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**The Reception of Russian Music in Riga During the 1860s and 1870s:
The Characteristic Opinions Manifested in Press Reviews**

The article characterizes the reception of Russian music in Riga in the 1860s and 1870s and highlights the reasons for such a reception. For this purpose, a contextual analysis of the main positions manifested by music critics and their historical background is carried out.

Already since the 13th century Germans had dominated the economic, cultural and language spheres of Riga. In the 1860s the situation began to change significantly. This was because of active migration on the part of representatives of other nationalities (Latvians and Russians) to Riga, resulting in an increase in the influence of their communities. In the 1870s, there was a sharp exchange of opposing views between the Russian and German press, for example, the discussion described in this article about the need to open a Russian theater with its own opera troupe in Riga. The reception of several works by Russian composers (*Serenade Russe* and *Caprice Russe* by Anton Rubinstein, *A Life for the Tsar* by Mikhail Glinka), performed in Riga, is also examined.

A comparative analysis of the press reviews makes it possible for us to conclude: notwithstanding the manifold political disagreements between the Baltic German and Russian communities of Riga, both sides also tried to search for shared values, and music presented a field not only of rivalry and controversies, but also of a search for mutual understanding.

Keywords: Baltic Germans and Russians, sociocultural context, music criticism, Anton Rubinstein, Mikhail Glinka.

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**Восприятие русской музыки в Риге 1860–1870-х годов:
обзор публикаций периодической печати**

В статье даётся характеристика восприятия русской музыки в Риге в 1860–1870-е годы, а также излагаются причины данной рецепции. С этой целью проводится контекстуальный анализ основных позиций, представленных музыкальными критиками, и раскрываются их исторические основы.

Начиная с XIII века, представители немецкой общины возглавляли сферы экономики, культуры и языка в Риге. В 1860-х годах ситуация начала существенно меняться. Это было результатом активной миграции представителей других национальностей (латышей и

русских) в Ригу. В 1870-е годы происходил резкий обмен мнениями между русской и немецкой прессой, к примеру, по вопросу, обрисованному в данной статье, о необходимости открыть в Риге русский театр со своей собственной труппой. Рассматривается также восприятие ряда сочинений русских композиторов («Русская серенада» и «Русское капричио» Антона Рубинштейна, «Жизнь за царя» Михаила Глинки), впервые исполненных в Риге в те годы.

Сравнительный анализ рецензий, опубликованных в периодической печати, позволил прийти к следующему заключению: вопреки многим политическим несогласиям между общинами балтийских немцев и русских в Риге, обе стороны, тем не менее, пытались найти общие ценности, и музыка представила собой сферу не только соперничества и противоречий, но также и поиска новых форм взаимопонимания.

Ключевые слова: балтийские немцы и русские, социокультурный контекст, музыкальная критика, Антон Рубинштейн, Михаил Глинка.

The reception of Russian music by the music critics of Riga in the 19th century merits research for several reasons, one of the most notable and interesting ones being the multicultural environment of the city. At that time, Riga was a part of the Russian Empire, but, nevertheless, already since the 13th century, Germans were dominating the economic, cultural and language spheres. Their role in the Baltic governorates, as a whole, is pointedly characterized by the researchers Per Bolin and Christina Douglas: the Baltic Germans “constituted an elite group with a strong sense of national identity and Baltic ‘Germandom’, they drew clear boundaries toward ‘Others’” [1, p. 20]. Thus, the Riga music scene of the 19th century was not significantly much different from what could be found in many German cities: its central institution was the City Theater (‘Stadttheater’), which featured both dramatic and opera troupes, and hosted symphonic and chamber music concerts. And, obviously, the repertoire was dominated by German music. However, occasionally, works by Russian composers were also performed, especially in the second half of the 19th century. The goal of this article is to characterize the reception of Russian music in Riga in the 1860s and 1870s and to reveal the reasons determining

this reception. Were there more similarities or differences in the attitudes toward Russian music delivered by the Russian and Baltic German critics? Were the residents of Riga able to evaluate the currently famous composers and compositions and to forestall their future significance? In order to answer these questions, a contextual analysis of the historical background and the main opinions manifested by music critics shall be provided.

