

Music to My Ears

NO RUSSE LIKE AN OLD RUSSE

TIS TRUE life in Russia is far from gay," sings the baritone. "Our good relations with the states of Europe encouraged hopes of lasting peace for Russia," declaims the tenor. "Ah, now we see the traces of those years of foreign schooling!" accuses the bass. Is this, then, a satire or commentary on the present state of affairs in the USSR? Hardly. They are excerpts from the text of Modeste Moussorgsky's "Khovanchina," written seventy-five years ago and just having its first performances at the Metropolitan. Incidentally, it is about incidents in the year 1682.

Whether retiring director Edward Johnson conceived this last novelty of his fifteen years at the Metropolitan as a political commentary as well as an artistic service, he alone can tell—and he isn't telling. The beards are long and the costumes are antiquated but the central theme is as topical as the latest news bulletin from Moscow—mistrust of Western influence in the life of Russia, pride in the times. Prince Galitsin tells us, "I led our war-torn troops against the Poles and broke the pride of their insolent nobles."

Art, when great, is justly considered timeless, but it has no right to be as timely as this save to remind us there are some things so fundamental in the life of the world that a few centuries change not their underlying doubts and conflicts but merely the shape in which they recur in one epoch or another. We may as well recognize that security for "Mother Russia" was as much a problem to Peter's Russia as it is to Stalin's and try to fathom the forces at work. There may not be as much time in the future for leisurely thought as there has been since 1682.

In this patchwork of song and dance, chorus and solo—and, for that matter, Moussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakoff, for the composer had not finished the score when he died in 1881, and we know it only as "refined" by his colleague—we are in a period when Westernism had the upper hand and the "rebels" were those who wanted to return to "old faiths and customs." Unfortunately for clarity of plot, Peter never appears on the stage (being a Romanoff, he could not be physically represented in a play during Moussorgsky's life)—and it takes mighty much mulling of the separate incidents to assemble the philosophic pattern I have mentioned.

Khovansky (played powerfully, if with little subtlety, by Lawrence Tib-

bett) represents the political rejection of outside influence; Dosifei (splendidly sung by Jerome Hines), the religious force urging return to ancient beliefs as the means of salvation. Always and ever in the middle is the huge mass of Russian people (Moussorgsky called this "a people's music drama"), for whom somebody purports to be doing something—without those concerned knowing much what is being done or how. In the Moussorgskyan connotation it was a reaction against one kind of authoritarianism (the Czars and princes vs. the people). In our framework, it is still authoritarianism (the Stalin dictatorship vs. the people) with the central theme, as ever, peace, security, fear of the Germans (as exemplifying the West).

So much for parable. What of polyphony? "Khovanchina" is no more an opera in the common sense than "Of Time and the River" is a novel in the common sense. Yet the aspects of genius which were Moussorgsky's as well as Wolfe's are all over it. The strange mingling of folk-sounding modal music and sweeping outbursts in a rather Verdian, Italianate manner are not nearly so strange or so jarring as they may seem to the uninitiated. Through the Moussorgsky correspondence of the "Khovanchina" period runs a constant thread of reference to musical ideas "very European" to represent the elements of the story which are European-influenced, with others "Old Russia" in sound and context. To descend from the general to the particular, Moussorgsky was himself a key figure in the struggle against Western influence in the music of Russia. He was by nature (and lack of formal training) opposed to those disciplines and procedures which found their typical expression in Tchaikovsky, considered by his contemporaries the most Westernized of Russian composers.

In this rigorous, rather untheatrical design, interest goes only with dramatic truth—which is not the easy way of effectiveness. The superb prelude painting dawn over the Red Square is known to symphonic audiences and record listeners (a Koussevitzky disc is still current) as are the engaging "Persian Dances" of act four. Even here is a kind of parable, turning the Russian face to the East—for, as Mous-

sorgsky says in one of his letters: "The sun never rises in the West." The musical interest accumulates, rather than develops, with a richly interesting third act, when the impelling factor of most Russian opera—the chorus—finally becomes dominant in both the musical and dramatic scheme. Oddly, the impressive entr'acte of act IV (which Stokowski once recorded) is omitted in the version now given.

