The association of relative major and minor as a resource of tonality and form has been validated by more than three centuries of tonal music ever since the late sixteenth century. Its intrinsic importance was recognized early by several theorists, but we need only cite here Rameau: “[O]ne may conclude that a great relationship exists between these two systems [G major and E descending minor]. Likewise, it is only from this relationship that the liberty which we have to pass back and forth from the major mode to the minor mode is born.”²

For a concise and elementary illustration we may look to J. S. Bach’s chorale harmonizations (example 2), crowning examples of the German Baroque chorale, which reveal numerous instances where tonal functions are guided by various modal characteristics of the older *cantus firmi*, and where tonal functions, even those reinforced by secondary dominants, may be unexpected; in many instances, when the primary tonality is minor, the strongest secondary tonal function is the relative major.

Two analyses are shown, one modulating, the other identifying secondary functions. The relative minor and major tonic functions (or, alternatively, the tonic and mediant) are strengthened by their preceding dominants. Notwithstanding that relative minor and major appear within the same phrase, this is unmistakably tonal harmony, of a kind that is completely characteristic of Western styles throughout the period of common practice.

² Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Nouveau système de musique théorique et pratique*, 1726; the citation here is from B. Glenn Chandler, *Rameau’s “Nouveau système de musique théorique”: An Annotated Translation With Commentary* (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1975). I am grateful to David Cohen for pointing out this particularly appropriate source to me.

Example 2: Bach: Chorale no. 62, "Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten," (1724) last two phrases

B minor: V i V\ III IV(ii)⁶\ V\ III V⁰ i IV(ii)⁶ i₄⁶ V I (Pic.)

B minor: V { i III V⁰ i IV(ii)⁶ i₄⁶ V I (Pic.)

D major: { vi V I IV(ii)⁶ V { I

By the time of the flowering of the classical sonata form in the minor mode, the same relationship expands to include the assurance of the relative major for the second key area of the exposition, in nearly all cases. Two things are primarily significant about this result. First, the reverse association does not occur; in chorales in the major mode, the relative minor is not tonicized disproportionately to other secondary functions, not more often, say, than V or II; nor does a sonata form in C major proceed to A minor for its second theme. Second, secondary tonicizations require secondary dominants.

From time to time one encounters an example of music in which there is an actual balanced oscillation between relative major and minor by means of intervening applied dominants, and in which one perceives an effortless interchange between the two keys, Rameau's "[passing] back and forth from the major mode to the minor mode." This is what Jan LaRue meant when he wrote, using a visual analogy in a well-known essay about what he called *bifocal tonality* in Baroque music: "In each case the secondary tonality, though partly out of focus, is still very much in view, and only the slightest inflection is required to change the focus."³ The two phrases of the Bach chorale cited above show this in miniature. A more extended but tonally no more complex example would be the final section (following the A major section) of the second movement of Schubert's

³ Jan LaRue, "Bifocal Tonality: An Explanation for Ambiguous Baroque Cadences," in *Essays on Music in Honor of Archibald Thompson Davison, by his Associates*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 182.

“Great” C major Symphony; A minor is the stronger tonality, for structural reasons, but the C major is only slightly less important.⁴

Modal harmony is a term that is often used but seldom precisely defined. The early Baroque chorales are often said to exhibit both modal and tonal harmony, and a modal origin is often offered as an explanation of diatonic deviations from tonal harmony within common practice; for instance, the beginning of the finale of Beethoven’s Opus 59 no. 2 String Quartet and the beginning of the slow movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony are sometimes cited as related instances of Phrygian inflection of a tonal E minor. Diatonic scale patterns resembling the classical descriptions of the church modes, and harmony to fit them, begin to appear with increasing prominence in Western music after about 1850, at the same time that the harmony of Wagner and Liszt and their followers becomes increasingly enriched by chromaticism. Without dismissing their accomplishments in chromatic harmony, we will focus here on the modal harmony of the nineteenth-century Russians, and attempt to arrive at a definition of modal harmony that is practical enough to describe their music but that can also be extended to the modal harmony of their successors in Western Europe.

We begin here in a relatively restricted way by defining *modal progression* as any progression involving a modal-degree function (III, VI, and sometimes II) without an applied dominant. Modal harmony, then, is harmony in which modal progressions are particularly prominent, and in which dominant or secondary-dominant functions are de-emphasized. This definition may seem too simple, to be sure, but it does cover a lot of late nineteenth-century harmonic phenomena.

In Russian modal harmony, the association of relative major and minor is more important than any other modal relationship. Uniting the two domains is the sixth degree of the major scale itself. It functions as the root of VI, the third of IV, and the fifth of II. All of its other unital functions are dissonant: the upper neighbor of the fifth of the tonic triad, for instance, or the ninth in dominant harmony. We shall see that all of these functions are exploited in Russian harmony in such a way as to give unusual prominence to the sixth degree as a kind of “strange attractor,” as a momentary tonal focus within the larger major-mode context.

