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# Firebirds and Ice Queens: A Teaching Unit on Russian Music

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**T**he expectant silence of an orchestra hall. The commanding tap of a conductor's bow on his metal stand. The clean hum of a rosined bow on catgut. These sounds, so infused with excitement and emotion for lovers of classical music, strike the ears of most middle and high schoolers as dreary and uninteresting, inciting memories of being bored at Grandpa's house as he listened to his scratchy Beethoven LPs. Unfortunately, many school administrators share this glum view of classical music and the humanities in general; a course devoted solely to the study of art, literature, and music is a scarce find in any public high school. I know studies have been done on the inherent value of a humanities curriculum, on how after-school music programs decrease juvenile delinquency, and so on. But the best evidence I know for the value of classical music comes from my own life.

When I was in sixth grade, my mother's cousin gave our family their rickety, wooden upright piano completely free, under the condition that my father would fix it up and that my sister and I would learn to play it. My parents instantly accepted. My father refinished the old instrument beautifully, and my mother enrolled us in lessons with the local, beehive-haired church organist. I started my lessons with the usual mix of interest in learning something new and boredom with the drudg-

ery of practice. However, once my fingers started to master the scales and stopped stumbling through the short pieces my teacher provided me, my passing interest in piano music slowly grew into a hobby, which in turn grew into a passion. My teacher enrolled me in regional competitions and, to my adolescent disbelief, I did well. I eventually performed an hour-long solo concert for my Honors capstone project in college. For me, the study of piano transformed from an escape from algebra homework into a deeply fulfilling activity I still cherish today.

When a teacher taps into passion from his or her personal life, he or she makes thrilling teaching possible. Passion is useless, however, without sound methodology. In the humanities classes I've been privileged to teach at college, I've always sought to share my love of classical music with students, to varying degrees of success. First, I've chosen music that I find inherently interesting. All throughout my piano training, I always gravitated to the Russians, to the composers whose names end in *-off*: Gretchaninoff, Rebikoff, and later Rachmaninoff. There was something about Russian music that was different than the others. I couldn't quite put a finger on it; its rhythms were more interesting, the harmonies were more expressive, and the whole flavor was just a bit more fiery than the others. However, while my pulse quickens listening to the finale of Prokofiev's second piano sonata in class, I often note some students staring out the window, gnawing on their pencil erasers, undoubtedly making plans for the evening. Instances of boredom decrease, I've found, when students are told *how* to listen to this music. Just as I must often be told what to look for when staring at a Rembrandt or a Monet, it is my job to equip students with the handholds necessary to appreciate this music.

To that end, I present an outline of a teaching unit on Russian music that I would teach to a high school humanities course, most likely for upperclassmen. I imagine the audience for this course would be an interesting mix. First, a focused humanities course would never be a required course offering in a public school, so the students who register for this course would be learners with a strong interest in the world of humanities.

Second, the learner population would certainly be a mix of musical backgrounds. I imagine there would be several students in the class with a strong musical upbringing, who would be capable of talking about the musical selections using advanced musicological parlance. However, the bulk of the class would be comprised of students who have a passing interest in classical music in general, but do not have the experience necessary to talk about the pieces in advanced terms. As such, the learner outcomes (at least, on a very general level) would be twofold. By the end of the course, the students would be able to appreciate and discuss classical music in general using more sophisticated terms, and be able to describe the distinguishing characteristics of the major composers discussed in the course.

I will outline the major divisions of the unit, the learner outcomes for each division, the course content to be transmitted, and some sample activities. In many of these activities, I will attempt to draw parallels between Russian classical music and contemporary popular music (and there *are* parallels!). Any opportunity for students to see the how music of a century ago influenced what is popular today makes the study of humanities that much more worthwhile. In each unit, I would occasionally ask the students to bring something to discussion in the form of a one-and-a-half to two-page research paper. I will provide possible topics for the students to research for this paper and bring to class. Some units will also focus on one composer. Such units will feature a central work by this composer; I have chosen such works not only because they are indicative of that composer's style, but also simply because they are well-known. I think it would be valuable for my students to come away from my class being able to "talk shop" about the well-known names of classical music. Finally, I've chosen these selections simply for the fact that they are exciting pieces of music. As motivated as they may be, my students *are* still high schoolers, and consideration for their attention threshold must be paid. After all, I'm happy enough they're taking my class; the last thing I want to do is bore them out of it.

## Unit 1: Romantic Music 101

### Outcomes

- Students will be able to identify the various instruments in an orchestra.
- Students will be able to define the differences between Romantic music and the music of the time periods before it (Classical, Baroque, etc.).

Music: *Brandenburg Concerto*, J.S. Bach; various two- and three-part inventions, Bach; “Rage over the Lost Penny,” L.V. Beethoven; Piano Sonata No. 1, Beethoven; *Sleeping Beauty*, P.I. Tchaikovsky.

