

'Russian Wagnerians In The 20th & 21st Centuries' By Rosamund Bartlett, 12 March 2017

12.30pm: Magic Fire – 1955 film of the life of composer Richard Wagner with Wagner's music arranged by Erich Korngold - Part 1
2.00pm: Presentation by Dr Rosamund Bartlett

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The presentation by Dr Rosamund Bartlett on 12 March was very popular, attended by 53 members and visitors. She reminded us of the excellent Russian singers of the early 20th century, particularly the great basses, such as Kolovsky, Lemeshev and Reizen, whom she had discussed in her 2016 presentation. That had highlighted the popularity of Wagner during the period before and after World War I. She described the suppression of Wagner's music during the Stalinist period, when none of his operas were performed. She played the little-known 15th symphony of Shostakovich (1971) in which he quotes musical memories of his life, including references to Wagner's Ring, from 'Die Walküre' onwards.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1997 provided opportunities for a renewed interest in Wagner spearheaded by Valery Gergiev at the Mariinsky. She showed footage of a 1997 'Parsifal' directed by the UK's Tony Palmer, with a set drawing on Russian icons and a cast of 150. A promotional video showed a beautiful young Anna Netrebko as a Flower Maiden. Gergiev's commitment continued with 'Der fliegende Holländer' (1998), 'Lohengrin' (1999) and the full Ring Cycle in 2003, using a number of directors and designs referencing the Eastern Russian steppes and Caucasian mythology. This Ring travelled the world to such houses as Covent Garden. Gergiev also negotiated the building of a new Mariinsky Theatre and the redevelopment of the former Michalovsky Theatre.

While Gergiev ensured that St Petersburg led the Wagnerian revival, Moscow followed the example of expanding opera theatres while also introducing some Wagner. It expanded opera from the Bolshoi, very large, to a New Stage, for smaller chamber opera. There are also a number of newer or restored theatres. The Novaya Opera was built in 1997, in art nouveau style, with 700 seats, under the conductor Kolobov,

whose name is now included in its title. The Helikon Opera is smaller, seating 250, and presents productions by Opera Moscow. This theatre shows influences from European opera houses. A recent project was 'Das Liebesverbot'. A production of 'Lohengrin' in 2008 was directed by the Danish director Kasper Holten, later Director of Covent Garden.

Rosamund pointed out that some of the choices in Russia in recent times have been conservative and cited 3 productions of 'Der fliegende Holländer'. The first in July 2013 was in the Michalovsky Theatre in St Petersburg and used a young director and designer, who clad the cast in modern dress. A September 2013 production in Ekaterinburg's 1912 baroque style theatre was directed by Garry McCann from the UK and was rather austere. The Bolshoi in 2013 revived a 2004 production using Peter Konowitschy from Germany as director with leads from Canada and the US.

'Tannhäuser' continues to be a popular choice. One production was at the Novaya, a great achievement in this small theatre. Another 'Tannhäuser' was staged in Novosibirsk, in a huge 1944 opera house, which is the largest in Russia. With a young director and stars from Europe this caused a huge scandal, particular criticism focusing on the use of images from the crucifixion on the poster. It raised the ire of the culture minister, leading to the dismissal of the conductor.

An interesting point raised by Rosamund was that Russians are beginning to sing in German, rather than Russian, which had always been the language of choice. So interest in Wagner is rising and Russia may become a future venue for presentations of Wagner productions.

By Colleen Chesterman