

Prince Igor [*Knyaz' Igor'*]

Richard Taruskin

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Opera in a prologue and four acts by Alexander Porfir'yevich Borodin to his own libretto after a scenario by Vladimir Vasil'yevich Stasov largely based on the anonymous (?)12th-century epic *Slovo o polku Igoreve* ('The Lay of the Host of Igor'); St Petersburg, Mariinsky Theatre, 23 October/4 November 1890.

Igor Svyatoslavich <i>Prince of Seversk</i>	baritone
Yaroslavna <i>his second wife</i>	soprano
Vladimir Igorevich <i>son by his first marriage</i>	tenor
Vladimir Yaroslavich [Galitsky] <i>Prince of Galich, brother of Princess Yaroslavna</i>	high bass
Konchak <i>Polovtsian khan</i>	bass
Gzak <i>Polovtsian khan</i>	silent
Konchakovna <i>daughter of Khan Konchak</i>	contralto
Ovlur <i>a baptized Polovtsian</i>	tenor
Skula <i>gudok (rebec) player</i>	bass
Yeroshka <i>gudok (rebec) player</i>	tenor
Yaroslavna's Nurse	soprano
Polovtsian Maiden	soprano
Russian princes and princesses, boyars and boyarinyas, elders, Russian warriors, maidens, crowd; Polovtsian khans, girlfriends of Konchakovna, slave girls of Khan Konchak, Russian prisoners, Polovtsian guards	
<i>Setting</i> The city of Putivl' and a Polovtsian encampment, 1185	

The opera's protracted gestation – Borodin worked on it between 1869 and 1887, and left it unfinished – has suggested parallels with *Siegfried* and *Les Troyens*, but the most fitting comparison is with that other great unwieldy Russian torso, *Khovanshchina*, like *Prince Igor* a historical opera to the composer's own gradually accumulating and ideologically inconstant libretto. Both were left for others

to complete; neither can be said to have achieved definitive form within its author's lifetime. Perhaps most importantly, *Khovanshchina* and *Prince Igor* had Vladimir Stasov in common. The Mighty Kuchka's great tribune (and their christener), a librarian by profession, Stasov had a hand in the conception of many of the group's most characteristic works, but in none did he play so important a role as in Borodin's magnum opus.

The project had its origin in a scenario Stasov prepared, at Borodin's request but at Stasov's own choice, from Russia's earliest literary classic (supplemented by episodes and descriptions from two Kievan chronicles, the *Ipatiyevskaya* and the *Lavrentiyevskaya*). The possibly spurious 'Lay of the Host of Igor', describing a 12th-century princeling's ill-fated campaign against a nomadic Turkic tribe that was interfering with trade routes to the south, seemed to Stasov to answer to all of Borodin's poetic and musical strengths: 'broad epic themes, national character, the most diversified *dramatis personae*, passion, drama, the Orient in all its varied manifestations'.

In short, the opera was to be another *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, the only significant difference being one of tone: earnestly nationalist (as befitted its time and place) rather than innocently 'magical'. From the perspective of the latter 19th century a *Ruslan*-esque opera could not seem anything but anachronistic in concept and design: even Borodin's fellow-kuchkist César Cui called it 'an opera in the narrow and, perhaps, outmoded sense'. Its musical beauties have redeemed it, and the 'epic' genre to which it is said to belong has provided a trusty excuse for its glaring structural gaps (the fates of two major characters being unknown at the final curtain) and its superfluties (much of the love and dance music in the middle pair of acts). At the same time, the work's reputation as an 'operatic picture book' (Dahlhaus) has justified the crudest sort of play-doctoring, such as the 'traditional' omission of Act 3.

Like *Ruslan*, Borodin's opera derived its dramatic rhythm from an opposition of national musical idioms: rigorously Russian versus promiscuously 'oriental'. The former, in *Igor*, is based – though perhaps not as strictly as some have maintained – on 'intonations' from epic ballads and on a small repertory of folksongs such as *Uzh vi' gor'i moi Vorob'yovskiye* ('About the Sparrow Hills'). The latter ranges in *Igor* from Arabian to Turkic to Finno-Ugric vernaculars.

