

Marius Petipa's last choreography, "The Magic Mirror" and its music by Arseniy Koreshchenko

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"The Magic Mirror" was first performed on 9th February in 1903 at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. This was the last staged work by the great Ballet Master, Marius Petipa. The Ballet was composed of four Acts and seven scenes. It was based on the folklore-poem of Aleksandr Pushkin and the folktales of Grimm brothers.

Petipa and Ivan Vsevolozhsky, who was once the Director of the Imperial Theatres, wrote the script. However, some sources say it was Sergey Volkonsky who actually wrote the script. Volkonsky was a nephew of Vsevolozhsky and became the Director after his uncle had left.

The music was composed by young Arseniy Koreshchenko (1870-1921). The ballet was directed and choreographed by Petipa and the stage design was commissioned to Aleksandr Golovin.

Petipa came to Russia as a dancer in 1847. He became the first Ballet Master in 1870 and was a dominant figure for more than 30 years. He worked at the Imperial Theatres for more than 55 years. Petipa created Three Great Ballets with Tchaikovsky's music, namely Swan Lake, Nutcracker and Sleeping Beauty, but his last ballet was branded as 'a failure'.

Petipa, the old ballet master, retired from the Imperial Theatres.

The reason why the work was branded as 'a failure' is unclear.

There are several different theories.

Golovin was responsible for the stage design and the critics at the time blamed his 'decadant' style.

Some said the music by the young composer Koreshchenko was 'unsuccessful and heavy'. Others noted that Vladimir Telyakovsky, the director of the Imperial Theatres, and Petipa did not get on, so there was a conspiracy by Telyakovsky to force Petipa into a retirement.

Today, Golovin is highly regarded as a Russian Symbolist painter. Maybe his scenography was too revolutionary for its time. Petipa was a classicist and hated Golovin's 'modern' art. At the time, 'Modernism' was regarded as more or less the same as 'Decadant'.

Also, Telyakovsky gave Golovin an important position by inviting him as a residential stage artist of the Imperial Theatres.

Telyakovsky (1861-1924) was more than 40 years younger than Petipa (1818-1909).

It is obvious that this Director of the Imperial Theatres wanted to oust old Petipa and bring something revolutionary to the Theatres.

Some ten years before this, Sergei Diaghilev was kicked out from the Imperial Theatres due to the deterioration of the relationship within the organization and he hated Telyakovsky, but defended Golovin. This was because Golovin was a painter of the World of Art group, Mir Iskusstva, and Diaghilev regarded Golovin as his fellow artist.

How was the music itself? Is the music by Koreshchenko really 'unsuccessful and heavy'?

Today, how many people have actually listened to Koreshchenko's music? Koreshchenko is a composer who was forgotten together with "The Magic Mirror". How can we blame the failure of this ballet on the composer without actually knowing his music?

Three years ago (2019), my friends and I organized a concert in which the score of "The Magic Mirror" was played on a piano. If the time permits, I will let you listen to a part of it. I myself thought it was a beautiful piece of music, following the tradition of the late Russian Romanticism in the nineteenth century. Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninoff were known figures of this tradition.

I think it is important to compare Koreshchenko with Rachmaninoff. Koreshchenko was born in 1870 in Moscow and he was three years older than Sergei Rachmaninoff. Both of them studied under Serghei Taneyev (1858-1915) and Anton Arensky (1861-1906) at the Moscow Conservatory.

Koreshchenko was awarded the Great Gold Medal when he graduated from the Conservatory. This Great Gold Medal was only to be awarded to those whose achievement was considered exceeding the Gold Medal award or those who got the Gold Medal from both the Piano Department and the Composition Department. Until Rachmaninoff received it, it had been only Taneyev and Koreshchenko who were awarded the Great Gold Medal. Also, Koreshchenko's "The Last Day of Belshazzar (Belshazzar's Feast)", which was his graduation work at the Moscow Conservatory, was highly regarded and this was staged in 1892 at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. Another of his operas, "Ice Palace (1900)", was also staged at the Bolshoi Theater and it received a good review. (Rachmaninoff's opera, "Areko", also a graduation work, was staged at the Bolshoi Theatre. Later, his other operas "The Miserly Knight" and "Francesca da Rimini" were staged at the Bolshoi Theatre as well.)

