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MOMENTS MUSICAUX

Occasional Essays on Opera

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Occasional Essays on Opera

Edited by Henry Hardy

Isaiah Berlin's writings on music have never been printed in collected form. His undergraduate music criticism can be read [here](#). Later critical writing on music is in the process of being posted separately, with links [here](#). This PDF comprises his other principal essays on music, all with operatic subjects. Links to the individual essays appear below.

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Mozart at Glyndebourne

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I wish that I could say that I was a member of that small company which, drawn by friendship, curiosity, hope, or simple faith, boarded the historic train which went from Victoria to Sussex in May 1934 for the inaugural performance of *Le nozze di Figaro*. Nor, I am ashamed to say, did I go in 1935. I thought only about the Salzburg Festival, which I visited every year from 1929 until the *Anschluss*. I was not, before the war, as I now am, an addicted reader of periodicals, and had simply not taken in the new musical phenomenon. Nobody I spoke to at Oxford, where I lived as undergraduate and don, so much as mentioned Glyndebourne's existence before 1936 at the earliest. Yet I did not move in wholly philistine circles.

In 1936 I did go to Glyndebourne, and heard a performance of *Le nozze di Figaro* which, as I can confidently testify after almost fifty years, I still remember vividly: and remember as having been simply wonderful. Mariano Stabile was the best Figaro I have ever heard, in Salzburg and Milan as well as Glynde[102]bourne; and he was, if anything, even better in Rossini's *Barbiere*. The Countess at Glyndebourne, in that year and later, was the Finnish singer Aulikki Rautawaara. The conductor and director were then, and for many excellent years, Fritz Busch and Carl Ebert. Busch was the equal of, and at times superior to, even Franz Schalk and Bruno Walter; and the Glyndebourne orchestra under him rose to unexpected heights. Ebert must have been the best director of classical opera in Europe. Both were, as is not always the case with even the most gifted artists, men of inborn aesthetic sense and taste; and no composer requires this as much as Mozart. The orchestra was far less accomplished than the Vienna Philharmonic, yet the freshness, the wit, the sheer verve, the inner pulse, the forward movement, the marvellous enthusiasm lifted it above any performance of *Figaro* I had heard in Salzburg, Munich or anywhere else.

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Lotte Lehmann in Salzburg was incomparably the best Countess that I or any member of my generation could have heard; but both the Count (Brownlee) and Figaro (Stabile) acted and sang better at Glyndebourne; Cherubino (Helletsgruber) and Susanna (Mildmay) both sang exquisitely. Not only the gardens, the flowers, the summer evening, the novelty of it all, but that something so enchanting could happen in England at all, that was to me – and surely to many others – a source of lasting astonishment and delight.

There were, of course, the Covent Garden summer seasons, with international casts, often marvellous. But a festival devoted to a particular composer or particular type of opera is something very different. A combination of a great many factors is needed to constitute a festival of the first order. There is the pattern formed by the relationships of the works performed; there is the central conception, the precise direction of the imagination, the [103] care and unrelenting concentration, which generate a particular style; there are the genuine love of music and responsiveness of the audience; above all, the quality of ensemble, the depth of inner understanding which, for example, players of chamber music can achieve at their best – a coherent vision which singers and players can attain, but all too seldom do. The ensembles achieved at Glyndebourne were, and are, of unique quality, found, so far as I can tell, nowhere else.

The right combination of these elements can be reached momentarily even under repertory conditions: but continuously only where long preparation and patient genius are at work. Busch and Ebert created ensembles which approached perfection. This was made possible at Glyndebourne where the entire company lived together for many weeks – their lives and artistic work became interwoven with one another's during the late spring and early summer months, so that even those of moderate gifts were inspired to rise above themselves. The guidance of the two great masters filled the musicians with sufficient confidence in their own powers to achieve a degree of understanding that enabled them to create their own unique version of the great Mozart operas. The working conditions at Glyndebourne were and are unique. Who, in their senses, could have predicted then with confidence that in an England not notably devoted to opera in general, or Mozart in

particular, such a venture could be successful? So brilliantly successful almost immediately after the first few performances?

As everyone knows, this would not have happened without the peerless personality of John Christie. He had the single-mindedness of a secular visionary; he swept aside objections and apparently insuperable difficulties pointed out to him by cautious advisers. His boldness, indomitable will and total independence – above all this [104] last attribute, more often found in England fifty years ago than it is today (for reasons on which I will not speculate), were a major cultural asset to our country. Like every great intendant in the history of opera, he displayed a degree of personal authority, indeed, of the indispensable element of *terribilità*, which rivalled that of Diaghilev and Toscanini.

It was easier, after all, to create the Salzburg Festival – music in general and opera in particular had been for many years an intrinsic part of Austrian culture and life. Opera in this sense, despite the international seasons at Covent Garden, was not part of the British cultural heritage. John Christie intuitively understood how to realise his ideal, more, I suspect, by instinct and temperament than by rational calculation – the mere appointment of Busch and Ebert was an inspired decision.

Neither of these great masters was a pioneer of methods of interpretation of classical works. Both, I believe, took it for granted that no matter how closely a musical score was related to every nuance of the words or the story, it and it alone played the dominant role: *prima la musica*. The essence of the drama was conveyed by the music. It followed that what mattered above all else was the quality of the singers, the orchestra, the conductor and the chorus master.

After the revolution brought about by Wagner and the conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, production and design in opera were intended, above all, to serve the music and the words: this alone required the producer, in particular, to be profoundly musical. The libretti might carry clear moral or social or political implications, like those of, for example, *Figaro* or *Fidelio*; but this was not, in the days of which I am writing, as yet generally thought to require additional underlining by the production or the decor: it was assumed that the words and [105] music carried their own overt meaning, given them consciously by their creators; all this set limits to the freedom of performers and producers alike.

Even after the rise of the modern movement in poetry and the visual arts, and despite the bold new stage productions of Meyerhold in Moscow and Piscator in Berlin in the 1920s, relatively little attempt was made to bring out by extra-musical means the 'inner' political, sociological or psycho-pathological significance of the libretti and the scores, of which the composer and poet showed no conscious awareness. The political import of, say, *Figaro* was, no doubt, clear enough to Mozart and Da Ponte, and certainly to Beaumarchais and the imperial censors, that of *Rigoletto* and *Don Carlos* to Victor Hugo and Schiller, as well as to Verdi and probably his librettists. But there is, so far as I know, no evidence that – even if any of these artists suspected that their creative imagination might be affected by subliminal forces – they were the unconscious vehicles which carried psychological or sociological content very different from their own conscious conceptions and purposes; that they wished these latent structures or drives to be revealed by the type of techniques later employed by symbolists, expressionists, surrealists, dialectical materialists and the like. Whatever the value of this kind of approach to art in general, and opera in particular – and its interest and originality cannot be denied – it is the product of our own day. Neither the composers nor the librettists of the golden age of European opera, from Gluck to the First World War, so far as I know, thought in this fashion; nor did their most admired interpreters before and after and during the interwar years. Neither Fritz Busch nor Bruno Walter, neither Arturo Toscanini nor Erich Kleiber, supposed that they were engaged on a task of exhumation, of attempting to breathe a kind of new life – sometimes drawn from the world of the unconscious, [106] individual or collective – into what might otherwise remain noble corpses, museum pieces of little contemporary significance. The masterpieces of both the past and the present spoke to them directly, without reference to processes unknown to their creators, and they, and their producers and designers, so conveyed them.

This, too, has in general been the practice of their most gifted successors – we have not been lacking in conductors of genius in our own day. I wish to offer no judgements on the explicit value of these wide differences of approach. The new conception of the immense importance of the producer and the designer, as called upon to lay bare non-rational processes in the minds of the

librettist and the composer, and their personal or social roots, can be fascinating, and in the hands of musically gifted producers has been sociologically and aesthetically revealing and transforming; and this effect may well be permanent. I wish to do no more than point to the difference between this attitude and the ideals of the founders of Glyndebourne, which seem to me to have given life and sustenance for half a century to this nobly conceived and entirely delightful institution. Long may it flourish.

In 1936 all five of Mozart's most celebrated operas were performed at Glyndebourne. Few who heard Alexander Kipnis (identified correctly, but oddly, as American) as Sarastro in *Die Zauberflöte* are likely to forget it; nor Salvatore Baccaloni as Osmin, nor Julia Moor as Constanze, in *Die Entführung*. Moreover, wonder of wonders, it presently became clear that good British singers existed: excellent artists such as Roy Henderson or David Franklin, who, provided they were given adequate conditions, could hold their own in the company of celebrated foreign virtuosi.

Of course the charm and beauty of the Sussex countryside, the divine nature of the music, the technical perfection and exceptional artistic quality of the performances, and, year after year, the undiminished sense of occasion, all played their part in creating the idyll. For such it was for me and, I wish to believe, for most of the audience at Glyndebourne. But there was also something else: the spontaneity, informality, lack of solemnity of the atmosphere, the total absence of the kind of pomp and circumstance which were such an inevitable (and to their audiences to some extent welcome) attribute of Salzburg and, more particularly, Bayreuth; the sense of continuous enjoyment pervaded everything. All this was, without question, principally due to the personality and clearly felt dictatorship – unpredictable, benevolent, idiosyncratic, generous, life-giving – of one man.