⁴ A less familiar but equally convincing example is the final “Alleluia” chorus of Bach’s Cantata no. 142, “Uns ist ein Kind geboren,” a work which may be not by Bach but by Johann Kuhnau. In the 41 measures of this chorus, the principal A minor shifts to C major and back five times; the only harmonies used in the entire movement are A minor and C major and their dominants, and—just three times—D minor, as II of C and IV of A minor.

2. *The Natural Minor Mode, Folksong, and the Pentatonic Scale*

It is a truism that the melodic inspiration of Russian art music depends heavily on Russian folksong. (Even if it were not true, in this century it necessarily has been claimed as true for political reasons.⁵) We have the testimony of the greatest Russian composers, including the specific examples they pointed to in writing about their own works. The point here is not to determine the extent to which Russian composers' adoption of folk melody accurately reflects an authentic folk practice or tradition, but rather to consider how folk melodies were handled in their works.

There are many different published collections of Russian folk melodies available to the researcher, some of them going back to before the nineteenth century. Rimsky-Korsakov published a collection of one hundred Russian folksongs with texts (op. 24, 1875–76), providing his own harmonizations, as did Tchaikovsky, who arranged fifty, without texts (1868–69).⁶ One assumes that neither composer attempted to transcribe or recreate an authentic style of folk harmony reflective of Russian peasant sources, but that their motivation was instead a practical one: to make the melodies available in a form suitable for everyday use, as for instance for singing in the home or at school.

We have space here for only a brief examination of the relationship of Russian folksong melody to the harmonic individualities of Tchaikovsky and the Five. But even without amplification, some things should be mentioned. Both Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, in the harmonizations in their folksong collections, made abundant use of a more pronounced modal harmony than normally appears in their more familiar music, such as their symphonic works. This modal harmony often is grounded in the natural minor scale and avoids leading-tone inflections. Most important, the structure of any particular melody most often guides the modal harmony, particularly at cadential points. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that many Russian folk melodies map onto the diatonic major and natural minor scales with equal ease; in Rimsky-Korsakov's collections, at least one-fifth of the total lend themselves to this description. César Cui, in a famous essay first published in Paris in 1878,⁷ went so far as to say:

⁵ See, for instance, the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, 10 February 1948, and documents emanating from a meeting of Soviet composers in Moscow, 17–26 February 1948, as cited in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music Since 1900*, 3d ed. (New York: Coleman-Ross, 1949), 684–709.

⁶ Rimsky-Korsakov Complete Edition, vol. 47; Tchaikovsky Complete Edition, vol. 61.

⁷ César Cui, "La Musique en Russie," *Revue et Gazette musicale* 45, no. 19 (12 May 1878): 146.

The Russian folksong imperiously demands an original harmonization and a very special art of modulation. First, it is rare to come on a song the melody of which can be treated entirely in one of the two modes, major or minor; most often, even if it spans but a few measures, it passes from the minor to its relative major and vice versa. These changes, generally unexpected, are almost always of a striking and sympathetic effect.⁸

Some Russian folk melodies can be categorized even more simply as essentially pentatonic, and this property has important echoes in Russian art music. The pentatonic scale is really a kind of Occam's razor for the associated relative major and minor; only two triads can be formed from it, namely those related as relative major and minor. We normally think of the pentatonic scale in connection with ethnic melodies of the Far East and the British Isles; yet the melos of much Russian music is marked by it, even when the supporting harmony is fully diatonic or more (Chopin's "Black Key" Etude, though hardly a Russian piece, can be cited as an instance of a diatonic left-hand harmonization for an entirely black-key, or pentatonic, right-hand part). For a familiar example, we need look no farther than the most famous melody of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony, which is entirely pentatonic in its first two phrases (example 3); its characteristic sound, and perhaps no small part of its languorous sadness, comes not from the chromatic richness of its accompaniment, which in Western common-practice terms is entirely conventional, but from the exposure and attraction of the appoggiatura major sixth degree.

Example 3: Tchaikovsky: Symphony no. 6 ("Pathétique"), I (1893)

Andante. (♩ = 69)
teneramente, molto cantabile con espansione

⁸ Translation cited from Sam Morgenstern, *Composers on Music: An Anthology of Writings from Palestrina to Copland* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), 220–23.

An even more striking example is this one from Borodin's Third Symphony (example 4):

Example 4: Borodin: Symphony no. 3, II (Trio) (1882–87)

Moderato

mf dolce

p

The full melody of 25 bars has only two notes from outside the B \flat pentatonic scale, and it is remarkable how this scale has successfully and unobtrusively blended with the completely diatonic harmonization that supports it. The sixth degree here is hardly more than an upper neighbor to the fifth in tonic harmony, but it is a naturally contiguous scale degree in a pentatonic melody which is itself left for several measures without any added harmonization.⁹

3. Pairing the Relative Major and Minor

We will begin here with a specific illustration of the occurrence of relative major and minor within individual Russian folk melodies. Like the later collections by Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, the famous collection of Russian folk songs compiled by Lvov and Prach (1790),¹⁰ from which Beethoven drew the *Thème russe* in the finale of his op. 59 no. 1 quartet, is a practical edition. Example 5 illustrates the way the song appears there.

