

## 11 Russian opera: between modernism and romanticism

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### The first stirrings of modernism

The twentieth century began with Rimsky-Korsakov firmly established as the grand old man of Russian opera, with a catalogue of 11 operas to his credit, many of them regularly performed in St Petersburg and Moscow and throughout the provinces as well. His *Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (completed in 1904 and premiered in 1907) acts as a summation of the nationalist operatic tradition of Glinka and The Five; aside from the characteristically Russian mixture of history and legend, realism and the supernatural, Russian and Oriental, Rimsky-Korsakov also introduced Wagnerian elements – to the extent that the opera became known as ‘the Russian *Parsifal*’. But in two other operas from these last years of his life, Rimsky-Korsakov was laying the foundation for modernist opera in Russia and beyond. In *Kashchei the Immortal* (completed and premiered in 1902) and especially *The Golden Cockerel* (completed in 1907 and premiered in 1909 – after Rimsky-Korsakov’s death) the fairy-tale characters are presented as dehumanized, puppet-like figures, while the elements of The Five’s nationalist idiom are presented in an exaggerated, parodic manner. Chromatic harmony is pervasive, but this is used by Rimsky-Korsakov in a most un-Wagnerian way, since the music is designed to leave the audience’s emotions unengaged.

The modernist potential of the *Cockerel* spilled over into the staging when it was performed by the Diaghilev company in Paris in 1914: at the suggestion of Alexandre Benois, the singers sat throughout the opera, leaving dancers to provide the action; Benois called this divorce between music and action the ‘destruction of the synthesis’ of opera. This device was assimilated by Stravinsky, a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov’s, who employed it in *Renard* (completed in 1917 and premiered in 1922 in Paris), while in Russia it was applied by the modernist director Vsevolod Meyerhold to Stravinsky’s *Nightingale* (Mariinsky, 1918). In *Les Noces*, Stravinsky took the device further, by placing the singers out of view in the orchestra pit, leaving only the dancers on stage. But there were other possibilities opened up by Rimsky-Korsakov in the *Cockerel*, in particular the anti-psychologistic and absurdist approach that became known as ‘anti-opera’.

## Two anti-operas: *The Love for Three Oranges* and *The Nose*

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Russian modernist theatre in general and opera in particular were born of Meyerhold, the most eminent avant-garde theatrical director of his time. For all his influence, he still remains largely unknown in the West. Indeed, the fundamental ideas of modernist theatre that are usually associated with Brecht generally had their origins in Meyerhold's revolutionary practices, which predate their Brechtian incarnation by several years. There is a direct line of influence between Meyerhold and the theories of Russian formalists such as Shklovsky on the one hand, and Brecht on the other (see Leach 1989, 170–72).

In the case of Prokofiev, the connection with Meyerhold is evident even in the title of his celebrated anti-opera, since it was Meyerhold who had rediscovered Carlo Gozzi's fable, adapted and then published it as a kind of manifesto piece in the first issue of his journal, in 1914; Meyerhold went so far as to call the journal *The Love for Three Oranges*. Although this journal was short-lived, and the play itself was never staged by Meyerhold, the idea of appropriating *commedia dell'arte* principles in the struggle against the naturalist theatre of Stanislavsky became for a time a central strategy in the practices of Meyerhold and his followers. In 1917, Meyerhold himself suggested *Three Oranges* as an operatic subject that Prokofiev might like to take up; the opera was completed two years later, by which time Prokofiev was already in New York (it was premiered in Chicago in 1921, while the first Russian production was in Leningrad in 1926). The opera took the dehumanization principle to new heights: the 'characters' are not even puppets, but mere playing cards. Their destinies are decided in a card game between Fata Morgana and Chelio (Celio), two sorcerers who are so woefully inadequate in their craft that 'members of the audience' (the High-Brows, the Low-Brows, the Eccentrics, the Empty-Heads and others written into the score) have to interfere from time to time in order to bring the play to a satisfactory conclusion. The story is ruled by chance and makes no attempt to engage the audience through interest in the unfolding of the narrative, let alone through sympathy for the characters. It needs theatrical gimmicks – and Prokofiev's music – to keep the public in their seats to the end.

