Class 9 : Life on the Fringe

A. Overture

1. Class title 1 (Makovsky: *Peasant Dinner During Harvesting*, 1871)
2. Section title A

Let's start, as I often do, with some music. This is a montage I made: six countries, six composers, spanning half a century. The compositions all have something in common; I am sure it will be obvious what it is.

3. Montage of national dances
4. List of the above

Did you catch what was going on there? These were major composers taking a national style—in Tchaikovsky's case an actual melody—and incorporating it into concert works. The national identity of the music is quite different from Mozart's pastiches of Spanish or Turkish music in the century before. These are calling cards. The composers are saying, "This is where I'm from, and I want you to know it."

The other important thing is that they are all **peasant dances**. Even the *Polonaise* began as a peasant dance, although it had entered the ballroom by the end of the 18th century. In proclaiming National Identity, which was the purpose of all six composers, it is no good turning to the international language of salon and concert hall; you needed to go to the people.

5. Poland, Finland, Russia

The asterisks represent the three countries I shall focus on today: **Poland**, **Russia**, and **Finland**. But, as we shall see, they represent two very different kinds of artistic nationalism. For most of the 19th century, both Poland and Finland were occupied by foreign powers; nationalism is therefore a drive towards political and cultural acknowledgement of the underlying ethnic identity. Russia, on the other hand, was not occupied territory in this sense; geographically, it was the largest unified state in Europe. But under **Catherine the Great** (1729–96), most of its high culture had been imported from France; the cultural revolution that occupied much of the 19th century was a matter of reclaiming its native language, music, and folklore—the culture of the country, as you might say, versus the court.

I have chosen these three countries because they offer the most variety. I must say, though, that I have done similar classes in other courses, and some duplication is inevitable. Apart from one film clip, the Polish segment is entirely new. The Finnish segment is mostly a repeat, though I will put some new stuff into it. The Russian segment after the break is also something I have handled before, but 75% of my examples are new ones.

B. The Polish Jester

6. Section title B: Jan Matejko: *Stanczyk* (1862, Warsaw)

Imagine I were showing you this painting out of the blue, without attribution or context: what might you say about it? The subject is clearly a court jester, **Stanczyk**. The period represented is probably late Renaissance, though it is hard to be sure. For the period of the work itself, I would be fairly confident in saying mid-nineteenth century. Country of orgin? I would have guessed France; **Delacroix** did a lot in this vein, and there were numerous lesser artists in his train who paint historical subjects. Without knowing that the artist was Polish, would I have guessed it? No way. There is nothing whatever in the style to suggest Eastern Europe, let alone Poland.

7. — detail of the above

Up to now, I have tended to treat National Identity as more or less synoymous with style, but that does not work here. *But National Identity can also be expressed through subject and context*. Stanczyk, it appears, would be as well known in Poland as, say, Robin Hood in England. He was a real person, living roughly 1480–1560, and jester to three successive Polish kings. He earned his reputation as being a kind of political philosopher, using satire to influnce policy. As Wikipedia has it, "*He is remembered as a man of great intelligence and a political philosopher gifted with formidable insight into Poland's current and future situation*." So why should the artist, **Jan Matejko** (1838–93), have been painting him at *this* particular point in Poland's situation?

8. Map: the partitions of Poland

What *was* Poland's current situtaion? From the end of the 18th-century up to the end of WW1, Poland had ceased to be a national entity, but was partitioned between its three neighboring empires, Prussia, Russia, and Austria, who imposed their own languages and cultures. The century was marked by resistance movements of one kind or another. All failed. The January Revolution of 1863 was brutally put down by the Russians, resulting in mass executions and deportations. Earlier in the century, in 1830, the 20-year-old **Fryderyk Chopin** (1810–49) had to flee to Paris when his father was caught up in the November Uprising in Warsaw. This situation is demonstrated in the 2002 Polish biopic *Desire for Love* by **Jerzy Antczak**. Chopin and his fellow *émigré* from Eastern Europe **Franz Liszt** (1811–86) are guests at a fashionable *salon*. Liszt, showing off as usual, plays one of Chopin's most flamboyant pieces, the so-called *Revolutionary Etude,* but it only brings back memories of his flight. When Chopin himself is prevailed upon to play, he chooses something much more poetic, a *Nocturne* that he almost never performed in public. But knowing what that particular audience wanted, he ends with a snatch of his *Polonaise Eroique*, which in its orchestral version began today's class.

