

The Stage Performance Project of B. V. Asafyev's Orchestral Score for M. P. Mussorgsky's Opera *Khovanshchina*

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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the history of an unrealized stage performance of B. V. Asafyev's orchestral score for M. P. Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*, and is based on archival documents, stored in The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, The Russian National Museum of Music, The St. Petersburg Central State Archive of Literature and Art and The Museum of the Bolshoi Theatre of Russia, most of which have introduced into scholarly discourse for the first time. The circumstances under which the opera was planned to be staged in The State Academic Theatre of Opera And Ballet in Leningrad (today – The Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg) have been studied. The fragments from the reports of the Artistic Council of Opera at The State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet meetings, the Correspondence between B. V. Asafyev and P. A. Lamm, the manuscript "P. A. Lamm. A biography" by O. P. Lamm and other unpublished archival documents are cited. The author comes to the conclusion that most attempts to perform *Khovanshchina* were hindered by the political ideological constraints of the 1930s, and the existing supposition that Asafyev's orchestral score was an artistic failure doesn't find clear affirmation, neither in the historical documents, nor in the existing manuscript of the orchestral score.

Keywords: Modest Mussorgsky, Boris Asafyev, Pavel Lamm, *Khovanshchina*, Russian opera

I. INTRODUCTION

The orchestral score for *Khovanshchina* by M. P. Mussorgsky, completed in 1931 by B. V. Asafyev, is unknown both to professionals and to the general public. In the circle of Moscow musicians of the 1930s, there was an opinion that this score was an artistic failure. However, on closer examination, we see that this opinion is not based on any substantial primary sources. The score was never performed in its entirety, neither in theatre, nor on the concert stage. Only its most popular fragments were played but hardly even indicating the name of the orchestrator. ¹The score still

has not been published.

The scope of B. V. Asafyev's personality, the universality of his talent, is so important that his grandiose score cannot remain unknown. The study and publication of this manuscript is of great importance for academic research, stage practice and musical pedagogy. Until now, the theatre directors have had no orchestral score of *Khovanshchina* that would reflect as closely as possible the creative potential of the author's piano-vocal score. N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov's and D. D. Shostakovich's editions, with all their outstanding virtues, belong to their eras and bear their marks. In the light of the foregoing, P. A. Lamm's and B. V. Asafyev's edition, as a work of musicians of the first half of the 20th century, who set themselves the goal of getting as close as possible to Mussorgsky's authorial style, may turn out to be the material that the modern musical and theatrical world is looking for.

Asafyev's personality is particular in its syncretism in that it combines a professional composer's skills, sensitive to the nuances of different orchestral styles, and an outstanding talent of a musical scholar. And at the intersection of these qualities there is a rare ability to understand the creative process of other eras'

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¹ The manuscript is stored in The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), fund 2658, inventory 1, storage units 105–109. In N. V. Zaporozhets's book "M. P. Mussorgsky's Operas Boris Godunov and *Khovanshchina*" [1] it was incorrectly indicated that B. V. Asafyev's orchestral score for *Khovanshchina* had been published.

composers and to reconstruct their unrealized artistic ideas.

To clarify the specific circumstances in which Asafyev's orchestration of *Khovanshchina* was not performed and remained unpublished, it is necessary to address a number of archival documents.

The manuscript that he finished in February, 1931, was rejected by the group of musicians, which included Asafyev's co-editor in publishing *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*, Pavel Aleksandrovich Lamm, and composers Nikolay Jakovlevich Myaskovsky, Vissarion Jakovlevich Shebalin, Aleksandr Alekseevich Shenshin, as well as conductor, Konstantin Solomonovich Saradzhev.

II. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN LAMM AND ASAFYEV

There are few primary sources describing the situation of the discussion of Asafyev's *Khovanshchina*. The first one is the correspondence between Asafyev and Lamm. However, for the period of our interest – from January to March 1931 – that is, during the time when Asafyev was sending, act by act, his score to Lamm, the correspondence is preserved almost exclusively unilaterally. We know of nine letters by Asafyev and only one by Lamm (unfortunately, this text by Lamm is not complete and only a typewritten copy exists). All these letters are not published and are stored in The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (hereafter abbreviated as: RGALI). One more important source is the unpublished manuscript of Pavel Lamm's biography by Olga Pavlovna Lamm [2], where the scholar's niece, at the end of her life, tells us her memories about the events of more than 60 years ago.

