

## John Nelson. *The Political in Rimsky-Korsakov's Operas.*

Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. viii, 254 pp. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Illustrations. Plates. Figures. £64.99, hard bound.

Tony H. Lin

Boston College

Email: [tony.h.lin@bc.edu](mailto:tony.h.lin@bc.edu)

doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.485

In this well-researched book, an extension of the author's doctoral dissertation, *The Significance of Rimsky-Korsakov in the Development of a Russian National Identity*, John Nelson argues that Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's political leanings are reflected in his music, and he discusses each work and its context in detail to support his claims. Nelson's work has the makings of a fine book: scores and images abound, sources are consulted in the original language (primarily Russian but also German), and several appendices are included. The book's six chapters cover most of Rimsky-Korsakov's fifteen operas, with the first chapter serving as an introduction, discussing concepts such as national identity. The seven appendices include brief biographies of people mentioned in the text, operas Rimsky-Korsakov saw during his studies at the Cadet School, the full texts of two Aleksandr Pushkin poems, and a list of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera premieres. While these appendices are helpful, an index would have been preferable, especially because Nelson references countless individuals, organizations, and events.

Drawing on Rimsky-Korsakov's autobiography and correspondence, Nelson provides numerous biographical details, navigating the fine line between the personal and the musical. For example, he discusses Rimsky-Korsakov's family connections to Poland (89) as well as his reaction to the January Uprising in 1863 as an impetus to write *Pan Voyevoda*. In discussing the contemporary politics of *The Maid of Pskov*, Nelson makes a well-informed comparison between the *Kuchka* (The Mighty Five) and the *Peredvizhniki*, outlining the groups' similar agendas. He notes the key transition from staging operas in the state Mariinskii Theater to the Mamontov Russian Private Opera. While Nelson duly mentions Rimsky-Korsakov's career as a professor in the St. Petersburg Conservatory (named after Rimsky-Korsakov in 1944), the resulting tension vis-à-vis *Kuchka* could have been investigated in greater depth. So, too, could Rimsky-Korsakov's involvement in the events of 1905 that led to his dismissal from the conservatory.

Nelson is to be commended for the interdisciplinary intent of this book, as it includes plenty of discussions on literature and art. Nelson could explore whether his argument holds for Rimsky-Korsakov's other pursuits, such as editing and orchestrating works by other Russian composers. Rimsky-Korsakov is said, in a summary of Nelson's book on the Cambridge Scholars Publishing website, to have "systematically attacked, in a calculated way, the tsarist policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries . . ." (<https://www.cambridgescholars.com/news/item/book-in-focus-the-political-in-rimsky-korsakovs-operas>, emphasis mine). In the book, Nelson opts for a less charged word: *question*. This word pervades his discussion and argument: A *questioning* of Russia's attitude to Ukraine and Poland (vii), Rimsky-Korsakov *questions* Orthodoxy as a definition in "Official Nationality" (viii), he *questioned* the concepts of the State (141). One chapter ends with "Rimsky-Korsakov's *questioning* of the mode of government (in *The Maid of Pskov*) is a clear example of how he *questions* authority as a whole" (62, emphasis mine). Questioning does not always presume action, and this reader wishes Nelson were more forceful and specific in his argument.

Though the book may be of interest to a general audience and specialists, it does not always meet the expectations of scholarly rigor. Nelson uses sources ranging from *The Telegraph* and Wikipedia to CD booklets. Though images and scores are frequently shown in the book, they are not often accompanied by substantive analyses. Likewise, quotations are not always contextualized and analyzed thoroughly, and some translations are problematic. While the book strives to be comprehensive, the abundance of information distracts from Nelson's main arguments and does not always flow well. This reader was intrigued to learn about Nelson's experience as a singer and an intendant. Clearly, Rimsky-Korsakov is both an academic and musical interest of his; Nelson's perspectives as a performer and music administrator would have been welcome in the book.

While this reader acknowledges the effort and labor that went into writing and producing this book, it must be pointed out that the book contains a surprising number of errors, which should have been corrected in the copyediting process. These include rather jarring mistakes, such as the caption of the cover image as "The sole [sic] of the people." Pushkin's patronymic is rendered as Alekseevich (230) when it is Sergeevich; the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz's name is misspelled multiple times (91, 227); Princeton University is called Princetown University (132, 196). Aside from numerous typographical errors, there are also transliteration mistakes and inconsistencies as well as stylistic and formatting issues.

To conclude, Nelson's book joins a handful of others published after the centennial of Rimsky-Korsakov's death in 2008. It provides a helpful foundation for understanding him and the political aspects of his music.

## **Nicole Svobodny. *Nijinsky's Feeling Mind: The Dancer Writes, the Writer Dances.***

**Crosscurrents: Russia's Literature in Context. New York: Lexington Books, 2023. xi, 371 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$125.00, hard bound.**

Sharon Marie Carnicke

University of Southern California, School of Dramatic Arts

Email: [carnicke@usc.edu](mailto:carnicke@usc.edu)

doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.486

*Nijinsky's Feeling Mind* is a fascinating literary study on the diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky, who was arguably the most important dancer in Sergei Diaghilev's star-studded *Ballets Russes*. Nijinsky began to write when mental illness curtailed his ability to perform publicly. He wrote fluidly, much as he danced, without crossing out or editing anything. Thus, his writing captures the flow of his thoughts as they occurred without self-censorship. Rather than reading his diaries for symptoms of his illness as others have done, Nicole Svobodny approaches them as serious literature. She argues that, as his illness grew, Nijinsky engaged in a "multimodal project" (24) that brought three types of artistic activity together in conversation with each other: choreography, drawing, and writing. Within this project, his diaries constitute a literary performance, as rich in metaphor and allusion as his modernist choreography and as abstract in style as his drawings. By reading his diaries through this multimodal lens, Svobodny "aims to navigate a space between and across the 'poetics of dance' and the 'somatics of literature,'" (25) hence her subtitle *The Dancer Writes, the Writer Dances*.

The book begins with a descriptive analysis of Nijinsky's last public performance in 1919 at the Suvretta House Hotel in Switzerland, where he amazed, puzzled, and even frightened