

The Demon in the Village

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When Mussorgsky died in 1881, very few of his compositions were in a presentable state; yet the personality and rough genius of his music vexed and enchanted his peers to such an extent that they devoted considerable effort bringing it to publishable completion. Among the works left unfinished were two operas, of which *Khovanshchina*, later completed and orchestrated by Shostakovich, became the more well-known. The other opera, *Sorochyntsi Fair*, has had a more problematic afterlife. Despite no fewer than three completion attempts, it has remained an obscurity, and the new production at the Komische Oper, directed by Barrie Kosky, represents the first time it has been staged in Berlin for nearly seventy years.

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Komische
Oper Berlin.

Mussorgsky:
Sorochyntsi Fair.

Barrie Kosky,

director. Cast: Jens Larsen (Cherevik),
Agnes Zwierno (Khivrya), Mirka Wagner
(Parasya), Tom Erik Lie (Kum/
Chernobog), Alexander Lewis (Gritsko),
Ivan Turšić (Afanasy Ivanovich) and Hans
Gröning (Gypsy). Choir of the Komische
Oper Berlin. Vocalconsort Berlin.
Orchestra of the Komische Oper Berlin.
Henrik Nánási, conductor



It is not difficult to understand why the opera has had difficulty finding its place in the repertoire. Despite the best efforts of Pavel Lamm and Vissarion Shebalin – whose 1931 completion formed the basis for this production – *Sorochyntsi Fair* remains a work of uneven music and oddly weighted dramatic structure, made all the more frustrating by its not-infrequent flashes of brilliance. Its most inspired moments – the panoramic choral sequences and the ever-present suggestion of large scale madness – play directly to the strengths of Mr Kosky, whose staging largely managed to overcome to the limitations of the source.

The libretto – adapted from one of Gogol’s early stories by Mussorgsky himself – deals in folktale archetypes: Gritsko, a young lad from the country wants to marry Parasya; although Parasya’s father Cherevik agrees, his decision is overruled by his spiteful wife Khivrya who, in the meantime, is trying to arrange her own affair with Afanasy Ivanovich, the son of the village priest. This domestic comedy plays out against the story of a devil who haunts the village of Sorochyntsi in the form of a pig, looking for the red overcoat he pawned to the innkeeper years earlier. Had Mussorgsky lived to prepare the opera for performance, it is tempting to imagine he would have been compelled to make considerable alterations to the narrative structure ... after all, even *Boris Godunov* required some intervention from the Imperial Theatre before reaching its ideal form.

As Mussorgsky left it, the story is something of a mess: the two young lovers disappear for the whole of the long second act, the crucial back-story about the devil's overcoat doesn't appear until about two thirds of the way through, and the eventual happy ending seems both sudden and unearned. Fortunately Mr Kosky's production was less concerned with the details of the narrative than with the raw physicality of the action and the possibilities of a volatile crowd drunk on revelry and superstition. Mr Kosky is an undisputed master of transforming choral crowd scenes into exhilarating spectacles of barely-controlled chaos – witness his production of [Moses und Aron](#) a few years back – and the most memorable images of the production tended to arise from its most populous moments.



Mussorgsky: *Sorochyntsi Fair*. Barrie Kosky, director. Henrik Nánási, conductor. Berlin, Komische Oper, April 2017 © Monika Rittershaus, 2017

The decision not to have a set of any kind – the action took place on a steeply inclined stage furnished with nothing more than a low partition that slid forward and backward – left plenty of room for large-scale crowd scenes. The money saved on set construction costs was clearly diverted toward the exceptionally beautiful collection of Russian peasant costumes, designed by Katrin Lea Tag in a palette of dark-hued floral prints. Indeed costumes and action alone were enough to illuminate the evening's most extraordinary scene, Gritsko's dream of a witches sabbath set to the familiar music of *Night on Bare Mountain*, which Mussorgsky had rescued from an earlier project (and which Rimsky-Korsakov later turned into a standalone concert work); the image of an army

of red coated devils squaring off against a legion of human figures in evening suits and pig heads will undoubtedly prove difficult to forget.

It was the second act, with its succession of smaller-scale scenes, revolving mostly around Khivrya's attempts to consummate her dalliance with Afanasy Ivanovich, that tended to suffer. Although Mr Kosky kept the action alive with a series of inventive, physically awkward interactions – Khivrya cracking eggs on her sleeping husband's head in order to make cakes for her lover was a stroke of malicious genius, and the subsequent 'bird-stuffing' scene was oddly unsettling – these alone could not keep the action from sagging.

While Mussorgsky envisaged *Sorochyntsi Fair* as a comedy, and there were indeed numerous scenes played explicitly for laughs, the production injected an odd, and not unwelcome gravitas by placing selections from Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death* – in specially prepared arrangements by choir director David Cavelius – between the acts. These haunting interludes, usually performed in complete darkness, created a sense of spiritual unease beneath the broad secular comedy but, more practically, served to extend the stage time of the choir – the Komische Chorus augmented by Vocalconsort Berlin – whose performance was unquestionably among the finest of the evening.

Of the soloists, it was difficult not to be impressed by the resounding heft and confident delivery of Jens Larsen who, as Cherevik, seemed more than equal to the challenge of performing almost the entire role lurching around the stage in a variety of drunken states. Similar demands were made of Cherevik's drinking companion Kum, given an energetic reading from Tom Erik Lie; his fearful, exaggerated story of the devil's overcoat provided

the second act with a convincing and much needed moment of clarity. Alexander Lewis was an ardent, innocent Grizko; if there was a touch of strain at the lowest-lying passages of his first act aria, there was also considerable expression in his sorrowful outbursts. His piano-accompanied performance of the 'Lullaby' from *Songs and Dances of Death* during the interval between the second act and the intermezzo was similarly dramatic in character, even if the song itself all but demanded the range of a bass.

Agnes Zwierko, with her haughty manner and coldly precise voice, used the first act to sketch out a mean-spirited, thoroughly unsympathetic Khivrya, although her constant gesticulation did seem somewhat forced. In the second act, which she dominated, she revealed her character to be considerably more complex, and her ability to switch convincingly between outright cruelty and lovestruck foolishness constantly challenged the audience to reconsider her wickedness. Although Mirka Wagner was given little opportunity to make an impression in the first act, and was entirely absent from the second, she managed to turn her third act aria – a glorious lament which turns midway into a fiery folk dance – into one of the evening's vocal highlights.

Under the direction of Henrik Nánási, the orchestra rarely drew attention to itself, but remained sensitive to the action while keeping the possible excesses of the larger scenes mostly in check. Yet if the task of streamlining Mussorgsky's oddly-shaped retelling of Gogol into a more conventional story was perhaps beyond the ability of any production, it was Mr Kosky's unquestionable commitment to drawing out the hints of madness beneath the comedy which managed to transform *Sorochyntsi Fair* from a curious operatic rarity into a strikingly memorable evening.



Alexander Lewis (Grizko), Hans Gröning (Zigeuner), Mirka Wagner (Parasja) and Chorsolisten in Mussorgsky: *Sorochyntsi Fair*. Barrie Kosky, director. Henrik Nánási, conductor. Berlin, Komische Oper, April 2017 © Monika Rittershaus, 2017