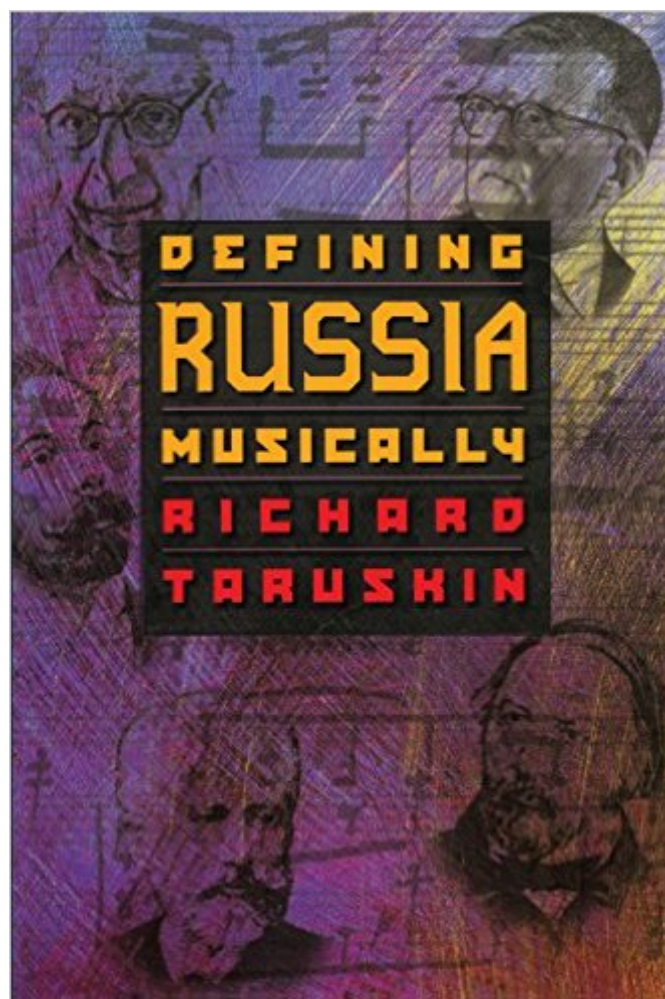


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Defining Russia Musically



Synopsis

The world-renowned musicologist Richard Taruskin has devoted much of his career to helping listeners appreciate Russian and Soviet music in new and sometimes controversial ways. *Defining Russia Musically* represents one of his landmark achievements: here Taruskin uses music, together with history and politics, to illustrate the many ways in which Russian national identity has been constructed, both from within Russia and from the Western perspective. He contends that it is through music that the powerful myth of Russia's "national character" can best be understood. Russian art music, like Russia itself, Taruskin writes, has "always [been] tinged or tainted ... with an air of alterity--sensed, exploited, bemoaned, reveled in, traded on, and defended against both from within and from without." The author's goal is to explore this assumption of otherness in an all-encompassing work that re-creates the cultural contexts of the folksong anthologies of the 1700s, the operas, symphonies, and ballets of the 1800s, the modernist masterpieces of the 1900s, and the hugely fraught but ambiguous products of the Soviet period. Taruskin begins by showing how enlightened aristocrats, reactionary romantics, and the theorists and victims of totalitarianism have variously fashioned their vision of Russian society in musical terms. He then examines how Russia as a whole shaped its identity in contrast to an "East" during the age of its imperialist expansion, and in contrast to two different musical "Wests," Germany and Italy, during the formative years of its national consciousness. The final section, expanded from a series of Christian Gauss seminars presented at Princeton in 1993, focuses on four individual composers, each characterized both as a self-consciously Russian creator and as a European, and each placed in perspective within a revealing hermeneutic scheme. In the culminating chapters--Chaikovsky and the Human, Scriabin and the Superhuman, Stravinsky and the Subhuman, and Shostakovich and the Inhuman--Taruskin offers especially thought-provoking insights, for example, on Chaikovsky's status as the "last great eighteenth-century composer" and on Stravinsky's espousal of formalism as a reactionary, literally counterrevolutionary move.

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Customer Reviews

Mr Taruskin is an excellent writer and knowledgeable musicologist. I read and learn from everything he writes. However, I think the gushing over him calls out for some balance. The 20th century made a lot of people uncomfortable. The great modernist artists (Picasso, Joyce / Proust, Debussy / Stravinsky) put an end to the "clear" categories (perspective, narrative, tonality / form) of the 19th as sociopolitical modernism (women's suffrage, worker's rights, the Russian Revolution, the Irish Rising) spurred the process of ending the "clear" categories of gender, class, empire, and racial entitlement, and as modernist physics (Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, et al) was reducing determinism to an approximation (as opposed to a definition) of reality. All these currents of understanding tend to terrify the unimaginative among us and reactionary historians and theorists (such as the present day creationists, climate change deniers, and "pick-up artists") have no trouble finding an audience. Taruskin is essentially a musicological conservative, made uncomfortable by the developments in the last century that moved away from the forms and tonalities of the "classical" era. As such he approaches a composer like Stravinsky (the most successful of all modernist musicians -- pretty clearly the greatest composer of the 20th century) with an axe to grind. Stravinsky was a social climbing snob and as such participated in the bigotry of the upper classes of his time, which, sadly, included making denigrating remarks about "the Jews" (see the film "Gentleman's Agreement"). Indefensible as that is, it is still a far cry from being a fascist or Nazi (as some artists of the era certainly were).

Musical scholarship today is like a dialogue within itself as well as informing the larger populace, sometimes you don't know which comes first. But here Taruskin must draw battle lines in the sand so to stake a claim, like the one against his benign enemy Peter van den Toorn. Taruskin is this side of the scholarship that shuns the guild system of note to note musical analysis the kind the Schenkerian ideologies have spawned in academia today. This is why his insights are so fascinating. It is incredible to think of all the Russians you hear at primary concert venues

throughout the United States it seems we have had virtually nothing to guide our listening habits. The music of Shostakovich is a great example, what we have had to guide our listening is his music was a veiled critique of the tyrannical Stalinist system that brutalized and pulverized culture, no one disagrees here. But one important question we never seem to have answered including Taruskin here, was Shostakovich a socialist, what did he actually think of the economic systems of the West?. Taruskin in two brilliant essays one on Shostakovich's opera "Lady Macbeth" and the other on the "Fifth Symphony" we have insights we have heard before, again Shostakovich the culture hero victim.. We also learn of Stravinsky's reactionary cast. I really didn't know he was an anti-Semite. Well you might say how does this effect his composition?. Well Taruskin makes a good argument for Stravinsky's treatments of subject matter, as in the obvious anti-social dimensions in the "Rite of Spring" where the virgin is sacrificed as an inevitability, no resortment to struggle, a concept anathema to Stravinsky.

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