The music of the opera is fragmented in a patently anti-Wagnerian manner: it consists effectively of nothing but a long string of *visions fugitives*, of roughly two-minute independent pieces, individuated by their texture, rhythm and melodic material. Only a very few non-leitmotivic themes turn up more than once. *Three Oranges* uses a variety of approaches to text-setting, and its vocal style is randomly eclectic – including

humorous references to operatic clichés of any provenance. Both on the musical and the dramatic level, the opera is therefore a Meyerholdian ‘montage of attractions’ (‘attractions’ in the fairground or circus sense; this is film director Sergei Eisenstein’s term). The attractions are of extremely varied nature but always deliberately superficial: we may chuckle at the list of illnesses enunciated by the doctors in unpunctuated, unmetred quavers, at the chorus of little devils that reminds us of five-finger exercises, at Chelio, who exhibits Rimsky-Korsakov’s octatonicism taken to an extreme, at the cross-dressed Cook (echoing another cross-dressing cook in Stravinsky’s *Mavra*), or at the total absurdity of the situation with the oranges and dead princesses when the narrative veers off the road and has to be salvaged by an extraordinary intervention of the ‘audience’. These chuckles, however, seem rather weak when compared to the ‘programmed’ audience responses to which both Meyerhold and Eisenstein aspired.

For Gozzi, *Three Oranges* was directed against Goldoni and Chiari, and for Meyerhold against Stanislavsky and the naturalist tradition; but, for Prokofiev, *Three Oranges* seems divorced from any theatrical or operatic debate. If it is taken as a satire, then it is curiously unfocused, since Prokofiev simply pokes fun at anything that happens to come his way, whether operatic clichés of the most general kind (the unison incantations ‘Fata Morgana!’, the typical duet inserts ‘Que faire! Misère!’), or the last scene of Bizet’s *Carmen* (the plaintive counterpoint to a joyful march which points to the presence of a dissatisfied character), or the musical style of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* (the brief occurrences of ‘love’ music). This disengagement, however, is understandable, since Prokofiev was an émigré who had not yet rooted himself in any particular cultural milieu outside Russia. *Three Oranges* was just as disconnected from the Chicago operatic scene of the premiere as it was from the revolutionary Russia that Prokofiev had left behind. In 1926, however, when the opera came to the Soviet Union, it fortuitously found itself at the centre of a cultural polemic: it was hailed by the ‘modernists’ and derided by the ‘proletarianists’. It was too late for the opera itself to have a significant following in Soviet Russia at this stage: the First Five-Year Plan, the cult of Stalin and the imposition of Socialist Realism were only a few years away, and the frivolity of *Three Oranges* would soon find itself unwanted. Nevertheless, the overwhelming popularity of the opera’s catchy March ensured that Prokofiev’s name was inseparably associated with his early fun creation, even though *Three Oranges* bore scant resemblance to most of his subsequent output.

It was during these last years of artistic freedom and experimentation in Soviet Russia that Shostakovich wrote his own anti-opera, *The Nose*, which was also inspired by Meyerhold. During its composition,

Shostakovich worked as a pianist in Meyerhold's theatre and even rented a room from him. He later collaborated with Meyerhold on Mayakovsky's play *The Bedbug* (1929), and Meyerhold also planned to produce *The Nose*: the eventual production, for various reasons, had to be shifted from Moscow to Leningrad, and so the Moscow-based Meyerhold was not involved. Even Shostakovich's inspiration for *The Nose* was drawn from Meyerhold's daring 1920s production of *The Government Inspector* (1926), based on Gogol, which fired Shostakovich's imagination; the production had been a critical *cause célèbre*, drawing responses from Trotsky and Walter Benjamin, and polarizing the critics of the day. Shostakovich likewise took Gogol as his source and attempted to translate the Meyerholdian approach to the musical stage. For example, the Meyerhold production had notably featured clusters of characters crammed on to small platforms that could be moved across an otherwise empty stage. Shostakovich also worked with clusters of characters: eight janitors, ten policemen, seven gentlemen, eight students and so forth. As the opera progresses, elaborate ensemble scenes become increasingly important: the scene in the small ads department (Act II) culminates in the octet of janitors enunciating eight different advertisements simultaneously as a pointillist atonal canon; the ambush scene (Act III) contains a variety of ensemble writing with a complex interaction of several groups; the letter-reading scene (Act III) is a quartet where two pairs of characters are reading a letter and a reply to it at the same time; finally, the Intermezzo of Act III begins as an unaccompanied septet with chorus and, as the wild rumours about the fortunes of the Nose keep accumulating, it turns into a brilliant comic-opera finale echoing the riotous finale of Meyerhold's production.

