

The Fate of a Nation

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Khovanshchina is not exactly a rarity: although it was left unfinished at the time of Mussorgsky's death, a series of orchestrations and completions – by Rimsky-Korsakov, by Ravel and Stravinsky, and by Shostakovich – have kept it alive at the edges of the repertoire. It is nonetheless a work that demands great singers, a great choir and a director of uncommon vision in order to thrive; one could easily go through life without witnessing a truly remarkable staged performance.

The superb new production at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden not only met the opera's demands, but surpassed them in nearly every way, systematically destroying any possible reservations one might have had about [Mussorgsky's](#) unusual narrative structure or earnestly forceful music. Directed by [Claus Guth](#) and conducted by [Simone Young](#), this *Khovanshchina* – performed in the Shostakovich orchestration, with Stravinsky's final scene – was both an unconventional tragedy and a true operatic spectacular with grand choral tableaux, outsized personalities and endlessly stirring music; and, like all great tragedies, by the end, its overwhelming sense of hopelessness had become strangely invigorating. If *Khovanshchina* is rarely described as a masterpiece, this was the production to make one wonder why.

The story, based on historical episodes, concerns a failed uprising (of sorts) in the time of Peter the Great, but unlike the historical epics that flourished in the West during the mid-nineteenth century, Mussorgsky refused to frame history in terms of melodrama: if the work follows the familiar five-act structure of *grand opera* (complete with ballet), the absence of huge love duets or surprise paternity reveals is notable. Yet Mussorgsky's almost defiantly un-operatic treatment of his material is perhaps the opera's greatest strength. Although the story may be initially confusing to anyone with little knowledge of Russian history, Mussorgsky's attempts to concentrate complex political conflicts into operatic form yielded a tragedy of national proportions.

The first act of Claus Guth's staging made little attempt to alleviate the potential confusion.



Guth, *Khovanshchina* © 2024 by Monika Rittershaus

Berlin, domingo, 2 de junio de 2024.
Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Mussorgsky: *Khovanshchina*. Claus Guth, director. Mika Kares (Ivan Khovansky), Najmiddin Mavlyanov (Andrei Khovansky), Stephan Rügamer (Vasily Golitsin), George Gagnidze (Shaklovity), Taras Shtonda (Dosifey), Marina Prudenskaya (Marfa), Evelin Novak (Emma), Andrei Popov (Scribe). Staatkapelle Berlin. Simone Young, conductor



Mussorgsky: Khovanshchina. Simone Young, conductor. Claus Guth, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, June 2024. © 2024 by Monika Rittershaus.

All of the story's major players were introduced in a series of scenes that, for all their pomp and solemnity, never quite added up to a coherent exposition; nor did the addition of Peter the Great as a silent figure – something that would have been forbidden in Mussorgsky's day – help to clarify the outlines of the conflict. The assortment of characters and motives on display was further obscured by the presence of silent figures dressed as modern-day lab assistants who followed the action from the sidelines, taking notes on computers and occasionally filming the action on stage (the live video was projected onto the backdrop of the set). The whole thing, it seemed, was one large, carefully-controlled

behavioural experiment.

In fact the staging never entirely settled down into anything as straightforward as an historical narrative. Although there were a handful of moments that flirted with conventional drama – notably the pursuit of Emma by the young Prince Andrei – the characters who emerged most vividly came across as distillations of a specific moral and political ethos; and each, in their own way, seemed motivated by both the love of their country and a genuine despair at the direction their country was headed. The meeting of these titanic figures, either in smaller ensemble scenes or flanked by a chorus of followers, had a cumulative power that transcended the opera's intended setting.

If the multi-directional conflict could not be reduced to a simple struggle between good and evil, by the end of the third act one had become fully immersed in the tragedy of a nation unable to escape its fate. Mr Guth made sure that the opera's parallels with twentieth century history did not go unnoticed, but was equally careful not to overstate the matter: the modern frame of the staging and a few well-chosen back projections during Shaklovity's third-act lament were enough to reinforce the notion of historical continuity. Beneath the complex surface of power struggles, there emerged a terrifying futility that rendered the characters, their actions and their beliefs all the more tragic.



Mussorgsky: Khovanshchina. Simone Young, conductor. Claus Guth, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, June 2024. © 2024 by Monika Rittershaus.

If the staging provided the evening with its cathartic power, the vocal and orchestral performances gave it its sense of occasion. In Mika [Kares](#), Taras [Shtonda](#) and George [Gagnidze](#) the production boasted three commanding basses, each highly distinctive in tone but all able to convey the full dramatic force of their respective characters. Mika Kares, as Ivan Khovansky, possessed the greatest warmth and elegance of phrasing: his speech to the Streltsy in the first act was radiant with the serenity of a natural leader, although his dramatic scenes – especially the superb trio with Dosifey and Golitsin in the second act – were equally compelling. His finest moment was perhaps the final scene of the third act in which he urged calm and resignation in the face of imminent danger.

Taras Shtonda, as Dosifey, was arguably the most consistently impressive. Each of his

entrances in the first three acts had a *deus ex machina* authority capable of bringing all surrounding action to a sudden halt. Yet the implacable sternness of his early scenes gave way to greater lyricism in the second scene of the fourth act, which was infused with a sense of inevitable fate. As Shaklovity, George Gagnidze had a lighter tone than Mr Shtonda and a more agitated manner than Mr Kares, but was nonetheless responsible for the evening's most moving scene, a heartfelt monologue at the centre of the third act lamenting the recurring misfortunes and sufferings of a nation and its people.



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Although the evening was dominated by its basses, Marina [Prudenskaya](#) delivered an excellent Marfa, equally at home in the opera's secular and spiritual dramas. Her fortune-telling scene in the second act was almost hypnotic in its concentration, while her confession in the third act was one of the few moments in which individual emotion was allowed to eclipse ideological conflict. Among the smaller roles, Stephan [Rügamer](#), as Golitsin, conveyed perfectly the sense of a bureaucrat engulfed by forces he had no hope of controlling; Najmiddin [Mavlyanov](#) was agreeably neurotic as the frustrated Prince Andrei; and Evelin [Novak](#) captured Emma's frightened agitation. The choir, who play such a crucial role in the drama, were on excellent form throughout the evening,

nowhere more so than the immolation chorus of the old believers that (in Stravinsky's version) brings the opera to its haunting conclusion.

The evening's voices were matched both in elegance in dramatic scope by the musical direction of Simone Young, whose unerring sense of pace and attention to textural detail were apparent in every scene. For much of the evening her tempi remained spacious enough to allow action and mood to emerge with equal clarity; although no scenes suffered from lack of momentum, Ms Young's patience with the score ensured that the opera's moments of quiet solemnity were every bit as compelling as its dramatic scenes. Ms Young also displayed a strong affinity for the breadth and variety of Mussorgsky's musical inspirations – from the sudden eruptions of folk rhythms to the near stasis of liturgical rapture – which were played without trivialisation or overstatement.

Khovanshchina may never become a core part of the western canon: the complexity of its subject matter and its lack of conventional character drama would seem to mitigate against widespread popularity. Yet it is a work rich in musical rewards, and anyone willing to engage with its intricate narrative – or its fatalistic mood – may also find it strangely moving. It may remain a difficult and demanding opera, but the new production at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden has made the strongest possible argument for its undeniable qualities.