

RECORDS

A la Russe

ROLAND GELATT

GLINKA'S *A Life for the Tsar* is a landmark in musical history that has been damned consistently with the faintest possible praise. There is no disputing its primacy as the first opera—indeed the first music—of any consequence to be written by a Russian composer, nor is there any gainsaying the success that attended its first performance at St. Petersburg in 1836. But *A Life for the Tsar* gets short shrift from Glinka's twentieth-century expositors.

It appears that Glinka had the misfortune to journey to Italy in 1830 and (horrors!) to fall under the wretched influence of Bellini and Donizetti. He returned to Russia tainted with Italianisms and in *A Life for the Tsar* composed an opera within the pre-Verdi operatic tradition. And what could possibly be worse than that? Even so faithful a partisan of Russian music as the late M. D. Calvocoressi felt obliged to warn readers that Glinka's opera would "prove tedious to all but confirmed devotees of old-fashioned, full-dress opera."

Within the past decade, however, the "old-fashioned" Italian opera of Bellini and Donizetti has quite suddenly come back into critical favor. For the first time within living memory *La Sonnambula* is being listened to with respect. And if *Sonnambula*, why not *A Life for the Tsar*? A fresh look at Glinka's first opera would seem to be in order, and this is provided by a new recording of it made in Paris, with a Russian-singing cast, under the direction of Igor Markevitch (Capitol GCR 7163).

THE WORK, in this beautifully executed performance, turns out to be not a bit tedious—and rather less beholden to the pre-Verdi Italian school than one would have been led to believe. The division of the



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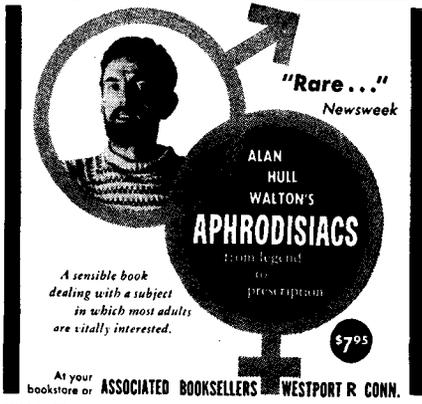
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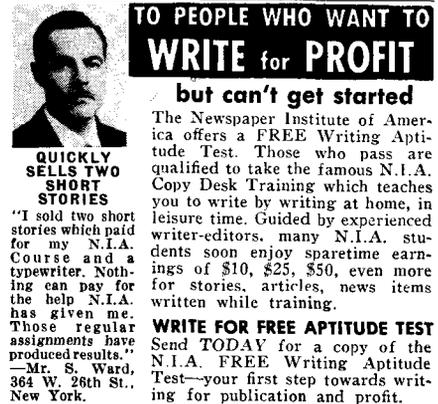


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opera into set pieces follows early-nineteenth-century practice, and the long, slow gait of certain arias is obviously Bellinian in spirit; but there is a rhythmic brightness and an imaginative use of orchestral coloration quite apart from—and above—the Bellini-Donizetti norm. Indeed, in certain respects *A Life for the Tsar* is more comparable to nineteenth-century French music and to Bizet in particular than to the orchestrally unadventurous Italian school. One is led to suspect that the composer of *L'Arlésienne* and *Carmen* studied Glinka's opera to good advantage.

NO TEDIUM at all? Well, perhaps that is too strong a claim to be made for this, or any, Russian opera. There are *longueurs* here, to be sure, but the many good things in the score far outweigh them. I would single out in particular the Act I trio, a serene elegy in B minor ornamented with lovely melismatic arabesques in the soprano part; the Polish ballet music in Act II, full of vigorous movement and deliciously wrought instrumental effects (surely the *Pas de Quatre* inspired Tchaikovsky when he turned to *Sleeping Beauty*); the soprano Romance in Act III, a melancholy lament that bears comparison with Mozart's "*Ach, ich fühl's*"; and the massive final "*Slávsya*" chorus, which is radiant with the pealing of Moscow bells.

The cast of the new recording is composed of an American soprano (Teresa Stich-Randall), a Yugoslav contralto (Mela Bugarinovitch), a Swedish tenor (Nicolai Gedda), and a Bulgarian bass (Boris Christoff). Miss Bugarinovitch wobbles rather distressingly at times; otherwise the singing is first-rate—Miss Stich-Randall's spectacularly so. However, it is Igor Markevitch, the one bona fide Russian connected with the undertaking, who rightfully takes first honors. He is clearly enchanted with the score, and his conducting conveys the delight of the musical discoverer who unexpectedly happens upon a neglected masterpiece. The work is given reasonably complete (a largish chunk is missing from Act V) and the recording is satisfactory. All told, something not to be missed.