The 19th century was the time when Russian, as well as Latvian¹ migration to Riga, became more and more intense. The data regarding Russians in the city and based on the audits and censuses of the population is as follows: in 1806, the number of Russian Riga dwellers was 5 000, in 1867 – already 25 800, in 1881 – 31 900, and in 1897 – 43 300 [8, p. 143].

Of course, the active migration was caused not only by economic circumstances. As it is noted by Vladislav Volkov, a historian and researcher of the Russian community in Latvia, the liberal reforms of Tsar Alexander II were closely intertwined with the policy of unification regarding the outskirts of the Russian Empire. The date of June 1, 1867, when the tsar ordered the immediate introduction of Russian-language record keeping in Baltic institutions, became

an important historical milestone [8, p. 152]. For many Baltic Germans, this new turn was an unpleasant surprise: as historian Katja Wezel states, “In the second half of the nineteenth century <...>, their rootedness in German culture and language brought them into conflict with national perceptions of ‘Russianness’ in the Russian Empire” [9, p. 1]. Other researchers, such as Ulriche Plath [6, p. 64–65] and Kārlis Cīrulis [2, p. 67], also highlight the second half of the 19th century as the period when Baltic Germans felt an increasing threat to their dominant position in the Baltic governorates.

The music criticism in Riga was not entirely dependent on politics, however, a certain degree of influence cannot be denied. It could also be found in the articles on Russian music published in both the Baltic German and the first Russian periodicals² in the 1860s and 1870s. At the same time, they contain many interesting and valuable insights also from a pure musical viewpoint. Further, the most interesting reviews shall be discussed in detail.

At the beginning of the researched period, Russian music was performed in Riga only occasionally and was represented mainly by vocal and instrumental chamber works. The composer and pianist from St. Petersburg **Anton Rubinstein** was a particular favourite. He visited the city several times, each time being a major success. An anonymous reviewer from the newspaper *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* (1869, October 11) even compares him to Franz Liszt (the latter visited Riga in 1842):

“Is there anyone who has not heard of the good old times, a coach carrying Franz Liszt would stop in our beloved city, and our ladies would form a passageway in the theater hall to see their darling as close as possible. Now we have Anton Rubinstein, the ‘star of the north,’ and the enthusiasm, in its modern form, runs just as high; <...>

his name is being spoken by everyone, his wonderous music is heard by everyone”³.

From Rubinstein’s repertoire, the reviewers have pointed out his own works *Serenade Russe* and *Caprice Russe*. Friedrich Pilzer from *Rigasche Zeitung* (1869, October 14) describes the latter as follows: “<...> The composer <...> had selected possibly one of the most unrewarding Slavic motives, quite poor on its own, as the basis for his *Caprice Russe*; however, he varied it so masterfully in the sense of form, that he has created ‘a pineapple out of a crabapple’”⁴.

Richard Taruskin in his monograph *Defining Russia Musically* notes that Rubinstein, as a composer of German schooling, “saw the future of Russian music in terms of professionalization under the <...> stewardship of imported teachers and virtuosos” [7, p. 123]. In the Russian metropolis of St. Petersburg, his musical “Germanism” was met with particularly strong resistance from the leader of *The Mighty Five* Mily Balakirev and the music critic Vladimir Stasov, who initiated, as Taruskin notes, an “anti-Rubinstein backlash” [7, p. 124]. However, the lack of Russianness (as claimed by *The Mighty Five*) was certainly not an obstacle to Rubinstein’s popularity in Riga. Possibly, he was a favourite of the Baltic German public not only because of his personal charisma and an outstanding piano virtuosity, but also because of the already noted “German schooling”.

