

# CLASS 10 : RUSSIAN LEGEND

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## A. RUSLAN AND LYUDMILA

### 1. Class title 1 (Tcherniakov *Ruslan*)

Russian opera is a comparatively new interest of mine. Why has it taken so long? Partly because Russian is the only major operatic language I cannot read with some ease. Partly because there are so few opportunities to attend productions in the West. And partly because they are so bound up in the history of Russia itself that it can be hard to get a grip on them.

### 2. Pushkin, Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov

Russian opera essentially came into being in the second quarter of the Nineteenth Century. It was the direct product of the surge in Russian Nationalism launched by **Alexander Pushkin** (1799–1837), who took the extraordinary step for his time of writing literary works in Russian, rather than French. His fairy tale poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila* is the subject of the opera of the same name by **Mikhail Glinka** (1804–57), which he began in 1838, just after the poet's death; this is the first work on our agenda today. Glinka had previously written an historical opera, *A Life for the Tsar*; this was not based directly on Pushkin, but surely influenced by Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov*, which would have to wait until 1870 for its operatic setting by **Modest Mussorgsky**; it is virtually the Russian national opera. The second piece we will look at today is also an historical work, *The Tsar's Bride* (1899) by **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844–1908), whose 14 other operas are mostly fantasies in a very similar vein to *Ruslan*.

### 3. Productions of *Ruslan and Lyudmila* and *The Tsar's Bride*

This nationalist impulse tends to give Russian opera productions one or other of two characteristic looks. Either they are based on folk art and the traditional costumes worn at weddings and other special occasions, or they reflected the ceremonial world of the Tsar and Boyars (nobles): a lot of red, gold, and fur; you can see both in these photographs. Now neither of the productions we shall see today adopt these styles, but they both have the same director, **Dmitri Tcherniakov**, who has made a specialty of referencing these traditional styles in quotes, as it were, and then riffing off them in interesting and essentially postmodern ways.

### 4. Dmitri Tcherniakov's production of *Ruslan and Lyudmila* at the Bolshoi , 2011

Tcherniakov's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, for example, begins with as traditional a set and costumes as you could ever wish. But just look how he gets into it, how neatly he puts those "quotes" around everything he is going to show.

### 5. Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, end of overture and curtain-rise

The voice you are going to hear is that of a **Bayan** or bardic wedding singer. He is expected to sing the praises of the bridal couple, **Ruslan** and **Lyudmila**, but instead he prophesizes disaster and many trials to come—though he also says that the couple will emerge to a happy ending (that will be at the end of Act Five!). The other three men who are prominent in this scene are **Ratmir** (originally contralto but here a countertenor) and **Farlaf** (baritone) in the tin hat, together with **Svetosar** (bass), the bride’s father. The style may be strange, but the singing and the music are beautiful.

#### 6. Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Act I, Bayan’s song

How might you place Glinka in the light of the other composers we have heard, Bellini, Meyerbeer, Verdi, and Wagner? Take away the Russian trappings, and I think you can hear the vocal lyricism of **Bellini**, and he is virtually writing a Russian equivalent of a spectacular **Meyerbeer** *grand opéra*. **Verdi** was doing much the same thing at this time, and **Wagner** was already mining the myths of his own country. Anyway, since I want to play as long clips as possible, I am going to jump right ahead to Acts Four and Five. Of course, the Bayan’s words come true; there is a whirlwind at the end of this scene, and Lyudmila disappears. Ruslan sets out to find her, and Lyudmila’s father sends Ratmir and Farlaf also as backup; the next three acts will show what happened to them.

#### 7. Illustration to *Ruslan and Lyudmila*

I’ll omit the intermediate acts, with what happens to Ruslan and Ratmir—who also gets reunited with his own girlfriend, Gorislava, though—and concentrate on Lyudmila. She is locked in a luxurious castle built for her by a magician called **Chernomor**, who is in love with her. We never see Chernomor, and no force is involved at all, but Tcherniakov is magnificent in giving us a feel of this ultra-luxurious captivity.

#### 8. Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Act IV, opening

I wish I could go on with this scene. Lyudmila has a long aria accompanied by a solo violin, and in Tcherniakov’s production, the player actually comes onstage in costume. This is followed by various kinds of dances, designed to weaken her resolve and confuse her. Then Ruslan breaks in, accompanied by Ratmir and his beloved Gorislava. It seems that we already have a happy ending, but not so. This would end Act IV, but Tcherniakov goes right on into Act V, which begins with a beautiful *Romance* that Ratmir sings about (and here to) Gorislava. It has nothing whatever to do with the plot, but I include it because it is just so darned beautiful!