Stasov sketched out the scenario during a soirée at the home of Glinka's sister, Lyudmila Shestakova, on the night of 19–20 April/1–2 May 1869. Three symmetrically disposed acts were planned. The first act portrays the social disintegration of Igor's domain in his absence. The second treats Igor and his son in captivity, corresponding roughly to the two middle acts of the eventual opera. The third act is again set in Putivl', and there is an epilogue, with no counterpart in the opera, set two years later at the wedding of Vladimir and Konchakovna. This epilogue, a transparent derivation from the *Ruslan* finale without precedent in lay or chronicle beyond the tacked-on final chorus, nonetheless epitomizes the scenario's ideology; for while in captivity Igor would not assent to a marriage that would make his son a Polovtsian, he rejoices at home in the same marriage when it 'annexes' the khan's daughter as a Russian and a Christian. Another manifestation of the same double standard is the egregious Ovlur, wholly Stasov's invention (in the scenario he is Yaroslavna's half-Polovtsian retainer), whose treachery against his father's people is heartily approved along with his appeal to Igor to break the bonds of chivalry for the sake of Russian 'honour'. (In the eventual opera Ovlur's connection with Yaroslavna

was severed; he appears only in Act 2 as a turncoat- *ex-machina*.) Thus *Prince Igor* made overt the pervasive subtext to 19th-century Russian essays in orientalism: the racially justified endorsement of Russia's militaristic expansion to the east. 'We go with trust in God for our faith, our Russia, our people', the operatic Igor anachronistically proclaims, very much in the spirit of the reigning tsar, Alexander II.

Borodin began composing, in the late summer of 1869, with Stasov's first number 'Yaroslavna's Dream', based in part on sketches for an earlier operatic project on Lev Mey's drama, *Tsarskaya nevesta* ('The Tsar's Bride', later the basis of an opera by Rimsky-Korsakov). According to Stasov, Borodin followed it early in 1870 with its 'oriental' counterpart, Konchakovna's cavatina (it should be noted however that the extant autograph material for that number dates from 1874-5), based in principle on Stasov material but not explicitly provided for. Next (again following Stasov rather than the extant manuscripts) came the chorus of khans, probably adapted from an Oprichniks' chorus in *The Tsar's Bride* - a purely decorative number that could fit here or there or anywhere in the middle act. These were early signs that Borodin's musical fantasy (like Glinka's before him) was going to have its head without concern for dramatic consequences. There is irony in this disregard; as early as March 1870, cold feet about the project's dramatic viability coupled with not unreasonable doubts as to his own competence as a librettist (exacerbated by the humiliating failure of Cui's *William Ratcliff*) caused Borodin to suspend work. Some of his musical sketches went into the Second Symphony, begun the next year, and into *Mlada*, the opera-ballet on which four of the Five worked for a while in 1872. It was only after that project aborted without hope of salvage that Borodin returned to *Igor*. The *Mlada* music, parts of the finale excepted, circled back into the work from which it had mainly been drawn (see *Mlada*).

It would be fruitless to attempt a detailed chronology of the opera's piecemeal accumulation from this point as long as Borodin's manuscripts remain undescribed (Bobéth's checklist is far from complete) and Lamm's annotated 'composite vocal score' - in effect a transcription of all the surviving autographs - remains unpublished. The salient points are: (a) Most of the Polovtsian music (and also Yaroslavna's Lament, which evidently picked up in this way the somewhat oriental flavour that has nonplussed some writers) was written in 1875; for the Act 2 hymn, no.7, the composer relied in part on the same melody from Christianowitsch's *Esquisse historique de la musique arabe* as he did later in the song 'Arabskaya melodiya'; Konchak's Act 2 aria, no.15, seems to have been based on a Chuvash melody from an 1870 collection. The Polovtsian March (no.18) was an obvious emulation of Chernomor's March in *Ruslan*. (b) A 'Carousal chorus' for Galitsky's followers, also written in 1875, became the basis for the eventual Act 1 scene i, which precedes the first number in Stasov's scenario. (c) The 'Chorus of Praise' now in the prologue was originally meant as the culmination of the epilogue, which was never fully composed. (d) Igor's aria, no.13, was originally composed in 1875 as a modest recitative-arioso to an entirely different text (see Dmitriyev 1950); its replacement, based in part on the *Mlada* music, was composed in 1881. (e) In 1878, following another break in his work, Borodin introduced Skula and Yeroshka, the pair of comical *gudochniki* (rebec players) associated with Vladimir Galitsky. Though comparable to minstrel or jester characters in earlier Russian operas such as *Askold's Grave* and *Rogneda*, they were obviously modelled on Varlaam and Missaïl, the tenor-bass pair of vagabond monks in *Boris Godunov*. (This correspondence extends to their musical idiom, largely

