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## Russian Music in and around Chekhov\*

Anton Chekhov, the anniversary of whose death falls in 2004, has many connections to music, both passive and active. He was on very friendly terms with both Chaikovskii and Rakhmaninov, his contemporaries, and he was also, as the second best-loved Russian writer after Pushkin, a popular choice for twentieth-century composers, Russian and non-Russian alike, seeking literary works to set to music in various forms. As many critics have observed, his own writing is extremely musical, and no less a person than Shostakovich (who himself loved Gogol' and Chekhov above all other writers) perceived musical form, particularly sonata form, in several of Chekhov's works, believing, indeed, that Chekhov had an essentially musical way of thinking and writing. Many others, including such diverse figures as Jonathan Miller, Rakhmaninov and André Maurois, to name but three, have also commented on the musical nature of Chekhov's prose and drama. Indeed, Chekhov originally described one of his stories, 'Schast'e' (Happiness, 1887) as 'quasi simfoniei'.<sup>1</sup> A particularly strong example of Chekhov's musical thinking is the story, 'Chernyi monakh' (The Black Monk, 1894), a work particularly loved by Shostakovich who noted its basic sonata form, an aspect of the story that has been analysed in detail by, amongst others, Rosamund Bartlett.<sup>2</sup> Chekhov has also been described as a librettist

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<sup>1</sup> E. Balabanovich, *Chekhov i Chaikovskii* (Moscow, Moskovskii rabochii, 3rd edition, 1978) (hereafter Balabanovich), p. 149. Chekhov considered this story the best of those he wrote in the 1880s: *Ibid.*, p. 76. For more detail see Rosamund Bartlett, 'Tchaikovsky, Chekhov and the Russian Elegy', in Leslie Kearney (ed.), *Tchaikovsky and His World* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 300–18 (hereafter Bartlett 1998) (307–08). One of the best academic studies of the innate musicality of Chekhov's writing is Abram Derman's *O masterstve Chekhova* (Moscow, Sovetskii pisatel', 1959), particularly pp. 120–25. He also points out a possible liturgical basis for some of Chekhov's syntactical rhythms: *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Rosamund Bartlett, 'Sonata Form in Chekhov's "The Black Monk"', in Andrew Wachtel (ed.), *Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Litera-*

*manqué*<sup>3</sup> and his works contain numerous references to music, directly or as part of the imagery.<sup>4</sup>

Chekhov's friendship with Chaikovskii and Rakhmaninov is not surprising, and their correspondence with him is full of mutual admiration, since Chekhov was a bright young hope for Russian literature in Chaikovskii's lifetime and already a recognized master in Rakhmaninov's.<sup>5</sup> Some works by writer and composer were dedicated to each other, projects were mooted, and, in Rakhmaninov's case, music was inspired.<sup>6</sup> Critics moreover have waxed lyrical in explaining the affini-

*ture and Society* (Evanston, ILL, Northwestern University Press, 1998), pp. 58-72 (hereafter Bartlett 1998a).

<sup>3</sup> Domenico Rigotti, 'Chehov librettista mancato', *La Scala*, nos. 129-30, 1960, pp. 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> His brother Nikolai was a more than competent amateur pianist, so that Chekhov had this source of music as well as his visits to the opera and, less frequently, concerts.

<sup>5</sup> Chaikovskii was generally very reticent towards his literary contemporaries, and thus his writing directly to the young Chekhov was quite exceptional: see Bartlett 1998, p. 302. Chekhov met Rakhmaninov when the latter visited Ialta in 1900 as accompanist to Shaliapin, immediately noting that the pianist had a remarkable face and was destined to become a great man: see E. K. Somova, in *Vospominaniia o Rakhmaninove*, 5th edition (Moscow, Muzyka, 1988) (hereafter *Vospominaniia o Rakhmaninove*), II, pp. 231-37 (33).

<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Rakhmaninov recalled that, although Chekhov 'frequently suggested that he should provide the text for one of my operas [. . .] [his] libretti did not lend themselves to a musical setting: their failure was due to the fact that he had no instinct for what was suitable and what unsuitable for musical purposes': *Rachmaninoff's Recollections told to Oskar von Rieseemann*, translated by Dolly Rutherford (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1934) (hereafter *Rachmaninoff's Recollections*), p. 151. Nonetheless he also admired the 'amazing musicality' of Chekhov's writing: Z. A. Prybitkova, 'S. V. Rakhmaninov v Peterburge-Petrograde', *Vospominaniia o Rakhmaninove*, II, p. 88. In later years he defended the writer's reputation and, indeed, remained a devoted admirer all his life, going to great lengths even to hear lectures about Chekhov: see S. A. Satina, 'Zapiska o S. V. Rakhmaninove', *Vospominaniia o Rakhmaninove*, I, pp. 12-115 (70). He also attempted to persuade Bunin to write a book about his predecessor: G. N. Kuznetsova, 'Iz "Grasskogo dnevnika"', *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 84, *Ivan Bunin*, II, pp. 250-99 (268). Moreover Rakhmaninov found it convenient to quote Chekhov's words on the value of making deletions, when commenting on the work of his more modernist contemporaries: 'U S. V.

