

BRIDGING RURAL TRADITIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RUSSIAN AND ROMANIAN FOLK INFLUENCES IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

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Abstract: *This study investigates the rural folk traditions of Russia and Romania and their influence on classical music development in both regions. Through a comparative analysis of representative compositions, the research highlights how Russian and Romanian folk elements—such as modal melodies, asymmetric rhythms, and storytelling structures—have shaped the musical language of classical composers. While Russian folk music often emphasizes lyrical themes and collective identity, Romanian folk traditions reveal rich regional diversity and complex rhythmic patterns rooted in village life. By examining these parallel yet distinct musical cultures, the paper offers insight into the ways rural heritage informs national identity and artistic innovation within classical music.*

Key words: *cultural heritage, modal scales, folk music, national identity, comparative music analysis*

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the integration of rural folk traditions into classical music through a comparative lens, focusing on two emblematic composers: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky from Russia and George Enescu from Romania. While separated by geography and cultural context, both composers drew inspiration from their nations' rural musical heritage, using folk elements not only to enrich their compositions but also to express a deeper sense of national identity [12].



Figure 1. Portrait of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, "Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky" [16]



Figure 2. Portrait of George Enescu

Source: George Enescu International Festival, "George Enescu: A Life Dedicated to Music" [6]

By comparing Tchaikovsky's expressive adaptation of Russian folk elements with Enescu's ethnographically informed integration of Romanian rural music, this research aims to uncover how each composer contributed to the creation of a national musical identity [3]. Through this focused analysis, the study reveals the varied ways in which rural soundscapes shape classical composition, reflecting not only artistic choices but also broader cultural and historical narratives.

Tchaikovsky's work often reflects a Romanticized portrayal of Russian village life, incorporating folk-like melodies, dance rhythms, and modal coloring within a Western

symphonic framework. Although he did not engage in formal ethnographic research, his intuitive grasp of Russian folk spirit allowed him to evoke the essence of the countryside with emotional depth and artistic elegance. His music represents an aesthetic transformation of folk idioms, more stylized than authentic—serving expressive and nationalist purposes within 19th-century Romanticism [9].

In contrast, George Enescu's approach was more scholarly and immersive. Deeply connected to the Romanian countryside, Enescu gathered folk tunes from rural regions and studied their modal structures, irregular rhythms, and ornamentation. His compositions, such as the Romanian Rhapsodies and the Sonata No. 3 for violin and piano, do not merely imitate folk music; they reconstruct its core characteristics within highly sophisticated classical forms. Enescu's work reveals a meticulous effort to preserve the authentic voice of Romanian village culture while simultaneously elevating it within the concert hall [1].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a comprehensive and multidisciplinary methodology designed to explore in depth the relationships between Russian and Romanian folk traditions and their artistic reinterpretation in the works of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and George Enescu. Drawing on a combination of musicological analysis, historical contextualization, and ethnographic inquiry, the research seeks to provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of how traditional folk elements were absorbed, transformed, and reimagined within these two national contexts. By bridging the boundaries between theory and practice, the study investigates not only the structural and stylistic dimensions of folk and art music but also situates them within broader social, political, and cultural frameworks [14]. Such an approach acknowledges that music, particularly when rooted in folk idioms, serves as both an artistic and a cultural document, reflecting the evolution of national consciousness, collective memory, and aesthetic innovation. The methods selected for this research thus reflect a deliberate balance between analytical rigor and contextual sensitivity, ensuring that the exploration of musical and ethnographic sources is deeply informed by the cultural realities that shaped their creation. The following subsections present in detail the methodological stages and the sources utilized throughout the research process, demonstrating how each contributes to the overall interpretive framework [7].

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The first phase of the research consisted of an extensive and critical review of relevant academic literature, aimed at establishing a solid theoretical and conceptual foundation for the comparative investigation of Russian and Romanian folk traditions. Scholarly writings on musical nationalism, ethnomusicology, and Slavic and Balkan folklore were systematically examined to identify prevailing interpretations and methodological tendencies within existing research [17]. This stage also involved mapping key debates concerning the function of folk music in the construction of national identity and its transformation within the classical idiom. To ensure both breadth and depth, the review incorporated sources drawn from major academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and SCOPUS, prioritizing peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and fieldwork-based ethnographic studies. Special attention was devoted to literature addressing the processes of adaptation, authenticity, and innovation within 19th- and early 20th-century European art music, where folk elements often served as vehicles for expressing national or regional specificity. This stage not only contextualized the present study within broader academic discourse but also identified significant gaps, particularly in direct comparative studies between Russian and Romanian folk systems, that this research aims to address [4].