The Metropolitan production cost a small fortune (small as fortunes are reckoned these days) and, unfortunately, didn't show it, since the milieu of 1682 had ugliness inherent in it. But while this layout is certainly ugly, it manages to be impressive amidst the calculated squalor and barren luxuries. Ten more rehearsals and a few changes of cast would certainly have improved it, but such singers (and actors) as Robert Weede (Shaklovity), Charles Kullman (Prince Golovitsin), and Brian Sullivan (as Khovansky's son), made much of their opportunities.

Whether the whole enterprise gained by being presented in English is very much an issue. I can't believe that anybody who didn't do considerable homework could have followed the story from the occasionally intelligible words that reached the ear, and the fault was not only enunciation. English syllables, when tortured into the framework of music written for Russian ones no longer sound like the vernacular to us. "Bring water—drinking water" may be the translation of what the Russian text says, but we would certainly say to a servant: "May we have some water?"

Mention of the ladies—Anne Bolinger, Polyna Stoska, and Risë Stevens—has been deferred because none of them was very good and they are, by and large, out of the main stream of the action, used as devices for changing vocal color and mood rather than as integral parts of the story. Miss Stevens, who has some of the most beautiful music in the score to sing, did it intelligently and with as much clarity as her good talents permitted in this exceptional part of Marthe.

Well, "Khovanchina" is here, for which thanks are due to Edward Johnson certainly and to Emil Cooper, who conducted. Whether it stays longer than the few repetitions possible in the remaining weeks of this season depends not on Moussorgsky, not on the public, but on the repertory ideas of Rudolf Bing. He might bear in mind another remark of Moussorgsky: "The artist believes in the future because he lives in it."

—IRVING KOLODIN.



ACADEMICIAN EXTRAORDINARY

(Continued from page 23)

tion was in its hazardous infancy, no wonder Mr. Churchill named the book as he did. Storms have been incessant in the climate of his life. If sometimes he has provoked them, at most times he has dominated them. Thunder and lightning have never frightened him. He can himself release lightning bolts and answer thunder with a thunder of his own.

Had it not been for the storms of both war and politics, Mr. Churchill might never have lifted a paint brush. If I use this expression instead of saying he might never have turned painter, it is because, as a writer and orator, Mr. Churchill has long been one of the most masterful of painters. He has executed his finest brush strokes with his pen. Great events have sat for him as his favorite model. Language has served him as his palette. His writing may at times be marred by oratory; his prose may be aimed at the ear instead of the eye. His cadences for their fullest effect may need the orchestration of his voice and his sibilants. Even so, his narratives are stirringly visual. They are hung with pictures. With words Mr. Churchill has proved himself a supreme colorist, fond of vermillion, khaki, and navy blue, though occasionally surrendering to purple. He is as boldly skilful at seascapes and battle scenes as he is at portraiture and exposition. Indeed the canvases by which he will always live and by which all of us have been moved are to be found in his books, not in galleries.

HE was forty when first he turned to painting with paints. His fortunes were not at their happiest. Reverses at Gallipoli had brought about his departure from the Admiralty at the end of May 1915. He remained a member of the Cabinet and of the War Council. He was left in a position where he "knew everything and could do nothing." His unbearable inactivity after his immense and exciting activities left him gasping. As he put it, he was like a sea-beast fished up from the depths, or a diver too suddenly hoisted, and his veins threatened to burst from the fall in pressure.

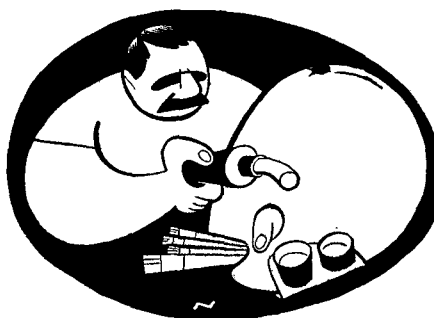
His first attempt was made one Sunday in the country with his children's paintbox. He liked the experiment so well that the next morning he bought a complete outfit for painting in oils. The next step was to begin. But how? Where? And with what color? His hand "seemed arrested by a silent veto." For once in

his life Mr. Churchill was timid. With a tiny brush and with tremendous caution he at last made, in the area where he knew the sky ought to be, a blue mark "about as big as a bean." Then he stopped. His career as a painter might have stopped, too, had not Sir John Lavery's wife arrived at that moment, asked for a big brush, and with large, fierce strokes proved to him that the canvas could not hit back. If Mr. Churchill has never felt any "awe" of canvases since, he has found infinite pleasure in attacking them.