GLINKA ESTABLISHED a precedent in *A Life for the Tsar* by allotting the hero's role, that of Ivan Sussanin, to a bass singer. Since then basses have dominated Russian opera, and the fortunes of this repertoire outside Russia have depended largely on the availability of suitable deep-voiced singers. The chief exponent of Russian bass roles in the West today is Boris Christoff, a forty-year-old Bulgarian who received his training in Italy and has never crossed the boundaries of Russia. Christoff has sung the role of Boris Godunov in most of the great opera houses of the world (though not at the Metropolitan) and has been acclaimed by long-memoried operagoers as more than a reasonable facsimile of the great Chaliapin. In addition to *A Life for the Tsar*, he has made a recording of *Boris Godunov* (originally published here by RCA Victor in 1953, now reissued as Capitol GDR 7164) and, more recently, of Mussorgsky's entire output of songs (Angel 3575).

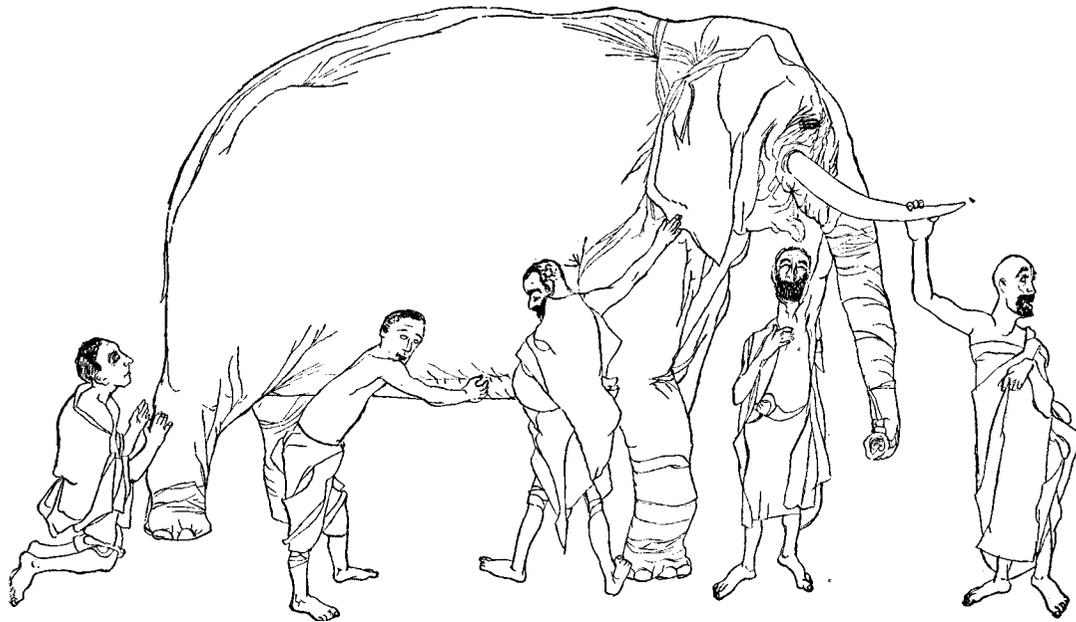
The latter production—an album containing four LP records and a lavishly printed eighty-four-page booklet of texts and annotations—bears some comment. Like all complete collections, it has its peaks and valleys. Mussorgsky committed his share of misfires—lethargic romantic effusions, dull topical satires, character studies that convey more "realism" than music—and they are here along with the flowerings of genius. But the collection does allow us to experience Mussorgsky in the round, so to speak, and to follow his development step by step into one of the supreme song composers of all time (his work is presented in strict chronological order). The album is analogous to the sumptuously produced art books devoted to a painter's entire life-work, those fascinating tomes which—as André Malraux has observed—enable us to become our own curators and free us from total dependence on the few isolated masterpieces by which most artists are known. This collection of songs enables us to become our own impresarios, and it reveals some unsuspected marvels. Throughout the album Christoff's vocal and interpretative powers function at top

form. His range is enormous—from the wide-eyed prattle of a young child in *With Nursey* through the dreamy legato of *On the River* to the terrifying colloquy between death and the mother in *Cradle Song*—and the total accomplishment adds up to a tour de force which few singers today could even hope to approach.