I well remember, both before and after the war, the wonderful spectacle of John Christie, vaguely John-Bull-like, perhaps more Churchillian, standing in front of his opera house, at the point at which the cars and buses discharge their loads of visitors, waving them on with impatient gestures into the open doors of the building, much as he must once have marshalled boys at Eton during his career as a master in that establishment. His presence – despite the motley international amalgam of artists, visitors, critics

– made the scene utterly and indescribably English, not British but English.

I recall a most exhilarating *Don Pasquale* and a good, but not exceptional, *Macbeth*. But my predominant memories of Glyndebourne before the war are, naturally enough, of Mozart. I have mentioned excellent British singers. As for the masters from abroad, no one who heard Willi Domgraf-Fassbänder as Figaro, Guglielmo, Papageno; Irene Eisinger as Despina, Blondchen, Barbarina; Luise Helletsgruber as Elvira, Dorabella, Cherubino; Salvatore Baccaloni as Leporello; Stabile and Baccaloni as Figaro and Bartolo, or as Malatesta and Don [108] Pasquale; Walter Ludwig as Belmonte – no one who heard these could possibly ask for a higher degree of musical pleasure, short-lived but intense.

When the young and the middle-aged say, as they often do, that it is a common illusion of the old that there were better singers and performances in the days of their youth, this is not always so: gramophone records (and even some memories) do not delude. The recorded ensembles towards the end of the second act of *Figaro*, in the scene of parting in the first act of *Così*, or the unmasking of Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, are there to testify to the reliability of our memories.

Glyndebourne spread its wings far more widely after the war. *Fidelio*, the brilliant succession of Rossini comedies conducted by Vittorio Gui – a repertoire which outdid the Piccola Scala – the operas of Richard Strauss, Britten, Stravinsky, Donizetti, Bellini, Henze, Monteverdi, Cavalli, Prokofiev, Janáček: the mounting of these with varying, but often splendid, results, is a source of justified pride on the part of the house.

But it is, in the end, its first love – the operas of Mozart – which has continued at the heart of the enterprise. Of course Munich, Vienna, Covent Garden have served Mozart nobly, and above all Salzburg then and now. But I wish to testify that for me, and I believe I speak for a good many of us in this country, the idea of what an opera by Mozart is and can be, was altered – indeed, transformed – by Glyndebourne and it alone. For a good many members of my generation it was the performances (and, perhaps, at least as much the magnificent recordings, technically imperfect as they must now seem) that shaped our outlook, and vastly raised the ceiling of our expectations. I cannot help rehearsing the sacred litany again: Willi Domgraf-Fassbänder and

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(the now almost forgotten) Aulikki Rautawaara, John Brownlee and Ivar Andresen, Mariano Stabile and [109] Salvatore Baccaloni, Irene Eisinger, Audrey Mildmay and Luise Helletsgruber – even the mysterious Zinaida Lisichkina (over-correctly and uninformatively identified as Nicaraguan) as Queen of the Night – and, above all, the matchless ensembles which only Glyndebourne seemed (and still seems) able to generate.

All this became for us the original ideal, the Platonic Idea, imprinted for life on our memory and imagination, no matter how much overlaid and transformed by later experiences, of what the canonical operas by Mozart (including *Idomeneo*) are and remain. It may be that I speak for myself alone. I am reluctant to believe this, but even if it is so, I can say only that in that dawn it was bliss (musically, not at all socially or politically) to be alive.

Tchaikovsky and *Eugene Onegin*

Glyndebourne Festival Programme Book 1971, 58–63; repr. as ‘Tchaikovsky, Pushkin and Onegin’ in *Musical Times* 121 (1980), 163–8, and in *Eugene Onegin* (Oxford University Opera Club programme) ([Oxford], 1992)

On 18 May 1877¹ Petr Il’ich Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Modest Il’ich:

Last week I happened to be at Mme Lavrovsky’s. There was talk about suitable subjects for opera. Her stupid husband talked the most incredible nonsense, and suggested the most impossible subjects. Elizaveta Andreevna smiled amiably and did not say a word. Suddenly she said, ‘What about *Eugene Onegin*?’² It seemed a wild idea to me, and I said nothing. Then when I supped alone in a tavern [59] I remembered *Onegin*, thought about it, and began to find her idea not impossible; then it gripped me, and before I had finished my meal I had come to a decision. I hurried off at once to find Pushkin, found one with some difficulty, went home, re-read it with enthusiasm, and spent an entirely sleepless night, the result of which was the scenario of an enchanting opera on Pushkin’s text. Next day I went to see Shilovsky³ and he is now working furiously on my scenario.

Tchaikovsky goes on to sketch the scenario:

Here it is in brief: Act 1, Scene 1: The curtain rises on old Larina and the nurse: they remember the old days and make jam. Duet of the old women. Singing heard from the house. Tatiana and Olga sing a duet accompanied by a harp on a text

¹ Dates are given according to the pre-Revolutionary Julian calendar: for the Gregorian dates used in the West add 12 days.

² The correct phonetic rendering is ‘Yevgyéni Anyégin’. But *Eugene Onegin* is the ordinary English title of both the poem and the opera, and will be used hereafter.

³ Konstantin Stepanovich Shilovsky (1849–93), a minor poet, justly forgotten.

by Zhukovsky. Peasants appear bearing the last sheaf: they sing and dance. Suddenly the servant boy announces "Guests!" Panic. Enter Onegin and Lensky. Ceremony of their introduction and hospitality (cranberry juice). Evgeny talks about his impressions to Lensky, the women to each other: quintet à la Mozart. Old woman goes off to prepare supper. The young stay behind and walk off in pairs; they pair off (as in *Faust*). Tatiana is at first shy, then falls in love. Scene 2: Scene with the nurse and Tatiana's letter. Scene 3: Onegin and Tatiana. Act 2, Scene 1: Tatiana's birthday. Ball. Lensky's jealous scene. He insults Onegin and challenges him to a duel. General horror. Scene 2: Lensky's aria before his death, duel (pistols). Act 3, Scene 1: Moscow. Ball at the Assembly. Tatiana meets rows of aunts and cousins. They sing a chorus. Appearance of the General. He falls in love with Tatiana. She tells him her story and agrees to marry him. Scene 2: Petersburg. Tatiana is waiting for Onegin. He appears. Enormous duet. Tatiana, after the explanation, yields to a feeling of love for Onegin and struggles against it. He implores her. Enter the husband. Duty wins. Onegin flees in despair.

This libretto was preserved almost intact, save that the penultimate scene was replaced by that of the ball in St Petersburg at which Onegin meets Tatiana and Gremin, and the episode of Gremin's proposal to Tatiana was omitted. The opera opens with a duet of Tatiana and Olga (not of the 'old women') on a text by Pushkin (not Zhukovsky): Gremin does not appear in the last scene. Tchaikovsky continues:

You won't believe how passionate I have become about this subject. How delighted I am to be rid of Ethiopian princesses, Pharaohs, poisonings, all the conventional stuff. What an infinity of poetry there is in *Onegin*. I am not deceived: I know that there will be little movement and few stage effects in this opera. The poetry, humanity, simplicity of the theme, combined with a text of genius, will more than make up for these shortcomings.

Nine days later he wrote to his adoring patroness Nadezhda von Meck that a libretto on Pushkin's text was being composed for him: 'a bold idea, don't you think?'

Why should he or anyone else have thought this idea 'wild', or even 'bold'? The plot of Pushkin's 'novel in verse' has a certain intrinsic operatic quality: indeed, the famous monologues and dialogues between Onegin and Tatiana, Tatiana and the nurse, Lensky and Olga had been recited by actors on the Russian stage since the early 1840s. What daunted Tchaikovsky was the mere thought of touching this great and sacred national masterpiece, of tampering with it at all; he constantly confesses to a feeling that he might be committing a sacrilege, and he defends his treatment of it as an act of sincere homage to a poet of unsurpassed genius.

Tchaikovsky's fears will be intelligible to anyone who knows that Pushkin occupies a unique position in his country's literature. Since his death in a duel in 1837 (and, indeed, to some degree in his lifetime), he has been recognised by Russians as being beyond all question the greatest poet and prose writer their country has produced. What Dante is to Italians, Shakespeare to Englishmen, Goethe to Germans, Pushkin is to the Russians. *Eugene Onegin* is his supreme masterpiece, the first and, for some critics, the greatest novel in the Russian language. It has dominated the imagination of virtually every major Russian writer since its day.