9. *Desire for Love*, Liszt and Chopin
10. Jan Matejko: *Stanczyk* (repeat)

So that is the political background against which Matejko was painting. Why is the jester, a professional funny man, looking so despondent. Look at its full title: *Stańczyk during a ball at the court of Queen*

Bona in the face of the loss of Smolensk. In the background, a royal ball is in progress, celebrating some recent victory. But the letter to the jester's right gives news of greater importance, that the then-Polish city of Smolensk has been captured by the Russians. Although this happened in 1514, the implication of the Russian takeover three centuries later is quite obvious. This is a revolutionary work, albeit in code.

11. Jan Matejko: *Rejtan—the Fall of Poland* (1866, Warsaw Castle)

Matejko's style may have been deliberately old-fashioned, but his subjects were very much relevant. Here is a painting of an event that took place in 1773, surely some happening lost in history as old as the costumes. But this is the leglislator **Tadeusz Rejtan** trying to stop the first Partition of Poland by physically blocking the exit to the chamber. So relevant, in fact, that I am surprised he could get away with it, though I gather the Austrians in Southern Poland where he lived were less repressive than the Russians to the East.

12. Jan Matejko: *Wernyhora* (1883, Krakow)

Two more; you will have gathered that I am rather impressed by Matejko! *Wernhora*, the subject of the vertical painting, is a mythical Cossack bard, who both prophesized the fall of Poland *and* its subsequent rebirth and flourishing; the one may have happened, but the other had yet to come.

13. Jan Matejko: *Copernicus, or Conversations with God* (1873, University, Krakow)

Here is one with no revolutionary agenda that I can see, except to celebrate Polish geniuses of great vision. I love the title: *Copernicus, or Conversations with God*.

C. Poland's Future, Poland's Past

14. Section title C: Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855)

Other than Chopin, the presiding visionary genius of Matejko's century was surely the poet **Adam Mickiewicz** (1798–1855), author of the national epic *Pan Tadeusz*, or "Mister Thaddeus." It is subtitled *The Last Foray in Lithuania,* Lithuania being part of the original Poland prior to Partition; Mickiewicz was born there, a Russian citizen, and he spent all his adult life in Russia, Italy, France, or Switzerland. He almost never lived within the borders of modern Poland. But he spoke Polish, wrote what I am told is some of the most beautiful Polish ever, and was a Polish patriot through and through. He published *Pan Tadeusz* in Paris in 1834, so he was there at the same time as Chopin. The book is about many things, but its background is the yearning for the restoration of Polish independence. While there is violence in it, it works through poetic persuasion, not political rhetoric. In the words of its most recent translator, **Bill Johnson**, "*it beautifully melds two impossible longings–for a future free and independent Poland, and for the lost Poland of the past*."

15. Bill Johnson on *Pan Tadeusz*

I have a recording of Johnson reading the last lines of the book that I'll play in a moment. But first, let me read passages from the beginning and near the end of the epic to see if I can give context to this matter of Poland past and Poland future. The epic begins with the young protagonist, Tadeusz, returning to his old home after completing his undergraduate studies. Mickiewicz fills this section with yearning nostalgia; this had once been *his* home too, and he would never return. Here's how it begins.

16. Mickiewicz: opening of *Pan Tadeusz*

At the very end of the book, in the epilogue, the poet imagines himself into the future, to a time when Poland would be a nation once more. The painting here is another Matejko, of the medieval Polish sculptor Veit Stoss, aided by his daughter to feel his sculpture after he himself had gone blind. It is another of his works in code.