A significant turning point in the attitude towards Russian music in Riga came at the end of the 1860s. It was caused by the aforementioned attempts on the part of the Russian government to ‘Russify’ the Baltic region, diminishing the influence of the Baltic Germans. To support the newly arrived Russians, the first Russian daily newspaper titled *Rizhskiy Vestnik* was published in Riga in 1869. The views of its first editor, Evgraf Cheshikhin, were strongly

influenced by the movement of Slavophilia. As historian Volkov states, *Rizhskiy Vestnik* had frequently published the articles by Yuri Samarin and Ivan Aksakov [8, p. 165]. In 1875, this newspaper repeatedly (see No. 88, 90, 95, 103, 110, etc.) insisted that the Riga City Theater should possess not only a German, but also a Russian troupe. This idea sparked protests among the members of the local Baltic German community and began a rivalry with the newspaper *Rigasche Zeitung*, which argued that the Russian troupe would not receive enough profit with two to three performances a week, while the German artists – both the dramatic and opera troupes – will be dispossessed of essential rehearsal space⁵. *Rigasche Zeitung* also makes the point that the Russians simply had to create their own theater, which could have not only a Russian but also a Latvian-speaking troupe. This drew ire from Evgraf Cheshikhin, and his sarcastic response shows a dissatisfaction with the dominance of German culture in Riga, as well as the fact that Latvian culture, which was at the state of its infancy at the time, was compared to the Russian heritage. A characteristic quote follows:

“Latvians do not yet have their own dramatic literature, but we can let the ‘*Rigasche Zeitung*’ in on a little secret: Russian dramatic literature, as well as the Russian school of composers, is rather abundant. ‘*Rigasche Zeitung*’ will find it interesting to learn that someone called Gogol has written a few comedies which are not all that bad and can even compare to works by Birch-Pfeiffer; someone called Griboedov has created a rather interesting play called ‘Woe from Wit,’ which some people rate even higher than Benedix <...>. Glinka, Dargomizhsky, Serov and Tchaikovsky have not attained the popularity of the Marschners and Lortzings, but they are still youthful, albeit deceased⁶, and it allows one to hope that one day, they will also be understood in Riga. Alongside

these insignificant news, we would also like to note for the ‘*Rigasche Zeitung*’ that, if the Russian theater is to receive its deserved space in Riga, it cannot and must not exist only on small and poorly equipped stages. The strength of the Russian theater is in its harsh, realistic poetry, dramas and comedies, intertwined by bitterness, but also by light humour, the rich melodies of its folk operas”⁷.

At the same time, since the end of the 1870s, the role of Russian music in Riga’s cultural life grows rather significantly. The first composer whose works have been noted by critics for featuring the Russian national colour, although much later than in Russia itself, is **Mikhail Glinka**. *A Life for the Tsar* was the first Russian opera staged in the Riga City Theater in 1879, on February 28. It was performed in German and became a widely discussed event.

Overall, this opera was received very well. When comparing the reviews in the Russian and Baltic German periodicals, we see that the latter seek more parallels with the music of composers from other countries. So, while discussing specific excerpts, Friedrich Pilzer from *Rigasche Zeitung* (1879, March 5) finds in Antonida’s rondo a similarity with Donizetti, and he holds the majestic polyphony of the choral numbers in high regard, drawing parallels with Handel’s choral numbers; and the orchestral language reminds him of Beethoven. The critic also notes the oratorical character of the work⁸.

In another article of the *Rigasche Zeitung* (1879, March 8), Pilzer also discusses the manifestation of Russian national musical motives in the opera. In this publication, he highlights the church bell imitation: “One of the characteristics of the opera ‘A Life for the Tsar’ are the bell sounds, which undoubtedly stress the festive and grandiose impression from the finale. <...> He [Glinka] is the first composer who has made use of it [the bells in the opera], and maybe he as the Russian

was so easily attracted to do this, because bell sounds have a far greater significance for members of the Greek Catholic Church than for representatives of other confessions”⁹.