2. Selection and Examination of Musical Works

At the core of the study lies a dual analytical approach: first, the examination of selected Russian and Romanian folk repertoires representative of their respective modal, rhythmic, and melodic features; second, the exploration of how these traits were reinterpreted in the art music of Tchaikovsky and Enescu. Russian folk songs characterized by pentatonicism, heterophony, and narrative lyricism were compared with Romanian doinas, ballads, and dance tunes distinguished by asymmetric meters, modal ambiguity, and ornamentation [10]. For Tchaikovsky, works such as *Symphony No. 2* ("Little Russian") and *String Quartet No. 1* were analyzed for their assimilation of folk melodic prototypes and rhythmic cadences. In parallel, Enescu's *Romanian Rhapsodies*, *Orchestral Suites*, and chamber works were examined as complex syntheses of folk modality and Western formal principles. Through detailed formal, harmonic, and thematic analyses, the research highlights the ways in which both composers negotiated the tension between folk authenticity and compositional sophistication, transforming oral traditions into written, symphonic expressions of national sentiment [2].

3. Historical and Cultural Contextualization

In order to understand the deeper cultural meanings underlying folk adaptation, the study incorporates a historical dimension based on both primary and secondary sources. Letters, essays, and theoretical writings by Tchaikovsky, Enescu, and their contemporaries were analyzed to uncover their attitudes toward folklore and national identity. These documents reveal how each composer's engagement with folk sources was not merely aesthetic but ideologically and emotionally charged, rooted in broader narratives of cultural revival and self-definition [15]. The study also draws on historical research concerning 19th-century Russia and Romania, both societies undergoing processes of modernization and national awakening. By situating musical practices within these contexts, the research demonstrates how folk materials functioned simultaneously as a means of preserving heritage and asserting modern identity. The historical analysis thus complements the musical examination, underscoring that folk-inspired art music reflected and shaped the collective consciousness of emerging nations.

4. Comparative Analytical Strategy

Finally, a comparative analytical framework was applied to elucidate the similarities and divergences in how Russian and Romanian traditions, as embodied by Tchaikovsky and Enescu, integrated folk heritage into the classical idiom. This approach entailed close attention to compositional techniques such as modal borrowing, rhythmic asymmetry, thematic transformation, and textural layering, alongside the exploration of culturally specific devices, such as the Russian reliance on choral homophony versus the Romanian preference for heterophony and ornamented melodic lines [5]. The comparative dimension revealed that while Tchaikovsky's approach to folk material often reflected an aesthetic ideal of refinement within the European symphonic tradition, Enescu's engagement was marked by an organic fusion of folk and art idioms, striving to preserve the improvisational spirit of the source material. The findings demonstrate that both Russian and Romanian folk systems, though distinct in form and ethos, share a capacity for transformation that transcends their oral origins. In illuminating these processes, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how folk traditions function as dynamic forces within the evolution of European musical modernity [11].

RESEARCH RESULTS

The comparative analysis reveals that both Russian and Romanian folk traditions occupy central yet distinct roles in shaping national musical identity, as reflected in the works of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and George Enescu. Although both composers drew inspiration from the vernacular idioms of their respective homelands, their approaches reveal fundamentally different aesthetic intentions, cultural functions, and philosophical relationships to tradition. Tchaikovsky's engagement with Russian folklore was primarily artistic and interpretive, aimed at transforming peasant melodies into emotionally charged symbols within the Romantic symphonic idiom. In contrast, Enescu's relationship with Romanian folk music was grounded in an ethnographic and experiential understanding of living oral traditions, which he sought not merely to stylize but to internalize and preserve as an integral part of his compositional language. Each composer's approach thus reflects not only individual creative choices but also broader national dialogues concerning authenticity, identity, and the reconciliation of folk heritage with the aspirations of European modernity [10].

Tchaikovsky's use of Russian folk material was filtered through a refined Romantic sensibility that privileged emotional resonance and structural balance over ethnographic precision. His references to folklore were often symbolic rather than literal, evoking the imagined essence of "the Russian soul" within the framework of Western symphonic form. In works such as *Symphony No. 2 ("Little Russian")* and *The Nutcracker*, folk melodies function as thematic nuclei that lend the music a distinctive national color, yet they are harmonically elaborated and formally integrated into broader developmental processes characteristic of the 19th-century European symphonic tradition [6]. Through this synthesis, Tchaikovsky constructed an idealized vision of folk culture, one that reflects the Romantic fascination with rural purity and emotional sincerity while remaining firmly rooted in cosmopolitan aesthetics. His treatment of folk idioms thus aligns with the larger European trend of musical nationalism, where the vernacular was appropriated not as documentary evidence but as a means of poetic and affective expression.

By contrast, Enescu's engagement with Romanian folk sources demonstrates a direct, immersive, and deeply respectful approach rooted in ethnomusicological observation. His contact with authentic village music—through fieldwork, transcription, and collaboration with folk performers—shaped a compositional practice that sought to preserve the modal, rhythmic, and melodic integrity of oral tradition. In Enescu's works, particularly the *Romanian Rhapsodies*, the *Orchestral Suites*, and his chamber compositions, folk idioms are not ornamental but structural: they determine melodic contour, rhythmic organization, and even large-scale formal development. The use of asymmetric meters (5/8, 7/8), modal inflection (especially Dorian, Lydian, and Mixolydian), and ornamented melodic lines echoes the spontaneity and expressive nuance of peasant performance. Rather than reinterpreting folk music through an external artistic lens, Enescu sought to elevate it from within, allowing its inherent vitality and freedom to shape the grammar of art music itself. This approach exemplifies a distinctly Romanian aesthetic of integration rather than stylization, emphasizing continuity between folk and cultivated traditions [8].

