

S.I. Taneyev, a renowned musician and erudite composer who resisted the mainstream advance of Russian nationalism, as apotheosised by Glinka and the 'Moguchaya Kuchka', adhered to western precepts founded on polyphony reaching back to the sixteenth century, and to harmonic formulae derived from the great German masters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With a reputation founded upon his chamber works and the great opera, 'Oresteia', relating a story from ancient Greece, his use of Russian folksong should not be overlooked, any more than his essentially Slavic characteristics.

Sergei Taneyev was descended from a wealthy family of landowners who, according to his elder brother, Vladimir (1840 -1921), traced their ancestry back to the sixteenth century. An example of music manifesting itself one generation earlier than that of Sergei Taneyev is provided in the instance of Nikolai Taneyev, elder brother of Sergei's father, Ivan Il'ich Taneyev (1796 -1879). Nikolai had two passions-horses and music. In regard to the latter, it is recorded that 'he constantly played the violin and had a small band. Twice a year, he would take to the garden. He put on hare pantaloons, a fur coat and a cap, and sallied forth on foot, accompanied by serfs. Further serfs followed him, one with a violin, another with the music, the third with an umbrella, and the fourth with handkerchiefs. They spread out a rug. They set down a chair. He (Nikolai) sat down. The violin was brought, the umbrella was opened, the music read. He took the violin, played for two or three hours, not taking off the fur coat, and returned.'¹

Ivan Il'ich was solidly educated at science and the arts, and had a particular love for music.² After his marriage to Varvara Pavlovna Protopopova (1822 -1889) in 1838, (he was forty-two and she sixteen), he moved to her home town of Vladimir, where he settled, entering into service in the government. The first offspring, Vladimir Ivanovich, born in 1840, rose to a position of the highest eminence in the field of law and survived until 1921. Ivan Il'ich was thus sixty-one years old when Sergei Ivanovich was born in 1856. Sergei's governess, Maria Alexandrovna Miropol'skaya (1848 -1920) was a pianist and skilled in languages, and tutored Taneyev in Russian, French, German and arithmetic, all this commencing in 1861. She was also a close friend of the Borodins. It has been suggested that Taneyev's gift for polyphony may have been sparked at the time of his childhood in Vladimir as a result of his exposure to the folksong singers and multi-voice ensembles which were heard everywhere in the area.³ 'created by craftsmen without the technique of polyphonic writing.'⁴

Taneyev was moved to Moscow in 1864 or 1865, and in 1866 was one of the first pupils to enter the newly opened Conservatoire. Nikolai Rubinstein displayed great interest in the ten-year-old boy. Early tuition was from E.L. Langer, a Russified German grounded in the German classics, both from visits to Germany and from his father, Leopold Langer, a Viennese who had been in contact, so it is claimed, with Beethoven and Schubert.⁵

Taneyev's innate piano gifts developed quickly and in November, 1867, he played the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in A minor (K 310/300d).⁶ In September, 1869, he entered the harmony class of Tchaikovsky, with whom he established a close relationship generating an abundant correspondence. Classes in counterpoint with Professor N.A. Hubert followed from 1872 to 1874.⁷

While still a student at the Conservatoire, Taneyev performed on 17th January, 1875, Brahms' Piano Concerto in D minor, at a concert of the Moscow branch of the Russian Musical Society, founded in 1859 by Nikolai Rubinstein⁸, who conducted the work. Cui praised the work in glowing terms.⁹ Later, in the same year, Taneyev gave the first performance in Moscow of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto in B flat minor, Op.23,¹⁰ pronounced unplayable by Nikolai Rubinstein at the time of its composition, in 1874, and given its world première in Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A., by Hans von Bülow, the same year.

Taneyev's first compositions date from the period 1874 to 1875. The most important of these was the Symphony in E minor, completed in November, 1874,¹¹ and dedicated to