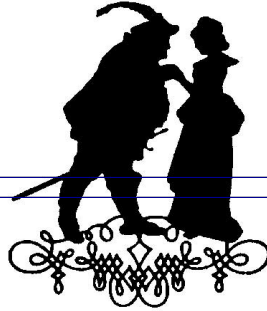


Opera con Brio

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A Triumph of Magic and Satire:

The Golden Cockerel Captivates at Santa Fe Opera

A trumpet sounds from the orchestra pit – the cry of the “golden cockerel” calling the audience to attention; barely has it ended when cellos and a solo clarinet depict the exotic Shemakhan Queen in a sensuous, falling melody. In another instant the tinkling of a xylophone has taken over, along with plucking from the upper reaches of the harp and the mysterious pizzicato of the cellos preparing the first entrance of the high-pitched Astrologer. In a flash we’ve encountered what musicologist Richard Taruskin, a scholar of Russian music, rightly labels the “open-textured, primary-hued idiom instantly recognizable as Rimskian,” rich in “leitmotivic” timbres and telling orchestral combinations.

What a thrill it was to have *The Golden Cockerel*, the 15th and last of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas, performed this summer – in Russian - at Santa Fe Opera. Indeed Santa Fe’s first ever presentation of the work was also one of the opera’s rare appearances in the United States, where Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas have, with a few exceptions, met with relative neglect. The Met’s last performance was in 1945, after having done some 68

performances over a period of 27 years, early on in French, later in English; the New York City Opera gave some 18 performances in English from 1967 to 1971, where I had last heard the work. And so with a hiatus of almost half a century, I waited eagerly for the Astrologer to step forward in Santa Fe, with his high-pitched prelude:

I am a magician. My mysterious art has given me an extraordinary gift...of breathing life’s magic. Here is an old tale for you...a fantastic tale, but in it there is a hint, a good lesson to all young men.

The Astrologer disappears, but in this otherworldly introduction one already felt not just the enigmatic magical world we were about to enter but also the sting of satire. Santa Fe did not disappoint in capturing either.

Indeed the political satire of *The Golden Cockerel* had to be toned down for the work’s 1909 premiere in Moscow, a year after Rimsky-Korsakov’s death, after he himself had refused to do so upon completing the work

two years earlier. Rimsky-Korsakov's primary source, Pushkin's *Tale of the Golden Cockerel* of 1834 (itself a reworking of a recent short story by Washington Irving) satirized the inept Russian aristocracy of his day. Seventy years later, following the blunders of Tsar Nicholas II in the disastrous Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, Rimsky-Korsakov used Pushkin to again criticize the aristocracy with his vain and childish Tsar Dodon. The imbecilic leader, manipulated by both the Astrologer and later seduced by his enemy, the sensuous Queen of Shemakha, blunders into war, where his two half-wit sons kill each other off, bringing down his nation and finally himself. The beautiful golden cockerel, commissioned by the Astrologer – at a price - to keep him worry-free with its high-pitched warnings, finally pecks Dodon to death.

Performing this work over a century later, can a director possibly leave the political satire alone? This is especially true given the current unsettling state of affairs with a reigning President Dodon who not only takes many hefty swings at the arts (will the NEA survive?) but who also, intent on self-destruction, seems to inhabit a fairy-tale universe. Arts organizations, after all, must continue to explore with empathy and insight the ambivalence of our tumultuous age. As Jeremy Eichler, music critic for the *Boston Globe*, recently concluded in his editorial regarding Trump's antipathy to the arts: "As the new season begins, keep your ears open for the moments – sometimes subtle, sometimes not – in which the arts punch back." Director Paul Curran's triumphant production in Santa Fe did just that, keeping both the work's traditional elements and satiric intent in mind throughout; sometimes subtle, sometimes not, it admirably kept a nice balance between the satiric element and the kind of visual splendor and delight that this bold work invites.

Just as the garish colors of the opening muted trumpet fanfares provide a musical cartoon of sorts (reminiscent, as musicologists have pointed out, of the



Tim Mix as King Dodon

Photo: Paul Horpedahl

crude sketchings of "lubki," primitive Russian prints), so too Dodon first appears in cartoonish red long johns, snoozing on an over-sized throne rising magically from below the floor. Soon, after a few golf swings using his golden scepter and some ill advice from his two idiot sons, the somnolent king heads off to war on an equally over-sized toy horse on wheels, mounting it backwards because of his girth (or idiocy). In Act II Dodon meets the exquisite Shemakha Queen, dressed in a Russian fairy-tale gown. At the opera's end he returns with his trophy bride – she now in a white designer pantsuit, he in an over-sized suit and long red tie.



Kevin Burdette as General Polkan; Tim Mix as King Dodon; and the Santa Fe Opera Chorus Photo: Paul Horpedahl



Kevin Burdette as General Polkan; Jorge Espino as Prince Afron; Richard Smagur as Prince Guidon; and Tim Mix as King Dodon
Photo: Paul Horpedahl

The fairy-tale/satire mixture works effectively, mostly because the contemporary references, although obvious, are kept to a minimum. Curran and his creative team – including Gary McCann, sets and costumes; Paul Hackenmueller, lighting; and Driscoll Otto, projections – certainly knew enough was enough. Overall, they maintained the proper idiomatic magical fairy-tale setting, accomplishing with lights what the composer does with music – this is Rimsky-Korsakov, after all, not Mussorgsky. Rimsky-Korsakov, the most lyrical and pictorial of composers, called his art “essentially the most enchanting and intoxicating of lies;” Mussorgsky, on the other hand, claimed his art was a means of communicating with people the truth of life, however bitter: “speaking out boldly...that is my aim...I am a realist in the highest sense.”

