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## Too Russian for British Ears: *La Vita per lo Czar* at Covent Garden, 1887

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At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain was caught up in a wave of veritable Russomania.<sup>1</sup> There were exhibitions of Russian art; numerous first translations of Russian novels; successful premieres of music by Russian composers; and, in 1911, Russian fever hit the stage when Sergei Diaghilev brought his famous *Saisons Russes* to London for the first time. British ballet dancers even started changing their names to Russian ones: Lillian Alicia Marks became Alicia Markova; Sydney Healy-Kay became Anton Dolin. As argued first and foremost by Richard Taruskin, the legacy of Diaghilev has lingered ever since, leading Russian music to be marketed, analysed and enjoyed in Britain on the basis of its supposed unique Russian qualities.<sup>2</sup> And yet, there was a time when being Russian was not so attractive to British audiences. The first operas by Russian composers to be staged in Britain – Anton Rubinstein’s *Demon* and Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* in 1881 and 1887 – were, in fact, Italianised to become *Il Demonio* and *La Vita per lo Czar* (see Appendix). While both met with enthusiastic audiences on their first nights, their runs were short; neither opera entered the repertoire. And rather than expressing intrigue into an exotic Other, critics commonly reasoned that these operas were somehow ‘too Russian’ for British ears.<sup>3</sup>

The past few decades have seen explorations of the role of the arts in nation-building in the nineteenth century become widespread.<sup>4</sup> This has been followed more recently by transnational investigations into what one nation’s responses to another might say about the hosts: nation-building, after all, emerges not only by constructing one’s own desired traits, but also by delimitating others’.<sup>5</sup> So far, the field of Russo-British cultural relations has been dominated by literary and historical studies. As these have shown, British interest in Russian culture first developed in the face of conflict; during the Crimean War the British began to consume Russian literature in the hope of learning more about the enemy. Tensions

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<sup>1</sup> See John Slatter, ‘Bears in the Lion’s Den: The Figure of the Russian Revolutionary Emigrant in English Fiction, 1880-1914’, *Slavonic and Eastern European Review*, Vol.77 No.1 (1999), 37. Donald Davie argues that ‘the awakening of the Anglo-Saxon people to Russian literature’ occurred ‘between 1885 and 1920’ (“Mr Tolstoy, I Presume?” The Russian Novel through Victorian Spectacles’, in Donald Davie (ed.), *Slavic Excursions: Essays on Russian and Polish Literature* (Manchester, 1990), 276) and *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* dates the ‘awakening’ of Britain to Russian literature’ to 1880, Peter France (ed.) (Oxford, 2000), 582.

<sup>2</sup> Since first discussing this in his seminal *Defining Russia Musically*, (Princeton, 1997), xi-xviii, Taruskin has coined the term ‘Diaghilevshchina’ to describe this phenomenon of marketing Russia as exotic or barbaric to the West. See his *Stravinsky and the Russian traditions: A Biography of works through Mavra* (Oxford, 1996), 1016, and ‘Non-Nationalists and Other Nationalists’, *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, Vol.35, No.2 (2011), 143-4.

<sup>3</sup> Though ‘England/English’ was more generally used in criticism of this time, I will use Britain/British because the chapter includes performances in Scotland and Wales.

<sup>4</sup> Including many in relation to music in Russia (Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven and London, 2007) and Merion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance 1840-1940: Constructing a National Music* (Manchester, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Of music see, for instance, Gundula Kreuzer, *Verdi and the Germans: From Unification to the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2010).

continued, as did the dissemination of Russian literature in Britain, into the 1880s as the two countries came into close proximity amidst colonial expansion in Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> Little has been said of the British reception of Russian opera, particularly performances which predated the 1890s boom in interest in all-things-Russian.<sup>7</sup> And yet, it is here that the concept of delimitation in the process of nation-building becomes most pointedly apparent. In the 1880s, British music critics were becoming increasingly anxious about London's opera scene: foreign performers and repertoire dominated the theatres, and British composers seemed yet to cultivate a distinct national voice. Not only would the appearance of *A Life for the Tsar* remind critics of the continuing cosmopolitanism of London's music scene, but they also demonstrated that a country, deemed politically and culturally inferior, was in possession of a thriving musical tradition. Thus, as well as uncovering the details of a little-known early encounter with Russian opera in Britain, in this article, I explore how British concerns over the state of their own national music, in combination with Russo-British political tensions, impacted the reception of *A Life for the Tsar*. In so doing, I offer explanations as to why the opera reached the stage; why its success was so short-lived; and what, if not exoticism, drew directors and audiences (albeit briefly) to the performances.