In tonal terms, this harmonization is comparable to the typical minor-mode Baroque chorale, in that relative major and minor are represented,

⁹ Borodin's Third Symphony, unfinished at his death in 1887 but essentially complete in two movements, was reconstructed and orchestrated by Alexander Glazunov.

¹⁰ Nikolai Lvov and Ivan Prach, *Sobranie russkikh narodnykh pesen s ikh golosami* (A Collection of Russian Folk Songs), *Classics of Russian Musical Folklore*, ed. by Malcolm Hamrick Brown, introduction and appendix by Margarita Mazo (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 177–78.

Example 5: Melody from Lvov & Prach

and even balanced, *pari passu* with the structure of the melody, and the harmony drawn from the two modes is conventional, with the B \flat major and G minor well supported by their own dominants. The shape of the melody suggests a single phrase of eight measures (or perhaps a nonsymmetrical breakdown into 4 1/2 and 3 1/2 measures, the longer first portion stressing B \flat major while the shorter second portion stresses G minor). Only the initial G appears to contradict the B \flat major tendency, and at that not very strongly. (Beethoven's own F major treatment of the melody, even in varied harmonizations, is comparable in this regard; he disposes of the initial pitch as a sixth-degree appoggiatura to dominant harmony.)

Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, composed 1837–42, a landmark in the history of Russian opera, is also an exotic, “orientalist” opera that served as a model for Borodin's *Prince Igor* and dozens of others of the genre. At the very least this exoticism is suggested by the geographical attributes all over the score: in addition to the Great Prince of Kiev, we have a Prince of Khazaria, a Persian chorus (whose melody is said to be an actual Persian folk melody), and dances from Turkey, Arabia, and Lezghin (subtitled “Caucasian Dance”). More important, *Ruslan* is a seminal work of Russian nationalism, in which Glinka's style demonstrates an original harmonic inventiveness that goes far beyond his merely skillful imitations of Rossini and other Italian models.

The Chorus of Persian Women at the beginning of Act III is an excellent illustration of how the sixth degree began to be tonally liberated in Russian music. The song is too long for more than partial quotation here (example 6), but it could profitably be examined in its entirety for a good appreciation of its developing significance of the C \sharp minor focus within an overall E major context.

Example 6: Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, act III, beginning (1837–42). Chorus of Persian Women, mm. 1–24

Andantino. $\text{♩} = 58$

pp M

5

10 N

15 M' N'

20

Mm. 1–8 introduce a principal melody, which we may call M repeated, in E major. The consequent phrase, mm. 9–12, labeled N, moves to C# minor, and an etiolated C# minor at that, because there is no supporting harmony. M', a slight variant of M, then returns in E major for one phrase, followed by N, this time without the voices but with a full harmonic support in the orchestra, so we may call it N'. We now have twenty measures of alternating E major and C# minor in which the C# minor moves gradually to the foreground. Significantly, the cadential C# minor triad in m. 20 is in first inversion, to connect better with the E bass in the

E major harmony that immediately follows: a modal progression. There is but slight semblance of a modulatory process between C# minor and E major here; the one moves to the other as smoothly as possible, with a pivot chord (II⁶ of E major = IV⁶ of C# minor) in m. 16, and a modal shift between m. 20 and m. 21.

Measures 21–24 are identical with mm. 13–16. Thus we have what appears to be a complete 24-bar stanza whose formal outline, in six four-bar phrases, is MMNM 'N'M'.

The second stanza is of identical length and form, from m. 25 through m. 48, with identical vocal melody. What is different in this stanza is the harmony, texture, and orchestration, a good illustration of “changing background.” This time, the C# minor triad appears in m. 26 in first inversion, that is, over a tonic pedal; it forms a smoother connection with the II harmony that follows than would the tonic triad. It is worthwhile to make a close comparison of the harmony in the two nearly identical phrases that begin the second stanza:

25	26	27	28
I I	I VI	II V ⁷	I I (tonic pedal throughout)

29	30	31	32
I I	I VI	II V ⁰⁹	I I (tonic pedal throughout)

The brushstroke in m. 31, compared with m. 27, is the C \flat minor ninth of dominant harmony in E major, enharmonic with B# that would be the leading-tone to C#. For an instant one hears an uncertainty of resolution: the C \flat represents a mixed-mode inflection in E major, but the B# is a conventional third in a secondary dominant (VVI) (example 7).

