

A Tribute to the Mighty Handful

The Russian Guitar Quartet



DE 3518



0 13491 35182 7



A Tribute to the Mighty Handful

The Russian Guitar Quartet

César Cui: Cherkess Dances ♦ Cossack Dances

Modest Mussorgsky: Potpourri from *Boris Godunov*

Mily Balakirev: Mazurka No. 3 ♦ Polka ♦ "Balakireviana"

Alexander Borodin: Polovtsian Dances

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade in Spain

Total playing time: 64:38

A Tribute to the Mighty Handful

The Russian Guitar Quartet

Dan Caraway, Alexei Stepanov, Vladimir Sumin, Oleg Timofeyev

CÉSAR CUI (arr. Oleg Timofeyev):

1. Cherkess Dances (5:53)

2. Cossack Dances (5:24)

3. MODEST MUSSORGSKY (arr. Timofeyev):

Potpourri from *Boris Godunov* (13:25)

MILY BALAKIREV (arr. Viktor Sobolenko):

4. Mazurka No. 3 (4:54)

5. Polka (3:17)

6. ALEXANDER BORODIN (arr. Timofeyev):

Polovtsian Dances (14:02)

MILY BALAKIREV (arr. Alexei Stepanov): "Balakireviana"

7. I – Along the meadow (1:19)

8. II – By my father's gate (1:49)

9. III – I am tired of those nights (2:54)

10. IV – Under the green apple tree (1:24)

11. NIKOLAY RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (arr. Sobolenko):

Scheherazade in Spain (10:12)

Total playing time: 64:38

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Serious connoisseurs of classical music as well as more superficial listeners usually have a certain image of (if not a prejudice about) Russian music. It is commonly thought of as something big, loud, flashy, emotional, expressive, on the edge, and painfully familiar, such as Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* or Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Let's face it: a Western listener is hardly aware of any Russian music prior to 1850. But this does *not* mean that there was no remarkable music in Russia before that. For example, Russia has long had its own original guitar tradition, one associated with the seven-string guitar in a particular tuning. This instrument came into fashion during the age of Catherine the Great (1790s), reached its peak in the 1820s and 30s, and slowly faded away from the mainstream just as Russian piano, orchestral, and operatic music began to attract international audiences.

This great but neglected treasury of Russian guitar music is nothing less than an alternative universe for today's standard classical guitar repertoire. Yet it contains a paradox: It barely relates to that magic world of "Russian music" that Western audiences are often eager to consume, searching for the depths of the mysterious Russian soul. Instead, the Russian guitar repertoire exists by itself, waiting to be discovered and embraced by conservatories and concert performers while capturing new listeners in the process.

In a certain way, this album is an attempt to reinvent history. We took the alliance of classical Russian composers known as "The Mighty Handful" or "The Five" and built a musical tribute to them with our quartet of four Russian seven-string guitars. We did this in the spirit of the Russian guitar tradition, observing the stylistic peculiarities of the first half of the 19th century. Let me explain.

For many years, Spanish and Latin American repertoires have dominated the classical guitar scene. That is hardly surprising, since we even refer to the instrument as "the Spanish guitar." One of the distinctive qualities of this music is its rhythmic crispness, reflecting the fiery dances of Spain and Latin America. In guitar terms this means a crystal clear, almost aggressive articulation in the right hand. When we examine the bulk of Russian guitar music from 1800 to 1850, we find a very different picture. A certain legato feel was preferred then; the guitarist was trying to imitate the smoothness of a Russian song as if it were being carried along by the driver of a "troika" (three-horse sleigh) as it traversed the endless Russian *steppes*. Technically, it meant that instead of articulating every note in the right hand, the Russian masters insisted on cleverly mixing legato passages (called "luxurious legatos" in 1854 by Mikhail Stakhovich) and harplike textures. Such combinations were common in the works of Andrey Sychra (1773-1850), Mikhail Vysotsky (1791-1837), and their noted disciples. We tried to hold on to this heritage in our arrangements for this recording.