modelled, in the prologue and finale, on the prose recitatives in Musorgsky's Inn Scene.)*(f)* 1879 saw the composition of the bulk of Act 1: in addition to nos.2 *b*, 4 and 5, Borodin replaced Stasov's narrative of the two merchants with the Chorus of Boyars, no.6, based on the folksong 'About the Sparrow Hills'. A theme from the merchants' narrative went into the unfinished Third Symphony; in 1880 Borodin composed a new conclusion for the act (later dropped, either by the composer or by his posthumous collaborators), in which Galitsky returns to Yaroslavna's quarters after the boyars' report and attempts a mutiny with the aid of the foreign residents of Putivl'.*(g)* The prologue, which followed in 1883, was an attempt to fill an obvious lacuna caused in Stasov's scenario by the absence of the title character before Act 2; the narration of the fateful eclipse was now replaced by its direct, if slightly anachronistic, portrayal.*(h)* The last major decision was taken in 1884, when Borodin detached the escape and made it the basis of a separate act, Act 3, in which some of the overflow Polovtsian music (March, Procession of khans, Konchak's song, etc.) might find a home.

By the time of his sudden death Borodin had orchestrated a miscellaneous group of ten numbers from the opera, mostly for concert performances at the Free Music School under Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov between 1876 and 1879. Besides the chorus of praise and its reprise in the prologue, the group included nos.2 *b*, 4 and 5 from Act 1; 9, 11, 15 and 17 from Act 2; and 25 and 29 from Act 4. Rimsky-Korsakov, who had actually begun a version of the opera in 1885 with the composer's active collaboration (in the process filling some gaps in the prologue), now undertook to complete it. As he had employed his former pupil Lyadov to assist with the orchestration of the Polovtsian dances in 1879, he now enlisted as his assistant the 21-year-old Glazunov – a favourite of Borodin's during the latter's last five years and possessor of a phenomenal musical memory. Rimsky retouched and scored the middle section of the prologue and all the unorchestrated portions of Acts 1, 2 and 4, plus the Polovtsian March in Act 3, adding verbal and musical transitions as needed. Glazunov's role was more creative: he had virtually to compose the bulk of the third act (1252 bars) on the basis of sometimes very fragmentary sketches. His scrupulous account of this work was published in 1896 and translated by Abraham (1939). The extent of his role in the composition of the overture must remain unsettled as he evaluated it differently at different times; Levashov (1985), on the basis of notations on Borodin's manuscripts ('This will do for a first theme', 'Good for a second theme' etc.), has asserted that Glazunov composed it outright.

Doubts about the correspondence between the structurally and dramaturgically lopsided performing version thus produced and the composer's final intentions were inevitable (see Abraham 1939). They were much abetted by Lamm's critical report, the conclusions of which were widely known long before the belated publication of excerpts in 1983. Lamm was able to demonstrate that Rimsky and Glazunov had pruned away some 1787 bars of music, amounting to almost one fifth of the total that Borodin had composed. Several alternative performing versions have been put forth (see Neef 1989), the most substantial being that prepared in the early 1970s by a troika consisting of a young musicologist (Levashov), a veteran composer (Yury Fortunatov) and the chief régisseur of the Moscow Bol'shoy Theatre (Boris Pokrovsky). First produced in Vilnius in 1974, it was given thereafter at the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin and published there in 1978. The chief differences naturally pertain to Act 3. In the alternative version a trio of princes, two of them new characters, swear mutual fealty; the familiar trio (no.23) is cut down to a duet (without Igor) to match its counterpart in *Mlada*; the Russian

prisoners sing an invocation to the River Don to the music of the *Mlada* finale; most controversially, the 1875 version of Igor's aria is reinstated alongside its 1881 successor, which retains its place in Act 2. In addition, the 1880 ending to Act 1 (Galitsky's rebellion) is restored (culminating in Galitsky's death on the ramparts of Putivl'), and an epilogue corresponding to Stasov's is appended.

PROLOGUE *The market place in Putivl'* Igor sets off on his campaign against the Polovtsi despite an ill-presaging eclipse and the entreaties of Yaroslavna, his wife; Skula and Yeroshka desert (no.1).

