

## *A Dog's Heart* by Alexander Raskatov

Alexander Raskatov's stage compositions, numerous works for orchestra, vocal groups, soloists and chamber ensembles reflect the sophisticated and subtle aesthetics of the composer.<sup>1</sup> In the composer's own words, his music often deals with 'the forgotten Romantic idioms'. These Romantic elements are often transformed and presented in a rather unusual, nostalgic, almost 'unreal' context. His early compositions sometimes have references to some elements of minimalism, as well as to Russian popular arts songs of the nineteenth-century (similar to the music of his older compatriot Valentin Silvestrov). There are also sacred, liturgical music elements in Raskatov's music, in all periods of his work, the most important examples being his *Stabat Mater* for high voice and organ (1988), *Miserere*, a double concerto for viola, cello and orchestra (1992), *Kyrie Eleison* for solo cello (1992), *Misteria brevis* for piano and percussion instruments (1992), *Gebet* for soprano and string quartet (1996), *Seven Stages of Alleluia* for voice, percussion and piano (1993), *Praise* for male voices (1998), *The Last Freedom*, a requiem for mixed choir and orchestra (2001) and *Obikhod* for male voices and string

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<sup>1</sup> Raskatov was born in 1953 in Moscow, and graduated from Moscow Conservatoire in 1978. In 1990 Raskatov together with other Russian composers – Edison Denisov, Vladimir Tarnopolski, Viktor Yekimovsky, Alexander Vustin - founded the group ASM-2 (Association of Contemporary Music – 2). From 1994 to 2004 Raskatov lives and works in Germany, from 2004 – in France. Raskatov gets commissions from numerous important music festivals, including the Lockenhaus Chamber Music Festival, the festival of the *Cité de la Musique* in Paris and the Salzburg Easter Festival, where Raskatov was awarded the Composition Prize in 1998. Raskatov has also been commissioned by major orchestras and ensembles such as the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Mariinsky Orchestra, Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra, The Hilliard Ensemble, the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, The Borodin Quartet, The Kremerata Baltica Chamber Orchestra, Schönberg/Asko Ensemble Amsterdam, Bläserensemble Sabine Meyer, among others. Raskatov's works have been recorded on numerous compact discs by the leading companies such as EMI, ECM, Wergo, BIS, Nonesuch, Le Chant du Monde, Megadisc, Melodiya, Claves.

orchestra (2003).

In 1990s Raskatov's music went through new changes. As the composer describes himself, he started to be interested in 'weaker or relaxed musical forms'. He sees a form as 'a static non-action', a 'pleasant doing nothing'.<sup>2</sup> As he said, 'stylistically, modern world's sound environment reminds him of childhood illusions and requires some escape from the limits of serious academic music making'. One of his works of 1991 even bears the title '*Dolce Far Niente*' ('Sweet doing nothing') for cello and piano. This is why in many of his compositions performers have to whistle, blow into a shell, play unusual instruments such as *vargan* (Asian type of jew's Harp), siren, bamboo tubes and so on. There are a number of Raskatov works in which the avant-garde language is used in an anti-avant-garde way, becoming rather a symbol of the naïve world of a child, like the vocal cycle *Angels read your book* on a text of Gennady Aigi (2003). Some avant-garde elements of instrumental technique change their meaning in a new context of Raskatov's music. They look and sound like toys, like recollections of a childhood. Typical examples of this new 'naïve' palette can already be found in Raskatov's earlier and slightly absurdist piece *Gra-ka-kha-ta* for tenor, violin and four percussionists (1988) on texts of the Russian futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922). Raskatov has developed this style in one of his central works, *Xenia* for chamber orchestra (1991), which includes rather unusual instruments such as a toy piano, Javanese gongs as well as the orchestra players' singing. *Xenia*, inspired by the poems of one of Russia's most original and least known poets Xenia Nekrasova (1912-1958), once again presents an innocent, pure, child-like world. In order to create this atmosphere the composer uses here only high-register

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes are from the composer's conversations with the author.

instruments.

Raskatov's opera *A Dog's Heart*, based on Mikhail Bulgakov's story (1925), is one of his two stage compositions. The other opera, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, after Edgar Allan Poe, is still unfinished. *A Dog's Heart*, commissioned by The Netherlands Opera House in Amsterdam (2008-2009), shows Raskatov's affinity to the recent past of Russian cultural history, as do many of his other works. The composer's arrangements of Mussorgsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich works are well-known, particularly his reconstructions of the scores by the Russian revolutionary composer Nikolai Roslavets (1881-1944). Raskatov's most recent reconstruction of Alfred Schnittke's last Symphony No. 9, is a brilliant work, both in terms of meticulous fidelity towards Schnittke's late style and creative power of Raskatov's own ideas. The symphony was premiered in Dresden in 2007, together with Raskatov's own moving tribute to Schnittke's memory, *Nunc Dimittis* for mezzo-soprano, male voices and orchestra on words by Joseph Brodsky and the monk Siluan.