Another way in which our approach differs from that of most guitar quartets in today's market is our use of the smaller, so-called "quart-guitars" that are tuned a fourth higher than the full-sized ones. This was also a historical practice for 19th-century Russian guitar ensembles: hundreds of duets composed for a full-sized guitar and a quart-guitar survive from that era. In about 1900, quartets consisting of four seven-string guitars of different sizes appeared in Russia. But unfortunately – while such ensembles were documented in photographs and program descriptions, – no sheet music for them has survived. With this recording, The Russian Guitar Quartet is attempting to revive this short-lived, yet extremely promising approach, applying it to the most famous examples of "Russian" music: the orchestral masterpieces of "The Mighty Handful."

From any music history textbook we learn that The Mighty Handful (in Russian: могучая кучка, literally, "a mighty little heap") was a group of St. Petersburg composers who were conscious of and enthusiastic about the creation of an authentic Russian national style in music. Sometimes the group is also called the "Balakirev circle" because Mily Balakirev was its main proponent and ideologist.

What textbooks are *not* telling us, however, is that this group of five composers represents the whole range of exposure, from extreme popularity to complete obscurity. For example, we often hear Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* on the radio. But when was the last time we heard any composition by Cui? Consequently, we

created this album's program on the principles of fair representation: you will find some very familiar melodies next to completely unknown ones, yet both are equally delightful.

The album opens with two compositions by César Cui (1835-1918), a high-ranking military engineer of French and Lithuanian descent. Typically for his generation, Cui was self-taught as a composer. But this did not prevent him from producing a grand *oeuvre* in all genres of music. The **Cherkess Dances** come from his early opera *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, conceived in 1857, while his **Cossack Dances** come from another opera, *The Captain's Daughter*, which was written almost half a century later. Set side by side, though, these two dances present a snapshot of the southern outpost of the Russian empire, the Caucasus. The word "Cherkess" was used by the Russians to collectively refer to the indigenous populations of the Caucasian mountains. The Cossacks were brought there to settle and to protect imperial interests. Both sets of dances show vigor and wit, and both are built on contrasting themes with softer and more languorous material in the middle sections.

Among The Mighty Handful composers, Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881) enjoys a well-deserved reputation as an unquestionable genius. He was born to a wealthy aristocratic family of ancient lineage, and showed remarkable musical talents very early in his life. He did receive piano lessons from his mother, but his family groomed him for a military career. He was sent to a military college in St. Petersburg – but

ironically, this was also where he met Alexander Dargomyzhsky, Borodin, Cui, and Balakirev: the composers who strongly influenced his career choices. He became so involved in his musical pursuits that, by 1858, he retired entirely from his military duties. His operatic masterpiece *Boris Godunov* is based on A. Pushkin's epic poem that, in turn, retells Nikolay Karamzin's version of the actual historical events.

Boris Godunov brings us to Russia's "Time of Trouble," the dark and gloomy period around 1600. For today's listener, it is impossible to imagine this great work without the lush and somewhat macabre coronation scene, the song of the Holy Fool, and the explosive song of the former monk Varlaam.

At this point, it's interesting to note that the majority of 19th-century audiences did not listen to operas or symphonies in the theaters, but rather heard them in piano reductions for two or four hands. Thus, for the foundation of our **Potpourri from *Boris Godunov***, we used a piano potpourri by a little-known composer of Mussorgsky's generation, Andrey Evgeniev. But we soon discovered that the composer (who, unlike Mussorgsky himself, was professionally trained as a conductor and composer) omitted the most telling moments in the opera! This inspired me to rewrite the *Potpourri*, so that it would include the above-mentioned numbers and would end gloriously with the Coronation Scene.

Mily Balakirev (1836–1810) turned out to be a very difficult *kuchkist* ("Mighty Handful mem-

ber") to include in our tribute. Both the mouth-piece and the brain of the group, he composed extremely demanding virtuoso piano music and large symphonic works, but nothing really suitable for our quartet. Back in 2007, I approached a friend from St. Petersburg, the well-known cellist and composer Viktor Sobolenko, to create a "Balakirev offering" for us. Viktor came up with an arrangement of a very sophisticated **Mazurka** by Balakirev – in fact, the piece has the characteristics of a rondo, and its refrain is more like a fugue by J.S. Bach than a Chopin mazurka. This seemed like the right direction, and a couple of years later I made my own arrangement of Balakirev's **Polka**. However, we all felt that Balakirev – as the group's leader, deserved more attention; thus we began another exploration which I will describe a little later.