In Pushkin's story, for the first time, simple and uncorrupted human beings come into contact with falsity, inhumanity, craven weakness – the debased values of the society in which they are condemned to live. Tatiana is the ancestress of the pure-hearted, morally passionate, at times *exaltées*, heroic Russian women whose unswerving idealism and suffering is celebrated by the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century, notably Turgenev, and is in danger of becoming a stereotype among their successors in the twentieth. Lensky and Onegin, too, are just as hopelessly alienated from this society: Lensky, passionate, poetical, his head deep in German metaphysical clouds, is incapable of facing the dreary reality of the Russian society of his time, escapes into romantic illusions and lives and dies for his fantasies. Onegin, a stronger and more ambitious man, stifled equally in a society in which he cannot develop his nature and his gifts, runs away from genuine feeling, and protects himself, like Byron's demonic heroes,

by defiant coldness, cynicism, and a self-dramatising, sardonic rejection of common humanity and its traditional values.

Both represent types of ‘the superfluous person’⁴ – those unusually sensitive and gifted human beings who cannot find a place in the society to which they are born, or a form of life that would satisfy their moral and intellectual needs, or at least not reduce them to impotence or despair. For all its exhilarating brilliance and wit, the poem is an expression of a bitterly frustrated society. No one, save the light-hearted Olga, is contented in Pushkin’s poem: everyone suffers and comes to terms in the end with a bleak reality. Even the conventional Mme Larina was forced to abandon the man she loved to marry her brigadier and settle down to her round of routine duties and boring country life; she carries on with the aid of the saving grace of habit – ‘habit [she sings with the old nurse Filipevna in the very beginning of the opera] is heaven’s gift to us: sent us in place of happiness’. Filipevna, too, sings Tatiana to sleep with the story of how bitterly she had cried when she was led to the altar with an unknown boy chosen for her by her parents.

Tatiana’s silent, inward-directed passion, nourished on the sentimental novels of her day, generates an image of the ideal lover; blindly she identifies it with Onegin; the Onegin of her imagination screens the true Onegin from her eyes. His smooth, faultlessly phrased, polite, faintly ironical, wholly sensible rejection of her love inflicts a wound upon her that never heals. In due course she, too, learns her lesson. Like her mother, like the nurse, she marries without love a general who adores her, and to whom she is grateful. When, in the last scene, she rejects Onegin, whom she still loves, it is because she has firmly stabilised [60] her life at another level, has capitulated, has renounced the possibility of personal fulfilment.

This is Tolstoy’s morality in *Anna Karenina*, not Anna’s. Tatiana, like Turgenev’s heroines, is Anna’s direct antithesis. Onegin,

⁴ [The concept of the ‘superfluous person’ was given its familiar name by Turgenev in *Dnevnik lishnego cheloveka* (‘Diary of a superfluous person’, 1850): see entry for 23 March 1850: I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1960–8), *Sochineniya*, v 185–9. The term was also used as a catchphrase by Dostoevsky in *Zapiski iz podpol’ya* (1864), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii F. M. Dostoevskogo v XVIII tomakh* (Moscow, 2003–6), vi 7–80.]

whose new passion for Tatiana is excited by her refusal to take notice of his pursuit, sees the door to a genuine life shut to him for ever, and is left with no further motive for existing. Lensky is destroyed by a total inability to come to terms with reality: he is wounded by Olga's light-hearted flirtation with Onegin, which he mistakes for betrayal of his love; infuriated by his friend's callous desire to amuse himself; dominated by a romantic conception of honour and by fear of seeming a poltroon, of cutting a ridiculous figure. He discovers that Olga's feeling for him, such as it is, has in fact not changed; but it is too late to retreat: he dies (as Pushkin was to die) because he is caught in a net, partly of his own making, from which he cannot, and does not want, to disentangle himself.

Loneliness, frustration, inability to find fulfilment in a human relationship, a bitter sense of failure, self-pity and, finally, despair – these are the feelings that Tchaikovsky knew most intimately, and he wished to write about what he knew:

The sensations of an Egyptian princess, a Pharaoh, some mad Nubian, I do not know and do not understand [he wrote to the composer Sergey Taneev on 2 January 1878]. Some kind of instinct tells me that these people must move, talk, feel, and therefore also to express their feelings in a peculiar fashion of their own – it is not ours. Hence my music [...] will have as much connection with the personages in *Aida* as the elaborate, gallant speeches of the heroes of Racine, who address each other as *vous*, have in common with [...] the real Orestes, the real Andromache, etc. [...] I don't want kings, queens, risings of the people, battles, marches, in a word, everything that makes up the attributes of 'grand opera'. I am looking for a drama which is intimate, yet powerful, based on the conflict of attitudes which I have myself experienced or witnessed, which touches me to the quick. [...] What I want to say is that *Aida* is so remote from me, her unhappy love for Radamès (whom I cannot imagine either) moves me so little, that my music would not be genuinely and deeply felt, as all good music must be. Not long ago I saw [Meyerbeer's] *L'Africaine* in Genoa. The miseries of this poor African! Slavery, imprisonment, death under a poisonous tree, her rival's triumph as she herself lies dying, all this she suffers – but I don't feel in the least sorry for her. Yet

here do we have ‘effects’! – a ship, fights, all kinds of goings on. To hell with them all – all these ‘effects’!

Onegin’s feelings, Tatiana’s feelings, as he understood them, meant everything to him:

I have always [he wrote to Taneev on 14 January 1891] tried to express in music as sincerely and truthfully as I could that which was in the text. Such truth and sincerity come not from the work of the intellect, but spring from inner feeling. To give this feeling life and warmth I have always tried to choose stories in which the characters are real, living men whose feelings are like my own.

The sweet, at times perhaps over-sweet, melancholy and resignation of the principal figures in the opera are to some degree read into Pushkin by Tchaikovsky, because these ‘feelings are like my own’. Tchaikovsky was not the ideal composer for Pushkin’s poem. Pushkin’s verse is taut, crystalline, of classical simplicity and purity, luminous, direct, passionate, sometimes ironical or gay, at other times sublime and magnificent, always of an indescribable freshness and beauty. It is as untranslatable as Sophocles or Racine. The only modern artist whom he resembles is Mozart; with Mozart and perhaps Goethe he can claim to be the greatest and most universal genius since the Renaissance. Yet Tchaikovsky’s setting of *Onegin* is neither silly nor vulgar, as some ferocious literary critics have maintained. He knew himself how far he fell below Pushkin – hence his acute nervousness about scaling this unapproachable peak. He adored the poem, and tells us that he had been – like so many of his compatriots – in love with Tatiana from his earliest youth. He found the subject irresistible; and his opera, whatever the relation or absence of relation of the score to Pushkin’s text, remains a deeply nostalgic, melodious, lyrical masterpiece, in its own way as moving a memorial to the dying, but still elegant and attractive, life of the decaying country houses of the Russian gentry as the novels and stories of Turgenev, with whom indeed he has much in common. The lyrical *arioso* recitatives, the long monologues (Tatiana’s sleepless night, Lisa’s in *The Queen of Spades*) are vocal symphonic poems which convey a vivid psychological portrait of character, and express

intimate personal feeling and experience. They have their counterparts in Turgenev's (and to some degree Chekhov's) writings.

Tchaikovsky set to work with the enthusiasm that gripped him whenever he contemplated a new and ambitious work. He began *Onegin* towards the end of May 1877, and finished two-thirds of it by 23 June. 'This opera will [...] have little dramatic movement in it; on the other hand, its social aspects will be interesting; and then how much poetry there is in it all!' he had written to Nadezhda von Meck on 27 May. 'I feel that Pushkin's text will work upon me in the most inspiring manner, if only I can find that peace of mind which is [61] necessary for composing.' The opposite occurred. He received a letter from an admiring lady suggesting marriage to him. He explained to her that he could not love her, and would at most be a good and faithful friend. She declared herself prepared to marry him on these terms. He decided that in his position he had no choice. The marriage occurred on 6 July and led, inevitably, to a severe nervous breakdown. In a hysterical condition, approaching madness, he fled from his wife; towards the end of August he slowly began to recover. He now had no doubt that his opera was doomed to failure:

Now that the first transport of enthusiasm is over [...] [he wrote to his ever-faithful friend on 30 August], I feel sure my opera [...] will be misunderstood by the mass of the public. The content is too artless, there are no theatrical effects, the music is neither brilliant nor 'effective'. [...] Only those who look in an opera for the musical re-creation of feelings remote from the tragic and the theatrical – ordinary, simple, human feeling, only they will (I hope) like my opera. In a word, it is written with sincerity, and it is on this sincerity that all my hopes are based.

In October he went to Clarins, where he orchestrated his Fourth Symphony. Having finished the symphony on 6 December, he worked on the opera, which was completed on 20 January 1878 in San Remo. As always, regular hours of dedicated work restored him to himself. His letters grew more calm. Taneev had complained to him that the first act was too static: he tried to express the character of the *dramatis personae* not by action or by music, but by the words they spoke, the words which Pushkin

used to describe them; but the methods of a novel or a poem cannot be effective in opera; here character must be conveyed by the music, not by self-descriptive statements. Agate in Weber's *Der Freischütz* conveys her dreamy nature by being heard at prayer, or singing on a balcony at night, not by declaring that she is dreamy: whereas Olga in Tchaikovsky's opera informs her audience that she is gay and thoughtless, Tatiana explains that she is pensive and fond of books, and so on.