The important differences of the fourth stanza (mm. 73–96) are at once apparent. The M melody which was harmonized in E major before is now harmonized with a C# minor neighbor-note ostinato figure; the B \flat in the melody is treated as the seventh degree of the descending melodic minor, with the resulting B#–B \flat cross-relation. It would have been too much to do this with the more strongly E major M' at mm. 85 and 93, and so M' is replaced in the succession by M. What is especially noticeable, however, is the harmonic flexibility that permits the easy interchange of E major and C# minor as harmonic context for identically repeated melodic figures.

The fifth and final stanza, mm. 97–126, begins to alter the melody and the phrase pattern, and the concomitant variants of the harmonic pattern introduce the minor sixth degree (C \flat) in II⁶⁴² harmony, in other words, as part of a plagal formula (mm. 111, 125), which is sometimes varied with

Example 7: Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Chorus of Persian Women, mm. 25–32

25 Voices

29

E: $V_6^0 / \underset{I}{5}$ (app.) $V_3^0 \backslash \underset{I}{vi}$ (app.)

V^{07642} (m. 123, minor ninth plus tonic pedal), and reinforced by the $\text{II}(\text{minor})^{642}$ at the very end, a touch that might have been inspired by the end of the Nocturne from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, in the same key.

The March in Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, half a century after *Ruslan*, reveals an object example for bifocal relative major and minor (example 8). The opening two bars are a modal *Grundgestalt* of the whole piece, in that G major (without its dominant) and E minor (without its leading tone) frame the phrase. All the periods that follow, up to the E minor Trio, are in G major, either with half cadence on V_{vi} or full cadence on I, or E minor, cadencing in E minor or G major. A glance at the chart below (which for convenience is analyzed with root functions in a single key) shows how completely G major is interpenetrated with E minor.

Example 8: Tchaikovsky: *The Nutcracker*, March (1892). Single-staff score

Tempo di marcia viva

The score consists of two systems of four staves each. The upper staff of each system contains chords with fingerings and dynamics, while the lower staff contains a rhythmic accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4.

System 1 (Measures 1-8):
 Chords: p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi, p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi, p I. Dynamics: p , mf , p , mf , p .
 Accompaniment: ii, V, I, IV, ii/vi, V/vi, vi, mf ii, V, f .

System 2 (Measures 9-16):
 Chords: p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi, p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi. Dynamics: p , mf , p , mf .
 Accompaniment: ii, V, iii, V/vi, vi, IV, ii, V, iii, vi, iv/III, V/vi, f .

System 3 (Measures 17-24):
 Chords: f V, i, VI(iv) 6_3 , V, f V, i, VI(iv) 6_3 , V, mf i, iv=Gl*ii*, V, f . Dynamics: f , mf , f .
 Accompaniment: f V, i, VI(iv) 6_3 , V, mf i, iv=Gl*ii*, V, f .

System 4 (Measures 25-32):
 Chords: p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi, p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi, p I. Dynamics: p , mf , p , mf , p .
 Accompaniment: ii, V, I, IV, ii/vi, V/vi, vi, mf ii, V, f .

System 5 (Measures 33-40):
 Chords: p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi, p I, vi, iii, I, mf vi, p I. Dynamics: p , mf , p , mf , p .
 Accompaniment: ii, V, iii, II/vi, vi, I 6 , V, I, f .

Mm. 1–4	G: I vi iii I vi (twice)
Mm. 5–8	ii V I IV ii ^{vi} Vvi vi ii V
Mm. 9–12	like 1–4
Mm. 13–16	ii V iii (VV) vi IV ii V iii vi IVvi Vvi
Mm. 17–20	Vvi vi ii (IV) ⁶⁵ ii ⁷ ii ⁷ vi Vvi vi IVvi IVvi Vvi
Mm. 21–24	Vvi vi ii (IV) ⁶⁵ ii ⁷ ii ⁷ vi Vvi vi IVvi (= ii) V
Mm. 25–28	like 1–4
Mm. 29–32	like 5–8
Mm. 33–36	like 1–4
Mm. 37–40	ii V iii (Vvi) vi IV ii V I ⁶ V I (cf. 13–16)

4. The Major Triad with Added Major Sixth

The beginning of Tchaikovsky's "None but the lonely heart" (example 9) may serve as a prototype for this use of the sixth degree. At the beginning the sixth degree is a simple ninth above the dominant, dissolving to the leading tone below. On a different level of perception, the sixth degree is a marker; it acquires a quasi-centric dimension, attracting the ear to a focus distinct from the tonic, and, added to the tonic triad as a harmony note, it is not considered an appoggiatura and thus needs no resolution. The expectation of resolution is contravened by the absorption of the B \flat into the tonic harmony.

Put another way, this sixth degree *sounds as though it belongs in the tonic harmony*. Compare especially mm. 2 and 10; the B \flat is present in the former but not the latter. Consider mm. 1–2 without the B \flat , and they remain nothing more than a V in the 642 position resolving regularly to I in first inversion. If there is any doubt about the independent attractive power of the B \flat at this point, we need only compare these measures to mm. 9–10. The bass progression is the same as in mm. 1–2, but now the tonic six-five of m. 2 is replaced by a submediant six-four, an unstable but pure triad all the same; tonic and submediant functions are combined, actually blended into one.

