

2003

Review of A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar, by Frances Maes.

James H. Krukones

John Carroll University, jkrukones@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub>



Part of the [European History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Krukones, James H., "Review of A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar, by Frances Maes." (2003). *History*. 35.
<http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub/35>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

Francis Maes. *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*. Translated by Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xiv, 428 pp. \$45.00.

As artistic director of the Flanders Festival, Francis Maes is responsible for organizing one of the largest cultural gatherings in the world today. In this, his second book, he has undertaken the equally daunting task of providing a one-volume account of Russian music. The attempt is mostly successful, and in the process the author challenges many of the myths that have attached themselves to the subject over the years. Above all, Maes is intent on dispelling the notion that the story of Russian music is to be understood chiefly as a struggle between, on the one hand, artists seeking to express the national character coupled with a liberal political agenda and, on the other, a repressive dictatorship (whether tsarist or Soviet) concerned exclusively with its self-preservation. The original version of this view can be traced to Vladimir Stasov, a friend and confidant of some of the most prominent nineteenth-century Russian composers, whose interpretation was uncritically embraced by historians of music in both the West and the Soviet Union. By contrast, Maes sides with revisionist scholars, who explain Russia's musical development within a multifaceted context, including not only politics but also musical/aesthetic concerns, social conditions, and personal rivalries. This approach – embodied in the works of Richard Taruskin, Malcolm Brown, and Caryl Emerson – discards Stasov in favor of an unprejudiced look at the sources. The resulting account has far more nuance and depth than the earlier cliché, which yoked musical composition to populist ideology.

A traditional chronology underlies the work, but Maes conceives each of his fourteen chapters in thematic terms; at times this results in the repetition of information. As the author points out, the origins of art music in Russia go back to the latter part of the seventeenth century. Most of the book, however, remains true to its subtitle, covering the 150 years from Mikhail Glinka (the creator of *Kamarinskaya*) to Dmitrii Shostakovich (whose Thirteenth Symphony bears the programmatic title *Babi Yar*). Glinka, in fact, was the first Russian composer to attract Western attention. Moreover, even though folk songs had begun to exert a major influence on Russian composition by that time, Glinka – an eclectic who borrowed Western styles – never intended to make them the basis of a new form of Russian art music. Folk song and its place in the overall scheme of Russian music remained a contentious subject among critics and composers, including even the "Mighty Five" (*kuchka*). Another matter of concern – both to nineteenth-century Russian composers and to some of their twentieth-century counterparts – was opera, which rates a chapter of its own. Furthermore, it is to Maes's credit that he describes the important contributions of individuals now overlooked if not forgotten, such as Alexander Dargomyzhskii, Alexander Serov, and Cesar Cui. *Boris Godunov* and *Eugene Onegin* get their due, but so do less famous works such as Musorgskii's *Sorochintsy Fair* and Chaikovskii's *Vakula the Smith*. As for Chaikovskii himself, Maes rejects the neurotic portrait of the composer and the interpretation of his works as so many snapshots of his psyche; he offers instead the contemporary view, articulated by Alexander Poznansky, that Chaikovskii was a happy and successful creative artist whose lyric spontaneity effectively hid a highly disciplined sense of musical structure. Rimskii-Korsakov pursued a path increasingly independent of the *kuchka*, opting for formal musical training of the kind Anton Rubinstein sought to establish in Russia through the founding of a conservatory. Rimskii, however, could never quite make the leap to musical modernism. That required a break with the past in which important roles fell to personalities such as Scriabin and Stravinskii, who emerged during Russia's Silver Age. Of course, the advent of Soviet

power in 1917 represented the most dramatic change of all, bringing with it unprecedented bureaucratization as well as ideological warfare between new musical organizations. All of that ended with the creation of the Union of Soviet Composers in 1932, signaling the arrival of Stalinist regimentation. The last two chapters in the book deal with the titans of twentieth-century Russian music, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. The author's treatment of the former dwells on his career-motivated decision to return to his homeland in the 1930s. As for Shostakovich, Maes notes how the assessment of his output has been complicated by the political spins imposed on his work by cultural Cold Warriors, especially since the appearance of his alleged memoir *Testimony* in 1979.

Maes' work is both admirable and useful, deftly treating an important and unwieldy subject in fewer than 400 pages. Those lacking expertise in Russian music, and perhaps readers of *Russian History* in particular, will find that his attempts at contextualizing this creative activity render it more accessible and compelling. His musical language is generally non-technical, and he shuns the quoting of musical passages altogether. At the same time, Maes makes connections with Western musical developments, breaking down the wall that has too often made an "other" of Russia. (Similarly, the separate chapter on Russia's post-1917 "musical emigrants" sheds light on a little explored topic.) The author uses mostly English-language sources; Russian works make no appearance in his bibliography, except as quoted in translation from secondary sources. Maes may rely too heavily on Taruskin's scholarship, especially for the nineteenth century, but at least he acknowledges this in his preface, not to mention endnotes. The well-rendered translation is enhanced by twenty-six pages of black-and-white photographs. In sum, this is a fresh and engaging account of a major chapter in Russia's cultural history.

James H. Krukones

John Carroll University