

MASTERS OF RUSSIAN SONG

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Masters of Russian Song by Kurt Schindler

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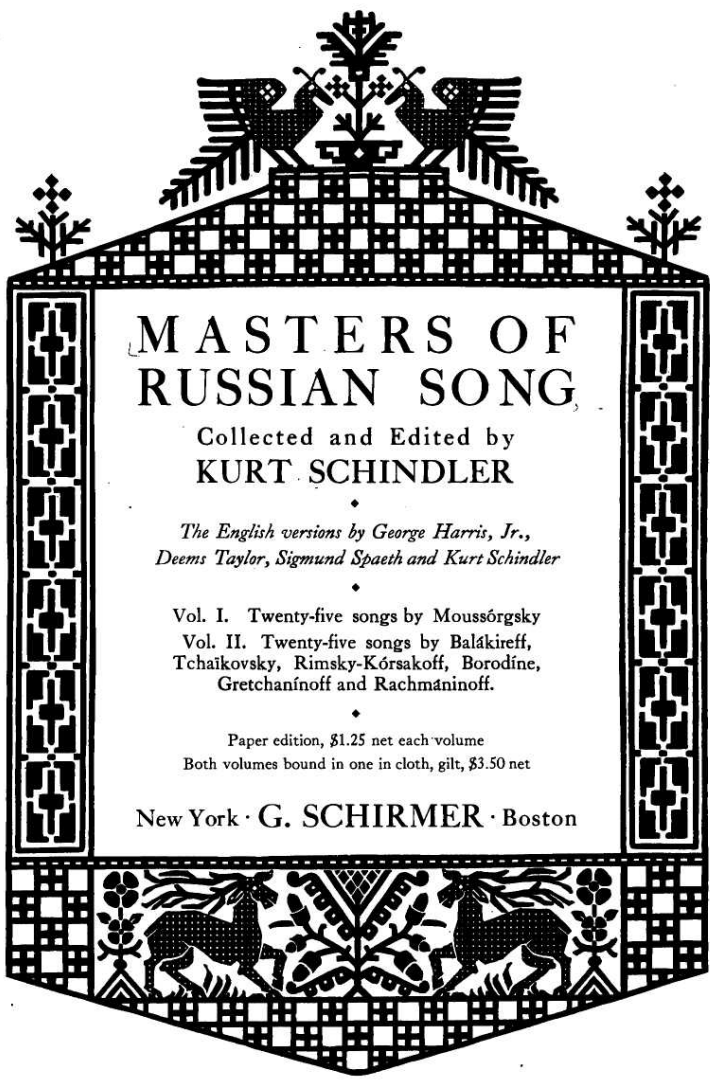
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KURT SCHINDLER

**MASTERS OF
RUSSIAN SONG**



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Collected and Edited by
KURT SCHINDLER

*The English versions by George Harris, Jr.,
Deems Taylor, Sigmund Spaeth and Kurt Schindler*

Vol. I. Twenty-five songs by Moussórgsky
Vol. II. Twenty-five songs by Balákireff,
Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Kórsakoff, Borodíne,
Gretchanínoff and Rachmáninoff.

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PREFACE

This volume of twenty-five songs by Moussórgsky is offered to the public of America and all other English-speaking countries with the earnest hope that it may definitely and lastingly contribute to the appreciation and understanding of this greatest of innovators and prophets in modern music. While the success of his historical opera "Boris Godounoff" has firmly established his name with American opera-goers, and while the serene and lofty strains of his other operatic work, "Khovánshtchina," have found many admirers among those privileged to attend its few performances in Russian at Drury Lane, yet for several reasons Moussórgsky's operas do not permit a complete evaluation of his genius; first of all, because in dealing with subjects that picture to a large extent the life of the Russian people in its manifold aspects, Moussórgsky's fanatical love of veracity, coupled with a purposeful idealism that verged upon self-abnegation, induced him to let the people speak in their own medium, the Russian folk-song, which he knew how to incorporate in his work as no other before or after him (and we must admit that no "composed" substitute would have been as good). Another reason why a critique based solely upon these operas must lack in accuracy, is, that both works have been largely made over by Rimsky-Kórsakoff, not only in orchestration but also in the building of Ensemble-scenes and Finales. That this was done with the fine theatrical sense of a great practitioner as well as with the delicate tact of a friend, no one can deny, nor that Rimsky's brilliant orchestration and climaxes certainly hastened the recognition of these operas; yet for those who know the sum of Rimsky's own operatic work, there is little doubt as to where, in "Boris" and "Khovánshtchina," the original stops and the *retouche* begins. A certain rectangular, pompous, over-regular style, an unnecessary polyphony, and a taint of conventionality, from which Rimsky was not altogether free, creep in from time to time; and for the most part one can easily distinguish the true from the "edited" Moussórgsky. This task will be especially facilitated by a perusal of his songs, because there one never finds a trace of conventionality, never a line too much, rather a desire to say the most possible with the simplest means—almost sketch-like at times—finally, a meticulous attention to correct declamation down to the reproduction of the minutest inflections of the spoken word.