### An Opera for the Jubilee

*A Life for the Tsar* was first performed in Britain on 12 July 1887 during a season of the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden. An opera known as the cornerstone of the Russian opera repertoire, by a composer considered the father of Russian music, may seem a strange choice, considering that this was the summer of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, and that Russo-British relations were strained. The only other Russian opera to appear at Covent Garden had been Rubinstein's *Demon*, conducted by the composer himself, then a world-renowned celebrity pianist. Though *Demon* played to a full and enthusiastic house on its first night, without Rubinstein, interest dwindled and the opera was dropped after four performances, never to be seen on London's main opera stage again. There were no celebrities to justify a production of *A Life for the Tsar*, however. The opera reached London through the contacts of Covent Garden's new manager, Antonio Lago (1829-1902). Since the 1870s, Lago had spent the summer seasons in London and the winters working as an impresario in St Petersburg, where the wealthy opera industry offered lucrative financial rewards to visiting musicians.<sup>8</sup> The familiarity with the Russian repertoire which these trips brought enabled Lago to also preside over the next Russian opera premiere in Britain, *Yevgeny Onegin*, in 1892. *A Life for the Tsar*'s conductor Enrico Bevignani, who had conducted *Demon* at Covent Garden in 1881, had experience in Russia too, having worked at the

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<sup>6</sup> See Philip Bullock and Rebecca Beasley, *Russia in Britain, 1880-1940: From Melodrama to Modernism* (Oxford, 2013), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Ross Bullock's *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-century England* (Farnham, 2009) and Gareth James Thomas' *The Impact of Russian Music in England 1893-1929* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 2005) both begin from the 1890s. Anthony Cross has also written on the reception of Russian music in Britain in the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> centuries: 'The Early British Acquaintance with Russian Popular Song and Music', 148-162, 'The 18th-Century Russian Theatre through British Eyes', 29-50 both in *Anglo-Russica: Aspects of Cultural Relations between Great Britain and Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century* (Oxford, 1993) and 'A Royal Blue-Stocking: Catherine's Early Reputation in England as an Authoress', in R. Auty et al (eds), *Gorski Vijenats: A Garland of Essays offered to Professor Elizabeth Mary Hill* (Cambridge, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> Jules Riviere, *My Musical Life and Recollections* (London, 1893), 123-5.

Mariinsky in St Petersburg and the Bolshoi in Moscow from 1874-81, where he had often conducted *Demon*. Although many critics would declare that *A Life for the Tsar* was representative of an alien musical tradition, therefore, the very circumstances of its London appearance demonstrate that the two countries enjoyed a host of cultural interconnections.

By 1887, *A Life for the Tsar* was relatively well known in Britain, both by reputation and through extracts played in concert halls. Information about the opera had been conveyed to Britain soon after its Russian premiere in the form of travel reports from British visitors. Elizabeth Rigby's *Letters from the Shores of the Baltic in 1839* and Henry Sutherland Edwards' *The Russians at Home* (1859), for instance, both made reference to the opera.<sup>9</sup> In 1860, orchestral extracts and arias from *A Life* began to appear in London concert halls following their introduction at St James Hall under Prince Yuri Golitsin.<sup>10</sup> As *A Life for the Tsar* began to spread to theatres outside of Russia in the 1860s and '70s, further attention was drawn to the opera. The non-Russian premiere in Prague in 1867 was barely mentioned in the British press, but stagings in Milan (1874), Hannover (1878) and Nice (1879) all generated considerable interest. The opera's reputation was such that Francis Hueffer, the leading music critic for *The Times*, could report in 1887 that '*La Vita per lo Czar* is one of those operas about which every one [*sic*] has heard a great deal and which very few people outside Russia have heard'.<sup>11</sup>

However, it was not enough that Lago or the public had some knowledge of the opera to make it a success. In the Jubilee year, it was imperative that an institution bearing a royal title, such as the Royal Italian Opera, gave performances that showed both the British public and the numerous international visitors attending the celebrations that London's opera industry was thriving. 'Progress' was the catchword of 1887; newspapers and commemorative books brimmed with glowing reports of national developments made in the past fifty years.<sup>12</sup> The unprecedentedly grand and public Jubilee celebrations, however, betrayed anxieties over the need to revive public faith in an increasingly impotent monarchy and an Empire in financial crisis. Since Prince Albert's death in 1861, Queen Victoria had withdrawn from public life and refused to take an active part in government.<sup>13</sup> The Empire, furthermore, had been weakened by recent events, such as the first Boer War of 1880-1 and the on-going Great Depression (1873-96). Britain's economic strength was threatened by the growing industrial power of Germany since its unification in 1871, and of America, which was a further point of concern due to worrying levels of British emigration there.

