

Introduction

IN THE DECADES BEFORE THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION, a group of composers interested in magic and the miraculous set out to manifest the impossible in opera. Of course the impossible cannot, by definition, be represented—much less enacted—but still they tried. Their operas exemplify the aesthetics of the Russian silver age and the Russian Symbolist movement in music.

One of the composers and one of the operas discussed in this book may be very familiar to operagoers: *The Queen of Spades*, by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, dates from 1890 and falls within the early years of the Symbolist movement. Tchaikovsky's rival Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov also dipped his toe into Symbolist waters. Rimsky-Korsakov was hardly an admirer of Symbolism and its decadence, but he too mulled the problem of the impossible. He teamed up with a polyglot folklorist to compose an opera about a magical city that disappears behind a golden fog or, depending on the production, submerges itself (with divine intercession) into a radiant lake. The most obsessive Symbolist composer, Alexander Scriabin, never wrote an opera but tried very hard to do so in his final years. His project is perhaps best described as a metaopera, a production meant to breach the barrier between the audience and the stage, such that everyone would become part of the production, enacting a drama about spiritual transport—all hearts and souls becoming one. The project drew on a Symbolist poetics of theater, worked out by classicists and poets in the years preceding the Great War, and rested on what claimed to be ancient Greek practice. Having been spared the Renaissance and Reformation, Russians were (these theorists claimed) the most immediate heirs to this practice.

Lesser-known composers Alexandre Gretchaninoff, Vladimir Rebikov, and Alexander Kastalsky also probed the magical terrain of what the French

Symbolists called the *au-delà*, the beyond, and the Russian Symbolists called *realiora*, the higher realm. The devout Gretchaninoff wrote the highly spiritual opera *Sister Beatrice*, which features a statue of the Madonna that miraculously comes to life. Kastalsky, another religious composer, represents rhapsodic self-oblivion in *Klara Milich*. Rebikov addresses the suffering of children subject to abuse, homelessness, loneliness, and cold as a way to open a seam into the *au-delà/realiora*.

The Symbolist movement ended some time after the Russian Revolution, although the Symbolists themselves lived on in various states of ineffectiveness and impotence. A pair of émigré composers kept the flame alive. Sergey Prokofiev based an opera on a Symbolist novel called *The Fiery Angel*, and Arthur Lourié labored on a score that ever expanded as he attempted to preserve the lost culture of Saint Petersburg. His Symbolist opera, *The Moor of Peter the Great*, has never been performed.

In terms of what the Symbolists meant to accomplish, a mixed metaphor coined by musicologist Carolyn Abbate about the mysterious sound heard just before the end of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* might be helpful: "No one can see the place where the sound originated," she writes, nor "the body that gave it life, and so [music] engenders a cascade of associations that cannot be caught in flight."¹ Russian Symbolist opera is engrossing—full of gambling, ghosts, séances, Ouija boards, angels, and demons. Yet these works are not for cynical, impatient, or intolerant listeners. The Symbolist interest in sounds that come from and transport us to another, invisible realm must be taken seriously and as its own reality. This concept might not be to the taste of categorical realists. The repertoire, moreover, is thickly textured and requires patience—a patience that, to be sure, is dazzlingly rewarded. Plots conceal other plots, and the listener is redirected (or misdirected) from one to another. Borrowings, references, and allusions abound. Symbols are all-important, but not symbols in the conventional sense of one thing substituting for another. A Symbolist symbol, the kind found in poems about the occult and the spirit world, is a concatenation or condensation of metaphors (recall Abbate's cascade). Listeners always imagine different things when hearing one and the same composition. So the challenge for composers interested in the occult and the spirit world was to harness that potential for excessive or indeterminate meaning and make it a point of repose while also keeping it mobile, as a motion-filled somewhere. Music, for the Symbolists, could be a portal, a trapdoor, or a gateway into another, higher form of perception—a time without time and space without space.

SYMBOLISM

In opera, words usually precede music, and this is true of Russian Symbolist opera. Indeed, the Russian Symbolist movement began in literature, where two generations of writers produced two distinct species of Symbolism. The first “decadent” generation includes the poets Konstantin Balmont (1867–1942), Valeri Bryusov (1873–1924), Zinaída Gippius (1869–1945), and Dmitri Merezhkovsky (1865–1941); in the second, more musically compelling “mystic” generation are Andrey Beliy (1880–1934), Alexander Blok (1880–1921), the actor and ballet theorist Lyubov Blok (1881–1939), and Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949). The division between these groups is, of course, a chronological and academic generalization. The decadents and the mystics interacted, plus Symbolism was not the be-all and end-all of their careers. One truth remains: whereas the first generation found inspiration in French Symbolism, the second looked to German Idealist philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer.

Comparing Bryusov and Beliy reveals the distinctions between the decadent and mystic Symbolists. A poet as well as novelist, Bryusov was interested in sonorous word combinations, the clinking and tinkling of phonemes. He relied on ambiguous and suggestive language that, he deduced, pointed back to an essence—a universal meaning that was paradoxically ancillary to language. In his conception some poems “give a complete picture, in which, however, something incompletely drawn, half-stated, is perceptible; as if several essential signs are not shown.” Other poems and other forms of literature “have been given the form of a complete story or even drama, but . . . separate scenes have a significance not so much for the development of the action as for a certain impression on the reader or viewer.” Examples of such imaginative surfeit can be found in French Symbolist literature, especially *Pelléas and Mélisande*, an 1892 drama by Maurice Maeterlinck and an 1902 opera by Claude Debussy. The plot concerns forbidden love, but the scenes are disconnected, remote from one another, and the texture so delicate as to dissolve under too much interpretive pressure. Bryusov also mentions poems that “appear to you to be an unrelated grouping of images.”² Like the French Symbolist authors who influenced him, Bryusov preferred suggestion to representation. He purposefully fractured lines of verse into phonemes and indulged irrational, unrealistic noun-adjective pairings.

