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Reviews

A challenging but rewarding experience

by Glyn Williams

Reise: Rasputin
Helikon Opera, Moscow
9 December 2011



Rasputin, by American composer Jay Reise, was commissioned by Beverly Sills and first performed at the New York City Opera, during the soprano's post-retirement phase as company chairman, on 17 September 1988. Born in New York City in 1950, Reise was educated at Hamilton College, McGill University, Tanglewood and at the University of Pennsylvania, where he remains as Professor of Music. Steeped in jazz and the polyphonic classical tradition, his style makes use of 'Carnatic rhythms', a technique of rhythmic polyphony found in the music of South India. *Rasputin* is his only opera to date. Other works

include symphonies, tone poems, concertos, chamber works, piano music and a few vocal and choral works.

As Reise remarks in his programme notes, 'I relied more on the legend of Rasputin than the actual historical facts.' The affairs of Rasputin and the Imperial Court form the foreground, Lenin and the imminent revolution the background. Act 1 starts with a meeting of Rasputin's 'Khlysty', a heretical sect devoted to sex, flagellation and salvation through pain and sin. Rasputin emerges as its Saviour: 'the Voice of God and The People'. Scene 2 develops conflicts between the protagonist and the Romanovs. Prince Felix Yusupov and Grand Duke Dmitry are bitterly opposed to this upstart monk. Tsaritsa Alexandra supports him. Her son Prince Alexei's haemophilia becomes a pressing issue. Unable to help, the royal physician Doctor Sokolsky can only

watch as Rasputin stops the bleeding by hypnosis. Tsar Nicholas and his consort are in Rasputin's power. Meanwhile there are reports of Cossack soldiers firing on a mob. Act 1 ends with a bizarre cabaret, representing pre-revolutionary decadence, performed by Yusupov in drag and Sokolovsky's suicide.

Act 2 opens with *beau monde* ladies of the court making merry in Rasputin's apartment. Yusupov and his royalist ally Smerdsky burst in with the intention of giving Rasputin a beating, but the monk hypnotises Yusupov into submission. Meanwhile Lenin calls for revolutionary violence. In Scene 2 Tsaritsa Alexandra and Rasputin hatch a plot in which Tsar Nicholas abdicates in favour of his son Alexei. Yusupov and his supporters hatch a counter-plot to destroy Rasputin. Nicholas goes mad. In desperation, Yusupov befriends Rasputin in order to kill him and Rasputin proclaims Alexei as the new Tsar. As history testifies, killing Rasputin proves to be easier said than done. Poison fails. So does shooting him. He appears to be dead from the bullet wounds but suddenly revives. The royalists eventually hack him to death. It is all in vain. In the powerful epilogue Lenin, with red hair and dressed entirely in red, delivers a frantic speech urging violent revolution.

Reise's musical language in *Rasputin* makes a clear distinction between the old Romanov order and what he describes as 'the brutal and chaotic new world of the 20th century'. Russian imperialism evokes delicate parodies of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in the Beethovenian key of E flat major, serving 'like a ball and chain anchoring [the old order] to the ancient monarchist tradition.' The Bolshevik revolution is entirely atonal. To the innocent ear, much of the work suggests the music of Alban Berg, and there are echoes of Kurt Weill in the Act 1 Scene 4 'cabaret' scene. In the epilogue in particular, dissonance rules, wild string glissandi prevail and a masterful rhythmic polyphony carries the music to a stunning climax.

Helikon's production of *Rasputin*, yet another triumph of director Dmitry Bertman and conductor Vladimir Ponkin, was first staged in Moscow on 1 October 2008 with lighting by Damir Ismagilov, choreography by Edvald Smirnov and the chorus directed by Denis Kirpanev. The composer's libretto was translated into Russian by Anna Bulycheva and Valentina Smirnova.

On 9 December 2011 the title role was played with utter conviction by the young Siberian bass Vladimir Kovarsky, Prince Felix Yusupov by tenor Vassily Efimov, Tsar Nicholas II by Andrey Palarmachuk (tenor), Tsaritsa Alexandra with tremendous panache by mezzo-soprano Tatiana Kuindzhi, Grand Duke Dmitry by baritone Mikhail Davydov, Doctor Sokolovsky by Dmitry Ponomarev (tenor), Princess Irina Yusupova by the formidable young mezzo Alexandra Kovalevich, Iliodor by Helikon regular Vladimir Bolotin (tenor), Smerdsky by Anatoly Ponomarev (tenor), and General Zhevadov by Dmitry Skorikov (bass). The speaking role of Lenin was played by Ilya Ilin and the cabaret manager by Valery Kiryanov. The performance was attended by the composer and conducted by Konstantin Chudovsky.

The main feature of the set, designed by Helikon's regular duo Igor Nezhny and Tatiana Tulubieva, is a revolving, slanted wooden rectangle. In Act 1 this supports a number of large mock-up Fabergé eggs (representing pre-Revolutionary decadence, like Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*) supported by crude wooden crates (depicting the 'rough-hewn lives of the working class'). The eggs disappear for Act 2,

leaving the revolving rectangle to resemble a barren stony beach.

Prior to the performance and during the interval, a front-drop features a black-and-white photograph of a revolutionary crowd scene. Costumes are unremarkable apart from the opening 'Khlysty' scene. From the third row it is impossible to decide if the chorus is dressed in cleverly-designed body stockings or actually naked!

The work was performed by Opéra Massy in Paris in 2010 and is scheduled for the Saaremaa Festival during 2012. Estonian opera lovers can anticipate a challenging but entirely rewarding experience.

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