Just as the grandeur of the Jubilee celebrations asserted Britain's power when it was waning, opera impresarios sought to reinstate the strength of the Italian Opera in a time of crisis. Before Albert's death, Victoria had been a regular attendee of opera, leading large numbers of wealthy patrons to follow her example. In her absence, and with the fading

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<sup>9</sup> Edwards' writings on Russia were first printed in *National Magazine*, January, 1859, then as a book in 1861. Apparently, it was not on at the theatre so he saw Verstovsky's *Askold's Tomb* instead. Henry Sutherland-Edwards, *The Russians at Home* (London, 1861), 190-1.

<sup>10</sup> These first concerts included the Trio, Mazurka, Overture, Polonaise and Finale. The Polonaise and Chorus from Act II had become a particularly popular concert piece across the British Isles by 1887, and was published in numerous collections and arrangements.

<sup>11</sup> Hueffer, *The Times*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>12</sup> This included musical literature. In that year, for instance, Hueffer's *Half a Century of Music in England, 1837-87* was published.

<sup>13</sup> See Thomas Richards, 'The Image of Queen Victoria in the Year of Jubilee', *Victorian Studies*, 31 (1987) and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds). *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1984).

political and economic strength of the aristocracy, London's opera industry had fallen into decline. Therefore, "in the year of Her Most Gracious Majesty's jubilee", declared one theatre director, Augustus Harris, it was imperative "to revive the past glories of Italian Opera".<sup>14</sup> Italian Opera was produced on a grander scale than ever before. Five different Royal Italian Opera seasons ran at three different theatres: Covent Garden, Drury Lane and Her Majesty's. Reflecting the Jubilee rhetoric of progress, one critic announced that it was 'one of the longest and most extraordinary opera seasons in living memory'.<sup>15</sup> *A Life for the Tsar* was given an extravagant production with the best singers of the day to ensure a fashionable turnout and to cultivate the image of a prosperous industry. Though there were only two performances, the opera, advertisements and critics' reports inform us, was 'handsomely costumed and beautifully mounted'<sup>16</sup> with new specially created sets and costumes based on designs from St Petersburg. One of the leading sopranos of the day, Emma Albani, was engaged in the principal soprano role of Antonida. Though Albani's old-fashioned, Italianate, florid style of singing received some complaints (Hueffer remarked that she 'yielded to her besetting sin of giving to a high B flat, in reality a semiquaver, the value of at least a minim'<sup>17</sup> during her opening Cavatina), this would have further awakened feelings of a revival of Italian Opera's golden years. It is clear that her presence was one of the main attractions; the second performance was even advertised as her benefit performance, despite her minimal role in the opera

Lago also ensured that his premiere drew crowds by fixing a celebrity royal in the audience. Fittingly, his choice was the Duchess of Edinburgh, the daughter of Tsar Alexander II who had married Queen Victoria's second son, Alfred, in 1874. Though Britain and Russia were at peace, recent events had made this somewhat tenuous. Just two years before, war had almost broken out when Russia made movements into Afghan lands towards the village of Panjdeh, drawing treacherously close to British territory in India. Sat on prominent display in the royal box with the Russian ambassador, the Russian Duchess of Edinburgh thus not only helped attract audiences hoping to rub shoulders with a royal celebrity, but also reinforced the Jubilee rhetoric of national achievement by reminding the public of past friendship and present peace with one of Britain's greatest rivals.

In a further attempt to consolidate this Russian national opera with a potentially hostile British audience, the patriotic language of *A Life for the Tsar's* libretto was greatly watered down. The numerous references made by the chorus in the first act to dying for the Tsar, for instance, were replaced with references to dying for the nation, evoking a more suitable brand of patriotism:

1836

I do not fear death!  
I'll die for the Tsar, for Rus'!  
Peace in the damp earth,  
Honour in my native land,

1887 translation

Those die happy deaths,  
Who for their nation fight!  
'Tis only on our native soil  
Peace and honour can be found;

<sup>14</sup> Harris's announcement in *The Times* quoted in *The Musical World*, 19 March 1887.

<sup>15</sup> *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 23 July 1887.

<sup>16</sup> *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 16 July 1887.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 17 July 1887.

Glory be to me in Holy Rus'!

For it, our blood we all would shed.<sup>18</sup>

Where 'peace' and 'soil' in the original refer to a martyr lying in a grave, in the English translation, this is altered to happiness *on* (not *in*) one's native soil. Dying for the Tsar and 'Holy Rus'' is replaced with fighting for the 'nation' and 'native' land.

The deifying imagery often used to describe the Tsar in the opera was also diluted. Continuing in the first Act, a passage comparing the Tsar to the sun was replaced with indications of his ability to bring political harmony:

Who's as bright as the sun?

Who's as fiery as the sun?

Mikhail Fyodorovich!

[...]

'The Lord is granting us a Tsar [...]

God has placed him on the throne,

He will be Tsar!