17. Mickiewicz: from the epilogue of *Pan Tadeusz*

But Mickiewicz does not end on such a rhetorical note. Instead, he goes back to his past, very simply, and as translator Bill Johnson points out, very beautifully.

18. Bill Johnson reads the last lines of *Pan Tadeusz*
19. Jacek Malczewski: *Melancholia* (1894, Poznan)

This sense of being a curator for the past while looking forward to an uncertain future seems to be a common Polish preoccupation. Nowhere have I seen it expressed in visual terms better than in *Melancholia*, the 1894 masterpiece of **Jacek Malczewski** (1854–1929), an artist from the end of the century. It's a cavalcade of Polish history stretching from the artist's easel to the half-open window, with the figure of Melancholy looking out. It is a kind of allegory of the burden of the artist engaged with history, and a perfect representation of how Poles of all kinds, even today, seem with good reason to be obsessed with the tragic history of their country, which simply ceased to exist for 123 years.

20. Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860–1941)

But Poland did regain its independence at the end of the First World War, at least until it was overrun by Hitler. And a principal architect of that independence was the man shown here, not a politician but a musician, **Ignacy Jan Paderewski** (1860–1941). Attaining worldwide fame as a pianist and composer, he was able to advocate for his country behind the scenes. Touring the United States, he came to know **President Woodrow Wilson**, who invited him to the Versailles Conference in 1919, and put the restoration of Poland on the table as one of his Fourteen Points. Padwerewski then served as the first Prime Minister of the new country, but resigned after ten months to return to music. And it so happens that I have a clip of him from the Hollywood film *Moonlight Sonata* (1937). And what is he playing? What else but the Chopin *Polonaise Eroique* that we have sampled twice already!

21. *Moonlight Sonata* (1937): Paderewski plays Chopin
22. Paderewski playing

D. Forging a National Myth

23. Section title D (opening of *Finlandia*)
24. Map of Finland

I am choosing Finland as the second of my three countries on the European fringe, because it is unique in so many ways. Its language, for instance, is distinct from any of the Scandinavian countries to its West or from Russia to the East; its closest cousin in Hungarian. But its unique identity could not easily emerge, squeezed as the country was between its two neighbors. For centuries it had been a province of Sweden. Then in the early 19th century, they enlisted Russia help to push the Swedes out, and so became an Autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. It was not until the Russian Revolution that Finland gained independence, but only at the cost of a civil war. However, Finnish nationalism was on the rise as the 19th century wore on. Much of the nationalist sentiment was focused on the Eastern province of **Karelia**, split then as now between Russian and Finnish jurisdiction. So when **Jean Sibelius** (1865–1957) wrote his *Karelia Music* in 1893, his rather jolly music also had something of a patriotic thrust. I found this video of the *Intermezzo* movement with rather good shots of the countryside.

25. Sibelius: *Karelia*, intermezzo
26. Akseli Gallen-Kallela: *The Forging of the Sampo* (1893, Helsinki Ateneum)

This wonderful picture by the painter **Akseli Gallen-Kallela** (1865–1931) shows a scene from the Finnish national epic, the ***Kalevala***. It shows the forging of some mystical device—perhaps a sword, but that is never made clear—that confers special powers on its possessors. It also gave me my title for this section, "Forging the National Myth," not using "forging" in the sense of faking, but rather of crafting. Most national epics, such as the Arthurian legends, the *Nibelungenlied*, or the *Chanson de Roland*, derive from medieval sources that were translated into the vernacular around 1800. The Finnish *Kalevala* is distinctly different. Not only did it enter into the literature rather late (1849 in the accepted version), it had no written antecedents.

27. Elias Lönnrot and the *Kalevala* (1835/1849)

In fact, it is the work of a single assiduous but amateur collector, **Elias Lönnrot** (1802–84), a physician and public health official who picked up folk poetry and songs while touring the Eastern Provinces as part of his job. Beginning with his first edition and 1835, he arranged these materials into a logical narrative, all in verse. But he seems to have been very respectful; scholars believe that only around 10% was changed from the original sources, and less than 3% of the lines were entirely Lönnrot's own. It has a distinctive rhythm of its own, and functions more as a sequence of chanted incantations. Here is a snatch in Finnish, with and approximate translation.