Turgenev, who had looked at the piano score in 1878, wrote in similar terms to Tolstoy on 15 November: 'the music is marvellous, the lyrical and tuneful moments are particularly good, but what a libretto! Pushkin's verses describing the characters are put in the mouths of the characters themselves. For example, the lines about Lensky, "He sang of the faded flower of his life – when he was scarcely eighteen years of age", in the libretto become "I sing about the faded flower of my life" etc., and so everywhere.'⁵ This did not worry the composer, who was tormented by only one thought, that his music might not be worthy of the divine poet. 'Pushkin's exquisite texture will be vulgarised if it is transferred to the stage, with its routine, its idiotic traditions, its veterans of the male and female sex.' As for the fact that the opera might not be effective on the stage:

You may be right [he wrote to Tanev on 2 January 1878] when you say the opera is not 'scenic' enough. The answer is – to hell with scenic effects. That fact that I haven't got a theatrical streak has long been recognised and I don't feel particularly gloomy about it. If you find that the work is not 'theatrical', don't stage it, don't play it. I wrote it because one fine day I suddenly felt an inconceivably strong desire to transform into music everything in *Onegin* that asks for it. I did this as well as I was able. I worked with indescribable absorption and pleasure without worrying much about movement, 'effectiveness', etc. Damn effects. [...] What I need is human beings, not puppets – [...] beings similar to myself who have experienced sensations which I, too, have experienced and which I understand.

⁵ In fact no such lines are to be found in the libretto, but Turgenev's (and Tanev's) general charge is perfectly valid.

And on 24 January he writes:

I have one anxiety – far more important than any fear that the public will not tremble with excitement about the *dénouement*. I am talking about my sacrilegious presumption when, reluctantly, I have to add to Pushkin's verse my own or, in places, Shilovsky's lines. That is what upsets me. As for the music, I can tell you, that if ever music was written with sincere passion, with love of the subject and the characters in it, it is the music for *Onegin*. I trembled and melted with inexpressible delight while writing it. If the listener feels even the smallest part of what I experienced when I was composing this opera, I shall be utterly content and ask for nothing more. Let *Onegin* be a tedious spectacle with warmly written music – that is all I want.

The central scene of the opera is Tatiana's letter scene in the first act, which he composed before the rest. Tatiana's fevered night, and the outpouring of love and terror, self-doubt and self-torture determine the mood of the work. Its central theme (in E flat major) occurs in the prelude to the opera. Her tormented doubts about Onegin – does he come as a guardian angel or a tempter? – is echoed in the prelude to the fatal birthday party in Act 2. The music of her resolve to write, come what may, is heard again in Onegin's mounting passion for her at the ball in Act 3. (Act 4, which expresses sober reality and an end to romantic revolt against convention, is sharply different.) Ernest Newman's description of the letter aria as 'one of the masterpieces of musical-dramatic psychology'⁶ would surely have pleased the composer, who wrote of this scene: 'if I burnt with the fire of inspiration when I wrote the letter scene – it was [62] Pushkin who lit this fire; if my music contains a tenth part of the beauty of the book, I shall be very proud and content'.⁷

Onegin must not be 'an opera': Tchaikovsky called it 'Lyrical scenes in three acts'.⁸ He will not offer it to the Imperial opera houses of St Petersburg or Moscow. The opera must be treated as an intimate piece of lyrical chamber music, best played and sung

⁶ Ernest Newman, *Opera Nights* (London, 1943), 105.

⁷ Letter of 28–30 September 1883 to Nadezhda von Meck.

⁸ Letter of 2 August 1878 to Petr Jurgenson.

‘in private houses’;⁹ in this way, it would enter the consciousness of sincere, musically sensitive people. Then, when the demand ‘from below’¹⁰ rose to sufficient pitch of intensity, the great opera houses would be bound to ask for it. That was the way to do it: let the pupils of the Imperial Conservatoire in Moscow do it first. He wrote to Karl Albrecht, choirmaster at the Moscow Conservatory, that the singers in the Conservatoire need not be first rate, but they must be ‘very well disciplined and firm’, and must be able ‘to act simply and well’.¹¹ The production must not be luxurious and meaningless; care must be taken about fidelity to the period, above all the historical accuracy of the costumes, ‘the choruses must not be the flock of sheep which appear on the Imperial stages, they must be human beings who participate in the action of the opera; [...] the conductor should not be a machine, or even a musician like Nápravník,¹² whose only anxiety is that where the score says C sharp, the musicians should not play C natural, but rather a real leader of the orchestra. [...] I need [...] artists and, moreover, friends.’ As for the singers, ‘to wait for an ideal Tatiana may be to wait until some distant age’. ‘I adored Tatiana,’ he told his friend Nikolay Kashkin, ‘and was terribly indignant about Onegin, who seemed to me a cold and heartless fop.’¹³ Again, Onegin is ‘a cold dandy, penetrated to his marrow by the odious conventional values’¹⁴ of the *beau monde*, and ‘a bored social lion who out of boredom, out of trivial irritation, without deliberate intention, as a result of a fatal combination of circumstances takes the life of a young man whom, in fact, he loves’.¹⁵ But he is not a monster: his tormented self-disgust at the destruction he wilfully causes is both dramatically and musically fully expressed. As for Lensky, ‘he must be a youth, eighteen years old, with thick curls and the impulsive,

⁹ Letter of 4 February 1878 to Petr Jurgenson.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Letter of 3 December 1877 to Karl Albrecht, from which the next three quotations are also taken.

¹² Eduard Francevič Nápravník, chief conductor of the St Petersburg opera.

¹³ N. N. Kashkin, ‘Iz vospominanii o P. I. Chaikovskom’ [‘From My Recollections of Tchaikovsky’], in *Proshloe russkoi muzyki: materialy I issledovaniya, I: P. I. Chaikovskii* (Petersburg, 1920), 99–132 at 119.

¹⁴ Letter of 16 December 1877 to Nadezhda von Meck.

¹⁵ Letter of 28 September 1883 to Nadezhda von Meck.

spontaneous movements of a young poet *à la* Schiller'.¹⁶ Sincere young singers, Pushkin's marvellous words – this will compensate for everything.

And indeed Pushkin's text is extensively used. From the opening duet (of Tatiana and Olga) in the first scene, which is a setting of a poem by Pushkin that is not in *Eugene Onegin*, to Onegin's lines to Tatiana before entering the house with which the first scene ends, virtually all but the peasants' chorus (which is an adapted folk song), and the words of the second half of Lensky's first aria ('I love you, Olga') is authentic Pushkin; there are interpolated connecting links, but they are scarcely noticeable. In the second scene, the confession of love which Tchaikovsky is the heart and centre of the work, scarcely a word of the text has been tampered with. In the third scene, even the words of the chorus of peasant girls are Pushkin's own. In the second act, the proportion is a good deal smaller. Onegin's stricken speech at the Larin's party after he provokes Lensky's insult, and, in the second scene, only Lensky's famous last aria and the rivals' melancholy duet over a predicament which neither desires, but neither seems able to avert, come from the poem. In the third act, Onegin's monologue, the first half of Gremin's aria, and the dialogue of Onegin and Tatiana, and, in the final scene, Tatiana's opening words to Onegin were composed by Pushkin; the rest were supplied by the faithful Shilovsky.

Even more faithfully than Bizet in *Carmen*, which he so much admired, Tchaikovsky sought to fuse every word in the text with its music; his letters to his various correspondents give evidence that he lived through this work more intensely than even he was accustomed to when composing a major piece. He is himself Tatiana, he is Lensky, he is at times even the bitter and disdainful Onegin in his moments of misery. If these are not Pushkin's creations, they have been transmuted into an equally authentic work of art. This is not Gounod's *Faust*, nor Thomas's *Mignon*; the wedding of music to words is genuine. *Figaro*, or *Falstaff*, or *Pelléas* (for all Maeterlinck's protests) are closer parallels. Nevertheless, critics have from time to time complained that the libretto of the opera is a monstrous travesty of Pushkin's text. In particular, it is said that too much in the poem has been left out. Where, it is

¹⁶ Letter of 16 December 1877 to Nadezhda von Meck.

asked, are Pushkin's brilliant evocations of the St Petersburg social scene, of Onegin's character, of his day from early morning until late into the night, which the poet describes so marvellously? Where is Onegin's own agonised letter to Tatiana? Where is the irony and the charm with which Lensky's complex relationship to him is conveyed? Where, above all, are the marvellous descriptions of country life and nature to which there is no parallel in any literature? Why is the minor but marvellously drawn figure of Zaretsky reduced [63] to nullity? Why is Gremin, who in Pushkin is still in his thirties, transformed into a pompous, limping old general, vastly older than his wife or, indeed, his kinsman Onegin? Why does Triquet sing a worthless little tune – that of *Dormez, dormez chers amours*, described as a *nocturne à deux voix* by Amedée de Beauplan, and not Pushkin's original, taken from *Reveillez vous, belle endormie* from *La belle dormeuse* by Dufresny, scored by Grandval?¹⁷ These questions, some more valid than others, have multiplied as time has gone on. The Russian public paid no attention to these grievances; it responded to the intentions of the composer, and continued to love both Pushkin and Tchaikovsky.