The information that we learn from Asafyev's letters to Lamm, in chronological sequence, is as follows:

Upon learning that his work on *Khovanshchina*'s orchestration was harshly criticized by Moscow musicians, Asafyev became desperate: "If my mistakes are large or completely fatal, then send back the whole score with the designation of all the mistakes. I will immediately do what needs to be done" [3], and even: "What the hell have I done?? So, it is the end for me as a musician, and my first experience to be reborn in music is a failure" [4].

However, when specific claims to the score (that remain completely unknown to us) were clarified, Asafyev began to defend himself: "Personally, I thought that with 'classical bass' – strings of three octaves – I just 'saved' many places without violating Mussorgsky's plan and, in essence, without adding anything, but only replenishing, or rather revealing the piano's inner bass in the orchestra (in the piano part it

exists thanks to overtones). But everywhere in such places you write: where does this voice come from?! I changed all these places, that is, I returned them to the emptiness of the piano-vocal score (visible [emptiness], because the voices, that I 'discovered', actually sound this way)" [5]. This series of Asafyev letters about *Khovanshchina* end with a direct question addressed to Lamm: "Aren't you fencing me in with the piano-vocal score more than the orchestral alphabet permits!?" [6].

In the manuscript by Olga Pavlovna Lamm, the conflict of Lamm's and Asafyev's creative ideas is described somewhat differently: "Asafyev went too far in his theories and, entering into creative excitement, had strayed, according to Pavel Aleksandrovich [Lamm. – V. A.], from the true author of the opera. Disputes arose. Pavel Aleksandrovich, embarrassed by such a turnaround, unwilling to offend Boris Vladimirovich [Asafyev. – V. A.], and not trusting himself in this delicate matter, convened a whole 'council' of composers and musicians, which included N. Ja. Myaskovsky, K. S. Saradzhev, V. Ja. Shebalin, and A. A. Shenshin. The total unconditional verdict was that Asafyev's instrumentation was a serious misinterpretation, not only regarding his understanding of Mussorgsky's style but also simply regarding the elementary orchestral sound, and undoubtedly would not contribute to the stage success of the opera. In such a case, it is better to stage the opera as edited by Rimsky-Korsakov" [7].

The mystery of this story is that none of the musicians who took part in the discussion of the orchestral score left any documentary or epistolary evidence of the reasonableness of their conclusions. And even Lamm's letters, as we see, did not survive (except a small fragment that does not clarify the situation). Thus, we can assume that Asafyev either learned of his colleagues' negative opinion verbally, when meeting with them, or the documentary sources have not yet been identified, or the documents are not yet sorted out and described in the archives, or no written evidence has been preserved at all.

When studying archival inventories, one may wonder if Asafyev, while working on *Khovanshchina*'s orchestration, had consulted his colleague, Vladimir Aleksandrovich Dranishnikov, a conductor from the State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet (hereafter abbreviated as: GATOB)². Asafyev was greatly helped by Dranishnikov, when he worked on *Boris Godunov*'s

² The State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet is the former name of The Mariinsky Theatre, a historic theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia opened in 1860. In 1920 it began to be called the State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet (the acronym GATOB, often used in historical documents, comes from the original Russian name "Gosudarstvennyj akademicheskij teatr opery i baleta"). In 1935 the theatre was named after Sergey Mironovich Kirov, and in 1992 the theatre's historic name, the Mariinsky theatre, was restored.

orchestration, and Dranishnikov conducted a stage performance of this opera in its "original version" that premiered on February 16, 1928. Unfortunately, extant primary sources for the period of Asafyev's work on *Khovanshchina's* orchestral score (approximately May 1930 – February 1931) give no conclusive answers. However, a later letter of Dranishnikov to Asafyev (dated February 14, 1932) was preserved in The Museum of the Bolshoi Theatre of Russia. In this letter, the conductor sharply addresses Lamm and is sympathetic to Asafyev and to the instrumental version for *Khovanshchina* that he created: "Regarding Lamm, I can say the following: over the past period, I am firmly convinced of the huge 'commercial' talents of Lamm and strongly doubt his academic, research base, which was concluded by my direct work with him on Boris, and his pretensions about your instrumentation of *Khovanshchina*" [8]. This opinion by the outstanding conductor, the first performer of *Boris Godunov* in the author's version, is, of course, of extreme importance.