28. *Kalevala* reading
29. Akseli Gallen-Kallela: *Lemminkainen at the River of Tuonela* (1893, Helsinki Ateneum)

I have only time for one hero of the *Kalevala*: **Lemminkainen**. In one cycle of poems, he has to undergo three trials to win the hand of a maiden. He accomplishes the first two, but the third is to go to the

underworld, **Tuonela**, and shoot the black swan he will find there. But he is hacked to pieces and his body thrown into the River of Death. In 1895, Sibelius wrote a memorable piece, assigning the swan's melancholy song to the *cor anglais* in dialogue with the solo cello. I know of no other piece of music that so perfectly captures the dark brooding quality of so much Nordic myth.

30. Sibelius*: The Swan of Tuonela,* opening
31. Akseli Gallen-Kallela: *Lemminkainen's Mother* (1897, Helsinki Ateneum)

Lemminkainen's mother goes to the river herself and uses a big rake to fish out the separate parts of her son's body. Using her magic charms, she is able to reunite them and bring Lemminkainen back to life. Sibelius celebrates his return in a movement of magnificent exuberance. It begins with a single three-note phrase in the bassoon, answered at once by a second bassoon and then by the clarinet. Out of this he builts a triumphant march involving the entire orchestra. I will put the complete link on the web, but for the purposes of the class, I have had to take a 3-minute cut in the middle.

32. Sibelius*: Lemminkainen's Return* (shortened)
33. Class title 2 (Aksel Gallen-Kallela: *The Symposium*)

E. A Nation Finds its Voice

34. Section title 5 (Sergiy Vasylkivskiy: *Cossack House*)

Let's start our look at Russia by analyzing a scene from Act I of *Eugene Onegin* (1879) by **Petr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840–93), in a film by **Petr Weigl**. It is entrance of the peasants bearing the first sheaf of the harvest in tribute to the landowner, who is a widow. I will ask you about the language, the setting, and the two different kinds of music you will hear.

35. Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin*, first chorus
36. Konstantin Makovsky : *Peasant Dinner During Harvesting* (1871)

What did you hear? Taking the items in reverse order, the quicker music towards the end is clearly a **Russian folk dance** in manner, if not an actual tune. And the long flexible line to which the peasants enter is very much in the tradition of **Orthodox chant**; this is a kind of religious ceremony, after all. The setting is a landed estate in the **Russian countryside**. And the language is **Russian**. Duh!

37. Oleg Kiprensky: *Alexander Pushkin* (1827)

Or maybe no so *duh…*! Tchaikovsky was writing in 1879, but his subject came from half a century earlier: the novel in verse *Yevgeny Onegin*, serialized between 1825 and 1832 by **Alexander Pushkin** (1799–1837). And in 1830, there would not have been an opera with such a simple country setting—there might not even have been a painting—and the language would certainly not have been Russian. Pushkin was a free-thinking aristocrat, an idle young man-about-town; his normal setting was the ballroom, gaming-house, or bedroom of somebody else's wife. His first language was French; he only understood

Russian because of his childhood nurse. But he wrote in it, and that's the point. Here is clip from a Russian who obviously has a low opinion of *Onegin*, and an even lower one as Pushkin as a person, but he nails the importance of Pushkin's language. I'll put the whole thing on the website.

38. Anonymous blog video on Pushkin, extract
39. Aleksandr Kravchuk: *Pushkin in Saint Petersburg* (1956)

Oh, and did I mention he was black? His maternal grandfather was a former slave, a pageboy given as a present to **Peter the Great**, who rose to become the chief military architect for the entire country. His other three grandparents were all Russian aristocrats, and this was his world. Even when writing a language that had never been used for such a purpose, his poetry has a courtly elegance that join 18th-century grace to 19th-century Romance. Listen to how *Onegin* begins, with this coolly ironic description of its protagonist; I think you will hear the formal elegance even in this traslation by **James Falen**, and certainly in the reading by **Stephen Fry**.

