

Jean Martinon was born in Lyon, where he began his education, going on to the Conservatoire de Paris to study under Albert Roussel for composition, under Charles Munch and Roger Désormière for conducting, under Vincent d'Indy for harmony, and under Jules Boucherit for violin. He served in the French army during World War II, and was taken prisoner in 1940, composing works such as *Chant des captifs* while incarcerated. Among his other compositions are four symphonies, four concertos, additional choral works and chamber music.

After the war, Martinon was appointed conductor of the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire of Paris, and, in 1946, of the Bordeaux Philharmonic Orchestra. Other orchestras with which he was associated were the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as music director from 1963 to 1968; the Düsseldorfer Symphoniker, the French National Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra, the Concerts Lamoureux and Het Residentie Orkest in The Hague.

Martinon's repertoire focused on the works of early twentieth century French and Russian composers. The premieres of his violin- and cello-concerti were given by Henry Szeryng and Pierre Fournier respectively. He was a National Patron of Delta Omicron, an international professional music fraternity.

Martinon was diagnosed with bone cancer, not long after he guest conducted the San Francisco Symphony in their first complete performances of Deryck Cooke's orchestration of Gustav Mahler's tenth symphony. He died in Paris.



# Alexander Borodin Symphony No. 2

Jean Martinon  
London Symphony Orchestra

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## Facts about this Recording

**Date of Recording: 6-7 Mar 1958 at Kingsway Hall**

**Producer: James Walker Engineer: Alan Abel**

**Recorded by Decca/RCA**

Borodin was the illegitimate child of a Caucasian prince who claimed descent from King David and quartered a harp and sling in his coat of arms. Alfred Habets surmises that these legendary roots imbued Borodin with a predilection for the rhythms and modes of the East.

In keeping with the practice of the time, Borodin was baptized as the son of a serf, from whom he got his name, and to whose lowly social status he would have been consigned, had he not been freed at an early age upon his father's death and then raised in relative comfort by his mother. Along the path to becoming one of Russia's most renowned chemical researchers and teachers, Borodin established a home laboratory at age 13, practiced medicine for four years, and founded the first Russian academy for the education of women doctors. Music was strictly a pastime – until he met Balakirev, who led him to recognize the creative powers within him and instilled a duty to assert the originality of national art.

Borodin was a social creature (he died at a party) with a disordered domestic life, and his concentration was constantly distracted by offering hospitality to relatives, students and frequent visitors. Above all else, the press of his professional duties, and in particular the need to be close to his pupils to guide their work, deprived him of the tranquility needed for composition: "One needs time to concentrate oneself, to get into the right key; otherwise, the creation of a sustained work is impossible." Thus his only (and incomplete) opera is a patchwork of materials added at various stages over 17 years. His lifetime output of complete works is sadly small – along with some songs, a few fine piano pieces, and some chamber works capped by two fabulous quartets, his orchestral work consists of only two symphonies and a tone poem.

Borodin's work is unlikely to ever achieve the popularity of Tchaikovsky's, as it lacks the compelling emotion that infuses the latter's final four symphonies (#s 4, 5, 6 and Manfred). Yet, his work is shorter, brighter and immediately appealing, fueled by a vast reserve of creativity that dazzles with its inventive brilliance.

Perhaps the most direct way to experience this is through Borodin's most popular work, *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, an eight-minute masterpiece whose understated elegance speaks more clearly and forcefully than the sprawling bombast that tends to typify the tone poem genre. Dedicated to Liszt (an ardent supporter who transformed the tone poem) and written for an 1880 festival that never materialized to honor the 25th anniversary of Alexander II's reign, Borodin described it in the concert program for the premiere as follows:

In the silence of the monotonous deserts of Central Asia are heard for the first time the strains of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance we hear the approach of horses and camels and the melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A caravan emerges out of the boundless steppe, escorted by Russian soldiers and continues safely and fearlessly on its long way, protected by the formidable military power of the conquerors. It slowly disappears, The tranquil songs of conqueror and conquered merge in harmony, echoes of which linger on as the caravan disappears in the distance. The music consists of four elements – a sustained violin harmonic representing the shimmering, timeless expanse of desert, a pizzicato loping figure of camel tread, a Russian folksong and an oriental melody. The last two are first heard apart, separated by the camel figure, and then together, rising to a powerful climax that recedes to leave only the original harmonic, heard pppp. (Speaking of Ives, the scheme is strikingly similar to his remarkable *Unanswered Question*.) Significantly, the programmatic political agenda to warn neighboring countries to accept Russian dominion is belied by the music, as the blending of themes can be construed as conveying a potent message of rising above cultural differences to foster friendship between former enemies, and perhaps even a prayer for lasting peace, all expressed with disarming simplicity. (Interestingly, for an 1882 concert program, Borodin softened "protected by the formidable military power of the conquerors" to: "under the armed protection of Russia" and the last sentence to replace reference to conqueror and conquered with: "The tranquil songs of Russians and the native population merge into a common harmony ... .")

Borodin wrote his first symphony from 1862 to 1867 under the strong influence of Balakirev, who led the 1869 premiere, which was so successful that Borodin was immediately inspired to begin a second. At the same time, he launched his most ambitious project which after 17 years of sporadic effort he would leave unfinished at his death. Prince Igor was to be an epic opera to Borodin's own libretto based on the twelfth century defense of Russia from barbarian invasion. As completed and published posthumously by Rimsky-Korsakoff and Glazunov, it is a sprawling compendium of disparate material from stirring choruses to soaring Italianate arias and, most famously, a ballet interlude of immensely tuneful "Polovtsian Dances" that have gone on to a life of their own as light concert favorites (along with an overture arranged by Glazunov, based on his phenomenal recall of Borodin having played sketches to him years earlier).

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I. Allegro

II. Scherzo: Prestissimo

III. Andante

IV. Finale. Allegro

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