A less detailed and, at the same time, more critical point of view is manifested in the article of another influential Riga newspaper, the *Neue Zeitung für Stadt und Land* (1879, March 2; the signature R. probably points to Moritz Rudolph, a long-term music reviewer of this newspaper). The main objections to the opera are in the storyline, which the reviewer believes is lacking a dramatic tension: “The sacrifice of the peasant Sussanin for the newly elected Tsar, <...> the salvation of the latter from the danger threatened by the Poles, is depicted as smoothly as possible and without any real intrigue. An incidentally running amorous story is related to the main dramatic plot only as far as Antonida is Sussanin’s daughter. The opera could almost start with the third act¹⁰.” However, this critic also praises the contribution of Glinka as a composer: “‘A Life for the Tsar’ is <...> worth the interest of every non-national too. Exceptionally characteristic and largely full of unique beauty is also the music¹¹.”

The Russian newspaper *Rizhskiy Vestnik* pays little attention to the music of *A Life for the Tsar*, possibly assuming that the most intelligent members of the Russian community of Riga already know this work from their visits to St. Petersburg. More attention is paid to the understanding of Russianness by Baltic German artists, and the review of the opera begins as follows: “We were feeling curiosity and a kind of distrust on the third day when we went to the opera hall of the City Theater, where the long-promised and eagerly awaited opera ‘A Life for the Tsar’ was staged¹².”

Later in the article, the anonymous reviewer from the *Rizhskiy Vestnik* generally appreciates the staging, especially the performance of Eduard Thümmel in the role

of Sussanin and Frida Bontemps as Vanya. However, the Russian newspaper also notes that the chorus was rather weak, and this objection is significant, considering the important position the choral numbers held in Glinka’s opera. The *Rizhskiy Vestnik* also criticizes the lack of Russian authenticity in certain details of the staging: “<...> so, instead of sarafans, all peasant women wore skirts that looked a little like Swedish [national] costumes <...>. We were particularly surprised by the monks of the Ipatyevo monastery, they were somehow dressed in cassocks of the Franciscan Catholic Order”¹³.

It should be added that the *Rizhskiy Vestnik* kept sight on the production of *A Life for the Tsar* also in the weeks following the premiere, and expressed a concern that the numbers of the audience on the second and especially on the third evening were less than at the first performance¹⁴, which had been sold out. Looking for ways to improve attendance, the newspaper gives certain suggestions to the German artists of the City Theater. For example, the performers of the famous trio *Ne tomi, rodimyy* (Grieve not, beloved) received the following recommendation: “Try to use a slower tempo, to highlight Sabinin’s passion towards his bride. <...> You will see that it will be fine.”

The comparative analysis of the views on Russian music expressed both in the German and Russian press of Riga leads to following **conclusions**.

In the Russian metropolises, the national romantic music flourished at least since the 1840s, e.g. from the culminating phase of Glinka’s activity. In Riga this music was represented poorly up to the 1870s, and it proves that Cheshikhin’s sparkling irony about the partiality of the Baltic Germans in their cultural preferences was not unfounded.

At the same time, when such a significant composition as Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* was finally premiered in Riga, it turned

out to be of great interest not only for the Russian but also for the Baltic German music critics. Among the cited reviews, the articles written by Friedrich Pilzer could be highlighted as being the most erudite and even the most lucid. Some of the parallels mentioned by Pilzer correlate well with the contemporary views on the music by Glinka – for example, the influence of Donizetti is also noted by many musicologists who have researched the biography of Glinka, including Rutger M. Helmers [3, p. 23], Richard Taruskin [7, p. 66], etc. Significant is also the highlighting of the use of bell sounds as a link to the Russian identity – thus, Pilzer has revealed a symbol that is important in later Russian music (by Modest Musorgsky, Sergey Rachmaninoff, etc.) too and is also frequently mentioned in this regard by contemporary musicologists [see, for example, 4, p. 361; 5, p. 8–9; etc.].

