Almost every aspect of Prince Igor—from its source material to its composition to its performance history and many versions—marks it as unique among operas. While some of the music, most notably the Polovtsian Dances, has long impressed the international public with its irresistible lyricism and rhythmic power, the complete work is not well known outside Russia. Like his creation, Alexander Borodin also stands apart from the profile of the typical composer (he was a chemist by profession). His only opera is based on an anonymous medieval epic, The Tale of Igor’s Campaign, which relates a historical incident: a raid by Prince Igor Svyatoslavich against the nomadic Central Asian Polovtsian tribes in the late 12th century, an era remembered as a time of formative national consciousness and the emergence of the modern Russian culture. In that respect, the Tale is akin to other European national epics of the period, such as the Nibelungenlied and the poem of El Cid. Borodin worked on the opera intermittently for 18 years and left it incomplete at the time of his death. Fellow composers Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov finished the orchestration and added some music of their own, based on various understandings of Borodin’s intentions and sketches. Thus, the score has been a work in progress from the very beginning, and every subsequent production has had to make choices about what music to include—in some sense making Prince Igor a new opera with every staging. It can be (and often has been in 20th-century Russia) understood as a rousing nationalist anthem against barbarian foreigners, but the enigmatic title character is a far more nuanced protagonist than the stereotypical hero.

The Creators

Alexander Borodin (1833–1887) pursued careers in chemistry, education, and music simultaneously in his native St. Petersburg. As a composer, he was noted for his symphonies, chamber works, piano music, and the memorable symphonic poem In the Steppes of Central Asia. Many of his works remained unfinished. The posthumous editing of Prince Igor was undertaken by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908), a successful and prolific composer in a variety of genres, including opera. Highly regarded as an orchestrator, Rimsky-Korsakov completed much of the instrumentation of Prince Igor. Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936), once a student of Rimsky-Korsakov’s, also worked on the score, orchestrating several large tracts of it and composing additional pieces. The libretto was adapted by Borodin himself from the anonymous 12th-century epic The Tale of Igor’s Campaign and two other medieval Slavic chronicles. For this production, three sections of the score, including Igor’s monologue in Act III, were orchestrated by conductor and composer Pavel Smelkov (b. 1976).
In Focus  CONTINUED

The Setting
The opera is set in the town of Putivl, now in northeastern Ukraine near the Russian border, and in an undefined area to the east, in the camp of the Polovtsians, a nomadic Turkic people of central Asia (and eventually Eastern Europe and the Middle East). The historic date of Igor’s campaign is 1185. The Met’s production is set in a timeless space inspired by different periods of Russian history and architecture.

The Music
Prince Igor’s sweepingly lyrical lines and rich Romantic exoticism have captured audiences’ imaginations ever since its first performance. But the score also offers masterful character delineation. Igor’s Act I aria, for example, combines sumptuously expressive melody with a form that is less strict than the classically symmetrical aria, reflecting both the hero’s state of mind and the dramatic situation. His character is explored even further in the rarely heard Act III monologue (newly orchestrated for this production). Throughout the opera, Igor’s conflicting impulses—going to war and remaining at home—are beautifully captured in the music. (The domestic longing will be echoed in Act III by his wife, Yaroslavna, in her ravishing lament.) The opera contains several other striking vocal solos (the tenor Vladimir’s and the mezzo Konchakovna’s cavatinas and the bass Konchak’s aria, all in Act I, the folk-derived song of the Gudak Player in Act III), but character insight is found throughout the score: an Act I recitative, for example, is a subtle and fascinating depiction of the ambivalent Ovlur’s shadiness set against Igor’s steadfastness. Borodin drew upon the idioms of Russian folk music to some degree in his depictions of the title hero’s compatriots, and on a contrasting musical palette for their enemies, the Polovtsians. The orchestral and dance interludes and several of the great choruses accentuate this difference—but Borodin’s use of an exotic sound to create an “otherness” for the Polovtsians (notably in the famous Polovtsian Dances in Act I and the Polovtsian March in Act III) is less ethnomusicology than a testament to the composer’s creative imagination. The role of the chorus is of extraordinary importance throughout the opera.

Prince Igor at the Met
Prince Igor premiered at the Met in 1915, with sets and costumes based on the original St. Petersburg production. The opera was sung in Italian and Giorgio Polacco conducted Pasquale Amato in the title role and Frances Alda as Yaroslavna. After nine more performances through 1917, it disappeared from the repertory for almost a century. Director Dmitri Tcherniakov made his Met debut with the current new production, which opened on February 6, 2014, starring Ildar Abdrazakov as Igor. Gianandrea Noseda conducted.