Shostakovich also managed to reproduce Meyerhold's trademark 'estrangement' effect – the deliberate laying bare of the artificiality of a stage production, in opposition to naturalism. (Again, this is usually credited to Brecht, whose term *Verfremdung* is normally translated as 'alienation'.) Shostakovich achieved this in two ways. First, the very act of putting Gogol's novella onto the stage meant that the absurdities of the story had to be fully worked out in visual terms; in Gogol, the tale of Major Kovalyov's runaway nose could be understood simply as a dream or tall tale, but on Shostakovich's stage we see all the ludicrous details of the missing nose showing up as a high-ranking civil servant, 'praying ardently' in the Kazan Cathedral and being placed under arrest (in Gogol, the arrest is only a rumour). There is no way in which the audience can square this with the real world; they are never asked to believe in the characters, let alone sympathize with them. Second, the music takes Gogol's own deadpan approach and turns it into another estrangement

device: the most ridiculous lines are accompanied often by the gravest and most earnest music. In the Kazan Cathedral scene (Act I), for example, we are presented with the dialogue between the bewildered Kovalyov and his nose; since the nose has somehow gained a higher social rank, he demands due respect from Kovalyov. But this lunacy unfolds against the background of a haunting wordless chorus that teeters on the brink of atonality. The chorus of sleeping soldiers from the last act of Berg's *Wozzeck* (performed in Leningrad in 1927) was probably the inspiration here. Another sign of *Wozzeck's* influence can be found in the grotesquely high notes in several male parts, especially those of police officers who, Shostakovich said, tended to shout. And of course Shostakovich's decision to begin with a shaving scene signals his debt to Berg's opera from the outset.

In another respect, however, Shostakovich draws from a tradition that predates Meyerhold, namely the Russian naturalistic tradition in opera of scrupulously following the prose of the literary original (Meyerhold felt free to alter his originals), which began in the mid-nineteenth century with Dargomizhsky's *Stone Guest*, which had used the complete text of Pushkin's 'little tragedy', word for word. Other 'little tragedies' that offered the right amount of text for one-act operas were subjected to similar treatment by Rimsky-Korsakov (*Mozart and Salieri*, 1898), Cui (*A Feast during the Plague*, 1901) and Rakhmaninov (*The Miserly Knight*, 1906). The naturalistic, word-for-word tradition found its most famous advocate in Musorgsky. His first attempt was *The Marriage*, which, like *The Nose*, used a comic Gogol text. He had not long begun the first act before he realized that the text would prove unmanageably long. The original version of *Boris Godunov* (1869) preserves the best of *The Marriage* while circumventing the pitfalls.

In Shostakovich's case, the fact that this device was originally associated with operatic naturalism may seem to conflict with Meyerholdian anti-naturalism, but given the inescapable absurdity of Gogol's story at every turn, such a conflict never arises. Shostakovich preserved nearly all of Gogol's original dialogue, and elsewhere carefully adapted the original narrative passages for stage use. On the other hand, there were some additions, all but one of which were drawn from elsewhere in Gogol. In his only borrowing from outside Gogol (Ivan's song from Act II), Shostakovich used Dostoyevsky; but since the latter was Gogol's celebrated disciple, the stylistic integrity of the libretto was not harmed. Shostakovich's principles of text-setting are close to those displayed in Musorgsky's *Marriage*; accordingly the music follows natural speech rhythm and intonation, while assigning a distinct idiom to each character; the closest correlation is to be found between Shostakovich's

Praskovya Osipovna and Musorgsky's Fyokla, who both exemplify the feisty and loquacious middle-aged female characters popular in Russian literature. This approach provides Shostakovich with a default, throwing into relief those passages where the text-setting is decidedly unnatural for comic purposes. The only significant passage from the novella that Shostakovich omitted was precisely an estrangement device: Gogol undermines his own story, shaking his head at the ludicrous subject matter, and pointing out various loose ends. But given the degree to which Shostakovich had already produced Meyerholdian estrangement effects, it would have been quite superfluous to mirror Gogol at this point (a consideration apparently overlooked in the 1974 Moscow revival, where Gogol's closing words were re-inserted).

How topical, however, was this Meyerhold-inspired satire for a Soviet Union in which Stalin was consolidating his power? Certainly much more so than anything to be found in *Three Oranges*. The flourishing of a bureaucracy in which the ruthlessly ambitious could rise rapidly through the ranks is reflected in the character of the Nose; likewise, the ubiquity of policing is mirrored in the constant presence of policemen of various ranks in the opera. But it would be wrong to look for any serious, sustained political critique; Shostakovich clearly enjoyed the opportunities afforded by the anarchic plot for the production of striking musical and dramatic effects in every scene (and, as in Prokofiev, primarily for their own sake). Like *Three Oranges*, Shostakovich's anti-opera became the immediate subject of vigorous debate, until Shostakovich was condemned for his modernist 'formalism' in 1936, when it disappeared from view. It did not resurface in the Soviet Union until 1974, although there were some Western productions in the 1960s because musicians had been able to take the score and parts abroad once the Khrushchev Thaw had set in.

