Rimsky-Korsakov

Four Operas

The Snow Maiden – Fairy-tale Opera in a Prologue and Four Acts*
The Golden Cockerel – Fairy-tale Opera in Three Acts#
T*he May Night* – Opera in Three Acts¶
Boyarinya Vera Sheloga – Opera in One Act*

Bulgarian Radio Symphony Orchestra*
Stoyan Angelov *cond*

Kölner Rundfunk-Sinfonie-Orchester¶
Alexander Lazarew *cond*

Sofia National Opera Orchestra#
Dimiter Manolov *cond*

Capriccio 49 474 (8 CDs: 10 hours: DDD), £12.99
Notes and translations included.

History has dealt unkindly with Rimksy-Korsakov's 15 operas, the musical fruit of the Russian Silver Age, seeing it as an interregnum between the Romantic highpoints of Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky, and Stravinsky's modernist dawn. By this light, Rimsky-Korsakov began well, *The Maid of Pskov*, his first opera, epitomizing the Stasovian realist (*kuchkist*) aesthetics of 'The Mighty Handful'. But his appointment as Professor in the St Petersburg Conservatory set Rimsky-Korsakov on a path of increasing academicism. Financed by the millionaire timber merchant Belyayev, Rimsky-Korsakov effectively became a *timbre* merchant, a purveyor of striking yet superficial orchestral effects. His quotation of a passage from *The Snow Maiden*, which he wrote out as a memento to his friend Yastrebtsev in 1900, could be read as a fitting epitaph to Rimsky-Korsakov's own journey: 'And it's all just light and cold brilliance, and there's no warmth'.[1] For listeners new to this repertory, Capriccio's budget-price box of four operas is an excellent introduction, and an opportunity to re-think the conventional wisdom.

The four operas are well chosen to comprise the first and last, an acknowledged masterpiece, and a rarity. *Boyarinya Vera Sheloga*, originally the prologue to *The Maid of Pskov* (1872), which Rimsky-Korsakov turned into a free-standing one-act opera in 1898, is not as early as it seems. Like Bruckner, an inveterate reviser and polisher, Rimsky-Korsakov domesticated some of the prologue's wilder, 'Dargomizhkian' traits (just as orchestrating *The Stone Guest* was a life-time preoccupation). *The Golden Cockerel* (1907), which was promoted by Diaghilev as an 'opera-ballet', is the most explicit testimony to how much the composer of *The Firebird* learnt from his teacher (the introductions to Acts II and

[1] Richard Tarushkin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997): 81–2.

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III are particularly Stravinskian). The epic *Snow Maiden* (1881) is perhaps Rimsky-Korsakov's most satisfying drama. But the ravishing *May Night* (1878–79), based on a short story by Gogol, is well worth a visit too. The four operas represent the distinct genres of historical drama, epic, 'Gogolian short story' and fairy-tale. But in practice, it is fascinating to observe Rimsky-Korsakov's idioms of nature, supernature, folk and comedy criss-cross the various works, and to watch his lyrical style bloom in *Snow Maiden* and *May Night*, and harden into modernism in *Golden Cockerel* (with its tertial and octatonic harmonies).

Regarding performance and recording quality, *May Night* is the best in the box. The other three operas are Bulgarian productions (featuring the Sofia National Opera Orchestra and the Bulgarian Radio Symphony Orchestra), dating from the mid-1980s, and are indifferent verging on scrappy. *May Night* was recorded in 1994, and the musicians are in a different league: the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Alexander Lazerew, with soloists of the Bolshoi Theatre. *May Night* really shines, whereas it is hard to enjoy the others as anything more than opportunities to get to know the music, and stepping-stones to better future issues. All three sound like badly miked live recordings, and the production engineers and conductors have struggled to negotiate Rimsky-Korsakov's complex levelling of soloists, orchestra and chorus. Thus the chorus of the people (*narod*), which is a central protagonist in Russian opera, is frequently internally unbalanced, or masked by the instruments. A case in point is Act III of *Golden Cockerel*, which is really a single-scene finale. The procession to the palace – one of Rimsky-Korsakov's delightfully bizarre conceptions – goes well, until the full entry of the *narod* overwhelms the recording. Within the distorted sound image, one can still make out the hoarseness of the sopranos, who are consistently covered by over-loud tenors and basses. Still, the stochastic chorus at the cockerel's flight (the singers are required to improvise around the bird's leitmotiv chord) is a moment to savour. The choral lament at the end of the opera, book-ended by the C-major white music at the very beginning of Act I, would be stolen by Stravinsky for his *Oedipus rex*. For historical reasons alone, demonstrating the 'missing link' between Glinka and Stravinsky, *Golden Cockerel* is required listening.

