

## Symphonic Poem, Thamar.

MILI BALAKIREW.

Born 1836, at Nishnij Novgorod, Russia.

That, simultaneously with the "New German School" of composers a "New Russian School" should have sprung into existence, is not surprising. Even the opposition of Rubinstein, who by education, association and conviction was in genuine sympathy with the German classics and romanticists, could not stem the tide which began to flow with mighty power when a channel had been prepared for it by the program music of Berlioz and Liszt, and by the opportunities which the form of the Symphonic Poem presented for the introduction of the peculiarities of national music and of folk-song—opportunities which could not be utilized legitimately in the symphony form in its purity. Rubinstein said of this tendency: "It (the Russian School) is the outcome of the influence of Berlioz and Liszt. \* \* \* Its creations are based upon thorough control of technical resources and masterly application of color, but on total absence of outline and predominating absence of form. \* \* \* Whether something is to be hoped in the future in this direction I do not know, but would not doubt it altogether, for I believe that the peculiarity of the melody, rhythm and the musical character of Russian folk-music may permit of a new fructification of music in general; besides, some of the representatives of this new tendency (school) are not without notable musical talent." César Cui was the

champion of this school; among the initiators of which, on whom the sobriquet of novatores was bestowed, were, besides Cui himself, Balakirew, Rimsky-Korsakow, Borodine and Moussorgski.

Balakirew, though he had given evidences of extraordinary musical talent in early youth, devoted himself to the study of mathematics and the natural sciences until he could no longer resist the persuasive powers of Oulibichew, the "Beethoven critic." In 1855 he appeared with success as pianist in St. Petersburg. A few years later, together with Lamakin, he founded the "Free School for Music," the directorship of which he held from 1867 till 1872, when he retired into private life and devoted himself to composing. For the composition under consideration a poem, "Thamar," by Lermontow (1814-1841), "the poet of the Caucasus," furnished the inspiration. It was probably during Lermontow's exile in the Caucasus that he put into verse what appears to be a myth concerning the Georgian Queen Thamar. The following synopsis of the poem prepared by the composer, freely Englished, may serve as a program for the music: "In the narrow Dariel Pass, where the river Terek roars, covered with heavy mists, there rises an ancient tower, in which there lived Queen Thamar, an angel in beauty, a cruel, wily demon in thoughts, and yet at the same time divine. At her enchanting call the passing traveler entered the tower to take part in the banquet in progress there. Shouts and cries of revelry awakened echoes in the darkness, as if at a great feast a hundred young, pleasure-loving men and women were gathered, or as if in that great tower, erstwhile forbidding, the celebration of funeral rites were taking place. At the break of day gloomy silence again reigned, broken only by the foaming Terek as it hurried away a corpse. At this moment there appeared at the window a pale shadow. It waved from afar a last farewell to the loved one. That farewell breathed such tender ecstasy, the voice which uttered it was so sweet, that its every accent, filled with promise, seemed to tell of near, unspeakable happiness." Such a narrative affords ample material for a tone picture of the most varied colors, for it offers rich opportunity to exercise the descriptive as well as the emotional powers of music. Of this the composer has availed himself to the fullest extent, and with laudable moderation, for notwithstanding peculiarities in harmonic progression, and occasional bursts of fierceness and almost savage impetuosity, the musical texture of the composition is not unnecessarily confused

In discussing the technical structure of a work which is descriptive of a program, the method applied to composition whose purport lies in the abstract beauty of music itself, and in its emotional contents apart from any definite association of ideas, cannot be followed to advantage. In the former tones are made to a great extent the means of reproducing a preconceived mental picture, while in the latter the tone combinations are the picture itself, which the receptive and discerning listener may associate with fancies called into life in him according to his faculty of understanding. In program music, therefore, themes or tone-groups often have no architectural purpose to fulfill, but are employed only as the medium of tone effects, and, as such, are not essential to the structure of a composition, however significant they may be of the ingenuity of the composer. Such themes it is not necessary to quote. Balakirew's symphonic poem is simple and logical in point of form. It consists of a slow introduction descriptive in character. This is followed by the exposition of the principal melodies of the work, which are then intertwined and elaborated. The principal subject matter recurs in condensed shape, and a coda, in which the introduction is again called to mind, forms a fitting close. The tone-poem begins with an imitation of the far off roaring of the river Terek. Now and then moaning and sighing sounds are heard as if the warning cry of spirits were echoed from rock to rock. At intervals a sweet voice calls from the distance in alluring accents:—



In a verse of the poem Lermontow narrates how the tradesman, shepherd and warrior obey Queen Thamar's summons. The first two the composer evidently had in mind when he chose the following themes, which have all the characteristics of folk-music and are accompanied by the never-ceasing roar of the river:—

No. 1.

*Allegro moderato.*

Violins.

*f* *p* *p* *p*

*etc.*

## No. 2.

Bassoon.

etc.

With gradually increasing force these melodies, with rhythmic alterations and counter-themes, are repeated, until the whole orchestra joins in a perfect deluge of sound. The approach of the warrior is heralded by taps of the drum and this strain:—

## No. 3.

Oboe.

The Siren-song of the Queen, lastly, the composer has conveyed in the following melody:—

## No. 4.

*Allegretto quasi Andantino.*  
Clar.

Harp.

Herewith the most important constituents of the composition have been enumerated. The musical description of the feast and revelry in their ebb and flow, the return of stillness with the approach of morn, the roar of the torrent as it dies away into a faint murmur, the adieu of the Queen as the corpse of her victim is borne off on the waves of the stream, and finally the promise of "near and inexpressible happiness"—all this will be easily traced with the aid of the excerpts given above, which are intended to serve as a short syllabus only.