ties between the characters and manner of writing of Chaikovskii and Chekhov; some of their suggestions, however, border on the grotesque. Chekhov and Chaikovskii were at first linked in the popular imagination as pessimists (a description later modified to such formulas as a shared sense of the tragic in life), but some of the attributed affinities written of by critics and historians seeking to revise this view seem extraordinarily comprehensive. The following quotation, dating from 1954, is not untypical:

A striving for happiness, for the truth of life, beauty and the hatred of evil and violence, a deeply realistic understanding of human feelings, wise simplicity and a common accessibility of style — all this links Chaikovskii and Chekhov.<sup>7</sup>

A year earlier another scholar speaks of perceived common features such as:

A particular type of simplicity, sincerity, intimacy, tenderness, grace, spiritually elevated sadness, heartfelt gentleness, warmth.<sup>8</sup>

Another commentator suggests that ‘a common poetic intonation links (*sblizhaet*) the works of Chekhov and Chaikovskii’.<sup>9</sup>

Marginally more interesting than such generalizations is that Chekhov particularly liked Chaikovskii’s rather gloomy but very skilful short romance, ‘Snova, kak prezhde, odin’ (Again, as before, alone, 1891), op. 73, no. 6.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Donald Rayfield’s comprehensive biog-

Rakhmaninov’, Z. A. Apetian (ed.), *Literaturnoe nasledie* (Moscow, Sovetskii kompozitor) I, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Iu. A. Kremlev, ‘Chekhov i muzyka’, *Sovetskaia muzyka*, 1954, 8, pp. 53–58 (53).

<sup>8</sup> I. Eiges, *Muzyka v zhizni i tvorchestve Chekhova* (Moscow, Gosudarstvennoe Muzykal’noe Izdatel’stvo, 1953), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Balabanovich, 153. Balabanovich’s very enthusiastic book contains the following aphorism: ‘esli u Chaikovskogo muzyka *govorit*, to u Chekhova slovo *poet*’ (p. 152).

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Chekhov to D. M. Ratgauz dated 10 March 1902: A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow, Nauka, 1974–1983) (hereafter Chekhov *PSS*), *Pis’ma* 10 (1981), p. 208.

raphy of Chekhov,<sup>11</sup> we know about many of his women friends, including Lika (Lidiia Lenskaia [real name Korf]) who wrote to him in 1898 ‘in memory of good relations’; having told him, with a traditional feminine formula, not to think that she was ‘really such an old witch’, she went on to quote the words of the last stanza of a romantic song she used to sing to him: Chaikovskii’s ‘Den’ li tsarit?’ (Does the day reign? 1880), op. 47, no. 6.<sup>12</sup> Chekhov was also very fond of Chaikovskii’s opera *Evgenii Onegin* that is, of course, described as ‘lyric scenes’, just as *Diadia Vania* is subtitled ‘scenes from country life’.<sup>13</sup> Chaikovskii seems to have liked the more colourful aspects of Chekhov’s writing. For example, in the story ‘Pochta’ (The Post) from the *Khmurye liudi* (Gloomy people) collection of 1890, which Chekhov had dedicated to him, he highlighted in his copy an uncharacteristically purple phrase:

Колокольчик что-то прозвякал бубенчиком, бубенчики ласково  
ответили ему. (Chekhov, *PSS*, 6, 335)

Chaikovskii also enjoyed the far less gaudy, indeed, grim story, ‘Gusev’ (1890) for its splendid landscapes and great musicality, and this is a story that, according to Flora Litvinova, Shostakovich had wanted to set to music.<sup>14</sup> Other stories which attracted his particular attention were ‘Pis’mo’ (The Letter) and ‘Step’ (The Steppe).<sup>15</sup>

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This fine song has been described as being near to a song-epigram: David Brown, *Tchaikovsky: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London, Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1992), IV, p. 465.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Rayfield, *Chekhov: A Life* (London, Harper Collins, 1997) (hereafter Rayfield 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Rayfield 1997, 469. The song is, in fact, rather stolid and, indeed, in the opinion of the present writer, one of Chaikovskii’s least inspired compositions in this genre.

<sup>13</sup> Academician B. V. Asaf’ev suggests that ‘without Chaikovskii, it is difficult to imagine *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, as well as several of Chekhov’s long stories (“The House with a Mezzanine” and even “The Steppe”): quoted from Balabanovich, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1994, p. 170. Earlier, Chaikovskii had also responded enthusiastically to this story, ‘the most musical prose in all Russian literature’ (Ibid).

<sup>15</sup> For more detail see Bartlett 1998, pp. 305–06, 308–09.