In whom can our country find hope?

On whom can we safely rely?

"Prince Michael"!

[...]

The elected, unconquered Czar [...]

He is the elect one, sent to us by Heaven;

To him let us swear obedience and love!

In the translation, such references to the people's 'election' of the Tsar frequently replace allusions to his dynastic rights, creating a rather less autocratic Tsar than in the original.

The greatest change, however, was the removal of the final Act: the coronation scene. The opera ended instead with Susanin lying murdered on the stage with a backdrop depicting the Kremlin and the 'Slavs'ya' chorus in praise of the Tsar being sung from behind the scenes. According to the programme book, this disclosed 'the vision beheld, with the eye of faith, by the dying patriot'. By ending with Susanin's death, the plot assumed the shape of a more traditional tragic opera. This shift in focus away from the Tsar and onto Susanin was also more palatable for a season celebrating the Queen's Jubilee. For the second and final performance, and the last night of the season, a more extravagant finale was added, in which a hero alternative to the Tsar or to Susanin was presented and the praises of a different monarch sung. As was tradition, the final performance of the season concluded with a rendition of 'God Save the Queen' by the whole cast. Covent Garden's matriarch, Albani, took to the stage, now in evening dress, to sing the verses and take the final bow.<sup>19</sup> This was not an entertainment designed to embrace the Russian repertoire, but to promote faith in the Royal Italian Opera at a time of doubt both for royalty and Italian Opera.

### *A Life for the Tsar, Nationalness and the English Musical Renaissance*

Glinka's nationality, therefore, was neither a selling point nor a motivation for either production, but a potential barrier that required delicate treatment by the director. The reviews show further that the concept of experiencing the music of a supposedly distant culture was not an attraction in the realm of serious opera. From the late 1870s, a new generation of influential critics, including Herman Klein, Joseph Bennett and Francis

<sup>18</sup> The English translation was given in the programme book alongside the Italian. *La Vita per lo Czar* (London, 1887). The Italian version was by Alexandra Gortschakova and 'C.Ferrari', and had been used for the Milan premiere in 1874. The English translation was by Henry Hersee. Northcott Collection, British Library.

<sup>19</sup> Clara Gye recalled the change of dress and numerous bouquets awarded to Albani after the performance in her diary on 16 July 1887 (ROH Archive). Many reviews commented that, unusually for an opera, especially such a long one as *A Life for the Tsar*, most of the audience stayed until the very end in order to see this finale.

Hueffer, emerged and fostered a new, professionalised, in-depth approach to music criticism. Some of these leading critics, the self-proclaimed 'watchmen of music',<sup>20</sup> proclaimed that the 1880s were a time of 'English Musical Renaissance'. Their goal was the reinvigoration of national musical life, fighting the indictment that Britain was a 'Land ohne Musik', through the support of native composers and the improvement of musical institutions, including opera.<sup>21</sup> Many argued that, like concert halls, the opera house should become a place of modest, hallowed appreciation of composers, rather than a social event or a platform for singers, and, even more importantly, a venue exhibiting 'a splendidly like-minded society without serious rifts of class or political interest'.<sup>22</sup> What went on at the opera house, therefore, became a matter of national import.

The reputation of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* as a national figurehead opera was well established in Britain by 1887. From the earliest international reports, it had been suggested that the opera's national significance and content rendered it unperformable abroad. A letter to the French journal *La France Musicale* from the French composer Adolphe Adam, translated and printed in the *Athenaeum* in 1840, read:

As a work of general interest, [*A Life for the Tsar*] must be pronounced a failure. It is written entirely in the style of the Russian national airs, which are nearly all in the minor key, and of a vague and melancholy rhythm [...] Its success in any other country would be more than doubtful.<sup>23</sup>

However, the argument that Russian culture was incomprehensible to outsiders was fostered equally vehemently in Russia, though to alternative ends.<sup>24</sup> In the weeks preceding *A Life for the Tsar*'s British premiere, *The Musical World* published César Cui's writings on the opera from *La Musique en Russie* in which he affirmed that: 'no other nation can take such an interest in this opera as the Russians'.<sup>25</sup> Preparatory articles such as these provided useful sources for opera critics (required to complete reviews in time for the morning press after attending operas that often finished after midnight). Cui's remarks thus reappeared in corrupted form in a multitude of reviews, as below:

[*A Life for the Tsar*] is essentially fitted for Russian audiences and no other. The music is tuneful enough, and at times vastly clever; but it is too intensely Russian to hold you amused for upwards of three hours [...] All that the characters do is to deliver Russian stump oratorios, breathe Russian patriotism, offer up Russian prayers, and warble Russian melodies. [...] I cannot wax enthusiastic about this kind of thing. As well I might be expected to make a dinner off Russian caviare [*sic*], or enjoy myself analysing Russian tallow.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This phrase was coined by Bennett, see Merion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance and the Press 1850-1914* (Aldershot, 2002), 1.

