

Vladimir Resnikoff, Subtle Interpreter of Russia's Unfamiliar Musical Strata

How Moussorgsky Sounds as Interpreted by Russian Tenor—
Restraint, a Keynote of His Art—Helping to Change the
American Idea of Russia

By DOROTHY J. TEALL

SO far from representing a time of idleness for the concert artist, summer is chiefly valuable for the opportunity it affords for research in the lesser known treasures of his art. Even in prima donnas' own accounts of their July and August doings, study nowadays takes a place of prime importance.

It is a study of Moussorgsky's songs which bids fair to rival commoner pastimes with the singers this summer. The familiar German pillars of the repertoire have not yet been restored to their old position of security, and while the effect of this condition may happily be seen in the turning of more than usual attention toward the work of native composers to that of the new-flowering British school, and also, of course, to the now intellectually gelatinous, now passion-quivering effusions of the Frenchmen, the chief consequence is doubtless an excess of interest in the modern Russians' outpourings. With a Prokofieff to titillate the ear with his bright-hued impressionism and a Rachmanoff to keep us in mind of the true stature of the Russian school's genius, what wonder is it that this should have come to pass, even supposing that the Russians do not hold the corner on the day's musical greatness which closer and closer observation tempts one to credit them with? In all this great school, no other composer stands out with the same authority as an interpreter—or should one say portrayer—of the national character, as does Moussorgsky.

In the "Nursery Songs," which average singers most frequently present, the average style, if animated by wit, fills the bill well enough. But it leaves out the salt of national savor. If the lack of that savor is felt here, how much more conscious of it shall we not be when the other cycles which are the backbone of Moussorgsky's work in the field of song, "Death Dances" and "Where No Sun Shines," are more often drawn on?

There is just one singer before the public now who interprets the greater Moussorgsky in a thoroughly satisfying manner—not always a pleasant manner, but always a manner that commands confidence. That singer is Vladimir Resnikoff. Would-be Moussorgsky interpreters could learn much from a study of this baritone's methods. "The Idiot's Love Song," "Ballad," "The Tease," "The Peep-show," "Tears," "The Minstrel's Vocation," "The Seminarist," "The Classicist," and a "Cradle Song" have all figured on typical programs of his in New York this season, and for each of these songs he has wrought an interpretive guise which seems the only right and authoritative one.

In looking over the scores of the Moussorgsky songs, one cannot help noticing that their dramatic intensity frequently comes to a head in dialogue through which inarticulate cries are scattered. The temptation of the academic singer is to sing the syllable indicated for such a cry to the actual note or notes written for it. Mr. Resnikoff makes these songs things of new and pulsing vitality by treating them in a more plastic, dramatic fashion. He often seems to be speaking rather than singing as he delivers them, and the cries are actually cries, not a mawkish amateur's pale copies of life.

Restraint Keynote of His Art

Were he less truly an artist than he is Mr. Resnikoff's dramatic methods might have disastrous results. But whereas a single hearing might leave one with the impression that his work is the fruit of the moment's inspiration, longer acquaintance leads to the realization that restraint is a factor of prime importance in the equation of his art. Conversation with Mr. Resnikoff, and more particularly with friends of his who are familiar with his ways of work—a matter of which friends of artists are often more competent to speak than the artists themselves—has confirmed the writer in the belief that Mr. Resnikoff's interpretations derive their air of spontaneity from long and painstaking labor. A song, it appears, presents itself to him even from the first in the form in which he finally

reproduces it. He knows from the first what he will do with it, but it is not always at second or third or even fourth trial that he surmounts the obstacle of the How.

As he sings it, "The Tease" becomes an uncannily real reproduction of a scene between the village bad boy and an old woman. The child "satirically compli-



—Photo by Charlotte Fairchild.

Vladimir Resnikoff, Russian Baritone

ments her on her age, her feebleness and ugliness, her crooked back, crippled hands and feet, the one tooth in her mouth and the three hairs and a half on her head, drawing stinging contrasts between her and the pretty, giggling young girls behind her who come from the woods carrying baskets filled with berries, while hers, though she has been at greater pains to fill it, is empty. From time to time she interrupts him by striking him with her cane, and in the end succeeds in driving him off. You hear her, in Mr. Resnikoff's interpretation, breaking into that hysteric laughter of the aged which is half compounded of tears. Jarring as this stroke is with the terrible force of its reality, it is yet a stroke entirely within the frame of the picture.

That his dramatic method proves quite the opposite of damaging is due to something else besides Mr. Resnikoff's artistry. That something is the highly dramatic, because highly human, character of the material he presents. Moussorgsky's music strikes root in the soil of Russian folk-song, and Russian folk-song is great because it in turn strikes root in the soil of universal human nature. It is "far nearer the primitive than the popular music of Italy, Scotland or Germany," says a writer on the subject of Slav folk-song in the encyclopedic "Art of music."

"Many of the loveliest tunes are mere snatches of melody. The more highly organized tunes are frequently irregular and crude. The scales are usually distinctive, and the tonic is inclined to be very movable, if not entirely absent. The minor, of course, predominates, as in all primitive music. It is used with the utmost distinction, showing how utterly Russian life (except in the highest classes) has for centuries been isolated from the influence of Western Europe. The common impression, because of this predominance of the minor, is that Russian songs are all 'sad' or 'moody.' This is not just, for the minor, which is an expressive means with us, is nothing more than a convention in Russian folk-music. It is the material out of which the music is made. It can be manipulated to express almost any emotion which the singer can feel. Hence the notion that the range of Russian folk-songs is narrow is quite false. They have a remarkably wide range, from the deepest gloom, through the tenderest senti-

mentality, to the fiercest exhilaration of physical life. The irregularity of the melodies, too, is not necessarily a sign of crudeness, but often an instrument of the highest expressive potency. . . . The irregularity of meter in Moussorgsky's songs, the barbarity of some of Borodine and Rachmaninoff, are the direct outcome of these composers' studies in folk-song."