It may also be noted in passing that then, as always, jealousy was rife, and Chekhov was criticized for dedicating a story to a mere composer, albeit his ‘ardent admirer’ (Rayfield 1997, 208) rather than to his long-suffering patron Aleksei Suvorin (1834–1912). Perhaps more to the point is Chaikovskii’s observation that ‘simplicity and everyday life exclude neither poetry nor drama’ (Balabanovich, p. 155); here there really seems to be a congruence of thinking, for these echo many of Chekhov’s well-known statements, particularly on drama.

Also worth mentioning is Chaikovskii’s plan to write an opera based on Lermontov’s ‘Bela’ from *Geroi nashego vremeni* (A Hero of Our Time, 1840), but with a libretto by Chekhov: Bela was to have been a soprano, Pechorin a baritone and, surprisingly, the gruff Maksim Maksimych a tenor. This project was mooted in 1889 after Chekhov and Chaikovskii had known each other for about two years, but it did not materialize. Incidentally, much spurious moral capital of a pacifist nature is detected by Soviet commentators in the request by Chaikovskii that there should be no processions with marches in the opera: ‘Sincerely, I do not like marches’.<sup>16</sup> This statement may bemuse some of the composer’s admirers who thoroughly enjoy such marches as, for instance, ‘Marche Slave’, op. 31 (1876), those in the 1812 Overture, op. 49 (1882),<sup>17</sup> or, indeed, the very specific march in the third movement of his Sixth Symphony, op. 74 (1893).

Lermontov also figures tangentially in considering the other main composer in Chekhov’s life, Sergei Rakhmaninov. Chekhov’s 1886 story, ‘Na puti’ (On the Road), takes as its epigraph the poet’s famous lines:

Ночевала тучка золотая  
На груди утеса великана<sup>18</sup>

Rakhmaninov, in turn, took the story, epigraph and all, as the programme for his early orchestral fantasy now known as ‘Utes’ (The rock,

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<sup>16</sup> M. P. Chekhov, ‘*Vokrug Chekhova*’: *Vstrechi i vpechatleniia* (Moscow and Leningrad, Academia, 1933), p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Chaikovskii’s own dislike of one of his most popular pieces is of course well known.

<sup>18</sup> M. Iu. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1957–58), I, 69.

1893), written when he was twenty; the work was, in fact, originally just called ‘Fantaziia’ (Fantasy) but the name ‘Utes’ came from the epigraph. In the poem it is, of course, the golden cloud that at dawn abandons the rock to weep. In Chekhov’s story it is a rather worldly but deeply unsuccessful older man, Likharev, who meets a young woman, Ilovaiskaia, and spends the night, trapped by a snowstorm, describing his various religious and political obsessions, followed by disillusionment, as well as extolling her virtues. Although apparently enraptured by his outpourings, the woman hastens off at dawn when the storm lifts, just as she seemed about to respond to him. In Rakhmaninov’s fantasy, after a quietly sombre opening, the second and third motifs may call to mind a cloud or, conceivably, the awakening of soon-to-be frustrated emotions, but Rakhmaninov was insistent that Chekhov’s story was his inspiration. He was far from ashamed of this early fantasy and included it in many of his concerts before he left Russia. Chaikovskii, who himself had made a setting of Lermontov’s poem for unaccompanied mixed chorus, was delighted with it and promised to promote it in St. Petersburg and on his forthcoming European tour.<sup>19</sup>

Rakhmaninov’s other existing setting of Chekhov to music is the song derived from the memorable final words of Sonia in *Diadia Vania* (Uncle Vania, 1897), ‘My otdokhnem’ (We shall rest, 1906) op. 26, no. 3, for contralto or bass, almost always the latter nowadays.<sup>20</sup> In this

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<sup>19</sup> Not all were so delighted. Tsezar’ Kiui (César Cui), who hardly ever had a good word for anyone or anything, said of the work that ‘the composer is always going somewhere but getting nowhere’ (quoted from Martyn, p. 79). English critics of the time, ever keen to promote home-grown talent or (until 1914) German music, were equally dismissive: *The Musical Times* (XL, 1899, p. 311) wrote of ‘Small, ill-nourished’ themes which ‘creep about in apologetic half-tones’; the *Daily Mail* (20 April 1899, p. 5) was equally dissatisfied by the piece’s perceived lack of muscle, declaring, ‘This is carrying symbolism far enough, God wot’.