### **The retrieval of the human element: *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and *The Fiery Angel***

Neither Prokofiev nor Shostakovich continued in this anti-opera vein. Their next two operas were both large-scale tragedies that engaged seriously with the tradition: Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* (completed 1927, concert performance 1954, staged premiere 1955) and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (completed 1932, premiere 1934). Both operas also sit uncomfortably between modernism and romanticism, and while for long stretches they wholeheartedly embrace tradition, elements of parody also re-emerge; likewise they both show a mixed attitude towards

their characters, sometimes inviting sympathy, sometimes deliberately distancing them from the audience. In spite of these unresolved conflicts, both operas are masterworks that are capable of giving their audiences much greater satisfaction than the aesthetically coherent anti-operas we have just discussed.

As it happens, it was in the more conservative *Lady Macbeth* that Shostakovich took truly Meyerholdian liberties with his source text, a novella by Leskov, adapting it ruthlessly to his own vision and even conflating the central character of Katerina with another Katerina of Russian classical literature, from Ostrovsky's drama *The Storm*. If Leskov's Katerina is a multiple murderer who is completely dehumanized by the author's dispassionate newspaper prose style, the changes carried out by Shostakovich are directed at exonerating and elevating her as a strong woman rebelling against oppression, struggling for her own happiness passionately and impulsively and perishing tragically after being betrayed, ridiculed, and finally overcome by the 'black waves' of her own conscience. To achieve this, Shostakovich had to remove one of Katerina's murders, of an innocent child (this would have been impossible to explain away), and also added a scene in which she saves a peasant woman from potential rape.

Ostrovsky's Katerina was dubbed 'a ray of sunshine in the kingdom of darkness' by the critic Nikolai Dobrolyubov ('Luch sveta v temnom tsarstve', *Sovremennik* (1860), vol. 10). But if Shostakovich wanted to elevate his own Katerina to this exalted level, these alterations to the story would not have sufficed; the music had to carry the main burden. Accordingly, he set Katerina into relief by casting the music for other characters in his grotesque or parodic style, representing a world of darkness; for Katerina, by contrast, he reserved a concentrated, serious lyricism. The only exception to this scheme is the Old Convict, who at the close offers Katerina some Dostoyevskian compassion; because of this, he is less a character within the narrative than a representation of the authorial voice. Everyone around Katerina, including her victims, is dehumanized by waltzes, polkas, galops and melodramatic operatic clichés – by this means, Shostakovich prevents these characters from engaging our sympathies, just as he had done in *The Nose*. On the other hand, we are given every encouragement to sympathize with Katerina, whose character is built up through a series of reflective ariosos. In Act I, her social status is indicated: she is a merchant's wife, hence the drawing-room romance, but she had come from a poorer background, hence the folk/popular song style on another occasion. In Act II, her love is represented by Mahlerian lyricism, and finally, in Act IV, her despair is represented in a bleak D-minor arioso; here Katerina stands alone at the



front of the stage, and her music is stripped of references to genre that would place her in any particular time or place. This is abstract tragic music for a heroine of Shakespearean stature, and Shostakovich has ensured that at this moment our hearts are unequivocally with Katerina.

The two styles thus allow Shostakovich to shape our attitudes towards the different characters, but present him with a problem of musical cohesion. At times the strain shows, as in the Act III policemen's scene, where the farcical, cabaret style stretches the opera's integrity almost to breaking point (although it is interesting that Shostakovich inserts dramatically redundant scenes ridiculing the police in both his operas). But the duality is generally more deftly handled: Act IV, for example, convincingly alternates between passages of music in inverted commas and passages intended seriously; Shostakovich even moves confidently between 'good' and 'bad' melodrama, somewhat in the manner of Mahler (who was another major influence on his music).

*Lady Macbeth* is still eclectic in the range of musical styles it exhibits, but it sheds all of the more pronouncedly modernist idioms that appeared in *The Nose*. Indeed, we can see Shostakovich's mature style beginning to coalesce in *Lady Macbeth*, above all in Katerina's ariosos. As in *The Nose*, Musorgsky is the most important musical inspiration, but now Shostakovich looks towards the products of Musorgsky's retreat from naturalistic text-setting: the later strata of *Boris* and *Khovanshchina*, where *arioso* predominates. Apart from this pervasive influence, there are some more specific references to Musorgsky. There are distorted quotations, such as the scene in which Katerina laments over the body of Boris Timofeyevich: this is a clear parody of the first chorus in *Boris Godunov*. Here we have a direct cerebral reference: we note that in both cases the lament is forced and insincere. In Act IV, through musical associations with Shchelkalov in *Boris* or Shaklovitiy in *Khovanshchina*, we realize that the Old Convict, in his *arioso*, is speaking on behalf of the author; the same associations also prompt us to apply his words to Russia ('vast steppes, endless nights, joyless thoughts and merciless gendarmes').

