PART I

Origins and contexts

1 Stravinsky's Russian origins

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'A man has one birthplace, one fatherland, one country – he *can* have only one country – and the place of his birth is the most important factor in his life.' These words were uttered by Stravinsky at a banquet held in his honour in Moscow on 1 October 1962.[1] The eighty-year-old composer had returned to his homeland after an absence of fifty years. In the intervening period he had acquired first French and then American citizenship, and developed an increasingly hostile attitude towards his native country and its culture.[2] This hostility had been fully reciprocated by the Soviet musical establishment. Now, as the guest of the Union of Composers, Stravinsky was seemingly performing a complete *volte-face* by wholeheartedly embracing his Russian identity. For Robert Craft, his assistant and amanuensis, this was nothing short of a 'transformation', and he was astonished, not only to witness Stravinsky and his wife suddenly taking 'pride in everything Russian', but to observe at close hand how 'half a century of expatriation' could be 'forgotten in a night'.[3] Craft's diary of the famous visit contains many revealing comments about a composer who was a master of mystification.

Like his younger contemporary Vladimir Nabokov, with whom there are some intriguing biographical parallels,[4] Stravinsky did not care to be pigeon-holed or linked with any particular artistic trend after he left Russia. Above all, because of a sense of cultural inferiority which stemmed from the fact that Russia's musical tradition was so much younger than that of other European nations, he came to disavow his own musical heritage, which necessitated embroidering a complex tapestry of lies and denials. So proficient was Stravinsky in creating an elaborate smoke-screen about who he really was, in fact, that the highly controlled image he projected of his artistic independence remained largely intact for over two decades following his death in 1971. It is an achievement of the painstaking scholarship of Richard Taruskin and Stephen Walsh[5] that in the twenty-first century we can now look behind Stravinsky's cosmopolitan façade to see the carefully concealed but manifestly Russian identity that lies behind it. The extent of the obfuscations and contradictions of Stravinsky's musical persona can be judged from the sheer scale of Richard Taruskin's efforts in unravelling them: his study runs to 1,757 pages, and does not explore works written after 1922. Stravinsky's habit of falsifying his own life story means that we must clearly treat all his pronouncements with circumspection, but his highly

emotional and apparently involuntary reaction in 1962 to being back on Russian soil (which he claimed even had a particular smell),[6] nevertheless speaks volumes about the continuing importance of his native origins.

Stravinsky was born on the cusp of two distinct eras, at a pivotal point in Russian cultural history. In 1881, the year before his birth, not only was Alexander II assassinated, but Dostoevsky and Musorgsky died, thus symbolically bringing to a close the era of the Great Reforms, Realist novels and Populism. Alexander II's reign (particularly the earlier part of it) had been a time of relative liberalism compared with the oppressive regime of Nicholas I which had preceded it. The reforms Alexander II had introduced in the 1860s, most notably the long-awaited Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861, had given rise to an upsurge of energy and optimism that was reflected across all sections of Russian society over the course of the following decade. The young radical intelligentsia believed at last the time had come for action (not for nothing was Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel of political emancipation entitled *What is to be Done?*), and the arts were dominated throughout the 1860s and 1870s by a preoccupation with ideas of social change and questions of national identity. This was the age of the great novels of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev, and the ideologically charged canvases of the 'Wanderers' – nationalist painters who wished to highlight Russia's acute social problems. This was also a vibrant time for Russian music. As a result of the efforts of Anton Rubinstein, a Conservatoire had finally opened in St Petersburg in 1862, enabling Russian musicians to acquire professional status for the first time (all-important in a society where social position was still defined by a notorious Table of Ranks). Tchaikovsky was one of its first graduates. And at the same time that the Populist-minded artists of the 'Wanderers' group were rebelling against the Western and classical orientation of the St Petersburg Academy of Arts, a nucleus of nationalist composers was already turning its back on the Western and classical orientation of the new Conservatoire. Rather than be trained according to the German model set up by Rubinstein, the five members of the Balakirev circle opted to teach themselves, out of a belief that Russian music should follow its own course. One of those composers was Rimsky-Korsakov, later to become Stravinsky's teacher. Their spokesman was the prolific critic Vladimir Stasov, who waged an unceasing and often cantankerous campaign on behalf of Russian nationalist art from 1847 to 1906, the year of his death.