A contemporary of Wagner, Moussórgsky has solved in his own way—without much theorizing—the problem of musical declamation, being led merely by his desire to be ab-

solutely true to life. The guiding advice of his elder friend, Balákireff (who foresaw this development), a rare gift for acoustical observation, scrupulous studies, and an unerring steadfastness of purpose, thus led Moussórgsky to find his own mode of expression, which is unlike any other's. It is not a style, not a pattern, but is new and reborn with every new problem which he attacks. It is so free, so intangible, so without compromise and convention, that one stands before his creations amazed, as before Nature herself.

The key to Moussórgsky's work is the spiritual personality of the man himself; that is why he cannot be imitated. If certain pages in Debussy's scores have similar melodic contours or harmonies, they are so much amalgamated with this Frenchman's peculiar style, that the idea of imitation is out of the question. The point is that Debussy is essentially a man of style, of patterns, of an individual, hyper-civilized musical vision (I say this in no derogatory sense). This is in direct opposition to the genius of Moussórgsky, who is rugged, frank, untrammelled, and who strikes at the very roots of things, laying open their inmost soul and letting it speak for itself, free of all personal admixture; an "impressionist" of the soul, in fact, if one dare thus freely apply the name of the painter-school of Manet and Monet to a musician, inasmuch as the revolutionizing process, the gradual evolving of a new ideal of expression, is much the same in both cases.

The only one of the younger Russian school who is called a disciple of Moussórgsky, by reason of the freedom and audacity of his conceptions, Igor Stravinsky, is, however, far from the roots and mainsprings of Moussórgsky's art. His extraordinary technique leads him to an external, kaleidoscopic portrayal of life, quite unlike the direct simplicity, the power of divination of the master.

To study Moussórgsky's work is a profound experience in a musician's life, one likely to revolutionize not only accepted musical standards, but also to enlarge his vision of the spiritual and psychic powers of music. It is futile to argue, as many of Moussórgsky's contemporaries did, that he lacked technique, that his artistic equipment was amateurish, that his originality was freakishness. We who are able to envisage the entire field of his life's work, and to gauge the tremendous seriousness and achievement of it, can appreciate the sum of its energy, the unerring logic of it all, the long path of self-development that he travelled.—Moussórgsky was young enough, when he took up music as a career, to assimilate all the classical technique of music, if he had so desired. But his conviction was bent upon finding his own way, free from all convention, to express all the emotions of the human heart as faithfully to nature as possible. And so he began his way, at first stumbling and staggering, often rugged and uncouth in his work, but finally arriving at heights of overpowering directness and lucidity. Thus his life's achievement stands before us completed in a Rembrandtian chiaroscuro, with the high lights always placed

where they lay bare the essential life of the soul. This is why his songs are such revelations of psychology, and why the character of Boris Godounoff or of Dosifiéf and Marfa in "Khovánshtchina" affect audiences with the direct power of Shakespearian drama.

Moussórgsky's songs constitute the bulk and mainstay of his artistic bequest. Besides these, and the two completed operas, he wrote only two operatic fragments ("The Fair of Sorótchinsk" and "The Wedding"); a small number of less significant piano-pieces, an orchestral fantasy, and a few choral works (among them the superb biblical cantata "Joshua"). But among the songs there is a wide variety, and here we find the Moussórgsky who uncovers the soul of his art in all its purity. Here he is usually free from the influence of the Russian folk-song, which otherwise so engrossingly preoccupied him as to become almost a part of his own self. The collections comprising the four "Songs and Dances of Death" and the six songs of the cycle "Without Sunlight" show us the quintessence of Moussórgsky. They were written during the darkest period of his life, after his opera "Boris" had, despite its success, been banished from the stage because of political intrigue, and while he was living in poverty and seclusion with his poet-friend, Count Golénishtcheff-Kutóózoff. Here we find a descriptive power uncanny in its visual correctness; melodic lines of undreamt-of boldness; harmonies that none other heard or felt before him; and a masterful handling of technical resources and of declamation.

Probably no layman can imagine the difficulty of translating these strange and powerful musical incarnations into poetic or even adequate English. This, then, being the first time that these song-cycles are given in English versions, no effort was spared by my collaborators and myself to render them as perfectly as possible; many a poem in this volume has been translated four or five times, before one compound version was deemed acceptable.