Beliy, a mystic Symbolist, also wanted to liberate poetic language from the constraints of logic and sense. Unlike Bryusov, he was interested in

religious-philosophical matters and how Symbolism, as an esoteric mystical movement, might inform them. His thought drew on diverse sources—some Western European, others Far Eastern, and still others cultivated in Russian soil. The nature and function of the symbol, he argued, was neither metaphorical nor allegorical. A pair of aphorisms by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, author of the mystic Symbolist primer *Faust*, comes to mind: “The allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept, and the concept into an image, but in such a manner that the concept can only be stated, confirmed or expressed in the image in a way that is always limited and incomplete.” Furthermore, “the symbol transforms the phenomenon into an idea, and the idea into an image, but does this in such a way that the idea in the image has infinite repercussions, and remains intangible; even when expressed in every language it will always remain unexpressed.”³

Beliy specifically claimed that “the aim of [Symbolism] lies not in the harmony of forms, but rather in the visual actualization of the depths of the spirit”—and the depths of the spirit have no ground, no anchor.⁴ For this poet Symbolism is a process and a dynamic: it is not a terrain. And the familiar definition of the symbol as multivalent became tangled in his mind with fantasies of transubstantiation (as the actualization of the depths of the spirit), magical spells, and medieval occult practices. Beliy also talked about spiritual togetherness and spiritual transformation, basic ideas that inspired composers like Scriabin and informed operatic representations of heaven on earth. The leading expert on Russian Symbolism, Avril Pyman, summarizes the similarities and differences between the mystic Symbolist linking of artistic expression with spiritual transformation. “For Bely,” she writes, “art was but one flank, albeit a most important one, of the intellectual army he was mustering for the redemption of all culture.” And “for Ivanov [a poet personally close to Scriabin], art was a temple or sacred grove of the spirits to which the poets, a chosen company, should be drawn to celebrate half-forgotten gods—a sanctuary of recollection to which, one day, all people would follow.” Blok regarded “art like life itself . . . [as] a hell which must be traversed in order to emerge—somewhere beyond art—into the unimaginable light of a new Eden, a New Life.”⁵ Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera about the mythic Russian *grad* (fortified settlement) of Kitezh symbolizes just such a traversal.

Ultimately, the decadent Symbolists considered the symbol a device for suggestion and allusion, whereas the mystic Symbolists embraced the symbol as a means for disclosure and revelation. For the first-generation poets, symbols were stimuli, exciting the imagination of the reader, sending the mind

back and forth through time and space, around the old world and the new. For the second generation, the symbol was something more: magical, hallucinogenic, altering time and space. The poets knew one another—this was a small circle of dreamers—and the investment of their egos in their art cannot be underestimated. They thought of themselves as capital *C* Creators, capable of summoning entire worlds into being. Slavist Steven Cassedy notes that Beliy, like other mystic Symbolists, “assigned himself the same power of God in the logology of Eastern Orthodoxy: by pronouncing the World (Logos), which then becomes incarnate, he (He) is creating a concrete ‘world’ reality that exists as a hypostatic emanation of his (His) own being.”⁶ Bryusov, as a decadent Symbolist, did not follow his younger colleagues down this particular path: he was a much more cerebral and cynical figure. But it was the views of the mystics that gained greater traction, partly because they were so noisily articulated, partly because composers found them attractive.

What brought the mystic Symbolists and composers together was the recurring fantasy in opera history about ancient Greek theater as a bonding between performer and spectator supposedly facilitated by music. Back in the days (sixteenth-century days) of the Florentine Camerata, this fantasy spurred the actual invention of opera, which, according to the Symbolists, had yet to achieve its full potential, even in the present day. Ivanov, for one, reimagined opera as a ritual-based experience facilitating communal bonding and healing social divisions. In 1904 he published an article in the Symbolist journal *Vesì* (Libra) called “Poet i chern” (The Poet and the Masses/Mob), which, Pyman reports, riffed on a verse dialogue by Alexander Pushkin called “Poet i tolpa” (The Poet and the Crowd, 1828). Ivanov proposed uniting these opposites—allegorized, cumbersomely, as “the rhapsode [meaning: Classical Greek performer] and the crowd” as well as “the protagonist of the dithyramb [meaning: rapturous hymn and dance] and the chorus.”⁷

Central to Ivanov’s thinking were the artistic musings of Nietzsche, including the most famous of them, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872). Nietzsche describes artistic creation as a struggle, or exchange, between “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” impulses. The music dramas of Richard Wagner serve as a point of reference, and Nietzsche’s treatise (as well as Wagner’s opera) had a nationalist aspect, insofar as the Germans are the new Greeks, and the French the new Romans. The tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian is as between order and disorder. Apollo represents “that restraining boundary, that freedom from wilder impulses, that sagacious calm of the sculptor god. . . . Indeed, we might even describe Apollo

as the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*, from whose gestures and looks all the delight, wisdom and beauty of ‘illusion’ speak to us.” Nietzsche and Ivanov are interested in what Apollo has suppressed: “Under the influence of the narcotic potion hymned by all primitive men and peoples, or in the powerful approach of spring, joyfully penetrating the whole of nature, those Dionysian urges are awakened, and as they grow more intense subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self. . . . Not only is the bond between man and man sealed by the Dionysian magic: alienated, hostile, or subjugated nature, too, celebrates her reconciliation with her lost son, man.”⁸ The two principles have interacted throughout music history. One efficient and well-known example is Johann Sebastian Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto no. 5, staple of every music appreciation course. The “Dionysian” harpsichord soloist goes on an inebriated tear, stunning the “Apollonian” ritornello group into silence.