That delight, the delight of carrying in your pocket a key to "a wonderful new world of thought and craft, a sunlit garden gleaming with light and color," he communicates in every wise and witty line of "Painting as a Pastime." Mr. Churchill's is a remarkable essay. It is personal, warm, and perceptive. It is basted in the rich juices of experience; written with unashamed enthusiasm; written from the heart, yet written with a smile. To find its match in felicity and charm, one must turn back to Hazlitt's "On the Pleasure of Painting."

No two men could be less alike than William Hazlitt and Winston Churchill. A gulf divides their minds and temperaments and endowments. Yet in two of their passionate absorptions—the English language and painting—they are blood brothers. Although Hazlitt turned to writing after having attempted to be a painter and Mr. Churchill did not paint until after his fame in both public affairs and literature had been securely established, both men express sentiments almost interchangeable on the joys of painting.

"From the moment you take up the pencil, and look Nature in the face, you are at peace with your own heart. . . . The mind is calm, and full at the same time. The hand and eye are equally employed. . . . The hours pass away untold, without chagrin, and without weariness; nor would you ever wish to pass them otherwise." That is Hazlitt, but it could be Mr. Churchill,



because it is he who says, "Go out into the sunlight and be happy with what you see. Painting is a complete distraction. I know of nothing which, without exhausting the body, more entirely absorbs the mind. Whatever the worries of the hour or the threats of the future, once the picture has begun to flow along, there is no room for them in the mental screen. . . . Time stands respectfully aside, and it is only after many hesitations that luncheon knocks gruffly at the door."

There are differences, however. Where Hazlitt, whose life was tempest-tossed, writes about painting as a sedentary man, Mr. Churchill writes about it with equal skill as a man who has seen and relished combat in the field. Only he, with his fondness for military metaphor, would seize upon such a Churchillian word as "audacity" as a painter's first requirement. Only he would liken a painter to a commander-in-chief and a canvas to a battleground. Only he would compare "proportion" and "relation" in painting to the reserves upon which a general must depend, or insist that, if a canvas is not to represent a defeat, it in the manner of a victory must be the result of a good plan.

Although, in passing, Mr. Churchill pays delightful tribute to books, libraries, a change of interest as a means to rest, the heightened powers of observation brought about by surveying any object with a painter's eye, and to such impressionists as Manet, Monet, Cézanne, and Matisse, perhaps the most exciting aspect of his essay is the reverent affection which he, the man of action, feels for art and the artist. He condescends to neither; he has only admiration for both. A great painting is to him "an intellectual manifestation the equal in quality and intensity of the finest achievements of warlike action, of forensic argument, or of scientific or philosophical adjudication."

The world by some, in moments of over-simplification, is held to be divided into Greeks and Romans. The first are supposed to symbolize the lovers and creators of beauty; the second, the givers of laws and the doers of deeds. But it is one of the distinctions of British history that it abounds in fusions of the two temperaments which prove the fallacy of such an easy division.

When, on the night before he was to face Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham, General Wolfe said he would prefer being the author of Gray's "Elegy" to the glory of beating the French on the morrow, he demonstrated that double endowment Englishmen can possess for being, so to speak, both Greek and Roman. Sir Philip Sidney, as a warrior-statesman who

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had written "Astrophel and Stella," "An Apology for Poetry," and "Arcadia," had proved this long ago. So had the Viscount of St. Albans, that Lord Chancellor better remembered as Francis Bacon. Indeed, from the distant days when a king named Alfred translated Gregory the Great and St. Augustine, and a hard-working man, variously employed as a soldier, a commercial agent, an M.P., a Clerk of the King's Works, and a Deputy Forester for the Crown, found time to write "The Canterbury Tales," the tradition had persisted. Macaulay, Disraeli, and Bulwer-Lytton were among its torchbearers. Fortunately it has not perished. The Lord Tweedsmuir who was John Buchan continued it. So has General Wavell, who in the midst of the last war compiled an anthology of poetry known as "Other Men's Flowers."

