

Polovtsian Dances from "Prince Igor"

Alexander Borodin (1833–87)

Written: 1875–79

Duration: 14 minutes

Alexander Borodin—one of the group of Russian “amateur” composers known as “The Mighty Handful”—was more successful in his “day job” than as a composer. He was the illegitimate son of a Georgian prince. Raised by his mother, Alexander showed an early interest in music, but chemistry was his passion. After getting a doctorate in chemistry, he quickly established his career in research, doing notable work on aldehydes. As a teacher, he was one of the first advocates for educating women in medicine. “Science is my work, and music is my fun,” he said. “I am a Sunday composer who strives to remain obscure.”

The music critic Vladimir Stassov suggested that Borodin write an opera based on Prince Igor’s battles against a Tartar tribe known as the Polovtsi. He immediately took up the idea and then spent the rest of his life—eighteen years—working on it. When Borodin dropped dead from heart failure, *Prince Igor* was still unfinished. It was up to Alexander Glazunov and his fellow “Mighty Handful” composer, Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov, to finish the opera.

The story of the opera takes place in twelfth-century Russia and centers around Igor Severski. He has taken his son Vladimir with him on a military campaign against the Polovtsi, a nomadic people now known as the Cumans. (The term *Polovtsky* means *yellow*, in reference to hair color.) Khan Konchak captures the two, but one of his tribesmen offers a way of escape. They refuse because Vladimir has, of course, fallen in love with the Khan’s daughter. After some Polovtsian warriors return with extensive plunder from Igor’s capital, Igor and Vladimir try to escape, but the daughter turns them in. Igor eventually makes it back, alone—to a ruined city.

The *Polovtsian Dances* come at the end of the second act when Khan Kontchak

entertains his prisoner with a series of dances performed by his slaves. They begin with the “Dance of the Polovtsian Maidens” and then move to the lyrical “Gliding Dance of the Maidens.” The dances end with the “Wild Dance of the Men,” “Dance of the Boys,” and the raucous “General Dance.” The oriental flavor of the dances exploits the exotic nature of Russia’s indigenous cultures. That exoticism is what makes the dances so engaging even today.

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