<sup>20</sup> N. F. Bel’chikov, (ed.), *Chekhov i ego sreda* (Leningrad, Academia, 1930), p. 371. For an elaborate analysis of this fantasy as a representation of Chekhov’s story see Barrie Martyn, *Rachmaninoff: Composer. Pianist. Conductor* (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1990) (hereafter Martyn), pp. 77–79. It may have been Rakhmaninov’s enthusiasm for Chekhov’s plays, especially *Chaika*, that inspired him to set music to prose in this song. It may, indeed, have been part of an opera he contemplated based on *Diadia Vania*. At any rate World War I seriously

song, instead of heartbroken Sonia's sombrely resigned lamentation against the background of Telegin's soft twanging on a guitar, her words are usually sung by a robust male voice accompanied by modern grand piano.<sup>21</sup> Rakhmaninov's song is none the less a sensitive piece which follows faithfully the cadences of Sonia's words. The composer, who had sent Chekhov a copy of 'Utes' in 1893, was very distressed at his death eleven years later, and this dark and declamatory musical setting of Chekhov's prose serves as an indication of why Chekhov might have thought of him as a possible composer for an opera based on 'Chernyi monakh', as well as acting as an elegy for the playwright who had befriended and encouraged him.<sup>22</sup>

The coincidence of the famous flop at the première of Rakhmaninov's First Symphony on 13 March 1897<sup>23</sup> and that of *Chaika* in the previous year (on 17 October 1896) has drawn the attention of many memoirists, comparing the reactions of the two to such a blow to their confidence, when Rakhmaninov abandoned composing completely and Chekhov gave up playwriting.<sup>24</sup> *Chaika* itself, of course, contains a celebrated theatrical flop, and it has been suggested that not only, as is usually supposed, Levitan was a model for Treplev, but also Rakhmaninov.<sup>25</sup>

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interrupted his work and his last setting of a prose text was of words from the Gospel of St. John. See Natalia Challis, *The Singer's Rachmaninoff* (New York, Pelion Press, 1989), p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> John Culshaw, writing at a time when it was fashionable to denigrate Rakhmaninov, found 'the Tchekov poem' [*sic*] 'beautiful' but 'too fragmentary for Rachmaninov to make much of it', going on to suggest that 'the short, concise phrases do not lend themselves to his kind of treatment' so that 'the words are hindered, rather than enhanced by the music': John Culshaw, *Rachmaninov: The Man and his Music* (London, Dennis Dobson, 1949), p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> Chekhov once mentioned to friends *Diadia Vania* as a possible opera subject. See Sergei Bertensson, and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 200), p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> Rakhmaninov forbade performances of this work throughout his lifetime. A second performance of it was put on by Aleksandr Gauk in 1945.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, A.V. Ossovskii, 'S.V. Rakhmaninov', in *Vospominaniia o Rakhmaninove*, I, pp. 343–87 (265–66).

<sup>25</sup> Isaak Levitan, incidentally, was Rakhmaninov's favourite landscape painter. The belief of some that Rakhmaninov may also have been a model for Treplev can only apply to later interpretations of his character at MKhAT. The affinity

Two general aspects of Chekhov and music deserve mention: first, the amount of music referred to in his stories and plays, and, secondly and more importantly, the particularly musical aspects of his writing.

More than two dozen of Chekhov's stories and plays contain strongly musical elements either in the plot or in the imagery. It may, perhaps, seem that seeking out references to music in 19th-century literature is hardly more worthwhile than listing literary references to the television or video games referred to in contemporary fiction; Vincenzo Bellini (1801–35), for instance, had no particular significance for Goncharov, although the aria 'Casta diva' from *Norma* (1831) plays a considerable part in his novel *Oblomov* as the party-piece with which Ol'ga captivates the hero's sensitive but immature heart.<sup>26</sup> There is, therefore, no need to dwell long on the musical elements in Chekhov's fiction, noting only that the motif of music occurs in some of his best-known stories, including 'Poprygun'ia' (The Grasshopper, 1892), 'Nevesta' (The Bride, 1903) and 'Arkhieri' (The Bishop, 1902);<sup>27</sup> the story, 'Posle teatra' (After the Theatre, 1892), in particular, was influenced by Chekhov's impressions after one of his several visits to *Evgenii Onegin*. Although the writer more than once referred to musicality as the highest aspiration of prose writers,<sup>28</sup> music in his fiction is far from always benevolent or beautiful: in 'Nevesta' Nadia's after-dinner playing on the fiddle, for instance, or Ol'ga's music making in 'Poprygun'ia' are both reflections of their *poshlost'*. In 'Ionych' (1899) the eponymous hero, Dmitrii Ionych Startsev, falls for a younger lady, Katia, partly because of her energetic piano playing, though he remains indecisive, even apathetic, and is all too easily put off; when he has grown fat and successful, Startsev finds Katia's banging of the keys distasteful; none the less piano playing remains her most distinguishing feature. At the end of Act II of *Diadia Vania* the banning of music with the word 'Nel'zia!'

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particularly struck audiences at the first performance in the interpretation of Vsevolod Meierkhol'd. I am grateful to my colleague Victor Borovsky who has spoken to me persuasively about the similarities between the temperaments of the composer and Chekhov's character.

<sup>26</sup> It should not be forgotten, however, that the merits or otherwise of Italian operas were widely debated in the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>27</sup> This story is unusual in that it features music of the Church.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Balabanovich 1978, p. 154.

