

## Behind the Image, Beyond the Image

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# The Production of Modest Musorgsky's Opera *Khovanshchina* at La Scala (1933) as an Attempt to Reconstruct the Authentic Image of an Artwork

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**Abstract** The 1933 production of *Khovanshchina* at La Scala Theatre, conducted by Vittorio Gui (1885-1975), was the second time this opera was performed on the Italian opera stage. In studying the Italian productions of *Khovanshchina*, the 1933 stage version is usually overshadowed by the Italian premiere of this opera, which took place in 1926. However, Vittorio Gui made his own stage version of *Khovanshchina*, changing the structure, orchestration and tonal plan of the full score of this opera in Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's edition in order to get closer to Musorgsky's authorial text. The paper uses archival materials from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, the Russian National Museum of Music, the Archive of the Museo Teatrale alla Scala, and articles from Italian periodicals of the 1920s-1940s.

**Keywords** Modest Musorgsky. Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. Russian opera. Russian opera in Italy. La Scala. *Khovanshchina*. Boris Godunov. Vittorio Gui. Mary Tibaldi Chiesa. Boris Asafyev. Pavel Lamm.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Second Italian Production of *Khovanshchina*. – 3 Vittorio Gui's Stage Version. – 4 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

As is known, Modest Petrovich Musorgsky (1839-1881) did not complete his opera *Khovanshchina*.<sup>1</sup> After the composer's death, his colleague and friend, Nikolay Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov, completed the unfinished fragments and orchestrated the entire opera. It was Rimsky-Korsakov's creative revision of *Khovanshchina* that was first published and put on stage,<sup>2</sup> and for a long time the version created by him remained the only one possible to perform. It was with the use of Rimsky-Korsakov's score that *Khovanshchina* was first staged in Italy (La Scala, 1926).<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, in the mid-1920s, in the Soviet Union, the musicologist and textual critic Pavel Aleksandrovich Lamm (1882-1951) was already studying the composer's manuscripts and preparing *M.P. Musorgsky's Complete Works* for publication. The scholarly thesis of the 'reconstruction of the authentic author's text' was highly relevant for this new edition, especially when comparing the originals with Rimsky-Korsakov's creative versions. For this reason, the 1926 production, despite its unique staging and performance team, drew criticism from leading Italian musicians for using Rimsky-Korsakov's version, as it was already known that it was far from the original.

In Lamm's book collection, which is now preserved at the Russian National Museum of Music (RNMM), there is a brochure entitled *La Khovantscina di Mussorgsky (Khovanshchina by Musorgsky)*,<sup>4</sup> published in 1926 in Milan (Tibaldi Chiesa 1926). The author is the Italian writer Mary Tibaldi Chiesa (1896-1968). This publication was scheduled for a conference held twelve days before the opera's premiere, on February 16, 1926, at the Academy of Music 'Marco Enri-

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**1** Musorgsky's last name and the title *Khovanshchina* are used in several spellings. In English and when transliterated from Russian, the spelling Musorgsky and Khovanshchina is used. The quotations and the bibliography retain original's variant, i.e. Mussorgsky, Mussorgski, Khovanschina, Kovànschina (Italian), Moussorgsky (French). When translating these names into English, the standard spelling of Musorgsky and Khovanshchina is used.

**2** See Musorgskij 1883. The first production took place in St. Petersburg on the stage of the Musical and Dramatic Circle of Amateurs in the hall of I.A. Kononov on February 9 (21), 1886.

**3** The premiere performances were conducted by Arturo Toscanini (the second conductor was Ettore Panizza), directed by Alexander Sanin, designed by Nikolay Benois, translation of the libretto by Rinaldo Küfferle; the only soloists known are Alexander Veselovsky and Evgeny Zhdanovsky. See Petrushanskaja 2018, 99, 387, 390, 395, 400; Rahmanova 1990.

**4** Unless otherwise indicated all translations are by the Author.

co Bossi'. The reason for holding the conference was obviously the upcoming stage performance, but in the text of the brochure, Tibaldi Chiesa talks about the significant differences between Rimsky-Korsakov's version of *Khovanshchina* and Musorgsky's original version.