Nevertheless, one can pick out a host of other problems in these recordings. A major concern is insensitive shaping and pacing. In Act III of *Snow Maiden*, just after Lel has picked Koupava rather than Snegurochka as his partner, the big tune enters far too abruptly, with an ugly abrasive sound. Compare this with the subtle orchestral swell at the end of Act III Scene 13 of *May Night*, which beautifully bridges the magical realm of the water nymphs with the realist world of the village comedy. Rimsky-Korsakov's art of transition typically mediates between natural and supernatural domains. The pacing in *May Night* is crisp and supple. Reliant, after Glinka, on a potentially non-dramatic chain of tableaux, Rimsky-Korsakov's architecture is built up through the cumulative accretion of forces. The formula is schematic: first acts often beginning in wistful fantasy, and climaxing with noisy choral rituals or crowd scenes. The rougher handling of the Bulgarians works better in the satirical *Golden Cockerel*, comporting with the composer's fairy-tale distancing effects. Similarly, it is easier to forgive the bass Nikolai Stoilov's shaky intonation in a comic role (Tsar Dodon) than that of the two 'serious' basses in *Boyarinya Vera Sheloga* (Peter Bakardziev and Dimiter Stanchev). The part of the Astrologer in *Golden Cockerel* was written for a 'tenor-altino', but is normally sung by tenors who can cope with its extremely high range without lapsing into falsetto. Lyubomir Dyakovski makes a brave job of

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this, but one occasionally hears the strain. Another male singer who stands out is the tenor Avram Andreev, Tsar Berendei in *Snow Maiden*, a role into which Rimsky-Korsakov's pours his most heartfelt Italianate melodic writing. Slavic female voices can sound overly bright and harsh to Western European ears. A more serious problem is the mismatch of voice-types in ensemble: for instance, the two sopranos in the trio that concludes Act III of *Snow Maiden* (Elena Zemenkova and Stefka Evstatieva) appear to be singing in different operas. Another, more pervasive, problem is the inconsistent vibrato techniques of voices and instruments: the characteristic wide vibrato of these Slavic singers is out of kilter with the flat and reedy sound of the strings. Mellifluous blend and transparent orchestration are the hallmarks of Rimsky-Korsakov's genius: only the *May Night* recording gets these right. The piece reminds us that his best orchestral effects, like Mahler's, actually rely on reduced forces, a chamber-like interplay of solo instruments. Thus Levko and Hanna's Act I duet eventually becomes a 'trio' once the solo violin joins in. And the magic in the Act III water-nymph scene is created through a delicious blend of solo horn, harp and piano (a combination evoking the traditional *gusli* accompaniment to folk narration). If this opera should justly be as celebrated as *Rusalka*, the delicately elfin quality of this music anticipates the finale of *Falstaff* by 15 years. The comparison is not as outlandish as it seems: Russian opera had been Italianate at least since Glinka's *Ruslan*, and although Rimsky-Korsakov's nationalism 'officially' renounced this idiom, it never left his blood stream. One could say, then, that 'Italian' opera evolved in a parallel stream in Italy and Russia, with Verdi and Rimsky-Korsakov reaching similar conclusions. The same goes for their comparable solutions to blending numbers opera with realist continuity. In this respect, the first act of *Golden Cockerel* is a tour-de-force of tight, yet seamless, continuity, perhaps a culmination of Rimsky-Korsakov's experiments in this area. This is not to gainsay the prestige of the glittering set pieces – for instance, the rumbustious 'Dance of the Clowns' in Act Three of *Snow Queen*, where the Bulgarian Radio Symphony Orchestra comes into its own.

A major failing of this Capriccio collection is the lamentable quality of the liner notes, and here I must come down hard. The précis of the libretto into a 'plot' is fairly common in budget-price opera discs. But the guides here are so skeletal as to be practically useless. And in one case (*Golden Cockerel*), a printer's error has blanked out alternate pages. Without better guides, listeners faced with such an unfamiliar repertory, performed in the Russian language, will inevitably default to receiving Rimsky-Korsakov's operas as a stream of pretty sound effects, rather than as dramas. Capriccio's enterprise is thus rather counter-productive, unless listeners are prepared to go out of their way to obtain libretti and scores. In short, the box does not work on its own terms. A pity, since there is so much gorgeous music here.

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