(We mustn't!) is a characteristic offstage moment for the pernicious professor. Far more touching, not least against the Neronic fiddling of Andrei, is Irina, the youngest of the sisters in Chekhov's *Tri sestry* (The Three Sisters, 1901) who in the last act, entering upon a loveless and, as it turns out, doomed marriage, utters words which in other circumstances might seem overcharged: 'my soul is like a wonderful grand piano of which the key has been lost'.

It is well known that Stanislavskii resisted the introduction of any music between the scenes and acts of Chekhov's plays. Within the plays, he appears to have used non-Russian music. For instance, at the end of *Tri sestry*, as the regiment leaves the town, the background march traditionally heard in MKhat productions was K. Frant's *Marsh Skobeleva*.<sup>29</sup> For Act 3 of *Vishnevyi sad* two very popular waltzes of the time were used: 'Sobre las olas' (1891), known in Russia as 'Nad volnami', by the Mexican composer Juventino Rosas (1868–1894), and 'Valurile Dunării' (1880), known in Russia as 'Dunaiskie volny', by the Romanian composer Iosip Ivanovici (?1845–1905). Boris Izrlevskii, conducting the theatre's small orchestra, recalls thinking of asking Ol'ga Knipper whether she would prefer some of the fine waltzes by Glinka and Chaikovskii instead, but realizing that Mme Ranevskaia probably preferred to be stimulated by the very familiar music (Izrlevskii, 57).<sup>30</sup>

Before turning to Shostakovich, it is worth mentioning some far less well known Chekhov-based works and their composers. They include three operas all dated 1916: Arkadii Dubenskii's, *Roman s kontrabasom* (Novel with Double Base), Boris Ianovskii's *Ved'ma* (The Witch) and Vladimir Erenberg's one-act *Svad'ba* (The Wedding), dedi-

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<sup>29</sup> Nothing is known of Frant, but his march is unconnected with Chaikovskii's *Marche Slave* which was originally dedicated to Skobelev and had the same name as Frant's: see B. L. Izrlevskii, *Muzyka v spektakliakh Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo Teatra: Zapiski dirizhera* (Moscow, Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1965) (hereafter Izrlevskii), pp. 240–42.

<sup>30</sup> An attempt at authenticity was the shepherd's pipe at the end of Act 1 of *Vishnevyi sad*, and a real shepherd from near Podol'sk used to commute to the theatre to perform. Until, that is, a fierce thunderstorm caused his flock to bolt, and, by the time he had gathered it again, the train to Moscow had departed. After this, the enraged Stanislavskii vowed never again to rely on anyone outside the theatre: Izrlevskii, 58–59.

cated to Shaliapin (Chaliapin).<sup>31</sup> Moving forward half a century, there are some more operas, including Roman Vlad's 1968 *Chaika* (The Seagull), Gennadii Bانشchikov's 1978 *Smert' Korneta Kliuzova* (The Death of Cornet Kliuzov, based on Chekhov's story, 'Shvedskaia spichka' [The Safety Match]), Vladimov Kobekin's 1980 *Lebedinaia pesnia* (Swan Song), and Aleksandr Kholminov's *Van'ka* and *Svad'ba* (The Wedding), both of 1984.

These composers are not household names even in Russia, and few details are known about them: Arkadii Dubenskii (1890–1966) emigrated to the United States in 1921 after which most of his compositions were on specifically American themes;<sup>32</sup> Ianovskii (1875–1933) was a composer and teacher who after the Revolution lived in Kharkiv and wrote, amongst other things, a total of ten operas. Erenberg (1874–1923) was a composer of satirical music before the Revolution, best known for an opera: *Vampuka ili nevesta afrikanskaia: opera, obraztsovaia vo vsekh otnosheniakh* (Vampuka or the African Bride: A Model Opera in All Respects, 1909); this confection was performed no less than a thousand times and has given a new word to the Russian language (*vampuka* meaning operatic or theatrical clichés). Roman Vlad, born in 1919, has lived in Rome since 1938. Aleksandr Kholminov (b. 1925) is an establishment figure who also wrote music based on Gogol';<sup>33</sup> not surprisingly his versions pale beside those of Shostakovich and Shnitke, but he is a far from untalented composer for the stage, a very long way from pernicious establishment hacks like Tikhon Khrennikov (b. 1913). Of a somewhat younger generation, Gennadii Bانشchikov (b. 1943), is a professor at St. Petersburg conservatory. Vladimir Kobekin, who was born in Sverdlovsk in 1947, is a prominent figure in contemporary Russian opera, who, in addition to *Lebedinaia pesnia*, also, apparently, wrote an opera based on 'Skripka Rotshil'da'

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<sup>31</sup> A possible, though perhaps not very probable, stimulus for these operas in 1916 was the publication of a first biography of Chekhov by A. Izmailov: *Chekhov, 1860–1904: biograficheskii nabrosok* (Moscow, I. D. Sytin, 1916).

<sup>32</sup> For a brief account of his life and works see Allan Ho and Dmitry Feofanov, (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Russian/Soviet Composers* (New York, Westport, CN and London, 1989) (hereafter Ho and Feofanov).