UNFORTUNATELY, as a documentation of Mussorgsky's genius the album has some severe flaws. For an unexplained—and one would think inexplicable—reason, Christoff seems to prefer the old nineteenth-century editions of the songs as "edited" by Rimsky-Korsakov to the more recent Soviet edition based on Mussorgsky's manuscripts. Rimsky was a fine composer, but as an editor he left a great deal to be desired. He did not boggle at changing melodies in Mussorgsky's songs, "correcting" harmonies, adding his own postludes, and in general making as free use of the blue pencil as he desired. If Christoff really had some rationale for favoring these doctored texts over the music as Mussorgsky wrote it, he does not convey it in the voluminous annotations he wrote for this album. Indeed, one would not know from those annotations that any textual problems had ever existed in regard to Mussorgsky's songs.

It is lamentable too that Christoff has chosen the orchestral accompaniments of Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov in certain of the songs in preference to Mussorgsky's own piano accompaniments. He explains that "the orchestrations enhance the richness and color of these compositions," but again we are being offered something other than what the composer intended. Curiously, Christoff does not use any of the orchestrations that Mussorgsky himself wrote. In fact, to judge from his notes on "Tell Me, Star, Where Art Thou?" and "Night," one cannot be certain that he even knows about them.

Great artists are seldom great scholars, and artistry is undoubtedly more precious than scholarship. But why, in undertaking an edition as elaborate as this, did not the recording company obtain a little expert advice?



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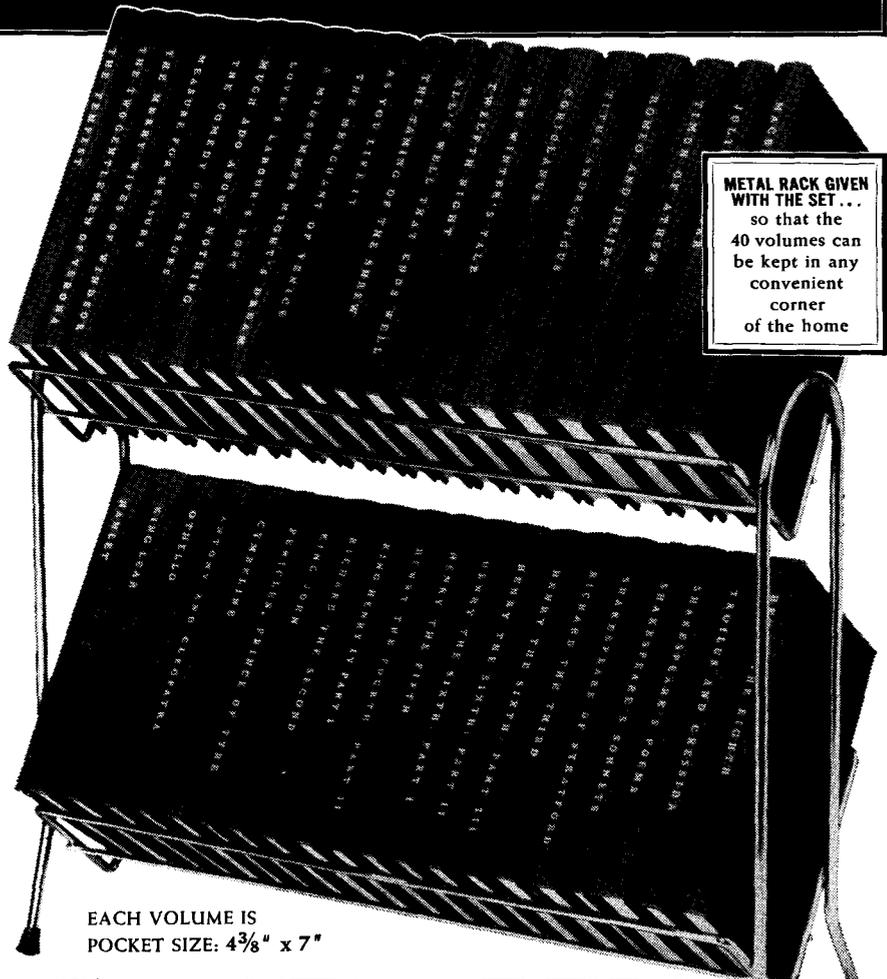
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