

ANTON ARENSKY

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

All the writings about Anton Stepanovich Arensky seem to major on his debauched lifestyle. He was clearly disliked by Rimsky Korsakov who said, shortly after his death, which occurred in Terioki, Finland in 1906, "Arensky will soon be forgotten."

That was an injudicious and unfair remark from a master which had a disastrous effect on Arensky's music. But it must be remembered that Rimsky Korsakov eventually did not like Balakirev or Nápravnik, although the latter rehearsed and conducted several of his operas.

Arensky was born in Novgorod on 11 August 1861. Both his parents were musical. His mother was a fine pianist and his father, who was a doctor, played the cello. The boy studied harmony and composition with Zikke (1879–1882) and then went to Rimsky Korsakov in St. Petersburg. Upon graduation, Arensky became professor of harmony and counterpoint at the Moscow Conservatory from 1882. Around this time he wrote his short Intermezzo for orchestra Op 13, which, for all its brevity, has an onward drive. He was only twenty one years of age. From 1889–1893 he was a member of the Council of the Synod of Church Music in Moscow and conducted the Russian Choral Society the appointment coming into being in 1888. At the recommendation of Balakirev, he became the director of the Imperial Chapel in St Petersburg from 1895 to 1901 on the retirement of Balakirev. Sergei Lyapunov was Arensky's deputy. Arensky composed a great deal of religious music which seems at odds with his lifestyle.

His own compositions were influenced by Tchaikovsky and his Variations on a theme of Tchaikovsky Op 35a for string orchestra is a work of glowing beauty and a loving memorial to the master.

When he moved back to St Petersburg in 1895 he was accused of being aloof. He did not join in Balalaieff's Friday musical soirees.

Arensky wrote three operas: *A Dream on the Volga*, Op 16, which uses some folk tunes, and premiered in Moscow in December 1890. The new calendar system would put it at January 1891. It is based on the historical play by Alexander Ostrovsky. Tchaikovsky had considered the subject but it was Arensky who realised it. It was a great success. Arensky's next opera, *Raphael*, was given in Moscow on 6 May 1894, and *Nal and Damayanti*, after Pushkin, his third and last opera, written in 1897 was produced at the Bolshoi Theatre in January 1904. The libretto was by Tchaikovsky's brother Modeste. It is based on an oriental poem in which the heroine Damayanti is liberated from the evil Kali, the god of hell, and reunited with her betrothed Nal. It is very well written.

He composed two symphonies, number one is in B minor Opus 4, and no. 2 in A minor Opus 22.

The Symphony no. 1 in B minor of 1883 is a fine piece with an arresting opening and the leisurely introduction to the first movement is full of melody and nostalgia. The allegro is very beautiful but broad. There is a fluency and elegance in this music. There are four movements, the slow movement is beautiful and much of the melodic material is given to the cellos which is sometimes a trade mark of this composer who was, perhaps, recalling his father. The music has a wistfulness. Even the scherzo has a seductiveness about it and the finale seems to be an amalgam of Russian dance. It is very attractive music.

In 1889 Arensky completed his Symphony no. 2 in A, Op 22. It is a confident work in four movements and is coherent in form. The opening allegro giocosa follows sonata form combining dramatic assertive music with lyrical beauty. The adagio is a romance which is sometimes unbearably beautiful. There is a brief intermezzo and a short finale that ends the work triumphantly.



There are two concertos, the Piano Concerto, Op 2, and the Violin Concerto in A minor, Op 54. The Piano Concerto in F minor was his graduation piece. It suffers from the Chopinesque weakness of tinkly music at the top of the keyboard and has no depth or drama, although it is often pleasant. As well as the concerto, there is the Fantasia on themes of I.T. Ryabnini Op 48 of 1899 for piano and orchestra. Trofim Ryabnini was a peasant fisherman who had kept alive the oral tradition of bilina, epic songs from North Russia.

One of these bilina was the inspiration behind Rimsky's Sadko. Arensky takes two songs from the collection of Ryabnini's son, Ivan (1845–1910) to form the basis of this one movement work. One theme is an andante in E minor and the second, in D minor, is akin to a march. The composer effectively imitates the zither and the work is full of colour and brilliance.

His Piano Trio no. 1 in D minor was written in memory of Carl Davidoff, the famous cellist. The Piano Trio no. 2 is his Opus 73.

His string quartets are in G Op 11 and A minor, Op 35, the second of which which was written in memory of Tchaikovsky who died in 1893. The wonderful second movement is a set of variations on Tchaikovsky's Legend Christ in His Garden from his children's songs Op 54. The composer later arranged this for string orchestra and identified them Op 35a. There is a Piano Quintet in D Op 51.

There is the cantata on the tenth anniversary of the Coronation, Op 26. The cantata The Fountain of Bakhchisara, after Pushkin, is his opus 46 and the other cantata is The Diver, Op 64. There is a ballet Egyptian Night, Op 50 The Cantata, Op 26 of 1893 was written when Arensky was the conductor of the Russian Choral Society. The anniversary refers to the tenth year of Alexander III. The words are by the forgotten A. Kryukov and is a sycophantic adoration of the Tsar. It is scored for soprano, baritone and large orchestra and is very short at six and a half minutes. Arensky uses the Slavic melody that Mussorgsky used in the coronation scene in Boris Godunov.

Tchaikovsky wrote his Moscow cantata for the accession of Alexander III in 1883.

What I admire about Arensky's music is that it is absolute music. It is never self-indulgent or excessive. They are works of understatement, seldom bombastic which aggression one might expect from a heavy drinker and gambler. There is a lot of piano music among which are his four suites for two pianos The Suite no. 3, Op 33 like the Suite no 2, Silhouettes, Op 31, also exists in an orchestral version. The Suite no. 3 is called variations and consists of a theme and nine variations including a minuet and gavotte, a waltz and a funeral march. The Suite no 4 is Op 62.

The piano music has been criticised for being too pretty since Arensky had an easy gift of melody. Arensky was a fine pianist and his piano music is notable for its lack of Russian ideas. His pieces are never modern or forward looking as, for example, in Rebikov, but his music is often subtle. It must be remembered that Arensky taught Rachmaninov whom he held in high regard and he also taught Scriabin, who was a loathsome, self-opinionated, arrogant man who would not do as his teacher instructed him. In this, he was like Schubert, who wasted his lessons with the great Salieri. It is interesting to note that a few months after Arensky's death, Sergei Taneyev played many of Arensky's solo piano works at the home of Rimsky Korsakov.

Latterly in his short life, Arensky was awarded a pension of 6,000 rubles which enabled him the freedom of composition. However, he indulged in parties, card-playing and a life style that undermined his health. He suffered from depression and alcoholism. While holidaying in Nice it was clear that he was dying of increasing consumption. The border with Finland was close to St Petersburg and it was in Terioki that he died.

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