The Imperial Themes of Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor*

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Nineteenth-century Russia produced no shortage of opulent cultural masterpieces, and chief among them was Alexander Porfiryevich Borodin's stunning opera, Prince Igor. This medieval tale of a Russian prince's struggle against the encroaching Turkic hordes of the Polovtsy embodies all the most popular nationalistic and romantic aspects of the nineteenth-century Russian cultural output. However, analysis of the opera's themes shows the opera endorses not only nationalism, but imperialism. When the contemporary Russian invasion of Central Asia is considered, it is evident that Prince Igor serves as a justification for Russian Imperial expansion by developing themes of the Christian civilizing mission, Orientalism, and the "Great Man" theory.

The story of Borodin's opera begins with the real-life reign of Igor Svyatoslavich, the prince of the Kievan Rus city of Putivl, whose reign was dramatized in the twelfth century epic *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, a national epic on the scale of the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Nibelungenlied*. The poem chronicles Igor's legendary raid against the Cumans (referred to as the Polovtsy in the opera), which led to Igor's captivity, and his subsequent dramatic escape across the mighty Donets River to the lands of the Rus.

In 1869, the music critic and ardent nationalist Vladimir Stasov drafted a scenario based on the poem and presented it to Borodin, who had been longing to write an opera. According to the English musicologist Gerald Abraham, Stasov believed he had found a theme which "met all

the demands of Borodin's talent and artistic nature: broad epic motives, nationalism, variety of characters, passion, drama, [and] the oriental."[1]

Soon after being presented with the scenario, Borodin immersed himself in the study of *The Song of Igor's Campaign* as well as the *Hypatian Codex* (on which the poem was based). However, progress on the opera soon slowed. In his *My Musical Life*, friend and fellow composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov wrote that the opera was being written by a man whose life was "rather queerly arranged."[2] Borodin was composing *Prince Igor* while serving as a professor of chemistry at the Imperial Medical Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg, and he spent much of his free time on charitable pursuits.[3] Unsurprisingly, Borodin died before completing the opera, having worked on the composition for eighteen years.

Unwilling to let Borodin's masterpiece go to waste, Rimsky Korskaov and his student Alexander Glazunov "decided to finish, orchestrate and set in order all that had been left behind by A. P. [Borodin], as well as prepare it for publication."[4] The pair finished the opera in less than a year, and on October 23, 1890, *Prince Igor* was premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg.

It is now relevant to mention the fact that most productions of *Prince Igor* follow the aforementioned events contained in the prologue with the second act of the opera as opposed to the first act. The opera is typically ordered this way in order to allow the setting of the opera to alternate between Putivl and the Polovtsian Camp in each act. This paper will address the

[1] Gerald Abraham, "The History of 'Prince Igor,'" *Music and Letters* XVI, no. 2 (April 1935): 85–95.
[2] Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, trans. Judah A. Joffe (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).
[3] Among these charitable pursuits were establishing the first medical schools for women in Russia, and using his four room apartment to take care of myriad stray cats and vagrants.
[4] Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, trans. Judah A. Joffe (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).

composition as performed: Prologue, Act 2, Act 1, Act 3, Act 4, as this is the order most nineteenth-century Russians would have watched and experienced the opera.

Borodin's opera opens outside the cathedral of Putivl with a rousing "slava" chorus which exalts the sun, the nation of Russia, and Prince Igor himself.[5] Prince Igor is preparing to march against the Polovtsian Khans, but his war celebration is interrupted by a solar eclipse. The people of Putivl, regarding the astronomical phenomenon as a bad omen, encourage Igor to abandon his campaign. Despite the warnings, Igor rides on the Polovtsy and suffers a catastrophic defeat.

In the next act, Igor and his son Vladimir are prisoners in the Polovtsian camp. Igor laments his loss of honor as a result of his capture until he is approached by the Christian Polovtsy slave Ovlur, who offers to help Igor escape. Igor initially refuses because his code of honor disallows him from fleeing captivity. Igor is soon confronted by Khan Konchak, who summons Polovtsian slaves and soldiers to perform a series of lavish, exotic dances to celebrate his glory.

