

For Peter Roy Cook
VLADIMIR REBIKOV
by Dr. David C.F. Wright

Vladimir Rebikov was the most advanced Russian composer of his time yet he has been unfairly dismissed as a composer of inconsequential piano miniatures.

The fact is that he was an innovator shaking off the restrictions of traditionalism and the influence of Tchaikovsky although Rebikov studied at the Moscow Conservatory under Nikolai Klenovsky who was a pupil of Tchaikovsky.

By 1898 Rebikov had composed music of originality and invention. It was in 1905 that Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915) became innovative having fallen under the spell of Madame Blavatsky's theosophy and mysticism. She believed that she could prevent many strong men from lifting a table by the power of her mind. She was exposed as a fraud in 1914. Scriabin began to use chords of fourths seven years after Rebikov had done so and Scriabin built up his mystic chord of fourths namely C, F sharp, B flat, E, A and D.

Rebikov had been using such chords for seven years or more as well as unresolved dissonances and the whole tone scale. No wonder at the end of his life Rebikov was disillusioned and said that Scriabin, and others, had stolen and profited from his original ideas.

Even today, Scriabin is well-known and Rebikov is not.

He was born in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia on 31 May 1866. He studied the piano, first with his mother but studied and graduated in linguistics. He studied at the Moscow Conservatory of Music and Klenovsky was his theory teacher. Not wishing to be trammelled by current fashion, Rebikov strove to be original, which must be a mark of a great composer, and while those who do remember him do so for his piano miniatures it was the music for the theatre that made his name. His ballet *Yelka*, *The Christmas Tree* was first produced in Moscow on 30 October 1903 and was a great success. It became very popular for many years eclipsing the ballets of Tchaikovsky. Rebikov's ballet, *Snow White*, first produced in Tiflis in 1906, was also a phenomenal success.

While Humperdinck's opera "*Hänsel und Gretel*" may be an opera for children, Rebikov wrote an opera with children in mind and for them to participate in. This fairy opera was called *Prince Charming and Princess Beautiful* and it successfully engendered in children a love for opera and the theatre which for many became a lifelong passion. One can therefore say that Rebikov was a major cause of bringing culture and art to children and the masses. Benjamin Britten tried to emulate this in 1949 by composing his *Let's make an opera*.

Rebikov's first opera, *The Storm* is his opus five premiered in Odessa in 1895 where the composer began his teaching career. He also was to teach in Moscow, Kiev and Kishinev and all before 1898. He founded music schools in Odessa, Kishinev and elsewhere. He was not just a composer of piano miniatures. He was a fine composer of operas, ballets, orchestral suites, educational music, musical-psychographic dramas, a renowned teacher and a progressive composer and not a musician stuck in a rut.

In 1898 he visited Vienna and realised that his music must take a different direction. He was hearing music unhampered by Russian traditionalism and predictability. His music, like that of many Russian pianist-composers was merely salon music. He revolutionised his music and this influenced Stravinsky who was only 16 at the time of Rebikov's conversion. In 1910, Stravinsky composed his first ballet *The Firebird* followed by *Petrushka* in 1911 and the sensational *Rite of Spring* in 1913. He was clearly inspired by the ballets of Rebikov and even more so by their success.

It is true that Rebikov's early piano music is influenced by Tchaikovsky. His *Rêveries d'automne*, Op 8 of 1897 begins with a *Chanson Triste* written in memory of Tchaikovsky, who had died in 1893. The second piece is entitled *Insouciance*, the third *Moment Triste*, the fourth *Le dernier rendez-vous*, the fifth *Souvenir*

doloureux, the sixth Preseverance, the seventh Autumn's Journey, the eighth Bouffonnene, the ninth is a mazurka and the tenth is called Doux reproche. This is followed by Rustic echoes and the fourteenth piece is called Le Repenter. The pieces are straightforward but enriched with melody. They are also prophetic as the titles perhaps suggest. There is the sadness as the passing of a great master and autumn's journey itself as if the composer had come to the crossroads in his musical journey and wants to embark on and explore an unfamiliar route.

Opus 11 is his first set of Melomimics, each piece being prefaced with a written text describing a short scenario or theme. The first in this set is entitled A Declaration of Love and the second is headed A letter. Here his new harmonies are evident and are developed in his Opus 15, Les Reves, five melomimics of 1898. Debussy was to take up some of these ideas in his Preludes (1910–1913) and in his Etudes of 1915. In Rebikov's Opus 11 the piece, Les demons s'amusement is written entirely in the whole tone scale.

He was the first Russian composer to make an important use of the chords of the seventh and ninths and of polytonality. Grieg admired him considerably but his brave and new harmonic palette in his piano music was not appreciated in Russia and his definition of some of his music as melodeclamation was ridiculed. He also used the vocal technique of sprechstimme which means spoken song. Humperdinck had used this very briefly in his opera Königskinder of 1897. Rebikov developed this with amazing rhythmic contrasts.

His Aspirir et attendre is described as a tableau musical-psychogique and is his Opus 25. His other musico-psychographic dramas include The Abyss of 1910. The Gentry's Nest (sometimes called The Nobleman's Nest) of 1916, which is a setting of Turgenev's play, in which the vocal parts are speech-based and the music supports the action on the stage. Such works have been described as akin to the movie musical. The score sets out details of all the characters and full details of the required set designs.

Operas include The Woman with the Dagger of 1911, Alpha and Omega, with a libretto by the composer, also of 1911, and Narcissus based on Ovid's Metamorphoses.

In 1909 Rebikov arrived in Yalta in the Crimea setting up a music school. He became resentful of other composers stealing his ideas which they clearly did and enjoyed consequential fame as a result.

He died on 4 August 1920 in Yalta. He has been forgotten and ridiculed and these injustices must be remedied.

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