

# Notes on the Program

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## ***In the Steppes of Central Asia, Op. 7***

### **Alexander Borodin**

**A**lexander Borodin was born the illegitimate son of a Russian prince and his mistress, but following the custom in such circumstances he was officially registered as the progeny of one of the prince's serfs. Nonetheless, the prince saw to it that young Alexander received privileges beyond what someone of that station might expect, with the result that Borodin received an excellent education. Music and science especially appealed to him, and he would spend his entire career working as a research chemist and professor, specializing in the substances known as aldehydes.

His non-working hours, however, were given over to music — to playing chamber music, to conducting ensembles, and to composing a small but choice catalogue of works. In 1862 he fell into the circle of the “Mighty Handful” or “Russian Five” that formed around the eccentric but forceful Mily Balakirev, the only full-time composer of the lot. Many of Borodin's masterworks from the 1860s forward reflect that group's passionate embrace of folk sources, most especially his two symphonies (plus two movements of a third), the “musical picture” *In the Steppes of Central Asia* (the standard English title of the work he called simply *In Central Asia*), and his opera *Prince Igor* (which he left incomplete at his death). Through a quirk of fate, he died an apparent peasant, just as he had ostensibly been born one: he dropped dead while dressed as a Russian peasant at a Carnival Week costume party at the St. Petersburg Medico-Surgical Academy.

Most of Borodin's career corresponded to the reign of Tsar Alexander II, who acceded

to the throne in 1855 and ruled until his assassination in March 1881. He had inherited the Crimean War from his father and lost no time bringing it to an end. Without that weighing on the nation's resources, he began introducing important social reforms that conformed to his generally enlightened outlook: emancipation of the serfs, reorganizing the justice and penal systems (abolishing capital punishment), instituting nationwide controls on regional governments to eliminate gross abuses and injustices, and so on. On the other hand, he strengthened Russian dominance in such lands as Poland and Lithuania. He sent military forces to expand Russia's reach into Central Asia to the Caucasus region, Turkestan, Samarkand, and various emirates — and even to the shores

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### **IN SHORT**

**Born:** November 12, 1833, in St. Petersburg, Russia

**Died:** February 27, 1887, in St. Petersburg

**Work composed:** 1880; dedicated to Franz Liszt

**World premiere:** April 29, 1880, in St. Petersburg, with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov conducting the Russian Opera Orchestra

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** July 9, 1901, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 6, 2007, Bramwell Tovey, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 8 minutes

of the Pacific Ocean (though he did not choose to consolidate Russia's reach farther east, and, in fact, sold its Alaskan territory to the United States). In 1877–78 he plunged into and quickly won the Russo-Turkish War, which strengthened Russia's sway in the Balkans.

In 1880 Russia celebrated the silver anniversary of the Tsar's remarkable reign, and, as part of the festivities, plans were made to devise *tableaux vivants* depicting some of his glorious achievements. Several notable composers were approached to provide music against which the scenes might unroll: thus were born such orchestral items as Musorgsky's march *The Taking of Kars* (now forgotten) and Tchaikovsky's *The Montenegrins Receiving the News of Russia's Declaration of War on Turkey* (not just forgotten but, indeed, lost), as well as Rimsky-Korsakov's chorus *Glory*, and pieces by a couple of other more obscure figures. A better fate lay in

store for Borodin's contribution, although — like the other pieces — it was not heard in its intended context, since the *tableaux vivants* performance was cancelled when its producers vanished. In its concert premiere, *In the Steppes of Central Asia* scored a hit with its blend of Russian and “oriental” melodies and its evocation of the wide-open spaces that had recently come under Russia's protection. This short symphonic poem (or “musical picture,” to use the term Borodin borrowed from his colleague Balakirev) was quickly embraced not only in Russia but also in Western Europe, and it not only ignited international interest in Borodin's compositions but also served as a catalyst for mainstream European attention to Russian music in general.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, oboe and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

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## In the Composer's Words

Borodin provided a programmatic description to accompany *In the Steppes of Central Asia*:

In the desert of Central Asia the melody of a peaceful Russian song is heard at first. The approaching tramp of horses and camels is heard, together with the doleful sounds of an oriental melody. A native caravan guarded by Russian soldiers crosses the boundless steppe. It completes its long journey trustingly and without fear under the protection of the victors' awesome military strength. The caravan moves further and further away. The peaceful melodies of both vanquished and vanquisher merge into a single common harmony, whose echoes long resound in the steppe before eventually dying away in the distance.



Borodin's “peaceful Russian song” is played at the outset by solo clarinet; the “oriental melody” is given initially to the English horn.

*Caravan in Russian territory, in the steppes of Central Asia, ca. 1900*