Another striking example of this stressed sixth degree is found at mm. 156–195 of the Finale of Tchaikovsky's ever-popular Violin Concerto (1878). The less well-known first movement of Tchaikovsky's Third Piano Concerto (1893), op. 75, reveals a similarly extended passage.¹¹

¹¹ See measures 91–115 of this movement (Tchaikovsky Complete Edition, Kalmus reprint, volume 52). The idea has echoes even lasting into our own time, if one remembers the signature tune to the Barbara Eden/Larry Hagman sitcom "I Dream of Jeannie."

Example 9: Tchaikovsky: *Nyet, tol'ko-tol, kto znal . . .*, "None but the lonely heart," Op. 6, no. 6 (1869)

Andante non tanto
espr.

p

6 *Voice p espr.*

p

These examples all stress the sixth degree originating as the ninth of V, *within the melodic line*. In tonic harmony the sixth degree becomes absorbed into the harmony itself when it is in the position of upper neighbor to the fifth of the root-position tonic triad.

The major tonic triad with added major sixth begins to appear with some frequency in various Western styles at about the time it becomes a distinctive Russian emblem. For no readily apparent reason, it seems to turn up more frequently in ballet music than elsewhere. In waltzes it has been identified as the "Viennese sixth";¹² the following example could be supplemented by dozens of others, from the *Waltz King* to *Waldteufel* to Chabrier to Fauré.

Example 10: Johann Strauss, Jr.: *Die Fledermaus*, Act II, finale (1874)

Walzertempo

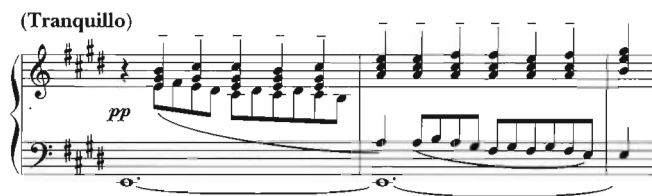
f

G: (I) ii⁶ (6/5) (9/6/4)

¹² Fritz Reuter, *Praktische Harmonik des 20. Jahrhunderts: Konsonanz- und Dissonanzlehre nach dem System von Sigfrid Karg-Elert* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1952), 67.

More typically Russian, however, is this example from Rimsky-Korsakov:

Example 11: Rimsky-Korsakov, *Scheherazade*, I (1888)



This is somewhat like Offenbach's famous Barcarolle or any of several other familiar pieces in which the neighbor-note sixth degree is prominently emphasized. Here, however, the tonic harmony with added sixth is associated with auxiliary *subdominant* harmony. The submediant is an anticipating substitute for IV; there is no dominant component to the phrase at all.

The A minor first movement of Borodin's Third Symphony has extensive passages where the leading tone is effectively suppressed, allowing natural-minor harmony to be projected. In such instances the perception of C major or A natural-minor centrality often veers away from classical expectations. The melody that appears unmistakably in A minor at the beginning of the movement is reharmonized just as unmistakably in C major only a minute or so later, with the A functioning as a *harmonic* added major sixth above the tonic six-four. In this harmony, tonic and submediant are completely merged (example 12).

Example 12: Borodin: Symphony no. 3, I (1882)

(Moderato assai) Poco più mosso.

Another and even subtler example, too long to quote here, is the beginning of the second scene of Act III of Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1871–74); E \flat major and C minor are well blended, hovering about each other, again without dominants.

With examples like these in mind, we are now ready to consider the Russian sixth, which is the most characteristic manifestation of associated submediant and tonic functions in the nineteenth century and, at the same time, the most widely distributed among different Russian composers.

5. *The Russian Sixth*

The one really characteristic and recurrent chromaticism in Glinka's harmony is the sharpened fifth (or flattened sixth) of the scale. . . . Glinka is very fond of using it to produce brief cadential modulations to the relative minor, often so brief that one feels them to be less truly modulations than chromatic extensions of the major; but even its transient appearance as a passing-note is sufficient to cast a minor shadow over the music (see [example 13], for instance).¹³

Example 13: Glinka: *Ivan Susanin*, act III, Bridal Chorus



The example cited by Abraham, from the Bridal Chorus in Glinka's *Ivan Susanin*, would not seem out of place in any Western work contemporary with it. (One could easily go back even further to find familiar examples, for instance to the third vocal phrase of Schubert's "Ave Maria" of 1825.) Here the "characteristic and recurrent chromaticism" is nothing more than a straightforward preparation for a cadence on the dominant octave of the relative minor. It is only in hindsight that we see it as a harbinger of later emblems in Russian music.

