

'Zigfrid And Bryungilda - A History of the Great Wagner Singers of Imperial Russia'

by Dr Rosamund Bartlett, 13 March 2016

12.30pm: DVD: Visconti's 'Ludvig', Part 2

2.00pm: Presentation by Dr Rosamund Bartlett

Presentation by Dr Rosamund Bartlett

Dr Rosamund Bartlett, a visiting British academic, addressed the Society in 2015 on the introduction of Wagner to Moscow and St Petersburg from 1841 throughout the 19th century. Attendees at many of Dr Bartlett's lectures in Sydney in venues such as AGNSW have grown accustomed to her breadth of coverage and to her well-illustrated examples. Sadly, at the Goethe Institut last year there was a problem with the sound system, meaning we could not hear musical examples using Russian singers and musicians in Wagnerian performance. Rosamund returned this year to give us more information on this underexplored area, bringing a number of recordings she had discovered. Over 50 people attended her presentation on 13 March 2016.

She believes Wagner's music and ideas found more fertile ground in Russia than anywhere else in Europe, other than Germany. Some of this was because of the influence of German princesses who had married into the Tsarist line, such as Queen Victoria's granddaughters, princesses Elizabeth and Alix of Hesse. Other Wagner supporters included powerful figures in the cultural life of St Petersburg, such as Stefan Gedeonov, first director of the Hermitage Museum, and Eduard Nápravník, a Czech and principal conductor of the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre (who did not like Wagner's late operas), leading Wagner's frustrations in Vienna, trying to get *Tristan and Isolde* performed (after 77 rehearsals!) were assuaged in 1862 by an invitation from the St Petersburg Philharmonic Society, under the influence of Alexander Serov, important music critic, composer and Wagner enthusiast. Wagner conducted performances of his own work and gained some additional individual financial support from concerts in St Petersburg and Moscow in 1863, where his concerts featuring much recently composed material, including sections of The Ring Cycle were hugely successful. From this beginning, the performance of Wagner operas was infrequent, even though articles on his music and aesthetic theories gradually increased, particularly championed in an influential journal RMG. Another important breakthrough was a tour of six Wagner operas in 1898 by Breslau

Opera, with German conductors such as Hans Richter. Despite this, opposition to Wagner's music remained strong in the Imperial Theatres Directorate. So, it is extraordinary to know that by 1913, 25% of the performances at the Mariinsky were of Wagner's operas.

Russian singers became Wagner interpreters. Russian bass and baritone singers, trained church music traditions, were particularly successful. Even so the tradition was to sing in Russian, not German. Indeed the first performance of *Tristan and Isolde* in 1899 had the two leading roles sung in French, with all other roles in Russian. The Isolde in this production was Felia Litvinne, who in 1900 sang the first Brünnhilde. She became a leading Russian Wagnerian, described by critics as 'one of the greatest singers that ever existed.'

Among the other singers introduced to us through the presentation and heard on record was Ivan Ershov. From a poor background and working as a locomotive driver, he progressed to singing, eventually becoming Russia's leading helden-tenor. He was largely responsible for the popularisation of Wagner in Russia. Not only did he have a magnificent voice, but he was also a great dramatic performer and on the evidence of the slides shown had a striking appearance. He refused Cosima Wagner's 1901 invitation to sing at Bayreuth, staying instead in Russia, performing all the leading Wagnerian tenor roles. He married Georgian soprano Sofia Akimova, who sang leading soprano roles.

There were singers from Jewish backgrounds who faced discrimination. Alexander Davydov from the Ukraine had to become Orthodox to sing. A great bass, Leib Moisevich Spivak, studied in Italy and sang at San Carlo and La Scala, but returning to Russia took his wife's name and was baptised in order to sing.

In the pre-Revolutionary years, the Mariinsky and St Petersburg continued to lead Russia in Wagnerian performance; Moscow was generally seen to be backward and provincial. The conservatism of the Russian audiences was reflected in the fact that the recordings Rosamund had uncovered were dominated by the earlier operas; we heard a number of versions of 'O! du mein holder Abendstern' from *Tannhäuser*, while Elizabeth's arias were also featured. The post-Revolutionary years produced a broadening of the repertoire; we received a taste of what we might hear next year of 20th century Russian singers in a wonderful video of baritone Dmitri Hvorostovsky – even if he also sang 'Abendstern'!

By Colleen Chesterman