<sup>33</sup> For more detail see Arnold McMillin, 'Gogol's "St Petersburg Stories" in the Hands of Russian Composers', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 2003, pp. 171–82.

(Rothschild's Violin), about which no details are available. The story itself figures in the work of other composers to be discussed later. Finally, in this catalogue of little-known names may be mentioned an opera which is listed in Grove's and Bernandt's dictionaries,<sup>34</sup> but about whose composer no information was available to the present writer: M. A. Ostroglazov's one-act *Khirurgiia* (Surgery, 1914).

Dmitrii Shostakovich, as has been mentioned, was particularly fond of Chekhov's story 'Chernyi monakh', referring to it in letters as early as 1926 and as late as 1972. In 1943 he had plans to write an opera based on this work, whose sense of the tragic he found comparable to Chaikovskii's Sixth so-called Pathétique Symphony, declaring 'Chernyi monakh' one of the most musical works in Russian literature and almost in sonata form;<sup>35</sup> he hoped that Aleksandr Medvedev (b. 1927) would write the libretto. Shostakovich did, however, feel that lack of action in the story would make the task a difficult one.<sup>36</sup> He also said

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<sup>34</sup> Stanley Sadie, (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, Macmillan, 2001), 5, p. 558; G. Bernandt, *Slovar' oper vperyye postavlennykh ili izdannykh v dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii i v SSSR (1736–1959)* (Moscow, Sovetskii kompozitor, 1962), p. 328.

<sup>35</sup> *Shostakovich o vremeni i o sebe* (Moscow, Sovetskii kompozitor, 1980), p. 108. Another project, still in progress, to write an opera on this story is that by Aleksandr Chaikovskii who works as a consultant at the Mariinskii Theatre in St. Petersburg. Not everyone relished the prospect of setting Chekhov to music. When Al'fred Shnitke received a proposal from John Neumeier to write a ballet based on a Chekhov work or on *Peer Gynt* he immediately chose the latter saying, 'I somehow do not feel Chekhov in this musical world': Aleksandr Ivashkin, *Besedy s Al'fredom Shnitke* (Moscow, Klassika-XXI, 2003), p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000) (hereafter Fay), p. 274. Chekhov himself had, in 1900, suggested to Rakhmaninov that he might consider writing an opera based on this story, but nothing came of the project: *Rachmaninoff's Recollections*, p. 151. 'Chernyi monakh' has continued to attract composers up until the twenty-first century: on 28 October 2003 Anthony Bailey's one-act chamber opera, *The Black Monk* was given its first performance at the Bloomsbury Theatre, London. An expressionist work, closer to the world of Schoenberg than of Shostakovich, it contains elements of jazz and also incorporates the only part of Shostakovich's opera that remains, namely 'The Angel's Serenade', a 'salon piece' (Chekhov's appellation) by Gaetano Braga, which Shostakovich had arranged for soprano, mezzo soprano, violin and piano (his op. 141). Anthony Bailey's version of this musical

that he had incorporated many motifs from this story into his last, Fifteenth Symphony.<sup>37</sup> Hardly anything of the opera remains though. This story has been excellently described and discussed by Rosamund Bartlett in her 1998 article (see note 2). Also fundamental for students of Chekhov's musicality is her recent 'Shostakovich and Chekhov'.<sup>38</sup>

Shostakovich was a voracious and amazingly swift reader (something he attributed to practice in score reading); he also possessed an extraordinary memory, and took great pleasure in quoting by heart long passages from Gogol' and also Chekhov.<sup>39</sup> Shostakovich's comment on the musicality of Chekhov's works was pre-echoed by Meierkhöld when in 1903 he said of *Vishnevyyi sad* that it was 'abstract, like a Chaikovskii symphony' (Bartlett 1998a, 59). This, of course, begs a number of questions about the abstractness or otherwise of Chaikovskii's symphonies. Some examples of gushing musico-literary expressions of admiration have already been cited, but Shostakovich was also prone to wax lyrical on the subject of Russian literature: in 1960, for instance, he said, 'Reading his [Chekhov's] writings, I often recognize myself; I think that in any of the situations in which he found himself, I should have reacted in just the same way as he did'.<sup>40</sup> Five years earlier he had quoted approvingly a passage from a letter of 6 February 1896 from Chekhov to Suvorin: 'It is not the duty of writers to accuse, not to prosecute, but

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component of Chekhov's story is, naturally, quite different from Shostakovich's. The first production of Bailey's chamber opera, by the Sirius Ensemble, made extensive use of multiple projected video and visual images which, combined with the action on the stage, provided ample evidence of the dramatic potential of Chekhov's story.

<sup>37</sup> Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1979) (hereafter Volkov), p. 174.

