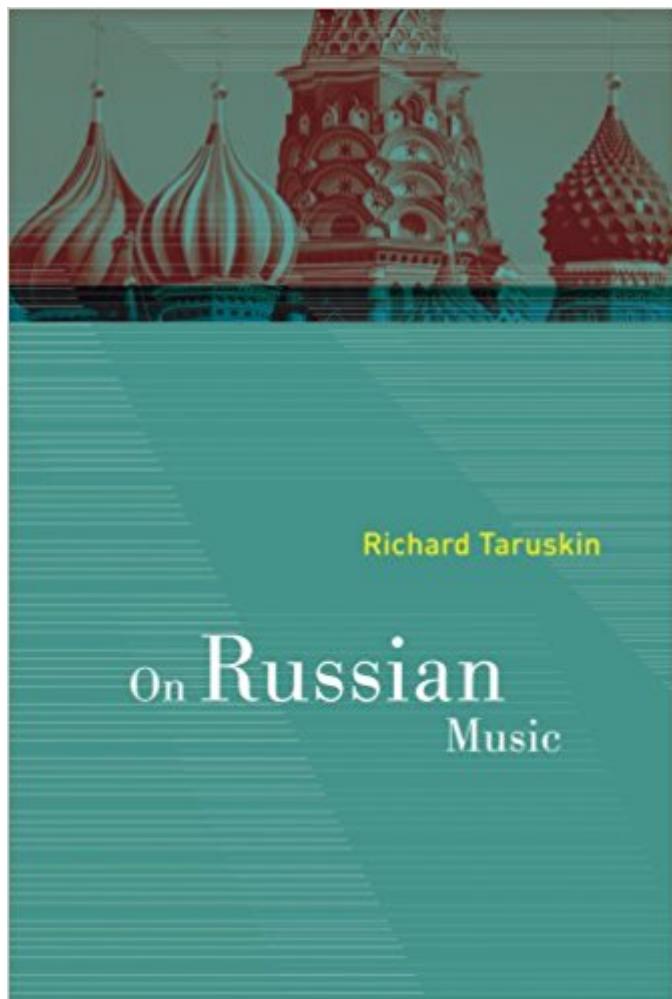


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# On Russian Music



## Synopsis

Over the past four decades, Richard Taruskin's publications have redefined the field of Russian-music study. This volume gathers thirty-six essays on composers ranging from Bortnyansky in the eighteenth century to Tarnopolsky in the twenty-first, as well as all of the famous names in between. Some of these pieces, like the ones on Chaikovsky's alleged suicide and on the interpretation of Shostakovich's legacy, have won fame in their own right as decisive contributions to some of the most significant debates in contemporary musicology. An extensive introduction lays out the main issues and a justification of Taruskin's approach, seen both in the light of his intellectual development and in that of the changing intellectual environment, which has been particularly marked by the end of the cold war in Europe.

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## Customer Reviews

“[Taruskin's] command of this subject is surely unparalleled. . . . This is an authoritative, consistently challenging, deeply engaging volume of essays - very strongly recommended.” (Philip Borg-Wheeler Classical Music Magazine 2009-05-23) “Very entertaining.” (Michael Kimmelman New York Review Of Books 2009-08-13) “[Taruskin's essays] demonstrate his . . . rare gift for conveying complex information in a concise, accessible manner. . . . An essential compendium.” (Notes 2010-07-02) “Whether [Taruskin is] validating Susan McClary's sexist charges at Beethoven or implicitly acknowledging his debt to Donald Francis Tovey, reading his essays will

make you a better, smarter person. (Huffington Post 2010-11-11)

"Taruskin's autobiographical reflections of his engagement with Russian music are fascinating. The author's pre-eminent stature in this field of studies is justification enough for issuing such a collection, and the range of materials is considerable." Laurel E. Fay, author of *Shostakovich: A Life*"The scholarship and writing style in this book are up to Taruskin's usual superior standard. It is especially impressive to see the assurance and acute sense for the important issues at the heart of the topic in the earliest essays." Sanna Pederson, University of Oklahoma

well written and comprehensive.

You may not agree with everything Richard Taruskin says, but you can rest assured he will never bore you. Taruskin is one of those rare scholars who can give you a lot of information in a readable, witty way. On Russian music, he is certainly the authority in the English language, both from the point of view of music and of musicology. Taruskin exacts from artists high moral standards that artists simply do not have, but even in this position he is informative and well documented. A lovely book.