The story of *Lady Macbeth's* reception is a striking illustration of the twists and turns of cultural policy under Stalin: it was the first Soviet opera to enjoy true popularity, and it also won official critical acclaim, being held up as a model Soviet opera; but within two years of its premiere, it had been condemned by the same critics, and banned from the stage. It reappeared on the Soviet stage only after the death of Stalin, under the title *Katerina Izmailova*, with light revisions by Shostakovich, for artistic rather than political reasons (see Fay 1995). The condemnation of *Lady Macbeth* had lasting and wide-ranging effects on Shostakovich's career and musical style; not least of these was his decision



to avoid opera thereafter, to concentrate instead on the safer course of writing symphonies and string quartets (instrumental music was policed much less than the literary, dramatic and pictorial arts). Nevertheless, *Lady Macbeth* was already a move in the direction of Socialist Realism *avant la lettre*: Shostakovich here uses a simpler musical idiom than anything to be found in *The Nose*, and Katerina's music often looks back to the nineteenth-century Russian classics. Shostakovich's retreat to a more conservative manner therefore began several years before it was politically required of him, since it was not yet decided at this stage precisely what Socialist Realism entailed for music.

Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel*, by contrast, received no attention, either supportive or hostile. Disregarding the advice of various friends, Prokofiev worked on the opera without any commission, only to find that no one was interested in staging it; indeed, there were no complete performances of the opera during the composer's lifetime. Beyond the lack of any commission, the *The Fiery Angel* was already handicapped by its failure to engage with any contemporary artistic currents. The source text was a symbolist novel by Valery Bryusov based on the author's personal experience: a love triangle consisting of himself, Nina Petrovskaya and Andrey Bely. Bryusov placed the narrative in medieval Germany, which enabled him to use a palette of dark Gothic hues, and to employ his skills as historian and master of literary pastiche; the occult practices of Ruprecht and Renata reflect the spiritist séances popular in symbolist circles (see Morrison 2002). But this novel was already considered old-fashioned by the time Prokofiev set to work on it, and his idea of parodying its symbolist preoccupations scarcely improved matters – who would be interested in a parody of an artistic trend that no longer held sway? No-one in the West, where Bryusov was unknown, but even less so in the Soviet Union, where artists had forcefully rejected the Russian symbolism of pre-Revolutionary years. On the musical level, Prokofiev's harmonic complications and often dense orchestration, together with his revival of nineteenth-century operatic forms and principles (there are Wagnerian leitmotives, for example) also seemed out of touch with the times in the West, where neo-classicism was the dominant current in new music. Yet, unwanted by its contemporaries, the opera finally won an audience at the end of the twentieth century, and was hailed as a uniquely powerful work.

It appears that Prokofiev was attracted by the operatic potential of the novel, and could not imagine that interest would be lacking in what he quite correctly judged to be his masterpiece, whatever its musical and literary styles. He was fascinated by Bryusov's occultism, and relished the musical task of depicting the 'endless orgies' of the plot, as he called them

in a letter to Myaskovsky (Kabalevskiy 1977, 276). These ‘orgies’ of increasing intensity can readily be seen as the central strand of the opera. In Act I, we have the wild behaviour of the demon-possessed Renata, and then later the bizarre fortune-telling scene. Act II offers us the invocation of the infernal spirits, and eventually we have the spectacular collective insanity of the final act. In all of these scenes Prokofiev uses multiple layers of hypnotic ostinato patterns (after the manner of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*), and in the final tableau this principle is elevated to a colossal scale, with terrifying effect. Especially where these scenes are concerned, the orchestra plays the leading role in shaping the audience’s perceptions, so it is not surprising that Prokofiev was able to assemble his Third Symphony (1928) from the material of the opera. This is particularly true of Act II scene 2, where Ruprecht is interviewing the scholar of magical arts, Agrippa of Nettelsheim. The rather prosaic and at times even comic dialogue is set to one of the raging orchestral ‘orgies’, without obvious motivation (unless we imagine the demons working feverishly behind the scenes). To some extent this scene is indicative of how this opera works: however sceptically we might regard the plot, the power of the orchestra sweeps all before it.