By the time of Alexander II's violent death, however, Russian culture was already beginning to undergo a sea-change as former radicals and non-conformists amongst the artistic community began to become part of the establishment. Rimsky-Korsakov had been appointed to teach at the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1871, for example, and the Wanderers later

became stalwart representatives of the Academy of Arts. Russia had embarked on a programme of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, but the pace of reform had slowed, and social unrest consequently increased. When the peaceful attempts of the Populists failed to convince the peasantry of the need for urgent political action, the Revolutionary intelligentsia began to turn its attention to the new working-class organisations that were beginning to spring up in cities across the Russian empire. And their new terrorist methods began to achieve results. Conservative anyway by nature, Alexander III responded to the assassination of his father by bringing to a halt the wheels of progress and by tightening instruments of repression. Thus Stravinsky was born at a time of widespread despondency amongst the Russian population.

The new tsar's chauvinistic policies resulted in the persecution of Jews and other religious minorities, but there was one aspect of his Russification policies that had positive consequences, namely his active promotion of native culture. A century and a half of imperial patronage of Western art forms at the expense of Russian traditions (long considered unsophisticated by comparison, and associated with peasants, therefore inferior) had led to a huge explosion of national consciousness amongst Russian artists in the middle of the nineteenth century. Alexander III was the first Russian tsar to recognise and support native achievements. It was due to his efforts that the first government-sponsored collection of Russian art (now housed in the Russian Museum) was put on public display in St Petersburg in 1898, and he was clearly in favour of the 'revivalist' architecture which quickly became popular. The first major public building project of his reign was the onion-domed Church of the Resurrection, begun in 1882, the year of Stravinsky's birth. Built on the spot where Alexander II was assassinated, its pastiche of medieval Russian styles sits oddly amongst the stately neoclassicism of most of the rest of St Petersburg's eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century buildings, which had of course been specifically designed to emulate the European style and make a deliberate break with Muscovite tradition. This sort of retrogressive orientation was closely allied to Alexander III's reactionary and Slavophile political beliefs. Of far greater value were his services to Russian music. Alexander's decision, also in 1882, to end the monopoly on theatrical production held by the Imperial Theatres and to close down the Italian Opera were to have far-reaching consequences for the performing arts in Russia. As a singer at the Russian Opera in St Petersburg (where he was principal bass), Stravinsky's father was a direct beneficiary of this policy. Stravinsky's own musical development was also indirectly affected as a result. The two most important operas premiered in the year of Stravinsky's birth were Wagner's *Parsifal*, staged in Bayreuth, and Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden*, the latter performed at the Mariinsky Theatre in

St Petersburg, with Fyodor Stravinsky creating the role of Grandfather Frost.

Nicholas I had installed an Italian company in the main opera house in St Petersburg in 1843 (as much for political as for artistic reasons), and lavish sums from the imperial purse were invested in promoting it. Very much second-class citizens, the composers and performers involved with the Russian Opera did not even have a proper stage of their own until the Mariinsky Theatre was built in 1860. It must be said that the repertoire was still not very large at this stage, nor of consistently high quality (with the obvious exceptions of Glinka's operas, of course), but the Russian government had equally done nothing to encourage its subjects to become composers. The fortunes of the Russian Opera started to prosper in earnest only after the accession of Alexander III, when it became the sole company in St Petersburg, and thus the country's premier stage. Fyodor Stravinsky had joined the Russian Opera in 1876, having begun his singing career in Kiev, and it was in the 1880s that he began to receive his greatest acclaim, not only for his powerful voice, but also for his dramatic talents. By the time he stopped performing in 1902, he had developed a repertoire of sixty-four roles, most but not all of which were in Russian opera. He also knew composers like Musorgsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov, as well as other prominent musicians and critics, many of whom must have come to visit the singer at home. The young Igor Stravinsky thus grew up in an environment which was steeped in Russian music. Stasov and Dostoevsky also paid calls.[7]

Apart from his fine voice, Fyodor Stravinsky was famous for his extensive library of valuable books and scores (held to be one of the largest private collections in Russia), and for the painstaking way in which he researched his roles. All of this inevitably rubbed off on his son, who would have probably heard his father rehearse at home and who also had the benefit of being able to attend operatic performances at the Mariinsky on a regular basis from a young age. It is not surprising that the theatre became something of a second home for Stravinsky while he was growing up, as his family's apartment was situated right next door to it. The 1890s and early 1900s were the Mariinsky Theatre's golden years: operas by Russian composers had become its staple repertoire,[8] and there was now, for the first time, an impressive roster of performers, producers and set designers to stage them. Stravinsky was able to become closely acquainted with what are now the classic masterpieces of Tchaikovsky, Glinka, Borodin, Musorgsky and, of course, Rimsky-Korsakov. 'Sitting in the dark of the Mariinsky Theatre, I judged, saw, and heard everything at first hand', he later recalled, 'and my impressions were immediate and indelible'.[9] He would subsequently have a direct involvement with Rimsky-Korsakov's last operas.

