A Master of Science History

Essays in Honor of Charles Coulston Gillispie
Chapter 9
The Weekday Chemist: The Training of Aleksandr Borodin

Michael D. Gordin

On 3 July 1877 (N.S.), Aleksandr Porfir’evich Borodin (1833–1887), chemistry professor at the Medico-Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg, found himself on a scientific trip near Weimar, Germany, and wanted to pay homage to a great mentor he had never met. The object of his aspirations was not the local chemistry doyen, but Franz Liszt (1811–1886), piano virtuoso and mainstay of avant-garde musical composition. He managed to locate Liszt’s house with some difficulty, and while waiting a few hours to be received he wandered around the local monuments to German cultural supremacy: the domiciles of Goethe, Schiller, and Herder. He was finally ushered in to see the Hungarian-born master, and his reception exceeded his wildest fantasies:

The majestic lively figure of the old man, with an energetic, attractive face, moved before me and spoke unceasingly, tossing questions at me. The conversation was now in French, now in German, skipping from one to the other each minute. When I told Liszt that I am properly a Sonntagenstifter [Sunday musician], he even quipped: “über Sonntag ist immer ein Feiertag” [But Sunday is always a holiday], and that “you have a complete right to ‘Feiern’”, i.e., to celebrate.

This episode quickly became legend. Borodin came to the master of modern composition (for the Russians scorned the alternative, Richard Wagner),

Abbreviations: BorP: A. P. Borodin, Pisma: Polnoe sobranie, kriticheski izuchenoe s podlinnymi tekstami, ed. S. A. Dianin, 4 v. (Moscow: Gos. izd. muzykal’nyi sektor, 1927–1950); TsGAIP: Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg. All dates are given in the old style Julian calendar, which lags 13 days behind the new-style Gregorian calendar in the nineteenth century. Exceptions are indicated by (N.S.). Transliterations follow a modification of the standard Library of Congress format, with the exception of Cui. All untranslated translations are mine. I would like to thank Michael S. Mahoney, Caryl Emerson, and Simon Morrisson for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1 Borodin to E. S. Borodina, 3 July [1877] (N.S.), BorP, II, 133.

M.D. Gordin
Department of History, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA
e-mail: mgordin@princeton.edu

confessed his amateur status, and was welcomed. For the remainder of his life, Liszt was an active supporter of the so-called “New Russian School” of music, arranging for concerts of the work of Borodin and his like-minded peers across Western Europe. Propagandist for Russian art Vladimir Vasil’evich Stasov (1824–1906) insisted that Borodin take precious time away from composition and write up his encounters for a Russian journal. This was the stuff of mythmaking, and Stasov was not about to let it slip.

Several features of the Borodin-Liszt encounter have made it a mainstay of the collective hagiography of Borodin, especially the enthusiastic reception of Russian music by elite foreigners and Borodin’s casual attitude towards his craft. One might just as well stress other features of the encounter: that Borodin was abroad on a chemist’s errand; the profusion of foreign languages and the play of national identity, central for the Hungarian-born and French-educated composer of German ancestry (“He speaks both languages [French and German] excellently, loudly, in lively fashion, with excitement, quickly, and a great deal; one might think that he is a Frenchman”); and the vital role of Vladimir Stasov in shaping the account. What follows does not pretend to be a comprehensive biography; it is, rather, a focused depiction of the central role of training in a category to reframe the cultural dilemma that has perpetually obsessed writers on Borodin: how does one reconcile the fact that he was both a scientist and an artist, a chemist and a composer? A profusion of articles, primarily in medical and chemical journals, portray Borodin’s life as a problem of “double vocation”: his biographers must decide which career—chemistry or music—was the “true” one, and which merely a distraction.

2 Liszt was the undisputed leader of the avant-garde in the 1850s, but the torch passed quite decisively to Wagner a decade later. See Alan Walker, Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years 1848–1861 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 336.


4 Borodin to E. S. Borodina, 3 July [1877] (N.S.), Borodin, II, 135.

kind of mark of Cain on Borodin’s forehead that could have told him what his true career was. Borodin was employed as a chemist, taught at a medical school, wrote music, organized women’s medical education, and in general partook of the vibrant intellectual life of post-Great Reforms Petersburg. Instead of accepting the categories established in Borodin’s obituary by Stasov, we should return to his voluminous and beautifully styled correspondence to observe how he self-consciously understood his unusual life. Borodin’s tubercular wife spent her winters in Moscow while her husband worked in Petersburg, and he wrote to her several times a week chronicling his activities. These letters form an amazing panorama of the musical, scientific, and other cultural spheres in which the man moved—and one in which he steadfastly refused to make precisely the “vocational” distinctions Stasov later imposed on him. Instead, one finds the keitmotif of training—the process which creates vocations—as a way of understanding Borodin’s cultural peregrinations.

9.1 The Random Walk from Chemistry to Music

Borodin’s life was colorfully atypical from the moment of his birth. He was born on 31 October 1833, in St. Petersburg, a royal bastard. His father, Luka Stepanovich Gedianov (1772–1845), was an Imaretian prince from Transcaucasia, suitably Russified and living in the center of Petersburg, who sired young Aleksandr with his maid, Avdot’ia Konstantinovna Antonova, a soldier’s daughter from Narva who was 24 at the time. In order to establish legitimacy, Borodin was registered as the son of Gedianov’s valet, Porfiri Ivanovich Borodin, and his wife Tat’iana Fyodorovna Borodina—which technically meant that the boy was a serf. His biological mother—who he called “auntie (tetushka)” for the rest of her life—took charge of his education at home, having him tutored in German (by Fräulein Luischen, a housekeeper), French (by Béguin, who taught at the Lycee), and in English (by John Roper, who served as a governor at a commercial school). He was registered as a free serf on 3 November 1849, and the next year, at age 17, his mother attempted to register him as a student at St. Petersburg University. This proved abortive, but she managed to enroll him as a student at the Medico-Surgical Academy on the Vyborg Side of Petersburg—largely because her current beau, F. A. Fedorov, knew the inspector, Il’inskii, who directed admissions there. Antonova, married

---

6 The original Borodin template essay is V. Stasov, “Aleksandr Porfiri’evich Borodin,” Istoričeskii Vestnik 28 (1887): 137–168; reprinted in V. Stasov, Isbrannye sochineniya, 3 v. (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1952), 329–365. All quotations come from the original published article. Stasov had already begun to shape the story in the days after Borodin’s death with a brief obituary in a newspaper: V. Stasov, “Aleksandr Porfiri’evich Borodin: Nekrolog,” Novye Vremia, 17 February (1 March) 1887, 63980. 3. Many later biographies betray explicitly or through their footnotes that they are entirely derived from this one us-source for biographical information.