Koreshchenko had a bright future ahead of him and, according to Petipa's diary, it was Aleksandr Glazunov (1865-1936) who recommended Koreshchenko as a composer for "The Magic Mirror".

Glazunov himself is, of course, the composer of a ballet "Raymonda".

Glazunov was the director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He was known for being the conductor when Rachmeninoff's First Symphony was branded as 'a great failure'.

Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the director of the Imperial Theatres, who was also a patron of Petipa, wanted to reform the ballet music at the Imperial Theatres. As a result, the position held by Leon Minkus as an official ballet composer was abolished and instead, more academic composers such as Tchaikovsky and Glazunov created music for the palatial Grand Ballet. Clearly, Koreshchenko was commissioned following this tradition.

Today, the piano score of "The Magic Mirror" is available on the internet and the small details of all scenes were written down in French. Clearly, the creators of the ballet "The Magic Mirror" followed the tradition of Grand Ballet represented by Tchaikovsky.

In "Swan Lake" and "Sleeping Beauty", it was set at the palace and the main characters were the royals. It is noticeable that there are similarities with "Sleeping Beauty".

Richard Taruskin called it Imperial Style. Just as Polish dance was incorporated in "Swan Lake" and "Sleeping Beauty", Cracovienne (in Polish it is called 'Krakowiak') was danced adding a splendid atmosphere in the last Act of "The Magic Mirror".

Its style may be old-fashioned, but I myself find Koreshchenko's music splendid, appealing and very beautiful.

Golovin had great figures like Telyakovsky and Diaghilev firmly on his side.

Petipa, even then, must have had so many followers as well.

But, no one was defending this young composer who came to St. Petersburg from Moscow. Is it possible to say, because no one was on his side, Koreshchenko was blamed for 'a failure' of "The Magic Mirror" and, thus, became a victim?

How was the review of Koreshchenko's opera, "Ice Palace"? There is an article from the Moskovskii Listok newspapers on 9th November in 1900 which reviews "Ice Palace" describing Koreshchenko's music. I quote.

First of all, we'd like to say that Mr. Koreshchenko's music deserves to be fully respected. Mr. Koreshchenko is a well educated musician who knows modern composing techniques

very well, has a brilliant understanding of orchestration and does not like rough and loud style. His style is closest to Tchaikovsky. There is a significant difference between them. That is, not about the style, but about the way these two composers create music, which reflects their own fundamental characteristics of the works. Tchaikovsky is very sincere to his imagination and uses it with great ease to compose, sometimes very simple, but sometimes complicated music and he does so with a perfect command of creativity.

In contrast, Mr. Koreshchenko constantly introduces all sorts of modern tricks into his music and in many cases as if he is deliberately complicating his music pattern. This method of composing music made his work interesting but at the same time it made it difficult to grasp his music instinctively, therefore, for many, it is difficult to understand his music. Still, we'd like to emphasize again that the music of Koreshchenko deserves full respect.

We may be criticized for being biased (trying to be positive) towards Mr. Koreshchenko's music. If his music is of such high qualities, then, does it mean that the libretto, staging and performance are to be blamed as the reason of the failure of his opera? We are not saying that his music is perfect. We are not fond of the fact that, especially, his music has a tendency of being too theoretical and lacking in warmth, sincerity and a variation of tunes. As reflected in his previous works, these characteristics of his music are felt strongly in his opera. In an opera, it is important to experience the feelings and passions of the characters and to expand own creativity and imagination. But at the same time, all individual scenes and episodes must be unified as one story. There are some good and, at times, very beautiful scenes in "Ice Palace". As there are many of these scenes, it is, therefore, possible to say they would constitute good materials for an entire opera (given its extraordinary length). But because these scenes are so scattered and there is so little logic in the way the scenes change, they do not make the proper impression, they just pass unnoticed and are soon forgotten.