## 2 The Second Italian Production of *Khovanshchina*

Seven years later, in 1933, a new production of *Khovanshchina*, which was chronologically the second on the Italian stage, was planned at La Scala. The composer and conductor Vittorio Gui (1885-1975) was appointed musical director of the production. As early as 1927, this musician declared his interest in the 'restoration of the authentic Musorgsky'.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it was not surprising, that Gui expressed a desire to bring the production, entrusted to him, as close to the author's text as possible [fig. 1].

It should be noted that since the first Italian premiere of *Khovanshchina* in 1926, there had been a major shift in the Soviet Union with respect to Musorgsky's authorial legacy. The piano-vocal score of *Khovanshchina* in Lamm's scholarly edition came from print (Musorgsky 1932); however, the orchestral score of this opera, completed by Boris Asafyev as early as February 1931, remained in manuscript.

Publication of Asafyev's instrumentation of the opera was hindered by several circumstances at once. The most important of these was the creative and professional conflict between the two co-editors of the 'authentic Musorgsky' edition, Asafyev and Lamm, which led to the termination of their joint work on the composer's legacy.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, in 1930-31 there was a major reorganisation in the RSFSR State Publishing House, when the Musical Sector of the State Publishing House (*Muzsektor Gosizdata*) was transformed into a discipline-specific State Music Publishing House (*Muzgiz*). In the course of organisational restructuring, several directors were replaced in a short period of time, and many experienced employees of the publishing house were forced to leave their jobs.

In addition, at that time, high-profile court cases for the copyright of the author's version of Musorgsky's work outside of Soviet Russia took place between the heirs of the publisher Vasily Bessel on the one hand, and Oxford University Press (Great Britain) and Universal Edition (Austria), on the other hand.

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<sup>5</sup> V. Gui published an article entitled "The Authentic 'Boris'", in which he compared the piano-vocal score of *Boris Godunov* as revised by N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov with the reprinted edition of the author's piano-vocal score (Musorgsky 1926). See Gui 1927, reprinted in Gui 1944.

<sup>6</sup> See Aleksandrova 2020.



Figure 1 Vittorio Gui. Atelier Willinger, Vienna. S.d. Theaternmuseum Wien

Both processes ended in Bessel's heirs' victory, which had an extremely negative effect on the dissemination of Musorgsky's works, not only in Europe but all over the world. Musorgsky's Complete Works had since been published only in the USSR.<sup>7</sup> However, all the described events were not known to Italian musicians - in particular,

<sup>7</sup> See Bobrik 2011; Teterina 2020.

to the conductor Vittorio Gui and to the writer Mary Tibaldi Chiesa.

The main sources of information about the 1933 production of *Khovanshchina*, directed by Gui, are two publications from Italian periodicals.<sup>8</sup> The first is Tibaldi Chiesa's article *Note a Khovanshchina* (Notes on *Khovanshchina*), which she published in the newspaper *L'Ambrosiano* on the day of the premiere at La Scala on March 16, 1933.<sup>9</sup> The second is Gui's article *Le correzioni alla Kovànschina* (The Corrections of *Khovanshchina*), published by him in 1943 in the *Nuova Antologia* journal.<sup>10</sup>

Tibaldi-Chiesa's article is supplemented by an important announcement of the upcoming premiere of *Khovanshchina*. It contains a list of the soloists of the premiere cast who participated in the performance of March 16, 1933: Nini Giani,<sup>11</sup> Nino Piccaluga,<sup>12</sup> Luigi Rossi Morelli,<sup>13</sup> Eugenio Sdanowski,<sup>14</sup> Alessandro Wesselowski,<sup>15</sup> Piero Biasini,<sup>16</sup> and Giuseppe Nessi.<sup>17</sup> The mezzo-soprano Nini Giani probably sang the role of Marfa, the famous Italian baritone Luigi Rossi Morelli sang Dosifey, the Russian tenor Alexander Veselovsky and the bass Evgeny Zhdanovsky were probably in their typical roles - Prince Golitsyn and Ivan Khovansky, the tenor Giuseppe Nessi supposedly sang the role of the Scribe (there is information that he performed it in the Florentine production of 1948).<sup>18</sup> About the other soloists, no information could be found.

In addition, according to information provided by the archives of the Teatro alla Scala Museum, it is known that the authors of the sce-

**8** In addition, some valuable information was provided by the La Scala Theatre Museum Archive, and this archive also contains several photographs of the performance.

