

OPERA TODAY

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★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Die Eroberung von Mexico in Salzburg

That's *The Conquest of Mexico*, an historical music drama composed in 1991 by German composer Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952). But wait. Wolfgang Rihm construed a few sentences of Artaud's *La Conquête du Mexique* (1932) mixed up with bits of Aztec chant and bits of poem(s) by Mexico's Octavio Paz (d. 1998) to make a libretto.

Scottish Sensation at Glimmerglass

Glimmerglass is celebrating its 40th Festival season with a stylish new production of Verdi's *Macbeth*.

Norma in Salzburg

This Salzburg *Norma* is not new news. This superb production was first seen at the Salzburg Festival's springtime Whitsun Festival in 2013 with this same cast. It will now travel to a few major European cities.

The power of music: a young cast in a semi-stage account of Monteverdi's first opera

John Eliot Gardiner conducted a much anticipated performance of Monteverdi's first opera *L'Orfeo* at the BBC Proms on 4 August 2015, with his own Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists.

Cold Mountain Wows Audience at Santa Fe World Premiere

On August 1, 2015, Santa Fe Opera presented the world premiere of *Cold Mountain*, a brand new opera composed by Pulitzer Prize and Grammy winner Jennifer Higdon.

Manon Lescaut, Munich

Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* at the Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich. Some will scream in rage but in its austerity it reaches to the heart of the opera.

Proms Saturday Matinée 1

It might seem churlish to complain about the BBC Proms coverage of Pierre Boulez's 90th anniversary. After all, there are a few performances dotted around — although some seem rather oddly programmed, as if embarrassed at the presence of new or newish music. (That could certainly not be claimed in the present case.)

The Maid of Pskov (Pskovityanka) , St. Petersburg

I recently spent four days in St. Petersburg, timed to coincide with the annual Stars of the White Nights Festival. Yet the most memorable singing I heard was neither at the Mariinsky Theater nor any other performance hall. It was in the small, nearly empty church built for the last Tsar, Nicholas II, at Tsarskoye Selo.

Prom 11 — Grange Park Opera: Fiddler on the Roof

As I walked up Exhibition Road on my way to the Royal Albert Hall, I passed a busking tuba player whose fairground ditties were enlivened by bursts of flame which shot skyward from the bell of his instrument, to the amusement and bemusement of a rapidly gathering pavement audience.

Saul, Glyndebourne

A brilliant theatrical event, bringing Handel's theatre of the mind to life on stage

Roberta Invernizzi, Wigmore Hall

'Here, thanks be to God, my opera is praised to the skies and there is nothing in it which does not

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27 Jul 2015

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At 11 a.m. on a Monday morning three priests sang a mass for a dozen elderly women and one man, all dressed in traditional peasant costume. As is Russian Orthodox custom, they stood at seemingly random spots on the stone floor. To complete the Dostoyevskian scene, one mentally challenged man sat in the corner rocking and mumbling to himself. As I slipped in, a priest turned to face an altar of icons and began to sing the liturgy. In that space, his deep bass rang forth smoother, warmer and more resonant than anything I have heard on an opera stage in several decades. After a few minutes, he signaled to the congregation, which joined him in perfect four-part harmony. The visceral power of full-throated human voices singing a *capella* rooted me to the spot, transfixed.

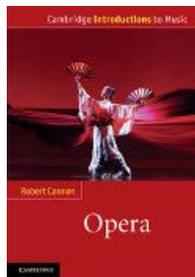
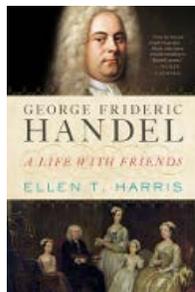
The Maid of Pskov (Pskovityanka) , St. Petersburg

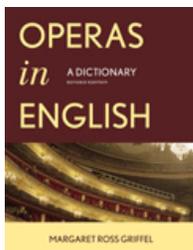
A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Alexei Tanovitski as Tsar Ivan Vasilievich, Tatiana Pavlovskaya as Princess Olga Yurievna Tokmakova [Photos courtesy of Mariinsky Theatre]

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please greatly.' So wrote Antonio Vivaldi to Marchese Guido Bentivoglio d'Aragona in Ferrara in 1737.

Montemezzi: *L'amore dei tre Re*

Asphyxiations, atrophy by poison, assassination: in Italo Montemezzi's *L'amore dei tre Re* (The Love of the Three Kings, 1913) foul deed follows foul deed until the corpses are piled high.

Prom 4: Andris Nelsons

The precision of attack in the opening to Beethoven's *Creatures of Prometheus* Overture signalled thoroughgoing excellence in the contribution of the CBSO to this concert.

BBC Proms: The Cardinal's Musick

When he was skilfully negotiating the not inconsiderable complexities, upheavals and strife of musical and religious life at the English royal court during the Reformation, Thomas Tallis (c.1505-85) could hardly have imagined that more than 450 years later people would be queuing round the block for the opportunity spend their lunch-hour listening to the music that he composed in service of his God and his monarch.