Ivanov’s musings mimicked those of Scriabin, whose later music, in Ivanov’s reading, became just such an awakening of Dionysian urges. Scriabin’s outlandish Dionysian theatrical conception, the *Mysterium*, was doomed from the start, but undeniably bold. Composers of a more practical mindset explored Symbolist landscapes without razing the opera house (as Scriabin proposed to do). Communion is a central theme of their works, and so too altered mental states (madness of the more pedestrian variety is associated with realism, hence taboo within the Symbolist matrix). Myths and legends were popular with the mystics, since these had no obvious authors and seemed to be independent of the creative mind, invoking a primal essence.⁹ In Russian Symbolist operas the past, present, and even future intertwine, with each musical, verbal, and visual level imbricated with references to the others.

Wagner’s Dionysian music dramas became a strategic focus, a *point d’appui* for the Russian mystic Symbolists in the battle for a new theatrical art. The myths and magic of Wagner’s *Ring* tetralogy greatly appealed to them, with its overlapping narratives, the nights without end, the forever quests, evocations of hidden ideas, and secret forces. The Symbolists also rhapsodized about the unsynchronized horns, the frequent mishearings and misquotations, and the act 3 *alte Weise* (the Haunting Ancient Tune) of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (1859). Yet the Symbolists did not write about Wagner’s orchestral innovations, his tam-tams (gongs) and tubas, beyond noting the importance he placed on hiding the orchestra so that no one would know where the strange sounds were coming from. Gundula Kreuzer, author of a book about Wagner’s use of the tam-tam, vapor (steam), and “acoustic curtains,” points

out that the name “Nibelung,” as in *Ring of the Nibelung*, means “son of the fog [or] the misty underworld.”¹⁰

Wagner’s practice inspired Beliy’s four novelistic “symphonies.” Published between 1900 and 1908, they bear the titles *Northern and Heroic, Dramatic, The Return*, and *Goblet of Blizzards*. Quoting from Beliy’s memoirs, Rosamund Bartlett explains how Beliy hoped, with words, “‘to proceed as Wagner had done with melody,’ using the themes as a ‘strong line of rhythm’ which would absorb subsidiary themes ‘according to the rules of counterpoint.’ Elsewhere he declared equally explicitly that the subjects of his first four books had been drawn from ‘musical leitmotifs.’”¹¹ Why Beliy thought this was a good idea remains unclear, likewise what he means by poetic equivalents of melodies, themes, and leitmotifs as a “strong line of rhythm.” Roger Keys, whom Bartlett references in her discussion of Beliy’s “symphonies,” argues that the chaos of the plots is calmed on another level. In the *First (Northern and Heroic) Symphony*, for example, Beliy blends “negative” and “positive” leitmotifs, then synthesizes his effects such that the “confusion” of life in the here and now “resolve[s] in a higher, cosmic or spiritual purpose.”¹² These explanations, by and large, have satisfied neither poets nor musicians seeking explicit structural or functional parallels between word and music in Beliy’s composition.

Beliy came to know Wagner through Emil Medtner (1872–1936), a music critic obsessed with Wagner’s *Ring* for the worst reason: the ethnic nationalistic elements (he was proudly anti-Semitic). Medtner likened his friends and enemies to characters in the music dramas and thought of his own life, past and present, as the plot of a Wagner opera. He was also not alone in his atavistic role-playing; indeed, it was typical of the mystic Symbolists, who looked to translate art into life, rather than sticking to the nineteenth-century realist opposite: life into art. Medtner and his clique talked through the night about the politics of Wagner’s *Ring* and heard in the four music dramas the harbingers of revolution. Their era was, in their thinking, the *Götterdämmerung*, the Twilight of the Gods. And so, during a “magnificently revolutionary” 1905 performance of the *Ring* in Saint Petersburg, the group imagined Wotan as part of “the old regime,” the imperial Russian establishment. Siegfried represented “the people,” and Brünnhilde “the World Soul, more specifically the soul of Russia about to be awakened from an enchanted sleep.”¹³

Tchaikovsky’s imperial Russian ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* could also have been allegorized along these lines. But the mystic Symbolists preferred Wagner

for a simple reason: there was no Dionysian revolution in Tchaikovsky's essentially Apollonian ballet; without revolution, there could be no spiritual transformation. Consider Arlene Croce's elegant description of the meaning of *The Sleeping Beauty*: "Historically speaking, Aurora in Act I is the embodiment of Mlle. LaFontaine, the first ballerina of the Paris Opera; in Act II, she is Taglioni, appearing to the prince as a naiad of the river of time. In the third-act mazurka, Aurora is a Russian ballerina."¹⁴ The Symbolists imagined the world coming into an end; Tchaikovsky, though adopted by the Symbolists as one of their own, counted on the empire's endurance.

The Symbolists, therefore, had a forked relation with time. They were open to the apocalypse at some imminent future point, but they also embraced the nostalgic dimension of Wagner's music dramas and his attempt to retrieve "lost" time. This happened before Marcel Proust wrote his great novel on the topic of *temps perdu*, but the same strange dissipation of the present, of the immediate moment, nourished them both. Following a 1901 concert of highlights from *Parsifal*, Blok composed an untitled poem about Wagner's recollection of images from the distant past. Bartlett quotes the poem with her insertions: "Although Blok 'never understood before / The art of holy music,' hearing excerpts from *Parsifal* provoked a surge of involuntary memory, 'So that all former beauty / Came back from oblivion in a wave.'"¹⁵ Oblivion certainly, but also vagueness: frankly, one looks in vain for substantive discussions of music by Russian Symbolist poets. Composers were like magicians to them, figures like Morgan le Fay (aka Fata Morgana), sister of King Arthur, who could change shapes and had great healing powers. She created castles in the air that dissolved upon inspection.¹⁶

For sheer absence of detail, the most perversely intriguing Symbolist rumination on music is Beliy's "O teurgii" (About Theurgy), published in 1903 in the religious-philosophical journal *Noviy Put'* (New Path). *Theurgy*, a term coined by the Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus of Chalcis, refers, in the Symbolist caricature of serious religious thought, to magical rituals and the working of divine wonders. Beliy imagined composers as theurgists, capable of turning religion into transcendent experience. Drawing on Arthur Schopenhauer (almost as popular a philosopher among the group as Nietzsche), Beliy hypothesized that music channels the energies that constitute the noumenal will. Unlike a poem, which offers traces of and glimpses into the beyond, music *was* that beyond—or at least could be, properly experienced. The mystic Symbolist poets were forced to confine their activities to this world, but the composers, as theurgists, had access to it.

