



Richard Taruskin Bio

Among those who write about music today, Richard Taruskin stands out for his keen insight into source material; his rigorous musical analysis; his wide-ranging grasp of the related social, cultural, and political background; his high degree of serendipitous discovery; his gift for looking at the familiar through a new lens; and his use of language, combining both scholarly authority with wit and ease of expression. Taruskin's books, articles, and lectures frequently overturn previously accepted ideas in highly original, perceptive, and often controversial ways that have earned him the respect, admiration, and, sometimes, ire of his colleagues and readers. His activities in music cover a surprising gamut: music critic, gambist and conductor of early music ensembles, teacher, and eminent musicologist. His scholarly work is equally diverse. He has written about the chanson and sacred music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, issues of musical performance practice, music historiography, the relationship of music and politics, and the music of Russia from the eighteenth century to the present. In addition to his writings about music, he has recorded and edited numerous Renaissance musical works. To the lay reader, he is well-known as a reviewer for the *New York Times* and the *New Republic*, for his program notes to recordings and opera performances, and for his recent voluminous contribution to the musicological literature, [*The Oxford History of Western Music*](#).

Taruskin was born in New York in 1945. His mother was a piano teacher and his father an amateur violinist. His musical studies began on the cello, and he attended New York's High School of Music and Art before enrolling at Columbia University to study Russian and music. In 1965 he completed his B.A., graduating magna cum laude. He continued at Columbia, earning his Ph.D. in historical musicology and then immediately joining the faculty, where he remained until 1986. The following year Taruskin moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where he now holds the Class of 1955 Chair in the Music Department.

As a student and professor at Columbia Taruskin was active in the performance of early music as a viola da gamba player, performing regularly with the Aulos Ensemble. He also directed the Columbia University Collegium Musicum (1968-1973) and the Cappella Nova vocal group (1975-1983). Aside from numerous performances, he recorded over fifteen discs with these groups. In addition to this practical performance experience in early music, he edited eight editions of Renaissance works for the publisher Ogni Sorte (1978-1983), an edition of two viol suites by William Lawes (1983), and an edition of the works of Antoine Busnoys with Latin texts (1990), a major work of textual criticism. This was preceded by "Antoine Busnoys and the 'L'homme arme' Tradition" (1986), a significant article on the *Missa L'homme armé* whose musical text was contained in the edition. In this article Taruskin presents evidence to suggest that Busnoys may have composed the first of the "L'homme armé" mass settings that were written by numerous composers over the next two hundred years and that Busnoys may have been the composer of the famous *L'homme armé* melody itself.

Taruskin is an outspoken critic of the so-called "authentic" performance practice movement that gradually gained momentum starting in the 1960s. He is not so much a critic of research into how music was performed in earlier times, or necessarily of the practice of using instruments from the time period in which the music was written. Rather, he disagrees with some of the claims and conventions adopted by musicians attempting to reconstruct historical performance practices. In recent decades many early music performers have adhered strictly to what was notated in musical scores. Taruskin sees this as a modern distortion of how music was performed before 1900, when composers were not so exact in notating their music and performers took much more latitude in their interpretations. In the twentieth century performers such as Arturo Toscanini, Bruno Walter, and others attempted to determine the intentions of the composer entirely from the score alone by following exactly what was written and only what was written there. At the same time, the music theorist, Heinrich Schenker, based his theoretical approach on ascertaining from the composers' autograph scores the "absolute" texts of the "master" composers. Taruskin devoted numerous reviews to pointing out the fruitlessness of applying such principles to create "authentic" performances of both early music and

music of the standard repertory, as historical performance practices began to be applied to eighteenth and nineteenth-century music. The most significant of his articles and reviews on this topic were compiled in *Text and Act* (1995). The book includes "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past" (1988), the article that most fully covers his position in this area, and his masterfully written review, "Resisting the Ninth" (1989), which critiques Roger Norrington's idiosyncratic performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the London Classical Players (EMI CDC 7 49221 2).

Above and beyond these important studies, Taruskin is widely acknowledged as the leading scholar in the field of Russian music today. His master's thesis, "Vladmir Vasilievich Stasov: Functionary in Art" (1968) — which won the Bennet Prize from the Columbia University Department of English and Comparative Literature for the best essay in the humanities other than a Ph.D. dissertation — laid the groundwork for his research in Russian music, which has remained the focus of most of his scholarship. Stasov (1824-1906) was an influential writer on music and the arts in Russia who vigorously championed, in partisan terms, the idea of Russian nationalism in music. He is responsible for inventing the term *Moguchaya kuchka*, frequently translated in English as "The Mighty Five," to describe the circle of composers associated with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: Modest Mussorgsky, Alexander Borodin, César Cui, and Mily Balakirev.

