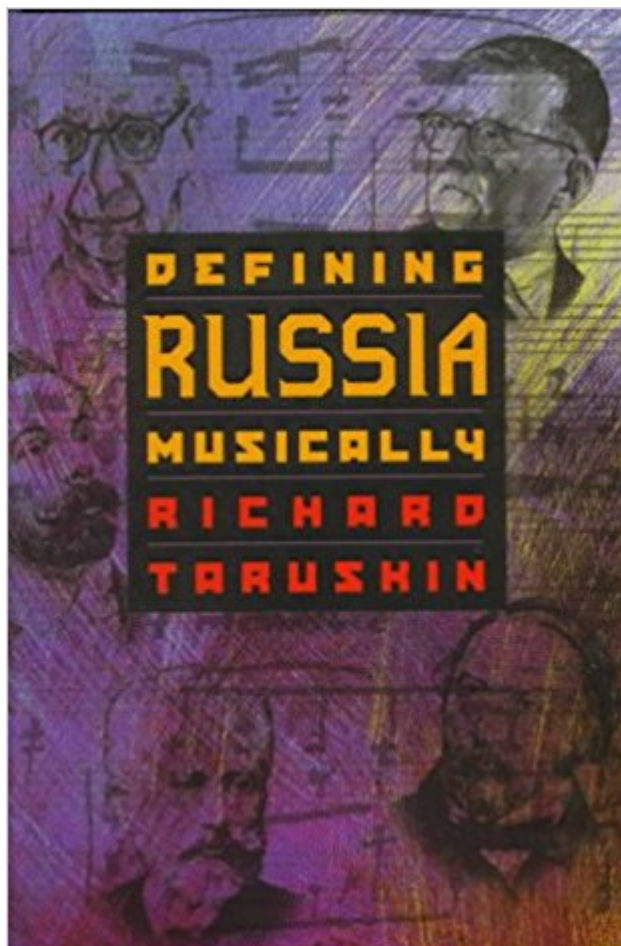


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# Defining Russia Musically



## 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.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 600 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press (April 14, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691011567

ISBN-13: 978-0691011561

Product Dimensions: 9.6 x 6.4 x 1.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.3 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #693,032 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #148 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Ethnic & International > Ethnic](#) #330 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Movements & Periods > Renaissance](#) #2201 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > History & Criticism](#)

## Customer Reviews

The term hermeneutics is omitted from most recently published music dictionaries, but it is making a comeback in scholarly musicological studies. Increasingly, there is an attempt to understand works in their historical contexts rather than by application of possibly inappropriate analytic formulas or culturally biased aesthetic judgments, which are cited and "deconstructed" so as to make way for new interpretations. Taruskin, the leading American Russian music scholar (*Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, LJ 12/95), here collects 14 essays on Russian art music and Russianess in general, most based on lectures he gave in 1993 and 1994. His usual originality, passionate arguments, and deep, broad research are present as Taruskin treats music by and scholarship on Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin, Stravinsky (again), Shostakovich, and others. For academic and large public libraries. © Bonnie Jo Dopp, Univ. of Maryland Lib., College Park Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 1997 "A passionate vision of what Russian music has meant both as an expression and as a shaping force of the country's character. . . . [Taruskin is] an exceptionally gifted critic. . . . [T]he connections between technique and expression are formidably argued, and it is the capacity to do this, with patience and depth of understanding and with a vast knowledge of the literature, that gives Taruskin's criticism its quality."--John Warrack, *Time Literary Supplement* "Taruskin's work is far too rich and multi-layered, steeped in Russian intellectual history, literature, and culture, even to synopsise in a short review. . . . His newest book is essential for musicologists wishing to understand Russia's place in music, and for Slavists wishing to understand music's place in Russia."--Robert W. Oldani, *The Russian Review* "More than a musicologist, Richard Taruskin is a cultural critic who deserves non-scholarly readers. His brilliant and alarmingly timely book *Defining Russia Musically* is about the battle for a nation's soul--fought between Europe and Asia, modernity and primitivism--in the music of Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich."--Peter Conrad, *The Observer* "Taruskin's hallmarks are evident throughout:

research of almost astonishing breadth, impatience with facile views and those who propound them, and contempt for formalist modes of analysis that ignore the extramusical. This is an important, challenging book; no other book in English covers this ground with equal depth or brilliance."--Choice "When this controversial book first appeared in hardback, it sparked a debate . . . both because of and despite the way it tore into big names in the musicological world. Now it seems like a landmark. . . Richard Taruskin raises important questions about how cultural and artistic judgements are made."--Literary Review

Taruskin-Defining Russia musically The term hermeneutics is omitted from most recently published music dictionaries, but it is making a comeback in scholarly musicological studies. Increasingly, there is an attempt to understand works in their historical contexts rather than by application of possibly inappropriate analytic formulas or culturally biased aesthetic judgments, which are cited and "deconstructed" so as to make way for new interpretations. Taruskin, the leading American Russian music scholar . . . here collects 14 essays on Russian art music and Russian-ness in general, most based on lectures he gave in 1993 and 1994. His usual originality, passionate arguments, and deep, broad research are present as Taruskin treats music by and scholarship on Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and others.-Bonnie Jo Dopp, University of Maryland Library - From Library Journal, copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc Taruskin's hallmarks are evident throughout: research of almost astonishing breadth, impatience with facile views and those who propound them, and contempt for formalist modes of analysis that ignore the extramusical. This is an important, challenging book; no other book in English covers this ground with equal depth or brilliance.-Choice As a regular user of his Oxford History of Western Music and reader of his more recent book on Russian music, I never seem to tire of Taruskin's writings: lean, but knowledgeable well beyond the immediate musical context; not the proverbial specialist in generalities, rather a specialist and a generalist in one. With him, the symbiosis is natural, hence the strength of his understanding and the power of his knowledge. Communicates well and with a solid sense of humour.obus5 - Taruskin-Defining Russia musically - 1/8/2012

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. What this kind of social scholarship unleashes is at the very heart of the music's value. It is easy to see now Stravinsky's brutalization of sound, not only in the obvious choice of the "Rite of Spring" but Stravinsky's taming his voices subjecting them to a passivity, to a one-dimensional function, as part of a texture, And where has Stravinsky found his voice when there is one?, in borrowings, particularly Russian folk. These four last hermeneutical essays are for me the high point of this volume. Also Scriabin and Tchaikovsky complete it. I never understood any scholarship for Tchaikovsky, what's there to discuss, his relations with the Tsar's aristocracy? Except that Taruskin works at another level of contemplation, in saying things as this music has an immediacy that is borne through lived experience, it is not premeditated music, the kind we find in the West with an obsession for global order and pitch configurations. You will always find something to think about (even in Tchaikovsky) with this kind of social and political scholarship which Taruskin espouses.

Taruskin's name is associated by the experienced reader of Russian music books with texts of in-depth treatment (I bet nobody could research more exhaustively on Stravinsky), rigorous demands of his texts for clarity and entertaining style for the non-scholar reader. *Defining Russian Music* offers through a series of essays a description very accurate of what Russian music is from the beginning of the formation of a Russian musical identity to the Soviet period and, what I think is more important, why it shows these characteristics. A passage I found very interesting explains the origin of a Pushkin's poem and compares settings of it by three composers from different periods. A non rough-reading text, fully illustrated with musical examples, this book is a must-have for people

who appreciate Russian composers and their work as all Taruskin's books up to now.

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