Bel'iy talks about an actual composition in "O teurgii": the *8 Stimmungsbilder* (1897) of Nikolay Medtner (1880–1951), Emil's younger brother. These slight but well-received pieces recall Robert Schumann in programmatic content and Johannes Brahms in rhythmic inventiveness. Bel'iy's "analysis" involves quoting from the first stanza of an unrelated, untitled poem by Mikhail Lermontov (1814–41) and aligning it with the musical prologue. The poem falls expressively short, Bel'iy claims, but the music continues, pushing through the poem's "mist." Lermontov represents a star speaking with a star, and a figure (the poetic "I") walking "alone along the road." Medtner's chords release the soul from that quiet, lonely place, allowing it to soar heavenward. The comparison is hypothetical at best. Bel'iy fantasizes the poem and music having points in common, imagining that both Lermontov and Medtner, who did not know each other and lived completely different lives, had the same road and the same conversation between stars in mind. Bel'iy acknowledges the thinness of his method, but he believed that formal musical analysis, to which he was briefly exposed as a piano student, was worse. It impeded surrender to musical rapture.¹⁷

What Bel'iy might have meant is cleverly discussed by Ryan Rowen: the "effect" of the music—specifically the "triplets [in the right hand] in hemiola"—is

of being suspended in air. Even without Bel'iy's discussion of theurgy, this music is inherently synthetic. Even a cursory glance shows that Christian symbolism of triplets (trinity) and E major—four sharps (*kreuz* in German) in the shape of a cross—already are embedded in the score. But the sound and intent is what Bel'iy is after most: the feeling of music in this way functions like prayer for God's mercy and this is why it is so venerated; it's put in simple, pious terms, reflected through nature struggling between light and dark, reaching for a return to the past, before life, where the soul is one with God and heaven is what makes this music theurgic.¹⁸

Rowen explains what Bel'iy himself could not explain, for all his efforts, and Emil Medtner's, to promote Nikolay Medtner's music.

The musical ruminations of the mystic Symbolists touched solid ground only when discussing dissonance, disruption, and distortion as the means for transferring the listening experience from the intellect to the senses. Debates about musical "meaning" (in the denotative, connotative sense, as the term is defined in dictionaries) did not interest them, because music, to them, meant nothing translatable into words. It's not the case that, for the poets, "music itself" was but a meaningless dark void; rather, music had no end of potential

meanings. It offered a “release from everyday perception” by revealing “countless possibilities of being.”¹⁹ But the “cascade” is not ubiquitous; few works can be properly labeled Symbolist. To be a Symbolist, the composer must depart from fixed musical systems, which assign a grammar and syntax to music, placing a definable extramusical cover over its indefinable content. Hence the vagueness: scientific descriptions of musical expression avoided, or negated, the mysticism. The Symbolists cared about *Music*, the metaphysical experience, as opposed to *music*, the art or craft of composition, which put composers in a bind: How could the little *m* be joined to the big *M*? Might it be best, in this murky forest, merely to suggest such a connection?

Composer Konstantin Eiges, part of Nikolay Medtner’s circle, wrote about music as “one of the highest mystical experiences.” This is the title of an article that he published in 1907 in *Zolotoye runo* (The Golden Fleece), a Symbolist journal in search of the highest beauty, including articles in Russian and French, printed on silk and enameled paper and destined to go out of business after forty-eight issues. (Nowadays it is a gorgeous collector’s item.) For Eiges, music was the golden fleece, “super-empirical,” containing “within itself both ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ ‘I’ and ‘not I,’ representation and the will. In ontological terms it is the will to sounds.”²⁰ The language is precious and pretentious as well as beholden to Schopenhauer, but Eiges has an argument to make. The big *M* could not be reached, but music could be loosened up in the direction of the ineffable. Symbolist composition, Eiges proposes, is the encoding of thought and emotion in an expansive, elastic musical syntax. He advocates a kind of open process, such that the musical gesture is allowed to escape, to become a fleeting otherness. Composers become rule breakers—become, in short, decadents, in their pursuit of “one of the highest mystical experiences.” Eiges does not tell us what the other experiences are, perhaps hedging his bets having placed great pressure on himself to live up to his own expectations as a composer.

Eiges preached what he practiced to the extent that his piano poems luxuriate in ninth and eleventh chords, and the right- and left-hand parts of his *skazki* (fairy tales) twirl and leap like the lithest ballerina. Brooding bass-line chromaticism and thick, dense counterpoint also occasionally define his salon sound. Yet Eiges keeps his hands on the tiller; there are no crackups on dissonant shores. Unlike Scriabin, a composer to whom he was (along with Medtner and Rachmaninoff) indebted, Eiges did not abandon formal-functional practice. His music is lovely. It is neither revolutionary nor nihilistic, but rather ingratiating. It wants to be liked.