<sup>21</sup> This movement is often dated either from the premiere of Parry's *Prometheus Unbound* in 1880 or the opening of the Royal College of Music by George Grove in 1882.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Solie, 'Music', in Francis O'Gorman (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, 2010), 102.

<sup>23</sup> Adolphe Adam, 'On the Present State of Music in Russia', *The Athenaeum*, 9 July 1840.

<sup>24</sup> Distinguishing Russian culture from that of the West was the basis, for instance of myth-making surrounding the Mighty Handful. See, for earlier manifestations of such rhetoric, Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven and London, 2007), 40.

<sup>25</sup> *Musical World*, 9 July 1887. Hueffer's review in *The Times*, 13 July 1887. explicitly mentioned using this article as a source, writing about the opinions of 'M. Cæsar Cui, himself a Russian composer of note'.

<sup>26</sup> *The Bat* (theatrical magazine), 19 July 1887.

The critic's comparison of *A Life for the Tsar* to caviar and tallow, two Russian luxury imports, points to a further problem these operas posed for critics of the 1880s. Like these imports, the opera was not only deemed unnecessarily lavish, but also presented an unwelcome rival to native produce. As with *Demon*, despite widespread comments that *A Life* did not digress far from Italian and German models,<sup>27</sup> many reviewers still concluded that the opera was 'too Russian' to ever become part of the canon. The critic for the *Dramatic Review* wrote, for example, '*La Vita per lo Czar* [...] teems with Russian national airs – which may be very sweet in Russian ears, but which cannot much interest us',<sup>28</sup> and in the *Morning Post*, we read 'the interest depends solely on national tunes about which the cosmopolitan public care little'.<sup>29</sup>

For others, aversion to the opera on political grounds was stated more explicitly. For instance, the critic for the society magazine *Life* wrote that 'perhaps it would have been all the better if the Poles had given [the Tsar] his quietus for ever and aye'.<sup>30</sup> Russian tsardom had long been vilified in Britain, but more recently Alexander III's repressive policies in Russian Poland had received especial criticism. One critic consequently declared that it was difficult to imagine, let alone feel sympathy for, 'a Czar in danger from bloodthirsty and oppressive Poles'.<sup>31</sup> Any potential for escapist exoticism, therefore, was drastically reduced by the real-life situation brought to the fore by the opera's plot; a situation which merely served to reinforce disapproval towards Russia.

### The Attractions of National Opera

But, though being Russian was not necessarily an attractive prospect, for the advocates of the so-called English Musical Renaissance, cultivating a national musical voice was a respectable practice. The critic for the *London Figaro*, for instance, commented (in something of a backhanded compliment) that opera goers would 'doubtless be willing to forgive much' in *A Life for the Tsar* because it had been written to 'found a national style of art'.<sup>32</sup> The idea that *A Life* presented a new genre, 'national opera', also meant that Lago received praise for providing a 'welcome relief from the routine of hackneyed opera'.<sup>33</sup> In the years since 1881, composers deemed nationally representative, especially Dvořák and Grieg,<sup>34</sup> had become increasingly popular in concert halls. Russian composers had also become more familiar to

<sup>27</sup> For detailed discussion of Glinka's Italian influences in *A Life for the Tsar*, see Rutger Helmers, "'It Just Reeks of Italianism": Traces of Italian Opera in *A Life for the Tsar*', *Music & Letters*, Vol.91, No.3 (2010), 376-405.

<sup>28</sup> *Dramatic Review*, 16 July 1887.

<sup>29</sup> William Barrett, *Morning Post*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>30</sup> *Life*, 14 July 1887.

<sup>31</sup> *The Standard*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>32</sup> *The London Figaro*, 16 July 1887.

<sup>33</sup> Stated in advance of the performance, *Musical World*, 25 June 1881.

<sup>34</sup> Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* had been popular in Britain since 1879. His first big success in Britain was the *Stabat Mater* in 1883. This led to invitations from the London Philharmonic Society, and from Novello to compose an oratorio for the Birmingham Festival. Dvořák went on to make 9 tours to Britain and received 5 commissions (See Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music Online* <http://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-014009.xml?rskey=wmUShw&result=9> (Accessed 8 February 2012) and Viktor Fischl, 'Dvořák in England', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 68<sup>th</sup> session (1941-2)

Grieg's A minor piano concerto had been popular since the 1870s and he was invited to perform in Britain in 1880, 1883, 1884, 1886 and 1887 by various London musical societies. He turned them down until 1888 when he made his first visit. See Lionel Carley, *Edvard Grieg in England* (Woodbridge, 2006).



concert goers by 1887. In 1886, Rubinstein had included Russian composers (apart from himself), such as Lyadov, Balakirev, Cui and Rimsky-Korsakov, in his recitals for the first time.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, to many critics, Lago's production of *A Life* catered to the cultural elite: to the middle class concert goers who were developing a taste for 'national' music.

