Rimsky-Korsakov – Cantatas (2002)

1. Poem about Aleksei, Man of God, Op. 20. 2. Song of Oleg the Wise, Op. 58. 3. From Homer, Op. 60. 4. Switezianka, Op. 44 Dmitri Kortchak – Tenor (2,4) Nikolai Didenko – Bass (2) Svetlana Sizova - Mezzo Soprano (3) Tatiana Fedotova - Soprano (3) Svetlana Luchmanova - Alto (3) Elena Mitrakova - Soprano (4) Moscow Choral Academy Moscow Symphony Orchestra Vladimir Ziva - conductor

The idiom of these pieces will be familiar to those acquainted with Rimsky's operas, and two of them in fact have operatic origins. Poem about Aleksei, Man of God (Stikh ob Aleksee, Bozhem cheloveke) is scored for chorus and orchestra and is the shortest of the works on this disc, just under six minutes in duration. Malcolm MacDonald's knowledgeable notes relate that this work, dating from 1878, began as a pilgrims' chorus in the opera The Maid of Pskov , but that in revising the opera Rimsky deleted this number and reworked it as a separate piece. The result is a grave, stirring choral work, suggestive of Russian Orthodox church music. The piece is built on a single melodic figure, but variations of harmony, timbre, and texture prevent it from becoming repetitious. It receives a fine performance, aptly paced, with excellent choral singing.

Composed in 1899, Song of Oleg the Wise (Pesn' o veshchem Olege) is a 17-minute setting for tenor, bass, male chorus, and orchestra of a poem by Pushkin dealing with a very early ruler of the Kievian Rus', who reigned in the late ninth and early 10th centuries. (The Pushkin text is available on line at library.liverus.com/index.php?mi= 3&smi=2&ssmi=2, in Russian and English. Be warned, however, that the translation is extremely free.) A powerful, warlike leader, Oleg seized Kiev from its previous rulers, expanded the territory subject to his city, fought successfully with neighboring powers, and even invaded the Byzantine Empire, besieging Constantinople and imposing an advantageous treaty on the Emperor. Pushkin's text recounts

the legend of Oleg's death, drawn from a medieval Russian chronicle. A wizard prophesies that the Prince's death will be caused by his favorite horse. Oleg resolves never again to mount this horse and orders the horse put out to pasture but cared for attentively. Years later, inquiring about the condition of the horse, he is told that it had died some time ago. Believing himself out of danger, Oleg approaches the horse's remains, places his foot on its skull, and mocks the wizard's prophesy. A poisonous snake emerges from the skull and bites the Prince's leg, causing his death. In Rimsky's setting, after a martial instrumental prelude, the chorus performs as narrator, while the bass soloist takes the part of Oleg and the tenor the role of the wizard. Bass Nikolai Didenko delivers his declamatory part accurately and with feeling, but displays a fast vibrato that undermines tonal solidity, and his voice lacks weight, especially at the lower end. Tenor Dmitry Korchak, too, sometimes lacks ideally steady tone, although he has reserves of power and delivers his lines with a good deal of dramatic force. The choral singing is once again excellent, and conductor Vladimir Ziva's pacing is unhurried but effective. That said, Gauk's performance is more urgent and exciting, and his unnamed bass soloist is superior in tonal weight and solidity. The sound of the Gauk recording, although certainly not a match for Ziva's recent stereo, is pretty good given its age and provenance. In the notes for the Gauk set, the usually authoritative Ates Orga incorrectly assigns the reign of Oleg to the seventh century and claims that the text of the cantata is based on "the poem by Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy after Pushkin." The words sung on both recordings, however, are those of the Pushkin poem.

From Homer (Iz Gomera), composed in 1901, is another spinoff from Rimsky's operatic projects, in this case from his unfulfilled ambition to write an opera based on Homer's Odyssey. The music of the cantata derives from what was to have been the orchestral introduction and first scene of the projected opera, in which Odysseus is shipwrecked on the shores of the kingdom of Phaecia and is aided by the King's daughter Nausicaä. In the resulting 12-minute piece, the opening orchestral music convincingly conjures a violent sea-storm and is followed by an extended passage for three female soloists (two sopranos and a mezzo) and female chorus, depicting, as MacDonald puts it, "the Homeric sea nymphs greeting the dawn." Ziva renders the storm music persuasively, with brilliant and precise playing by his orchestra, but Svetlanov is still more fiery and hair-raising. Where Ziva tends to set a tempo and stick to it, Svetlanov is more inclined to alter the pace to characterize individual passages. In the vocal section, which takes up slightly more than half the piece, Svetlanov's flexibility, along with his greater energy and urgency, yields a more convincing rendition. Svetlanov's unnamed vocal soloists are also a bit more euphonious and blend better in the ensemble writing that predominates. The orchestral sound of Svetlanov's recording, although good, doesn't match Ziva's in depth, impact, and bass response.

The text of Switezianka (The Mermaid of Lake Switez) is based on verses by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, in a Russian translation by the playwright Lev Mei. The Polish original and Mei's translation are available on line at pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Poezye/Switezianka. The text actually sung on this recording, however, deviates substantially at some points from the online Russian version. I haven't been able to find an English translation online, and the automated Google translation is garbled. The poem tells the story of a young huntsman who is seduced by a water sprite in Lake ?witez and meets his doom as a result. Rimsky's evocative 16-minute setting for soprano, tenor, chorus, and orchestra dates from 1897. The performance on this recording has no competition but seems effective enough. Ziva's leadership is once again steady and straightforward, with fine orchestral and choral execution. Tenor Korchak and soprano Elena Mitrakova sing with considerable dramatic involvement, although neither has a particularly ingratiating sound. ---Daniel Morrison, arkivmusic.com

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