As a person and as an artist, Scriabin was not universally liked by the poets, for an interesting reason: his pursuit of mystical experiences was considered derivative and overly literal. His music was an acquired taste, but that was not the problem with it. The problem was authenticity, or the lack thereof. Beliy felt that Scriabin was not sufficiently serious, that he was just grabbing on to fashionable intellectual material and mapping it onto his scores. Richard Taruskin offers proof: Beliy's hilariously disdainful account of his one meeting with Scriabin at the residence of Margarita Morozova, who was both Beliy's lover and Scriabin's financier. "All the while," Beliy recalled of Scriabin's chatter, "the little white fingers of his pale little hand kept jabbing out chords of some kind in the air: his pinkies took the 'Kant' note, his middle finger would trace the 'Culture' theme, and all at once—whoops!—a leap of the index finger over a whole row of keys to the one marked 'Blavatsky.'" ²¹

Ivanov, however, admired Scriabin so much that he interpreted the composer's life and art as a tale of self-overcoming and thus transcendence. He told it several times, first in his 1910 article "Zaveti simbolizma" (The Testaments of Symbolism), which makes clear that he considered himself both Scriabin's promoter and educator. His account of Scriabin's achievement has three parts. The first part, the "thesis," finds the Symbolist artist Scriabin deciding that the world has unseen dimensions: it "is not narrow, flat, or poor; it is not desolate or predetermined, for there is much in it that yesterday's wise men did not dream of; there are passages and openings into its secret from the labyrinth of man's soul." Using symbols, the artist thereafter seeks to express the correspondences between this world and others. The second part, the "antithesis," imagines the artist fighting through moral and spiritual doubt to commit himself to a "mystical" reinterpretation of being. The artist elevates himself above the common herd and assumes the status of a theurgist, a worker of and for the divine. Part three is the "synthesis," in which the artist confronts his "true and ultimate goals": the enactment, rather than the mere representation, of transcendence. Creativity becomes "vital and significant," involving "correlations with higher essences." His art overcomes "the division of forms" to become a "theurgic, transfiguring *Fiat*." ²²

There is some basis in Scriabin's actual career for this incredible description. His Symphony no. 1 in E Major (1900) comes with a Beethoven-derived choral and solo singer finale, excluded from the premiere performance, concerned with the powers of art. This is the thesis. The antithesis arrives a decade later in *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, which allegorically assigns the

composer the role of divine agent. The third phase, the synthesis, remains hypothetical, since Scriabin died (in 1915) before it could be enacted, although at the time Ivanov wrote his article, Scriabin was actively devising (composing seems too limited a word in this context) his *Mysterium*.

In 1919 Ivanov revisited his dialectical three-part description of Scriabin's career in a preconcert memorial lecture. On this occasion the intellectually versatile Ivanov claimed that Scriabin's aesthetic platform embraced "a threefold idea, a threefold emotion, a threefold vision." The thesis, in Taruskin's translation, was Scriabin's "vision of surmounting the boundaries of the personal, the individual." The antithesis involved his perception of "universal, communal mingling of all humanity," and the synthesis was his "vision of a violent breakthrough into the expanse of a free new plane of being—universal transformation."²³ Paradoxically, Ivanov described not a creative expansion but a contraction. Moving from the narrowly individualistic to the all-encompassing, Scriabin's plans went from realizable to partially realizable to completely unrealizable. Music points to the beyond but can't actually take us there; that's for death to do. Scriabin was not satisfied with this Schopenhauerian precept and entered places that no other composer dared to tread. Thus Scriabin became the musical poster child of the Russian Symbolist movement, overshadowing his peers, who respected him but knew better than to imitate him.

The Symbolist operatic repertoire, comprising those scores that can be performed, as opposed to the death knell of Scriabin's *Mysterium*, centers on liminal moments and oscillations. The familiar operatic binaries of the natural and the supernatural, the real and the dreamed, are effaced while time bends and folds over on itself. In Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, the past moves ahead of the present into the future, which locks the characters in to what fate decides. Portents and premonitions are dominant plot elements in the repertoire, so too hellacious fears of a bad end and glimpses of paradise (Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* includes both). Another attribute of the symbol is the synesthetic mixing of senses—the seeing of sound and hearing of colors. Rimsky-Korsakov was interested in this phenomenon along with Scriabin, his detractor Belïy, and his supporter Ivanov too.²⁴

The symbol, in sum, transmediates; it establishes "correspondences." That last word comes from a poem by one of the opium-smoking bohemians of French Symbolism, Charles Baudelaire. The French Symbolist composer Claude Debussy, Baudelaire's associate, influenced and was influenced by the Russians. Thus Wagner was not the sole non-Russian musical influence on

the Symbolists, despite the excessive attention paid to him by Emil Medtner. And although Rimsky-Korsakov was much in Wagner's debt, he recognized that Wagner's musical fantasies were hampered by his nationalism. This is something the French Symbolists also believed. As music critic Alex Ross summarizes, Stéphane Mallarmé "saw Wagner as a threat and a challenge. The all-devouring composer was usurping the poet's function as the mouth-piece of humanity's primal myths. And Wagner's myths were too limiting, too bounded by nationhood."²⁵

Both literally and figuratively, Wagner was much too loud for the successive generation of composers. Debussy possessed a slower-acting but longer-lasting Symbolist formula. He drew his orchestral and theatrical music from nature, as did Rimsky-Korsakov in his *Legend of Kitezh*. In *La Mer* Stefan Jarociński finds Debussy speaking "directly through bird-song, the sound of the sea, the rocking of a boat by the waves, the movement of clouds in the sky, or drifting mists, to lead our thoughts to the origin of things and cause them to dwell on the ultimate questions in life."²⁶ His music asked the big questions but did not answer them, because questioning and answering are rational processes. As he moved into Symbolism, Debussy came to disdain musical cause-and-effect relationships as well as the Apollonianism of form and function. Instead, he privileged oscillations and reverberations (his scores are full of echo effects); he dismantled melodies and distributed the fragments throughout the orchestral registers; he estranged diatonicism and made the whole tone, the octatonic, and the pentatonic home turf; and he added "wrong notes" to chords, turning those notes into epiphenomena.