The opera was not an immediate success. The singers at the Conservatoire performance found the music strange: it was too unlike the Rossini or Donizetti to which they were accustomed. Only the set 'numbers', the only really conventional writing in the entire work – Triquet's couplets and Gremin's aria – were greeted with genuine applause. Triquet's pretty rhymes in particular were the kind of *pastiche* at which Tchaikovsky was so brilliant. Nevertheless, his plan worked in the end. The opera became more and more popular in the Russian provinces until it came back in triumph to Moscow and St Petersburg. In the original version, the work ended with the happy embrace of Onegin and Tatiana, which is alleged to have lasted for five minutes. After a unanimous protest by the critics, this was altered in 1889 to the present finale. The Moscow critic Kruglikov expressed his fear that to put a modern sitting room on the operatic stage and to allow singers to

¹⁷ Beauplan wrote in the early years of the nineteenth century; Dufresny and Grandval are versifiers and composers of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. No dancing master worth his salt would use a tune a hundred years old for his *pièce d'occasion*. This fully justifies Tchaikovsky's choice of a contemporary piece.

appear in prosaic frock-coats or jackets was much too bold. Moreover, to end an act with the nurse's recitative – without any bravura climax – was to ask for trouble: how could the public tell that the act had ended? The curtain had come down on a profoundly puzzled audience. Nevertheless, the work made steady progress in popular esteem. The performances in 1881 at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow under Bevignani, and then in St Petersburg, evidently left much to be desired. The first full-scale performance took place on 21 October 21 1884, in the Bolshoi Theatre in St Petersburg. The grandest, however, was the hundredth performance, conducted by Napravnik in St Petersburg on 8 November 1882, with the famous tenor Figner, then not in his first youth, as a very dashing Lensky, and his Italian wife Medea Mei as Tatiana. Medea Mei learnt her part in Cernobbio with Toscanini (who knew no Russian), and asked for directions from the composer. She tells us that he gave her none: said only that she was his ideal Tatiana. The best singer of Lensky's part was, by all accounts, Leonid Sobinov, who first sang it in 1898; his terrible battle in 1901 in St Petersburg with the jealous Figner, who coveted the role, is part of Russian operatic history. Tchaikovsky's favourite Onegin was Khokhlov. He declared that after seeing him, he 'could not imagine Onegin except as Khokhlov'.¹⁸

Some of Tchaikovsky's worst fears were duly realised, and not in St Petersburg alone. In the Prague production of 1888 the curtain rose on the interior of an Italian Renaissance palazzo; the dancers of the *écossaise* in the sixth scene wore Highland dress; but the Tatiana was 'marvellous', better, the composer wrote, than any Russian, and this made up for everything; the quality of the singers meant incomparably more to him, as to every true composer (at any rate before the dominant influence of Wagner) than decor or production.

The opera grew in fame. Gustav Mahler conducted it in Hamburg in 1892 and then in Vienna; he took it to France and Italy. In 1922 Stravinsky attempted a production on the lines of Chekhovian psychological realism (his comments on Tatiana are still worth reading), but this proved an honourable failure. In the present century, it grew to be virtually a national opera, better loved, if not more respected or venerated, than the masterpieces of

¹⁸ L[ev Mikhailovich] Tarasov, *Volshebstvo opery: ocherki* (Leningrad, 1979), 145.

Glinka or Mussorgsky. In the middle 1920s, the fashion among zealous Communist critics in the Soviet Union was to attack it for being soft, sentimental and decadent, an entertainment for the declining gentry, not for workers. Tatiana was described as anaemic, pathetic, passive, embodying the reactionary 'spiritualist' morality of the *ancien régime*. This proved a passing phase. Lenin did not waver in his loyalty to the work: 'So I see,' he said to some students in 1921, 'you are against *Eugene Onegin*: well, we old people, we are for it.'¹⁹

Eugene Onegin is a work of the late Victorian summer. It looks back with nostalgia upon an almost vanished world, and this communicates a sweet, intimate and haunting melancholy to the entire work, in which the central themes reflect and echo each other. Only those who find the novels of Turgenev and the poetry of Tennyson intolerably cloying, and still react violently against the elegiac mood of some of the most beautiful works of art of the nineteenth century, will harden their hearts against this lyrical masterpiece.

¹⁹ Aleksandr Maisurian, *Drugoy Lenin* (Moscow, 2006), 97.

Khovanshchina

First published as 'Historical Note' in *Khovanshchina* (opera programme) ([London], 1963: Royal Opera House); repr. in the 1972 programme as 'Programme Note: Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881)', as '*Khovanshchina*' in the 1982 programme and *San Francisco Opera*, Fall Season 1984, 34–8, and with revisions as 'A Note on *Khovanshchina*', *New York Review of Books*, 19 December 1985, 40–2 (the page numbering used here); excerpted as 'Stasov, Mussorgsky and *Khovanshchina*' in *The Kirov Opera* (opera programme) ([London], 2005: Royal Opera House), 24

In the spring of 1872, Vladimir Vasili'evich Stasov, the friend, inspirer, critic, historian and principal standard-bearer of the new national school of Russian art, conceived a new theme for an opera, which he urged with characteristic vehemence upon his admiring friend Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky. The composer had just completed his second version of *Boris Godunov*; that work, too, owed a great deal to Stasov, whose sympathies, like those of the painters, sculptors and composers whom he influenced, were against the regime and with the populist movement. For him and his friends art was not an end in itself; its primary purpose was not to give delight but to communicate truth. This truth was of necessity social and historical, for, as Mussorgsky wrote on 18 October of the same year to Stasov:

The artistic representation of beauty alone in its material manifestation is crude, immature, and belongs to the infancy of art. *The subtlest traits of the nature* of both the individual and *the masses* – to explore these little-known regions and to conquer them, that is the true mission of the artist. To new shores! Boldly, through storms, shoals and underwater rocks, to new shores! Man is a social being and cannot be otherwise; masses, like individuals, invariably possess elusive traits that no one has seen, that slip through one's fingers – to note them, study them, read, observe, conjecture, to dedicate *one's entire being* to their study, to offer the result to humanity as a wholesome dish which it has never before tasted, that is the task – the joy of joys!

This is what we shall try to do in our *Khovanshcina* – what, my dear Oracle?²⁰

Unswerving service to the cause of truth – scrupulous fidelity to every nuance of human character and action, the invention of a special musical idiom for ‘the re-creation in musical terms not only of thoughts or feelings, but also of the melodic quality of actual human speech’²¹ by means of which what is significant in the flow of life can be directly conveyed to his contemporaries: that, according to the ‘oracle’ – Stasov – is the task of every progressive artist. To do this, to follow every pulsation of the constantly changing human spirit, was to abandon fixed rules: this was what the great innovators ‘Palestrina, Bach, Gluck, Beethoven, Berlioz, Liszt’ (and in Russia Dargomyzhsky, whom Mussorgsky described as a composer of genius) had done.²²

The principal enemy was the spiritually empty music of the West. Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi were singled out by the new Russian school as purveyors of lifeless, mass-produced artefacts which, with their conventional arias, mechanical harmonies and absurd plots, were only too obviously designed to satisfy the routine demands of commercialised Western taste. Tchaikovsky was condemned as their cosmopolitan imitator; Wagner’s music was dismissed as pretentious cacophony. The heroes were Berlioz, Liszt, Dargomyzhsky, who had created new vehicles to express a contemporary vision of life. To see and understand the ever-varying stream of experience, above all the evolution of the life of societies (in the light, for example, of Darwin’s theories, which greatly excited Mussorgsky), and to communicate this in images – in this lay the whole duty of the artist.

Mussorgsky and his friends believed in what today is called commitment. The Russian artist must transmute into his chosen medium that which is most significant in his world, however painful or monstrous. Russian history, Russian society, what are

²⁰ To V. V. Stasov, 18 October 1872, in Modest Petrovich Musorgsky, *Literaturnoe naslednie*, ed. A. A. Orlova and M. S. Pekelis, vol. 1, *Pis'ma, biograficheskie, materialy i dokumenty* (Moscow, 1971) (hereafter LN1), 141.

²¹ ‘Autobiographical note’ (1880), LN1 270; cf. letter to L. I. Shestakova, 30 July 1868, LN1 100.

