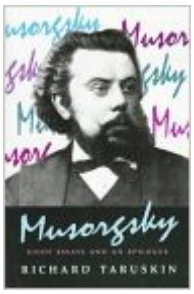
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Synopsis

"It is [a] fully illuminated story that Richard Taruskin, in the path-breaking essays collected here, unfolds around Modest Musorgsky, Russia's greatest national composer.... [Taruskin's] tour de force comes with a frontal attack on all the Soviet-bred truisms that for a century have refashioned Musorgsky from what the evidence suggests he was--an aristocrat with an early clinical interest in true-to-life musical portraiture and a later penchant for drinking partners who were both folklore buffs and political reactionaries democrat."--From the foreword Incorporating both new and now-classic essays, this book for the first time sets the vocal works of Modest Musorgsky in a fully detailed cultural, political, and historical context. From this perspective Richard Taruskin revises fundamentally the composer's historical and artistic image, in particular debunking the century-old dogmas of Vladimir Stasov, Musorgsky's first biographer. Here the author offers the most complete explanation of the revision of the opera Boris Godunov, compares it to contemporaneous operas by Chaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, advances a revisionary characterization of Khovanshchina as an aristocratic tragedy informed by a pessimistic view of history, discusses Musorgsky's use of folklore, and, focusing on Sorochintsi Fair, brings to a climax his refutation of Musorgsky as a protorevolutionary populist. The epilogue is a survey of revisionary productions of Musorgsky's works at home during the Gorbachev era.

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Customer Reviews

As one of the outstanding musical scholars of his generation, Taruskin is notable for his regular contributions to the Sunday New York Times as well as to many periodicals, includng the New Republic. His appeal outside the academy is easy to explain: Aside from the sheer brilliance and originality of many of his insights, his lucid and witty prose is a pleaure to read. Here, Taruskin turns his attention to the 19th-century Russian nationalist composer Modest Musorgsky, with particuar emphasis on his vocal music, and the result is a compelling revisionist view. In particular, the received notion of Musorgsky as a rebellious, antiestablishment figure (traceable to his first biographer and highly congenial to Soviet ideology) is shown to be false. Recommended for large music collections.- E. Gaub, Villa Maria Coll., Buffalo, N.Y.Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The merit of Taruskin's essays lies in his clear, highly readable style, which constantly keeps the reader's interest.... A major achievement. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

AmericaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s leading historian of Russian music, Richard Taruskin, collected ten essays about 19th-century composer Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881) in this 1993 publication. This volume will be of interest to specialist readers, not general ones. Points of interest are:1) Taruskin extensively discusses and documents MusorgskyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s radical period in the 1860s, marked by populism, an attempt to integrate theater and popular speech rhythms in musical drama through the unfinished opera ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“The MarriageÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• and the long 15-minute song ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“The Puppet Show.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•2) How Musorgsky developed and moved away from the anti-melodic dramatics of this early period when he was a member of the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“kuchkaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“mighty handfulÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. Taruskin shows the growing melodic interest of the vocal writing in the composerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s major achievement, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Boris GodunovÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• and the almost-as-good ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Khovanschina.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• This is explored in a number of ways, including debunking the traditional musicological view of how the initial rejection of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Boris GudonovÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• by the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg forced Musorgsky into revising the opera. Taruskin instead shows the revision of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“BorisÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• was in progress before the rejection, impelled by the composerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s changing dramatic and musical views rather than imposed by the Imperial Theater.3) Ploughing through years of accumulated leftist and Soviet claims as to MusorgskyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s putative leftist populism, Taruskin goes straight to source documents to show that Musorgsky, born of an aristocratic family

which lost its wealth in the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, was in fact a conservative supporter of the Tsar & the aristocracy, was quite anti-semitic even by the standards of his time, and in fact, though a drunk, exhibited the bred behavior of the aristocracy throughout his life.Beyond these major themes, Taruskin explores the revisions in an early song (ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Little StarÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•), the interest in historiography and the epoch of Ivan the Terrible among Russian writers and musicians in the middle of the 19th century, and the effect of Glasnost on views of Musorgsky within Russia. TaruskinÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s scholarship is impressive and expert, with valuable research into primary sources.I am rating the volume 4 stars instead of 5 because Taruskin does not deal in more than a cursory way with three important aspects of the Musorgsky legacy: the editorial changes to the operas made by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (which Taruskin dispenses with by saying the subject has been covered elsewhere), the composerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s likely closeted homosexuality (discussed in a footnote) and last but not least the composerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s alcoholism, which led to the unproductivity of his later years and most likely his death. These all would be of vital interest to a general reader but the scholarly audience targeted by Taruskin presumably knows where to find out more about those topics. There is also an excessive intellectualization, so characteristic of academic writing, which concentrates on debates among the intelligentsia and aesthetic disputes about musico-dramatic principles instead of the main drivers of MusorgskyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s art and life: drink, shame, a fall from wealth and status to impoverished artistic obscurity, fears of compositional incompetence. While Taruskin is a sometimes witty writer, some of the text is plodding while also being unclear in the particulars and unclear on larger points: for example, TaruskinÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s interpretation of politics in the revision of Boris is confusing and in my humble view overinterpreted. General readers are more likely to profit from David BrownÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“MusorgskyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (in the Oxford Master Musicians series), but more specialized readers who are exploring Russian music in depth will learn much from TaruskinÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s fine effort.

