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On Russian Music (review)

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(Dmitri Shostakovich: A Phenomenological Essay [St Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2004]), is the nearest thing to Mishra's Russian opposite number. In fact most of his references to Russian materials are via translations. So far as coverage of works goes, somehow or other the two-piano Suite op. 6 has fallen through the net, which is a shame on at least three counts. The piece is a vital stepping-stone towards Shostakovich's mastery of large-scale form in his breakthrough First Symphony; as the first of his memorial pieces (dedicated to his late father) it shows him exploring musical pathos for the first time; and in quoting it on the last page of his last opus (the Viola Sonata) he rounded off his oeuvre on a note of longed-for benediction that is extraordinarily moving.

Among irksome passing details, I wish Mishra had not let himself get away with telling the reader that so-and-so's observation "begs interesting questions," without then saying what the questions are, never mind the answers (p. 239); similarly he should not have pulled up one of his contributors for telling us that the quotations in Boris Chaikovsky's Second Symphony "bear both personal and cultural relevance" without vouchsafing what that relevance might be (p. 501). A few Russian names have gone slightly awry—for example, Beneditsky for Benditsky (p. 26), Brentanitskaya for Bretanitskaya (p. 327)—and the title of Akopian's book is misspelled in the bibliography, but in general the level of accuracy in the text is commendably high. More frustrating are the large number of slips in the music examples, which themselves are far fewer in number than Mishra's text merits or than the astronomical cost of the book would lead one to expect.

Taken on its own terms, there is far more to praise than to blame in Mishra's central contribution. Yet it is hard not to feel that his sterling efforts would have been better concentrated on honing it rather than on dealing with the reception issues that constitute his three preliminary chapters. Those issues, in particular the *Testimony* debate and the so-called Shostakovich Wars, may have been live when he started work on the book, but they seem very passé now (it feels somehow symptomatic that an opinion held "to this day" is referenced to a radio talk from 1998 [p. 20]). And Mishra's

contribution to the miscellaneous studies that take up the last 200 pages of the book is, like most of the eight others, praiseworthy but somehow less than essential; certainly they do not add up to a "companion" in the usual academic sense. Mishra offers an analytical synopsis of the Fifth Symphony that is engaging in its observations but light on theory. James Morgan steers a steady course through the shark-infested waters of dramatic issues in the two completed operas, and David Haas's probing of Berg's *Wozzeck* for the source of a "Shostakovich mode" is stimulating, even if ultimately he overstates and underargues his case. Andrew Grobengieser on the Preludes and Fugues rather loses sight of his own arguments in a forest of detail; Lyn Henderson on Shostakovich's deployment of passacaglia and serialism treads ground already familiar to scholars; and Richard Burke's essay on cinematographic techniques in the Fifteenth Quartet probably merited its republication, but not in a volume of this kind. John Riley on the film scores and Sofia Moshevich on the piano music give us no more than snapshots of their published monographs (though Mishra's editorial helping hand enhances the value of the latter); and Louis Blois on "The Shostakovich Legacy" is more a record-collector's roundup than scholarship of the kind Simon Morrison has bestowed on Prokofiev (in *Sergey Prokofiev and his World* [Princeton University Press, 2009]). All of which leaves Shostakovich's orchestral, chamber, ballet, theatre, vocal and choral music lacking synoptic overviews.

Quite how the book ended up in this curious less-than-two-in-one guise is anyone's guess. The impression it leaves is that Mishra's survey started as one part of a projected symposium and grew out of all proportion, at the same time as other planned contributions dropped out or proved inadequate. Whatever the case, the rewards for the reader, though not negligible, are hardly commensurate with the Stakhanovite efforts of the author-editor.

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On Russian Music. By Richard Taruskin. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. [407 p. ISBN

9780520249790. \$39.95.] Music examples, index.

Because I am a former student of its author, I initially was hesitant to review this collection; the editor's memorable reply changed my mind: "I'm sure you realize that if I eliminated from consideration everyone praised or excoriated by Taruskin, there would be virtually nobody left!" Even if I am an interested party, so is everyone else. The same applies to this book: although seemingly aimed at a narrower audience than its partner, *The Danger of Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), many of the debates it chronicles, most crucially those surrounding Tchaikovsky's purported suicide and Shostakovich's fraudulent memoirs, have proven to be of vital importance to the theory and practice of contemporary musicology. (Taruskin himself makes this observation in his introduction to *On Russian Music*, p. 14.) This is not to say that these essays are targeted only at musicologists. Quite the contrary: they demonstrate his remarkable ability to address both professionals and general readers alike, facilitated by his enviable (and far too rare) gift for conveying complex information in a concise, accessible manner.