The Russian sixth that we will consider extensively here is an aspect of harmony, one that is so prominent as to become a nationalist mannerism, marking a particular era in Russian music with characteristic force and precision. It is remarkable that Gerald Abraham, veteran scholar of Russian music, failed to hit the mark when he came as close to describing the Russian sixth as he did in the paragraph cited above. It is no less remark-

¹³ Gerald Abraham, *On Russian Music* (New York and London: Scribners, 1939), 259–60.

Example 16: Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*, III (1888)

maintained instead, resulting in a first-inversion submediant as a tonic prolongation; 3) the chromatic approach to the submediant degree in an inner part by raising the fifth degree. (This raised fifth degree is not always present, but it is one of the surest indicators when it is found. Historically, the tonic with raised fifth is anticipated by an earlier function, that of connecting I and IV⁶⁴.)

I have not found a convincing example of the Russian sixth earlier than example 17, from Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, which is more characteristic than the example from *Ivan Susanin* cited by Abraham. This passage from the *Lesghinka* in act IV is not particularly striking in itself.¹⁶ But it is unquestionably part of an orientalist context, in a work in which relative major and minor come into a variety of close associations, and in whose exotic climate the listener perceives a number of emerging stylistic markers that would be developed much more fully by others, as we shall see.

The first inheritor of Glinka's stylistic legacy was Dargomyzhsky, whose relatively slender formal technique is well compensated by a considerable harmonic imagination. The following example, the beginning of his song

¹⁶ The *lesghinka*, or *lezghinka*, is a dance of the Lesghian people of Dagestan in the Russian North Caucasus, not far from present-day Chechnya. About Balakirev's *Islamei* a recent editor, Christof Rüger, writes: "*Islamei* is a folk-dance, a variety of the *Lesghinka*, practiced by the peoples of the present-day Carbadian-Balkarian ASSR, and in contrast to the *Lesghinka* which must be written down in 6/8 time, is specifically built up on a 12/16 rhythm." (Preface to Balakirev's *Islamei*, Edition Peters Nr. 9167, [Leipzig: Edition Peters, 1970].) No. 10 of the *Transcendental Etudes* (1897–1905) of Balakirev's pupil, Sergey Lyapunov, is modeled on *Islamei* and is specifically entitled *Lesghinka in the style of Balakirev*.

Example 17: Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, act IV, Lesginka

Vostochniy romanç (Eastern romance), composed in 1852 on a text by Pushkin, shows the Russian sixth as something more than an incidental by-product of voice-leading (example 18). The ambiguity of the A# leading tone rising to B with the B♭ minor sixth degree falling to A provides a closure that surrounds the B, and this expanded use of the Russian sixth was widely modeled by later composers, as we shall see (compare the second prototype above).

Dargomyzhsky died in 1869; in that year, his admirer Balakirev wrote what would become one of the most famous piano pieces by any of the Five, the furiously difficult *Islamey*, which he subtitled “oriental fantasy.” Balakirev begins the piece with his own Lesginka melody that advantageously balances B♭ minor and D♭ major (example 19).

In example 20, very near the beginning, the B♭ is harmonized at the beginning of the phrase as part of an auxiliary subdominant, and at the end of the phrase as a Russian sixth, which emerges as a stable entity in the harmony despite the chromatic counterpoint.¹⁷

¹⁷ In the contrasting middle section of *Islamey*, an entirely new theme appears, prominently featuring the Russian sixth. In 1871, two years after *Islamey*, the Russian sixth appears prominently in the Lesginka of the opera *The Demon*, by Anton Rubinstein (1829–94), the great German-trained Russian pianist and prolific composer who founded the Moscow Conservatory, and who held that there never could be an authentic Russian nationalism in music. The Rubinstein example is quoted in Taruskin, “Entoiling the Falconet” (example 8).

Example 18: Dargomyzhsky: *Vostochniy romanç* (1852)

Adagio

p

Ty rozh-de -

p legato assai

na vos-pla-me-nyat' vo-ob-ra-zhe-ni-ye pa-é-tov, ye-vo-tre-

Example 19: Balakirev: *Islamey*, monophonic melody (1869)

Allegro agitato

f

Example 20: Balakirev: *Islamey*

12

f

The Russian sixth plays a considerable part in Balakirev's First Symphony (1864–66, reworked 1893–97), which, notwithstanding some formal defects which were not remedied during the work's long and difficult gestation, remains one of his best works, indeed, one of the best and most original of all Russian symphonies (example 21). The long, expressive theme of slow movement announces the Russian sixth at the outset:

Example 21: Balakirev: Symphony no. 1, III (1864–66)

The musical score for Example 21 is presented in three systems. The first system is marked 'Andante' and begins with a treble clef staff containing a melodic line and a bass clef staff with chords. The second system features a triplet of eighth notes in the treble staff. The third system continues the melodic and harmonic development. The word 'Sim.' is written in the first system.

This statement shows full closure comparable to the Dargomyzhsky example given above. Later, the Russian sixth appears with its V^{09}/IV extension, like the last chord in the *Islamey* example, in the rich circular modulation, seen in example 22.

