

M. I. Glinka's Opera *A Life for the Tzar*: a Historical-Archaeological Perspective of Research

Yevgeniy Levashev

State Institute for Art Studies

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: levashev_e@mail.ru

Nadezhda Teterina

State Institute for Art Studies

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: nad_teterina@mail.ru

Yelena Shcheboleva

State Institute for Art Studies

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: egs-sv@mail.ru

Abstract—The scientific matter, which is associated with the name of a real historical person, but somewhat mythologized folk hero, the peasant Ivan Susanin, has been discussed in many dozens of books and hundreds of articles in various fields of domestic Humanities. Among them, a significant part of this research is musicology, which is the key value in the history of Russian music opera masterpiece by Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka. The objective of this article consists consequently in an attempt to show how naturally the musical drama is associated with the creatively comprehended system of historical facts in the opera “A Life for the Tsar”.

Keywords—Opera “A Life for the Tsar”, Ivan Susanin, tsar Mikhail Romanov, Russia and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of 1613-1614., M.I. Glinka, E.F. Rosen, V.A. Zhukovskiy, history of Kostroma region

(the day of Mikhail Feodorovich Romanov's coronation at the Moscow Kremlin)¹.

When approached superficially, the development of action in Glinka's opera may seem overloaded with blatant contradictions. They were especially visible in the sumptuous theatrical productions of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the scene of Polish ball, at which a typical figure of Catholic cardinal is present, gives rise to the following perplexing question: how the Polish soldiers, despite the cruel Russian frost, could reach the distant village of Domnino without having noticed on their way neither Smolensk, nor Moscow, nor else Yaroslavl' or Kostroma.

I. INTRODUCTION: PARADOXES OF TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATIONS

There is something paradoxical in the situation that has developed around M. I. Glinka's great masterpiece *A Life for the Tzar* in academic scholarship. Though obviously related to the opera's plot, this situation still awaits its adequate conceptualization in fundamental treatises and specialized articles; moreover, it still remains unnoticed by many.

The question is of the composer's thoroughly and profoundly thought-out logic of artistic interpretation of the historical realities pertaining to the last months of the 'time of troubles' in Muscovy, that is to the period from around 21 February (three days of the opera's principal action at the village of Domnino and in its environs) up to 11 June 1613

¹ Notable is the following fact: among the 355 works listed in the bibliographical catalogue 'Ivan Susanin in Art History' (Kostroma: KOUNB, 2014, in Russian), the dissertations mentioned in T. I. Naumenko's book 'Textual Criticism in Musicology' (Moscow: Monuments of Historical Thought, 2013, in Russian), and the materials of the two-volume edition 'M. I. Glinka. To the Bicentenary of his Birth' (Moscow: P. I. Tchaikovsky State Conservatoire, 2006, in Russian), containing around 100 conceptual observations related to the opera *A Life for the Tzar*, only five or six texts approach the problems that are touched upon in this article; in all the cases, the authors limit themselves to general statements based on well-known historical facts, without entering into subtler details.

It is impossible to understand how the Poles, having learnt in Warsaw about the decision of the Zemsky Sobor (Lands Assembly) of 21 February 1613, could outdistance the Muscovite deputation to the 16-year-old boyar Mikhail Feodorovich and unexpectedly found themselves in the backwoods not far from Kostroma. The very season during which the action takes place is uncertain: Bogdan Sobinin arrives in his native village in a boat, a choir of maidens rejoices over the spring warmth, but the whole detachment of foreigners freezes to death in a thick forest because of a severe winter cold.

These absurdities were sometimes explained by the conventions of the genre, though more often they were ignored because of a profound respect to Glinka.

Such a tendency to hush up some peculiarities of the opera's plot was additionally underpinned by some important motives of religious-ideological and social-political kind. Let us examine them briefly.

II. A SOCIAL ASPECT OF THE ARTISTIC PROBLEM

Since Glinka's opera was actively supported by the imperial family, many of free-thinking Russian intellectuals and artists associated the work's genre denomination 'patriotic heroic and tragic opera' with S. S. Uvarov's notorious triad 'Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality', which already at that time was perceived with scepticism (though nobody remained indifferent to the music itself). The reminiscences of the recent cruel suppression of the Polish uprising (1830–31) could suggest an idea that the composer's attitude was essentially anti-Polish, while the fact that in 1610–15 the Russian territories were occupied by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzecz Pospolita*) could recede into the background of social consciousness. For the same reason, the Russian composers, members of 'The Five', in the second half of the 19th century somewhat demonstratively called themselves 'Ruslanists', thus distancing themselves from the supposed ideological substance of Glinka's earlier opera.