The leading music journals, the *Musical Times* and *Musical World*, showed their support for *A Life for the Tsar* by printing new, lengthy articles on Glinka that year.<sup>36</sup> *The Musical World*, then edited by Hueffer, printed extracts from Cui's *La Musique en Russie* and Bennett wrote a new preparatory article for his series 'The Great Composers' in the *Musical Times*. Bennett's article was the first ever published in Britain on Glinka that was not a translation from German or French, though it relied heavily on an article by the French critic, Octave Fouque, that had first been translated in the *Musical World* in 1880.<sup>37</sup> Bennett's version makes few additions, but, when it does, these are often either didactic interjections on the virtues of writing national music or embellishments that reshape Glinka's story into something reminiscent of Britain's own search for national opera.

Bennett begins by reporting that Glinka was 'the most national of composers; the founder of a Russian school, and the initiator of an artistic development which may, and probably will, exercise an immense influence upon music in general'.<sup>38</sup> As a staunch champion of the English Musical Renaissance, Bennett makes it clear that Glinka's significance is bound up with his position as a national figurehead, regardless of which nation he represents. The 'artistic development' to which he refers is the quest for a national voice. His article thus presents Glinka as a glowing example for contemporary British composers, arguing that:

[in contemplating] a lyric drama having a Russian subject, written in the Russian language, and composed in a Russian spirit and style [...] the young musician was unquestionably right [...] – right in principle as well as justified in result [...] We would that the gifted youth of all nations were as faithful as Glinka in a matter so vitally important.<sup>39</sup>

Bennett had already been prophesising that Slavic music was the 'music of the future'<sup>40</sup> since Dvořák's phenomenal rise in popularity after the premiere of his *Stabat Mater* in 1883. In 1884, Bennett declared in another *Musical Times* article: 'What nation, it may curiously be asked, will succeed to the pre-eminence of Germany? [...] The issues lies, I am disposed to think, with two races, the Sclavonic and the Anglo-Saxon'.<sup>41</sup> His endorsement of Dvořák and Glinka - of new national voices - therefore, was made to generate faith in British composers.

<sup>35</sup> Other composers included Nikolai Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky and Glinka. These concerts also included Chopin, showing that he was still counted among Russian composers, or as a representative of the Russian or Slavic style.

<sup>36</sup> The *Magazine of Music* also printed an article giving a detailed run-through of the opera including musical examples. This was followed by a print of the *Cracovienne* arranged for piano (September 1887).

<sup>37</sup> Originally published in *Ménestrel* from August-December 1879. Fouque cited Stasov and Laroche's biographies of Glinka of 1858 and 1868 as his two main sources, as well as Gustave Bertrand's *Les Nationalités Musicales* and Cui's series of articles on 'La Musique en Russie' which had begun in 1878 and continued into 1880 in *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*.

<sup>38</sup> *The Musical Times*, 1 January 1887.

<sup>39</sup> *The Musical Times*, 1 February 1887.

<sup>40</sup> He wrote numerous articles on the subject. See Gerald Norris, *Stanford, the Cambridge Jubilee, and Tchaikovsky* (Newton Abbot, Devon, 1980), 254, 256 and 'English Music in 1884', *The Musical Times* (June 1884) among many others.

<sup>41</sup> The reasons for this change of heart become apparent towards the end of the article when Bennett heaps especial praise on Dvořák as a 'luminary of meaning in the present musical firmament.' However, Bennett

However, on attending the premiere, Bennett found that *A Life for the Tsar* failed to match his expectations for national opera. As a result, his review for *The Daily Telegraph* was one of the most scathing of the lot. Bennett lamented that Glinka ‘shrank from’ the invention of ‘a lyric drama altogether new in structure and character’,<sup>42</sup> the like of which he had foreseen in January. Furthermore, rather than being ‘Russian in style and spirit’, he discovered that there was ‘nothing specially Russian in “Life for the Tsar”’.<sup>43</sup> Worse still, the opera was highly Italianate. William Barrett, who, like Bennett, was a regular critic of London’s Italian Opera scene, shared in his disapproval. Barrett wrote that:

[Glinka’s] method of scoring, and the construction of the *ensemble* are of the *dilettante* fashion in vogue at the time the opera was written, [...] there is a sense of anachronism surrounding the whole.<sup>44</sup>