Content: The aesthetic by which Baroque music must be appreciated is based on structure. The more melodically complex a piece of music, the more beautiful it is (at least by Baroque standards). As such, there is a great emphasis on counterpoint in this style of music—that is, two or three or four melodies all playing at once, overlapping and harmonizing with each other. Classical music (“Classical” here meaning the era of Beethoven and Handel) retains this idea of structure with the advent of the sonata, a highly structured form to which the melodies and harmonic development of the piece must adhere. Introducing this material shows what Romantic music is by first showing what it is not. While Romantic music certainly adheres to certain forms, the emphasis in Romanticism is on the portrayal of an emotion, rather than adherence to a prescribed format. I’ve chosen the *Brandenburg Concerto* and the *Inventions* as exemplars of the Baroque era for their emphasis on structure and successful marriage of many melodies. Sonata No. 1

by Beethoven is the best example I could find of “sonata-allegro” form, a strict Classical structure (the first melody appears in a certain key, is repeated once, then a second melody appears in the key five notes away from the original one, etc.). Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty* is an enjoyable contrast between the Baroque and Classical works simply because it clearly focuses on pulling the heartstrings instead of putting forth an impressive structure.

Research Topics: The life of Bach, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky; Sonata-allegro form (very important).

### Activities:

- Listen to the *Inventions* at home, then *Sleeping Beauty*. Without analyzing too deeply the use of various instruments, simply relate how the works made you feel. Did one stir you more than the other? Why or why not?
- Bring in a work of literature that adheres strictly to a form (Shakespearean sonnet, Greek tragedy, etc.). Analyze how well it sticks to that format. In your opinion, does the fact that it obeys a certain form make it a better piece of literature? Are you more moved by it? Explain your reactions.
- Bring in a popular piece of music that uses two melodies on top of each other, much like Bach did in his *Inventions*. It can be anything: the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Incubus, whatever. We’ll listen to it in class, and it’s up to you to explain how the melodies work together.

## Unit 2: Tchaikovsky, or Bring Down The House

### Outcomes

- Students will be able to identify the music of Tchaikovsky by

what makes it distinctly “Tchaikovskyan.”

- Students will be able to identify Tchaikovsky’s music as distinctly “romantic.”

Music: Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Eugene Onegin*.

Research Topics: The Petersburg conservatory, Tchaikovsky’s bizarre marriage, his relationship to his teacher Nicholas Rubinstein.

Content: Tchaikovsky is the composer most noted for his sense of “pull-out-all-the-stops” Romanticism, a quality I feel is best exemplified by the *Sleeping Beauty* selection covered in the preceding unit, and by his first piano concerto. Some find his style moving, while others find it too obvious and forced; it would be interesting to see which side my students fall on.

#### Activities:

- Research what a concerto is. What different types are there?
- Listen to the piano concerto. First, how does the piano interact with the orchestra? Do the piano and orchestra take turns playing? Do they play together? How well do they play together? Second, what do you think of his style? Grandiose and moving? Overdone? Tell me briefly why.
- Read portions of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and relate them to Tchaikovsky’s opera. (I will have divided Pushkin’s work up among groups.) What part of the story is being portrayed in the opera version?
- Bring in a piece of modern popular music that you feel “goes for broke” with emotion. I’m thinking of harder rock

(metal), or pop songs that really pull the heartstrings. Is this effective music to you? What do you like or not like about it?

### Unit 3: Rachmaninoff

#### Outcomes

- Students will be able to see the stylistic departure of Rachmaninoff's music from Tchaikovsky's.
- Students will be able to analyze music on a more complex level.

Music: Piano Concerti Nos. 2 and 3, literature for four hands, *Etudes-Tableaux*.

Research Topics: His musical background, the failure of his *First Symphony*, his relationship with his teacher Sverev, the *Third Piano Concerto*, his huge hands (how big were they, anyway?).

Content: With Rachmaninoff, one can sense a departure from Tchaikovsky's music. Rachmaninoff employs a much more subtle touch to much of his music. Though he certainly has a flair for the dramatic (as can be heard in his *Third Concerto*), Rachmaninoff's strength is the simplicity of his melodies. It is this simplicity that differentiates him from Tchaikovsky, and the opening bars of the second piano concerto illustrate this nicely. Also, some of Rachmaninoff's music is meant to evoke a visual image, which causes some to place him within the "impressionist" composers as well.

#### Activities:

- Since some of the *Etudes-Tableaux* were inspired by paintings by Böcklin, find some of his work. Which paintings do

you think inspired the music?

- Bring in any visual work you think could have inspired an *Etude-Tableau*. What qualities of the work are portrayed in the music?
- Listen to the *Variations on A Russian Folk Song for Four Hands*. How many times can you hear the original melody played again? How does Rachmaninoff vary the melody? On what registers of the piano can you hear the principal melody?