Oberon, Persephone and Iolanta at the Aix Festival

Two of the important late twentieth century stage directors, Robert Carsen and Peter Sellars, returned to the Aix Festival this summer. Carsen's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a masterpiece, Sellars' strange Tchaikovsky/Stravinsky double bill is simply bizarre.

Betrothal and Betrayal : JPYA at the ROH

The annual celebration of young talent at the Royal Opera House is a magnificent showcase, and it was good to see such a healthy audience turnout.

Jenůfa Packs a Wallop at DMMO

There are few operas that can rival the visceral impact of a well-staged *Jenůfa* and Des Moines Metro Opera has emphatically delivered the goods.

Des Moines *Fanciulla a Minnie-Triumph*

The Girl of the Golden West (La Fanciulla del West) often gets eclipsed when compared to the rest of the mature Puccini canon.

First Night of the BBC Proms 2015

First Night of the BBC Proms 2015 with Sakari Oramo in exuberant form, pulling off William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* with the theatrical flair it deserves.

Monsters and Marriage at the Aix Festival

Plus an evening by the superb Modigliani Quartet that complimented the brief (55 minutes) *a cappella* opera for six female voices *Svadba* (2013) by Serbian composer Ana Sokolovic (b. 1968). She lives in Canada.

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town of Pskov lost its freedom to Tsar Ivan IV Vasilyevich in the 1500s. It recounts the death of a young maiden, Ivan's lost daughter, who is caught between her lover, a diehard defender of ancient liberties, and her father the Tsar. The opera is a modest national treasure almost never performed outside of Russia.



Viktor Lutsyuk as Mikhail Andreyevich Tucha, Tatiana Pavlovskaya as Princess Olga Yurievna Tokmakova

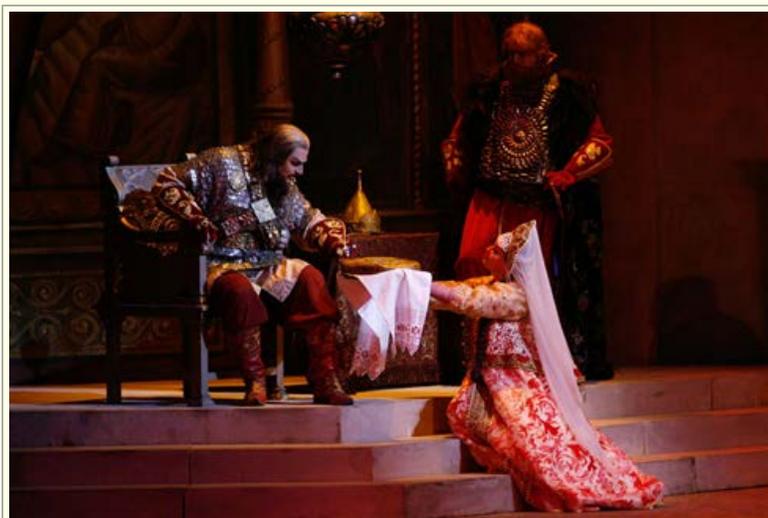
This role of Ivan the Terrible calls for a bass with great vocal and dramatic charisma. The Tsar's initial scene, for example, contains mostly sung recitative of constantly changing moods: a sarcastic aside is followed by an imperious command, a sudden moment of tenderness, a request for food, and an expression of world-weariness. Fyodor Chaliapin, whose self-portrait still hangs on the wall of a practice room at the Mariinsky, was legendary in the part. Though we have no recording, one can imagine how he must have savored its theatrical potential, turning on a kopeck to inflect each line differently, and projecting it to the back row of this very same hall.

Yet where have the great Russian basses gone? Consider Alexander Morozov, who sang the role as I heard it performed on 5 July. Not only is he no Chaliapin (who is?); he does not even possess a basic instrument in the same league as that of Vasily Gorshkov, who sang the Boyar Matuta with fluency, feeling and reasonable fullness of sound. A Tsar Ivan the Terrible who cannot vocally overpower a local boyar of Pskov not only sucks the life out the musical score, but makes nonsense of the dramatic proceedings. At times Morosov was completely inaudible from the ninth row over modest orchestral forces, and in the final scene he gave up, bawling and hamming instead.

Mariinsky insiders told me that Morozov was second-best, though his name was on the cast list from the start. (Perhaps Alexei Tanovitski would have been preferable, despite rumors of recent vocal troubles.) Music Director Valery Gergiev also canceled, a widespread problem in St. Petersburg. In *La Traviata*, for example, superstar Anna Netrebko was replaced as Violetta by the darkly passionate but uneven young Oxana Shilova, evidently taking with her Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko and again Music Director Gergiev. Is the economic crisis sapping internationally active artists from the festival? Until this is sorted out, those contemplating a trip to the (so-called) Stars of the White Nights should beware!