<sup>38</sup> Rosamund Bartlett (ed.), *Shostakovich in Context* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 199–218. Of no less interest in this connection is Caryl Emerson, 'Shostakovich and the Russian Literary Tradition', forthcoming in Laurel E. Fay (ed.), *Shostakovich and His World* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Krzysztof Meyer, *Dimitri Chostakovitch* (Paris, Fayard, 1994) (hereafter Meyer), p. 134.

<sup>40</sup> See Eric Roseberry, 'Shostakovich and his Late-Period Recognition of Britten', in David Fanning (ed.), *Shostakovich Studies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 234.

to champion even the guilty once they have been condemned and are enduring punishments. . . . Great writers and artists ought to take part in politics only so far as they have to protect themselves from politics. There are plenty of accusers, prosecutors and gendarmes without them' (Fay, 197). Miserably ashamed after signing a collective letter condemning the dissident Andrei Sakharov, Shostakovich compared himself to the unlovable Dr. Ragin in Chekhov's story 'Palata No. 6' (Ward No. 6, 1892) who signed a blatantly falsified account.

Going back several decades, Vsevolod Meierkhol'd (1874–1940), who always highlighted the function of music in his productions, attempted unsuccessfully to get Shostakovich to write the music for a 1934 show based on three of Chekhov's one-act plays — *Iubilei* (The Anniversary), *Medved'* (The Bear) and *Predlozhenie* (The Proposal) — with the intriguing title, *Tridtsat' tri obmoroka* (Thirty-three swoons). In the event the music was written by the talented and rather underrated Soviet composer Vissarion Shebalin (1902–1963), to whom belong some three dozen pieces for the theatre.

Shostakovich's interest in Chekhov was reflected in his plan to make him the source of the second opera in a projected trilogy on Russian heroines (Meyer, 163). For the third he intended to turn to Saltykov-Shchedrin.<sup>41</sup> The magnificent *Katerina Izmailova* (also known as *Ledi Makbet mstenskogo uezda* [1934]) is, of course, the only part of this trilogy to be completed. Shostakovich is said to have later regretted that he had not done as much work on Chekhov as he had wanted. His main interest for the topic of this survey, apart from his notable perception of musical form in Chekhov's stories and plays, lies in his contribution to the opera based on the story 'Skripka Rotshil'da' (Rothschild's Fiddle, 1894). This work had been begun by one of Shostakovich's pupils and friends, Veniamin Fleishman (1913–41), and was completed and orchestrated by Shostakovich after Fleishman had volunteered for service in the war and been killed. The disputed question of how much of the opera belongs to Fleishman and how much to Shostakovich need not occupy us here.<sup>42</sup>

'Skripka Rotshil'da' is set in a little town described as being worse than a village, and the main character is a somewhat bullying coffin-

<sup>41</sup> See Dmitrii Shostakovich, 'Pochemu "Nos"?', *Rabochii i teatr*, 3, 1930, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> For a survey of the various conjectures see Ho and Feofanov, pp. 128–33.

maker called Iakov Matveevich Ivanov who is for some reason nicknamed Bronza. A skilled violinist, he sometimes plays with the local Jewish orchestra at weddings where he sits next to a flautist called Rothschild. His outlook is unrelievedly gloomy, as he sees all life as one long string of losses (*ubytki*). He quarrels with Rothschild, but after his wife Marfa has died and he feels himself dying, Iakov bequeaths his violin to the Jew who takes it up in place of his flute and by his soulful playing makes people weep at every wedding he attends. Chekhov was not in the least sentimental about Jews, although Rayfield suggests the story has a 'harmonious end of almost schmalzy sentimentality'.<sup>43</sup> What seems certain is that his completion of this work by a Jewish composer was undoubtedly a part of Shostakovich's increasing interest in and association with Jews and their suffering.<sup>44</sup>

The work was first given a concert performance in 1960 and a broadcast in 1962. It was first staged at an experimental theatre in Leningrad in 1978 when it was taken off immediately, as Soviet officialdom's anti-Semitism was redoubled after the recent Six-Day War. The instigators, who included Solomon Volkov and Maksim Shostakovich, were summoned before a high official: 'Are you aware you are playing into the enemy's hands? This is a Zionist opera!' (Ho and Feofanov, 319). Since that time a French film has been made of the opera, set in the context of Shostakovich's and Fleishman's lives, and an audio recording was made by the ever enterprising Gennadii Rozhdestvenskii (b. 1931) in 1995.<sup>45</sup> The music is wistfully melancholy like most of Fleishman's writing, and Iakov's gloomy character is well caught; the pathos of his wife's death is all the stronger for the extreme contrast with the frenetic revelry of the weddings where his playing is so in de-

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<sup>43</sup> Donald Rayfield, *Chekhov: The Evolution of his Art* (London, Paul Elek, 1975), p. 137.

<sup>44</sup> Much has been written on this subject. A particularly good article is: Joachim Braun, 'The Double Meaning of Jewish Elements in Dimitri Shostakovich's Music', *The Musical Quarterly*, 71, 1, 1985, pp. 68–80. See also: Timothy J. Jackson, 'Dmitry Shostakovich: The Composer as Jew', in Ho and Feofanov, 597–640.