7 This information is heavily emphasized by Stasov in “Aleksandr Porfiri’evich Borodin,” 138–139.

8 The biographical particulars here and in what follows are drawn from the most reliable Soviet-era biographies of Borodin: N. A. Figurovskii and Yu. I. Solov’ev, Aleksandr Porfiri’evich Borodin: A Chemist’s Biography, tr. Charlene Steinberg and George B. Kauffman (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988); Dianin, Borodin; A. P. Zorina, Aleksandr Porfiri’evich Borodin (Moscow: Muzyka, 1987). On issues of interpretation, however, all these sources follow the basic structure offered by Stasov. A recent Dutch dissertation has attempted to fill in many of these lacunae: Willem Vijeers, “Alexander Borodin: een biografische studie” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2007).


According to an account which is presented only by Stasov, and appears nowhere else in Borodin’s writings—including a lengthy obituary for Zinin that he penned in 1889—Zinin once tried to dissuade Borodin from his musical activities, encouraging him to focus on his chemical studies, declaring: “Mr. Borodin, busy yourself less with [musical] romances—I am placing all my hopes in you, that you will be my deputy, and you all the time think about music and two hares [i.e., try to catch two hares simultaneously and you will end up with neither—MG].” Absolutely no contemporary refers to this anecdote in any context except by citing Stasov, and therefore it is highly likely that this is an apocryphal embellishment—a supposition also suggested by Stasov’s use of the unusual idiomatic expression in his correspondence. This quotation is the sole source of evidence for the claim that chemists disapproved of Borodin’s musical activities. On no other occasion did any chemist—either to Borodin or to a third party—suggest he give up his music or any of his other activities. They were, of course, enthusiastic about Borodin’s chemical research, and lamented that he did not complete more of it.

Borodin graduated on 25 March 1856 and served briefly as a physician at the Second Infantry Hospital (where he happened across Modest Musorgsky as an army officer, an inconsequential encounter at the time that was later exaggerated by Stasov), but he preferred to pursue a career in chemistry and not medicine. Borodin returned to work with Zinin, and defended his dissertation—the first in the history of the Academy written and defended in Russian (not Latin)—“On the Analogies of Arenosous Acid with Phosphoric Acid in Its Chemical and Toxicological Relations,” on 3 May 1858. (He later would obtain a master’s in chemistry from St. Petersburg University while working in Zinin’s lab at the Medico-Surgical Academy.) Borodin had already been abroad once, escorting the distinguished oculist Ivan Ivanovich Kabat to an international ophthalmological congress in Brussels, and which he used to visit chemistry laboratories (such as Marcellin Berthelot’s) in Paris. Zinin believed that a postdoctoral trip to study abroad would be beneficial for the development of young Borodin’s chemical career, and he arranged for him to embark on a subsidized three-year stay in Heidelberg (and incidentally also in Paris and Pisa). Upon his return a position at the Medico-Surgical Academy quickly materialized. Borodin was appointed an adjunct at the Academy in October 1862 and was already promoted to adjunct professor on 8 December 1862, and to full professor on 15 April 1864. There he remained until his death twenty-three years later.

The account above portrays a career that is primarily chemical. What about the music? One does not, of course, become a renowned composer overnight, and Borodin had—according to reliable evidence beyond Stasov’s obituary—plenty of exposure to music in his youth. He learned how to play piano quite young, at the insistence of his mother, and by 1850 he and his close friend in all things musical, Mikhail Shchiglev, were brought by a violinist friend, Petr Ivanovich Vasil’ev, into amateur chamber musician I. I. Gavrushkevich’s circle. Borodin’s musical activities, essentially confined to romances—some of them published, probably through a family friend, in 1849—and halting ventures into chamber music, continued into his stay at Heidelberg. He even wrote four songs while a student at the Academy from 1852 to 1855. Much of this juvenilia remains unpublished and Borodin himself almost never referred to these pieces.

His musical career began at a chance meeting at a kruzhok (discussion circle) of his colleague at the Medico-Surgical Academy, Sergei Petrovich Botkin, soon to become one of the most distinguished Russian clinical physicians of the second half of the nineteenth century. In late November or early December 1862, at one of the regular Saturday night meetings around 9 pm, Borodin met Mili Alekseevich Balakirev (1836–1910), a local amateur musician who was also a rather hypochondriac patient of Botkin’s. Balakirev would form the fulcrum around which Borodin pivoted into the musical world, and it is to this world that we now follow him (although it behooves us to keep in mind that this connection was made by virtue of the Medico-Surgical Academy).

Borodin entered Balakirev’s circle at a time of tremendous ferment in musical Petersburg, developments that were intimately tied to the liberalization and

---

15 Borodin to his mother (Avdot’ia Konstantinovna Kleinecke), 15 August 1857, Borodin, 40.
17 Zinin, Aleksandr Porf’irovich Borodin, 23.
18 Balakirev thought very highly of Botkin, and mentioned him in his correspondence with Stasov on several occasions. (He did not, however, remark on meeting Borodin there; the Botkin historiography maintains a similar silence on the matter.) See Balakirev to Stasov, 31 March 1862 and 29 April 1862, in Balakirev and Stasov, Pervepiska, I, 184–185.
19 See the correspondence regarding permission to take his master’s exam: A. Borodin to rector of St. Petersburg University Aleksandr Plentev, 23 March 1859, TsGIA SPb f. 14, op. 1 d. 5983, I. 1; Plentev to Dean of Physico-Mathematical Faculty of St. Petersburg University Emilian Khristianovich Lenz, 29 May 1859, TsGIA SPb f. 14, op. 3, d. 14709, II. 51–51ob.


In a discussion of César Cui, Stasov snapped: "Go after two hares—and you won’t catch one." Stasov to Balakirev, 3 September 1866, in M. A. Balakirev and V. V. Stasov, Perepiska 2 v., ed. A. S. Liapunova (Moscow: Muzeya, 1970–1971), II, 88.
professionalization that characterized the Great Reforms. In the 1850s there were two opera companies in Petersburg and several concert series, most of them administered by the Imperial Theater Directorate, a department in the Ministry of the Imperial Court, which had held the official monopoly on public entertainment in the winter season since Alexander I instituted the system in 1803 (it was abolished in 1882 by Alexander III). The central feature of the Petersburg music scene in the 1850s was the dominance of foreign musicians and musical instructors, mostly Italians (vocal) and Germans (piano). In 1859, pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein (of Jewish heritage but a baptized Orthodox Christian) formed the Russian Musical Society with several associates. Rubinstein’s goals were threefold: an annual concert series; civil status to be granted to musicians under the “free artists” clause of the Table of Ranks; and a Western-style conservatory in St. Petersburg. These goals might seem uncontroversial from our perspective, but they were all positions that called for the establishment of music as a profession in Petersburg molded on the prevailing German standards of the musical world, and thus drew fire from self-styled amateur composers: first from the Wagnerian Aleksandr Serov (1820-1871), and then from the circle surrounding Balakirev, dubbed the “New Russian School” and somewhat ironically as the “Mighty Little Heap (moguchaja kuchka)” at home and the “Mighty Five” abroad, terms which I shall use interchangeably.