Stravinsky's family came from the nobility, but it is important to recognise that this was a class that differed from its Western European counterpart by encompassing small-scale landowners without titles and (by the end of the nineteenth century) *haute-bourgeoisie* as well as Counts and Princesses. Only in Russia could one automatically join the nobility by being promoted to a certain position in the Table of Ranks (as happened with Dostoevsky's father). Stravinsky's social background was relatively privileged without being particularly aristocratic. While the young Nabokov was driven to school by a chauffeur from the family mansion, for example, Stravinsky walked across town from a rented apartment. His parents also rented their summer dachas; although the family was able to stay at the country estates of their relatives and were later affluent enough to travel abroad, they had no property of their own, however modest, to retreat to at the end of the season. It is also worth pointing out that pursuing a career on the stage as a singer in Russia had only begun to acquire social respectability at the end of the nineteenth century. Both Shaliapin and Ershov, two of Russia's other great pre-revolutionary male singers, were of lowly origins, and Fyodor Stravinsky had originally planned to join the Civil Service, following a training in law. It is indicative that he and his wife also wanted their son Igor to become a lawyer rather than a professional musician, and he studied law at St Petersburg University from 1901 to 1906. But as with Tchaikovsky, who half a century earlier had been destined for a career in the Ministry of Justice, the urge to write music proved ultimately too strong to resist.

Stravinsky had his first piano lessons in 1891, when he was nine years old. This was also the year in which he met his first cousin Ekaterina Nosenko, who was later to become his wife. Then, when he was a university student, he began to study music theory privately. Musically speaking, however, the pivotal year for Stravinsky was 1902, the date of his earliest surviving compositions. At university Stravinsky had become friends with Rimsky-Korsakov's son Vladimir, and through him met the composer while they were on holiday in Germany that summer. After Stravinsky's father died of cancer at the end of 1902 at the age of fifty-nine, Rimsky-Korsakov – just one year younger – became a kind of father figure to him. There was something of an inevitability to this development. Fyodor Stravinsky studiously recorded details of the cost of each of Igor's music lessons, along with every other family expense, and his son seems to have inherited his love of precision,[10] sending dutiful letters to his parents during summer vacations when they were apart.[11] Stravinsky did not, however, have a particularly affectionate relationship with his father (he was closer to his mother, though that relationship was difficult too), and neither of his parents encouraged his musical ambitions. Rimsky-Korsakov did not formally become Stravinsky's

composition teacher until 1905, having persuaded him that enrolling at the Conservatoire, where Rimsky had now been teaching for thirty years, would at this point be counter-productive. In the meantime, however, Stravinsky started to receive informal tuition from him, and to attend the musical soirées at his apartment which became a weekly fixture from 1905 onwards.

Cultural life in St Petersburg by 1905 had undergone another sea-change since the time of Stravinsky's childhood. He was not exaggerating when he later remembered the city as a stimulating and exciting place in which to have grown up,[12] as his coming of age coincided with the birth of Russian Modernism – the movement to which he himself was to make such an enormous contribution. Alexander III's Russification policies had positive consequences for the fortunes of Russian opera in the 1880s, and the abolition of the Imperial Theatres' monopoly had led to the foundation of important new companies such as Savva Mamontov's Private Opera in 1885, and later the Moscow Arts Theatre, directed by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. In general, however, the reign of Alexander III was one of the bleaker periods in Russian culture, typified more by repression and stagnation than by innovation and dynamism. The apathy and disillusionment of the period is captured well in the short stories of Chekhov, the very modesty of their form indicating the diminution of the intelligentsia's hopes and dreams following the era of the great reforms. The Russian musical scene also lacked dynamism and innovation. The main symphony concert series, which had been inaugurated by the Russian Musical Society in 1859, was now becoming increasingly reliant on the classical repertoire, for example, and was beginning to lack freshness. The wealthy art patron Mitrofan Belyayev promoted contemporary composers at the 'Russian Symphony Concerts' he founded in 1885, an enterprise of inestimable value in consolidating a national musical tradition that was now well and truly established, but Arensky, Lyadov, Glazunov and Rachmaninov hardly belonged to the avant garde. As Walsh has commented, the enterprise succeeded, ironically, in truly institutionalising Russian music,[13] which had hitherto prided itself on its anti-establishment stance. As a bastion of the musical establishment, and now the *éminence grise* of the St Petersburg Conservatoire where he had been professor since 1882, Rimsky-Korsakov certainly did not use his position as Belyayev's main adviser to change its orientation.