If in the conditions of the Tzarist regime any more or less critical judgment concerning the opera's dramaturgical problems could result in troubles, after the Bolshevik coup d'état even a slightest mention of a Tzar, indeed, became mortally dangerous.

Consequently, the opera's storyline was radically remade more than once. Finally, S. M. Gorodetzky's 'non-monarchic' version of 1939 acquired the status of a legitimate substitute for Glinka's original; only this version, with all its absurd turns of the plot was allowed for use in theatres and concert performances, in textbooks and musicological research, and even in the academic editions of the opera's full score and piano score.

And when in the 1990s the ideological barriers crashed down, the situation remained largely unchanged, partly on account of a psychological inertia caused the long-term

domination of Gorodetzky's version, partly because of the typically journalistic penchant for superficial sensations.

It would be unfair to underestimate the fact that the process of accumulation and systematization of data directly or indirectly related to the issue of Ivan Susanin's heroic deed was going on during the last several decades in a number of scholarly disciplines, including general history, archaeology, musicology, folk-lore studies, and local lore studies. These lines, however quite often developed separately. And the problems of musical art remained virtually untouched².

It was shown more than once that the peculiarities of the opera's musical dramaturgy correlate with historical facts and with findings in the field of folk-lore studies. Until a certain moment, however, no one among musicologists addressed any studies concerning the history and geography of the Kostroma region. No one visited the village of Domnino with the purpose to draw nearer to the site of the legendary hero's deed and to listen to tales on him narrated in various versions by local people.

On the other hand, though the Kostroma students of local lore showed great diligence in collecting such legends, and the archaeologists did some valuable excavation work, all of them had but a vague idea about Glinka's music. At best they knew the opera's libretto in the version 'updated' in Stalin's era, remaining ignorant of the original.

The specialists in the history of the 'time of troubles' quite often have to make a choice between a number of highly heterogeneous hypotheses leading to a historical truth. The purpose of the authors of this article is essentially different. Since in the centre of our attention is Glinka's opera rather than a particular historical episode, the problem of historical factology is less important for us than the question of Glinka's basic sources and creative principles.

² In the rare cases when specialists in local lore and philologists refer to the verbal texts of arias, vocal ensembles and choruses from the opera, they always quote S. M. Gorodetzky's version rather than the original libretto without being aware that not only the phraseology, but even the meaning could have been radically modified. Such fallacies are predictable, for in the full score published in volumes 12A and 12B of M. I. Glinka's Complete Works (Moscow: Muzgiz Publishers, 1965) the libretto is given in S. M. Gorodetzky's version, while the original text is never cited even in the comments. For the first time in the USSR, the original verbal text was reproduced in the Supplement to the first volume of O. E. Levasheva's monograph 'Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka' (Moscow: Muzka, 1987, in 2 volumes. Vol. I. P. 299–375, in Russian). This is the libretto's only reliable contemporary publication.

Such an approach implies a necessity to combine scholarly efforts of specialists in adjacent fields, having sufficient experience in collecting and systematizing field materials, in working with archives, and in producing theatre performances. This is the only way to achieve a desired result.

The process of gradual formation of the scholarly collective deserves to be described in some detail – even though in a rather non-traditional way – in order to show how the amalgamation of previously separated scholarly disciplines could take place in the context of the ‘Susanin issue’.

III. EVGENY LEVASHEV’S EXPEDITION

In August 1969, while preparing a cycle of lectures to be delivered at the Moscow Conservatoire, E. M. Levashev set off for a remote area in the Kostroma region. His purpose was to find out, to what extent the environs of Domnino agree with the audience’s expectations about the scene of action of Glinka’s opera. And the impressions were really unforgettable.

There were no traces of a thick forest. A view on the boundless Pure Swamp (Chistoye Boloto), over 28 versts (around 100 000 feet) long and of more or less the same width, opened from picturesque hills. Even in summer the swamp could be easily mistook for a huge water-meadow, especially as here and there haystacks were seen, placed on invisible boards. And the drifts of sand along the Shacha river looked as a safe country road. One could not help remembering Glinka’s music and Susanin’s words addressed to his adopted son Vanya: ‘I’ll go and lead them to the swamp, to the backwoods, to the bog, to the marsh land’.