#### 9. Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Act IV finale and Ratmir’s *Romance*

Ratmir and Gorislava intend to take Lyudmila back to her father, but **Farlaf** gets in first, stealing the comatose Lyudmila to win the reward. But he doesn’t; she is still comatose when she arrives back at the palace. It will take Ruslan and his companions to cure her, and the **Bayan** to sum everything up in a song. Note again Tcherniakov’s wonderful way of putting the traditional elements in quotes, this time by having a lot of the characters get dressed onstage—and Lyudmila at the end to get *out* of costume

#### 10. Glinka: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Act V finale

#### 11. Class title 2 (still from the above)

## B. THE TSAR'S BRIDE

### 12. Class title 3 (*The Tsar's Bride*)

Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride* (1899) is nominally an historical opera, except that it has no more connection to the Tsar of the title, **Ivan the Terrible**, than Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* has to William the Conqueror. Less in fact, in that the Tsar himself never appears. Tcherniakov makes a point out of that, which I'll tell you about in a moment. It is based on a play of exactly 50 years earlier by **Lev Mei** (1822–62), which starts from a single fact: that Ivan the Terrible's third wife, **Marfa Sobakina**, died only five weeks after their marriage; the rest is sheer imagination—legend at best.

### 13. Pre-show image for *The Tsar's Bride*

If you were sitting in the theatre (this one is from Berlin) waiting for the overture to start, you might think that **Tcherniakov** had totally gone back to tradition; this could be a scene from *Boris Godunov*. But he puts this in quotes also, and they are quotes of a completely different kind from those he had used in *Ruslan*. Watch.

### 14. Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tsar's Bride*, opening

Tsar Ivan never appears, but he acts—as he did in real life—through his coterie of **Oprichniks**, a group of Boyars who act partially as managers, partly as secret police. Tcherniakov sees these Oprichniks as technocrats, handling the Tsar's image on the web, television, and other news media. The folksy scene of the opening was filmed in a green-screen studio with the background added later. **And this Tsar does not even exist!** He is made up entirely as a propaganda tool. During the rest of the overture, you would see the managers combining the best features of past leaders. I'll jump ahead to a clip in which the man at the center of this first scene, **Grigory Gryaznoy**, takes his guests into the studio to see the clips they have prepared of the Tsar; the song they are singing is the *Slava* (Glory), the real hymn that Mussorgsky also uses in *Boris*.

### 15. Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tsar's Bride*, Act I, Slava sequence

I'm not sure whether Gryaznoy is in on the secret that the Tsar is a fake. He certainly does not know of the plan to make Marfa Sobakhina his bride. Because he has fallen in love with the real **Marfa**, and is furious that her father has refused his marriage proposal, saying she is already engaged to a pleasant young man, **Ivan Lykov**. This is the engine of the plot, because he gets a German doctor to give him a love potion which will make her fall for him rather than the sophomoric Lykov. Unfortunately, this is overheard by his mistress **Lyubasha**, who pleads with him in a long duet. I have time only for the end, in which he walks out on her, and she plans revenge, but it is enough to show the power of the character.

### 16. Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tsar's Bride*, end of Act I

### 17. Still from Act II, Marfa

These clips have been relatively short. As I did with *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, I am working towards playing the final scene of the opera complete. And to do that, I need to fill you in on the necessary backstory.

One such is the scorned Lyubasha, who in the next act will get the German doctor to prescribe a slow-acting poison that she can give to Gryaznoy. No need to show that, but I do need to introduce you to **Marfa** herself, first coming home from school with her friend **Dunyasha**, and then in their house, watching clips of the Tsar on television; for some reason she does not understand, this gives her chills.

18. Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tsar's Bride*, opening of Act II

In Act III, there is an engagement party for **Marfa** and **Lykov**. Two of the drinks are spiked, one with Gryaznoy's love potion, one with Lyubasha's poison, but by some means that I have not figured out, they get switched, so that it is Marfa who is given the poison. She is already feeling the effects of it when news comes in that it is she who has been chosen as the Tsar's Bride.

19. Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tsar's Bride*, ending of Act III

I very much liked Ivan Lykov's unselfish joy when he learns that Marfa is to become the Tsarina rather than marrying him. But it does him no good, for Gryaznoy pins the blame for the poisoning on him, and he is executed. In the finale, Marfa has obviously gone mad from the poison. She has convulsions, then when she comes to, she mistakes Gryaznoy for Ivan Lykov, her fiancé. This is too much for Gryaznoy who confesses his part in the plot. And piling on the melodrama even further, Lyubasha then enters and confesses too, leaving us with a bloodbath that almost rivals *Hamlet*. But Tcherniakov's final image is bitterly ironic—and, in our media world, chillingly true.

20. Rimsky-Korsakov: *The Tsar's Bride*, Act IV finale

21. Class title 4 (still from the above)