40. Pushkin: *Eugene Onegin*, opening, translated by James Falen, read by Stephen Fry
41. Illustration to *Eugene Onegin* (Pushkin, 1833)

Onegin, the bored dandy who models himself on **Lord Byron**, is partly Pushkin himself. But his understanding of his heroine **Tatiana** is something else again. She too will enter the court circle; she marries an elderly Prince. But for now, she is a love-sick teenage girl. By placing her in such a rural setting, Pushkin creates an emotional authenticity quite different from the posed dandyism of Onegin.

42. Pushkin: "I loved you"

Pushkin knew women; the blog post we sampled just now says he had over 100 affairs, not counting the servants and serfs he managed to knock up. He wrote to them, apparently, in French. But he memorialized them in Russian, in lyrics such as this. He wrote it in 1829, in between volumes of *Eugene Onegin*; I admire its understatement, the quiet renunciation of a love that is obviously still quite deep.

43. Pushkin: *Napoleon*, opening

So Pushkin virtually invented literary Russian. And he was a dab hand at everything from amorous lyrics to book-length poems about unrequited love. But he had a deep patriotism, a conscious duty towards the Nation itself. Here is the beginning of a poem that Pushkin wrote in 1821, on hearing news of the death of **Napoleon Bonaparte** in exile on St. Helena. It begins conventionally enough, but the last few stanzas are something else, seeing Napoleon's failed assault on Moscow in 1812 as the turning of the artistic tide for Russia itself.

44. Pushkin: *Napoleon*, final stanzas

I was struck by Pushkin's descriptions of nature for emotive purposes, and above all by his ability to place himself inside the mind of the lonely exile on that barren rock. I was going to show it with a painting of Napoleon on St. Helena looking forlornly our to sea, but then found this later painting by **Ilya Repin** (1844–1930) and **Ivan Aivazovsky** (1817–1900) of Pushkin himself standing on a rocky shore.

F. The Past, the Present, and the Never-Was

45. Section title 6 (*Ruslan* and *Boris*)

Reclaiming the language is one thing, a vitally important one and unique to Russia. But the examples of Poland and Finland suggested two other ways of asserting National Identity: though the use of a country's history (Poland), and by accessing its folklore (Finland). Pushkin did both. His *oeuvre* includes several historical works, such as the 1825 play *Boris Godunov*, his Shakespearean treatment of an early 17th-century Tsar tormented by guilt over the murder he had to order to reach the throne; I'll show you another historical subject, *Khovanschina*, at the end of class. And Pushkin first came to fame with his 1820 poem treating the legend of *Ruslan and Ludmilla*; he continued to write verse fairy tales such as *The Golden Cockerel* and *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, many of which were later made into operas.

46. Polish posters of *Borus Godunov* and *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*

Before we move on, I'll let you sample two of them, though not in the productions shown advertised by the Polish posters here. Neither, actually, are as you would see them onstage. The clip of Boris Godunov (1869) by **Modest Mussorgsky** (1839–81) comes from a film version by **Andrzej Zulawski** made in the studio starring the Italian bass **Ruggero Raimondi**. The other is a trailer for *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (1900) by **Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844–1908) from the Mariinsky Theater in Saint Petersburg; it is all chopped up, but you will certainly get the flavor.