Despite the negative decision of the aforementioned Moscow musicians, Asafyev's score was scheduled for publication in the Soviet State Music Publishing House (Muzgiz). External circumstances hindered the publication. At the turn of 1930–31 the reorganization of the Muzsektor (Music Department of the Soviet State Publishing House) into Muzgiz took place, which caused the dismissal of P. A. Lamm's friend and right hand-man – Sergey Sergeyevich Popov (technical editor of the publishing house), and then the change of the director, Aleksandr Naumovich Jurovsky. In the same years, high-profile court cases for the copyright of the author's version of Mussorgsky's work outside of Soviet Russia took place between Bessel & Cie and Oxford University Press (Great Britain) and then between Bessel and Cie, and Universal Edition (Austria). Both cases ended in Bessel's victory. This was the reason for the termination of Muzgiz's collaboration, first with Oxford University Press, and then with the Universal Edition [9], [10]. However, both Asafyev and Lamm did not abandon their attempts to organize the performance of this score, either in its entirety or in fragments, for the rest of their lives.

To date, eight attempts to perform *Khovanshchina* with Asafyev's instrumentation have been identified. These formats of these attempts were either the whole opera on the theatre stage, in a concert but with the participation of a theatre orchestra, a recording session on the radio in a slightly reduced form, or, finally, in concerts dedicated to Mussorgsky's anniversary dates (not completely from the first to the fifth act, but only the most popular fragments, such as "Dawn on the Moscow River", "Marfa's Song", "Streltsy's Chorus"). Chronologically, the first of these attempts was associated with the plan of staging the opera in the Leningrad GATOB.

III. THE PLAN OF *KHOVANSHCINA'S* PRODUCTION IN THE GATOB

Lamm's and Asafyev's collaboration, related to the publication of Mussorgsky's works according to the composer's manuscripts, began with attention to the opera *Boris Godunov*. Having not yet completed this task, they began to plan the publication of *Khovanshchina*: "I hope that this fall we will say: 'an obligation, bequeathed to us by Russian music, is fulfilled', and we will talk about *Khovanshchina* – I would really like you to complete all the music missing there and to orchestrate everything..." – writes Lamm to Asafyev in a letter from June 16, 1927 [11] (published in [12]).

The preparation of the musical material for the *Boris Godunov's* score was related to the premiere of this opera at the GATOB, scheduled for February 16, 1928. When the production took place and achieved success, negotiations about the edition of *Khovanshchina's* piano-vocal and orchestral scores began immediately, as well as about the production of the opera – just the same as *Boris Godunov* had been performed, in the GATOB.

In a letter from July 2, 1928 Asafyev writes to Lamm: "I'm terribly worn out. Summer is wasted. But I still managed to do one thing – namely, made sure that the Art Council of the Academic Theatres considered it desirable to reconstruct *Khovanshchina*" [13].

Almost a year later – in April-May of 1929 – the next stage of Asafyev's struggle for *Khovanshchina's* production in the GATOB began. This period is documented in great detail: the St. Petersburg Central State Archive of Literature and Art (hereafter abbreviated as: TsGALI SPb) has preserved the verbatim records of several meetings of the Art Council of the Opera, where the theatre's repertoire plan for the next five-year period was discussed [14], [15], [16], [17]. From these primary sources it becomes clear how many impediments, sometimes nontrivial from the position of today, had to be overcome by Asafyev and his adherents. The issues discussed at these meetings concerned: the proportion of classical and Soviet operas in the GATOB's repertoire, the accordance of opera plots with Soviet ideology, and even the possibility of organizing guest performances on the stages of community cultural centers, "dom kul'tury" (from this last point of view *Khovanshchina* was considered inappropriate).