This collection serves as an essential compendium of Taruskin's writings on Russian music, many of them updated with new, informative postscripts. The essays herein are taken from a variety of sources—scholarly journals, *Festschriften*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, compact disc liner notes, concert program booklets, and scholarly collections. Many of them, including "Pathetic Symphonist: Chaikovsky, Russia, Sexuality, and the Study of Music," "Some Thoughts on the History and Historiography of Russian Music," and "Current Chronicle: Molchanov's *The Dawns Are Quiet Here*," to name a few, are classics. The whole, known and less known, spans Taruskin's entire professional musicological career, beginning with examples from 1975 and 1976 when he was fresh out of graduate school and extending up to 2006. Many of the key ongoing concerns of his scholarship receive treatment, including authenticity (chap. 10–11), nationalism (chap. 1 and *passim*), the impact of the cold war on scholarship (*passim*), and es-

pecially the "poietic fallacy," defined in the introduction as the "conviction . . . that composers are the only significant historical agents in music and that scholarship should be an aspect of their defense against social mediation" (p. 8). The essays are arranged chronologically, not in the order of writing but rather by subject matter, beginning with the already mentioned 1984 history and historiography essay and moving forward through Bortnyansky, Glinka, Dargomyzhsky, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Diaghilev, Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, Roslavets, Shostakovich, Molchanov, and Weinberg, and then on to post-Soviet music. While most were crafted for specific occasions, Taruskin has an admirable facility for turning ostensibly occasional pieces—for particular concerts, books, or recordings—into occasions for broader reflection, always informed by details from his more specialized research. As a result these essays have held up well.

As the title to the introduction, "Taking it Personally," suggests, with this collection we are on Taruskin's home turf. The title carries multiple implications; the personal pervades its contents on several levels. Here Taruskin traces in detail his connection to Russian music, carefully explaining that as a Jewish American his "ancestry goes back to Russia geographically but not ethnically" (p. 3). As a result he is not, as he puts it in chapter 16, a "rootsicologist," or someone who studies the music of his own ethnic heritage (pp. 191–92). He further emphasizes in the later chapter that "[t]o me, Russian music is definitely the music of the other, and . . . the more intimately I know it, the more other it seems" (p. 192).

While he might feel personally removed from Russian music in an ethnic sense, Taruskin nonetheless guards it ferociously, driven by his strong sense of professional integrity. He writes that individuals holding a Ph.D. in musicology must be held "to a higher standard of accountability than the various lawyers, fiddlers, keyboard ticklers, and baton wavers who share the dock with them. My own credentials and bona fides are judged by their behavior, and that is why I take their misbehavior so personally. When they write nonsense, we are all demeaned" (p. 23). And Russian music studies have seen more than its fair share of nonsense. Lest anyone doubt this, many

moments in the debates over Tchaikovsky's end (suicide or cholera?) and Shostakovich's (or rather Solomon Volkov's) *Testimony* rehearsed here still inspire cringing.

Among countless low points, Taruskin provides the following statement from Anthony Holden regarding the cause of Tchaikovsky's death: "It can only be left to each Tchaikovsky student to reach his or her own private empirical verdict, based less on the available evidence than on an individual reading of the composer's psychological profile, his avowed suicidal tendencies and his attitude to his own sexuality." Taruskin's understated assessment? "Imagine the kind of mind that could call such a judgment 'empirical' " (p. 88). Taruskin also recalls David Brown, who "defended the old rumor [of Tchaikovsky's suicide] anew on the embarrassingly innocent grounds that nobody had yet proved conclusively that it could not have happened." To which Taruskin responds:

"One teaches first year graduate students not to degrade themselves with such arguments. Nobody has yet proved beyond doubt that Chaikovsky did not die of AIDS either, or of Lyme disease, or of death rays from Mars. Mature scholars know that such proofs are impossible, and concentrate not on defending remote possibilities but on testing probabilities" (pp. 102–3; see also p. 86).

It astounds that such arguments were ever taken seriously, although they unfortunately still are, as witnessed in the very recent Tchaikovsky biography by Roland John Wiley, who attempts to clarify but only compounds the tortuous interpretations of the composer's demise: "death resulted from a totality of influences conspiring over a long period. Tchaikovsky sensed death was near, but it occurred in its own good time" (Roland John Wiley, *Tchaikovsky, The Master Musicians* [Oxford University Press, 2009], 440; see also p. 448). The explanation Wiley appears to prefer (beyond no explanation at all) is tautological if not incomprehensible: Who or what is the agent here? In fact, Wiley's previous attempt to proffer a "fair and balanced" interpretation of Tchaikovsky's death—found in the composer's entry in the second edition of *The New Grove*—has also received a harsh verdict from Taruskin: "reprehensible concealment, if not of the truth, then at

least of the most reasonable and plausible of the available hypotheses" (p. 104).