According to legends that passed on from generation to generation among the inhabitants of neighbouring villages, the Poles unexpectedly came from the north-east, that is from the environs of Galich, to the village of Derevnishche, and in the early spring Ivan Susanin led them not to nearby Domnino, but to a little island in the midst of a swamp; having reached it, they killed their crafty guide and after several days perished before the eyes of the peasants who watched them from the surrounding hills. Having met their ‘sunrise’ several times, they nevertheless failed to find their way back.

All these villages became depopulated long ago and ultimately disappeared. But the emotional shock has preserved its psychological impact. In particular, it has influenced the perception of the opera’s musical dramaturgy, gradually leading to the following scholarly justified conclusion: the work’s composition, in every detail of its storyline, is a thoroughly considered system, which is as perfect as Glinka’s technique of working with melody, harmony, polyphony, and orchestration.

Levashev spoke about his unexpected findings at a session of B. A. Pokrovsky’s laboratory of opera directors, and in the autumn of 1990 this eventually resulted in a

Bolshoy Theatre production of *A Life for the Tzar* with the original libretto in an uncut version. The performance was first shown in Milan and then in Moscow, at the principal stage of the Bolshoy (director N. I. Kuznetsov, conductor A. N. Lazarev, stage designer V. Ya. Levental’, choreographer B. I. Myagkov).

At that time, however, it was too early to promulgate the findings, since some uncertainties still remained concerning Glinka’s possible sources.

On the one hand, there was a feeling that the composer himself visited the localities where the tragic events had taken place in the old days. The verbal text of Antonida’s cavatina, in an ideal harmony with music, recreates the image of the boyar village of Domnino, from which ‘in a neighbourhood on the other side of the river [in the village of Derevnishche on the other side of the river Korba – E. L.] one can see a new hut [according to a popular legend, Susanin built there a log house for his daughter’s wedding – E. L.]’.

The words of Polish chorus, ‘This brilliant ball is our joy in the Muscovite desert’, clearly show that the celebration was taking place in a remote Russian province rather than in Warsaw.

Such fleeting allusions, and even direct hints, are too numerous in the opera to be treated as fortuitous coincidences or traditional generalizations. They have a concrete character and are exact as regards their geographic aspect.

On the other hand, neither Glinka nor his librettist E. F. Rosen had ever visited those places. Moreover, they had no serious historical treatises at their disposal. The last, 12th volume of N. M. Karamzin’s ‘History of the Russian State’ ended with the description of events preceding the accession of the Romanov dynasty; Karamzin either had no time to continue his narration or preferred to sidestep diplomatically. V. N. Tatishchev’s materials on the period of the accession of Mikhail Feodorovich, though collected in the 18th century, were published later (1843). As regards superficial journalistic fantasies published in the times of the Napoleonic wars, they inspired no confidence when Glinka was composing his first opera.

A radical change of the aspect of research was needed.

IV. NADEZHDA TETERINA'S ARCHIVAL INVESTIGATIONS

N. I. Teterina drew our attention to the mode of continuous interaction between the officially appointed mentors of the heir to the Russian throne, Grand Duke Alexander Nikolayevich, the future Tzar Alexander II. The best known among them was poet V. A. Zhukovsky, a fervent admirer of Glinka's talent³. Another teacher was poet and playwright Baron E. F. Rosen; true, his Russian was rather imperfect, but he was an assiduous craftsman of a characteristically German type, always showing an utmost pedantic attitude towards historical details. For us, a figure of not less importance was K. I. Arsen'yev – a distinguished Russian historian and geographer, specialist in statistics and, most notably, an expert on culture and history of his native Kostroma region⁴.

It is worth noting here that while the opera *A Life for the Tzar* was being rehearsed, premièred (1836) and then supplemented with the scene 'Tzar's Manor' (1837), Zhukovsky and Arsen'yev were elaborating a detailed plan of Alexander Nikolayevich's educational journey from Kostroma to Galich. It was Arsen'yev who compiled a detailed list of memorable places worthy of being visited by the heir to the throne. Afterwards, both men accompanied Alexander Nikolayevich in his journey. But even earlier the historical documents and geographic maps were at their entire disposal [1].

Some conjectures can be made about the composer's possible acquaintance with these sources.

