

Lorin Maazel

Lucky Everybody: A Stunning World Premiere!

(A conversation with Rodion Shchedrin)

Commissioning a major work, even from a great composer, can be a risky venture. (Maybe the composer's creative powers are failing, maybe the muse won't gird him/her into creative action, maybe under time stress we'll get potboiler filler in place of inspired music.)

We were lucky. Rodion Shchedrin gave the New York Philharmonic a masterpiece that will enrich the repertoire of classical music as few works have in recent years.

Did anyone notice? For starters, the patrons of the Philharmonic on the evening of the premiere at Avery Fisher Hall on December 19, and at the two successive performances accorded the composer a standing ovation.

A contemporary work evaluated for the masterpiece it is at first hearing--and not a cough during its 85 minutes of playing time?! Orchestra and chorus also proffered the composer their maximum approbation: a floor-pounding that challenged the engineering of the hall to withstand.

Conductor (I was fortunate to be he) and soloists, as one, applauded the composer, Rodion Shchedrin.

The work is entitled "The Enchanted Wanderer". It is a chamber opera based on a long short story of Nikolai Leskov. The stuff of theater is there in abundance: treachery, passionate physical love, spiritual love, guilt, murder, redemption. There is a drinking bout, enslavement and torture at the hands of the Tartars, a ghost of a flogged-to-death monk, a despotic Prince, a ravishing gypsy girl. Shchedrin weaves all these elements into a beguiling sound fabric, drawing into it the very threads of the listener's emotions. We giggle at the teetering hero who has had one too many vodkas (a bow drawn on a saw communicates to perfection the singing of approaching delirium tremens), we thrill to the gypsy's sensual song (the audience could not resist cheering at its conclusion). There was many a damp eye as the theme of melancholy, a Leitmotiv of infinite sadness, wove its spell.

In Moscow recently (December 10-12), on the occasion of Shchedrin's seventieth birthday, a three-day festival of his music was given.

President Putin was in attendance as were major musical lights from about the world, both as performers and listeners.

His piano concerti, symphonies and incidental music were performed.

It is encouraging to see composers who write music that is music, and not simply a concatenation of sounds that appeal to the eye of fellow note-designers, recognized and lauded.

True music has shelf life. The faddists fade in time. How many I have seen, bloated with pretentious "I-write-the-music-of-the-future" rhetoric, simply vanish, despite the frantic and strident efforts of their equally sterile supporters to keep them with us.

It's good to live long enough to see it happen.

Rodion agreed to be interviewed.

L.M.

You were a concert pianist like Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninoff.
Did your experience as performer aid or hinder you as a composer?

R.S.

Experience as a performer is valuable for a composer. When I come across a performer for the first time, I can tell right away whether or not he composes music. The difference is in the logic of his thought and the quickness with which he orients himself in the thickets of unfamiliar music.

Performing music gives one a clearer sense of music as an art in time. It increases the value of each and every small contrast and nuance, every tiny shift in tempo. It opens wider the curtain that conceals the secrets of subjugating the audience's attention to the composer's will. The composer moves closer to the "breathing of the hall" and away from intellectual exercise and abstract calculation.

The only minus is that you have to work at playing an instrument, and to work harder as the years go by. And that swallows up time...

L.M.

There are only 12 notes. Is it not daunting to write for the human voice within the limits of the sounds we are given to work with?

R.S.

I am limited, of course, by the range and character of the chosen type of voice, be it a lyric coloratura soprano or a basso profundo. But twelve notes seem perfectly adequate.

L.M.

How important to you are a dramatic situation and the actual words of a text when composing an opera?

R.S.

I think for opera the temperature of the interaction must be a bit higher than normal, say 39.7° C (103° F), because an acute dramatic situation is very desirable and appropriate for heating up the composer's imagination. Just as important for me is the quality of the literary text-be it dialogue, aria or brief reply. It is always incalculably helpful to have a strong text.

L.M.

Why did you choose the Leskov story?

R.S.

Leskov is one of my favorite Russian writers. He is less known outside of Russian than his contemporaries Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev because of the difficulties of translating his vivid and extremely individualized language. Besides which, he is probably more a Russian writer than an international one in every respect-the language, plot and themes, the characters, the hopelessly dramatic and paradoxical situations, and the tragic denouement of his stories.

Journalists often ask about the Russian soul and its mysteries. If the "Russian soul" exists at all, no one could answer the profound questions about it better than Leskov.

The novella "The Enchanted Wanderer" has long attracted me with the power and three-dimensionality of the characters, the multicolored and dramatic plot, and the opportunity to tap into strata of ancient Russian musical culture, untouched even in classical music. And I am so happy that I was able to realize my dream at the very highest level possible: Lorin Maazel, the New York Philharmonic, Avery Fisher Hall...

L.M.

You write very quickly. Do you revise very much of what you have written?

R.S.

As a rule, almost never.

I can only remember two times. Once, when at the suggestion of my wife, Maya Plisetskaya [the celebrated prima ballerina of the Bolshoi and now a famed choreographer for whom Shchedrin has written a number of ballets], I changed the ending of "Concerto cantabile" from a quiet to a loud one, writing fifteen more measures for the coda. And once, out of the same consideration, namely the loudness of the ending, I added two final measures to "Two Tangos by Albeniz."

Usually, before I sit down with the score, I need a certain amount of time for the concept to mature within me without having a desk, or manuscript paper or a piano before me. It's only when I feel I have captured the main idea that suits my current concept and when I have determined the "technical route" to follow to reach it, only then do I feel a level of readiness to go to my desk and select the format of the notation paper. Then the work goes quickly....

I think many of my colleagues, you included, behave in the same way.

L.M.

I caught you with a tear in your eye during the dress rehearsal!

Do you promise to always care about the music you write so that we the listeners and performers can also be moved by it, as we were during the performances of your opera "The Enchanted Wanderer"?

R.S.

You noticed my tears at the dress rehearsal, because I was in the orchestra seats not far from you. But I will not hide the fact that the three subsequent public performances did not leave me unmoved. I even thought, perhaps naively, "Surely there must be someone else in the audience feeling the same emotions in unison with me."

I don't like the term "contemporary music." It is a kind of indulgence. As if to say, "Well, sorry, but you're going to be listening to a mess. This is contemporary music and you aren't educated enough to appreciate it yet."

There is music of today, which may have been written yesterday or today. There is a date on every composition. It is just a marker, an orientation point. It is not an a priori rehabilitation of, or an excuse for, artificiality, inexpressiveness, lack of spirituality or simply dreary composing. Music written today must, as before, move the listeners, grab them, take them away, and settle into their hearts and souls. No explanations by mentors and false prophets

will change the essence of the matter. There is music and there is "not-music." There is inspiration and there is forced writing. There is innate musicality and there is painstaking, studied effect. There is intuition and there is the desire to be in step with musical fashion and the desire to please its trendsetters.

Human emotions-and human ears-are basically the same as they were one or two hundred years ago. Is that something to regret?