²² *ibid.*

they but the life of the submerged, helpless, trampled-on Russian people? It was for this *Volksseele* in all its protean forms, ignored by officials and aesthetes, that the artist must seek to find – to be – a voice. This was the doctrine of the new school, at once nationalist and naturalistic, that created the painting of Kramskoy and Repin, the sculptures of Antokolsky and Ginzburg, the compositions of Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Cui. This outlook had affinities with some of the ideas of William Morris, Ruskin and Tolstoy: it was part of the opposition to commercialism on the one hand and to unhistorical, ‘pure’ aestheticism on the other. It was idealistic and democratic, national and naturalistic; it looked in history and anthropology for the unique, the individual, the quintessential – the authentic inner core of a people, a movement, a period, a historic outlook.

Boris Godunov was one of the early fruits of this conception, but in it the Tsar himself is so dominant a figure that it preserves continuity with an earlier tradition of drama in which individuals and personal relationships, and not impersonal forces, are the chief agents. *Khovanshchina* goes further. It is an attempt to recreate a moment in the history of the Russian people in which the personages are, in the first place, embodiments of historical movements, for each of which the composer attempted to find its own unique type of musical expression.

The subject chosen by Stasov was a turning point in his country’s history, when the old Muscovy perished and the new Russia, led and symbolised by the gigantic figure of Peter the Great, was born in the throes of political and religious confusion and conflict. The year chosen is 1682. Some two decades before this, in the reign of Alexis, the second Romanov tsar, Russia was torn by schism. The Patriarch Nikon did not touch dogma, but he sought to bring Russian ritual into line with the contemporary practice of the Greek Church and the Eastern Patriarchs. His reforms, which were officially adopted, led to violent (and to some degree nationalistic) opposition within the Church and among the peasantry and merchants, and led to the defection of a large body of dissenters (Old Believers or Old Ritualists). In the autobiography of one of their leaders, the Archpriest Avvakum, who was burned at the stake for his belief, this widespread movement, which has survived until our own day, created a celebrated religious and literary masterpiece.

Tsar Alexis died in 1676 and left three sons – Fedor (Theodore) and Ivan by his first wife (Mariya Miloslavskaya), and Peter by the second (Natal'ya Naryshkina). After the death of Tsar Fedor in 1682, violent strife between the followers of the Miloslavsky and Naryshkin factions culminated in a riot outside the Kremlin by the Streltsy (musketeers) regiments, which were becoming a kind of Praetorian Guard dominating the city. In the course of it the boy Peter – then aged ten – saw his nearest relations lynched by the mob. The Streltsy helped to set up a new regime with Peter's half-sister Sophia as regent, and the two surviving sons of Alexis, Ivan and Peter, as joint tsars under her tutelage. The Streltsy were placed under the command of Prince Ivan Khovansky. Having acted as kingmakers, the unruly soldiers and their commanders showed a good deal of independence and some disrespect towards the person of the new regent. Sophia's former lover and principal minister, Prince Vassily Golitsyn (an intelligent, cultivated, psychologically ambivalent figure, swaying uncertainly between Muscovite traditionalism and enlightened plans for reform in a Western direction), for a while attempted to play off the fanatical Old Believers against the reformers and Westernisers. Suspecting that the Streltsy, who were getting out of hand, would soon attempt another palace revolution, Sophia managed, in true Renaissance style, to lure Prince Khovansky to the manor of Vozdvizhenskoe, where she had him arrested and shortly afterward beheaded; his son, Prince Andrey, was also executed, and his immediate followers scattered into exile. The cowed musketeers were placed in the charge of Fedor Shaklovity, Sophia's trusted agent.

During this time Peter and his mother lived quietly near Moscow in Preobrazhenskoe, where his chief distractions were the hours he spent in the company of the Moscow foreign colony – soldiers, craftsmen, traders and technical experts of various kinds, for the most part Protestant – and in arranging, with their help, sham battles and naval games of an apparently innocuous kind. In 1689 Golitsyn and Shaklovity decided to clear the path for Sophia by getting rid of Peter and his entourage, but their plot miscarried and the bulk of the Army and Church went over to Peter. Shaklovity was executed and Golitsyn sent into exile. Sophia was incarcerated in a convent for the rest of her life. A few years later,

after his half-brother Ivan's death, Peter formally ascended the throne, and a new period in Russian history began.

It is clear that both Stasov and Mussorgsky conceived the opera as a kind of epic. Mussorgsky plunged headlong into study of the literature of the period, and in particular of the liturgical music of the Old Believers. He dedicated the work to Stasov: 'It would not be absurd', he wrote to him, 'if I said "I dedicate myself to you – myself and my life during this period" [...] Please accept from me "my entire incongruous being".'²³ He called Stasov 'généralissime'²⁴ and often referred to the opera as his. They called it a 'musical folk drama',²⁵ and it [41] was plainly their intention to present a broad historical panorama – a slow unfolding of a dramatic situation mounting toward a crisis – in which the individual characters and groups would embody the social and spiritual forces out of whose growth, combination and collision modern Russia was painfully born.

Mussorgsky and Stasov took large liberties with historical facts: they conflated the events of 1682 and 1689; caused Ivan Khovansky to be killed by Shaklovity's assassins, and not formally executed; sent Golitsyn into exile seven years too early; represented Shaklovity as working for Peter, and not merely for Sophia; described Peter at the age of ten as a 'tsar who inspires dread';²⁶ identified Dosifey, the leader of the Old Believers, with an obscure Old Believer, Prince Myshetsky, and represented him as inspiring the collective suicide by burning which the historical Myshetsky had condemned; and so on. This passionate wish to be true to social and psychological reality evidently did not entail concern for precise detail. Stasov wrote:

In the centre of the plot I wanted to put the majestic figure of Dosifey, the head of the Old Believers, a strong, energetic man, a deep spirit [...] who, like a powerful spring, directs the actions of the two princes – Khovansky, who represents ancient, dark, fanatical, unfathomable Russia, and Golitsyn, the representative

²³ Letter of 15 July 1872: LN1 138.

²⁴ *passim*, e.g. *ibid.*

²⁵ [In the opera's subtitle, *A Musical Folk Drama in Five Acts.*]

²⁶ In the words of Khovansky at the end of Act 3.

of Europe [i.e., the West], which some, even in the party of the Princess Sophia, had begun to understand and value.²⁷

He goes on to speak of a contrast between the two ‘settlements’,²⁸ that inhabited by the foreign colony, and that occupied by the musketeers. He conceived a sharp contrast between the Lutherans (exemplified in the final version only by the girl Emma) in their orderly, pious, tidy households, and the drunken, superstitious, savage Streltsy. He wanted to set side by side the proud, arbitrary, violent feudal lord, Ivan Khovansky, with his face turned to Old Russia, and his foolish, amorous, ambitious son, who is in love with Emma; and to show the cunning, civilised, vacillating, uneasy Minister Golitsyn, and the ruthless (but in his own way patriotic) intriguer Shaklovity, determined to ruin the Old Believers and with them the clan of the Khovanskys and all they were and stood for (‘Khovanshchina’).

Stasov provided character sketches of the Old Believer Marfa, violent, devout, unbalanced, given to clairvoyant prophesying, tormented by her love for Prince Andrey; of the squalid and craven scribe; of the boastful, handsome young musketeer Kuz’ka; above all, of the ignorant, helpless people, represented by bewildered passers-by, then (as in his own day) unresisting and voiceless victims of forces too strong for them. Over the entire scene broods the vast, fanatical presence of the mythical old priest Dosifey, ‘a mighty Russian Muhammad, bigoted and menacing, a Savonarola, a John the Baptist, crying “Repent, the time has come!”’²⁹ Only when Dosifey finally realises that the new, satanic forces – Peter and his Horse Guards and his foreigners and the accursed Church perverted by the arch-heretic Nikon – are too powerful does he call upon his followers, including Marfa (who draws with her the by now helpless, wretched Andrey Khovansky), to cast off the city of the Devil, and enter the city of God by a great single act of collective self-immolation.

²⁷ ‘Modest Petrovich Musorgsky: biograficheskii ocherk’ (1881), in V. V. Stasov, *Izbrannye stati o M. P. Mussorgskom*, ed. A. S. Ogolevets (Moscow, 1952), 122.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Stasov to Mussorgsky, 15 August 1873, LN1 322.

The love themes – Marfa’s violent passion for Andrey Khovansky, and his infatuation with Emma – are (unlike the love scenes in *Boris Godunov*) intrinsic to the story of *Khovanshchina*, and the actions of the leaders – Golitsyn, the Khovanskys, Shaklovity, Dosifey – are given highly realistic expression. Yet in the end, unlike *Boris Godunov*, the opera has neither a hero nor a central plot. It is a succession of historical episodes, each with its own colour and pattern, culminating in what the composer regarded as his artistic triumph: the final scene in the last act, in which Marfa, to the sound of hallelujahs, ‘clothed in a white shroud and with lighted candles in her hands’,³⁰ circles round her lover, ‘as stupid as the German girl he pines for’;³¹ the Old Believers’ chant is heard in another key and with different harmonies; Dosifey, in a shroud and holding a candle, chants ‘The time has come to win in the flames a martyr’s crown and life everlasting.’ Mussorgsky composed this scene in 1875, and spoke of it as ‘Requiem of Love’.³² It rises to its climax in the fire in which the Old Believers destroy themselves; the dark, ‘Phrygian’, Orthodox cadences mingle with the Western, secular theme of Peter’s gaily marching troops – the heralds of the bright, hard, realistic new world.