During the Russian Symbolist movement, the poets asked questions of their own—not the ultimate questions but questions of aesthetics, creative practice, production, and performance. Were all the philosophers, from Plato onward, honest brokers in defining music as the portal, the open sesame, the thousand and one nights of the soul? How, in the end, does *Music* relate to *music*? Or should the fantasies of magical transport through sound always be confined to paper, so that no one, in the end, is disappointed?

The conversation between *Music* and *music* can be previewed here in a little-known but important play by Alexander Blok titled *Roza i Krest* (The Rose and the Cross). One iteration included music by Mikhaíl Gnesin, a composer also influenced by Wagner but otherwise peripheral to the Symbolist movement. The collaboration did not work out, and the play was a flop. But, as failures go, it proves, conceptually at least, a rather remarkable success.

THE ROSE AND THE CROSS

Blok conceived *The Rose and the Cross* in 1912 first as a ballet scenario, then reconceived it as an opera script. A year later he decided that it should be a play, with Gnesin providing three medieval-sounding songs for it: one for a lovesick page boy; another for maidens cavorting in the springtime sun; and a third song—the important one, the impossible one—for an old troubadour named Gaëtan.

The play is set in two eras: the thirteenth-century Brittany of the Croisade des Albigeois and the eighteenth-century castle of Archambault at Languedoc.²⁷ References to the legends of the earlier historical period infuse the real-time action, transporting the reader (or viewer, given that the play eventually made it to the stage) back and forth between them as though by metempsychosis.

The plot is a latticework of love stories infused with Gnostic questions about time and being, who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.²⁸ Lady Izora and Knight Bertran, occupants of a rundown castle near a cold, deserted beach, are the main characters. Bertran has grown too feeble to perform his duties, and Izora has reduced him in rank to a nighttime guard. Beneath her window he sings a song about chivalrous misfortune. The song thereafter haunts Izora's dreams, and she dreams (or envisions) that its author is a beautiful young singer. Melancholia overtakes her, but the castle doctor offers no assistance beyond bloodletting, in keeping with the useless prescriptions of Galen and Hippocrates. Izora finds herself, in act 1, scene 3, recalling from Bertran's performance the first and second verses of the song under her breath: "Snow swirls . . . / An age races by as though an instant . . . / The blessed shore is dreamed." She tells the chatelaine, Alisa, that she "can't remember anything else, a . . . strange song! 'Joy-and-Suffering . . . the eternal edict that governs the heart . . . ' Help me remember it, Alisa!" Alisa is perplexed. "How can I help you, my lady," she puzzles, "if even the doctor can't help you?"²⁹ Izora loses herself in reverie. The outlines of the castle fade, and she trips back in time.

Izora demands that the angelic musician of her fantasies be found and brought to her. She is so insistent that her husband, Count Archambault, suspects she has cuckolded him, so imprisons her in the Tower of the Inconsolable Widow. Meanwhile, a subplot unfolds between the castle chaplain and chatelaine and between the chatelaine and a handsome page boy. The count dispatches Bertran on a diplomatic mission, during which he

encounters the actual author of the song, the old troubadour Gaëtan, who might once have been beautiful, but who, like Bertran, has gone to seed.

The (anti)climax of the drama is the outdoor song festival. Maidens dance around a tree in the May sun; jugglers and acrobats entertain the audience of knights and ladies. The song contest begins. A minstrel sings, "I love the breath of the beautiful spring," which Blok claimed to be a "free translation of three strophes (I, II, and IV) from the famous *sirventes* [service song] by Bertran de born [1140–1215]"; another minstrel sings, "through the thick forest in spring-time," a "free adaptation of a thirteenth-century song by a *trouvère* from Picardy."³⁰ Gaëtan arrives to perform his long-awaited number. Seeing that he is gray-haired, old, and undesirable, Izora loses interest and directs her attention to the page boy, Alikсан, who has attended the contest out of boredom. The ideals of courtly love are forgotten: the lady invites the lad into her bed-chamber. During this time Bertran has been injured in a duel, stabbed in the heart, but Izora nonetheless instructs him to keep guard beneath her window to protect her and her lover's privacy. He bleeds to death, breathing his last at sunrise. The clatter of his sword hitting the flagstones is a noise of immense significance, a symbol of the fracturing of reality in the play as a whole. It is the *Cherry Orchard* moment in *The Rose and the Cross*, and Gnesin, the composer Blok asked to write incidental music for the play, didn't touch it.

The play is chockablock with quotes and paraphrases from other works of literature, but it also came from life: Blok modeled the "Knight of Misfortune," Bertran, partly on himself.³¹ Izora, moreover, is based on Lyubov Blok, the long-suffering wife of the famous poet and the long-suffering daughter of a famous chemist (Dmitri Mendeleev, who created a periodic table of the known elements while also anticipating the appearance of new ones). She was a gifted dramatic actor, an art historian, a scholar of ballet, and a memoirist, but she could not escape the shadow of the famous men in her life, according to Slavist Sian Chalke, except through infidelity, of which she was proud.³² Blok dedicated a famed collection of poems to Lyubov called *Stikhi o prekrasnoy dame* (Poems about the Most Beautiful Lady, 1905). These were written in the afterglow of their 1903 marriage, before she had a child and the marriage cracked up. An infamous ménage à trois involving the most beautiful lady, Blok, and the most promiscuous poet Beliy sent them all to hell, rather than transporting the actor and the poets to the luscious erotic paradise of their dreams.