Barrett was then the editor of *The Musical Times* and so would have approved Bennett’s placement of Glinka in the ‘Great Composers’ series that year. However, both critics revoked the accolade of genius in their reviews; Barrett wrote that the opera ‘leaves no impression’ of ‘greatness’<sup>45</sup> and Bennett repeatedly referred to him as an ‘amateur’ and a ‘novice’.<sup>46</sup>

Even with the watered-down libretto, Bennett found fault with the opera’s ‘outbursts of patriotism that take place every few minutes’ and ‘bore the public by the obtrusiveness of local feeling’.<sup>47</sup> Glinka had written *A Life for the Tsar* in propagation of Nicholas I’s doctrine of Official Nationality - autocracy, orthodoxy and *narodnost*’. It was this that won the opera court support in Russia in 1836, enabling its repertory and national status. However, Susanin’s display of ‘dog-like fidelity’ to a future tsar he had never met, as it was described by the critic for the *Weekly Dispatch*,<sup>48</sup> did not match Bennett’s hopes for a national opera that would ennoble and empower the people. And indeed, the same had already been argued in Russia; even Vladimir Stasov was embarrassed by what he called Susanin’s ‘canine’ submission and ‘henlike’ stupidity.<sup>49</sup> *A Life for the Tsar*’s reputation as a Russian musical monument thus meant that it became subject to a set of 1880s markers for the ideal ‘national opera’ – autochthonous music devoid of foreign influence, political values in keeping with post-1848 nationalism – markers which an opera of the 1830s was inevitably unable to reach.

Other critics, however, kept faith in *A Life for the Tsar*’s position as a worthy example of national opera. Two of the most influential critics of this opinion were Hueffer and J.A.Fuller-Maitland of *The Times* and *Manchester Guardian*. Both regularly argued that opera impresarios needed to move away from the hackneyed repertoire, particularly Italian opera, and support serious, modern works, particularly those of Wagner. Thus, Maitland compared

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remained scathing of Russia, as hinted at in his Glinka biography (1887). Bennett’s retelling of Fouque’s biography adds insertions that betray his less than enthusiastic position towards Russia. For example, he describes Glinka as ‘one brought up upon the uninteresting plains, and amid the forbidding physical conditions of Russia.’

<sup>42</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> *The Morning Post*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *The Weekly Dispatch*, 17 July 1887.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, 1997), 38.

the final scene of *A Life*, which he called ‘the work of a great genius’,<sup>50</sup> to the finale to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, indicating that the opera would speak to a cultivated, Germanic audience, rather than the usual socialite crowds found at Covent Garden. Hueffer found merit principally in Glinka’s ‘mastery of orchestration, combined with great contrapuntal skill’ and defended the mix of Italian, German and Russian styles by writing that ‘the star of Wagner had not yet arisen’.<sup>51</sup> In continuation of the opera’s more ‘Germanic’ moments, Fuller-Maitland and Hueffer also noted with a tone of pride that ‘as a rare incident in the annals of opera [...] a fugal chorus in the first act was unanimously re-demanded’<sup>52</sup> when normally such an accolade was reserved for arias. This highlighted their belief that an opera such as this could draw ‘inquisitive amateurs’ to the opera; the kind of audience that it was hoped would come to fill London’s opera houses, making the opera an institution representative of the nation, not just of the monied elite.

Such moralistic cultural ideals were seen out, once again, through Albani’s involvement. Though still a popular soprano, Albani was not the young, glamorous prima donna she had once been.<sup>53</sup> *The Musical World* described her as ‘matronly in appearance’<sup>54</sup> and possessing a ‘womanly sweetness and modesty’<sup>55</sup> which made her unsuited to parts such as Violetta in *La Traviata*. Descriptions like this aligned her with Queen Victoria in the Jubilee year, who refused to wear a crown and dressed in plain black even amidst the grand pomp of the celebrations. The part of the demurely attired Antonida, a faithful fiancée and daughter, was well-suited to a soprano representing this late-Victorian feminine ideal and was a welcome contrast, one critic remarked, to the ‘revolting and nonsensical’ characters and stories in such Italian operas as *Rigoletto*, *Lucia* and *Don Giovanni*.<sup>56</sup> Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* may have been representative of a distrusted nation - but at least it was not Italian. And though the opera did display Italian operatic traits, critics such as Hueffer and Fuller-Maitland could off-set these with affirmations of Germanism, indicating that, even if the opera’s future position on the British stage was doubtful, it could demand respect as an example of something more cerebral, more wholesome and more nationally distinct, than Italian opera.