If scenes of hysteria, both musical and dramatic, provide the modernist side of the opera, there is also a more conservative side, found in the parallel development of a psychological drama. As in Bryusov’s original, this drama is experienced through Ruprecht, the robust and rational knight who falls under the spell of the seductive Renata and begins a stormy relationship with her. Whether she is a visionary, or simply mentally ill (we are not told), she gradually takes control of Ruprecht’s will. Tormented by love for her and jealousy for an invisible third party (the Fiery Angel, also known as Madiel and Count Heinrich), he is prepared to serve Renata blindly, to kill and to die for her if necessary. Their psychological battles are played out in a string of scenes which are essentially duets with a minimum of action. Occasionally, Wagnerian models are in evidence: for example, Renata’s Tale is shaped similarly to Elsa’s Tale in Act I of *Lohengrin*, and Elsa’s tactics of emotional blackmail in Act III seem to be a prototype for Renata’s behaviour throughout the opera. In spite of all his sacrifices, Ruprecht loses his battle and Renata leaves him for the convent. But if this train of events has lulled us into thinking that this is a fundamentally romantic opera, a surprise is in store: the opera changes its course in the middle of Act IV, beginning with the insertion of an unexpected comic scene featuring Faust and Mephistopheles; Simon Morrison calls this a ‘visitation from another opera’ (2002, 260). This strange pair offers to spirit Ruprecht away to the convent so that he can observe Renata’s exorcism.

With the failure of the exorcism, and the frenzied spread of the demons to the assembled nuns, the opera comes to an abrupt end with a death sentence pronounced upon Renata by the Grand Inquisitor; Ruprecht observes, but appears impassive. This ending has often been criticized, although it is no more illogical than the ending of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, where the seductress has been exposed as a witch, thereby healing the victim of her snares. Because we too have been intoxicated and hypnotized by Renata, we fail to realize until now that the story has unfolded from Ruprecht's perspective alone; while we were party to all his private thoughts, Renata's terrible visions were never shared with us. The device of the comic interlude enables Prokofiev to lead us outside the confines of the psychological drama, so that we can observe the punishment of the seductress dispassionately. Ruprecht does not intercede on behalf of Renata as Faust did on behalf of Margaret; instead, he is once again simply a voyeur, just as he was in the opera's opening scene. This last-moment subversion of the opera's apparent 'romanticism' is a strikingly modernist negation: after becoming deeply engaged with the plight of the characters, we are suddenly dumped in an emotionally neutral location, with Renata dehumanized and no more sympathetic to us than the Chosen One in *The Rite of Spring*.

### The return of grand opera: *War and Peace*

In an interview from 1927, Prokofiev contemplated the possibility of a Soviet production of *The Fiery Angel*. Perhaps it could have happened during the 1920s, but when Prokofiev eventually returned to his homeland in the mid-1930s this was clearly an impossibility. *Lady Macbeth* was condemned shortly after he arrived, and restrictions were placed on the subject matter and musical style of new operas. Opera was now a showcase genre, intended to extol the virtues of the Stalinist state after the completion of the first Five-Year Plan. The first opera based on a specifically Soviet subject was *For Red Petrograd*, by A. Gladkovsky and Y. Prussak, first performed in Leningrad in April 1925: it was a historical chronicle of the events of 1919, presented as a realistic spectacle; the music was eclectic, and included many quotations of Red and White songs. The subject matter and format were chosen freely by the composer and his collaborators. By the mid-1930s, however, the authorities were demanding that composers should use Soviet subjects for some of their operas; there was often official interference from choice of subject through to the dress rehearsal.

Stalin himself had now begun to pay close attention to opera, and in 1936 the negative example of *Lady Macbeth* was counterbalanced by a new opera officially regarded as the model for future efforts, namely the ‘song opera’, *Quiet Flows the Don*, by Ivan Dzerzhinsky, whose musical language was very undemanding. In the same year, official culture had turned towards the open celebration of various episodes in Russia’s pre-Revolutionary history. As a corollary, the classics of nineteenth-century Russian opera were elevated in importance, both as models for new operas, and also as works deserving of the most lavish, monumental productions themselves, as Stalin began to amass all the paraphernalia of imperial grandeur that the Tsarist past could offer. Tendencies towards monumentality had become readily discernible since the 1928 production of *Boris Godunov* and the 1931 *Maid of Pskov*; in the 1930s, the grand-opera manner became *de rigueur*, as in the productions of *Prince Igor*, *Sadko* and *A Life for the Tsar* – the last refashioned as *Ivan Susanin* (see Gozenpud 1963, 215–20).