(end of quote)

(Russian original text):

Прежде всего скажем, что музыка г. Корещенко, как таковая, заслуживает полного уважения. Г. Корещенко - музыкант глубоко образованный, владеющий современной композиторской техникой, отлично чувствующий оркестр и не любящий грубых, крикливых эффектов. По стилю он ближе всего примыкает к Чайковскому, хотя между обоими авторами есть и существенная разница, но она проявляется не в стиле, а в органическом свойстве творчества обоих композитров. Чайковский писал вполне искренно, не насилуя своей фантазии, где ему хотелось - очень просто, а иногда и очень сложно; г. Корещенко же большую часть как бы нарочно усложняет музыкальный рисунок, вводя в него постоянно

все современные ухищрения. Эта сложность работы делает его сочинения для музыканта безусловно интересными, но она затрудняет их понимание в виду того, что уловить их музыку непосредственным чувством часто нельзя. И все таки мы повторяем, что музыка г. Корещенко заслуживает уважения. Нас могут обвинит в пристрастном (в хорошую сторону) отношения к г. Корещенко, так как, раз его музыка имеет положительные качества, то в малом успех его оперы приходится винить либретто, постановку и исполнение. Нет, мы не сторонники направления таланта г. Корещенко, нам не симпатичны именно излишняя рассудочность его музыки, малая теплота её и искренность, отсутствие в ней размаха. Эти свойства его таланта сказались и в его прежних сочинениях, но особенно сильно они дают себя знать в опере, где необходимо пережить чувства и страсти действующих лиц, и где необходимо в широком полет творческой фантазии объединит все отдельные моменты и эпизоды.

Хороших, под-час весьма красивых отдельных мест в “Ледяном дом” не мало, так много даже, что они составили-бы материал для целой оперы (принимая во внимание непомерную длину её), но эти места так разрозненны, в их смене так мало высшей логики, что они не производят должного впечатления, проходят малозаметно и скоро забываются.

The newspaper article did criticize Koreshchenko on some small aspects, but it shows that Korshchevo's music was highly regarded.

Let's go back to “The Magic Mirror”.

Regarding the stage art and the costumes, Petipa and Telyakovsky had very different views.

The costumes were designed by Mrs.Tekyakovsky. Of course, Mr.Telyakovsky, who is her husband as well as the director, wouldn't have criticized her. However, it wouldn't be surprising if Petipa, Diaghilev and Alexandr Benois criticized the costumes by Mrs.Telyakovsky as they hated the director himself. (But I won't focus on this issue any further.)

Petipa hated Golovin. While Diaghilev and Benois hated Telyakovsky and his wife, all of them defended Golovin's stage art. So, Golovin was defended by two conflicting sides, namely Telyakovsky on one side and Diaghilev and Benois on the other side.

Sadly, it was Korshchenko whom no one defended.

The review by the Peterburgskaya Gazeta (newspapers) on 10th Feburary in 1903 was

favorable to Petipa but was very critical of the stage art of "The Magic Mirror".

Probably, the Gazeta itself was taking the side of Petipa.

As for the music, the reviews describe it like this.

What is undesirable for the Ballet Master is, firstly, the poorly-composed, dull and characterless music. There is little to say about the melody. Mr.Koreshchenko's music totally lacks it. The audience showed how they felt about his music and quite rightly so. When Mr.Koreshchenko came out with the ballet dancers at the end of the performance, the audience were shushing him.

(end of quote.)

(Russian original text):

Неблагоприятные для балетмейстера условия заключаются во-первых в неважной музыке, лишенной всякого колорита и характера. О мелодии и помышлять нечего. В музыке г-на Корещенко нет и намеков на мелодии. Публика по достоинству оценила музыку молодого композитора. Когда после конца спектакля г-н Корещенко вышел с исполнителями балета, то он был встречен дружным шиканьем.

There is no favorable review of the music at all in newspapers reviews and both diaries by Petipa and Telyakovsky. It is a mystery why Korshchenko's music suffered such bad criticism.

I think the fact that Koreshchenko graduated from the Moscow Conservatory is a crucial factor here.

Let's look at the comparison I made earlier regarding Koreshchenko and Rachmaninoff.

Quite often, people from St.Petersburg were not friendly towards the composers from Moscow. As I mentioned earlier, when the premiere of Rachmaninoff's First Symphony in 1897 ended as 'a great failure', it was in St.Petersburg. There are many different theories for why this 'great failure' happened. For example, it was said the conductor Glazunov was drunk on the stage. Another theory is that the First Symphony itself was too ahead of its time. The real reasoning still remains unclear. But I'd like to point out another theory, which was that people in St.Petersburg were indifferent to the premier of Rachmeninoff's First Symphony as he was from the Moscow Conservatory.

