

BORODINE AS MAN AND AS COMPOSER

Rimsky-Korsakoff's Reminiscences of His Intimate Friend and Associate in Art—How Social Matters and His Absorption in Chemistry Took Away Borodine's Time from Music—Standing of "Prince Igor" in the Répertoire of Russian Opera Houses

By IVAN NARODNY

ALEXANDER P. BORODINE, composer of "Prince Igor," was an interesting genius, but even the Russian history of music gives comparatively little information about him. The late Rimsky-Korsakoff is perhaps the best authority on Borodine. Not only did he edit and finish Borodine's opera, but he enjoyed the intimate friendship of his fellow-composer. Having known Mr. Rimsky-Korsakoff personally and having conducted a correspondence with his daughter, I have been able to gather some valuable data about Borodine here and there. It ought to be of interest to the American musical public to know what a great Russian composer and Russian critics think of Borodine and his opera.

"In 1865, when I returned on the ship Almaz from the United States, I heard for the first time of Borodine," writes Rimsky-Korsakoff. "The members of Balakireff's circle thought very much of him. Balakireff and Moussorgsky played to me, four hands, the first movement of his E Flat Symphony. But the piece did not please me much, though it was very interesting. One evening I met Borodine at Balakireff's house, and from that moment on our friendship began and lasted as long as he lived. At that time I also met his wife, Ekaterina Sergievna. Borodine was then professor of chemistry in the Imperial Medical Academy, and lived in a five-room apartment connected with the institution. Later I heard more of his music, and it struck me as being virile, exotic and original.

"Borodine and I visited each other often, sometimes twice in a week. Sometimes I stayed over night at his place, and we discussed or played our compositions. He was then already making drafts of the opera. His technique was better than mine, as he played excellently on the 'cello, oboe and flute. He was one of the most charming men that I ever knew, noble, frank, manly and a dreamer. Besides, he was a good entertainer.

"During my visits to him I frequently found him in his laboratory, which was connected with the apartment, sitting silently before his tubes, retorts and other queer-looking chemical implements. When he had finished his experiments we returned to the apartment and again began to work on music. But the trouble with Borodine was that he was never at peace; either he jumped up and went to see whether something had not boiled over and spoiled in the laboratory, or somebody wanted to see him. His apartment was an eternal hotel lobby; the people never left him alone. His wife was a charming and well-educated woman, a good pianist and a true companion of her husband.

"Borodine, as I have said, remained my intimate friend as long as he lived. During the last years he was able to devote little time to his musical work. He was seemingly more absorbed in his chemical and physical experiments and

inventions, although he assured me that he was equally fond of music. However, science did not take so much of his time as social trifles.

Service for Women's League

"Borodine was the first Russian scholar to advocate that women be admitted to the universities and particularly to medical, surgical and natural history studies. In this he succeeded. Work of this kind immensely fascinated him. For some time he acted as treasurer of the Women Students' League, and did everything in his power to further its cause. He was always attending meetings, writing reports or speeches, and devoting most of his free time to the movement in behalf of women. Besides all that, he was very conscientious in his college lectures and in his clinical work.

"There existed also a circle of women who dragged him to all kinds of little musical evenings and asked him to play for them. Then there were the students who wanted him to help them, and he was a man who never could refuse anything he had and could give. Finally, there were his provincial relatives and friends, who came to visit him and took his time. His apartment looked like a hospital or boarding house, full of people from early morning till late at night. The poor man did not even have time for his meals. I found him frequently eating his dinner at eleven o'clock at night. There prevailed a complete disorder in the house. Often, it appeared, one could not play the piano because some provincial friend was sleeping in an adjacent room. Besides this, Ekaterina Sergievna suffered from asthma and could not sleep nights. My heart ached to see how a great genius wasted his time on such matters and could not accomplish his real work.

"Borodine and Ekaterina Sergievna were very fond of cats, and those beasts did not give us peace at any time. They were not fancy animals, but cats without a home, hungry and sick, whom Borodine had cared for. The most conspicuous of his cats were one called Fishcatcher and another called The Long One. Often they jumped on the plates and spoiled the meals; then they would crawl up Borodine's neck. I saw The Long One jump on Borodine's neck thus on one occasion and begin to scratch him. 'My dear sir, this is the limit. I cannot stand such fun as this,' the composer would mutter, and push the cat away.

"Borodine had iron health, though he was not a man of strong physique or blooming appearance. He slept little, but he could sleep on any sort of improvised bed. The same condition applied to his meals. He might take two, three, four or five meals a day; and on the other hand, he might work without a single meal. Sometimes he came to us at dinner time. 'Well, I have had my dinner; nevertheless, I can eat with you,' he would say. We would offer him a glass of wine. 'Well, I don't drink wine, yet I always make an exception with you,' he would say, and drink the wine. On the other hand, I have seen him work without eating the whole day without giving the least sign of fatigue.

When I reminded him that he should eat he shrugged his shoulders. 'It makes no difference whether I eat or not,' he said.

No Admirer of Tschaiowsky

"Between Tschaiowsky and Borodine there was never any friendship. Tschaiowsky to him seemed a technician and a foreigner in music, and too sentimental and queer in his private life. Borodine was a noble soul, and loved originality in art. He was masculine and direct in everything he created or said. Tschaiowsky was effeminate and suspicious of everybody. 'Tschaiowsky as a symphonist is pretty good,' said Borodine to me on one occasion, 'but Tschaiowsky as an opera composer is a mediocrity. He is fine when it comes to stirring up our morbid emotions, but he lacks the invigorating, positive insight into Russian aspirations.'