21 This foreign dependence persisted into the 1860s, as noted by music critic G. A. Larosh: “Muzhskaja Rusia even now is nothing but a colony of Germany: all our musical activity, with the exception of the most insignificant in volume—composition—is in the hands of Germans; our pianists, a class of musicians predominant in our times, are almost exclusively Germans; kappelmesters, teachers, finally instrumental masters and sellers of notes are again Germans, seizing among us all the steps of the musical hierarchy from brilliant virtuosity to humble craftsmanship. However, it is more influential than one usually thinks. Germans don’t only materially control our music, but they morally influence it in terms of its national character.” Larosh, “Glinka i ego znachenie v istorii muzyki (1867-1868),” “Id Larosh, Izbrannye state’i, 4 v. (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1974-1977), I, 33.

22 On Rubinstein’s stance toward professionalism and its casting by his opponents as eclecticism to the Germans, see Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, 123. For a sympathetic interpretation of Serov, see Taruskin, Opera and Drama in Russia.

9 The Weekday Chemist: The Training of Aleksandr Borodin

The Mighty Five defined the first decade of Borodin’s musical life, a decade centered on the person of Mili Balakirev. Balakirev had moved to St. Petersburg from his native Nizhnii Novgorod in 1855, not yet nineteen years old and by training a mathematician. The following year he met the Stasov brothers, Vladimir and Dmitrii, and the three of them formed a kruzhok that centered around their shared passion for the music of Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857). They were soon joined by Cesar Cui (1835-1918; of French and Lithuanian parentage), a fortification engineer and composer who in 1857 brought a young military officer—Modest Musorgskii (1839-1881)—into the fold, whom he had in turn met at the house of Glinka’s Doppelgänger in Russian musical composition, Aleksandr Dargomyzskii (1813-1869). In November 1861 a piano teacher introduced his student, a naval cadet named Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov (1844-1908), to Balakirev for further training. They were joined by Aleksandr Borodin in 1862, the oldest by far at the ripe age of 28. This was a group built around the institutions of the kruzhok, and was characterized by the fact that all of the members initially earned their livings from careers other than music. By the mid-1870s, the only members of the rapidly dissolving Five who were still engaged in “double careers” were Cui and Borodin—the latter often marked by his career among the group through references to him as “the alchemist,” “the chemical gentleman,” and “the chemical brigand.”

Musical relations among the group were far from equal. Balakirev was clearly the leader, treated by all as the undisputed authority on issues of orchestral music, while Cui was deemed the master of opera. Stasov—the only close member of the group who did not compose original music—assumed the role of chief ideologue, having already shaped many of Balakirev’s views, although the public dissemination of those views devoted to Cui, who served as the music critic for the St. Petersburg News. (It was only after Cui ceased to perform this role in the mid-1870s that Stasov assumed the mantle.) The content of the group’s musical ideology has long been a subject of some dispute. Officially, it was couched in the language of “nationalism”—although that
would seem to preclude Cui's position on the side of the angels and the placement of Petr Il'ič Chaikovskii (1840–1893) on the Rubinstein side.28 The Five ostensibly based their music on folk tunes, but so did Chaikovskii; meanwhile they waxed enthusiastic for Franz Liszt or Hector Berlioz.29 I will postpone the problem of teasing out the content of the ideology for now, to return to it later in one specific aspect which reflects many of its other features: the issue of musical training.

Training was in fact a central feature of the public institution associated with the Five (much as the Russian Musical Society was associated with Rubinstein) the Free Music School, created by Balakirev and his associate Gavriil Lomakin on 18 March 1862. Lomakin had originally managed to constrain Balakirev's propagandistic use of the School, but ended up retiring on 28 January 1866. This left Balakirev in charge of almost all non-state musical events in the capital. For on 16 July 1867 Rubinstein, due to conflicts with the Musical Society's primary patron, Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, resigned as director of the Society's concert series, and Balakirev—his arch-nemesis—was appointed in his stead. Balakirev's reign over both the Free Music School and the Russian Musical Society did not last long (he was dismissed in 1869). From 1872 to 1877 Balakirev withdrew into increasingly archaic religiosity, cutting off contact with all of his former musical friends, with the partial exception of Borodin.

Borodin saw this dissolution of the Five to be a natural process. In the beginning, he recalled, when they were all “in the position of eggs under a brood hen (I mean under Balakirev), we were all more or less close.”29 Writing to reassure a friend, he argued that the separation of the group was more an expression of the success of the initial group than its complete disintegration.

We do not understand the words “the collapse of the circle” entirely identically. After all, you also find among us great differences, and you even say that the works of each of the circle’s members are so different and varied in character and spirit, and so on, but isn’t this what the fact of “collapse” expresses? ... And if I find such a collapse to be natural, then that is only because this is how it always happens in all areas of human activity in the degree of the development of activity, individuality begins to take

28 Cui would not always be considered fully of the group. After the collapse of the Five, Borodin would write of him: “Tell the truth, for all his advantages, he is still not a Russian person and not a Russian composer; he doesn’t understand properly Russian music, he likes only insofar as it is good music in general; he doesn’t at all feel, value, or understand the national streak.” Borodin to E. S. Borodina, 20 November 1886, BorP, IV, 217. Emphasis in original. For more on the rise and fall of Cui—certainly the most obscure member of the group to concert-goers today, although perhaps the most visible and popular of them in terms of opera composition in the 1860s, see Taruskin, Opera and Drama in Russia, Chapter 6. On the peculiarity of excluding Chaikovskii, see Vladimir Fedorov, “Čajkovskij, Musicien Type du XIXe siècle?”, Acta Musicologica 42 (1970): 59–70; and Georg Knepler, “Čajkovskij, Musicien Type du XIXe siècle?” Acta Musicologica 43 (1971): 205–235.

29 These issues are usefully discussed in Ridenour, Nationalism, Modernism, and Personal Rivalry in Nineteenth-Century Russian Music.

30 Borodin to Liubov Ivanovna Karmalina, 15 April 1875, BorP, II, 89.

To put it another way, their training was complete.