47. Mussorgsky: *Boris Godunov*, coronation scene (Zulawski)
48. Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, trailer
49. Ilya Repin: *Self-Portrait* (1887)

Time now to introduce you to another painter: **Ilya Repin** (1844–1930), whose importance in 19th-century Russia was similar to that of **Jan Matejko** in Poland. He painted the figure of Pushkin that I used as a stand-in for Napoleon, although the water was painted by another artist. The two details shown here illustrate that he too had both an historical and a fantastic side; the subjects are a detail of the mad Tar Ivan the Terrible mourning the death of his son, whom he has killed in a fit of demented rage, and an illustration to another of Pushkin's fairy tales, *Sadko*, about a musician cajoled into playing for the wedding of some gods under the sea. Like Matejko, Repin could also use history to make contemporary political points. The next painting, which he began in 1880, is called *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Turkish Sultan*. It depicts an event from 1676, when the Ukrainian Cossacks, receiving a demand from the Turkish Sultan that they submit to Ottoman rule, sent a reply telling him exactly where he could put it. The whole thing is probably apochryphal, but Repin had fun showing the Cossacks trying to come up with increasingly obscene suggestions!

50. Ilya Repin: *The Reply of the Cossacks* (1880), with Rimsky: *Dubinushka* (1905)

The music, incidentally, is *Dubinushka*, an arrangement of the folk song "the little oak stick," by **Rimsky-Korsakov**. Written in 1905, at the time of the **First Russian Revolution**, this too had a political implication. But history and fantasy is not all Repin did. Here is the picture that made his reputation:

Boat-Haulers on the Volga from 1870. You see the title, and no doubt you hear the Volga Boat Song in your mind; it's all so folkloric and picturesque. I've put the song together with the painting too. But Repin shows how it really is: back-breaking work performed by men who are little better than slaves.

51. Ilya Repin: *Boat-Haulers on the Volga* (1870), with Volga Boat Song
52. — still from the above

In Russia especially, realism was an essential part of claiming National Identity; this is why I call this section "The Past, *the Present*, and the Never-Was." Repin's realism almost always had a political context. I'll show you one more: first the right hand center of the picture, that you might almost think was by **Norman Rockwell**, and then the whole thing.

53. Ilya Repin: *They Did Not Expect Him* (1884, Tretyakov), cropped
54. — the same, full picture

This is Repin being utterly realistic and entirely modern. The man whom they did not expect is a former revolutionary, released from exile in Siberia. Note that Repin is not criticizing the government, at least not overtly; he is simply showing it as it is.

55. Grigoriy Grigorievich Myasoyedov: *Busy Time for the Reapers* (1887)

Realism can take many forms. I will end this section with five paintings by other Russian artists from the 1870s and 1880s, shown without further comment. They cover the gamut from simple enjoyment of the Russian countryside and its people to implied social criticism. I am showing them in thematic rather than chronological order. The artists are: **Grigoriy Grigorievich Myasoyedov** (1834–1911), **Konstantin Savitsky** (1844–1905), **Sergei Ivanov** (1864–1910), **Alexei Savrasov** (1830–97), and **Vasily Polenov** (1844–1927).

56. Konstantin Savitsky: *Repairing the Railroad* (1874)
57. Sergei Ivanov: *A Female Migrant* (1886)
58. Alexei Savrasov: *The Rooks Have Come Back* (1871)
59. Vasily Polenov: *Courtyard in Moscow* (1878)

G. Epilogue

Finally, to sum up the three elements I have been considering: here is a poem extolling the natural inspiration of the **Russian land** and its people, followed by a scene from **Mussorgsky's** other hisotorical opera (not by Pushkin but Pushkinesque) combining both **folk song** and **historical drama**. First, an almost complete 1841 poem by Pushkin's younger contemporary **Mikhail Lermontov** (1814–41), who is generally regarded as second only to Pushkin among the Russian Romantics; he was also not half bad as a painter.

60. Lermontov: *My Native Land* (slightly abridged)

I am not even going to attempt to summarize the plot of Mussorgsky's *Khovanschina* (The Khovansky Affair), except to say that it is set in 1682 and concerns a struggle for the throne. Prince Ivan Khovansky, whom we see being serenaded by his female servants in a rather lovely folk song, is the leader of an attempted coup. He ignores warnings that his life is in danger, and in the shocking end to the act, loses it to a Boyar acting in defence of the young Tsar.

61. Mussorgsky: *Khovanschina*, end of Act IV, scene 1
62. The Death of Pushkin