Simultaneously, Igor's brother-in-law Galitsky turns Putivl into a raucous party venue. Galitsky signals his desire to rule Putivl until he is interrupted by a group of women. The women beg Galitsky to return one of their friends, who has been kidnapped by Galitsky's drunken cohort. The victim is only released when Igor's wife Yaroslavna is informed of the crime and orders Galitsky to release the girl. Suddenly, the Boyars of the city appear and inform Yaroslavna that the Polovtsy under Khan Gzak, having destroyed Igor's army, are marching on the city. Galitsky and his followers emerge demanding that he be declared the new Prince of Putivl, but the argument is interrupted when the Polovtsy arrive and begin to sack the city.

[5] "Slava Choruses (slava being the Russian word for glory) was a common musical trope in 19th Century Russian operas

After the Polovtsy return to their camp, they begin to celebrate the successful sack of the city. Igor's rage at the destruction of his city inspires him to accept Ovlur's offer. That night, Igor flees on horseback. The next morning, Yaroslavna and the subjects of Putivl celebrate their prince's return. The opera ends as Igor pledges to unite the Russian cities and strike back against the Khans.

Like many other operas and musical works created in the nineteenth century, *Prince Igor* is deeply nationalistic.[6] However, through its development of the themes including the civilizing Christian narrative, Orientalism, and the "Great Man," we can see that *Prince Igor* enforces an imperialist narrative. Furthermore, the themes of imperialism embedded in the work become even more apparent once the contemporary Russian invasion of Central Asia is considered as political context for the opera's creation.

From the beginning of the opera, there is a dominant theme of the civilizing Christian mission. The curtain rises in the square in front of the Putivl cathedral, and Prince Igor enters the stage making the sign of the cross as he passes through the imposing church doors. During the dialogue that extends from the opening "Slava" chorus, Prince Igor declares to his subjects that "we go to battle for our faith!"[7]. When the forces of Khan Gzak besiege Putivl, the boyars reassure the princess Yaroslavna that the city is safe because, "our fortress is our faith in the lord."[8] Then, as Ovlur, the notably Christian slave of the Polovtsy, convinces Igor to escape, he reminds Igor that by escaping, "you will save your native land, your faith."[9] Clearly, the preservation of Christianity is important to the characters, and Prince Igor's declaration of intent

[6] Examples of such contemporary works include: Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*, Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmilla*, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov,* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Kashchey the Deathless*
[7] Alexander Borodin, *Prince Igor*, 1890
[8] Ibid
[9] Ibid

for his conquest indicates that he finds his faith to be worth spreading. But why is Igor so determined to not only protect his faith, but expand it?

These calls to religion are reflective of larger themes of imperialism within Russia and within general themes of nineteenth-century Imperialism. Much like the United States and the other Western colonial powers, Russia perceived itself as a great power with a "White Man's burden" to bring civilization to their neighbors. Oxford University historian Alexander Morrison describes Russia's motivations: "['The Russian conquest of Central Asia] was also seen as part of a wider civilizing mission, which saw Russia take her place among the other European colonial empires that dominated the nineteenth-century world; as a means of championing the spread of Orthodox Christianity in a region most of whose population were Muslims."[10] Borodin's opera perfectly reflects this sentiment. Igor's religious zeal reflects larger imperialist undertones.

To strengthen the civilizing narrative, the opera relies on another popular theme within musical works of the time, Orientalism, to "otherize" the Polovtsy. Like nationalism, Orientalism was a staple of nineteenth-century Russian musical works.[11] Russian Orientalism aimed to create a sense of exoticism and mystery about the people, cultures, and nations of the "Orient" (often defined by Russian opera as the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central and Eastern Asia) and to portray those peoples, cultures, and nations as an "other." This "otherization" created a sense of distinction between the people of the Orient and the Russians. Furthermore, it led Russians to develop perceptions of the backwardness and inferiority of "Oriental" peoples.

