

On Sat. 2/23 we saw the Kirov Opera from St. Petersburg at the Kennedy Center in Washington. The work was Modest Mussorgsky's "Khovantschina," a grand spectacle in the greatest tradition of Grand Opera. Mussorgsky was not a professional musician, and left his works in piano form; they were later orchestrated by others, with the most famous arrangements by Rimsky-Korsakov (Pictures at an Exhibition, Night on Bald Mountain, Boris Godunov, Khovantschina). This production, however, was orchestrated by Paul Lamm (who?), but it was still in the Rimsky / Rachmaninoff idiom of lush neo-romantic sound.

The production was gorgeous, with beautiful sets – nothing rotated, dropped from the flies or rolled in from the wings, just old-fashioned low-tech static decorations. There are two scenes in Red Square, with views of the Kremlin and St. Basil (*the* famous onion-dome church in Moscow), and each was different, with different perspectives on the scene! Now that's conspicuous consumption.

The singing was not spectacular, the major roles were merely excellent :-). But the chorus! I've only heard two other ensembles come close: New York's Met, and Chicago's Lyric on a good day.

The performance was in Russian, with English titles. We could understand words now and then, and that was cause for some amusement. At one point a man sings to a woman: "ty zmija" (z with dot, = viper), but the titles read "you evil creature." At another point, one character interjects into another's long aria: "szczo ty pleciesz" (what are you babbling); that never made it into the titles at all.

The story has political overtones that reflect Russian feelings of inferiority in the late 19C: Holy Mother Russia as the seat of the true Orthodox faith being challenged from the west by Polish nobles and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, from the east by the Tartars, but eventually triumphing by sheer weight of faith in Hospody and the Tsar.