Yet the problem of basses is clearly more fundamental. Many Russian opera

administrators voice deep concern about the lack of such voices up to the standard set by their illustrious predecessors. Even if we leave Chaliapin out of it, one can track that decline in the role of Ivan the Terrible from the standard a half century ago (Aleksandr Pirogov in the 1947 Bolshoi recording of this opera and Boris Christoff in live recordings from the 1950s and 1960s) to what has been on offer more recently (Vladimir Ognovenko's solid portrayal in Gergiev's 1994 recording and the basses mentioned above). A chasm has opened up between what one hears in Orthodox churches and what one hears on a Russian opera stage. Until it is closed, it will be difficult to do full justice to this vital repertoire.



Alexei Tanovitski as Tsar Ivan Vasilievich, Varvara Solovyova as Boyarinya Stepanida Matuta (Styosha)

Despite the gaping vocal hole at its core, the Mariinsky production was most other respects enjoyable. Best of all was the old theater itself (so-called Mariinsky 1), which dates from 1860. It is not only lovely to behold, with gilded gold, straight-backed chairs and a pale blue-green painted ceiling. It is also—to judge from what I heard from Row 9—one of the most acoustically live and well-balanced opera houses in the world, with full, immediate and pin-point directional sound. The visceral experience of opera there bears no resemblance to brassy yet distant impact of opera in big halls like the Met and the Bastille (or the newly opened Mariinsky 2 next door), or even the somewhat less immediate impact of opera in other great houses, such as the Wiener Staatsoper or Covent Garden. While the orchestra under the young Finn Kalle Kuusava was sloppy at times, certainly lacking the punch Gergiev gives such works or the romantic sweep imparted by Simon Sakharov fifty years ago, it sounded vital in the hall.

The Mariinsky *Maid of Pskov* is a Fyodor Fedorovsky production dating from 1952 (refurbished by Yuri Laptev in 2008) and its staging of the cities and landscapes of old Russia reminds us how much color, romance, grandeur and realism traditional painted flats can offer. Diehard advocates of *Regietheater* would have been bored by the straightforward, almost fairy-tale, nostalgia, but the approach seemed to me just right for this excursion into medieval life. Moreover, flat and closed sets reflect sound well, adding to the hall's acoustical glow.

Aside from Morosov's weak and Gorshkov's strong showing, the singers acquitted themselves competently. Maxim Aksenov possesses a strong, somewhat metallic tenor, with a more burnished tone at the top than the bottom—the right kind of voice for Mikhail Andreyevich Tucha, the romantic young defender of a city doomed to servitude. Soprano Svetlana Aksenova, who sang Princess Olga Yurievna Tokmakova (the maid of Pskov), sang in the modern way: evenly, correctly, well-projected, slightly pushed, with a bit

of Slavic steel in the voice, but without a great deal of feeling or character. Veteran mezzo Lyudmila Kanunnikova used her large voice and idiomatic style to best advantage in her Act One cameo as the wet-nurse. The other princes, boyars and officials, notably Yuri Vorobiev, as well as the chorus, sang with virility. While none of this could be mistaken for the top-flight vocalism that can be heard at Glyndebourne, Salzburg or other top-tier summer festivals in Europe, the whole was more than the sum of the parts, due to the fine acoustic, superb diction, idiomatic delivery, and the sense that singers were performing a well-known work from their distinct tradition that could only be heard here.

The sense of being at a distinctively Russian occasion was reinforced by the audience—a crowd for which those who seek to expand the opera's appeal (think Peter Gelb and his PR minions at New York's Metropolitan) can only dream. The Sunday-night performance was all but sold out, and the audience contained quite a number of common people of various ages, including numerous families with children. Listening to a tale from their own history, they—even an older gentleman next to us who smelled strongly of vodka—were well-behaved, attentive and responsive. The clear impression is that, from the perspective of audiences, Russian opera remains vital in the country of its origin. Now all we need are some great basses.

Andrew Moravcsik

Cast and production information:

Tsar Ivan Vasil'yevich (The Terrible): Alexander Morozov; Prince Yuri Ivanovich Tokmakov: Yuri Vorobiev; Boyar Nikita Matuta: Vasily Gorshkov; Prince Afanasy Vyazemsky: Mikhail Kolehshvili; Mikhail Andreyevich Tucha: Maxim Aksenov; Yushko Velebin: Alexander Nikitin; Princess Olga Yur'yevna Tokmakova: Svetlana Aksenova; Boyarinya Stepanida Matuta: Varvara Solovyova; Vlas'yevna: Lyudmila Kanunnikova; Perfiyevna: Svetlana Volkova; Malyuta Skutatov: Gennadt Borchenko; A Watchman's Voice: Denis Begansky. Revival of the 1952 Production with sets and costumes by Fyodor Fedorovsky. Revival Stage Director: Yuri Laptev. Conductor: Kalle Kuusava. Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, Russia (5 July 2015).

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