The best example of *Prince Igor's* orientalist leanings can be found at the end of the opera's second act in a series of dances often referred to as the "Polovtsian Dances." The staging of these dances often emphasizes the theme of Orientalism to hyperbolic proportions:

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[10] Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion 1814-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
[11] For example, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherezade*, Balakirev's *Islamey,* and Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*

scantily-clad maidens glide across the stage, soldiers leap and hoot war whoops in raucous circles, and choruses exalt the glory of the Khan in refrain after refrain. Some performances of the dances end with Khan Konchak rising from his throne to lasciviously lift one of the beautiful maidens up into his arms and then turn towards the audience and thrust her into the air as if she were a trophy.

While the "otherization" of the Polovtsy in their eponymous dances can stand alone as an orientalist theme with unique artistic motivations, it can also be seen as an implicit extension of imperialist themes. As if it weren't bad enough that the Polovtsy are non-Christian, they are also raucous, misogynistic, and violent. The portrayal of the Polovtsy as morally inferior to the Russians serves to justify the civilizing narrative. In other words, the portrayal of the Polovtsy as backwards creates a justification for the Russians to dominate and civilize them.

There are different types of Orientalism to be considered. Since the Orientalist movement began in Revolutionary France, several tropes have emerged to characterize the people of the "Orient." Among these tropes are the raucous, misogynistic, and violent depictions of hyper-aggressive Asian men that we see in Prince Igor. However, there are a number of other tropes to be discussed. In the nineteenth-century United States, orientalist narratives responding to the increase in Chinese labor featured a bumbling, passive, and submissive stereotype of the "Oriental" man. In Bret Harte's 1871 poem "The Heathen Chinee," he describes a card game with a Chinese man named Ah Sin, who bore a "pensive and childlike smile" and "did not understand" the simple rules of the card game.[12] The passive orientalist trope later developed into various forms: the peace-loving "oriental monk" Cheng Huan of D.W Griffith's 1919 film *Broken Blossoms* who wanted to "spread the gentle message of the Buddha," the submissive and smitten "geisha" Cio-Cio San of John Luther Long's 1898 short story *Madame Butterfly*, and the

[12] Bret Harte, *The Heathen Chinee,* (Boston, James R. Osgood & Co, 1871).

bumbling ministers Ping, Pang and Pong from Puccini's 1924 *Turandot* all present less-than-savage Oriental stereotypes.[13]

The range of Orientalist portrayals exhibited from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries matters because it shows that Borodin's choice to portray the Polovtsy as savage was not simply reflective of the inherent nature of Orientalism. Prince Igor depicts the Polovtsy as raucous and violent because such a portrayal would make an invasion of Central Asia seem warranted. Whether intentional or an implicit extension of the opera, Borodin meant for the viewers of his opera to perceive Central Asians as violent and in need of civilization.

So if the Polovtsy need conquering, then who is to be the conqueror? Prince Igor certainly embodies many characteristics of Thomas Carlyle's "The Hero As King," which he describes as "Commander over Men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men."[14] Igor certainly is a commander of great fortitude and charisma. He compels his army by the mere force of his character to fight against the Polovtsy despite the bad omen of an eclipse, and his subjects celebrate his return to Putivl at the end of the opera.

However, Igor is unique among "great men" because he is perceived as great by both his allies and his enemies. During the opera, Igor is treated with the utmost respect by both his Russian subjects and his Turkic adversaries. The notion of Prince Igor's command of the respect of others is made clear by Khan Konchak's repeated mentions of the fact that he would rather be Igor's ally than his enemy. After hearing the news of Igor's escape, Konchak exclaims "Good for him! I did not admire him so much in vain: In Igor's place I would have done the same thing! Oh,

[13] D.W. Griffith, *Broken Blossoms: Or the Yellow Man and the Girl*. (U.S.A.: D.W. Griffith, 1919).
[14] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and The Heroic In History*, (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1841).

we should not have been enemies, But faithful allies!"[15] Such laudation certainly leaves the viewer with the impression that Igor is truly a great hero.