Here are few quotes in defense of *Khovanshchina's* production from the verbatim records of the meeting of the Commission for the Development of a Five-Year Repertoire Plan (April 18, 1929) that clearly represent the ideological language of the era:

"Comrade Obnorsky³. I consider it necessary to emphasize the theatre's work on the creation of performances that are valuable in artistic and social terms, moreover, I said that such a task is achievable not only through the production of Soviet operas; it is also necessary to perform classics, establish new relationships to the material, and create quite acceptable operas in the artistic and ideological sense. On the other hand, I pointed out the fact that until we switch mainly to new repertoires, we will have to heavily use the classical repertoire, so to speak, not in the form that means a radical adaptation of an artwork: we can just clean a classical work from any peels, any impurities, any scum, and from the imprint that time has left on this work. It is necessary to present the classics in a purified form. <...>

Comrade Rappoport⁴. <...> When drafting the repertoire, basically, as the foundation for the plan's preparation, I would put forward the consideration of this order – the work's relevance. The relevance of the work not in the order of theoretical considerations of a purely academic character, not a classic in the history of literature, but current relevance, because what can happen is that the requirements of the academic perspective, the requirements of the historical cycle, they will just clash with contradictory details of this work in the sense of its relevance now. It was completely dropped, and I must say that it impresses me that B. V. [Asafyev? – V. A.] doesn't particularly mean it. I suggest putting forward the moment of relevance in parallel with all the requirements of the academic perspective. <...> The work's direction should be such that the objectives of the academic perspective from year to year yield to the objectives of social character. <...> when choosing operas from the old repertoire, to give priority not to the academic character, but to the social one" [18].

When the discussion focuses on specific works of the "Russian classical opera cycle", the following dialogue arises regarding *Khovanshchina*:

"Comrade Rappoport. It's dangerous to stage *Khovanshchina*, because the subject is not the one we need. If in the new production of *Khovanshchina* Marfa will represent the refined beauty of the Nesterov⁵ type, that certainly won't do. But if this is what is being said now – a sectarian, savage, strange person, it really will

³ Obnorsky, Boris Petrovich (1893–1944) – Member of the Communist Party from 1920. Member of the Editorial board of "Zhizn' Iskusstva" magazine. Head of the Institute of Art History's Social Committee's Department of Arts policy. From 1935 – Chief and Artistic Director of the Leningrad Theatre of Working Youth.

⁴ Rappoport (Rappaport), Victor Romanovich (1889–1943) – director, playwright. From 1923, the main director of the GATOB.

⁵ Nesterov, Mikhail Vasilyevich (1862–1942) – famous Russian and Soviet painter. Creator of a cycle of paintings depicting Old Believers.

be the heyday of music. The social construction is in the work itself. The work is distorted; it needs to be truly revealed.

Comrade B. V. Asafyev. In the first act, the music is certainly important, [and] people play a big role: the scribe, the inscriptions, this crowd, which should replace the musketeers (streltsy), the revolt, and the appearance of Khovansky are of great interest. But in the form in which it is now⁶, it all disappears. The scene with the German woman is very bright. It turns out that the religious moment dominates here. The second act is much more dynamic and resonant. There is no Preobrazhensky March there. It breaks off dramatically. There is no plot in the last act. It permits revision. As a general conclusion, *Khovanshchina* may be included in the plan as anti-religious.

Comrade Sollertinsky⁷. The religiousness of *Khovanshchina* is of a completely different character than one of the City of Kitezh. From *Khovanshchina* you can splendidly create an anti-religious performance; sectarianism and popular atheism, all this makes it possible to create an extremely strong performance, which can be very easily reworked at the desired angle of view. In this regard, *Khovanshchina* is the most favorable material. The first edition⁸ can really give a folk drama of such overwhelming character, and can be revised from such an angle that the performance will be interesting. From the point of view of directorship, more consistent and brave conclusions should be applied. <...> Marfa's character does allow for non-Nesterov interpretation. I believe that the present production of *Khovanshchina* [i.e., the performance as edited by N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov. – V. A.] must be removed so that in the 1930–31 season it can be updated in the first edition. Agreed: To include *Khovanshchina* in the five-year plan" [19].