How he used that training was another issue entirely. Issues of both the quantity and the quality of Borodin's musical writing were live ones for his contemporaries, as they have been for scholars since. Borodin's few compositions were across the map in terms of genre, but in each genre—particularly the string quartet and the symphony—Borodin clung doggedly to old models, such as the sonata form of symphonic structure. In terms of innovations in both structure and music theory—strong points for Russian music in general—Borodin was (in all but his musical politics) among the conservatives.31 While his friends may have looked askance at the lack of novelty in his compositions, they were quick to defend him in terms of quantity. Less, they claimed, was certainly more for the New Russian School. The less Russian composers wrote—and Borodin was their prime example—the better each individual work was.32

While Borodin left quite a limited legacy, it was essentially all of high quality.33 The quantity, however, was meager, and this was attributed to lack of time. Borodin himself lamented the scarcity of time for composition: “In winter I can only write music when I am so ill that I don’t give lectures, don’t go to the laboratory, yet all the same can work a little. For this reason my musical friends, contrary to universal custom, always wish me not health, but sickness.”34 That said, he undertook no efforts to rearrange his commitments to allow more time for composition. It remained something he did when the occasion presented itself. What resulted were brief ventures in almost every

30 Borodin to Liubov Ivanovna Karmalina, 1 June 1876, BorP, II, 107–108. Ellipses added; emphasis in original.


34 Borodin to Liubov Ivanovna Karmalina, 1 June 1876, BorP, II, 108.
genre of music explored by the New Russian School. His most numerous works are his twelve mature songs, six of whose words he composed himself, and eight of which were published in his lifetime.35 Much more widely known are his two symphonies—in E-flat (composed 1862–1867) and in B (1869–1876)—accompanied by a third symphony (in A), only two movements of which were completed at his death and were later orchestrated by Glazunov.36 Borodin, alone of the Five, took chamber music seriously even in his mature period, and composed two string quartets (in A [1874–1879] and D [1881]), the second of which is still widely played in repertoires both in Russia and abroad.37 Of his orchestral music, however, the most widely appreciated—both at the time and since—is his symphonic poem, “The Steppes of Central Asia,” with its peaceful musical confrontation and synthesis of both Russian folk themes with Oriental ones. This piece was one of twelve commissioned to accompany a production of tableaux vivants celebrating a quarter century of Tsar Alexander II’s reign in 1880.38

By far Borodin’s most famous composition, and the one that has drawn the greatest amount of attention from musicologists, is his posthumous opera, Prince Igor, in particular the Polovtsian Dances drawn from it.39 The idea for turning the unique twelfth-century poetic epic Tale of Igor’s Campaign—which chronicles the defeat in battle of Russian troops against Polovtsian forces—into an opera, as well as a plan of scenes, clearly lay with Stasov. Borodin’s only worry was his competence to undertake the project: “Will I have the strength for


34, 40 I don’t know. If you are afraid of wolves, don’t go into the forest. I’ll try.” Almost immediately, Borodin began researching the history of twelfth-century Russia so he would be able to draw from what he considered appropriate present-day folk music, historical costumes, and scenery.41 Borodin would, over the years, rewrite the libretto entirely, removing much of the coherence that had made Stasov’s version attractive.42 The lack of a complete libretto before beginning composition was more responsible than any other factor for the delay of the opera from its genesis in 1869 until Borodin’s death in 1887—making it the gold standard for disorganized operatic composition by which other fiascos are measured.43

Borodin spent as much time deciding to quit the opera as actually writing it. His first demurrals came in March 1870, when he wrote his wife that he had hardly the time and the patience to deal with all the little details, that the public would not like the story due to lack of drama, that “it is no joke to make a libretto which satisfies both the musical and the scenic demands,” that he has no experience for it, that he was drawn to symphonic forms, and, in the end, that “opera (not dramatic in the strict sense) seems to me an unnatural thing.”44 In short, whatever excuse came most handy. Intriguingly, an interview with a former medical student, V. A. Shonorov, who lamented the abandonment of the opera, triggered Borodin to get back to work on it. When Borodin told Stasov about his return to Igor in 1874, the latter was positively ecstatic.45 Of all his associates—even more than Stasov—Rimski-Korsakov was constantly agitated that the opera was still so far from completion, a point he reiterated not just to Borodin (“Write more, using the summer, write as abbreviated, as dirty as possible, but only more quickly”), but to a large number of his correspondents and visitors.46 Rimski-Korsakov also volunteered to assist Borodin with orchestration, editing, and copying out parts.


41 V. V. Mainov reported to Borodin in the mid-1870s that he had contacted the famous Hungarian travel writer Hunfalvi to find out information about the Polovtsian tribes and their possible connection to the Magyars and Pechenegs. See letters reproduced in Dianin, Borodin, 200 and 338; and Gerald E. H. Abraham, Studies in Russian Music (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), Chapter 7.


44 Borodin to E. S. Borodina, 4 March 1870, BorP, I, 200.

45 Stasov to D. V. Stasov, 18 October 1874, in Stasov, Pis’ma k rodynu, 1(2), 222.

46 Quotation from Rimski-Korsakov to Borodin, 10 August [1879], reproduced in Dianin, Borodin, 231. See also Rimski-Korsakov, Letopis’ moej muzykal’noj zhizni, 217, 223–224.
After Borodin's death, *Prince Igor* was further delayed both because it was unfinished and due to legal battles over authorship rights following the death of Borodin's wife a few months after his own.\(^{47}\) Given the repeated foot-dragging, Borodin had displayed for over a decade on the completion of the opera, his musical allies already had contingency plans prepared. As Rimskii-Korsakov had noted to a mutual friend in 1884, "Borodin is somehow more and more approaching a collapse in general; there can't even be any talk of composition, when he hears music, then he sleeps; he has completely dropped behind in musical affairs; he uselessly participates in an innumerable quantity of committees. If I survive him, I'll finish 'Igor.'"\(^{48}\) It is clear that the notion that Borodin abandoned chemistry so he could work on music, or vice versa, rings hollow. Borodin simply was not completing *anything*. Rimskii-Korsakov ended up having to make good on his pledge. He went with Stasov to Borodin's apartment immediately after hearing of the latter's death and seized all his musical manuscripts, and finally completed the opera together with A. K. Glazunov.\(^{49}\) Borodin's most famous work was thus not, strictly speaking, his.