Additionally, Igor is not only admired but respected by both the Russians and the Central Asians. Yaroslavna and the Polovtsy both refer to Igor as the "falcon" throughout the opera. Following Igor's escape, the frantic assembly of Khans laments that "the falcon has flown to his nest," while Yaroslavna refers to the returning prince as "my bright falcon."[16] To be called "the falcon" is a sign of great respect and admiration. Russian folklore is filled with falcon iconography: the legendary firebird was often depicted as a falcon, depictions of falcons adorn Kievan coats of arms, and many Russian fairy tales contain princes trapped in the form of a falcon.

However, it is interesting to consider the humility and sense of honor embodied by Igor. Throughout the opera, Prince Igor often states his belief that the prowess of the Russian nation is more important than his own individual victories. Before launching his attack against the Polovtsy, Igor declares that "For Russia's glory, I would break my lance in the distant Polovtsian steppes!"[17] This line (one of the few taken nearly exactly from the original *Song of Igor's Campaign*) signifies that Igor demonstrates his virtue by serving the glory of his nation and working to expand its territory, clearly embracing dual themes of nationalism and imperialism.

While imprisoned, Igor stays dedicated to his country. He maintains that he must remain a captive in order to preserve his surviving honor. Yet he longs to free his country from the yoke of his enemy. In his signature aria, Igor laments that "The enemy is like a terrible beast. Russia moans in the grip of its mighty claws and lays the blame for this on me! Oh, give, give me freedom, I will succeed in atoning for my disgrace; I will save Russia from the enemy! No sleep,

[15] Alexander Borodin, *Prince Igor*, 1890
[16] Ibid
[17] Ibid

no rest for my tormented soul! The night brings me no hope of escape."[18] By committing to save his country, Igor displays the obligation he feels to redeem his individual failure. The aria is doubly effective in further "otherizing" the Polovtsy by describing them as a "terrible beast" which is implied to be in need of civilization.

So what makes these themes so relevant to Borodin's world? Why was there a need for an imperialist opera? Only one year before Stasov suggested the subject of Prince Igor, the Central Asian city of Samarkand was besieged by Russian forces under Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufmann. The siege signified the end of the Russian conquest of the Khanate of Bukhara, a significant Turkic power in the region. The siege was immediately romanticized and "produced many heroes of Russian arms," several of whom were depicted on the orientalist canvases of Vasily Vereshchagin.[19] Despite the fact that it is set several centuries in the past, *Prince Igor* nonetheless is one extension of the romanticization and justification of the war. The recent siege of Samarkand and subsequent fall of the Bukhara Khanate had a profound impact on the deeply patriotic Stasov, and inspired him to hone in on a theme of Central Asian conquest for Borodin's operatic ambitions.

The choice of subject of *Prince Igor* is important because it reflects the need for a justification of Russian Imperialism. The Russian state needed to legitimize its imperial ambitions, and it frequently did so through the nationalistic and Orientalist tropes found in the opera house. *Prince Igor* is one example of such legitimization. Borodin's opera portrays the Turkic Polovtsy as barbarians in need of civilization, because Russia had just conquered the Turkic Bukharans. The opera depicts Igor as a "Great Man" so the Russian audiences can see themselves as virtuous in their imperialist activities.

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[18] Ibid
[19] Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion 1814-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Borodin's opera is a grandiose and deeply layered composition, which like many of its contemporary works is steeped in themes of nationalism, Christianity, and Orientalism. However, we see from Igor's dedication to the state, and the portrayal of the Polovtsy as a horde in need of civilization, that imperialistic themes made a significant impact on the opera. Consideration of the opera's political context makes such a notion even more evident. *Prince Igor* serves as a patriotic, bombastic, musical justification of Russian imperial expansion, and demonstrates a narrative of Russian cultural and moral supremacy.