



KHOVANSCHINA

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Khovanshchina

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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?¹

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’² 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.³

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 they but the life of the submerged, helpless, trampled-on Russian

¹ 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.

² ‘Autobiographical note’ (1880), LN1 270; cf. letter to L. I. Shestakova, 30 July 1868, LN1 100.

³ *ibid.*

people? It was for this *Volkseele* 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. *Khovanschina* 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"'.⁴ He called Stasov 'généralissime'⁵ and often referred to the opera as his. They called it a 'musical folk drama',⁶ and it was plainly [41] 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';⁷ 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

⁴ Letter of 15 July 1872: LN1 138.

⁵ *passim*, e.g. *ibid.*

⁶ [In the opera's subtitle, *A Musical Folk Drama in Five Acts.*]

⁷ In the words of Khovansky at the end of Act 3.

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of Europe [i.e., the West], which some, even in the party of the Princess Sophia, had begun to understand and value.⁸

He goes on to speak of a contrast between the two 'settlements',⁹ 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!"'¹⁰ 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.

The love themes – Marfa's violent passion for Andrey Khovansky, and his infatuation with Emma – are (unlike the love

⁸ 'Modest Petrovich Musorgsky: biograficheskii ocherk' (1881), in V. V. Stasov, *Izbrannye statii o M. P. Mussorgskom*, ed. A. S. Ogolevets (Moscow, 1952), 122.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Stasov to Mussorgsky, 15 August 1873, LN1 322.

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’,¹¹ circles round her lover, ‘as stupid as the German girl he pines for’;¹² 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’.¹³ 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 song¹⁴ and the old liturgical music of the Old Believers, which Mussorgsky had unearthed,¹⁵ 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 Opera, to whom the vocal score was submitted in 1880; they

¹¹ Mussorgsky to Stasov, 23 July 1873, LN1 154.

¹² [Probably *ibid.*, but if so, very free for ‘he preferred a German girl as stupid as he was’.]

¹³ Or ‘Mass of love’. To Stasov, 2 August 1873, LN1 161.

¹⁴ 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 deperovth in the final scene.

¹⁵ For example, the ‘Aeolian’ chorus of the Old Believers in the first act, and their ‘Phrygian’ chorus in the last.

rejected it on the ground that one ‘radical’ opera (*Boris Godunov*) was enough.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.

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¹⁶ Stasov, ‘Po povodu postanovki “Khovanshchiny”’ (1886), *Izbrannyye*, op. cit. (28 note 1), 186; id., ‘Konets li “Khovanshchine”?’ (1886), *ibid.*, 190.

¹⁷ ‘Konets li “Khovanshchine”?’ (30), 190.