Before I'll make some critical notions on this book I have to confess how much I enjoyed reading this book. This book, like the other books by Taruskin is academic literature at its best. Not only profound, detailled and knowledgable but also driven by curiosity and passionate interest in his subject. And I wouldn't even consider my objections against many of his assumptions as something to be put against this book. I prefer being confronted with some controversial theories to boring middle of the road literature.Already the title of the introduction "Who Speaks for Musorgsky?" made me a little resentful and is somehow symptomatic for the case Musorgsky. Why is it that everybody

feels invited to either speak for him or school him like a dependent boy? Balakirev, Cui and Rimsky did, and even his friends and supporters Stasov and Kutuzov loved to do it. Taruskin decided that Kutuzov speaks more for Musorgsky than Stasov since this fits better to his revisionist thesis. The truth is that they all first speak for themselves. Stasov projects his revolutionary ideas on him like Kutuzov his reactionary aristocratic ideals. Cui wants to demonstrate his intellectual and Rinsky his technical superiority. And of course the soviet propaganda used him for their prposesas well. I would say that even the Musorgsky of the letters is not always speaking for Musorgsky since his hypersensitive and conflict avoiding character often made him write rather what his addresser wanted to hear than what he really thought. The only thing that speaks truthfully for Musorgsky is his music.The underlying thesis of this book or at least some chapters (the book is a selection of essays written at different times and occasions) is, as already hinted in the introduction, that Musorgsky was only a revolutionary in the early years of the "Marriage" and the "Ur-Boris" but became more and more conventional not to say reactionary already with the revision of Boris. I completely agree with the observation that there is this change from a more recitative dialogue style to more coherent musical entities. But to say one thing is the right way the other the false (compromising) way is a little bit too simple for my taste.Not only that other composers made this experience as well that the recitative style has its limiations. Wagner turned back after the "Rheingold" which represents his theory of Leitmotivtechnik in the purest form. Debussy wanted to overcome his loose Pelleas style in his planned (but unfortunately never realized) later opera projects. And also Ravels two small operas reflect this experience.The Ur-Boris definitely has its merits and is by no means defective. However, the additions of the revision process, mainly the "Polish act" and the "Kromy scene", may not be necessary for the plot, but are much more than just giving in to opera conventions. They add new dimensions to the epic feel of the opera. Besides that I would not want to miss the fountain scene, with its burst of emotions one of the magic moments of all opera history.Especially when it comes to Khovanshchina Taruskin’s thesis becomes awkward. There might be more pieces in this opera that look like an aria or a conventional choir scene than in Boris, but if you don’t look at this opera with the eyes of a musicologist but experience it as a musical drama you must realize that it is much more radical and experimental (and therefore also much less popular) than Boris Godunov. Its atmosphere is completely different. Boris has this young hero and the element of upheaval and despite some pessimistic undertones it shows (especially in the second act) a relatively intact world while Khovanshchina lacks all idealistic appeal. It is a dark, rotten, pessimistic world close to Shakespeare’s late plays (I always felt a strong connection especially to Macbeth). It speaks for Musorgsky’s instinkt that he couldn’t just continue composing in

the good old Boris style. To consider this opera as a work of a reactionary only because there are princes as main characters is not convincing at all, as if the personnel would say anything about quality.Taruskin sees a conflict in Musorgsky's personality between the progressive "democratic" side influenced by Stasov and the reactionist aristocratic side claimed by Kutusov. I don't really believe that this played a big role since Musorgsky didn't think in this kind of political categories. There are some interesting biographical similarities to Lev Tolstoi which might help understand some aspects of Musorgskys character. Like Tolstoi he was of aristocratic origins and had a happy previleged childhood. Like Tolsoi in his early novels also Musorgsky remembers this time with nostalgic fondness, namely in the song cycle "Nursery" and the second Boris act. Both welcomed the end of serfdom in Russia and went through a phase of idealizing the simple folks but then lost pretty much all illusions. Apart from that they were rather antipodes. Tolstoi was driven by a idealistic spirit and all of his works have some kind of message (although I think that the messages are rather a byproduct and not what makes his novels so great). Musorgsky was a sensualist and explorer of truth. He looks at the bottom of people's souls and created figures with complex characters. He was interested in people no matter of which rank and origin. The song cycle "Without sun" for example, deeply admired by Debussy, which Taruskin considers as self centered aristocratic whiny stuff, are psychograms of depression and decline (here another interesting link to some of Shakespeare's sonnets) and as such first of all human. There is a deep compassion for everybody, not only for the guilt marked Boris but also for the holy fool and even for characters like Andrej and Ivan Chovansky.With such gifts Musorgsky was a born music dramatist and as a music dramatist he is a genius of the hightest rank. None of the operas by Rimsky and Tchaikovsky can compare with the dramatic power of Musorgsky. I would even go so far to estimate him as a dramatist (not as a composer) higher than Wagner. And even work like "Pictures of an exhibition" I would consider in nuce as a music dramatic work. I don't share the popular belief that if Musorgsky would have achieved more technical skills he would have been a even more important artist. People who think like that don't understand the dynamics of creativity. It might sound strange but Musorgsky's neglect of technical aspects and his tremendous expressive power are undividable.

Musorgsky has been the subject of a variety of interpretations for so long through many cultural regimes. Taruskin sets the record straight. The essays are all excellent in spite of the technical analysis at times, which is not a hindrance to the lay person. Most enjoyable is his essay on the origin and spelling of Musorgsky's name, another cultural puzzle solved. Now, how about a comprehensive overview of Russian musical history?

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