ACT 1.i *The court of Prince Vladimir Galitsky* Skula and Yeroshka lead a paean to Igor's profligate brother-in-law and recount how he abducted a maiden for his pleasure (no.2 *a*: chorus, 'Slava, slava Volodimiru': 'All hail, Vladimir'). Galitsky announces his philosophy (no.2 *b*, recitative and song, 'Greshno tait': ya skuki ne lyublyu': 'Twere a sin to hide it: I hate a dreary life'). He mocks his sister Yaroslavna's disapproval (no.2 *c*, recitative). A crowd of maidens rushes in to protest at the abduction; Galitsky sends them on their way (no.2 *d*, chorus and *scena*, 'Oy, likhon'ko! Oy, goryushko!': 'Oh, what misfortune, oh, what sorrow'). The men briefly show their fear of Yaroslavna (no.2 *e*) but, turning their attention to wine, resume singing Galitsky's praises: he should be their prince, not Igor (no.2 *f*: Princely Song, 'Chto u knyazya da Volodomira': 'At Prince Vladimir's').

1.ii *Chamber in Yaroslavna's quarters* Yaroslavna, pining for Igor, suffers from evil dreams (no.3, arioso, 'Nemalo vremeni proshlo': 'No little time has passed'). The Nurse announces the arrival of the maidens, who complain of Galitsky's behaviour in a Glinka-esque 5/4 metre (no.4). Galitsky unexpectedly arrives, frightens off the maidens, attempts to laugh off his sister's reproaches, but in the end agrees to release the abducted girl (no.5); he leaves. A party of boyars comes to Yaroslavna with terrible news: Igor and his son Vladimir have been taken prisoner by the Polovtsi. An alarm sounds: a Polovtsian force under Khan Gzak attacks Putivl' (no.6, finale).

ACT 2 *The Polovtsian encampment; evening* A chorus of Polovtsian maidens entertain Konchakovna with a hymn to the cool refreshment of evening (no.7, 'Na bezvod'ye, dnyom na solntse vyanet tsvetik': 'In the absence of water the flower withers in the sun by day'), and go into their dance (no.8, 'Dance of the Polovtsian Maidens'). Konchakovna sings of her expected tryst with Vladimir (no.9, cavatina, 'Merknet svet dnevnoy': 'The daylight dies'). Russian prisoners march by on their way back from forced labour. Konchakovna bids the maidens refresh them. The Polovtsian patrol, Ovlur among them, make their round. Ovlur furtively remains onstage when they depart (no.10). Vladimir cautiously makes his way to Konchakovna's tent and sings of their tryst (no.11, recitative and cavatina, 'Gde ti, gde': 'Where art thou, where'). Konchakovna appears, and the lovers sing in ecstasy (no.12, duet, 'Ti li Vladimir moy?': 'Is it you, Vladimir mine?'). They scamper off at the sound of Igor's approach. He sings an elaborate aria in two parts, the first expressing his passionate thirst for freedom, the second his tender thoughts of Yaroslavna (no.13, 'Ni sna, ni otdikha': 'Nor sleep, nor rest of any kind'). Ovlur seizes the moment: he approaches Igor and proposes a plan of escape. Igor at first refuses to consider such a dishonourable course, but vacillates (no.14); Ovlur disappears. Khan Konchak enters, oozes magnanimity towards his 'honoured guest' (no.15, aria, 'Zdorov li, Knyaz?': 'How goes it, Prince?'). He offers to grant Igor's freedom in return for a pledge of non-aggression, even suggests they become

allies; to all of this Igor firmly refuses, much to Konchak's admiration (no.16). The khan orders entertainment from his slaves, offering Igor his pick of the maidens (no.17, Polovtsian dance [s] with chorus).

ACT 3 *An outpost of the encampment* Khan Gzak returns from Putivl', prisoners in tow, to a tumultuous greeting from Khan Konchak and the Polovtsi, while the Russians look on and seethe (no. 18, Polovtsian March). Konchak sings a song of triumph (no.19, 'Nash mech nam dal pobedu': 'Our sword has given us victory'). He orders a feast (no.20 a); the khans go off to divide the spoils (no.20 b, chorus, 'Idyom za nim sovet derzhat': 'We'll follow him and hold council'); the Russians bewail their defeat and urge Igor to accept Ovlur's offer (no.20 c). The Polovtsi drink and dance themselves into a stupor (no.21, chorus and dance, 'Podoben solntsu khan Konchak': 'Khan Konchak is like unto the sun'). Ovlur summons Igor (no.22). Konchakovna, having heard of the plan, runs onstage; she contends with Igor over Vladimir, Igor making his appeal to the tune of his 'freedom' aria. Finally she rouses the camp, and Igor must make off without his son (no.23, trio, 'Ya vsyo, ya vsyo uznala': 'I've found out everything'). The Polovtsi threaten Vladimir, but Konchak, ever magnanimous, spares him and even blesses his union with Konchakovna (no.24, finale).