Everything was to change after the death of Alexander III in 1894, although his successor Nicholas II was hardly less reactionary. The cultural revival that was now instigated was prompted to a certain extent by a desire to escape from a depressing political reality that was clearly going to worsen and partly by the simple and inevitable need to strike out in a new direction. Music was in fact the last art form to be affected by the winds of change that now began to sweep through Russian cultural life, but ironically it was music

which – through the agency of Stravinsky – was to contribute Russia's most significant contribution to the Modernist movement. Signs of the dawning of a new age in the arts came with the production of Tchaikovsky's operatic masterpiece *The Queen of Spades*, premiered in 1890 at the Mariinsky. A loyal subject of Alexander III, Tchaikovsky willingly conformed to the dictates of the Imperial Theatres, which commissioned the opera, and *The Queen of Spades* represents, in many ways, the apotheosis of the Russian 'imperial style'. It is also, however, a work whose hallucinatory subject-matter, nostalgic mood and stylistic pastiche align it with the preoccupations of the new generation of artists that emerged in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Their rebellion against old forms and their championing of the new were accompanied by an explosion of creative talent across all the arts on an unprecedented scale at the beginning of the twentieth century and is now rightly regarded as a kind of Russian 'Renaissance'. Stravinsky, of course, was at the epicentre of this movement, which saw Russian artists for the first time becoming leaders of the avant garde. Along with Kandinsky, Malevich and, to a lesser extent, Skryabin and perhaps Bely, he was one of the key Russian figures of the period who was destined to change the very language of art.

Russian Modernism began in the middle of the 1890s as a reaction against the relentless utilitarianism that had dominated all the arts in the preceding period in favour of aestheticism. Concern with ideology was jettisoned to be replaced by an interest in individual experience and beauty, which was expressed at first in small, lyrical forms rather than the grand canvases of the Realist period. The narrow Russian focus of much of what was produced earlier was exchanged for a new cosmopolitan outlook. There was also, in the aftermath of Nietzsche and the 'death of God', a liberation from the stifling Victorian mores of the 1880s and a cultivation of amorality and the occult. The earliest practitioners were a group of poets who called themselves Symbolists, but who were quickly labelled Decadents by their detractors. Led in Moscow by Valery Bryusov and Konstantin Bal'mont, they drew their inspiration from French writers such as Baudelaire and Verlaine. In St Petersburg the leader of the new movement was the writer Dmitry Merezhkovsky, who published an influential article in 1893 that pinned the blame for the general decline in literary quality at the time on the didacticism of the Populist age and called for culture to be revived through a concern with metaphysical idealism and spiritual experience.

The torchbearers for this artistic renewal were the eclectic young artists and sexually liberated aesthetes of the 'World of Art' group, also based in St Petersburg, who wished precisely to bring Russian culture out of the doldrums. Convinced that the quality of modern Russian art was now on a parity with that of Western Europe, their leader, Sergey Diaghilev, organised

a series of international exhibitions beginning in 1898, which the ageing Stasov was quick to condemn as decadent. Diaghilev had anticipated this reaction. When soliciting work for his first exhibition, he had addressed the problem directly: 'Russian art at the moment is in a state of transition', he wrote to prospective exhibitors. 'History places any emerging trend in this position when the principles of the older generation clash and struggle with the newly developing demands of youth.'[14] Later in 1898, the group launched a lavishly illustrated and expensively produced journal under the title *The World of Art* which acted, amongst other things, as the first major platform for the Symbolists. Diaghilev, Benois and their colleagues had eclectic tastes also where music was concerned. They worshipped Tchaikovsky, but they were also the first non-musicians in Russia to champion Wagner in the pages of their journal, regarding him as a founder of the Modernist movement in Russia, as he had been elsewhere. As well as publishing articles on Wagner's artistic ideas and methods, Diaghilev began to review the first Russian stagings of his music dramas at the Mariinsky Theatre, and Benois was invited to design the first production of *Götterdämmerung*.

