

Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

Russian Realism (Musorgsky, Chaikovsky); Opéra Lyrique; Operetta, Verismo

Chapter: CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

GOING TOO FAR

To continue the argument of the previous chapter, the concept of “comedization” can accommodate without contradiction not only realism but also some other developments in European musical theater that on the face of it seem quite incompatible with realism. A defining moment for the concept, a sort of limiting case, was a creative crisis that unexpectedly intervened in the work of the century's most committed musical realist, altering the course of his career.

That composer was Modest Musorgsky, already mentioned in chapter 8 as a realist, and in chapter 9 as a member of the “mighty little bunch” of Russian nationalist composers who grouped themselves around Miliy Balakirev in the 1850s and 1860s. Musorgsky's nationalism, combined with his insecure nonprofessional status (having been trained not for a musical but for a military career), led him to adopt an extreme “outsider's” attitude toward the existing traditions and institutions of musical Europe. He rejected with equal fervor both the traditional curriculum of the German conservatory—counterpoint, mastery of “form,” systematic theory, any manifestation of “braininess”—and the esthetic of Italian opera: bel canto, refined or ornate melody, all conventional canons of musical “beauty.”



fig. 12-1 Modest Musorgsky, painted by Ilya Repin in the hospital a week before the composer's death in February 1881.

Such a stance is easy enough to write off as a case of sour grapes. There was no Russian conservatory where Musorgsky might have studied until 1862, when he was already overage; and the Russian musical stage was dominated during his formative years by a state-supported Italian opera troupe from which the work of native composers was barred by official policy. Russian composers of Musorgsky's generation were effectively frozen out of the country's musical establishment—a situation comparable to that which existed in America, and lasted longer. Unless one went abroad for training, as Glinka and Gottschalk did, one had to content oneself with correspondence courses or self-education. And there were next to no performance outlets for one's creative labor unless one was a performing virtuoso, as Musorgsky (while a fine and much sought-after accompanist) was not.

What is left, though, after both brains and beauty have been renounced? Good character, obviously. That is where Musorgsky's high moral commitment to “truth” was born (a commitment he thought of as being particularly Russian, in opposition to the falsities of German and Italian routine) and hence his commitment to realism, with its contempt for fine manners and convention. He found a mentor in Dargomizhsky (like him an aristocratic dilettante frozen out by the professional establishment), and a model in *The Stone Guest*, the opera mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. Dargomizhsky had

solved the problem of operatic “form” by dispensing with the libretto altogether, and that made him “the great teacher of musical truth,” as Musorgsky put it in two separate dedications.

But Dargomizhsky's solution was not complete, because the text of *The Stone Guest* consisted of artistic (that is, artificial) verse. In what may have been the most extreme “reformist” position ever adopted by an opera composer, Musorgsky proclaimed that the ultimate in musical truth could be achieved only if composers set librettos in conversational prose, with the music faithfully mirroring the tempo and contour of actual conversational speech. This was a particularly strict application to music of the old neoclassical (or “Renaissance”) precept of *mimesis*, or “imitation of nature,” the idea that art derives its power from the mimicking of reality. It was the same idea that had inspired the invention of opera in the humanist academies of Florence almost three centuries before.



fig. 12-2 Alexander Dargomizhsky, engraving from a photograph.

But music had always fit uneasily into the mimetic scheme of things because it had no obvious natural model. The old Florentine solution was similar to Musorgsky's: the idea that, if speech is taken to be the outward embodiment of emotion, then imitation of speech was tantamount to the imitation of emotion—that is, human psychological reality (“human nature”). The difference lay in

the type of speech to be imitated. For the Florentines, living in the age of humanism, it was poetry composed in the style of Greek drama. For Musorgsky, living in an age of burgeoning scientific empiricism (or “positivism”), it would be the “natural” speech one observed in “real life.”

