

John Nelson
Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki

The definition of the Russian spiritual world as seen through music

Orthodoxy was a central pillar of the 1833 Official Nationality decree. However, the question as to what are the representative spiritual beliefs of the people has always been an enigma, provoking discussion concerning the meaning of 'dual faith' (двоеверие). This has also been reflected in music. Rimsky-Korsakov confessed to having an enthusiasm for pagan worship and a fear that "all signs of ancient pantheism are evidently vanishing". He particularly drew attention to the fact that "The people, as a nation sing ceremonial songs by force of habit and custom, neither understanding nor suspecting what really underlies these ceremonies and games".

It was the aristocracy who adopted Christianity whilst the coexistence of Christian and "pagan" elements was a facet of the uneducated peasant. The continuing struggle for dominance can be seen from chronicles appearing as a result of the Stoglav, the Moscow Council of 1551. Whilst the Nikon reforms led to the separation of the 'Old Believers' from the established church even in their hand-painted religious pictures the mythical bird, Sirin, is depicted, and later represented in The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevronia. The Old Believers also feature in Khovanshchina, which can be interpreted as giving an additional balanced view to spirituality in Russia. Later Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil Stravinsky went as far as depicting pagan practice in The Rite of Spring. It is consequently pertinent to evaluate the interaction within the Russian spiritual mentality between paganism and Orthodox Christianity as represented by music.