

Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857)

Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmila*

*First performance of the opera:* December 9, 1842, St. Petersburg. *First BSO performances of the overture:* March 1894, Emil Paur cond. *First BSO performance at Tanglewood:* July 25, 1958, Pierre Monteux cond. *Most recent Tanglewood performance:* July 16, 2004, Kurt Masur cond.

In 19th-century Russia, where Italian opera was in great vogue and the principal source of musical entertainment, the composers inevitably wrote operas, and being amateurs, lacking in the experience and extensive training necessary to draw the loose ends of this large form into a complete and performable score, they inevitably floundered about among innumerable sketches and alterations, leaving their music in a chaotic state at their death, to be straightened out for publication by their descendants. Such, at least, was the case with composers who swore allegiance to Russian subjects and a Russian handling, avoiding the easy Italian clichés which would have helped them through many perplexing spots. Such were Glinka, Dargomizhsky, Borodin, Mussorgsky. Glinka was the pioneer, and the others owed much to him. *Ruslan and Ludmila*, like its predecessor, *A Life for the Czar*, was a compilation of loose episodes—a dance, an air, a concerted number composed at various times. “As regards music in general and *Ruslan* in particular,” the composer wrote to Kukolnik, destined to be one of his librettists, “you must know that my head is like a garden allowed to run wild with weeds.”

There were many mishaps in the preparation for the first performance, which took place at St. Petersburg on December 9, 1842, including a substitution in the principal part of Ludmila. There was a chilly reception, with plainly audible hisses. Voin Rimsky-Korsakov, destined brother of the yet unborn composer, wrote, “The music is beautiful, the décor magnificent, but the actors are most unsatisfactory. Petrov as Ruslan is a regular *mujik* and Stepanova sings Ludmila like a cat being strangled. Glinka himself was terribly upset. When he was called out his face was as long as a fiddle.”

The plot in principal outline concerns Ludmila, a princess of pagan Russia who disappears and is sought by three suitors—the knights Ruslan and Farlaf, and the Tartar prince, Ratmir. Ludmila’s hand, according to the decree of the king, her father, is to be bestowed upon him who finds her and brings her home. The knight Ruslan rescues Ludmila from her captor, the magician Chernomor, but their homeward journey is intercepted by Farlaf who casts upon Ruslan a magic slumber and returns with Ludmila to claim her as his bride. Ruslan awakes and arrives in time to become the true prince of Ludmila.