This was unprecedented. Never had a composer envisioned the renunciation of verse, however terse, as the basis of musical setting. Outside the realm of functioning church liturgies in oral tradition (e.g., Gregorian chant), no one had ever seriously questioned the status of regular meter as a basic musical ingredient. In his quest for the ultimate musical embodiment of nature, Musorgsky did not shrink from questioning any assumption about “the nature of music.” This was surely the most radical posture ever assumed by a nineteenth-century composer, and he gloried in it for a while because it turned all of his liabilities into advantages. Far from handicapped, he was *privileged* by his maverick, autodidact status to think the unthinkable. “On nature's scale,” he wrote to a friend (typically imitating the language of science),

man is the highest organism (at least on earth), and this highest organism possesses the gift of word and voice without equal among terrestrial organisms. If one admits the reproduction by artistic means of human speech in all its subtlest and most capricious shades—to depict it naturally, as life and human nature demand—would this not amount to the deification of the human gift of words? And if by this simplest of means, simply submitting strictly to artistic instinct in catching human vocal intonations, it becomes possible to capture the heart, then is it not a worthy enterprise? And if one could, along with that, catch the thinking faculties in a vise, then would it not be worthwhile to devote oneself to such an occupation?¹

His conservatory would be the conservatory of life. To another correspondent he wrote, “whatever speech I hear, whoever is speaking (or, the main thing, no matter what he is saying), my brain is already churning out the musical embodiment of such speech.”² These optimistic letters were written during the summer of 1868, when the twenty-nine-year-old Musorgsky was making his first attempt to realize these ideals in practice—or, to put it in the “scientific” terms he preferred, to carry out his first “experiment in dramatic music in prose.”

The exercise in question was similar to *The Stone Guest* in concept: a verbatim setting of a preexisting play. The play in question, though, had to be a prose play, and that meant, according to the conventions of the nineteenth-century theater, that it had to be a comedy. Musorgsky chose *Marriage*, a farce by Nikolai Gogol about the vacillations of an unwilling bridegroom. The naturalistic dialogue in which it is cast must surely rank among the most unlyrical prose ever put on paper. For a sample of the unlyrical music with which Musorgsky clothed it, we can start right at the beginning with the main character's opening speech (Ex. 12-1).

Dovol'no medlenno (rather slow)

Vot, kak nach - nyosh' è - tak o - din na do - su - ge po - dum - ìva',
 tak vi - dish', chto toch - no, na - do zhe - nit' - sya.
 Chto, v sa - mom de - le? Zhi - vyosh', zhi - vyosh', da ta - ka - ya na - ko - nets,
 skver - nost' sta - no - vit - sya. Vot op - ya' pro - pus - til mya - so - yed.
 A, ved', ka - zhet - sya, vsyo go - to - vo, i sva - kha vot uzh tri me - sya - tsa kho - dit.
 Pra - vo! Sa - mo - mu kak - to sta - no - vit - sya so - vest - no Ey! Ste - pan!

Well, when you begin thus, alone and at leisure, to think about it, you see that you positively have to get married. What do you find? You live your life, but in the end, finally, what a horror it becomes. Again I've let the winter go by, and all the while, it seems, everything is ready: the matchmaker has been coming three months already. Really! You get to feeling ashamed of yourself. Hey! Stepan!

ex. 12-1 Modest Musorgsky, *Marriage*, opening speech

As a Russian, Musorgsky had an actual advantage in writing naturalistic prose recitative, because the accentual pattern of the spoken language imposes a sort of beat on most utterances that can be represented fairly accurately in ordinary musical notation. In ordinary Russian speech accents are distributed evenly, within a tempo that varies according to affect. At the outset, Podkolyosin, the prospective bridegroom, is lying on a divan, smoking his pipe. The accented syllables (*Vot*, *-nyosh'*, *-din*, *-su*, etc.) fall regularly on a half-note tactus as befits his lethargic state. Unaccented syllables are arranged in patterns of short equal values between the accented ones. An unaccented syllable is never allowed to occupy the beginning of a beat, lest it introduce an un-Russian secondary accent. (No matter how many syllables it may contain, a Russian word takes only one accent: English-speaking students, who are used to introducing secondary accents even in two-syllable words, often practice the word *dostiprimechátel'nosti*, which means “points of interest,” as in sightseeing.)