Bertran's moroseness about Izora's infidelities in the play mirrors Blok's (hypocritical) sadness at Lyubov's adultery in real life. The intrigues and rivalries between inhabitants of the castle, moreover, reflect those of Blok,

Beliy, and their rivals in the small, debauched world of the Russian Symbolists. Nostalgia is a dominant theme in the play, despite the author's youth (he was thirty-two when he wrote it). Bertran's routine visits to the barren beach speak to Blok's experience with depression.

The setting of the play and the name of the heroine, Izora, have obvious ties to Wagner. Izora is both Isolde, Irish maiden heroine of *Tristan und Isolde*; and Kundry, femme fatale of Wagner's final music drama, *Parsifal*. Blok did not know Wagner's scores as well as his colleagues, but he edited and translated Wagner's prose, including the mystic Symbolist theatrical primer, *Art and Revolution* (1849), and the texts of the *Ring*. According to Donald Rayfield, Blok also left behind "substantial sketches" for a "dramatic 'tableau' of *Tristan und Isolde*," and indeed there are scattered references in *The Rose and the Cross* to the *Liebestod*.³³ Izora's obsession with Gaëtan and his song lines up with Isolde's endless love for Tristan; Izora's imprisonment in the count's claustrophobic castle recalls Isolde's fear and loathing of her betrothed, King Marke; and her reliance on her chatelaine Alisa parallels her Wagnerian counterpart's dependence on the maidservant Brangaene. And, like Kundry, Izora is a tormented, insomniac seductress who seeks spiritual redemption.

Bertran does not have clear-cut Wagnerian prototypes, but Slavic scholars have found plenty of Wagner resonances. Rosamund Bartlett endorses Robert Hughes's claim that "the three stages of Bertran's death and transfiguration (wherein Joy and Sorrow—his physical suffering—do indeed become one) are very much like the long dying of Tristan as he awaits the arrival of Isolde." Tristan's death, moreover, is "accomplished in three stages of reminiscence and a final transfiguration in which the joy of understanding becomes at one with his suffering."³⁴

Gaëtan, however, does not come from Wagner's world. The play's title tells us that he is a member of an ancient occult brotherhood, the Rosicrucian order, and yet he describes himself, when he meets Bertran, as an orphan raised by a sprite on the seaside. He sings, moreover, of being condemned to eternal wandering. He is a composite: part ancient mystical order Rosae Crucis, part Celtic legend, part Caspar David Friedrich canvas. But Blok was not finished with Wagner (the Symbolists were never finished with Wagner). He based the song contest on its equivalent in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868), which he heard performed in Saint Petersburg at the beginning of 1913, while busy at work on *The Rose and the Cross*.³⁵ Just as Izora's passion for Gaëtan informs his contest song in act 4, scene 3, of the play, so too the melodic gesture, the leitmotif, of Walther's passion for Eva (heard in

the overture of *Die Meistersinger*) becomes part of his contest song in act 3, scene 5, of the music drama. The songs by Blok and Wagner pull in different directions, however. Gaëtan sings about his fruitless quest for ideal love, for the most beautiful lady; Walther, in contrast, sings about waking up in the paradise of which he dreamed, the heaven of his love for Eva.

Bertran hears in the song echoes of ancient legends and forgotten balladeers, while also connecting the love and longing the troubadour Gaëtan describes with the miseries the self-centered Izora has inflicted on him. Near the end of the play, before Bertran drops his sword and dies of his wounded heart beneath Izora's window, he speaks of the radiance of the night, deafening silence, and the painful pleasure of the troubadour's singing:

How beautiful the night!
Hark! A murmur bursts into
The trumpets' solemn fanfare. . . .
No, it's silent again. . . .
Nothing more disturbs the peace.
God, your poor slave
Clearly hears
Your thunderous silence!
The wound in my heart has opened,
My strength fades. . . .
Rose, burn!
Death, you make the heart wiser. . . .
I understand, I understand, Izora:
"The eternal edict that governs the heart—
Joy and Suffering are one. . . .
Joy, oh, Joy and Suffering—
The pain of unknown wounds!"

[Как ночь прекрасна!
Чу, в торжественный голос труб
Врывается шелест. . . .
Нет, опять тишина. . . .
Больше ничем не нарушен покой.
Боже, твою тишину громовую
Явственно слышит
Бедный твой раб!
Рана открылась,
Силы слабеют мои. . . .
Роза, гори!
Смерть, умудряешь ты сердце. . . .
Я понял, понял, Изора:

“Сердцу закон непреложный—
 Радость—Страдание одно. . . .
 Радость, о, Радость—Страдание—
 Боль неизведанных ран!”³⁶

Separated, the rose and the cross stand for love and honor; combined, the rose and the cross speak of the movement to God. Gaëtan’s song reveals the mysteries of self-sacrifice for love to Bertran and the salvation to come from this self-sacrifice. But the song was not supposed to describe these things. Its effect on the knight and the lady could not be translated into words because, Blok insisted, to do so would set up a crimping equivalence between representation and enactment.

Could a composer, an actual composer, come up with a song for *The Rose and the Cross* that would have the desired effect? No, and Blok knew it. He hedged by having the magical song fail in the final scene: Gaëtan’s performance in the song context is a letdown, the real music no match for the ideal music in Izora’s imagination. But this failure does not mean that Blok was thwarted in his aspirations—not at all. Indeed, the song, the real Symbolist song, has been sounding all along unheard.

