

Igor Stravinsky (1872-1971) *Funeral Song*, Op 5. (1908)

It's a treat that we get to hear this work at all, as it was long thought lost. *Funeral Song* received only one performance during Stravinsky's lifetime. The work premiered in 1909, in St. Petersburg, as a memorial to Stravinsky's composition teacher, the Russian nationalist composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Stravinsky believed that the work had been destroyed in the Russian Revolution, but, in 2015, a librarian for the St. Petersburg Conservatory found the orchestral parts in a pile of old musical scores that had never been catalogued. To great excitement, the work was "re-premiered" for modern audiences in 2016 by the Marinsky Theatre Orchestra under the direction of the Russian conductor Valery Gergiev.

Rimsky-Korsakov influenced Stravinsky profoundly, not only as Stravinsky's primary composition teacher, but also as a close personal mentor, particularly after the death of Stravinsky's father in 1902. Several of Stravinsky's early works, particularly *The Firebird*, as well as the work we hear today, show his musical indebtedness to his mentor, particularly in their inventive and vivid orchestration, and Late-Romantic musical language. Stravinsky even adopted some of Rimsky-Korsakov's personal eccentricities, including the habit of wearing two pairs of prescription glasses at once—one on his forehead, the other on his nose—switching between the two to make annotations to his musical scores and rehearse an ensemble. Although Stravinsky once famously remarked that "Music is incapable of expressing anything but it itself," he nonetheless left an evocative recollection of *Funeral Song*: "It's a piece in which all the solo instruments of the orchestra file past the master's tomb in succession, each laying down its own melody as a wreath against a deep background of tremolo murmurings simulating the vibrations of bass voices singing in chorus." This sort of "singing" in the lowest register has a special resonance in Russian tradition. The Orthodox Church often features low men's voices in its liturgical music, a contrast to the Roman Catholic preference for higher sonorities. When Stravinsky first introduces the haunting main theme, it is played by a solo, muted horn. Listen for its solemn procession from instrument to instrument as the piece progresses.