The views of the German and Russian communities on certain events of music life, were, obviously, frequently quite different – the Russian reviewers had stricter demands regarding the Russian authenticity of the performance, and they did not hesitate to criticize this aspect. However, the general

tone of the *Rizhskiy Vestnik* reviewing the performance of the ‘Rigaer Stadttheater’ is far from being negative – even if the objections are expressed (for example, about the previously mentioned trio *Ne tomi, rodimyy*), their goal is to bring German artists closer to the desirable understanding (from the viewpoint of the critic) of this opera and thus to improve its reception. It lets us conclude that, notwithstanding the political disagreements between the German and Russian communities of Riga, both sides also tried to look for common values, and music was a field not only of rivalry and controversies but also of a search for mutual understanding.

In the following decades, Riga’s music life was also significantly enriched by the works of other Russian composers – Tchaikovsky, the members of *The Mighty Five*, etc. Thus, the thematic scope discussed in this article is undoubtedly worth further study, which could deepen the awareness not only of the music history of this particular region, but also that of all of Europe. Indirectly, it also helps to understand contemporary processes – the similarities and differences in the views on various musical events in a multicultural environment.

NOTES

¹ The intensive migration of Latvian peasants to Riga in the 19th century was conditioned by the rapid industrialization and the labor shortages in the city, as well as by the much wider educational opportunities emerging after the abolition of serfdom (in Curonia 1817, in Livonia 1819, in Vitebsk governorate, including current Latgale, 1861).

² Music criticism in the Latvian-language press of this time was still in its wake, and the first critics paid more attention to Latvian rather to Baltic German or Russian music, therefore, Latvian-language reviews are not discussed in my article.

³ Original: “Wer erinnert sich nicht der naiv überschwenglichen Zeit, oder nicht hat wenigstens von ihr gehört, als Franz Liszt in unserer guten Stadt die Pferde ausgespannt wurden und unsere Damen im Corridor des Theaters Gasse bildeten, um den Liebling ihrer Herzen aus nächster Nähe sehen zu können. Gegenwärtig weilt Anton Rubinstein, “der Stern des Nordens” bei uns, und der Enthusiasmus, natürlich in unsere Zeit übersetzt, ist kaum ein geringerer; <...> der Name Rubinstein ist auf Aller Zungen, seine zauberhafte Musik in Aller Ohren.” See the article: Anton Rubinstein’s Concert [Concert by Anton Rubinstein]. *Zeitung*

für Stadt und Land [Newspaper for City and Country]. 1869. October 11, p. 2.

⁴ Original: “<...> so hatte der Componist <...> zu der “Caprice russe” vielleicht eines der undankbarsten, an sich überaus armen slawischen Motive gewählt, dasselbe aber in so meisterhafter Formenbehandlung variiert, daß “aus dem Holzapfel eine Ananas” wurde.” See the article: Fr. P. [Friedrich Pilzer]. Anton Rubinstein. *Rigasche Zeitung* [Newspaper of Riga]. 1869. October 14, p. 1.

⁵ Noch einmal die Russische Bühne im Stadttheater [Once More About the Russian Scene in the City Theater]. *Rigasche Zeitung* [Newspaper of Riga]. 1875. May 10, p. 1.

⁶ Tchaikovsky was still alive at this time, but his music was hardly performed in Riga in 1870s.

⁷ Original: «Если латыши не имеют ещё своей драматической литературы, то мы можем сказать “Рижск. Газ.” по секрету, что существует довольно богатая русская драматическая литература и целая школа русских музыкальных композиторов. Для “Рижск. Газеты” может быть не безинтересно будет узнать, что некто Гоголь написал очень недурные комедии, не уступающие пожалуй даже пьесам Бирх-Пфейфер; некто Грибоедов тоже сочинил довольно интересную вещь “Горе от ума”, которую некоторые ставят даже выше Бенедикса. <...> Что касается Глинки, Даргомыжского, Серова и Чайковского, то хоть они в Риге и не достигли славы Маршнеров и Лорцингов, но все-таки они как люди молодые (хотя и умершие) подают ещё надежды (на то, что их со временем поймут и в Риге). Сообщив эти маленькие сведения “Рижск. Газете” мы заметим, что если русскому театру суждено в Риге занять подобающее ему место, то он не может и не должен держаться на маленьких сценах со скудной обстановкою. Сила русского театра – в суровой поэзии правды, в его драмах и проникнутых горечью, но светлым юмором комедиях, в богатых мелодиях его народных опер». See the article: E[vgraf] Cheshikhin. Eshche raz russkaya stsena v gorodskom teatre [Once More About

the Russian Scene in the City Theater]. *Rizhskiy Vestnik* [The Riga Herald]. 1875. May 16, p. 2.