<sup>45</sup> The best general surveys of Chekhov films, without particular regard to music, are: M. Turovskaia, 'Ob ekranizatsii Chekhova. Predvaritel'nye zametki', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 5, 1989, pp. 25–40, and V. Bozhovich, 'Rentgenoskopiia dushi', *Iskusstvo kino*, 9, 1987, pp. 51–70.

mand. In terms of orchestral sound, *Skripka Rotshil'da* is considerably closer to *Katerina Izmailova* than, for instance, to *Nos*.

Amongst recent settings of Chekhov's works to music, ballets have been popular, a good example being *Aniuta* based on motifs from 'Anna na shei' (Anna Round the Neck, 1895). The music is by Valerii Gavrilin (1939–1999), a composer from the Vologda region best known for his far from simplistic folk-based vocal compositions. In this ballet the music is mostly ironical, some of it apparently influenced by Shostakovich. It is harmonically and rhythmically simple and yet appropriate to the story of Anna, here portrayed as a flighty and unfaithful woman, married to a boring and ambitious civil servant, Modest Alekseevich, who ends up with both his wife and the Anna medal round his neck. The ballet was created for Ekaterina Maksimova, but there are also excellent parts for Anna's drunken father and for Modest, for whom Gavrilin has provided some excellently obsessive music, particularly in the number where he preens himself on receiving the Order of St Anna, second class.

One of the most successful Chekhovian ballets of all is *Dama s sobachkoi* (The Lady with the Little Dog, 1985) by Rodion Shchedrin (b. 1932). Shchedrin is a very considerable composer who has grown in stature during the post-Soviet era, writing successfully in a number of different idioms and genres. This ballet was written for his wife Maia Plisetskaia's 60th birthday, and shows the lighter, more virtuosic side of Shchedrin's music, previously best known from his very popular *Karmen Siuita* (Carmen Suite, 1967). *Dama s sobachkoi* takes the form of a one-act ballet for two dancers. It was given its première at the Bol'shoi in 1985. The universality of this story's significance was underlined by Konstantin Paustovskii who once said, 'Everyone has probably had their "Dama s sobachkoi"'. And if they haven't, they undoubtedly will.'<sup>46</sup> Shchedrin's ballet comprises an extensive *pas de deux* in five parts, against a background of a *tableau-vivant* of the public engaged in various innocuous activities on the promenade at Ialta to the accompaniment of minimalist music that sounds almost like a musical box. In contrast to this stylized background, the scenes of passion between Anna and Gurov are exceptionally realistic, with explicit choreography and sensually expressionist, passionate music somewhat redolent of

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted from Valentina Kholopova, *Put' po tsentru: Kompozitor Rodion Shchedrin* (Moscow, Kompozitor, 2000) (hereafter Kholopova), p. 147.

Richard Strauss (1864–1949).<sup>47</sup> No less relevant to the topic of Chekhov and music is Shchedrin's earlier ballet *Chaika* (1979), an enterprising and innovative work, also written for Plisetskaja, in which he turned Chekhov's four-act comedy into a two-act tragedy comprising twenty-four preludes, three interludes and a postlude, with a notable leitmotiv of seagull cries from the orchestra.<sup>48</sup> Also based on this play, John Neumeier choreographed a piece for the Hamburg Ballet using the music of Shostakovich, Skriabin and Chaikovskii (not to mention Evelyn Glennie) in 2003; it was later performed at the Mariinskii Theatre as part of St. Petersburg's tricentenary celebrations.<sup>49</sup> Finally, it may be mentioned that in the repertoire of the Royal Ballet in London is Kenneth MacMillan's one-act ballet *Winter Dreams* based on *Tri sestry*, using the music of Chaikovskii. MacMillan does not attempt a balletic reworking of the whole play, although the characters are named after Chekhov's, but seeks mainly to capture the work's 'Chekhovian' atmosphere.<sup>50</sup>

Both in his lifetime and in a later age, indeed up to the present, Chekhov inspired many composers, Russian and foreign alike, both by his very musical writing and by the perceived strength of his character and his wisdom. The apparent musical form of some works, especially 'Chernyi monakh' first noted by Shostakovich, has now been thoroughly analysed. There are very many musical references and elements in both his stories and plays, and his friendship with two of the leading composers of his time was mutually beneficial and creatively fruitful. Indeed, without the music in and around Chekhov both he and the music itself would be much the poorer.

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<sup>47</sup> For more detail on this ballet see Kholopova, pp. 147–52.

<sup>48</sup> For a thorough analysis of this ambitious and conceptually complex ballet see Kholopova, pp. 44–49.

<sup>49</sup> For details of the pieces used as well as other features of the production, see: <http://www.hamburgballett.de/d/rep/moewe.htm>

<sup>50</sup> I am grateful to Christina Ezrahi for this information, as well as for that on Neumeier's *Chaika* (see note 46).