## Conclusion

Being Russian, therefore, was not always so marketable in Britain: at least not at Covent Garden. Neither, however, was it the sole hindrance to longer-term endorsement. A combination of national prejudice, insecurities about native opera and the conservative nature of the opera industry all worked to keep Russian opera on the side-lines. The responses of such critics as Hueffer and Fuller-Maitland do show evidence of increasing faith in Russian composers, even if this was based on seeking out evidence of Germanism in

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<sup>50</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>51</sup> *The Times*, 13 July 1887. Interestingly, Hueffer’s review compared the story of the Tsar being in hiding to that of ‘King Alfred [...] before the conquering Danes’ showing a very different take to those who were outraged by the subject matter.

<sup>52</sup> Hueffer, *The Times*, 13 July 1887.

<sup>53</sup> In 1887, she had reached the grand old age of 30. Considering that she made her Covent Garden debut at the age of 15 in 1872, however, this was comparatively old.

<sup>54</sup> *The Musical World*, 4 June 1887.

<sup>55</sup> *The Musical World*, 25 June 1887.

<sup>56</sup> *The Musical Standard*, 23 July 1887.

place of Italian formulaic, even immoral, opera. The premiere of *A Life for the Tsar* thus falls into an interim period for Russian opera in Britain; a time when Russian composers were sufficiently acknowledged to be staged, but when their entitlement to these stagings remained, for many, in doubt. It would be in the concert hall, in emerging socialist groups, in literary circles, that the negative connotations of Russia's supposed otherness would gradually be flipped around; where the term barbarism would be used to mean freedom from the failings of the West; where the use of folksong would be praised as speaking to the masses; and where difference would mean fresh innovation and modernity. It was only once these arguments had become widespread at the beginning of the next century that Diaghilev would be able to sell his version of Russia, and that Russian opera begin to secure its place on the British stage.

## Appendix

**Timeline of Russian opera in Britain, 1881-92**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Opera</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Company and Venue</b>	<b>People</b>
21, 25, 30 June, 15 July, 1881	<i>Demon</i> Rubinstein	Italian (trans. Giuseppe Vacotti) (English trans. Joseph Pittman)	<b>Royal Italian Opera</b> Covent Garden	<b>Director</b> Ernest Gye <b>Conductor</b> Anton Rubinstein, Enrico Bevignani <b>Cast</b> Demon: Jean Lassalle Tamara: Emma Albani Angel of Light: Zelia Trebelli Prince Sinodal: Marini Prince Gudal: Jean de Reszke Servant to Sinodal: Silvestri Tamara's Nurse: Ghiotti
12, 16 July, 1887	<i>Life for the Tsar</i> Glinka	Italian (trans. Aleksandra Gorchakova-Santagano and C.Ferrari) (English trans. Henry Hersee)	<b>Royal Italian Opera</b> Covent Garden	<b>Director</b> Antonio Lago <b>Conductor</b> Enrico Bevignani <b>Cast</b> Susanin: Jules Devoyod Antonida: Emma Albani Vanya: Sofia Scalchi Sobinin: Julian Gayarre Commander of the Polish detachment: Ughetti

2 July-4 November, 1888	<i>Life for the Tsar</i> Glinka <i>Demon</i> Rubinstein <i>Mazeppa</i> Tchaikovsky	Russian	<b>Russian Opera Company</b> Comedy Theatre, Manchester. Grand Theatre, Birmingham. Theatre Royal, Huddersfield. Alexandra Theatre, Liverpool. Grand Theatre, Nottingham. Grand Theatre, Cardiff. Jodrell Theatre, London.	<b>Director</b> Vladimir Lubimov, Alexander Alexandrov <b>Administrator</b> Bogatirov, Mikahil Perlov <b>Stage Managers</b> Grigory Gordiyev and Mikhail Deminukov <b>Conductor</b> Giuseppe Truffi <b>Cast</b> Soprano (Tamara, Antonida, Maria): Mathilde Wieber, Ekaterina Yanovskaya, Liarionova, Ivanova Mezzo sporano (Vanya, Tamara's Nurse, Angel of Light, Lyubov) Gordieva, Olga Puskova Tenor (Prince Sinodal, Sobinin, Andrey): Bogatirov, Yumashev Baritones (Demon, Mazeppa) : Vinogradov, Vladimir Lubimov, Joachim Tartakov Bass (Prince Gudal, Susanin, Kochubey): Alexander Liarov, Weisshev
17, 20, 21, 24, 26, 28, 31 October 1892	Tchaikovsky <i>Eugene Onegin</i>	English (trans. Henry and Margaret Sutherland Edwards)	<b>Royal Italian Opera,</b> Olympic Theatre, London	<b>Director</b> Antonio Lago <b>Conductor</b> Henry Wood <b>Cast</b> Tatyana: Fanny Moody Onegin: Eugene Oudin Olga: Lily Moody Lensky: Iver Mackay, Edwin Wareham Nurse: Sviatlovsky Gremin: Charles Manners Triquet: James Appleton Larina: Selma Captain : George Tate Zaretsky: James Appleton