With an understanding of Stasov's importance to the development of Russian music in the nineteenth century, Taruskin became an exchange student from 1971-72. This allowed him to work at the Moscow Conservatory on his dissertation research on Russian opera in the 1860s. This period is generally neglected in most music histories, which focus instead on the operas of Mikhail Glinka during the 1830s and 1840s, and then skip to the operas of Rimsky-Korsakov and the "Five," beginning in the 1870s. His dissertation, "Opera and Drama in Russia: The Preachment and Practice of Operatic Aesthetics in the Eighteen Sixties" (1975), was later revised and published as *Opera and Drama in Russia as Preached and Practiced in the 1860s* (1981). His dissertation committee was so impressed with the thoroughness of the research and his defense that he was awarded the Ph.D. with distinction. Although he initially intended to focus on the operas of Alexander Serov, the research was expanded to include the operas of Alexander Dargomyzhsky and César Cui, and to show how the political and aesthetic attacks on Serov's music by Stasov influenced and led to the later operas of Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, and Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

With his appointment to the Columbia faculty, he offered a seminar on Mussorgsky in 1977, but the enrollment was small. His next proposal was for a course on Tchaikovsky, but the students suggested that a course be offered on Igor Stravinsky. And so he became fascinated with the early Russian works of Stravinsky over the next decade, while continuing to conduct research on nineteenth-century Russian music. The latter interest produced a plethora of writings on Mussorgsky, resulting in the anthology of articles, *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (1993). In his typical style, Taruskin challenges and destroys the accepted picture of the composer's life, works, and the historical context in which he worked. Stasov emerges once again as the villain through his distortion of the historical record: Stasov's Musorgsky was Stasov's creation — in more ways than one. He manufactured not only Musorgsky's historiographical image but also, to a considerable extent and for a considerable time, the actual historical person. (p. 7)

Virtually everything that is known about Mussorgsky is reexamined here — down to the very spelling of his name, to which a "g" was added, since the Russian word *musor*, meaning garbage, provides an unfortunate connotation. But above all, the essay "Musorgsky verses Musorgsky: The Versions of Boris Godunov," is a tour de force of analytic reasoning and source study, which explains the rationale behind the composer's revision of his opera and how, in the later 1872 version, he moved away from Stasovian ideals to create a musical drama possessing "an integrity of structure, style, and significance such as the earlier version had notably lacked" (p. 290).

Stravinsky offered an even richer musicological vein for Taruskin to mine, and his research culminated in *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra* (1996), a monumental two-volume work of 1757 pages. In this book he developed modes of interrelating all the various kinds of research strategies and methods required by the task, whether historical, theoretical, analytical, or ethnological, by tying everything to the overriding question of Stravinsky's relationship to Russian traditions — as many

Russian traditions as I could think of: intellectual, artistic, cultural, social, linguistic, and of course musical, but the last on several rigorously distinguished levels. (p. xii-xiii.)

From this a totally different Stravinsky emerges, one unencumbered by the myths perpetrated by the composer himself through his own memoirs and writings penned late in life. This work covers the world and compositions of Stravinsky before his turn to neo-classicism in the 1920s and his later twelve-tone works. Taruskin found so much at variance between the composer's view of himself and the actual facts, that Stravinsky's memoirs are entirely avoided in the study except when it is necessary to correct the historical record. In the sketches to *The Rite of Spring*, to which he had access shortly after they were made available to the public, Taruskin shows the wealth of folk song material Stravinsky drew upon and adapted in unprecedented ways to compose one of the most influential musical works of the twentieth century.

In *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, Taruskin develops five primary ideas about Stravinsky:

1. First, that Stravinsky's Russian works created a new modernist technique by juxtaposing traditional Russian folk songs and elements against the Westernized art music style of the Russian composers by whom he had been trained.
2. Next, that his knowledge of Russian folk material was learned from working with visual artists rather than from musicians and composers, or from his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov.
3. That he deliberately attempted to excise strictly "European" aspects from his music, retaining the most "Russian" aspects of his musical training and combining a stylistically abstracted folk song and folklore in his compositions.
4. That the synthesis of these styles is present in all of his music, even in the later neo-classical and twelve-tone works.
5. And lastly, that these qualities make Stravinsky the most "Russian" of all composers — past, present, and future.

While Stravinsky and Russian music are life-long topics of research for Taruskin, in 1991 he turned his attention to the entire history of Western art music at the suggestion of Maribeth Payne, an editor first at Schirmer Books and then at Oxford University Press. (Together with a fellow musicologist, Piero Weiss, Taruskin already had compiled *Music in the Western World: A History of Documents* [1984; 2nd edition, 2007], a book intended as a supplementary music-history and appreciation text for students with no previous knowledge of music.) The resulting book, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, goes far beyond the scope of a traditional music history text or survey. Instead, it is a massive six-volume treatise that takes as its focus the traditions of notated music in Europe and the Americas. The centrality of musical notation is perhaps Western music's most distinguishing feature when compared to other musics of the world. The book begins not with ancient Greek music, which is frequently the starting point for most other music histories, but rather with the first notation of music in the eighth century, which shifted Western music away from a totally oral tradition toward a literate practice. Interestingly, Taruskin brings the argument full circle in the last volume, where he predicts the decline and possible end of the literate tradition because of the advent of the composition of electronic and computer music which began in the mid-twentieth century. Computer-generated music is no longer dependent upon a written score to be stored, disseminated, and reproduced for performance. With new technologies it is possible to compose and perform highly sophisticated works of art by working with the actual sounds themselves without resorting to any kind of notation.

The Oxford History of Western Music is not only an overview of music and musicians throughout history — or a stylistic, social, and cultural analysis — but is also an examination of the hermeneutics and historiography of music. In this history Taruskin tells us about much more than just the music. His is a history of how and why music was written, performed, and studied. He challenges the reader to probe the texts and to consider the historical and cultural background of music not only as an art, but as an endeavor that is at the heart of what it is to be human.