Borodin's unfinished *Prince Igor*, an orientalist opera that was as inspired by Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* just as certainly as it inspired an immortal Broadway musical called *Kismet* three-quarters of a century later,¹⁸ provides some particularly resplendent examples of the Russian sixth. We will examine here the *Presto* tarantella in F major, which is sometimes

¹⁸ By Robert Wright and George Forrest (1953).

Example 22: Balakirev: Symphony no. 1, III

Andante

included in performances of the famous Polovetsian Dances. The opening phrase cadences on the Russian sixth (example 23):

Example 23: Borodin: *Prince Igor*, act II, Dance of the Polovetsian Maidens (1869–87)

The answering period unambiguously cadences on the F major tonic. Near the end of the dance, the Russian sixth appears more intensely, with first-inversion submediant chromatically by a doubly augmented fourth chord; the enharmonically notated $D\flat$ (for $C\sharp$) resolves regularly for the Russian sixth, and irregularly for the augmented sixth chord (example 24).

A more complex and subtle example of the Russian sixth is the familiar “Stranger in Paradise” passage in the Polovetsian Dances (example 25), which warrants a detailed examination, especially of the unusual shape of the melody itself, with its ambitus between high and low $F\sharp$ and its centering on B. The first statement of the melody cadences on a VI^6 in A major;

Example 24: Borodin: *Prince Igor*, act II, Dance of the Polovetsian Maidens

the Russian sixth here, as in so many other instances, is a concomitant of the tonic pedal that initiated the phrase. The second statement moves the pedal bass down to $F\sharp$, with no change at all in the melody itself, giving a much stronger feeling of $F\sharp$ *natural minor* to the phrase, although the accented $E\sharp$ in the English horn remains in the cadence. Eight bars later, with a fuller orchestration, the melody returns for a third time, this time over an E pedal, the harmonization otherwise being almost identical with the first; the exception is the cadence, which is now upon a full tonic triad, but in the six-four position from the E pedal, and the chord leading into it is a dominant minor ninth, with $F\flat$ instead of $E\sharp$. The fourth and final statement of the complete melody gives a true harmonic bass, with secondary dominants applied to V and to II , but the cadence is just as it was in the third statement, on a tonic six-four with superposed sixth degree. Only after a two-measure extension of the phrase do we get a classical cadence in root position, indeed a perfect cadence, with the melody altered so as to end on the tonic note.

The whole passage, another fine illustration of “changing background,” is telling testimony not only to Borodin’s melodic and harmonic originality but also to his sense of form.

The most exaggerated Russian sixth I will offer here amounts to nearly an entire section of a movement, namely the trio of the second movement of Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony, 55 bars (including repeats) of virtually uninterrupted D pedal ostensibly in B minor (example 26).

Ostensibly, because the D major is closely in the background, and the $A\sharp$ – $B\flat$ ambiguity is especially stressed. In the first sixteen measures (including repeat) of the trio, for example, under the melodic appoggiatura on every third beat the ostensible dominant of B minor is a $V^{\circ 9}$, lacking the $F\sharp$ but with the G and $A\sharp$ emphasized. This is offset in the next sixteen

Example 25: Borodin: *Prince Igor*, act II, Chorus of Polovetsian Maidens

(voices mostly doubling)
Ob.

p *con espressione è dolce*

(8 bars omitted here)

mf

Example 26: Tchaikovsky: Symphony no. 6, II (1893)

55 *mf* *f* *mf* *espressivo*

59

63 *sf* *mf*

67 *pp* *cresc.*

71

measures by harmony pointing more strongly toward D, including, in m. 67, a $V^{\circ 9}$ in D, with $B\flat$ resolving down to A in m. 68. The phrase nevertheless cadences on B minor with D ever faithfully in the bass—the unmistakable Russian sixth. One is continually aware of the different ways Tchaikovsky could have resolved the harmonies more conventionally, in favor of a more definite B minor in one instance or a more definite D

major in the other, by means of a mere brushstroke of harmonic or melodic detail—and in every case one is grateful for the straight-and-narrow road not taken.

Tchaikovsky had considered this kind of extended harmony before, in an earlier and less developed passage in his *Sleeping Beauty* of 1888–89: the Dance of the Countesses in the second tableau is 26 measures long, over a continuous C pedal, ending on a first-inversion A minor triad.

Tchaikovsky's death in 1893 at the height of his career, a few days after conducting the premiere of the Sixth Symphony, marks an apogee of the Russian sixth as well, at least in Russia. By that time, the Russian sixth was well established in works of younger Russians, and one can begin to identify it as well in the works of composers outside its country of origin. There are some intriguing passages in early pieces of Claude Debussy, who had a nearly direct connection with Tchaikovsky from spending two summers in Russia in 1880 and 1881 as Mme. von Meck's household pianist. A clear example of a Russian sixth is found in the first measures of Debussy's early Piano Trio of 1880; another one turns up in his *Danse* for piano (1890; originally entitled *Tarentelle styrienne*). Debussy may well not have been aware of any Russian influence in this particular aspect of his compositional development, although he was well aware of it in other aspects; a number of his works, especially the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1894), show profoundly original and skillful application of the bifocal relative minor and major, and this can be correlated with his interest in Musorgsky and others of the Five. The following passage (example 27) is both harmonically and contrapuntally complex, with vii6/I in E major, an appoggiatura chord, substituting for the tonic itself in what sounds like a Russian sixth progression, moving with unexpected smoothness to VI⁶ over the E pedal.