#### Unit 4: While We're Talking About Russian Folk Music...

##### Outcomes

- Students will be able to identify the musical devices that make this folk music distinctly Russian.
- Students will see the musical techniques that Russian folk music shares with other musical forms.

Music: various Russian folk tunes, Gregorian chant, Asian folk music.

Research Topics: Modes vs. Scales.

Content: Russian music is often based on “modes” instead of the traditional “keys” on which most classical music is based (A minor, C major, etc.). These modes (Lydian, Dorian, Aeolian, etc.) are also utilized in Gregorian chant. The pentatonic scale, a scale based on five notes instead of the traditional seven, often appears in Russian folk music as well. This scale, which often appears in traditional Asian music, corresponds to the black keys on the piano, which is why playing on just the black keys gives a distinctly Asian sound to the music.



Activities:

- Find some traditional Russian folk music. React to it briefly. Does it sound like anything else you may have heard?

Unit 5: Stravinsky and His Firebird (Not The Car)

Outcomes

- Students will be able to see the role that a traditional Russian folk tale plays in Stravinsky's suite.
- Students will be able to analyze on a yet more complex level the musical structure of *The Firebird Suite*.

Music: *The Firebird Suite*.

Research Topics: the tale itself, Diaghilev and Les Ballets Russes, Michel Fokine, his friendship with fellow composer Alexander Tcherepnin.

Content: Stravinsky utilizes a variety of tricks in his bag as a composer to create the images in *The Firebird*. From the dark and ominous opening bars, to the trills and ornaments that depict the graceful fluttering of the firebird's wings, to the heavy pounding chords that signify the ogre's arrival, *The Firebird* is a wide-ranging piece that will hopefully fascinate the students. I've chosen this one as opposed to *Petrouchka* or *The Rite of Spring* because of its accessibility. As much as I enjoy the avant-garde sounds of these works, I want to maintain the interest of my students without hearing "Well, it all just sounds like a bunch of loud, random noises to me."

Activities:

- Find and read a variation of the Firebird folk tale. How do the features of the story show up in the work? What instruments does Stravinsky use to portray certain elements of the story? Focus on specific kinds of instruments (brass, percussion, winds, etc.).

## Unit 6: A Few Others – Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Scriabin

### Outcomes

- Students will be able to hear the difference between these composers' music and that of the composers from the units before.
- Students will be able to offer a sophisticated analysis of one musical selection.

Music: Piano Concerto No. 2, Shostakovich; *Romeo and Juliet*, Prokofiev; Piano Prelude in E-flat Minor, Op. 11, No. 14, Scriabin.

Research Topics: the life of each of the composers, what makes each of their music distinct.

Content: For this unit, I would split the class into three, and each group would be responsible for presenting its composer to the rest of the class. I would create the groups, attempting to place a variety of skill levels into each group. Each group would be responsible for some biographical information on its composer, identification of its composer's contemporaries, how the composer's music differs from said contemporaries, and an analysis of one of the composer's works, not necessarily limited to those above. I chose these works because they lend themselves well to analysis and comparison (e.g., the

Prokofiev group could compare his *Romeo and Juliet* to Tchaikovsky's, etc.).

### Final Projects

- Analyze a work by a composer not covered here (Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Dagormyzhksy, Tcherepnin, etc.). Present it to the class by comparing it to a work we did cover. How do the works differ? How are they the same?
- Much Russian music creates a visual image in the mind of the reader. Put this image on a canvas. Create a painting, drawing, or other visual medium that re-creates what is portrayed in any work that we covered in class.
- Make a movie based on a Russian folk tale, and incorporate a musical selection into the soundtrack. Re-enact Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden*! Stravinsky's *Firebird*! Find one we didn't cover, perhaps!

An ambitious curriculum, to be sure. The success or failure of the unit will depend in large part on the instructor and the make-up of the students in the classroom. However, the potential positive outcomes for the student are numerous, and exist on a variety of levels. In the sunniest of all my teacher fantasies, students would come away with a profound understanding of Russian music, find themselves thrilled by its passion and complexity, and rush in a joyous throng to the nearest orchestra hall to purchase season subscriptions. Even on a more realistic level, though, students can come away from this unit with a better understanding of the creative forces that helped shape the music they listen to now. The simple study of classical music, Russian or no, also helps students to listen with more attention, to increase their listening attention span, a trait desired by teachers in many disciplines. And for the teacher (this teacher, anyway), the unit offers the opportunity to employ truly passionate

pedagogy. I encourage teachers to take liberally from this curriculum what they find useful, or use its basic structure to create a plan for teaching something that ignites their own passions, that fills their own classroom with the fire of brilliant teaching.