A medical doctor and chemistry professor, Alexander Borodin (1833-1887) was also a very talented composer. The illegitimate son of a Georgian aristocrat, he was always financially taken care of by his father, and received a good education in the sciences and medicine. His only composition teacher was Mily Balakirev, who started giving him lessons in 1862. The **Polovtsian Dances** from Borodin's opera *Prince Igor* is not only his best-known orchestral composition but one of the most beloved pieces of classical music.

Now, back to Balakirev. The beauty of his *Mazurka* and *Polka* notwithstanding, I felt that our tribute to him had to be connected with his ambitions as a leader of nationalist composers

who were committed to the idea of authentic Russian music. Since one of our quartet members, Alexei Stepanov, is also a promising composer, I gave him a Soviet edition of Balakirev's 1866 and 1900 collections of Russian songs. Obviously, to propagate Russian *melos* and harmony, the founder of The Handful had to collect and sort through a massive amount of Russian folk music. He published his songs in a format that was typical of his times: for solo voice with piano accompaniment. I asked Alexei to choose several songs from these collections, to arrange them in Balakirev's style, and thereby create a tribute to Balakirev that we would call **Balakireviana**. (Of course, this title is a bit of a tongue-twister to pronounce, but imagine how much worse it would have been had we decided to create such a monument to Rimsky-Korsakov!) Alexei chose the following songs from Balakirev's collection: *Kak po lugu, lugu* ("Along the meadow"), *U vorot, vorot batiushkinykh* ("By my father's gate"), *Nadoeli noch, naskuchili* ("I am tired of those nights"), and *Pod iablon'iu zelionoiu* ("Under the green apple tree"). Being intimately familiar with the resources of our quartet, Alexei crafted a truly enjoyable suite.

The last piece on the program is also chronologically the first composition that the Russian Guitar Quartet commissioned from Viktor Sobolenko in 2007. The youngest member of Balakirev's circle, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) also had another career besides his musical activities: he was a naval officer and later an inspector of naval bands. Of all members of the circle, he has been the one most

recognized for his command of orchestration. Viktor Sobolenko noticed some rhythmic and melodic similarity between the famous episodes from Rimsky's *Scheherazade* and *Capriccio Espagnol*. Without much delay, he created his own piece, **Scheherazade in Spain**, a witty post-modern paraphrase on both of these famous classical hits.

A couple of words should perhaps be added here concerning "Russian Orientalism" in music. From Baroque times on it was common for Western European composers to portray exotic lands in their operas and ballets. But as these lands were remote from the epicenters of their musical fantasies, only toward the end of the 19th century did they develop any accuracy in imitating Oriental music. The path of Russian composers was quite different. Since Russia as an empire had claimed the Caucasus and Central Asia, many Russian composers were well versed in the authentic music from those lands. For example, Mikhail Glinka had already used real Persian and Caucasian music in his opera *Ruslan and Ludmila* (1842). But the other aspect instead concerns the Western reception of Russian art. Beginning with Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, European and American listeners were expecting Oriental exoticism from Russian composers, not necessarily distinguishing between what was supposed to be natively Russian and a Russian attempt to portray the music of the "real" Orient. In our album, the obviously Orientalist numbers are, of course, Cui's *Cherchess Dances*, Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*, and the middle section of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. The recognizable Spanish compo-

nents of *Scheherazade in Spain* are, of course, Rimsky's tribute to another type of musical exoticism, Spanish music's own multi-faceted "oriental" influences dating back to the ancient Moorish (essentially Arabic) invasions.

– Oleg Timofeyev

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN GUITAR QUARTET

The idea that led to the founding of **The Russian Guitar Quartet** goes back to 2006, when we started the International Annual Russian Guitar Seminar and Festival (IARGUS), an annual seven-string guitar festival in Iowa. The purpose of the festival was not only to revive and promote little-known music for the Russian guitar, but also to encourage composers to create a modern repertoire for it. I knew of the Russian guitar quartet tradition, and decided to recreate it in the 21st century.