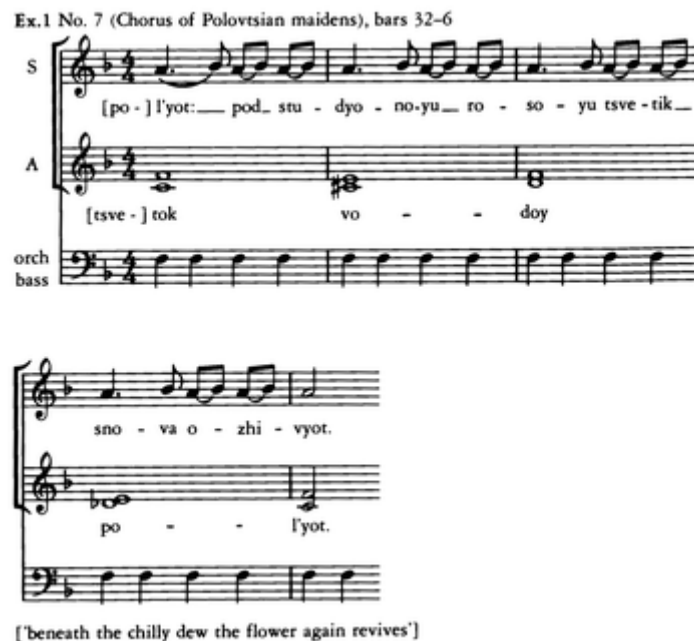
ACT 4 *At the Putivl' town wall* Yaroslavna laments her fate and that of her husband (no.25, Yaroslavna's Lament: 'Akh! plachu ya gor'ko': 'Ah, bitterly I weep'). Some passers-by sing a lament of their own at the fate of Putivl', a masterly and justly famous stylization of folk heterophonic polyphony (no.26, Chorus of villagers, 'Okh, ne buyniy veter zavival': 'Oh, it was not a stormy wind that howled'). Yaroslavna's dejected mood is broken by the sound of approaching hoofbeats; she recognizes Igor from afar. When he dismounts she rushes to him and they exchange ecstatic greetings (no.27, recitative and duet, 'On - moy sokol yasnii!': 'It is he, my bright falcon'). Skula and Yeroshka blunder onstage carousing, recognize Igor with panic from afar, save their skins by ringing the tocsin to announce the prince's return and gratuitously declare their loyalty (no.28, song to the rebec, *scena* and chorus). The opera ends with a joyful chorus of greeting (no.29, 'Znat', gospod' mol'bi uslishal': 'We know the Lord has heard our prayers').

Act 2 of *Prince Igor*, the only one that Borodin may plausibly be said to have completed (though even this was much retouched by Glazunov and Rimsky-Korsakov: the Prisoners' Chorus was reconstructed from memory by the former to a text by the latter), may serve as paradigm of his operatic manner, and also of the way in which a thoroughly static, formal, conventional (and in some ways inept) conception of the genre is enlivened (and, in corresponding ways, redeemed) by music so fresh and alluring as to keep the opera perpetually alive on the fringes of the repertory.

The act is framed by decorative 'oriental' numbers that set the scene and supply the routine choreographic diversion endemic to grand-operatic second acts. The subplot, the romance of Igor's son Vladimir and his captor's daughter Konchakovna, is given a risibly redundant exposition: lengthy da capo cavatinas for each (Konchakovna's, accompanied by the chorus in Rimsky-Korsakov's version, being a virtual replay of the act's decorative opening), separated by a pair of tiny choral numbers which serve to bring Ovlur furtively on stage, and followed by a duet, longer than the two cavatinas combined, that is cast in equally stereotypical format. The lovers having sung, they depart, almost as if

in a Baroque opera, to make way for the title character, who enters to sing his aria of remorse and longing, the opera's centrepiece. This, the largest of all the musical structures in *Prince Igor*, is once again in da capo form but with the reprise modified to produce a climax. After a brief *scena*, Igor's aria is followed by another extended aria for another bass soloist, his captor Khan Konchak, who, like Igor, enters for no other purpose than to sing. The only real dramatic confrontation in the act takes place during the little *scena* between the bass arias when Ovlur steps out of the shadows to propose to Igor an escape plan. Otherwise the act is a classic 'concert in costume', one large vocal number following (but hardly motivated by) another.