### 9.2 Conservatories, Conservatives, and Consternation

The specifiess of Borodin's life seem to demand a reckoning. What was he, a composer or a chemist? Why did he shift from one topic and mentor to the next, so readily? His music is now considered to be among the greatest produced in Russia, so surely his chemistry must have been equally promising? This last question is one that has occupied a large number of those who write on Borodin. The intrinsic oddities of Borodin's case have prompted many to argue that his status as a chemist was equal to those of his more well-known countrymen such as D. I. Mendeleev (of the periodic system of chemical elements) and A. M. Butlerov (of the structure theory of organic compounds) — but that foreigners stole all his credit, or that perhaps his musical activities "distracted" Rimskii-Korsakov to S. N. Kruglikov, letters of 12 August 1879, 23 September 1880, and 28 March 1887, in idem, *Pohode sobornie sochineni*, v. 8a (Moscow: Muzika, 1981), 20, 50, 87, and M. M. Kurbanoff, "A Few Reminiscences of Borodin (1884–1885)," tr. Alfred J. Swets, *Chesterian* 16 (1913): 96–99, on 98. Stasov and Balakirev repeatedly bemused Borodin's lack of progress: Balakirev to Stasov, 10 August 1882, and Stasov to Balakirev, 20 June 1884 in Balakirev and Stasov, *Peresipska*, II, 42 and 63.\(^{47}\) On the legal dispute, see Stasov to Balakirev, 20 August 1887, in Balakirev and Stasov, *Peresipska*, II, 120.\(^{48}\) Rimskii-Korsakov to Kruglikov, 23 February 1884, in Rimskii-Korsakov, *Pohode sobornie sochineni*, 130.\(^{49}\) Rimskii-Korsakov, *Lotopi moei myzyskal'noi zhizni*, 281. For an enumeration of precisely which features of the opera were created from scratch, and which were original with Borodin, see Glazunov's account published as V. Stasov, "Redakteva 'Kniazhi Igor' Borodina," *Russkaja muzyskal'naja gazeta* 3(2) (1896): 153–160.


When the kruchok of musicians met, each would bring a piece that he had been working on, and then it was publicly performed for the group and communally criticized—with Cui, Balakirev, and Stasov most prominent in suggesting changes.53 Stasov encouraged Balakirev's anti-academic stance, urging him "to learn directly in practice, directly in action, and not from textbooks, the entire system of Russian music, church and popular, just as you have up till now learned without textbooks one of its members, one of its scales. This learning (asenavanie) is truer and more stable than what you would get from [Adolph Marx's] book or any other."54 Balakirev made a point teaching other members of the Five and his auxiliary students without textbooks.55

Of course, not everyone was pleased with Balakirev's teaching methods. Most of the prominent critics of the New Russian School—with the exception of the equally autodidact Aleksandr Serov—felt that the fault of this cadre of musicians was not their lack of talent, but the inferiority of their training. Not surprisingly, many of these contrary voices, such as music critic G. A. Larosh, were conservatory trained, and thus became in turn prime targets for the wrath of Cui and Stasov.56 The "junior" members of the Five—including the eldest, Borodin—also found some of Balakirev's strictures to be too severe, and one of the most common criticisms of his teachings, and a central reason why the kruchka fell apart by the 1870s, was the widespread perception among them that Balakirev was simply too "despotick to bear."57 They did not crave the academism of professionals, but rather a kinder, gentler Balakirev patterned on Franz Liszt. Liszt, like Hector Berlioz, was strongly opposed to what he saw as pedantry and academism.58 This glorification of Liszt's anti-academism was somewhat overstated, since the first thing Liszt did when he arrived in Paris from Budapest for the first time as a piano prodigy was to attempt to enroll in the Paris Conservatory. He was turned away because the institution excluded foreigners, but he quickly found other teachers in their stead.59 As a private teacher of piano, however, he had essentially no teaching method, eschewing an analytic approach in favor of allowing students to play freely, and only intervening with minor and gentle suggestions. As Borodin observed during his visit to Liszt: "In general between him and his students relations are terribly simple, familiar, and heartfelt, not at all reminiscent of the relations of students to a professor, but more like children to a father, or grandchildren to a grandfather."60

This model was self-consciously designed as an alternative to the Conservatory, which was erected under the auspices of the Russian Musical Society by Rubinstein. By the late 1850s, Russia was the only major European country that had no dedicated musical educational establishment, and scattered comments in various newspapers and journals began to call for such an organization. In December 1859 the Russian Musical Society began preparatory courses, and in spring 1860 courses were offered (some for a fee, others at no cost). On 17 October 1861, the "Musical Academy (Uchilishche)" was opened, renamed the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1866. A Moscow Conservatory followed, quickly supplanting the virtual forest of piano and voice schools in the two metropoles.61 Rubinstein's goal, as mentioned earlier, was to establish civil status and formal training for musicians on the German model precisely to eliminate dependence on Germans for the future of music in Russia. Rubinstein was concerned with establishing music in Russia, not Russian music. Music was international, much like science, and formal training was needed in both.62

Stasov would have none of this. At precisely this moment, he was encountering hostility from the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg against the brand of realist painting he most favored—that of the Wanderers (Peredvizhniki)—and he felt that any art-training institute would always be compromised by its connection to the state, by virtue of being an institution, from truly supporting original Russian art.63 All the Conservatory would inevitably generate two undesirable features: "Germaness" and "craft"—the former was a nationalist nightmare that would perpetuate perceived German dominance, the latter was the related routinization of musical education and a stifling of creativity. Stasov decryed the Conservatory as a bastion of ungifted elites, even twenty-five years after its creation:

53 Stasov, "Modest Petrovich Musorgskii: Biograficheskii ocherk (1883)," in Izbrannye sochineniia, II, 184.
54 Stasov to Balakirev, 20 August 1860, in Balakirev and Stasov, Perepis'ka, I, 115. Emphasis in original.
55 Garden, Balakirev, 61.
56 As Larosh put it: "With us, in Russia, where the public is small, where traditions are not established, where specialists are very few, it is especially easy to fall into that kruchok manner, to take a half-dozen of one's friends for the Russian people, an anvil for the globe, and examples of such sad confusions in our tiny musical world as more common and usual than in any other." From his "Dernon' A. Rubinsteinu" (1877), in Larosh, Izbrannye soch., III, 227.
57 See, for example, Cui to M. S. Kerzina, 23 May [1910], in Cui, Izbrannye pis'ma, ed. I. L. Gussin (Leningrad: Gos. muzikal'noe izd., 1955), 404; Rimskii-Korsakov, Lopatnaya muzikal'naia shkola, 283; and, as Borodin wrote to his wife in October 1871: "Balakirev is such a despotic person, that he demands complete submissiveness up to the tiniest infinitesimals. He can in no way understand and recognize freedom and equal rights.... He wants to impose his yoke on everyone and everything." Letter of [24-25 October 1871], Bor, I, 311. Ellipses added.

61 Borodin to E. S. Borodina, 12 July 1877 (N.S.), Bor, I, 146. See Alan Walker, From Liszt: The Final Years, 1861–1886 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 228.
64 Lebedev and Solodovnikov, Vladimir Vasil'evich Stasov, 66.
The Weekday Chemist: The Training of Aleksandr Borodin

Now again about symphonic development. For you it’s as if it’s frightening that you write like Korsakov and not like Schumann. And I tell you (you seem scared—you êtes brave), that okroshka [Russian bread soup] is horrible for a German, but we eat it with pleasure (pont de comparaison, s’il vous plait, comparaison n’est pas raison). German Milchsuppe or Kirschenuppe is horrible for us, and a German is in raptures from it.

