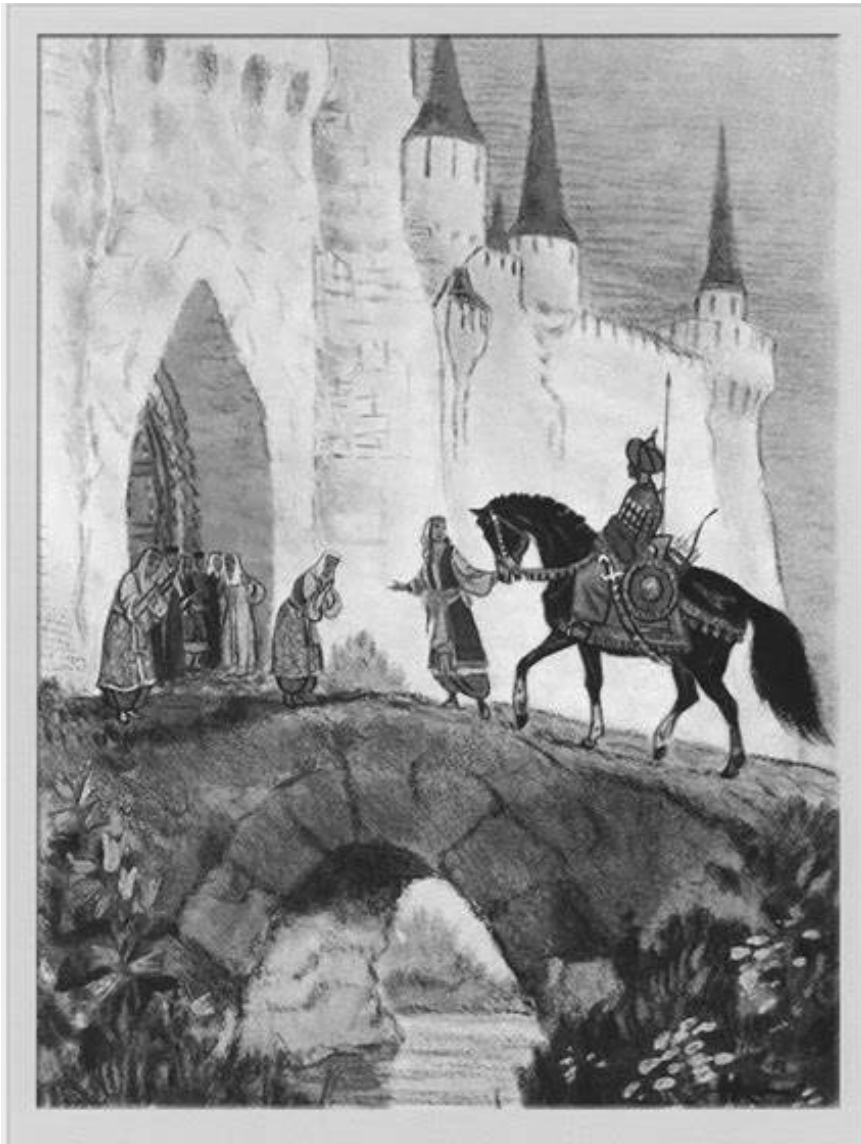


PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



10. RUSSIAN LEGEND

28 November, 2023

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RUSSIAN OPERA ESSENTIALLY CAME INTO BEING in the second quarter of the Nineteenth Century, the product of a surge in Russian nationalism. Because of this, it tends to deal with subjects that are less well known in the West, staged in a décor based on traditional court or peasant costumes and folk art.

Both productions we shall sample today are the work of stage director **Dmitri Tcherniakov**, who does not eschew traditional approaches so much as to put them in quotes, as it were, as reference points in his postmodern staging. So he can take the fairy-tale fantasy of *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1841) by **Mikhail Glinka** (1804–57), and set its individual scenes in a bomb shelter, brothel, or penthouse apartment—or conversely take an historical opera such as *The Tsar's Bride* (1899) by **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844–1908), and set it in a hi-tech world that specializes in the creation of illusion. *rb.*

RUSLAN AND LYUDMILA

The opera opens at the wedding feast of **Ruslan** and **Lyudmila**, the title characters of the **Pushkin** poem on which the opera is based. A **Bayan** (bardic wedding-singer) predicts that the couple must pass through terrible ordeals before they can be united.