Where the notated beat is the quarter note and the accents fall on the half note, as here, this means that the intervening quarter-note pulses will be occupied by rests, as is uniformly the case in this example up to the words *nádo zhenít'sya*. The resultant strings of little notes, evenly crowded into the space of one beat (entailing the very free use of triplets and other *gruppetti*) and interrupted by a rest at the beginning of the next, are instantly recognizable as “Musorgskian.” Beginning with *nádo zhenít'sya*, (“you have to get married”), the accents begin falling on the quarter notes in response to the anxiety that the thought of marriage has aroused in a confirmed bachelor.

The other noteworthy feature is the fastidiousness with which note values are assigned. Musorgsky's ear for the tempo of Russian speech, as the quoted letter suggests, was practiced and marvelously refined. The rhythm of *na dosúge*, for example, decelerates (triplets followed by eighths), while the next word, *podúmivat'*, reverses the order of note values and accelerates. These rhythms are not arbitrarily chosen; Musorgsky is indeed drawing faithfully and "scientifically" from life (from his own observed declamation, in all likelihood). Similarly, the lengths of upbeats vary according to the natural model. The first syllable of *odín* and the unaccented word *chto* are set as sixteenth notes, while the word *tak*, even when unaccented, is usually drawled in spoken Russian, and hence is entitled to an eighth note.

Yet the composer exercises a careful "artistic" control over the shape of the line, directing all tension to release on the explosive *nádo zhenít'sya*. This culminating phrase is the first since the initial word in which the first syllable is an accented one, hence unprecedented by an upbeat. It therefore gives the impression of being delayed, which heightens the sense of climax. Melodic contour is also handled naturalistically, but with artistic control. The climactic *nádo zhenít'sya* is exceeded, as melodic high point, only by *takáya skvérnost'* ("what a horror").

These emotional climaxes stand out all the more because they are surrounded with neutral utterances that reproduce the characteristic Russian monotone quite accurately. Podkolyosin's turbid deliberations at the outset are deftly transmitted by singsong oscillations between a "reciting tone" of sorts (E/E ♭), which takes the strings of unaccented syllables, and a higher pitch area (A/A ♭) that alternates with the lower pitch on accented syllables. Where irony is called for (*zhiviyosh', zhiviyosh'*), the contour of this oscillation is widened to a grotesque seventh. The intonational model is always provided by the spoken language, and melodic contour is dictated by the type of utterance—declarative, interrogative, exclamatory—that the music must reflect.

One of Musorgsky's most striking "antimusicalisms" is the harmonic ambience. In this musical prose, tonal motion is kept purposefully static and ambiguous for long stretches, since functional harmony tends to periodize phrase structure. There is no key signature anywhere in *Marriage*, and tonal ambiguity is maintained by means of an unprecedented reliance on augmented and diminished intervals, with chords of corresponding intervallic content in the accompaniment. These, of course, are the "unvocal" intervals shunned in lyrical melodies, hence all the more desirable if lyricism is to be renounced and the illusion of "ordinary speech" sustained despite the use of fixed pitch.

But needless to say, there is nothing ordinary about such music. It is a highly distinctive medium, and Musorgsky was certainly its master. Within his own domain he had evolved a very sophisticated and elegant technique. After setting a few scenes from *Marriage* (in Russian, *Zhenit'ba*) he was ready for a task that would put to a worthy test his conviction that his new style could produce a music of unprecedented moral and intellectual force, "capturing the heart and catching the thinking faculties in a vise." The worthiest task of all would surely be a historical drama with a national theme; and this, too, reflected conditions in Russia.

Notes:

(1) Musorgsky to V. V. Nikolsky, 15 August 1868; in M. P. Musorgsky, *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, eds. Mikhail Pekelis and Alexandra Orlova, (Moscow: Muzika, 1971), pp. 102–103. 

(2) Musorgsky to N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, 30 July 1868; Musorgsky, *Literaturnoye naslediyе*, Vol. I, p. 102.

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