**9** See Tibaldi Chiesa 1933. A clipping of this article has been preserved in P.A. Lamm's archival collection. See *Stat'i i zametki* 1924-33.

**10** See Gui 1943b. This article is the second in a series of two Gui's articles about his 1933 work on *Khovanshchina* at La Scala, but in the first one, "Musorgsky and *Khovanshchina*", Gui simply retells the plot of the opera for Italian audiences, making analogies from Western European culture. See Gui 1943a.

**11** Nini Giani (1904-1972) was an Italian opera singer (mezzo-soprano, later dramatic soprano).

**12** Nino Piccaluga (1890-1973) was an Italian singer (tenor). Nino is the stage name of the singer, his real name is Filippo.

**13** Luigi Rossi Morelli (1887-1940) was an Italian singer (baritone).

**14** Evgeny Fadeevich Zhdanovsky (Eugenio Sdanowski; 1892-1949) was a Russian opera singer (bass). In 1917-24 he was a soloist of the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre. In 1924 he left Russia and performed in Madrid and Milan, from 1927 he settled in Bulgaria.

**15** Alexander Nikolayevich Veselovsky (Alessandro Wesselowski; 1894-1964) was a Russian opera singer (tenor). In 1919-21 he was the soloist of the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre. In 1921 he emigrated to France. From 1925 he studied and then worked in Italy, where he performed at La Scala until 1950.

**16** Piero Biasini (1899-1973) was an Italian opera singer (baritone).

**17** Giuseppe Nessi (1887-1961) was an Italian opera singer (tenor).

**18** See Petrushanskaja 2018, 395

nography for this production were Nikolay Benois<sup>19</sup> and Giovan Battista Santoni,<sup>20</sup> and the costume designer was Luigi Sapelli, better known by his pseudonym 'Caramba'<sup>21</sup> [figs 2-4].

The articles by Tibaldi Chiesa and Gui contain significant inaccuracies due to the huge information gap from the Soviet Union. Thus, Tibaldi Chiesa writes of the enormity of Rimsky-Korsakov's editorial interventions and declares that the time had already come to "trovarsi faccia a faccia col vero Mussorgsky" (come face to face with the real Musorgsky) (Tibaldi Chiesa 1933). However, she uses Soviet Russia as a positive example of a country, where:

Da qualche anno, a cura dello Stato, si procede in Russia all'edizione completa del manoscritti di Mussorgsky e la *Khovanshchina* è già pubblicata, dal 1931. In Russia ormai le opere di Mussorgsky non si rappresentano se non nella forma originale. (Tibaldi Chiesa 1933)

For some years now a complete edition of Musorgsky's manuscripts has been undertaken by the state; *Khovanshchina* was published in 1931. In Russia now Musorgsky's operas are heard in no other way than their original form.

This same misconception is repeated by Gui ten years later. He writes:

La Repubblica dei Sovieti ha pubblicato le opere complete di Musorgsky nell'edizione corrispondente ai manoscritti, ed oggi è stato reso possibile a chiunque il confronto, e, volendo, la rimessa a punto delle opera. (Gui 1943b, 189)

The Soviet Republic has published the *M.P. Musorgsky's Complete Works* in an edition corresponding to the manuscripts, and today a comparison and, if desired, restoration of the works is available to everybody.

In fact, although Lamm finished an edition of *M.P. Musorgsky's Complete Works* in 1939, he did not publish all the volumes originally planned, and it would be more accurate to say that the edition was cut short rather than given logical completion. And it is important to

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**19** Nikolai Alexandrovich Benois (1901-1988) was a Russian theatre artist. From 1925 he lived and worked in Italy.