⁸ Fr. P. [Friedrich Pilzer]. Glinka’s Oper “Das Leben für den Zaren” [The Opera by Glinka “A Life for the Tsar”]. *Rigasche Zeitung* [Newspaper of Riga]. 1879. March 5, p. 1.

⁹ Original: “Eine der besonderen Eigenthümlichkeiten in der Oper “Das Leben für den Zaren” ist das Glockengeläute, durch welches die feierlich großartige Wirkung des Finale unstreitig sehr erhöht wird. <...> er ist eben einfach der erste, der es angewendet und konnte als Russe um so leichter dazu geführt werden, als das Glockenläuten bei den Angehörigen der griechisch-katholischen Kirche eine weit höhere Bedeutung hat, als bei denen anderer Confessionen.” See the article: Fr. P. [Friedrich Pilzer]. Michael Iwanowitsch Glinka. *Rigasche Zeitung* [Newspaper of Riga]. 1879. March 8, p. 1.

¹⁰ Original: “Der Opfertod des Bauern Sussanin für den neuerwählten Zar, <...> die Errettung des letzteren aus der ihn durch die Polen bedrohenden Gefahr vollziehen sich mit unbehinderter Glätte und ohne jene eigentliche Verwicklung. Eine nebenbei laufende Herzensgeschichte steht mit dem eigentlichen dramatischen Gedanken nur insofern in lockestem Zusammenhang, als Antonida Sussanins Tochter ist. Die Oper könnte beinahe gleich mit dem dritten Acte anfangen.” See the article: R. [Moritz Rudolph?]. Oper [Opera]. *Neue Zeitung für Stadt und Land* [New Newspaper for City and Country]. 1879. March 2, p. 3.

¹¹ Original: ““Das Leben für den Zar” verdient <...> das Interesse auch jedes gebildeten Nicht-Nationalen. Außerordentlich charakteristisch und fast durchweg von origineller Schönheit ist auch die Musik.” See the article: R. [Moritz Rudolph?]. Oper [Opera]. *Neue Zeitung für Stadt und Land* [New Newspaper for City and Country]. 1879. March 2, p. 3.

¹² Original: «Любопытство и род недоверия – вот те чувства, под влиянием которых мы отпраплялись третьего дня в залу городского театра, на сцене которого давалась в этот вечер давно обещанная и с такими нетерпением жданная всеми опера “Жизнь

за царя»». See the article: Gorodskoy teatr [The City Theater]. *Rizhskiy Vestnik* [The Riga Herald]. 1879. March 2, p. 1.

¹³ Original: «<...> так, все крестьянки вместо сарафанов явились в юбках, несколько напоминающих шведский наряд. <...> Более всего поразили нас монахи Ипатьевского монастыря, которые почему-то представлялись в рясах францисканского католического ордена». See the article: Gorodskoy teatr [The City Theater]. *Rizhskiy Vestnik* [The Riga Herald]. 1879. March 2, p. 1–2.

¹⁴ “Zhizn' za tsarya” na stsene rizhskogo gorodskogo teatra [“Life for the Tsar” on the scene of the Riga City Theater]. *Rizhskiy Vestnik* [The Riga Herald]. 1879. March 8, p. 2–3.

¹⁵ «Попробуйте несколько замедлить темп, придайте Сабину более страстного увлечения к своей невесте <...>. Вы увидите тогда, что выйдет хорошо». See the article: Primechaniya dlya g. Rutkhardta [Notes for Mr. Ruthardt]. *Rizhskiy Vestnik* [The Riga Herald]. 1879. March 10, p. 2. The conductor Julius Ruthardt is referred to here.

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