Taruskin argues throughout for the fundamental integrity of musicology as a discipline, but just as important among his concerns is that music be regarded as an object of serious study and reflection as well. In "*Yevrei and Zhidy*" he asks in exasperation:

Must we reduce important works by significant composers to the level of lolipops? Is that the only level on which we can enjoy them? Must we always seek comfort in art? Or can we also admit that art criticism can and perhaps ought to have an ethical dimension, at least insofar as it requires us, when acting as critics or historians, to interpret meaning as we have come to understand it? (p. 200)

This rebuke is intended for those with an excessively romantic attachment to musical works, an unwillingness to critically scrutinize dearly held music that ultimately demeans listener and composer alike. Despite his best efforts, Taruskin himself is forced to acknowledge elsewhere that "[s]ubscholarly romanticism, alas, dies even harder" (p. 104).

Because of the numerous instances in which Taruskin combats "subscholarly romanticism" in these essays, they, and especially the introduction and the chapters on Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich, serve as ideal teaching aids—or cautionary tales—for graduate students. Pedagogical lessons abound, among them his reminder that "sentences containing [the words *may* or *maybe*] are not arguments. At best they are hypotheses—formulations awaiting a test. When put forth without any intention of testing they are what is known as innuendo" (p. 19). Perhaps the most valuable contribution is Taruskin's necessary insistence that "the essential mark of a scholar is skepticism," for "a sense of belonging breeds advocacy and a necessarily lowered critical guard" (p. 192; see also p. 67). Such skepticism has proven especially difficult to maintain for writers confronting two interconnected objects of study—music and Russia—so prone to such deep personal attachments, biased interpretations, and overall mythmaking.

The most succinct voicing of the scholarly credo informing the preceding declarations can be found near the end of the introduction, where Taruskin writes in

homage to pioneering Russian music scholar Gerald Abraham. His summary is worth quoting in full:

And so the fact that . . . Abraham's work is by now largely outdated will never make him any the less my hero. When my own pupils confess to cold feet, when finishing their dissertations or awaiting their early publications or on the eve of a conference appearance, at the prospect that someone will show them up as wrong, I take pleasure in owning up to my own corrected errors and reminding them that there are far worse things one can be than wrong: one can be lazy; one can be incompetent; one can be dishonest. If one is diligent, competent, and honest, one need not fear being wrong. (p. 23)

As Taruskin proclaimed many years ago in another context: "Sew that into a sampler and hang it on the wall" (in his *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 231).

Beyond its important lessons in scholarly practice, the essays in *On Russian Music* introduce readers to a wide range of topics and facts. To pick just one: the earliest musical treatise to appear in Russia (by Nikolai Diletsky in 1679) is also the first book to contain a chart of the circle of fifths (p. 59). Best of all, the essays invite further listening. They send the reader to the CD player, MP3 player, or turntable (or when lucky, the concert hall) again and again, making us hear, and often rehear, the music under discussion, as is true especially of the essays on Dargomyzhky's *The Stone Guest*, Shostakovich and Beethoven ("Hearing Cycles"), Rimsky-Korsakov, "perhaps the most underrated composer of all time" (p. 166), and Myaskovsky (chap. 25; despite the postscript on p. 293, at the time of my writing the Svetlanov set of Myaskov-

sky's symphonies Taruskin reviews *is* currently available from Warner music; the beast has been rebagged [16 CDs, Warner 2564 69689-8]). Taruskin praises critic Harold Schonberg as "a matchless connoisseur of romantic piano playing" in *The Danger of Music* (p. 35), but in this book he reveals himself to be a matchless connoisseur of Russian music, a certifiable "record geek" (to borrow his own phrase on p. 289). Based in no small part on his extensive listening and concert attendance, he becomes an eloquent advocate for overlooked or misunderstood creators such as Glinka, Dargomyzhsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Weinberg, and especially Tchaikovsky, in Taruskin's provocative assessment "perhaps the most disciplined and sophisticated creative artist nineteenth-century Russia ever produced" (p. 90).

Taruskin declares that he "[looks] forward to the rapid outdateding of the contents of this book" (p. 23), a remark that nicely complements his earlier announcement that "I, for one, am content to sit back and await the discoveries and interpretations of my colleagues, the direction of whose research I am in no position to predict. I love surprises" (p. 27). The scholarship that supersedes Taruskin's will nevertheless be indebted to the firm foundation he has painstakingly built. Research on Russian music is currently burgeoning; surprises (most of them pleasant) are appearing with increasing frequency. That so much of this recent work is of such high quality largely is a result of the examples provided by Taruskin in these essays and his other Russian music scholarship. If some of this recent effort is still lacking, then we have his strong example of diligence, competence, and honesty to drive us to improve it.

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OUTSIDE THE "WESTERN ART MUSIC" CANON

The Birth of the Cool of Miles Davis and His Associates. By Frank Tirro. (CMS Sourcebooks in American Music, no. 5.) Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2009. [xxv, 196 p. ISBN 9781576471289. \$45.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, discography, appendices, index, compact disc.

The Birth of the Cool is the title of the 1957 album containing eleven recordings by Miles Davis's nonet from three Capitol ses-

sions in 1949 and 1950. The nonet consisted of an unusual instrumentation, including a French horn and a tuba, which,