**20** Giovan Battista Santoni (1881-1966) was an Italian stage designer.

**21** Luigi Sapelli (pseud. 'Caramba'; 1865-1936) was an Italian stage and costume designer and illustrator.



**Figure 2** *Khovanshchina* (1933), the Summer Residence of Prince Vasily Golitsyn. Teatro alla Scala Museum



**Figure 3** *Khovanshchina* (1933), choir "Father, father, come out to us" ("Batja, batja, vyjdi k nam"). Teatro alla Scala Museum

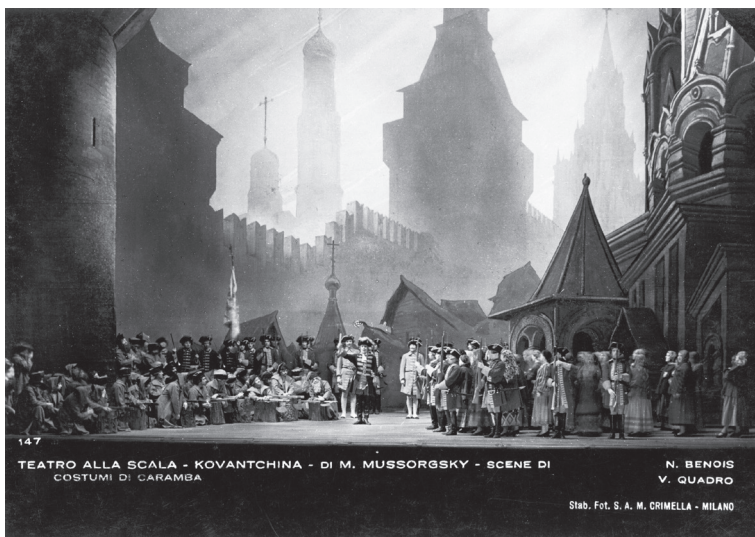


Figure 4 *Khovanshchina* (1933), execution of the Streltsy. Teatro alla Scala Museum

emphasise that the orchestral score of *Khovanshchina*<sup>22</sup> have never been published as part of this edition.

The question of which particular sheet music materials Gui used in preparing the 1933 performance can only be answered hypothetically, as their location is unknown by now, and the information available is quite contradictory. Mary Tibaldi Chiesa reports that “Il maestro Vittorio Gui [...] ha potuto valersi [...] della partitura originale dell’opera” (Maestro Vittorio Gui [...] was able to use [...] the original score of the opera) (Tibaldi Chiesa 1933). But the manuscript of the full score was kept by Asafyev, who was then living in the Detskoye Selo suburb of Leningrad.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the ‘original score’ could in no way have reached Italy.

It is most likely that when Tibaldi Chiesa mentioned the word ‘score’, she was referring to the piano-vocal reduction. Not being a musician, she may well have made such an inaccuracy. This assumption is confirmed by the other words of her article:

<sup>22</sup> The manuscript of Asafyev’s full score is preserved in his archival collection. See Asafyev, *Khovanshchina* 1931.

<sup>23</sup> According to available information, by 1933 V. Gui had not been to the USSR. On his 1935 visit with a tour is known. See Codokov 1999.



nell'insieme la rappresentazione seguirà, come nel 1926, la revisione de Rimsky-Korsakov e la sua strumentazione, in più luoghi particolari il maestro Gui si atterrà alla redazione di Mussorgsky. (Tibaldi Chiesa 1933)

in general the performance will follow, as in 1926, Rimsky-Korsakov's version and his instrumentation, in more specific places Maestro Gui will obey Musorgsky's version.

It follows that Gui had the full score of *Khovanshchina* as revised by Rimsky-Korsakov and the piano-vocal score of that opera as edited by Lamm.

### 3 **Vittorio Gui's Stage Version**

In his article "The Corrections of *Khovanshchina*" Gui confesses:

Nelle esecuzioni della *Kovanscina* che io ho avuto occasione di dirigere in Italia dal 1933 in poi [...] ho cercato per quanto possibile di riaccostare la versione di Rimsky all'edizione originale di Musorgski. Raschiare pareti imbiancate a ritrovare la freschezza dei colori primitivi è opera lunga laboriosa e di tale responsabilità che non si può pretendere di fare se non con larghezza di tempo e di mezzi che mi è sempre mancata. (Gui 1943b, 191)

In the performances of *Khovanshchina*, which I have conducted in Italy since 1933, [...] I have tried my best to return Rimsky-Korsakov's version to Musorgsky's original edition. But to destroy the 'whitewashing of the walls' in order to rediscover the freshness of the original colors was a long and diligent work, moreover, so responsible that I could not qualify for it for lack of time and resources.