I was singularly fortunate in having as my collaborators such men of both musical and literary ability as Messrs. George Harris, Jr., and Deems Taylor; while for the correctness of the translation my wife (herself a Russian) and myself stand sponsors. Thus I can vouch for the conscientiousness with which the attempt has been made to render every shade of the literary meaning into English idiom, as well as for the scrupulous care taken to have everything singable and correctly accented. Being myself a hearty believer in the use of the English language for song-recitals—since non-understanding or half-understanding on the part of the audience kills the very sense of such entertainments—I find it especially needed in the case of Moussórgsky's songs, where word and music form the most intimate union, and where the one conveys nothing without the other. Apart from this, the use of French, German, or even Italian translations seems quite inappropriate before an English-speaking audience, as I said, six years ago, in the preface to "A Century of Russian Song." This

earlier collection, which has so effectively instilled a love for Russian Song in America, already contained eleven songs by Moussórgsky, which of course have not been included in the present volume. Interested musicians may want to consult these, especially as they will find among them one additional song from each of the afore-mentioned song-cycles, which could not well be included here.

All periods of Moussórgsky's productivity from 1857 to about 1880, are represented in this new collection. The years of the forming of his personality (1865-67), when he lived in the country near Pskoff, and observed and analyzed the melodies and unconscious musical expressions of the peasants all around him, are especially featured; the "Orphan Girl," the "Love-Song of the Idiot," the "Magpie," and the biblical "Song of Solomon" (noted down from the lips of Jewish peasants), are among the first-fruits of this period of observation, during which he was bent upon deeper psychology and expression; written during this same period, songs like "The Bank of the Don" and the "Country Feast" attest to his happy gift of description.

The humorous side of Moussórgsky, which is such an essential and unique feature of his work, is represented by the excruciatingly funny adventures of the young Latin scholar (the Seminarian), by the Doll's Cradle-Song, and finally by the dances of Parásha and Khivria (from the Little-Russian opera-fragment "The Fair of Sorótchinsk"). Little-Russian melodies, so different in kind from the Northern Russian music, attracted Moussórgsky's attention frequently, and his "Dnyéper-Song" is the very embodiment of the proud, fiery music of the Cossacks. The "Revery of the Young Peasant," and the song "Little Star so bright," in their close affinity to the pure Russian folk-song, show how deeply the composer had entered into and comprehended the soul of the Russian peasant. Finally, two battle-songs stand out from all the rest as towering creations of vital import to our war-ridden age. "After the Battle," the ballad of the lonely soldier who dies far from wife and child, is impressive beyond description. With a simple but inexorable rhythm, with harsh and pitilessly logical harmonies, the grim picture is evoked. Moussórgsky was inspired to write it after seeing Verestchágin's painting of the same subject at a picture exhibit. Tsar Alexander II, who visited the same gallery a few days later, was so violently affected by the picture's strong realism, that the painter, out of deference to the Tsar, destroyed his own work. The tone-picture, however, that it inspired in Moussórgsky lives on with us, as one of the most powerful delineations in modern music. And what shall we call the song of "Death the Commander," if not the very incarnation in music of the horror of War?

The last number of this volume—not strictly a song, but a dramatic excerpt of melodies from the opera "Khovánshtchina"—was included to illustrate the ultimate period of the

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composer's creativeness, and the strains of sublime mysticism which his genius could then evoke. Marfa, a young fanatic belonging to the sect of "Old-Believers," finds herself cut off by the enemy's troops in a dense forest, with her co-sectarians, who choose to die on a funeral pyre rather than surrender. In the supreme moment Prince Khovansky, son of a dethroned Boïar, but dearly beloved by Marfa, joins her in the forest; and she, inspired with the spirit of self-immolation, bids him die with her, and consecrates him with the "Hallelujah of Love," while slowly circling about him with a lighted candle in each upraised hand. This scene belongs to the most sublime that can be seen on the stage, and the music reveals the mystic and divine powers of the soul. Americans have the right to know of it, even though the Metropolitan opera-stage still continues to bar the opera itself. That is why it was chosen to end this book.

I cannot close this introductory note without once more expressing my thanks and indebtedness to Messrs. George Harris, Jr., and Deems Taylor for the unfaltering patience and painstaking labor by which they have made it possible for me to present this volume and its companion (twenty-five songs by Balákireff, Tchaikovsky, Borodine, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Gretchaninoff and Rachmáninoff). It was their conviction as well as mine that we were trustees of an important bequest to the American public, and it was in this spirit of earnest devotion that all obstacles were approached.

Stony Brook, L. I.,
August 26, 1917.

KURT SCHINDLER.