Ex.1 No. 7 (Chorus of Polovtsian maidens), bars 32-6



S
[po -] l'yot: pod stu - dyo - no-yu ro - so - yu tsve - tik

A
[tsve -] tok vo - - - doy

orch
bass

sno - va o - zhi - vyot.
po - - l'yot.
['beneath the chilly dew the flower again revives']

Ex.1

The second act of *Prince Igor* would no doubt be just as silly as this description has made it seem were it not for the fact that every number in it is a masterpiece. Borodin's exotic idiom, though it followed and enlarged upon the examples of Glinka (the Ratmir scenes in *Ruslan*) and Balakirev (*Islamey*, *Tamara*), and though it to some extent incorporated source tunes culled from books, was an intensely personal yet flexible style, of all Borodinesque idioms the one most instantly identifiable as the composer's, and adaptable to a great range of emotional expression. At its most *Ruslan*-esque, Borodin's 'orientalism' emphasizes chromatic passes in both directions between the fifth and sixth diatonic degrees over a tonic pedal (and usually with some sort of melismatic ostinato serving as 'melodic pedal': see ex.1). At full sensual strength, the chromatic passes grow to encompass whole scales, accompanied by suitably slithery auxiliaries (ex.2). It is the supreme musical expression of *nega*, the lush languor of the orient as viewed through European eyes. (That it was taken, along with a concomitant modal instability, as the essential - and influential! - Borodin trait, can be seen from Ravel's pastiche *A la manière de Borodine*.) More *nega* is evoked by the tessitura of Konchakovna's contralto, unexpected in an *ingénue* role. When her voice coils around and eventually beneath

Vladimir's as the love duet reaches its climax, the effect is startling, redeeming the insipid verbal text. The concluding Polovtsian dances (which, when performed as a suite, begin with the orchestrally inventive maidens' dance, no.8) marked an epoch for French musicians when introduced by Dyagilev in 1909.

Igor's aria was written twice: first (in 1875) as a dutifully 'kuchkist' arioso over a texture of leitmotifs (all 'petty form, detail, tincyraft', to quote Borodin's operatic credo), then, definitively (in 1881), in full accord with the composer's lyric impulse and in manifest emulation of the title character's battlefield soliloquy in *Ruslan*. The stately themes of its vast da capo structure are concerned, respectively, with Igor's freedom to seek personal glory, and with tender thoughts of his waiting wife, Yaroslavna. The composer's belief in 'artistic truth' over the literal variety (what was then known as realism) is affirmed by Yaroslavna's reprise of Igor's love theme - which, so to speak, we have never seen her hear - when she sings of her corresponding longing in Act 4. It is fascinating to ponder the process by which Igor's aria was amplified alongside the exactly comparable metamorphosis of the title character's central aria in *Boris Godunov* (or, for that matter, that of Kutuzov's big aria in *War and Peace*). In all three cases realistic declamation over a texture of leitmotifs was replaced by lyrical melody adapted from an earlier or abandoned work (in Borodin's case it was *Mlada*; in Musorgsky's, *Salammbô*; in Prokofiev's, *Ivan the Terrible*), and for the identical purpose: monumentalization of form and exaltation of tone.

Withal, Borodin could be an excellent musical dramatist when that, rather than totemic portraiture, was his purpose. The terse little scene with Ovlur between the big bass arias is a masterly study in character and contrast. Ovlur retains an 'oriental' tendency towards insinuating melisma as against Igor's syllabic steadfastness, but the fast tempo and the obsessive ostinato repetitions endow his responses with a suitable dramatic tension, and the tellingly sparse accompaniment in two- or three-part counterpoint manages to retain a whiff of the lush Polovtsian harmonic idiom even as it conveys urgency rather than the usual *nega*.

A few more scenes like that (and there is reason to believe they might have been supplied had the composer lived), and *Prince Igor* would have needed no excuses. As it is, the opera is a magnificent farrago, a smorgåsbord from which all listeners and critics seem to find some morsel to their taste. As Borodin put it in a letter, 'Curiously enough, all the members of our circle seem to come together on my *Igor*: from the ultra-innovatory realist Modest Petrovich [Musorgsky], to the lyric-dramatic innovator César Antonovich [Cui], to the martinet with respect to outward form and musical tradition Nikolay Andreyevich [Rimsky-Korsakov], to the ardent champion of novelty and power in all things, Vladimir Vasil'yevich Stasov. Everyone is satisfied with *Igor*, strongly though they may differ about other things'.