Prokofiev composed his own Soviet opera, *Semyon Kotko* (1939, premiered in 1940), based on a Socialist Realist novel by Katayev about a Ukrainian soldier during the Civil War. But this attempt met with a mixed reception: while some aspects were praised, the preponderance of recitative and a lack of heroic monumentality were cited as substantial shortcomings. But over the following years, during the composition of *War and Peace*, Prokofiev must have looked upon such criticism as mere friendly banter, for his chosen subject had guaranteed that his work would be subject to the full scrutiny of the Soviet bureaucracy. Such attention was drawn for several reasons. Marshal Kutuzov, in command of the Russian troops facing Napoleon, was seen to prefigure Stalin, who now invited comparisons between himself and various figures from the pre-Revolutionary past. The scenario of the foreign army advancing far into the territory of Mother Russia had immediate parallels in the Nazi invasion of 1941. And where the libretto was concerned, Tolstoy had come to occupy first place in the Soviet literary pantheon – this placed a third burden of responsibility on Prokofiev’s shoulders. Prokofiev had considered the novel as the possible basis for an opera for several years, and he had approached *War and Peace* simply as his own pet project, with little thought that it would become an artistic endeavour of gravest national significance which could not be allowed to go wrong in any detail. Prokofiev was desperate that the work should not meet the fate of *The Fiery Angel*, and he submitted five substantially different versions to various committees, incorporating hundreds of the changes they had called for (the Committee for Artistic Affairs had the last word, but bodies such as the Bolshoi Theatre were also involved). Even so, *War and Peace*

was never performed in its entirety during Prokofiev's lifetime; the final version was in two parts, and only the first was performed since the second, featuring Napoleon and Kutuzov, was still considered to be too risky by the committees involved in the project.

Prokofiev's original intentions were remote from this sprawling grand opera. He had originally been attracted to Tolstoy's complex heroes and his attention to the seemingly trivial details of everyday life. Tolstoy's prosaic, unoperatic language was another attraction for the composer. Dialogue was to be represented through Musorgskian speech intonation and rhythms, with musical characterization of each of the *dramatis personae*. At the same time, Tolstoy's frequent examinations of a character's mind were used by Prokofiev for arioso asides. 'It is impossible that they won't take a liking to me', sings Natasha before meeting her prospective in-laws. 'How can they execute me, kill me, take my life away – me, Pierre Bezukhov, with all my thoughts, hopes, strivings, memories?', sings Pierre in what he thinks are his last moments. Such arioso asides are strikingly fresh on the operatic stage, and suit the medium perfectly. The size of the novel, however, meant that Prokofiev could not even attempt to follow the psychological development that Tolstoy provides for each of characters. Even Natasha is only sketchily outlined, let alone Pierre and Andrey; to appreciate their complex interactions, a prior acquaintance with the novel is indispensable. This, of course, was not a problem where Prokofiev's Soviet audience was concerned; indeed, it was quite normal for Russian 'literary' operas.

By April 1942, Prokofiev had completed the vocal score of his first version, a patchwork of brief episodes, largely in dialogue, alternating declamatory passages with arioso; we can form an idea of Prokofiev's original conception from the scene at Dolokhov's, which survived almost unchanged through to the final version. The sharp contrasts between these episodes is still reminiscent of the *visions fugitives* manner that characterized *Three Oranges*. However, there are two features already present in the first version which were unusual for Prokofiev but *de rigueur* for Socialist Realist opera, namely a range of musical styles leaning heavily on the nineteenth century, and also the various set-pieces, such as the choral songs in the war scenes. It is notable that Prokofiev borrowed several of the opera's most prominent themes from the Tchaikovskian incidental music he had written for a stage version of *Eugene Onegin*, which had never been performed; examples are to be found in the opening theme of Scene 1, usually referred to as 'Natasha's theme', and the second theme of Andrey's first arioso, known as 'Andrey's theme'. The use of set-pieces and the tuneful retrospective style came to predominate in the later revisions, bringing the opera closer to the Socialist Realist ideal; the Ball

scene, for example, added during the revisions of 1945–6, consisted almost entirely of period pieces (as ever with characteristic Prokofiev touches in the harmony and orchestration).

It was the ‘war’ section of the opera that had to undergo the most drastic changes. The everyday aspects of Tolstoy’s account, especially the telling details that humanized Kutuzov, were not welcome on the operatic stage: the Committee for Artistic Affairs deemed them a trivialization of the Russian people’s struggle and, even worse, Marshal Kutuzov’s banter was considered shockingly inappropriate for the character who was to represent Stalin. Prokofiev was given the task of creating a grander Kutuzov, without the humanizing tics; with great reluctance, he composed a new scene, ‘The Council at Fili’, with a central aria of a suitably heroic type. Although at odds with the course of the drama at this point, the aria’s ‘Moscow theme’, majestically evoking the Russian classics, was perfect, as far as the authorities were concerned; even better, the same Moscow theme was to make a triumphant return in the choral apotheosis at the close of the opera. After much deliberation, Prokofiev took his Moscow theme from a passage in his music for Eisenstein’s film *Ivan the Terrible*, Part I (1942–4).

