Polovtsian Dances  A. Borodin (1833-1887)

Alexander Porfiryevich Borodin was a remarkable man. Born the illegitimate son of a nobleman and given the surname of one of his father’s serfs, he became a Doctor and respected Professor of Chemistry at the Imperial Medical-Surgical Academy in St Petersburg.

Alongside his scientific achievements, Borodin found time to develop his musical skills, playing both piano and ‘cello, and becoming a successful composer. For him, though, music always came second to his other responsibilities. He was one of The Five, or The Mighty Handful, with Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Cui. Their aim was to produce a Russian form of music, rather than one that relied on Western European models.

The Polovtsian Dances come from the opera Prince Igor, for which Borodin was both composer and librettist, and which he started in 1869. The story is set in the 12th century when the Polovtsians invaded southern Russia. It tells of the capture of Prince Igor and his son by Polovtsian leader Khan Konchack, who entertains them lavishly and calls on his slaves to perform the Polovtsian Dances. In the opera these dances provide a wonderful climax to the second act, but they are most often performed as a stand-alone concert item. The picture opposite is from a modern production by Moscow Ballet.

Sadly, Borodin suffered poor health and having survived both cholera and several heart attacks, he died suddenly at the age of 53 during a ball at the Academy. Prince Igor, together with a few other pieces, was unfinished at his death. Subsequently, it was edited and completed by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov, and first performed on 23rd October 1890 at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg.

Borodin’s music is noted for its strong melodies and rich, sometimes unusual, harmonies. His music has an undeniably Russian flavour, although more influenced by Western music than The Five would have liked to admit. His melodic gift was exploited in the 1953 American musical, Kismet, and as a result at least one melody from the Polovtsian Dances should be very familiar. Bizarrely, in 1954 Borodin was given a posthumous Tony Award ‘in recognition of achievement in live Broadway Theatre’!