Each scene, each human group, is characterised by its own musical phraseology. Apart from the three genuine pieces of Russian folk song³³ and the old liturgical music of the Old Believers, which Mussorgsky had unearthed,³⁴ all the rest is entirely his own. The constantly varying rhythmical structure and the fusion of meaning, sound and action into a single unbroken musical dramatic line in which the music is directly determined by the words – even more than in *Boris Godunov* – is an extraordinary musical achievement. It seemed merely barbarous to the musical director (Nápravnik) and the opera committee of the St Petersburg

³⁰ Mussorgsky to Stasov, 23 July 1873, LN1 154.

³¹ [Probably *ibid.*, but if so, very free for ‘he preferred a German girl as stupid as he was’.]

³² To Stasov, 2 August 1873, LN1 161.

³³ Marfa’s love song, ‘Through the meadows I wandered’ [at the beginning of Act 3]; the song of praise for Ivan Khovansky (in 17/4 time) in the first scene of Act 4; and (probably) Andrey Khovansky’s last song before his death in the final scene.

³⁴ For example, the ‘Aeolian’ chorus of the Old Believers in the first act, and their ‘Phrygian’ chorus in the last.

Opera, to whom the vocal score was submitted in 1880; they rejected it on the ground that one ‘radical’ opera (*Boris Godunov*) was enough.³⁵

Stasov reacted violently to this. Despite his altercations with Mussorgsky for making ruthless changes and cuts [42] (which in his view disfigured their original conception, and were a sign of the composer’s declining health and waning powers), he published an article in 1883, two years after Mussorgsky’s death, in which he warmly praised Rimsky-Korsakov and Cui for resigning from their posts on the opera committee over this issue; this was followed by a furious diatribe against the administration of the Opera as cowardly and philistine. In 1886 Stasov wrote a lyrical review of the first performance of *Khovanshchina* by the semi-amateur ‘Musical Circle’ in St Petersburg, and spoke of the ‘abominable’ attitude of the State Opera.³⁶ He did not live to see the vindication of his views. Five years after his death in 1911, *Khovanshchina* was finally given in the Mariinsky Theatre, conducted by Albert Coates, with Fedor Chaliapin in the part of Dosifey. The orchestration and some reorganising of the score were supplied by the faithful Rimsky-Korsakov, who, while deploring the oddities and irregularities of the score, nevertheless recognised its original genius. He was duly criticised (as in the analogous case of his ‘revision’ of *Boris Godunov*) for distorting and taming the idiosyncratic, boldly original, natural genius of his friend.

Besides Rimsky-Korsakov’s version, there exists one commissioned by Diaghilev from Igor Stravinsky and Maurice Ravel in 1911, as well as a version composed more recently by the Soviet composer Asaf’ev. Mussorgsky divided the opera into five acts and six scenes, of which only Marfa’s song and the chorus of the Streltsy that followed Shaklovity’s aria were orchestrated by the composer. Mussorgsky’s original vocal score was not published until 1931, by Pavel Lamm in Moscow, and forms the basis for the version in six scenes, orchestrated by Dmitry Shostakovich in 1959, that was first given in the West, at Covent Garden, in 1963.

³⁵ Stasov, ‘Po povodu postanovki “Khovanshchiny”’ (1886), *Izbraniye*, op. cit. (28 note 29), 186; id., ‘Konets li “Khovanshchine”?’ (1886), *ibid.*, 190.

³⁶ ‘Konets li “Khovanshchine”?’ (30), 190.

Performances Memorable – And Not So Memorable

Opera 26 (1975), 116–20

From 1916 to 1920 my parents lived in St Petersburg, or Petrograd as it was called during and after the First World War. The first performance of an opera that I remember at all clearly was that of *Boris Godunov* in 1916. Chaliapin, of course, sang the title role, and his enormous voice filled the Mariinsky Theatre, as much in lyrical legato passages as in the great dramatic monologue, and in the dialogue with Shuisky. I was seven years old at the time, and this naturally meant little to me, save that even then I noticed the enormous difference between the marvellous sensation of those huge, slow, all-sustaining, wholly delightful waves of musical sound, with their almost orchestral effect, and the voices of the other, more ordinary, singers. But what absorbed my attention and fascinated me completely was the scene in which the Tsar sees the ghost of the murdered Prince in a remote corner of the stage, starts back in horror and utters panic-stricken cries. Chaliapin, on his knees, seized the table legs, burying his head in the folds of the tablecloth which hung from it, and on which the map of Russia was stretched for the geography lesson of his young son in the earlier part of this act. Whether deliberately or not, in an exceedingly realistic performance of the scene of panic and hysteria, he pulled the tablecloth and the map over his head. The spectacle of this gigantic figure crawling on the floor, with the rich cloth and his own robes inextricably tangled over him, crying ‘Choo! Choo!’, and waving his arms desperately to drive away the terrible ghostly presence, was something at once so frightening and wonderful that I myself, apparently, began to utter cries of [117] mixed terror and pleasure, and had to be silenced by my parents and the hissing of indignant neighbours. I do not think that I had any idea of what the hallucination really signified, but even children respond to acting of genius.

I saw Chaliapin many times after this, in *Boris* (on one occasion he sang the parts both of Boris and Varlaam in the inn scene – I wonder whether his distinguished successor, Boris Christoff, could not be induced to do this), as Khan Konchak in *prince Igor*, as the

Miller in Dargomyzhsky's *Rusalka*, as Mephistopheles in Boito's opera (I never saw him, alas, as *Ivan the Terrible* in Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Maid of Pskov*). But the exciting and fearful memory of that heroic frame crawling on all fours, swathed in the rich tablecloth and map, uttering wonderful cries, and singing at full-throated ease, barbarous and marvellously and consciously artistic at the same time, lingers with me to this day. For a long time after that I thought of opera as a particularly terrifying sort of entertainment. It took a good many performances of French and Italian opera to obliterate this fixed idea.

My parents occasionally took me to Paris from London, where we lived, in the early 1920s, and we invariably saw *Carmen* at the Opéra Comique. One of the proofs that *Carmen* is an immortal masterpiece is its capacity for preserving its shape and essence through the most terrible renderings. Just as the genius of Shakespeare triumphs over the most appalling translations and performances, so the great popular classics – *Figaro*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, [118] *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *La Bohème* – survive the most unspeakable productions and the most appalling singing. That is, indeed, what makes them classics, gives them claim to immortality, and divides them from such masterpieces as the operas of Gluck, or *Fidelio*, or *Tristan*, or *The Ring*, or *Falstaff*, or the works of the twentieth century, few of which can survive such treatment. This is surely true of *Carmen*. I doubt if either Bizet or Meilhac and Halévy would have put pen to paper if they had anticipated the free performance by the Latvian National Opera (in Lettish) which I heard in 1928; the curious renderings in Hebrew (Tel-Aviv, 1962, I think);³⁷ in English (Carl Rosa in the 1920s, at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith, or perhaps somewhere else); or the most dreadful performance of all, by the Molotov Opera Company, in Leningrad in 1956, in very old-world Russian, sung by some wildly untutored singers from the Urals, whom nature had endowed with bittern-like vocal organs, and produced by someone whose notion of Spain, the entrance to a bullring, bore little relation to nineteenth-century life in any part of Europe. Yet *Carmen* stood up: it defied the forces arrayed against it; it came through – no amount of distortion or misinterpretation, of grotesque acting and terrible

³⁷ [Possibly 1963, when Plácido Domingo first sang Don José in that city.]

singing, could ruin it entirely. This is indeed proof of the vitality of genius. The city of Molotov has long since, for obvious reasons, reverted to its original name of Perm; perhaps *Carmen*, too, now obtains worthier performances by its singers. I must own to never having heard a perfect performance of the part of Carmen in my life. If only Maria Callas had sung the part on the stage and not only on records. The best *orchestral* performance of it I ever heard was by Leo Blech, in Berlin in the late 1920s – better than any, I truly believe, by Beecham or any living conductor; better than the stage or film performances of *Carmen Jones*, or the version where the cigarette factory is situated in Warsaw, of which I once heard a private performance. The dry fire, the passionate pulse, the great lyrical passages were of a standard not again attained in my experience. I cannot now remember who sang in it: it was not Conchita [119] Supervia. I remember now only Blech and the orchestra.

Superb performances and grotesque ones linger in the memory. I shall not forget the Swedish baritone John Forsell, in *Don Giovanni*, conducted by Bruno Walter in Salzburg in the very early 1930s: this was certainly the best performance of that part, and the best performance of the work, I have ever heard. This is equally true of Toscanini's performance of *Falstaff* in 1937, and of *Fidelio* too, both in Salzburg; and of *Don Carlos* in the original Visconti production at Covent Garden, conducted by Giulini and sung by Christoff, Brouwenstijn, Tito Gobbi and many of those who still sing it at Covent Garden.