It makes sense to divide the body of materials into several groups. First, Glinka definitely knew the texts of the Tzar's decrees (1616–1731) about Susanin's deed. Second, he almost certainly deliberated with Zhukovsky over alternative readings of sources. Third, it cannot be ruled out that he was well-informed about popular legends.

These theses can be immediately confirmed by some significant facts.

In a long chain of Tzar's decrees (1619 – 1633 – 1691 – 1731 – 1767...) unconditionally exempting all the generations of the heirs of Ivan Susanin and his son-in-law Bogdan Sobinin from any kind of State taxation, the first decree of 1619 is basic, while the rest confirm it in connection either with the peasants' resettlement to new lands 'in the village of Korobovo' (1633) or with the accession to the throne of new emperors, from Peter I (1691) through Anna Ioannovna (1731) and Catherine II (1767).

³ Scholars often mention Zhukovsky in connection with his role in Glinka's choice of the subject matter for the first opera. But they do not pay attention to some other important moments, including the poet's active participation in almost all the stages of Glinka's work on the opera.

⁴ Both Rosen and Arsen'yev were highly meticulous in rendering the details of Russian history – Rosen in his poetry and works for theatre, such as the poem *The Birth of Ivan the Terrible* (1830), the dramas *Russia and Batory* (1833) and *Petr Basmanov* (1835), Arsen'yev in his scholarship. In Arsen'yev's book 'An Essay in the Statistics of the Russian State' (1818–19), flawless statistics led to important historical generalizations.

Glinka, undoubtedly, knew the text of at least one of the first three decrees, and it does not matter of which one, because the descriptive sections of all the decrees, containing the only reliable information about Ivan Susanin and Bogdan Sobinin, as well as about the villages of Domnino and Derevnishche, were identical. In all probability, the librettist and the composer turned to the third decree of 1691, since it had already been published in full [2].

The fourth decree of 1731, however, included one significant supplement, probably invented by the compilers in order to make the document more convincing for Tzarina Anna Ioannovna. The question was of an alleged bold action of Sobinin, who, at the risk of his life, Domnino for the Ipat'yev (Hypatian) Monastery as quickly as possible.

Glinka was obviously dissatisfied with this version. Though in his musical and dramaturgic concept he made use of the idea to intensify the conflict, he emphasized its religious and psychological aspects, entrusting the crucial historical mission to the teenager boy Vanya⁵.

The circumstances of the composer's and librettist's work on the opera *A Life for the Tzar* will remain largely unclear if we limit ourselves to the facts that can be reliably confirmed, without taking into account their larger context. Without precluding arbitrary generalizations, this attitude would allow to enlarge the scope of possible sources and to search for relevant information in other areas of scholarship, such as the history of manor architecture, genealogy, studies of local lore, archaeology, and folk-lore studies.

V. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS

A professional with considerable experience in exploring and systematizing the architectural monuments of the Kostroma region, E. G. Shcheboleva drew our attention to a number of authoritative and influential figures, who were associated with the imperial court and at the same time preserved their links with Kostroma – the province of their birth or long-term service. These personalities include Senator S. S. Borshchov and his sister, Hofmeisterin Nataliya Borshchova, chief of the maids of honour of the Winter Palace (their manor at Il'inskoye on the Shacha river was situated at a distance of 13–15 versts from Domnino); M. N. Zhemchuzhnikov, the governor of Kostroma in 1832–

⁵ It is not unlikely that Glinka, having included Susanin's adopted son Vanya among the most important dramatis personae of his opera and having entrusted to him the outstanding scene in front of the Romanovs' manor ('Here is the Tzar's court!'), composed for the contralto singer Anna Vorob'yeva, was influenced, in particular, by the well-known textbook 'An Essay in the History of the Russian State' by I. K. Kaydanov (1831).

According to it, the key moment of Russia's passage from the Middle Ages to the modern period was just Susanin's feat, interpreted from a religious perspective as a 'weapon of Providence' (p. 176). Needless to say, Susanin himself could not sing this about himself. But Vanya, when the Tzar's servants at last have heard his shouting, more than once exclaims with youthful fervour: 'I am like God's ambassador...', thus as if announcing the beginning of a new era.