This incident bears certain similarities to Koreshchenko's experience; his two operas "The Last Day of Belshazzar (Belshazzar's Feast)" and "Ice Palace" gained quite good reviews at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, while "The Magic Mirror" was Koreshchenko's first ballet music staged in St.Petersburg.

When the Ballet Russes staged "The Egyptian Night", choreographed by Michel Fokine, in Paris in 1909, Diaghilev decided not to use Arensky's music and instead used the music by Mikhail Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov and Mussorgsky.

Arensky taught Rachmaninoff and Koreshchenko at the Moscow Conservatory and his music was hated by Diaghilev. But Diaghilev did not dislike Glazunov who was of the late Russian Romanticism just like Tchaikovsky and Koreshchenko. Glazunov taught at the St.Petersburg Conservatory and later became the director there. Diaghilev also did not reject the music by The Mighty Five who were based in St. Petersburg.

I'd like to add another fact. Today, "The Egyptian Night" is performed with the original music by Arensky at the Mariinsky Theatre.

Petipa was a director and choreographer; Golovin was defended by both Diaghilev and Telyakovsky. In contrast, Koreshchenko had no one defending him. Diaghilev may have shown some support, but still, it seems as if Koreshchenko was totally blamed for the failure of the ballet.

But can the music be the sole reason for-a failure of one ballet production?

"Don Quijote" is one of the most popular ballet productions even today and Minks wrote its music. I don't think Koreshchenko's work is any worse than that of Minks.

Roland John Wiley implies the theory that it was an indirect conspiracy by Telyakovsky and he has his own theory about the reason why "The Magic Mirror" failed. I quote,

'The ballet's failure was attributed to the stylistic disjunction between Petipa's choreography and the advanced impressionistic idiom of Alexandre Golovin's paintings and costumes. In a broader perspective, the new ballet represented a clash of traditional and modern which was fast developing in the first decade of the twentieth century, to which Petipa fell victim.'

Wiley also says, I quote again,

' The Magic Mirror was a nineteenth-century ballet resisting attack of the twentieth.'

(end of quote.)

It is true that Petipa's ballet was a little bit old-fashioned by the beginning of the twentieth century and new talents like Michel Fokine and Aleksandr Gorsky started gaining popularity. To let those new comers flourish, it was probably necessary to reduce the influence of Petipa.

However, if you look at which ballet repertoire was staged and how often it was performed at the Mariinsky Theatre and the Bolshoi Theatre in the 1900s, the most staged ones included "The Humpbacked Horse", "Swan Lake", "Sleeping Beauty" and "Don Quixote". It is true that Gorsky, who was promoted by Telyakovsky, rearranged those ballet works and Golovin and Konstantin Korovin were responsible for stage art.

However, it should be noted that Petipa's ballet was still very popular.

I'd like to add another fact. In February 1903, there was a luxurious costume ball held at the Winter Palace in St.Petersburg. The ball was to commemorate the 290th anniversary of the Romanov Dynasty. Importantly, this happened only two days after the premier of "The Magic Mirror". Telyakovsky's diary tells us that he was extremely busy organizing this ball and it must have made things awkward for the preparation of the premier of "The Magic Mirror". "The Magic Mirror" was performed to celebrate Petipa's fifty-five years' service at the Imperial Theatre. But the grand ball was held so close to his own important occasion. In addition, Petipa's "Swan Lake" and "La Bayadere" were performed at the ball. This was such an important occasion. It clearly shows that Petipa's authority was still very strong.

I'd like to point out that "The Magic Mirror", which was branded as 'a failure' in St.Petersburg was performed at least 29 times at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow between the 1904/05 season and the 1909/10 season, although the choreography and music were revised. Richard Drigo's music was added.

There are two things I'd like to point out today. One is that it is not right to blame Koreshchenko's music as a sole reason for a failure of the "The Magic Mirror".

The other is that we should reinstate Koreshchenko's music. It is beautiful to listen to and despite that very few people actually listened to his music it has been branded as 'unsuccessful (and) heavy music'.

Now I'll let you listen to a part of the piano score of "The Magic Mirror". It was originally written for an orchestra, but was probably rearranged as a piano score used for rehearsal

of the ballet. I am very much interested to know what you think of Koreshchenko's music.

Thank you for your attention.