



**IN THE STEPPES OF CENTRAL ASIA**  
**Alexander Borodin (1880)**



## IN THE STEPPES OF CENTRAL ASIA

By Alexander Borodin (Russia)  
Romantic (1880)

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### LESSON INTRODUCTION

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#### Important Terms and Concepts

- \* **Tone poem (aka symphonic poem):** a large-scale orchestral work, usually in one movement, that illustrates the content of a poem, story, landscape, or other non-musical source
- \* **Dynamics:** describes how soft or loud the music is

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### BEHIND THE MUSIC

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In his early teens, Alexander Borodin (1833 – 1887) began to take interest in music, studying piano and the cello. He also studied science seriously and eventually pursued a career in chemistry and medicine; however, he always made time on the side for composing music. In 1862, he met Mily Balakirev and became part of the so-called "Mighty Five," a group of composers (including Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov) who aimed to create a uniquely Russian style of music. During this period, Borodin composed his epic Second Symphony, two string quartets, and the tone poem *In the Steppes of Central Asia*. In the 1870s, due largely to the efforts of Franz Liszt, his

works became widely popular in concert halls of the West.

*In the Steppes of Central Asia*, which is dedicated to Liszt, depicts a peaceful interaction between Russians and Asians in the steppe lands of the Caucasus. A caravan of Central Asians is crossing the desert under the protection of Russian troops. The opening theme, representing the Russians, is soon joined by the “Eastern melody,” which is played on English horn. A third theme of pizzicato eighth notes represents the plodding hoofs of the horses and the camels. Eventually these three themes overlap contrapuntally. The Asian music wafts off into the distance and the Russian theme is left alone.

## ACTIVE LISTENING

1. Play the first two minutes of the Youtube recording for students (: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_W2aQf8Lb5M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_W2aQf8Lb5M))
2. Ask students:
  1. What did you hear?
  2. How would you describe the mood of the piece? The tempo?
  3. Where do you think this piece takes place?
3. Hold up the poster (page 1) and say, “This piece is called *In the Steppes of Central Asia*,” by Alexander Borodin. It is a tone poem, which is an orchestral work that was written to illustrate a specific story or scene. This tone poem is intended to depict a meeting by two groups of people in the Caucasus region of Asia.”

*If there is time, you may wish to help students locate the Caucasus Mountains on a map. The Youtube video linked above contains pictures of the Central Asian steppe region, the largest of its kind in the world. A steppe is a geological region characterized by grassland plains and very few trees. The climate of a steppe is too dry to support forests but too wet to be classified as a desert.*

4. Read Alexander Borodin’s own description of the piece:
 

“In the silence of the monotonous steppes of Central Asia is heard the unfamiliar sound of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance we hear the approach of horses and camels and the bizarre and melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A

caravan approaches, escorted by Russian soldiers, and continues safely on its way through the immense desert. It disappears slowly. The notes of the Russian and Asiatic melodies join in a common harmony, which dies away as the caravan disappears in the distance."

5. Divide the class into three groups. Each will represent different characters in the story (and thus, a different theme). Pass out copies of the three themes (page 7), and have students practice clapping/singing/playing the rhythm and/or melody so that they are familiar enough to recognize it in context. Then, play the excerpts listed below in parentheses, having each group stand up when they hear their theme. Then have each group try to guess which instrument is playing that theme.
  1. Group 1 represents the Russians (clarinet: 0:00 – 0:35)
  2. Group 2 represents the horses and camels (violas and cellos, pizzicato: 1:00 – 1:27). *Note that they will have to listen for their melody underneath the long held notes of the violins and woodwinds).*
  3. Group 3 represents the Asians (English horn: 1:29 – 2:06)
6. Now, listen to the entire song. Instruct each group to stand whenever they hear their melody being played. They can depict the **dynamics** of their theme as follows: When the melody is soft (piano), they should crouch down near the floor; and when it is very loud (fortissimo), they should stand up tall on their tiptoes! Tell students that they will have to be very good listeners: sometimes their theme will be prominent, and other times it may be more hidden!
7. Play the entire song, with students standing up as appropriate. Note that the themes begin separately but eventually begin to overlap (so that more than one group will be standing at one time).