This is a book that no lover of Russian music should miss. Just in case you don't know, Richard Taruskin is one of the brightest and most trenchant musicologists around today, with a formidable range of expertise, as his six-volume 'Oxford History of Western Music' has demonstrated, particularly since his idea of musical history is not just a story about notes but places them in a cultural and historical setting. The present volume is made up of occasional articles and reviews, but they form a satisfying sequence, leading us from Glinka right down to the present day. Particularly impressive is a series of pieces on Tchaikovsky, where Taruskin criticizes the conventional picture that treats nineteenth-century German music as normative and everything else as 'nationalist', not to say provincial. He shows how Tchaikovsky is just as indebted to Russian sources as Mussorgsky, but must be treated as primarily a composer in the European mainstream. He is effective in demolishing the view that Tchaikovsky was a guilt-ridden homosexual, whose music is self-indulgent and at times hysterical. In what is perhaps the best chapter in the book he argues that we are wrong to enjoy Evgeny Onegin condescendingly, as it were great fun but not worthy of Puskin, since the orchestral accompaniment makes all sorts of subtle points and connections, akin to the authorial voice in the Pushkin poem. This volume has nothing, strangely, on Stravinsky and

Scriabin and their generation, but a whole series of pieces on Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Taruskin adds powerful support to Laurel Fay's demolition of the pseudo-Shostakovich 'Testimony'. The volume concludes (almost) with a wide-ranging piece on post-Shostakovich Russian music, though omitting Schnittke and Gubaidulina. It is a real strength of the volume that it does not, however, reduce the reader to dumb admiration, but often provokes disagreement. I would particularly protest against his view that any interpretation of music that satisfies our 'private, selfish interests' is 'justified by securing these benefits' (p. 356) - as if the value of music did not lie precisely in its ability to take us beyond the mushy terrain of solipsistic fantasy. Taruskin is deeply concerned by what he perceives as the marginal status of classical music in modern culture, as if it had nothing to do with serious concerns, but here he is contributing to its trivialization.

ON RUSSIAN MUSIC collects Richard Taruskin's articles on the subject, published in a variety of periodicals from 1975 to the early millennium. For this volume, the critic has written an ample introduction, and for many of the articles he adds postscripts that discuss the media fallout from his remarks. One thing should be made clear: this collection really only covers Russian music up to Shostakovich. While fans of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Glazunov, Prokofiev, etc. will be quite happy with it, there is a noticeable lack of interest in the composers who came of age in the 1960s and beyond. There are two articles covering festivals of lesser-known Soviet and post-Soviet composers, but the remarks are quite general. Sofia Gubaidulina is only mentioned a couple of times, in lists of composers with no further details. The only time Alfred Schnittke substantially appears is for his comments on Prokofiev, not for his own music. I must admit that I have little interest in the earliest composers that Taruskin treats, but when he discusses the early and middle Soviet era, I find his views enjoyable. Taruskin takes up many times the tendency for Western critics to claim that Soviet works they liked were secretly dissident, even when there is no evidence for it (and occasionally there's evidence to the contrary). Taruskin does ascribe a doubleness to Shostakovich, but notes that the covert element is self-pity and self-consolation, not dissidence. The obsession with secret programmes in his music thus gets it wrong. As Taruskin writes, "To jump from such expressions of disaffection to blunt anticommunism (or pro-Westernism), as so many reviewers of the Glikman letters have done, is a gross misstep." Another persistent theme is the responsibility of putting on overtly Stalinist material. Taruskin (in)famously believes Prokofiev to be a titan of 20th century music, but his music doesn't exist in a vacuum, and to uphold certain works without mentioning their context betrays Stalin's victims. Like all critics, Taruskin has a few opinions that one won't agree with, that's fine. But there's the occasional misunderstanding. He

speaks of "Karlheinz Stockhausen's enviously admiring response to the destruction of the World Trade Center" when, as those who familiar with the composer's nutty personal cosmology would know, the response was neither envious nor admiring.

but, as someone interested in the present and even future of music, I find his relentlessly conservative agenda annoying. Despite his knowledge, he has no genuine sense of the vision of "modern" (1900-the present) musicians. Entertaining always, but . . .

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