An even later Russian sixth can be found in Debussy's *Fêtes*, the second of the *Nocturnes* for orchestra, whose first complete version dates from 1899. In that same year, Jean Sibelius conducted his own First Symphony, whose first movement begins its *Allegro energico* with a blazing Russian sixth (example 28).

So strong is this statement, indeed, that it becomes a motivic harmonic progression that reappears in different dispositions and textures in each of the remaining three movements. From the nationalist standpoint this is not necessarily so surprising. Sibelius came from a culture strongly marked by Russian influence, and indeed his native Finland would not achieve political independence from Russia for another nineteen years.

Russian composers of the next generation, such as Arensky, Lyapunov, Glazunov, Rachmaninov, Kalinnikov, and Glier, used the Russian sixth from time to time, but it is safe to say that its use had faded more or less completely by the first years of the twentieth century. I have not found

Example 27: Debussy: *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1894)

Example 28: Sibelius: *Symphony no. 1* (1899)

even a hint of a Russian sixth in the earliest works of Stravinsky, still under the influence of Rimsky-Korsakov, but, according to his own later (and hardly ingenuous) testimony, firmly opposed to Russian nationalism and orientalism.¹⁹ Nevertheless a passage like the following (example 29), a

¹⁹ "Nor could I take [Cui's] orientalism seriously. 'Russian music,' or 'Hungarian' or 'Spanish,' or any other of the national nineteenth-century kind is, all of it, as thin as local color, and as boring." Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (Garden City and New York: Doubleday, 1960), 59.

remote echo of the classic Russian sixth by the twenty-year-old Prokofiev, is a proud survivor, offering a fitting capstone to this discussion.

Example 29: Prokofiev: Piano Concerto no. 1 (1911)

Allegro brioso $\text{♩} = 88$

Piano solo

Orchestra

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system shows the initial entry of the Piano solo and the Orchestra. The Piano solo part starts with a forte (ff) dynamic and features a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The Orchestra part provides harmonic support with chords and a steady bass line. The second system continues the Piano solo part, which includes a section marked '8va' (octave). The third system shows the Piano solo part continuing with a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking, leading to a final chord. The score is written in a key signature of three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a 2/2 time signature.

One should compare this example, both psychologically and from the standpoint of voice-leading (even without the chromatically raised fifth degree), with the initial measures of another and much more famous $D\flat$ major piano concerto—the grandiose beginning of the one known as the Concerto no. 1 in $B\flat$ minor, by Tchaikovsky. That favorite concert piece, in the tonal structure of its first movement especially, crystallizes the relative major/relative minor formal association in much the same way as Balakirev's *Islamey*, and with the same keys and even a similar pianism, suggesting an influence from the earlier work.

To summarize our discussion, we may conclude that Glinka, and possibly no others, inspired by Russian folksong, sowed the seeds of the Russian submediant practically spontaneously. It was left for Dargomyzhsky to nurture its early growth, and for Tchaikovsky and the Five to reap the harvest, especially of the Russian sixth, of the submediant's fullest flowering. After the death of Tchaikovsky there was a second but shorter growing season of the Russian submediant, before it began to lose all of its nationalist individuality upon the dawning of a new age in Russian music in the twentieth century.²⁰ The Russian submediant remains, however, as one of the most recognizable characteristics of a famous national style through its most distinctive historical period. The Russian submediant became and remained a basis for an expanded diatonicism in which modal harmony successfully fought off, for half a century, the encroachments of Western chromaticism.

ABSTRACT

An outstanding characteristic of 19th century Russian nationalist music is its common language of modal harmony. Harmonic associations of submediant and tonic functions, frequently in relation to melodic use of pentatonic and natural minor scales, became particularly prominent in the works of Tchaikovsky and the "Five." An outstanding nationalist mannerism, identified here as the "Russian sixth," began in Glinka's operas, continued in Dargomyzhsky's works, evolved in full strength in numerous examples by Tchaikovsky and the "Five," abated somewhat in the generation of Russian composers that followed them, and died out by the turn of the twentieth century, at about the same time that it reappears in works of non-Russian composers such as Debussy and Sibelius.

²⁰ I have a vivid memory of hearing a lush and noisy orchestral piece, with unmistakable Russian sixths prominently featured, on the radio. Not recognizing the work, I guessed it might be a film score by some Soviet realist composer whom I didn't know. It turned out to be the *Russian Suite* by Arnold Bax.