"If Borodine had been able to finish his opera, as he wanted, it would have been a Shakespearian masterpiece. A few weeks before his sudden death he told me that he would take a year's vacation and work on the unfinished 'Prince Igor.' His idea was to make out of the fragmentary episodes of the opera a legendary story of Russian racial life. When I undertook to edit the score with Glazounoff, I did not dare to change anything in the dramatic structure; nor did I have the right to add anything, although the composer had told me he would do it himself. 'Prince Igor' is a unique piece of operatic art, not only in Russian music, but in that of the whole world. The Oriental note was in Borodine's blood. The motives, the melodies, the orchestration, the choruses and dances are distinct exotic pictures from the Eastern tone world. Every word of his libretto has its individual melodic and harmonic background. To change or translate those words would upset the whole structure."

The Question of Translation

"Prince Igor" is more an epic than a lyric opera, and as such it should have been left either in the original Russian or translated into English. The English language corresponds far more to the Russian than the musical Italian. At least the public would understand the dramatic or poetic vigor of the libretto, while now the opera, as given at the Metropolitan, remains nothing but a dead moving picture with music. The Metropolitan certainly could have put the opera into English this season, as it was Toscanini who previously had insisted on having it sung in Italian. There are half a dozen Russian singers here who could have sung their rôles in Russian.

Russian opera and concert singing differs from the west European by certain peculiarities which lie outside the technique and a good voice. For that very reason American critics take it for granted that many first-class Russian singers cannot be very good. This was the case with Chaliapine, Smirnoff, Mme. Narodny and this will be the case with many other Russian singers. All Russian vocal music allows greater liberties to the singer than the music of any other race. Russian singers are æsthetic anarchists, one interpreting a composition in the very opposite way from another. For a Russian, technical brilliancy means nothing (brilliancy that is specially emphasized here), nor is the volume of the voice an important point. The foremost requirement of Russian opera is the conveyance of emotion, atmosphere and color. The score of "Prince Igor" is written for artists who can translate the psychological phases of life into songs. The reserved *Yaroslavna* sings exactly as an amateurish boyarina would sing. There is no acrobatic thrill or extraordinary technique demanded of her rôle. It is all natural musical characterization. The passionate *Konchakovna* is a type of Caucasian girl. There is nothing Wagnerian in Borodine's women. They sing and act as Russian women would do naturally. The point that a Russian opera singer aims for in his art is true naturalness. Can an American singer, who has never seen Russian opera, and has no idea of Russian musical traditions, give this work in a foreign language? It is far easier to sing "Boris Godounoff" in Italian than "Prince Igor."

Borodine was perhaps not so profound an artist as Moussorgsky, but his music is more evenly balanced and there is a strong note of individualism, as well as polished grace in his few compositions. Borodine wrote very little: two symphonies, one symphonic poem, one unfinished opera, three or four chamber music pieces, some orchestral sketches and a dozen songs. Russian musical history places him very high among the nation's artistic pioneers, but his works are considered more those of a genial dilettante than of a great master. In this he is comparable to Glinka, whom his style resembles. Borodine was the first among the early Russian composers who based none of his writings on folk-music. All his works exalt at peculiar Caucasian spirit, exotic, romantic and virile. His great grandfather was a King of the Caucasus, and in Borodine's blood lived the soul of this ancestral atmosphere.

While Moussorgsky may be considered a *moujik* musician, Borodine was a *boyar* composer. The theme of all Moussorgsky's works was the Russian peasant; the theme of most of Borodine's music is the nobleman and prince.

Other Russian Operas More Popular

"Prince Igor" is considered a classic work in the repertoire of Russian opera, but it does not have the least claim upon popularity as compared with the operas of Rimsky-Korsakoff or even Tschaiowsky. If, for instance, "Prince Igor" is given twice in a season in Petrograd, and "Boris Godounoff" thrice, Rimsky-Korsakoff's "Sadko," "Snegourochka" or "The Czar's Bride" will be given at least twenty times. This goes to show that "Prince Igor" is by no means a typical repertoire Russian opera. If the Metropolitan or any other opera company in this country wishes to give good Russian opera, it should choose more modern and more popular works, such as would really arouse enthusiasm. I recently heard a remark of Mr. Otto H. Kahn to the effect that the average Russian opera was a series of historic episodes. This is the case with the operas of Moussorgsky and Borodine produced here, but by no means with all. "Sadko" is a magic fairy tale and "Snegourochka," "Roussalka," "Rogneda," "Eugen Onegin," "Ruslan and Ludmilla," and many other Russian operas are altogether different from "Prince Igor" and "Boris Godounoff." They are strong dramatically. The question of plot seems childish and artificial, however, to the Russian artist and audience, and accordingly all Russian dramatic art is based on psychological phases of human life, and by no means on melodramatic events.

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During the holiday season Mme. Marie Rappold, prima donna soprano of the Metropolitan Opera House, appeared in concert in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Richmond and Philadelphia. After the New Year she returned to the Metropolitan, to sing in the various operas in which she has been most successful, including "Trovatore," "Aida," and "Lohengrin."

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