It is clear from this statement that Gui did not seek a scholarly and restorative approach, but was limited to practical changes.

Before turning to specific examples of the corrections that Gui made to the musical text of *Khovanshchina*, it should be made clear that when referring to this opera, the musician inevitably had to face the problem of convincingly resolving two missing fragments in Musorgsky's manuscripts. One of these is at the end of Act II. The second is the fragment of 66 bars in the finale of the entire opera that was partly uncompleted by Mussorgsky and partly lost.

Tibaldi Chiesa wrote about the changes that Gui made at the end of Act II:

Alla fine del primo quadro del secondo atto la perorazione di Rimsky-Korsakov, calorosa e di sicuro effetto, ma troppo enfatica, è stata dal maestro Gui ridotta a metà. (Tibaldi Chiesa 1933)

At the end of the first scene of Act II<sup>24</sup> Rimsky-Korsakov's conclusion, fiery and certainly spectacular, but too emotional, is cut in half by Maestro Gui.

The solution to the finale of the entire opera in Gui's version is described by both Tibaldi Chiesa and Gui himself, and these descriptions differ considerably. Tibaldi Chiesa writes:

Il maestro Gui ha pensato di mantenere il coro dei Vecchi Credenti (la melodia è di Mussorgsky), ma facendolo cantare, primo, solo su un tessuto di accordi, poi, quando alle voci femminili si aggiungono le maschili, appoggiandolo su uno sfondo strumentale di commento discreto e sobrio. Nel finale, invece della fanfara dei Petrovzi, che disturbava e quasi stonava, nel quadro tutto pervaso di cupa terribilità, si riudirà il motivo della marcia funebre in sol minore, che aveva risonato prima, quando i settari si erano ritirati nell'eremitaggio. (Tibaldi Chiesa 1933)

Maestro Gui decided to leave the chorus of Old Believers (a tune by Musorgsky), suggesting it first to be sung with only chord accompaniment, and then, when the male voices join to the female, basing on a strict and modest instrumental accompaniment. At the very end, instead of the fanfare of the troops of Peter I, irrelevant in this picture of gloomy horror, appears the motif of the funeral march in G Minor, which had been heard earlier when the dissenters went to the hermitage.

Gui, on the other hand, describes his changes as follows:

nelle mie esecuzioni io lascio che il coro dei 'raskolniki' conchiuda l'opera con la propria melodia sul l'accordo finale che, privo della terza tonale, oscilla sospeso tra le due modalità minore e maggiore, [...] come spesso facevano i vocalisti degli antichi secoli. (Gui 1943b, 191)

in my performances I let the chorus of the Old Believers conclude the opera with a melody on the last chord, which, deprived of its

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**24** Tibaldi Chiesa is referring to the fragment not completed by Musorgsky, where Rimsky-Korsakov had composed the orchestral conclusion based on the "Dawn on the Moscow River" theme.

third, balanced between minor and major keys, [...] as singers often did in past centuries.

In addition to the musical adjustments described above, the conductor changed the structure of the opera: Gui's version had four rather than five acts (Tibaldi Chiesa 1933). By this change in structure, in addition to the reasons described above, Gui also helped himself to solve the problems with the missing authorial fragments of the opera. The end of Act II became the middle of Act III, and thus the audience's attention was less focused on this place, which was problematic from the point of view of dramatic development. It is the same in the case of Act V, whose combination with Act IV made it possible to keep attention away from the lack of integrity of Act V, in which a large fragment was partly unfinished by the composer and partly lost.

#### 4 Conclusion

Vittorio Gui's stage version of Musorgsky's opera *Khovanshchina*, created for La Scala in 1933, was of great historical significance. Having no access to the results of the work of Soviet musicologists Pavel Lamm and Boris Asafyev on the study of Musorgsky's manuscript legacy, Gui was able to attract the attention of Italian musicians to the important problem of the reconstruction of the Russian composer's conception.

Unfortunately, today Gui's activities in the study and popularisation of Musorgsky's creative legacy are almost unknown. And the 1933 production of *Khovanshchina* is traditionally overshadowed by the Italian premiere of this opera in 1926. However, this misconception must be overcome, as further study of the Italian conductor's experience will help us better understand the reception of Musorgsky's legacy in author's versions in Western Europe.

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