Bref, symphonic development, technically understood, is worked out by a German like his philosophy—at present destroyed by English psychology and our own [M. I.] Trolstski. A German, when he thinks, first recomposes, and then proves, our brother first proves, and then pacifies himself with recognition...

Musorgskii took national character as primary, and then constructed differences around it, from taste in soup to symphonic composition. A less essentialist tack would consider the concatenation of tastes as primary and then look at them as constitutive of national character. One of the most prominent features of the “Russian” musical style was precisely this failure to obtain adequate training before undertaking composition.

This impulsiveness—or, to use a term its proponents would prefer, spontaneity—was central in shaping reactions to the music of the Five both at home and abroad. For Borodin in particular, his qualities as a national composer were rarely spoken of without in the same breath dealing with his qualities as an untrained composer. For his critics, such as Larosh, “Borodin, entirely infected with dilettantism, never suffered from unmusicality. On the contrary, with him everything is interesting; the interest which attracts [one] to his works comprises at the same time their Achilles’s heel. They are only interesting, . . . they are not balanced out by any simplicity . . . .”96 The fault here was that Borodin’s education was too weak to balance the deleterious influence of the kruzhol’s training. Lack of training was both the consequence and the cause of its national qualities. There is an undercurrent in the elitist self-representation of the Balakirev circle and its supporters that while the musicians did not in fact need training to be national, the audiences in Russia did need to be trained so they could more appropriately mimic German audiences. As Glinsky’s sister, I. N. Sheshkova, wrote to Borodin after a performance of one of his symphonies was greeted with scorn:

You see, they didn’t understand [Glinsky’s operas] “Ruslan and Liudmila,” exactly as they didn’t understand your glorious symphony, and I don’t at all think that it was an agreed-upon booing, it seems to me simply that they didn’t understand and were nauseated; their ears are not grown up enough for this symphony, they are such a brilliant piece of jackassery (sadiatnaya). . . . Before and even during the performance itself, the public makes noise and disperses. After all it is only possible to do this in Russia. They should try to pull a similar prank in Germany...

94 Stasov, “Dvadsatiplatitel’ besplatnoi muzikal’noi shkoly” (1887), in Izbrannye sochineniia, II, 79. Cui also lamented the “craftments” of Conservatory-trained musicians as Chatkovskii in Cui to Stasov, 3 May [1880], in Cui, Izbrannye pis’ma, 102. This emphasis on the Conservatory was the central feature of the Five’s critique of Chatkovskii. For his part, it was precisely the lack of training that Chatkovskii lamented in Borodin, whom he saw as possessed of “talent, a very great talent which, however, has come to nothing for want of teaching...” Quoted in Victor I. Seroff, The Mighty Five: The Cradle of Russian National Music (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970 [1948]), 206. Ellipses added.

95 Larosh, “Muzikal’nye pis’ma iz Petropbura: Pis’noe pervoe” (1871), in Larosh, Izbrannye stihi, III, 65.

96 See, for example, V. Stasov, “Nasha muzika na poslednii 25 lat,” Vestnik Evropy 5 (October 1883): 561–622, on 563; and Borodin to E. S. Borodina, [21 September 1871], Borodin, 1, 294.


100 Letter of 27 February [1877], reproduced in Dumin, Borodin, 208. Ellipses added.
Germans were ideal audiences for music; they should just refrain from composition.

Proof of the suitability of Western European audiences for supposedly "purely national" music was evident abroad, particularly in Belgium, where—due largely to the good offices of the Countess Louisa de Mercy-Argentan—Borodin soon became the most prominent of the New Russian School in foreign climes.\(^{71}\) Even in the heart of the beast, musical Germany, the results were so encouraging, as Borodin wrote to Balakirev after a very well-received performance of his second symphony in Baden-Baden: "It is especially pleasing to me personally that this thing had success precisely in Germany...\(^{72}\) Truly, for Borodin to be recognized by the Germans on their home soil was the nationalistic victory the group as a whole savored in Petersburg—and was substantially more important than the enthusiasm his quartets received in Buffalo.\(^{73}\) Even domestically, although Stasov would later claim that Borodin had never been appreciated in his own country, he was lauded by large numbers of music aficionados. In 1879, for example, he traveled on business to Odessa and was greeted on arrival as a famous composer.\(^{74}\) And while it was true that Borodin received substantial criticism in the musical press, it was not the case—as Stasov reported after Borodin's death—that the first symphony had been poorly received, as Balakirev hastened to correct.\(^{75}\) And all of this without the slavish devotion to training that former Conservatory students like Chaikovsky insisted upon.

Interestingly, it was exactly such a devotion that Borodin himself was trying to establish for chemical education in the predominantly medical Academy. The Medico-Surgical Academy in the 1860s underwent deep transformations in its attitude towards the rigors of medical pedagogy under the presidency of P. A. Dubovitskii (1837–1867). Nikolai Zinin in particular, as Secretary of the Academy during the first eight years of this period, was Dubovitskii's central aide in grounding science more deeply in the medical curriculum, primarily through building a Natural History Institute (in 1863, with a grant of 45,000 rubles to start and 2,000 more annually) and traveling abroad under Dubovitskii's direction to import foreign teaching methods. The natural science chairs were expanded from two (chemistry, physics, and mineralogy on the one hand; and natural science on the other) to five (chemistry, physics, geography, and climatology, zoology and comparative anatomy, botany, and geology, mineralogy, and paleontology).\(^{76}\) Borodin later recalled Zinin's three fundamental transformations as the introduction of new fresh teachers, establishing facilities for applied medical and scientific work, and building an "Institute for Young Doctors."\(^{77}\) These transformations continued after Zinin formally resigned his chair in 1874 to move full-time to the Imperial Academy of Sciences, and Borodin was promoted from Zinin's apprentice to spearheading his own set of academic changes at the Medico-Surgical Academy.\(^{78}\)

Borodin was already thinking of his brief time abroad at Heidelberg, Paris, and Pisa primarily in terms of pedagogical reform as early as 1863:

Filled with the conviction that only a scientist who is completely possessed by this subject can be a really good teacher, I tried above all to develop myself from this point of view. This is accomplished first by mastering what was done by others, and second: by independent research, helping the advancement of science. Without these conditions it is impossible to obtain an accurate, critical outlook in science and to stand at the level of contemporary direction. But this is still not enough for the activity of a teacher: it is necessary to be able to teach others; it is necessary to be able to transmit science to audiences, conforming to their degree of development and to their future purpose. This is achieved, on the one hand, by the study of different methods of teaching others, and on the other hand, by independent training.\(^{79}\)