Though he does not care to be known primarily as an exponent of folk-songs, Mr. Resnikoff's work in this field is not only unique in itself but is so important in its relation to the whole question of the American public's knowledge of and attitude toward Russian music and indeed the Russian nature in general, that it must be given a word of special emphasis. The first sixteen years of his life were spent in Russia, and consequently his repertoire of Russian folk-songs is exceedingly rich. In the absence of good collections, at any rate of collections accessible to English-speaking students, his offerings of this sort are worth their weight in gold. Some of them he has dressed up in art garments through the addition of accompaniments.

To those who have heard Mr. Resnikoff's folk-songs, there is no surprise in the story an all-Russian audience for which he once sang them. If he had been the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* he could not have exercised a more potent charm on the children who were there. One by one they rose from their seats and stole down to the platform. Hardened faces broke into smiles that reflected the children's pleasure, and finally, as Mr. Resnikoff sang a bewitching ditty of peasant merriment, a wizened little old woman ventured into the aisle, and stepping in time to the music, she too approached the platform and asked for more.

Such an experience could have befallen none but a truth-teller. The more illegible the political situation in Russia becomes, the more the necessity increases for a knowledge of the Russian people. Perfectly apart from the esthetic pleasure which a singer so gifted in beauty of voice and so expert in musicianship can give, Mr. Resnikoff's work has a tremendous message to deliver to those who have the ears to hear it. The most various, vital and original of modern music has been given us by Russia's composers. In Vladimir Resnikoff, New Yorkers possess an unparalleled interpreter not only of this music but of the too little known deeper musical strata which furnished the golden material for it.

Philip Bennyhan with Bracale Opera Company in Venezuela

Philip Bennyhan, the young baritone, is now on tour with the Bracale Opera Company and will return to the United States in November. The company has just been playing with great success in Porto Rico and left on July 21 for Venezuela. They will be active in that country until the end of August, then going to Panama and Peru. Mr. Bennyhan has scored as *Marcello* in "Bohème," among other rôles.

The "Memorial Motet" for male voices, composed by Alexander Russell, the New York composer, and sung at the Princeton University Commencement this year, is now being published by G. Schirmer. The Singers Club of Cleveland, the Williams College Choir and the West Point Choir are among the well-known male choral societies which will produce it during the coming season.

Edna Eagan Vessella, formerly the wife of Oreste Vessella, the Atlantic City bandmaster, was married last week in Cincinnati to Thornton B. Barnes, a manufacturing chemist of New York. Mrs. Barnes is the daughter of Thomas P. Eagan of Cincinnati. Her marriage to Signor Vessella was annulled in 1910.

Adelaide Fischer, soprano, has been singing in her recent concerts "The Letter," by G. H. Federlein, in which she has scored a decided success.

Mme. Leginska has under consideration an offer to go into moving pictures.

ETHELYNDE SMITH IN RECITAL FOR JERSEY STATE UNIVERSITY



Ethelynde Smith, Soprano, and Howard D. McKinney, Director of Music at Rutgers College, Photographed at New Brunswick, N. J.

NEW BRUNSWICK, N. J., July 28.—A song recital was given by Ethelynde Smith, soprano, under the auspices of the Department of Music at the State University of New Jersey, on July 18. Miss Smith had the assistance of Howard D. McKinney, director of the Music Department at Rutgers College, who played her accompaniments. Mr. McKinney was also represented on the program in the group of children's songs, with the selection "De San' Man's Song" from Mr. McKinney's "Five Plantation Songs."

Miss Smith included in her program a group of songs of the Allied nations, the "One Fine Day" aria from "Madama Butterfly," modern French compositions by Coquard and Godard. There was also a group of songs by American composers, and the program ended with two war songs, Rudolph Ganz's "A Grave in France" and Fay Foster's "The Americans Come!"

The audience was enthusiastic in its reception of Miss Smith, and indicated unmistakably its appreciation of her efforts. This is the twentieth time that Miss Smith has given a complete recital program at colleges and universities within the past two seasons.

Among the interesting numbers which will be heard at Sascha Votichenko's next composition recital in the Fall is a minuet dedicated to Roshanara, the East Indian dancer who appeared at Mr. Votichenko's last recital of the season, which was entitled "Concert Intime de Musique Ancienne." "The Song of the Chain," a composition which was suggested to Votichenko by the plight of the Siberian prisoners, will also be played for the first time then.

Regina Hassler-Fox, contralto, has sung in her concerts during the past season Ernest R. Kroeger's "Garden Song" and "Pierrot," which she will also sing next season. She will also include in her repertoire Reddick's "Two Loves," Burnham's "The Cock Shall Crow" and Eastwood Lane's "The Little Fisherman."

Kate C. Booth, impresario, of Montgomery, Ala., and Lilly Gill, head of the piano department of the Montgomery College for girls, are chaperoning a party of Southern girls who are in New York attending the summer courses at Columbia University.

KATHRYN MEISLE

EDWIN FRANKO GOLDMAN

CONDUCTOR, NEW YORK MILITARY BAND
"A Symphony Orchestra in Brass"

500 West 144th Street

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
CONCERTS
SEASON 1918 and 1919
New York

The ELINOR COMSTOCK MUSIC SCHOOL

41 E. 80th Street

Boarding and Day Departments

Catalog on Request

Endorsed by Leschetizky and Paderewski

ELINOR COMSTOCK, Principal