As seen from the long quotes above, the restoration of Mussorgsky's original text and the creation of a performance that would be consistent with the author's intention was not the subject of discussion at all. Asafyev and his adherents had to look for arguments lying on a completely different plane, namely to convince the Council of the alleged revolutionism and anti-religiosity of *Khovanshchina* and to allow the fifth act to be revised in accordance with the ideological demands of the time. Unfortunately, it remains completely unknown what kind of revision and what alterations were discussed.

⁶ Probably, this was *Khovanshchina*'s production in Rimsky-Korsakov's version, which was present in the repertoire of the theatre at that time.

⁷ Sollertinsky, Ivan Ivanovich (1902–1944) – prominent musicologist, music critic, lecturer.

⁸ By "first edition" Lamm's edition is meant.

IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is important to clarify here that although *Khovanshchina* was not formally banned for production⁹, the historical period for the appearance of this opera by Mussorgsky was extremely unsuitable. The stage production of such a work dictated to the director the need for masterly maneuvering between the ideological requirements of the time and the demands of the audience (and the financial success of the production was also of great importance). With this approach, it was almost impossible to put the expression of the composer's artistic will at the forefront.

It should be noted that in 1929, in Soviet propaganda, a shift from internationalism to nationalism, which finally took place by the mid-1930s, had already begun. Throughout this period of uncertainty, from the late 1920s to the second half of the 1930s, it was unclear for cultural and arts workers which interpretation of historical events was politically correct at the moment, hence, it was extremely risky to turn to the creation or staging of an artwork on a theme from Russian history. Especially, one related to the church schism of the 17th century.

A vivid example of a work adapted to the changing state ideological principles is the story of the creation and stage production of Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy's play about Peter I – *On the Rack* (1929). This example is extremely indicative in the context of this article, since the historical periods in which *Khovanshchina* and the play by Tolstoy take place are largely identical. The play was accepted for production (under the name *Peter I*) at The Second Moscow Art Theatre¹⁰, in the season of 1929–30. The final rehearsal (February 21, 1930) was attended by Stalin. He left the lodge before the end of the play. The reasons for his departure are not fully known. However, it is clear that the character of Peter I in Tolstoy's play did not meet Stalin's expectations. Trying to capture the changing political trends of Russian history, Tolstoy made two more editions of the play (1935 and 1938), the last of which had practically nothing to do with the original version of 1929. In 1934 the production of The Second Moscow Art Theatre was removed from stage for revising and never returned to the theatre's repertoire [22], [23].

⁹ In the Repertoire Index, published in 1929 by the General Repertoire Committee, *Khovanshchina* was accredited with "B" status. The criteria for this mark in relation to a composition of the classical repertoire were as follows: "in the presence of outstanding formal values, it is extremely insignificant from the point of view of social importance." [20]. See also: [21].

¹⁰ A Drama Theatre, which existed in Moscow in 1924–1936. It was located in a building with the historical name "Shelaputin's Theatre" at Teatralnaya Square, 2.

V. CONCLUSION

In the circumstances set out above, it is not at all surprising that the planned production of *Khovanshchina* in the GATOB was not realized. Moreover, in the early 1930s, there were basically no productions of *Khovanshchina* (even as edited by N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov) in the repertoire of the country's main theatres. The Leningrad GATOB staged *Khovanshchina* in the 1936–37 season, and the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre – only in 1939 (and not on the main stage but in its branch¹¹). Both performances were staged in Rimsky-Korsakov's version. However, a really successful fusion of the art content, as close as possible to the author's intention and Soviet ideology, was found only in D. D. Shostakovich's edition and orchestration (1958).

Finally, let's add that for many years, until the end of the 1940s, both Lamm and Asafyev had used all opportunities to organize concert performances of this music. And in 1946–47, Lamm even included *Khovanshchina* in Asafyev's instrumentation in the 16 volumes' draft of the new Complete Works of M. P. Mussorgsky. However, this plan did not materialize.

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¹¹ In 1924–1959 The Bolshoi Theatre had a branch located at B. Dmitrovka, 6/2 in the former Zimin Opera House. Today this building belongs to the Moscow Operetta Theatre.

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