- **Act 1: end of overture and opening scene**

[*Sure enough, there is a whirlwind in which Lyudmila mysteriously vanishes. Not only does Ruslan set out to find her, but Lyudmila's father Svetosar sends two other suitors also, Ratmir and Farlaf. Acts Two and Three will show their various adventures, in the course of which Ratmir will be reunited with his true girlfriend, Gorislava.*]

We pick it up with the opening of **Act Four**. Lyudmila is a prisoner in a castle built for her by the unseen magician **Chernomor**, who loves her. Servants wait on her hand and foot; she has every luxury, but still longs for Ruslan, her bridegroom.

- **Act 4: opening**

[After Lyudmila has been subjected to serenades and dances intended to melt her resolve,] Ruslan appears with Ratmir and Gorislava. But his bride has been bewitched and does not recognize him.

- **Act 4: closing and Act 5 opening**

[Before they can take Lyudmila back to her father, the opportunistic Farlaf breaks in and abducts her.] But he cannot wake her from her spell when he brings her back in **Act Five**. Only Ruslan can do this with his song. All rejoice, and the Bayan completes his original ballad.

- **Act 5 final scene (complete)**

Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. Bolshoi 2011 (DVD).

Albina Shagimuratova (Lyudmila), Alexandrina Pendatchanska (Gorislava), Yuri Minenko (Ratmir), Mikhail Petrenko (Ruslan), Charles Workman (Bayan/Finn), Almas Svilpa (Farlaf), Vladimir Ognovenko (Svetosar); Vladimir Jurowski (c), Dmitri Tcherniakov (d)

THE TSAR'S BRIDE

The 1849 play by **Lev Mei** upon which the opera is based is a fiction built around a single fact: that **Marfa Sobakhina**, the third wife of **Ivan the Terrible**, died only days after their marriage. The Tsar himself never appears, but communicates with the people (as Ivan largely did) through a coterie of Boyars (nobles) known as the **Oprichniks**, a matter that director **Tcherniakov** interprets in an entirely modern way. **Rimsky-Korsakov** was aware that the central plot element of his opera—a poison getting switched with a love potion—was similar to that of **Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde***, and he wrote his opera as an explicit riposte to Wagner, filling it with melodies that the German master eschewed.

[The Oprichnik **Grigory Gryaznoy** wishes to marry Marfa Sobakhina, but her father says she is betrothed to a young man called Ivan Lykov. Desperate, Gryaznoy gets a doctor to prepare a love-potion that will make her fall for him.] But his long-term mistress **Lyubasha** overhears this bargain, and decides to take her revenge.

- **Act 1: opening and hymn to the Tsar**
- **Act 1 finale (Lyubasha/Gryaznoy), end**

We now see **Marfa** with her schoolfriend **Dunyasha**, talking about her upcoming marriage with **Ivan**.

- **Act 2: opening scene (Marfa/Dunyasha)**

[Stunned by Marfa's beauty, Lyubasha obtains a poison from the same doctor that she can substitute for the love-potion. So at the party in Act 3 to celebrate Marfa's engagement, Gryaznoy (who has volunteered as best man) inadvertently gives her the poison.] She is already feeling the effects when she gets the news that she has been chosen as the Tsar's Bride.

- **Act 3 finale**

Gryaznoy vindictively denounces Ivan Lykov as the poisoner, and reports his execution. Marfa, the new Tsarina, awakens from a convulsion with the mad belief that Gryaznoy is her beloved Ivan. This is too much for the older man, who confesses his involvement. At this point, Lyubasha comes in to confess that it was she who substituted the poison that is killing Marfa. By the end of the opera, all three are dead.

- **Act 4 finale (complete)**

Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tsar's Bride*. Berlin 2013 (DVD).

Olga Peretyatko (Marfa), Anna Lapkovskaya (Dunyasha), Anita Rachvelishvili (Lyubasha), Johannes Martin Kränzle (Gryaznoy); Daniel Barenboim (c), Dmitri Tcherniakov (d)

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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