In the initial period, the members of the World of Art group focused mainly on the visual arts. At first, Diaghilev had attempted to forge a career in music, but after being discouraged by Rimsky-Korsakov when he showed him his compositions, and having been turned down as a member of the august Russian Music Society, whose dull concert programmes he had hoped to revitalise, he decided to focus in the immediate term on art. In the meantime, two other members of the group, Alfred Nurok and Walter Nouvel, took up the challenge of bringing music under the World of Art canopy by founding the 'Evenings of Contemporary Music' in 1901. The aim was to acquaint the St Petersburg public with new music, consciously espousing a more radical programme than the rival Chamber Music Society.[15] As Taruskin has pointed out, the music that was performed at the concerts was hardly the most outré, since the most popular composers were Franck, D'Indy and Reger, while the most avant-garde Russian composers represented were Vasilenko, Senilov, Rebikov and Catoire.[16] Other living Russian composers whose works were performed included Rachmaninov, Tcherepnin and Glazunov. The Moscow-based Skryabin, who had most in common with the aesthetics of the Symbolist movement, was largely ignored. It was nevertheless here that music by Ravel, Fauré and Strauss was first introduced to Russian audiences and composers, while Debussy, Schoenberg and Reger were invited personally to attend performances of their works. And it was here that Stravinsky's music was publicly performed for the first time, on 27 December 1907.[17]

The nineteen-year-old Stravinsky had, in fact, taken part in the very first concert of the Evenings of Contemporary Music, on 20 December 1901,

according to a notice in a contemporary music journal,[18] and from then on he attended at least some of the concerts organised each season,[19] but his loyalties lay very much with Rimsky-Korsakov's circle after he was welcomed into its midst the following year. For this group, the Evenings of Contemporary Music represented the opposition. Rimsky-Korsakov attended their concerts when music by his pupils was performed, but he was in general hostile to the whole enterprise and its modernist and dilettante outlook, particularly since he had no direct involvement. Nurok did not, for his part, conceal his low regard for Rimsky-Korsakov's conventionality, the conservatism of the Belyayev concerts, and their already somewhat ossified aesthetic position.[20] A kind of half-way house was provided by the important new concert series founded by the conductor Aleksandr Ziloti in 1903, which premiered music by Strauss, Mahler and Schoenberg, amongst others. In 1909 Ziloti also conducted the first performances of Stravinsky's *Scherzo fantastique* and *Fireworks* at one of his concerts. Nevertheless, the contemporary music scene in St Petersburg in the early 1900s was certainly not as vibrant as, say, activities in literature at the time.

Just as Stravinsky was beginning his official tuition with Rimsky-Korsakov in 1905, his teacher began to host weekly musical soirées every Wednesday. These meetings provided an important forum for Stravinsky to meet other musicians, discuss ideas and hear informal performances of new compositions, including his own. In 1905 the ideas discussed were inevitably dominated by politics, as the year began with the infamous 'Bloody Sunday', when a peaceful demonstration by workers was greeted with gunfire and over a hundred people were killed. Stravinsky remained largely unaffected by the 1905 Revolution (this was also the year he became engaged to his cousin), but his teacher became directly caught up in the turbulent events. Amid public outcry, Rimsky-Korsakov was dismissed from his post for supporting Conservatoire students who had gone on strike to call for reform. Although musically he represented the forces of conservatism, Rimsky-Korsakov occupied a relatively left-wing position politically, and he was eventually successful in demanding autonomy for the Conservatoire administration. Despite the political factors, the atmosphere of the Rimsky-Korsakov 'Wednesdays' was still extremely tame by comparison with the infamous *jours-fixes* held across town on the same night by the Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, which also started in 1905. These attracted a broad spectrum of St Petersburg's leading modernists (including Walter Nouvel and several other musicians), who would congregate at midnight in Ivanov's orotund top-floor apartment (known by all as 'The Tower') and sit up until dawn participating in learned discussions on mysticism, poetry readings and impromptu musical and theatrical performances. Stravinsky was only two years younger than one of the salon's most celebrated habitués, the