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## GO DEEPER

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### OPTION 1. CREATE A LISTENING MAP

*This activity can be done as a class or in small groups (i.e. by mixing together students from the three Active Listening groups). Have students come up with a symbol to represent each of the three themes. As they listen again, they will write their symbol each time they hear the theme. When themes overlap, they can draw both symbols on top of one another.*

*Another option that incorporates reading music: have students color-code the score using three colors to represent the three themes.*

### OPTION 2. MUSICAL CONNECTIONS: TONE POEMS

*During this activity, students will listen to other symphonic tone poems. Choose one or more of the following pieces to listen to with the students. Teach students about the composers and historical periods that inspired these works. Invite students to identify the stories and images that they hear within the music, and compare these works with *In the Steppes of Central Asia*.*

1. Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886) is largely considered to have invented the tone poem form. He wanted to create single-movement works that were as complex and programmatically rich as entire symphonies. He did not initially base his symphonic poems on specific works but wrote prefaces to provide some context to these new works. Listen to No. 4 “Orpheus,” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=budSyYjt5cw>
2. Richard Strauss’ (1864 – 1949) *Don Juan* is based on the Spanish legend of Don Juan and was specifically written to illustrate the content of a play *Don Juans Ende*. Listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcBGsjPky0c>
3. Modest Mussorgsky’s (1839 - 1881) spooky *Night on Bald Mountain* depicts a witches’ Sabbath at Mt. Triglaf, near Kiev, on St. John’s Eve (June 23). Listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fizh0M8TczA>

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## RESOURCES

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**YOUTUBE RECORDING:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_W2aQf8Lb5M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_W2aQf8Lb5M)

**SHEET MUSIC:**

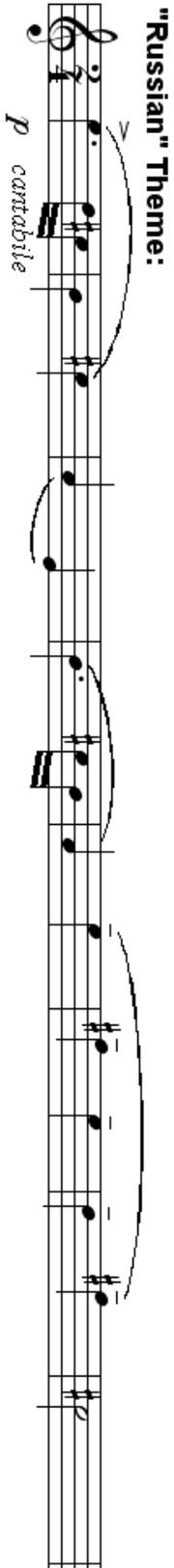
<http://japanese.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/1/1e/IMSLP15805-Borodin-SteppesFSmuz.pdf>

**LESSON ACTIVITIES WERE ADAPTED FROM:**

- SMART Exchange lesson on texture, by D. Mangus:  
<http://exchange.smarttech.com/details.html?id=0b80b81d-a8f7-4c74-aba2-e7572e4b0d32>

## Themes from Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia*

**"Russian" Theme:**



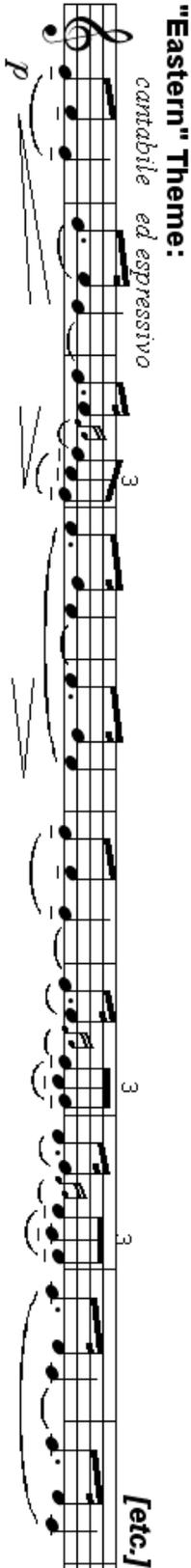
*p cantabile*

**"Traveling" Theme:**



*pizz p*

**"Eastern" Theme:**



*cantabile ed espressivo p*