

Du Quenoy, Paul. *Alexander Serov and the Birth of the Russian Modern*. Bethesda: Academica Press, 2016. xiii + 380 pp. \$72.95. ISBN 978-1-9363-2094-3.

Artistic censorship at the hands of an autocratic Russian ruler; a Russia divided between those who would look abroad to the West for inspiration and those who would look inward at their collective nationalistic soul; a Russian artist incarcerated for actions taken contrary to the good of the state. No, this is not Putin's Russia, nor even the USSR during Brezhnev. Rather, it is the mid-nineteenth century Russia of music critic and composer Alexander Serov, as related by Paul du Quenoy. Well researched and written, this biography offers a unique insight into this mercurial operatic figure, less well known than his contemporaries Glinka, Mussorgsky, and Tchaikovsky, and even his friend turned foe, the immensely influential nineteenth-century critic Vladimir Stasov.

Though he claimed to be apolitical, Serov could not avoid taking part in the battles over nationalism that raged in nineteenth-century Russia, yet he was able to straddle the divide perhaps better than any other significant cultural figure. Serov was certainly not allied with the nationalists of "The Mighty Handful"—Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov—nor their spiritual advisor, Stasov, but he also kept his distance from the Westerners, led by Anton Rubinstein and his patron, the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna. Ultimately, Serov's heart lay with the West and, most importantly, with Richard Wagner, whom he championed like no other in nineteenth-century Russia. Further, his many trips to Europe from Russia and his numerous meetings with such figures as Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz attested to Serov's true beliefs. So why was he not clearly in the Western camp? In short, because Serov was "rough and violent," "vain," "quarrelsome," and he "lacked character" (pp. 6–7).

Du Quenoy stresses that his book is not merely a biography, but "a cultural topography of the Russian Empire useful for understanding the totality of its experience at a time of immense transformation" (p. 10). This is understandable, insofar as the author has published extensively on Imperial Russia. Herein lies the value of this work. While there were certainly other more famous musical figures in nineteenth-century Russia, by choosing Serov as his lens through which to view the century, du Quenoy presents a new angle to what is, by now, well-trodden territory. In other words, Serov's story brings new views to the table, views that allow for a reexamination of some of the century's biggest controversies, such as the interpretation and reinterpretation of Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. Because he championed Wagner (and Liszt) and knew him personally, and also because he distanced himself from Rubinstein and Russia's two new conservatories in St. Petersburg (1862) and Moscow (1866), Serov maintained a highly nuanced position and, to an important degree, avoided the state censor, which allowed his work to get to the stage.

Alexander Serov follows the life of Serov (1820–71) roughly decade by decade. With the possible exception of Taruskin (1981), you will not find a better discussion in English of Serov's formative years in law school, where he met Stasov, or of Serov's time working as a civil servant in Crimea, biding his time until he could return to his beloved St. Petersburg. Nor will you find a better exposition of Serov's three operas—*Judith* (1863), *Rogneda* (1865), and *The Power of the Fiend* (1871)—which made him the most popular composer in Russia in the 1860s. Notably, du Quenoy not only outlines the background and compositional process for these operas and their librettos, but also contextualizes how and why they became so popular. While Gerald Abraham dismissed Serov's "vulgar opportunism," du Quenoy explains the fine line Serov had to walk, with respect not only to state censorship, but also to the debate on nationalism that so engulfed nineteenth-century Russia (p. 310).

At times one wishes for a musicological perspective. This was particularly noticeable during the discussion of Wagnerian elements in Glinka's technique, or the Italian melodic influences in

Russian opera. In other words, at times it would have been nice to have some musical examples, or possibly analysis, to back up the claims made. Of course, the author acknowledges his lack of such musicological abilities, but the point remains. Still, this is a small issue that does not detract from the overall achievement. Du Quenoy writes, “my purpose in writing this book has not been to suggest that Serov was an unappreciated genius who deserves a twenty-first century Renaissance,” to which I say, “Thanks!” (p. 347). Too often, when dealing with a secondary figure such as Serov, authors wish to elevate, even lionize, the subject of the work, all the while knowing, deep down, that no wave of enthusiasm is forthcoming. Rather, du Quenoy speaks of the new perspective that he is giving on the well-known topic of nineteenth-century Russia: the perspective of the critic and composer Alexander Serov.

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