In *A Dog's Heart* we hear some overtones of Schnittke's opera *Life with an Idiot* (premiered in the same Netherlands Opera House in 1992). Both operas relate to fairly recent nightmares of the Soviet life. Schnittke's *Life with an Idiot* (based on Victor Yerofeev's short story) is a mocking caricature on Lenin. Bulgakov's story deals with an attempt of transforming the dog (named *Sharik*) into a human being (with the new given name *Sharikov*).<sup>3</sup> In Raskatov's own words, 'he is worried that the cultural world is being eroded by these countless Sharikovs.' Indeed, the Bulgakov story

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly the idea of 'cloning' in the context of Soviet reality is a subject of *Rosenthal's Children*, another recent opera by the Russian composer Leonid Desyatnikov, based on a play by Vladimir Sorokin and staged at the Bolshoi Opera House in Moscow in 2005.

( unpublished in Russia until 1987) was a clear grotesque and metaphoric representation of the ideas of early Soviet 'cultural revolution'. In Raskatov's opera, the tunes of revolutionary songs, timbres of rather primitive Russian folk instruments ( Raskatov introduces a small 'band' of *balalaika*, *domra*, and rather rare *contrabass-balalaika*), Orthodox chorales, allusions to Romantic music ( such as Wagner or Tchaikovsky ) as well as *chastushki* ( vulgar poems) are all mixed and melted together . At the moment of the dog's successful transformation into a human being, Raskatov brings a quote from the opening chorus of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* ( just like Schnittke did in his *Life with an Idiot* ) . Raskatov, however, takes the idea of *polystylism* much further and uses it in a paradoxical , almost absurdist context of a 'black comedy'. The orthodox chorale is heard when Sharikov is vomiting on a luxury Persian carpet in the Professor's house. The voice of the dog is a weird combination of female screaming into a megaphone and counter-tenor-like singing.

There are also clear references to Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* in *A Dog's Heart*. According to Raskatov, 'Mussorgsky was the first, and perhaps the only composer whose music could plumb the depths of the Russian language. Eschewing cantilenas or drawn-out arias, he was able to clearly illustrate the text's emotional content in music, and in doing so he succeeded in putting into sound what we now like to call "the Russian soul".' Raskatov sees Shostakovich 's operas as a further development of the traditions initiated by Mussorgsky. Hence there are a number of allusions, or rather 'homages', to Shostakovich in Raskatov's opera: a famous trombone glissando from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*; a screaming on the word 'nose' – similar to Shostakovich's *The Nose* , composed only two years after Bulgakov's *A Dog's Heart*.

The vocal style of *A Dog's Heart* is extremely demanding. In Raskatov's own words, 'he toyed with the idea of calling it "an opera staccato", so many staccato accents he used...' In addition to more traditional parts such as Professor Philipp Philippovich ( masterly sung by Sergei Leiferkus), Sharik/ Sharikov part can only be described as truly 'avant-garde' one. The Sharikov's 'half', sung by a high tenor ( Alexander Kravets), is a fluent, virtuoso part with enormously changeable articulation, sometimes almost a 'rap'. The Sharik's 'share' is even more striking. It is performed by a soprano Elena Vassilieva who produces an incredible variety of noises by screaming and whispering into a megaphone ( a notorious device of Soviet propaganda in the 1930s-1960s). The human voice and its unusual sonic transformations is one of the most important means of expression for Raskatov. His *Ritual* ( 1997) on a text of Russian futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov ( 1885 – 1922) for solo voice, megaphone and percussion (one performer) uses numerous special vocal effects such as *rauco* ( hoarse) *tremolo* and *scrollato* ( shaky) whisper, often transformed by a megaphone. In *A Dog's Heart* all these effects are complemented by the vocal tessitura extremes and by the polarities of the dynamic range.

*A Dog's Heart* is a brilliant, provocative and witty show, staged by Simon McBurney . and directed by Martyn Brabbins. The production, in collaboration with the *Complicite* theatre company , engages singers, choir, actors, acrobats, and marionettes. Sharik itself is a giant skeleton- marionette , led by four actors. Stage events are not less dramatic and 'polystylistic' than the musical ones: a real flood ( with real water pouring on stage ) at the moment when Sharikov destroys Professor's flat; a surreal surgical operation, with all hair-raising details... Slogans, red banners and cravats, ugly

‘proletarian’ furniture and costumes (designed by Michael Levine) are unmistakably related to Soviet life style. But all these elements never become a cliché, being a flexible part of this dynamic interactive show.

The polystylistic palette of *A Dog's Heart* is truly amazing: from rather complex elements similar to Bernd Alois Zimmermann's musical language to the popular tunes of Ravel's *Bolero*; from primitive Soviet mass songs – to rather sophisticated quasi-Baroque recitatives accompanied by an amplified harpsichord. In Raskatov's own words, “I hope that – without becoming an eclectic – I've brought together different elements in this opera. I am incapable of following just one direction... Opera is probably the only genre where a composer is entirely free in his choice of stylistic means.’

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