Borodin's reforms of chemical pedagogy were perhaps the most time-consuming of his many activities of the 1870s, along with his involvement in committees for higher education for women (themselves emblematic of his concern for proper training). As he wrote to his wife in early September 1869: "I am busy up to here with the construction of the laboratory, the receipt of things, and the organizing of laboratory property. There was no gas or running water in the laboratory buildings yet, and we were filthy.\(^{80}\) Defending his delay in finishing Prince Igor to Liubov' Karmalina, Borodin wrote in 1876—after he had ceased to publish scientific papers—in defense of his expenditure of time on pedagogy: "I love my work, and my science, and the Academy, and my students; my science is practical in the character of the studies, and thus consumes a great deal of time; my male and female students are close to me...\(^{81}\)

\(^{71}\) On the Countess's very colorful life, see Carlo Bronte, *La Comtesse de Mercy-Argental*, 20th ed. (Liège: Soledi, 1945), esp. 65-74 on Borodin. Borodin and the Countess corresponded often, and she translated the lyrics for several of his works into French. See the letters of October 1884 in *Bor P.*, IV, 92 and 105.

\(^{72}\) Borodin to Balakirev, 17 May 1889, *Bor P.*, III, 99. This was also true in Paris. Borodin wrote to A. P. Dianin on 6 November 1877 that he had heard from Turgenev that the second symphony was a tremendous success there: *Bor P.*, II, 191.

\(^{73}\) Borodin to E. S. Borodina, 30 November 1885, *Bor P.*, IV, 99.


\(^{75}\) Balakirev to Stasov, 8 December 1888, in Balakirev and Stasov, *Perepis'ka*, II, 141.


\(^{77}\) Borodin's funeral oration for Zinin, 9 February 1880, reproduced in *Bor P.*, III, 87-88.

\(^{78}\) On these later transformations, including the change of name to the Military-Medical Academy, see D. Kodorotov, "Perekhodnoe vremya," in Ivanovsky, ed., *Istorii Imperatorskoi Voeno-Meditsinskoi (byvshoi Mediko-Khirurgicheskoi) Akademii za sto let* (1898), 581-683; and N. Kul'bin, "Imperatorskii Voeno-meditsinskii akademii, 1881-1896 g.," in ibid: 685-828.

\(^{79}\) Borodin's final report on his trip abroad, dated 31 January 1863, reproduced in Figurovskii and Solov'ev, *Aleksandr Porfir'evich Borodin*, 143.

\(^{80}\) Borodin to E. S. Borodina, [8 September 1869], *Bor P.*, I, 147.
even in other respects than as studying youth, which doesn't limit itself to listening to my lectures, but also needs practical exercises, etc. The interests of the Academy are dear to me."  

Assembling the remnants of proper instruction out of the mess he inherited was the task of the next several years. His son-in-law and eventual successor, A. P. Dinnin, saw 1874 as the watershed of Borodin's work at the Academy. With Zinin's retirement, Borodin made practical laboratory instruction a requirement in the chemical education of physicians. Since the medical students had different schedules, Borodin had to keep the laboratory open almost all day, every day, so that 300–400 students could conduct experiments. The point of these efforts, as Borodin had articulated in an essay review on pharmacy as early as 1863, was to show students who only dealt with the applied sciences (such as medicine and pharmacy) the kind of strict logic that is possible in the "pure sciences." Here, therefore, unlike in the Balakirev circle, Borodin was adamant about the importance of proper (read: formal) instruction. Guidance under the hands of a master like Balakirev without routine would just be insufficient for the sciences.

The connection and juxtaposition between formal training in the sciences and informal training in the arts (particularly music) was noted by members of the Five as being almost constitutive of the difference between these two domains of human activity. As Balakirev wrote to Stasov, referring to the properly dispute at the Medico-Surgical Academy over the disposition of the Borodins' estate, in August 1887:

> "All that you have written me concerning the ridiculous orders, concerning the property of the late Borodins, confirms my opinion of the fact that so-called specialists of sciences, especially medical sciences, are very stupid folk, of the sort like teachers of harmony, cobbles, and other workmen. The exceptions are only representatives of the humanities or such luminaries as, for example, Botkin. To the rest all of life appears in the narrow little confines of pedestrian concepts about the elevation or reduction of temperature, diarrhea, constipation, etc., and for the rest, no matter how important, they don't care, but their self-confidence is so high, that in another specialized affair, such as the arranging of spiritual testament, he is not afraid to consider himself competent, believing in his supposedly "bright head.""

Arrogance—that was the fundamental problem of a formal education, and it led to mistaking one's competence in one area with talent in another. The Conservatory merely perpetuated this when dealing with the fragile flower of creativity. Stasov had already mooted this point in his initial response to Rubinstein's call for conservatories:

> "It is possible that Rubinstein is not aware of the opinion now deep-rooted in the greater part of Europe that holds that academies and conservatories serve only as breeding grounds for tasteless people and aid in the establishment of harmful ideas and tastes. Therefore the best minds search in the sphere of artistic education for means of doing without higher educational establishments. Higher educational establishments for art are a completely different thing from their counterparts in the sciences, and the two categories should never be confused. There is a vast gulf between the two types. A university and a conservatoire are completely different things. The former communicates only knowledge; the latter is not content to do just that and interferes in the most dangerous way with the creative process of the artist in training, and extends a despotic power (from which nothing can protect him) over the shape and form of his works..."

Along these lines, Balakirev was not entirely pleased with the way his pedagogy was portrayed in Stasov's Borodin biography. As he wrote to Stasov in a comment on the draft:

> "You wrote that Borodin, thanks to his acquaintance with me, understood that one must relate to authorities critically, that they are not infallible, etc. I could have influence on him only in the specifically musical sphere. The question about authorities you touch on is not a specific question but a general intellectual one, and in this sphere Borodin, being not only excellently educated (obrazovannym), but even a scientist, had no need to be enlightened by me, who had received only a boy's schooling."

What differentiated Borodin from Balakirev was formal education—but only in the sense that one was a scientist and the other not. In music, all were equal before the Russian spirit.

Training seems so essential to Borodin's self-conception, that one might wonder at how much excavation and pruning of the historiography had to be undertaken to document this connection. Why, indeed, has the importance of training as not only a bridge between the two cultures of Borodin's world, but as a means of denying any direct homology between the two, been left out of the standard account? There are two main strands to this "sidetracking" of the Borodin legacy: the first the shaping of Borodin by Stasov into a posthumous spokesman for the greatness of Russian (read: anti-German) music; and the cooptation by historically-interested chemists of the man in attempt to transcend the debate about the "two cultures." In the process, both traditions only inscribe that divide more deeply.