Hence the production fittingly had both the splendor of Russian Orientalism and more than a whiff of intoxicating late Romanticism. Reinforcing the idea of the fantastic dream world the Astrologer had conjured up at the beginning, the cockerel itself appears via projection on a sweeping, curved screen as a huge golden cartoon bird perched atop an archetypal Russian onion dome. Alas the large screen, sweeping down

toward the stage on the left hand side, prevented some in audience from viewing fully this fantastic image, as well as other surreal and dreamlike sequences artfully (and at times disturbingly) displayed. On the other hand, the colorful costumes provided ample compensation alluding to the stunning folk-inspired dresses, cloaks and such of the Ballets Russes era and all vividly highlighted in a cartoonish, other-worldly kind of way.

The cast, although not perfect, was certainly up to the difficult task of bringing this fascinating work to light. The hefty bass-baritone Eric Owens had originally been scheduled to sing King Dodon. After he bowed out (before the run began), baritone Tim Mix bravely took over the role. He certainly projected the essence of the dimwitted king with his musicality and good sense of comic timing, but the voice lacked the power and heft to truly project the essence of this bombastic idiot. As for the casting of the eunuch Astrologer, Rimsky-Korsakov called for a weird, thin “tenore altino” – for which he wrote in a performance note that a high tenor with a strong falsetto might substitute. This is what we got from the fine tenor Barry Banks, although he indeed managed a full-throated high E sans falsetto.

Certainly the most virtuosic role of the opera is that of the Queen of Shemakha, a coloratura showpiece for such famous sopranos as Lilly Pons at the Met in the 1920’s and Beverly Sills at NYC Opera in the 1960’s. Now it was the turn for Russian soprano Venera Gimadieva, a star of the Bolshoi who had recently performed the role in Brussels and Madrid. She did not disappoint, once she got past a few tentative moments in the opening of her famous “Hymn to the Sun” with its exposed melodic line of tricky transparency. During the course of the act her coloratura was breathtaking, with subtle shading and tapering of her rich tone. So too was her seductive belly dance in which Pons had shocked



Venera Gimadieva as the Queen of Shemakha; Tim Mix as King Dodon
Photo: Ken Howard

audiences with her semi-nudity. Ms. Gimadieva certainly cut an ideal figure for this role, showing herself all the while to be cold and calculating in her sensuous gyrations. Beverly Sills once quipped regarding this scene, which she performed rather as a parody of seduction, that it is very difficult to be sexy on a high E; Ms. Gimadieva certainly managed both.

The many secondary roles were all handled with aplomb. Noteworthy was contralto Meredith Arwady as Amelfa, the King's royal housekeeper who in her own way attempts seduction of the king with notes as stunningly low as those of the Shemakha Queen are high. Her impressive low register and booming Wagnerian voice gave her complete command of this earthy role. Another standout was bass Kevin Burdette, fittingly pompous strutting about as Dodon's loyal commander, General Polkan – until the capricious Dodon orders him beheaded to impress the Queen! Per usual, Santa Fe also made good use of its fine apprentice singers, prepared by Susanne Sheston, in the

colorful choral scenes. Among these singers, two stood out in their solo roles: tenor Richard Smagur as Prince Guidon and soprano Kasia Borowiec as the offstage golden cockerel.

Especially impressive were the contributions of the orchestra itself, led with such sensitivity and élan by Emmanuel Villaume, music director of Dallas Opera. Right from the opening trumpet call, Maestro Villaume captured the ethereal beauty of not only the many solo moments, but also the frequently shimmering fabric of the score. Professor Taruskin once commented that Rimsky-Korsakov might perhaps be regarded as the most underrated composer of all time, given that so much of his orchestration involved reworking scores of his contemporaries – which collectively encompass such a larger portion of Russian opera repertory. A rare performance like this helps remind us that in his own extensive output Rimsky-Korsakov was one of the world's brilliant and most inventive orchestrators. (Happily, next summer at Bard's SummerScape, the two-week focus on Rimsky-Korsakov should do so as well.)



Meredith Arwady as Amelfa with the Santa Fe Opera Chorus
Photo: Ken Howard

At the opera's end, the familiar Astrologer's theme returns to bring him back for his unsettling farewell:

There, that is the end of my story. The Queen and myself were the only living persons in it; the rest – a delirium, an illusion, a pale apparition, emptiness...

Then the orchestra has the last say: a crescendo and again the cry of the cockerel on the muted trumpets, as in the introduction, prompting the audience to leave the enchantment of Rimsky-Korsakov and the charm of a summer evening in the Santa Fe hills. Would it be too much to suggest these lingering words anticipate some famous lines from another obscure modernist work, T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," written just fifteen years after the *Golden Cockerel*?

*What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal*

Rimsky-Korsakov was perhaps no modernist poet, nor a somber realist like Mussorgsky; but in *The Golden Cockerel* he was not just an intoxicating musician – but a satirist with a message worth considering. Thanks to Santa Fe Opera for helping "the arts punch back" in this ominous, unreal age of President Dodon.

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Crosby Theater of Santa Fe Opera

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