The oddest performance I ever saw and heard was perhaps Act 2 of *The Marriage of Figaro* performed in an Istanbul cinema (in Turkish); it appeared to take place in a seraglio with a decor that would be more appropriate to *Die Entführung*. The Countess as the favourite European wife of an oriental Almaviva was dressed in half-Turkish, half eighteenth-century Western garments, rather like an Albanian in *Così*; Susanna as the favourite slave, Figaro as a kind of Phanariot Greek or Armenian factotum, Bartolo and Marcellina as a foreign consul with his plump native housekeeper, and Basilio as the chief eunuch – all combined into a fantasy at once farcical and exotic, which I should love to see again.

Far the most absurd moment in opera that I know of was seen not, alas, by [120] me, but by my friend Nicolas Nabokov in Berlin, in the early 1920s. It was during the years of inflation, when

there was much poverty and a great dearth of food in Germany. The opera was *Götterdämmerung*. Nabokov described the moment when Brünnhilde's faithful Grane, played by an emaciated and evidently starved carthorse, appeared on the stage; a foot away stood Hagen, with a long tow beard suspended from his chin. The horse suddenly lunged forward, whipped off Hagen's beard and devoured it in one gulp. This apparently stopped the performance; while the feeble old horse was being hurried off the stage even the solemn German audience could not contain itself. Animals on the stage are always a potential embarrassment and cause nervous strain both to the performers and to the public. Someone once remarked that they are very inattentive, look for distraction and distract the audience; fear of misbehaviour adds to the strain. Only grand opera of the nineteenth century demands their presence: I cannot think of any work in the twentieth which calls for horses or swans, stags or golden cockerels, or even bumblebees. This indicates some failure of theatrical nerve, but it must be a relief to both singers and producers. The bats which on summer evenings fly above the heads of the audience in the later acts of operas at Glyndebourne add little to the pleasures of those delightful occasions.

Surtitles

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It is a truism, though an important one, that the words to which composers set their music are of crucial importance to the act of composition, especially in opera, where the words are an intrinsic element not only of the expression of the meaning of what is sung, but of the dramatic action; and not only the words, but syllables, inflections, accents, rise and fall, emphasis. Hence the natural concern of musicians and of the most responsive part of the public that opera be sung in the original language of the libretto; and hence, too, the opposition to this by those who, with no less reason, want the libretti translated into their own languages if they are to grasp the meaning of what is sung, and of the relation of the words both to the unfolding story and to the music – to its shape, texture, melodic, rhythmic, harmonic structure, its movement, nuance, accent, inner pulse and other attributes – all that makes the total pattern essential to its full aesthetic and psychological impact.

The difference made to appreciation of words set to music between understanding and not understanding exactly what is being sung is far greater than those who are content merely to listen to the music (or very nearly so) might begin to imagine. This may be more obvious in the case of the operas of Wagner or Debussy or Berg than in, say, those of Donizetti or Gounod, or even Handel; but it is very great in all works of genuine artistic merit. Consequently there arises a problem: should accessibility of the meaning of words be sacrificed (and, if so, to what degree) to fidelity to the composer's intended fusion of word and sound? Or, on the contrary, should the fidelity on which purists insist yield to intelligibility? Is there an inescapable incomparability between the two approaches? Are the alternatives mutually, or even largely, exclusive? Some would say that this is a matter of degree: libretti

have, after all, been translated with reasonable success, even if many translations are grotesque. I cannot, in this connection, help remembering Dent's grotesque translation of a line by the poet Pushkin in the libretto of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (Act 2, Scene 2), which begins the aria of Prince Gremin:

Onegin, I should not be human
If I did not adore that woman.

The German version of *Don Giovanni*, the Russian version of *La traviata* do well enough: but, all the same, something – at times too much – is lost. Poetry, said someone, is what is lost in translation.³⁸ Most libretti are, as often as not, a pretty debased form of poetry, some more so than others; but Boito, Hofmannsthal, Auden, even Wagner at times, wrote poetry; Metastasio, da Ponte, Meilhac and Halévy have stood up pretty well. Why, then, it may be asked, can the real opera lovers not read the libretti in languages they do understand – and in this way follow every bar, or at least every phrase, of the opera in a foreign language? If they truly want to obtain a full experience, they must do their homework. This, after all, applies in many spheres of life: is this not all it comes to? I believe not.

To obtain full enjoyment one would have virtually to memorise the text. Can one really demand this of ordinary listeners, however musical, however sensitive? A general sense of the knowledge of the story of the opera read in Kobbé, or even in a double-column libretto with translation, does not, and cannot, do much more than give one a general sense of what is going on. Let me take the least esoteric example: Rigoletto's famous words (Act 2, Scene 2), which convey at once fear and hatred of the courtiers of Mantua, and an effort to ingratiate himself with them in order to discover where his daughter is after her abduction, the falsely jaunty 'La rà, la rà, la rà, la rà ...' (offstage), followed by apparently insouciant, mocking repartee which half conceals his agonised suspicion, until he finally bursts out into 'Cortigiani, vil razza dannata ...'.³⁹ This marvellous, desperate, profoundly moving, broken-hearted passage, unique in

³⁸ Robert Frost in conversation with Louis Untermeyer, quoted in the latter's *Robert Frost: A Backward Look* (Washington, 1964), 18.

³⁹ 'Courtiers, vile, damnable rabble'.

opera, must be followed word by word if its impact is to be fully responded to – and the effort is supremely worth it.

This, of course, applies even more to the majority of Wagner's operas, where the words play an immeasurably more significant role than in, say, Weber's *Oberon*. I should like to urge that the least imperfect solution is the use of surtitles: ideally, of the entire text – even of ensembles when the various characters may all be saying something quite different – but if this last is impracticable, as it may well prove to be, then at any rate the words of the arias, dialogue, choruses, recitative – or at the very least the words that matter most – should be illuminated above the proscenium. But will this distract attention which should be concentrated only on the stage? Undeniably, to some degree. But not enough to be a serious obstacle to the vast majority of the audience.

The difference that the simultaneous appearance of words and music can make seems to me immense. There is no doubt in my mind that the extraordinary, wholly unexpected, success of the televised Bayreuth Chéreau–Boulez *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, while no doubt it owed a very great deal to the originality of the conception and the gifts of the conductor, director, designer, singers, owed even more to the captions, which even in translation brought home to the millions of viewers the truly organic unity of music and meaning, sound and word, which, in Wagner's fully developed style is everything. Many of that television audience, I suspect, had never seen any other production of *The Ring*, consequently they had no basis of comparison: yet they were undoubtedly fascinated, deeply affected, and some no doubt converted to Wagner's art, which, it may be, they had not initially expected to enjoy so much.

This courageous experiment alone seems to me to support strongly the thesis that opera-goers – and above all those who may either underrate the beauty and depth of operas because they cannot follow the words, or perhaps be deterred from going to see opera altogether – can be converted and illuminated and made enthusiastic by becoming able to understand the meaning, musically and emotionally, of what is going on, instead of being made to listen to mumbo-jumbo. Everyone has that experience of this last, and I need not labour the point. This is true, sad as it may be, even of opera in the public's native language. Articulation in opera is notoriously imperfect: English texts, whether original or translated,

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which should be so much more intelligible to British audiences than German or Italian, rarely succeed in being so; occasional sentences articulated by singers with exceptional powers of clear diction can achieve this, otherwise, as often as not, one grasps one word in three, in four, in five, or, at the very best, in two.

There is, of course, an obvious difference between a television screen which can be taken in – stage and subtitles – in a single glance, and the stage of an opera house, where surtitles do require a brief upward look; but I cannot persuade myself that such interruptions need materially interfere with attention to the action on the stage; not even the openings of trapdoors, or assassinations, are so unexpected in an opera that reading the surtitle could cause a serious distraction of attention. Of course, a great deal depends on precise synchronisation, the angle of vision, the size of the letters, the type of illumination, punctuation, the exact position above the proscenium and, where this is unavoidable, selection and condensation of the text. Other techniques have been suggested – of special spectacles which reveal the illuminated text to those who wish to see it and them alone; or of illuminated words on the back of the seats in front of those who wish to read them, screened from adjacent seats, so that only those who wish to switch them on need do so, without fear of disturbing others. But the last seems to me to be inferior, since it requires constant bobbing up and down. Even so, this would be an improvement on the present ‘non-titled’ situation.

The advantages of surtitles seem to me greatly to outweigh the shortcomings. Understanding of opera would be transformed, to the great profit of performers and audiences alike. Opposition to this method is, I suspect, based on mere conservatism, habit, misplaced aesthetic canons, or an obscure psychological resistance to a small but beneficent, pleasure-enhancing innovation. I feel sure that a poll of opera goers, certainly of those who watch opera on television, would produce a very significant majority in favour of this method, and that the sceptical would be converted. Glyndebourne Touring Opera is a brave and enlightened pioneer in this regard. Like all other beneficiaries of this new departure, I wish to offer it my gratitude and admiration.