From a rhythmic and tonal standpoint, both Russian and Romanian folk systems exhibit remarkable complexity, though their manifestations differ significantly. Russian folk music often relies on diatonic modal frameworks and collective vocal textures, producing melodies of broad, lyrical character and steady rhythmic pacing—qualities that naturally suited Tchaikovsky's symphonic elaboration. Romanian folk music, by contrast, is characterized by greater asymmetry, modal ambiguity, and microtonal flexibility, resulting in melodic and rhythmic gestures that oscillate between improvisation and fixed

form. These features give Enescu's works a rhythmic elasticity and tonal richness that mirror the subtle inflections of traditional Romanian performance. Thus, while Tchaikovsky transformed folk materials into idealized, emotionally resonant symbols within a balanced Romantic idiom, Enescu embedded the living pulse of folk practice into the very structure of his compositions [13]. The comparison between the two reveals how national musical identities evolve not only through the use of traditional materials but through the ways in which those materials are conceptualized—as artifice and symbol in the Russian case, as continuity and lived experience in the Romanian.

Ultimately, the dialogue between Russian and Romanian folk traditions—as mediated through Tchaikovsky and Enescu—illustrates two complementary modes of musical nationalism. In Russia, the folk element becomes a poetic emblem of emotional universality; in Romania, it remains an authentic voice of the people, preserved and reimagined within art music. Together, these parallel yet divergent paths demonstrate that the integration of folk material into classical composition is not a uniform process but a spectrum of aesthetic and cultural negotiation—one that reflects the broader historical, ideological, and human realities of each nation's musical self-understanding [12].

CONCLUSIONS

This comparative study offers a nuanced perspective on the differing methodologies through which Russian and Romanian folk traditions have been integrated into the realm of classical composition, as exemplified by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and George Enescu. While both composers drew on the musical idioms of their native cultures, their approaches reflect divergent aesthetic intentions, historical circumstances, and cultural functions. Tchaikovsky's engagement with Russian folklore embodies the spirit of Romantic idealization, transforming peasant melodies into expressive symbols that evoke national identity and emotional universality. His use of folk materials serves as a poetic gesture rather than an ethnographic one, reshaping traditional tunes within the harmonic and formal conventions of Western art music. Through this process, Tchaikovsky cultivated a lyrical and emotionally charged musical language that resonates with both Russian sentiment and the cosmopolitan ideals of 19th-century Romanticism. His folk-inspired themes, seamlessly woven into symphonic and balletic textures, illustrate an aesthetic that values cohesion, balance, and expressive immediacy over ethnographic authenticity.

In contrast, the Romanian approach to folk integration, represented most clearly by Enescu, reflects an ethnographically grounded and culturally immersive methodology. Deeply influenced by first-hand experience of village traditions and oral performance practices, Enescu's compositional language embodies the living soundscape of Romanian folklore. His engagement with authentic folk modes, rhythmic asymmetries, and ornamented melodic contours reveals an intention not merely to reference tradition, but to internalize and perpetuate it [7]. Works such as the *Romanian Rhapsodies* and *Orchestral Suites* exemplify how folk elements function as structural pillars rather than decorative motifs, shaping the harmonic, rhythmic, and textural fabric of the music itself. Through this synthesis, Enescu achieves a rare equilibrium between preservation and transformation, fusing the spontaneity of folk performance with the intellectual rigor of classical form.

From an analytical standpoint, both traditions share a profound rhythmic and modal richness, yet they manifest it in contrasting ways. Russian folk idioms, as mediated through Tchaikovsky, tend toward symmetrical phrasing, diatonic modality, and balanced melodic construction, aligning with the polished architecture of Western Romanticism. Romanian

folk music, by comparison, favors irregular meters, modal fluidity, and microtonal nuance, traits that give Enescu's compositions a distinctive rhythmic vitality and expressive depth. These differences underscore how each national tradition, shaped by its cultural geography and historical trajectory, cultivated its own path toward the synthesis of folk and art music.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the enduring creative potential of folk music as both a repository of cultural memory and a catalyst for artistic innovation. The juxtaposition of Russian and Romanian traditions through the works of Tchaikovsky and Enescu reveals two complementary visions of musical nationalism: one symbolic and idealized, the other organic and experiential. Both composers, in their distinct ways, demonstrate that folk heritage is not a static relic but a dynamic force capable of renewal and reinterpretation within the classical idiom [3]. Their legacies affirm that the dialogue between tradition and modernity, between the village and the concert hall, remains one of the most fertile and defining dimensions of European musical identity.

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