33 and of St Petersburg in 1835–1840, father of painter Lev Zhemchuzhnikov and poets Aleksey, Aleksandr, and Vladimir Zhemchuzhnikov; guards colonel and State councilor S. P. Kupreyanov, owner of an estate near Soligalich, who was twice elected as the Kostroma Marshal of the nobility (1815–18 and 1830–45).

The provincial nobles, especially those who occupied high official posts in major regional cities, maintained close contacts with the metropolitan nobility. In the eyes of the imperial court they embodied the idea of unity between the country's periphery and its capital; they had to be aware of their region's geographic peculiarities and of its historical past.

This was of special importance just for the Kostroma province because of a religious and political ritual having its roots in the first years of the reign of Catherine II: since 1767, a custom has been instituted to corroborate the rights for the Russian throne by an imperial prayer before the icons in the Ipat'yev (Hypatian) Monastery and by a commemoration of Ivan Susanin's deed. This tradition, which in the case of Catherine II, born German princess, could seem somewhat ambiguous, became firmly established; it was followed by all the Russian Tzars from Paul I (in 1798) to Nicholas II (in 1913)⁶.

Emperor Nicholas I prayed in Kostroma for the first time in the autumn of 1834. Around the same time the composer Glinka, who had just returned from Germany and several times met Zhukovsky, was embarking on his first opera. He was carried away by the happy opportunity to realize the dream that had overcome him during his stay abroad: 'A longing for my country gradually led me to the idea of composing in a Russian manner'. He could not imagine that the very fact of touching upon the theme of Ivan Susanin's heroic feat would give rise to longstanding social and political speculations on the part of both the official monarchism and the superficially conceived liberalism.

The scientific expedition to Kostroma province, organized under the leadership by E. G. Shcheboleva in August 2015, confirmed that journalistic discords, unfortunately, persist, putting obstacles in the way of scholarly research.

All this influenced the evaluation of the work of archaeologists, who in 2002 discovered a hacked male skull among several dozens of graves by the southern shore of the Pure Swamp (Chistoye Boloto) [3, 4]. The experts' report based on analyses of different kind was announced by a forensic medicine specialist V. N. Zvyagin: 'In view of such a multitude of expert data any judge would agree that this is Susanin. A mistake seems to be unlikely'.

⁶ During E. M. Levashev's summer expedition of 1969, the inhabitants of the village of Domnino showed him in Derevnishche the location of two log houses, one of Ivan Susanin, another by Bogdan Sobinin (downwards from St John the Baptist chapel), and told him that these huts were destroyed just before the beginning of the construction of the chapel in 1913.

To this, however, a comment was added: because of the decay it is impossible to analyze the DNA, and therefore it is necessary to continue the research. Such a judicious reservation was perceived by some listeners as a kind of self-denial. In a number of popular articles and books it was alleged that the material had been falsified⁷.

As often happens, with growing popularity of a historical theme a number of amateurish publication appeared in printed and electronic media, whose authors did their best to vulgarize the whole issue.

VI. CONCLUSION

Fortunately, all such scum subsides sooner or later. And on the smoothed surface of scholarly and artistic thinking such qualities of high art emerge, which come from the depths of the soul, making for the integration of minute details into a large-scale whole and providing metaphorical ways to express particular knowledge. This was the case of Glinka in the meaningful parallels he, relying on folk sources, drew between human and natural phenomena. The early spring of 1613 in Muscovy: the Polish–Lithuanian troops have already been dislodged from the Kremlin, but their garrisons are still a menace to the provinces; the days are becoming warmer, the rivers are overflowing, but the nights are frosty, sometimes even a blizzard rages. Another parallel: the 'time of troubles' is subsiding, but at the same time it seems to take roots in the people's hearts.

And the antithesis is the sunrise, eagerly expected by everybody. A historical sunrise for Russia and a personal spiritual sunrise for any of the opera's heroes. Another analogy having to do with nature appears in a remark of Susanin facing certain death: 'Ours is a way of human beings, we won't yield to winds'. A human being must not be a weathercock!

The plot develops quickly: three days in the early spring plus the epilogue, 11 July 1613. With regard to the religious and ideological substance of *A Life for the Tzar*, a minor, almost imperceptible detail is worth noting, which acquires a symbolic significance in the context of the opera's tragic denouement: the hopelessly sombre E flat minor chord changes enharmonically to D sharp minor, after which the first ray of heavenly sunrise emerges in B major: 'trampling down death by death!'

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⁷ For some reasons, such publications did not envisage a possibility of further examinations.

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