The first challenge was, of course, that there were no scores for such an ensemble. We therefore started to commission arrangements from a number of colleagues, with varying results (although we are grateful to every participant). Another challenge was the exact configuration of our quartet. The historical references suggested a "quart-guitar" (tuned a fourth higher than the "normal" one), a "terz-guitar" (tuned only a minor third higher), and two full-sized guitars. But it soon became clear that such a

combination of instruments was unsuited to our ambitious plan. The trick is that using different-sized guitars requires some transposing. For example, our *Scheherazade in Spain* begins in the key of G Major, but those playing the quart-guitars are looking at a score in D Major: They play in what they think of as "G Major," but must transpose their parts a fourth higher. If we were to use instruments tuned a third apart, like the terz-guitars, the relationship of keys would become impractical for stringed instruments; one would suddenly have to deal with 5 or 6 sharps, which is not how guitarists play. That is how we arrived at our present configuration: using two bright and snappy quart-guitars and two full-size guitars with additional basses. This combination allows us to achieve an almost orchestral sonic range.

But because of such a configuration, our guitars cannot change their roles as easily as they can in "normal" guitar quartets. We are much more like a string quartet, with assigned roles of first violin (quart-guitar one), second violin (quart-guitar two), and so on. The following biographies of our members are given in their playing order, from top to bottom.

A winner of several guitar competitions, **Vladimir Sumin** was born in Almaty, Kazakhstan. He began his music studies at the age of seven. From 1980 to 2008 he lived, worked, and studied guitar in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. He was fortunate to study at the Rostov Musical Col-

lege with Leonid Krivonosov (1936-2015), one of very few guitar pedagogues in post-Soviet musical academia who still offered instruction in Russian seven-string guitar. At present Vladimir lives in Moscow and combines his active solo career with participation in The Russian Guitar Quartet and teaching.

A native of Moscow, **Alexei Stepanov** grew up in a family with strong musical traditions. Both his father and his grandfather played the seven-string guitar, while his mother was an excellent singer. Alexei learned his first guitar chords from his father and later graduated from the Tchaikovsky College and Moscow State University of Arts and Culture. As a soloist and an ensemble player, Stepanov has performed in many countries of Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Africa. He performs in a variety of genres and is one of the most creative accompanists of Russian art songs. Alexei's serious interest in composition began a few years ago and has greatly benefited our quartet.

Dan Caraway studied classical guitar at Iowa's Cornell College with Richard Stratton, and has since studied with Todd Seelye, Steve Armstrong, and Oleg Timofeyev. Dan is a musician, music instructor, and freelance sound engineer. Before founding his own school, he taught classical guitar at one of the best liberal arts colleges in the United States, Grinnell College in Iowa, as well as guitar and guitar techniques at Cornell College. Dan lives in Dubuque, Iowa, where he teaches classical and finger-style guitar and runs a microbrewery.

Musicologist, lutenist, and guitarist **Oleg Timofeyev** holds an M.A. in Early Music Performance from USC, where he studied with James Tyler. His other lute teachers were Patrick O'Brien and Hopkinson Smith. In 1999, Timofeyev defended his Ph.D. dissertation on the Russian guitar tradition at Duke University. His playing can be heard on Brilliant Classics, Centaur, Dorian, Hänssler Classics, Naxos, Marquis, and Sono Luminus labels. A recipient of multiple awards, Timofeyev has taught at universities and conservatories in the United States, Russia, and the Ukraine.

For further information, go to
www.russian-guitar.com



Russian guitar made by Mikhail Eroshkin in 1912. In addition to seven strings tuned (bottom to top) D G B d g b d', it has five additional basses, BB C E F (or F#) A.

Left to right: Oleg Timofeyev, Dan Caraway, Alexei Stepanov, Vladimir Sumin





Recorded November 4 - 10, 2014, at
St. Bridget's Church, Johnson County, Iowa
Recording Engineer and Producer: Peter Nothnagle
Digital Mixing and Editing: Peter Nothnagle
Digital Mastering: Matthew Snyder, Allegro Recordings
Design and Layout: Lonnie Kunkel
Booklet editing: Lindsay Koob and Anne Maley

SPECIAL THANKS

We are grateful to Alexei Agibalov, Tariel Berimeladze, Viktor Sobolenko, Dimitri Illarionov, John Schneiderman, and Hideki Yamaya for their help with the arrangements; to Oksana Sumina and Dimitri Beier for all the pictures; to Tatiana Gorilovskaya for the cover design concept; to Toni Schlegel, Inna Naroditskaya, Cyrille Fague and Nicolas Beboutoff for their help in promoting the group; to my mother, Natalia Timofeyeva, for her general sponsorship; and last but not least to my wife, Sabine Gölz, for her encouragement and support all these years.

– Oleg Timofeyev