The story of the (little *m*, not big *M*) music for *The Rose and the Cross* is a story of diminishing expectations. Blok’s ballet scenario about the lives of Provençal troubadours morphed into an opera script after Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936) declined to compose the music. Had that ballet been composed it would have been assigned to the dancers of the Mariyinsky Theater, but that did not happen (Glazunov was fiendishly busy running the Saint Petersburg Conservatoire and forever falling off the wagon), and so the world was deprived of a sequel to Glazunov’s 1898 ballet *Raymonda*. In May 1912 Blok settled on the psychological profile of each character in the operatic version of *The Rose and the Cross*. (There are a dozen of them in all, ten men and two women.) But as he wrote the first draft, he began to doubt its potential as an opera, concluding that it needed a more “realistic” approach. He rewrote it and then waited for a theater to accept it. The Moscow Art Theater contracted it in 1915 after the director of the Imperial Theaters, Vladimir Telyakovsky, rejected it for performance on the imperial stage, but the on-again, off-again rehearsals, which lasted from 1916 through the Russian Revolution and then into 1918 at the Moscow Art Theater, came to naught.³⁷ Politics was less to blame than founding director Konstantin Stanislavsky’s unhappiness with Blok, and Blok’s unhappiness with him.

In the meantime, the search for a composer to write the music began and ended. In October 1916, the other founding director of the Moscow Art Theater, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, sent a letter to Blok on the subject. He reported that he had approached Serge Rachmaninoff, but that Rachmaninoff, then very busy with composing, conducting, and concertizing, hadn't gotten back to him. The director persisted, and four months later Rachmaninoff told him that the play did not need "music in the ordinary sense." Rather, it needed "a splendid romance of genius (of a Scriabinesque tone)" to be modestly accompanied by violin and three or four other instruments.³⁸

The "genius," however, wasn't Rachmaninoff's to provide, perhaps because he felt unable to compose in a Scriabinesque manner. (Certainly he didn't play the piano like Scriabin: *Russkaya muzikal'naya gazeta* (Russian Music Newspaper) reported that Rachmaninoff's "innocuous and prosaic" and "academically chilled" interpretations of Scriabin's Satanic Poem and Second and Fifth Sonatas upset Scriabin's devotees when he played them on tour after Scriabin's death.)³⁹ Rachmaninoff ended up recommending Nikolay Medtner for the job to Nemirovich-Danchenko, but Medtner too said no.⁴⁰

Blok, meantime, had approached Gnesin, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov's, a recipient of the Glinka Prize in composition, a founder of the Saint Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music, and, early on, a devotee of Wagner. He settled, with his musically talented sisters, into the conservatoire teaching life and specialized in the "musical interpretation of drama," to quote the vague title of one of his courses.⁴¹ But his setting of Gaëtan's song severely disappointed Blok. "Not Gnesin, at least not his Gaëtan," the poet wrote in his journal on March 10, 1916.⁴² The collaboration ended no sooner than it began, and one wonders why Blok didn't enlist Mikhail Kuzmin (1872–1936) for the task, as he had for his play *Balaganchik* (The Puppet Theater, 1906), a riotously successful theatrical production that boomeranged happily and horribly between art—specifically the commedia dell'arte, from which the characters are taken—and the lives of the Symbolists.⁴³

Gnesin published the song as his opus 14, no. 2, in 1915 and would be ridiculed for it in later years, owing to its "foreign outlook."⁴⁴ (This was in his pale years under Stalin.) Gnesin also wrote a chorus for the maidens celebrating springtime before the song contest ("Вот он, май, светлый май [Here it is May, sunshiny May]") and a love song for the page boy. Only the last was performed as part of the play during Blok's lifetime—in a staging during the winter of 1920 in Kostroma, hardly a major theater center.

In her memoirs poet Marietta Shaginyan claimed that Blok was attracted to “decadence in music” but then, for political reasons, decided that he wanted “realism.”⁴⁵ (By the time the play went into rehearsal, she proposes, decadence had fallen out of favor.) This explains his rejection of Gnesin’s music. His music has little decadent about it, but it is Romantic in conception and Wagnerian—so not realistic, not something a troubadour in the far distant past could have performed. For one thing the song requires an orchestral accompaniment; for another it is tonal, not modal, and stuffed with such Romantic topoi as hunting-horn calls, harp glissandi, and nature sounds. If Blok had been looking for a medieval sound or decadent “pure” sound values in Gaëtan’s song, he would have been doubly disappointed: Gnesin’s aria is of late nineteenth-century casting, highly representational at all musical levels.⁴⁶

The rising and falling scales in the outer sections of the song and the harp arpeggios in the middle match the descriptions of winds, waves, and rushing time. The rhythm is a mixture of sixteenth-note and (when the wind gusts strengthen) thirty-second-note groupings. Gnesin assigns fanfare-like motifs to the voice in measures 15–18 and 97–100, but for the most part the singing is confined to a narrow range and dispirited two- and four-measure phrases; the troubadour is indeed old and tired. Gaëtan’s description of time as a humming and singing spinning wheel is given undulating neighbor-note figures in the strings.

In one sense the song suited Blok’s needs, despite his allergic reaction to its Romantic excesses. Gnesin’s setting is a series (a cascade) of lyrical waves, and offers a microcosm of the poetic-metric macrocosm of the play. Each stanza is demarcated by a shift in tempo (*moderato* to *andantino* to *lento*, each gradation having a *ritardando* and an *a tempo*) and dynamic (*piano* to *forte* to *mezzoforte* to *fortissimo*, each gradation having a *crescendo*). Gnesin obfuscates his structure somewhat by overlapping the end of the B section and the beginning of the A’ section at measure 84 and by insisting on A minor throughout. He modulates to the relative major at measure 57, the midpoint of the song, just before the phrase about joy and suffering no longer being opposites but becoming one and the same. Sometimes the setting meanders, but it is not decadently tossed around. The most adventurous passage, measures 85–88 (the start of A’), features a series of tritone-related harmonies. Chords rooted on E are assigned sevenths without serving as dominants, but the harmonic elaborations go no further. There are no Scriabinesque ninth and eleventh chords, nothing harmonically mystical. Gnesin punctuates the declaration “знаком креста на груди! [with the