### 9.3 Conclusion: Vladimir Stasov and the Two Cultures

Aleksandr Borodin died at an Academy fancy-dress party celebrating carnival at 11:40 PM, 15 February 1887. He was immediately enveloped by his physician colleagues who attempted to revive him, but the heart attack proved fatal. Almost instantly, Vladimir Stasov began to collect his letters and unfinished..."
musical manuscripts, solicit reminiscences from his friends, and write obituaries for him that hit the same notes central to the Mighty Five’s message: Borodin was a composer, at best distracted by chemistry; he was resolutely nationalist, and the central tragedy of his brief life is that he was not given enough time to devote to finishing his opera. All three of these points are generally accepted by writers on Borodin both at the time and since, and all three of them are equivocal, to say the least. The first point (his status as a composer) assumes some kind of Platonic “vocation” which is imprinted on the soul of an individual and defines the essence of his or her life. The second point (his nationalism) was certainly a factor in his thought, but nowhere near as central as his emphasis on proper forms of training. The third point (time), is the most problematic, since often Borodin did have the time but chose to spend it on other matters. Just because Stasov and Rimskii-Korsakov wanted Prince Igor to be Borodin’s highest priority does not mean that Borodin himself did. Recall that when he died, he had essentially no reputation as an opera composer at all, having only displayed some extracts of Igor to the public. The grand reputation Borodin developed was posthumous, and the credit for it lies not only with the composer but with his unimpeachable publicist—Stasov.

I have mentioned Stasov’s imprint so frequently because it is literally incapable. Stasov, more than any other individual, shaped how people both at the time and since interpreted Borodin, and since Stasov clearly had a very articulate partisan agenda, one needs to be intensely critical of the nuances he imposed on his subject. In his writings on Borodin, Stasov emphasized three narrative points: that he had been a cosmopolitan as a child, speaking a great many languages, who later became a nationalist; that the meeting with Balakirev was the decisive shift in his life; and that while he had worked in chemistry and music simultaneously for most of his life, it was really in music where he fulfilled his destiny. Stasov left a very strong impression with this final point that Borodin was always a genius manqué, a promise deferred because of too many alternative commitments. One could always defend Stasov by pointing out that he was there and therefore knew the state of affairs. But, as Sigrid Neef has recently pointed out, the discrepancies between Stasov’s version and the surviving historical record best call to mind the common Russian proverb: “He lies like an eyewitness.”


84 Cui held the same line in his obituary for Borodin: his science is “fruitful and distinguished; but his musical, compositional activity has a still greater, perfectly outstanding significance.” Cui, “A. P. Borodin,” 283.


83 Stasov to V. D. Komarova, 25 August 1899, in Stasov, Pis’ma k rodnoy, III(6), 316.

Take, for example, the narrow issue of vocation, since it is here that Stasov’s argument lays its foundation, and it is also here that the most vital echo of Stasov’s Borodin—that propounded by professional chemists—takes its point of departure. If one is looking for it, one can find many references in Borodin’s correspondence that his music and his chemistry were engaged in a zero-sum battle for his time. If one values the music more than the chemistry, therefore, it is easy to claim that the music suffered because Borodin neglected his obligation to it. Borodin himself was aware of this particular narrative, and even at times subscribed to it, writing to an admirer in the year before his death: “I would ask that you not restrict my biography to the musical part alone, since my scientific and teaching activity serves as an explanation why I became a composer late and wrote so little music.”

For Stasov, as one glances from his correspondence, the issue of a “vocation” as the fulfillment of one’s destiny was quite a serious one, and it explains why he took his program for the autonomy and equality (if not primacy) of Russian art as a mission. He dedicated to Balakirev as early as 1858, when the constellation of views that he would later mobilize were just beginning to cohere, that one could only be truly happy when following one’s true vocation: “I already tried and became convinced that there is no other happiness than doing that which each of us is capable of, regardless of whether this will be a grand affair or the tiniest. We are all born only in order to birth from ourselves new creations, new thoughts, new life—as women are born in order to birth new people.” My goal is not to malign Stasov’s views of the history and historical function of art, but to show that they are indeed partisan views. Borodin articulated a world of actors who succeeded or failed based on how deeply they held to their vocation. From today’s perspective, where destiny is less of a category, there is no necessity to subscribe to his framework.

And, in fact, most of the brief articles written on Borodin today—the vast majority of them by practicing chemists—do not focus on vocation for the same reasons that Stasov did, although they still use the evidence packaged in his original pieces and speak of Borodin in almost identical terms. Many have observed that numerous scientists seem to have strong interests in classical music as opposed to the other arts, although to date there has been little persuasive explanation of it. Yet, despite these possible connections and well-documented instances of historical links between science and music, the case of Borodin has drawn the lion’s share of the attention from both within and outside the scientific community. The chemical biographies of Borodin cited at the beginning of this essay generally accept all the terms of Stasov’s presentation of Borodin, but instead of viewing Borodin’s work in chemistry as a distraction from his true vocation of music, they interpret the fact that Borodin spent so much time on it to argue that the man himself valued his chemistry first and his music second—accepting Stasov’s parameters and relabeling the priorities of the terms.

One gets a sense of the underlying moral of the Borodin story from the chemists’ perspective in the very first biography of the man in a chemical journal, his obituary by his son-in-law in the Journal of the Russian Physical-Chemical Society: “[The person of A. P. [Borodin] serves as a most obvious example (among a few others) that in a richly gifted nature analytic, strictly scientific work does not at all exclude the possibility of free, purely artistic creativity and vice versa.” Thus, this opposition was already being formed long before C. P. Snow would formulate the classic opposition between the sciences and the humanities (although most prominently literature) in his Rede Lecture of 1959—forever after known as the Two Cultures. As Lionel Trilling has pointed out, however, the common reading of Snow as pointing merely to a failure to communicate between two equal (and equally useful) cultures is quite misleading. Quite the contrary, Snow clearly declared the scientists as the team to bet on, and the literary intellectuals and other humanists as the slow coach that had missed its chance to join the race.


49 Dmitriy, “Aleksandr Poplach’ evich Borodin,” 376
50 C. P. Snow, The Two Cultures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1959])
This illuminates the underlying current of the chemists' consistent championing of Borodin: they do not wish to show that it is possible for a chemist to be a member of the artistic world; they hope to demonstrate that Borodin was at root scientific, and thus it is possible for scientists to belong to both cultures, while the humanists, parochial and simplistic, are confined to just one. One might be forgiven in thinking that Borodin would view such an agenda—as he would Stasov's—as a failure of proper training.