The list, though far longer than hinted here, has never possessed a more spectacular entry than Winston Churchill. From his days in India on his energies and curiosities have been superhuman. Even in his thirties when Mr. Churchill was new to the Cabinet, Sir Edward Grey was complaining, "Winston, very soon, will become incapable from sheer activity of mind of being anything in a Cabinet but Prime Minister." Most people never really live the one life at their disposal. Mr. Churchill would have found one life grossly insufficient, had he not discovered a simple solution to the problem. He has lived many lives, and lived all of them to the full.

"What do you do?" was a question asked occasionally of Annapolis graduates by officers of the Royal Navy during the last war. By this they did not mean "What is your specific assignment?" They took that for granted. They meant "What do you do in addition to your job? What is your outside interest, hobby, or diversion?"

Mr. Churchill has held almost every important position in His Majesty's Government. But, hard-pressed by arduous duties though he has been, he has a gusto of mind, spirit, and body which has demanded releases beyond his official tasks. He has written more books, and certainly more important books, than most authors whose whole careers are devoted to book-writing. Even getting these done has not robbed him of leisure and the need of filling his free hours. Hence his paint-

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ing and the joy he has found in it.

To live, most men fortunately must work. How civilized they are is better measured by how they employ their leisure than by what is the employment which has earned it for them. Mr. Churchill's is a mind which cannot tolerate inactivity. He rests it by recharging it. Instead of emptying it of all thought, he refreshes it by a change of interest. He is as impatient with the idle rich as he is with the idle poor. He divides rational, in-

dustrious, and useful human beings into two classes—those whose work is work and whose pleasure is pleasure and those whose work and pleasure are one. The life of those belonging to the second category is, as he sees it, "a natural harmony. For them the working hours are never long enough. Each day is a holiday . . ." No wonder Mr. Churchill describes such persons as "Fortune's favored children." Win or lose, he is one of these himself.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

My Gentlest Song

(Pine and rose)

By Peter Viereck

1.

SMALL FRIEND, you fed my awe when I was small,
I who have never fed on soil alone.

Because I must be lit by more than sun,
I bless the bloom of which you'll now be shorn,
Sweetness no cone of mine can ever grow.
Your nectar wounds me wilder than your thorn;
I've loved you fresher than my youngest bud
And longer than your oldest can recall;—
Yet must not help you, even if I could,
For it's not I who made you mortal. Mourn
That we—once planted by the selfsame strewing,

Pale seed by seed together flying,
You not yet rose, I not yet pine, upborne
By the same gusty randomness—must blow
Apart forever by the law of snow.

2.

Remember, friend, your dancing-days of May
When restless willows rustled just for you?
You tossed your petals such a reckless way
You hardly noticed me the whole month through
And thought your beauty was its own defense.
Yet all the while my boughs were shielding you.
You know the zephyrs, I the hurricanes;
I've suffered hail so you could sip the dew.
Because I've died so many times each fall,
Now something in me can not die at all.
But each new ring of wisdom cost me dear
In chills you'll never feel who last a year.
Now go—goodbye—while I grow still more tall;
You bore me when you look so glum;
For there's one Shade I must not shade you from.

3.

Small friend, you'll never leave me any more
Though you have death and I have sleep ahead.
My beautiful hunger waits for you, it waits
To twine us even closer than before—
(Before we sprouted toward such different fates)—
Close as the hour we lay there, spore by spore,
Two seeming twins in selfsame garden-bed.
How many times I've wished me dead instead!
How gladly I'd divide my unspent sheen
And lend your fadings half my evergreen!
But must not help you, even if I could,
For it's not I who made you less than wood.
You—bright brief putrefying weed—
Will feed my roots next spring, will feed
The fabulous white-hot darkness at my core.

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