Prokofiev’s first version of *War and Peace* was also lacking in another essential Socialist Realist quality: ‘organic unity’ was too little in evidence among the string of *visions fugitives*. Prokofiev had not been entirely oblivious to this requirement and had tried to link the ‘peace’ and ‘war’ sections by various means: for example, the scene at Mitishchi, where Natasha meets the dying Andrey, was a crucial overlap between the two worlds, from the first version onwards. But this was not nearly enough for the authorities, and so Prokofiev had to incorporate many thematic reminiscences. Unfortunately, a degree of exasperation seems to be in evidence, since Prokofiev sometimes rent the delicate fabric of a scene simply to insert one of the recurring themes, which must have satisfied the authorities, albeit at the cost of greater offences against unity at the local level. One such jarring moment occurs in the Mitishchi scene, where Andrey’s last thoughts are interrupted by the intrusion of the ‘Moscow theme’; the reminiscence of the ‘first waltz’ theme from the Ball scene is more justifiable, but hardly less incongruous stylistically.

There is certainly much evidence of the opera’s tortuous path of revision for those who look carefully enough; in spite of this, Prokofiev’s eclectic epic is not only viable, but has proven one of the most successful of twentieth-century operas. The committees involved in the project in all probability contributed to this, since Prokofiev’s original, more Meyerholdian vision, could hardly have won such wide acceptance as the grand opera that he eventually produced at the authorities’

behest. Nevertheless, much of the sophistication and intricate detail of the original version survived the revision process, which also resulted in the addition of much excellent music. Prokofiev had always prided himself on his ability to clothe the same melodic material in difficult or easy-going garb, according to circumstance. While the revisions of *War and Peace* severely tested his patience, he was generally able to make a virtue of necessity, to produce one of the handful of Socialist Realist classics that retained their classic status long after Socialist Realism had been consigned to the dustbin of history.

### The waning of Socialist Realism

While *War and Peace* managed to transcend the limitations of Socialist Realism, dozens of its contemporaries did not. The only other monumental historical spectacle that rivalled *War and Peace* in Soviet theatres was Yuri Shaporin's *Dekabristi* (*The Decembrists*, 1953), but most new operas of this kind deservedly had a much shorter lifespan. Comic opera yielded more works of quality and enduring popularity, including Kabalevsky's *Kolas Breugnon* (1939), Prokofiev's *Betrothal in a Monastery* (1940) and Shebalin's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1957). But the repertoires also included a number of duller efforts which had been judged Socialist Realist classics without winning any real affection from critics or audiences. Each of the USSR's seventy-eight opera houses had at least one of these 'classics' in its repertoire; even after *perestroika* was under way, the Moscow Bolshoi still glumly persisted with two such operas, regardless of the meagre audiences: Muradeli's *October* and Molchanov's *The Dawns are Quiet Here*. During one tour in the 1970s, the Bolshoi even played Molchanov's opera in New York, where it caused great puzzlement both for audience and critics (see Taruskin 1976). The effects of Khrushchev's Thaw on Russian operatic life were felt in the rehabilitation of both of Shostakovich's operas: in 1963, *Lady Macbeth* returned as *Katerina Izmailova*, and *The Nose* followed in 1974. With the return of *The Nose* in the small basement auditorium of the Moscow Chamber Opera, a real alternative to the grand 'imperial' stages was established; in a way, *The Nose* proved to be more pointed a weapon in 1974 than in 1930 since it was now, in effect, directed against the edifice of Socialist Realist grand opera. Thanks to *The Nose*, anti-opera came back into fashion; one of the better-known later examples was Schnittke's *Life with an Idiot* (premiered in 1992 in Amsterdam), a brusque satire of the Soviet way of life. Nevertheless, Denisov's *L'Ecume des jours* (also premiered in 1992, in Paris), based on a surrealist novel of the same name by



Boris Vian, continues in the tradition of large-scale serious opera, albeit in a fully modernist idiom.

For late and post-Soviet composers, both anti-opera and serious opera have provided a basis for major works – the former most often satirizing aspects of late Soviet Socialist Realism, the latter departing altogether from Socialist Realism in favour of Western modernist idioms. One important recent opera consciously attempts to draw the two strands together: Vladimir Tarnopolsky's *Wenn die Zeit über die Ufer tritt* (*When Time Overflows Its Banks*, Munich 1999). At first, Tarnopolsky's characters seem to have stepped out of a Chekhov play – they even utter lines selected from various Chekhov sources. But these characters are progressively dehumanized by the accumulation of estrangement techniques; they move from *cantilena* to *Sprechstimme*, then sentences are fragmented and shared out between the characters; finally, verbal communication breaks down altogether, and the characters are left with the disembodied vowel sounds of the Jews' harp. While this process makes use of characteristic anti-opera devices, the work is seriously intended as a bleak view of future prospects for Russia or the human race – among other things, a refusal to countenance the mendacious optimism of Socialist Realism.