Rimsky-Korsakov and his World. Ed. by Marina Frolova-Walker. pp. v + 367. (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2018, £27.00. ISBN 0-691-18271-1.)

Musorgsky has a habit of upstaging Rimsky-Korsakov. His image just fits that bit better with Romantic notions of the genius composer: anarchic musical experimentation, populist sympathies, an untimely death. Rimsky-Korsakov, meanwhile, defected from the rebellious Kuchka to become one of the St Petersburg Conservatory's most respectable professors, is best known for music dealing in fantasy, and lived a long, comfortable life. Sure enough, Musorgsky infiltrates every chapter of *Rimsky-Korsakov and his World*. But this time, the goal is to redress the balance. We find Rimsky-Korsakov portrayed as a composer of deep feeling; as an arch political commentator; and even as a suitable source of instruction for Soviet musicians. Indeed, it is quite rare for a collected volume to achieve such unity of intent as that found here. While Musorgsky, naturally, is not the focus, the authors throughout seek to enrich and enliven the current image of Rimsky-Korsakov – dare I say, to make him a little more Musorgskian.

This book, a companion to the 2018 Bard Music Festival, thus directs scholarly attention to a woefully neglected composer. As the editor Marina Frolova-Walker reminds us, he may be widely known for such concert staples as *Sheherazade* and 'The Flight of the Bumblebee', but Rimsky-Korsakov's music has resisted much in-depth analysis or contextualisation. The book is heavily weighted towards opera – understandably so, considering he wrote fifteen of them. The other focus is his teaching, which made him a powerful force of influence. And almost all the chapters are concerned with the final stages of Rimsky-Korsakov's life, from the late 1890s onwards, and his afterlife in the first decades of the twentieth century. As such, he emerges as a man of the turn of the century, often struggling against modernity even as he shaped it.

Like other books in the Bard series, *Rimsky-Korsakov and His World* presents newly translated source material. This comes in the form of letters between Rimsky-Korsakov and the soprano Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel, edited by Frolova-Walker and translated by Jonathan Walker. The intimate correspondence betrays a warmth of character not normally associated with Rimsky-Korsakov. It also offers remarkable insights into his operatic writing around 1900. This period is known as one of experimentation, in which he dabbled in *bel canto*, *opéra dialogué* and Wagnerism, as well as his more familiar fantastical style. What these letters reveal is how pivotal Zabela-Vrubel was amidst these shifts. Rimsky-Korsakov often chose opera subjects for their potential to feature Zabela, and tweaked the vocal writing at her behest. Moreover, this correspondence indicates that Rimsky-Korsakov's adoration of Zabela at least partly inspired his post-Kuchkan understanding of opera, to borrow Frolova-Walker's phrasing, as 'a collaborative art between composers and singers' (p. 9). Voicing his frustrations at the critics' dismissal of *The Tsar's Bride* as being too voice led, he writes in language that conveys just how highly he thought of Zabela's powers of performance: '[the critics] can't grasp that the singing provides everything: dramatism, stage-worthiness – everything that's needed from an opera' (p. 28).

The section that follows takes on the challenge, set so often by Richard Taruskin, of thoroughly dissecting Rimsky-Korsakov's music. Emily Frey puts forward a strong case for considering *The Snow Maiden* as something more than 'music-box exotica' (p. 87). As she has done before in articles on Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Frey offers a refreshingly

analytical approach to the field of opera and literature studies. Her argument is subtle. Being careful not to overstate Rimsky-Korsakov's activism, she suggests that this opera is couched in political thought, namely the fascination in the 'long 1870s' with the folk commune as a potential societal model: a vision for the future based on an idealised past. She proposes through a deft examination of the adaptation and musical setting of Alexander Ostrovsky's play that Rimsky-Korsakov transformed a somewhat inhuman story into one infused with feeling, reflecting this optimistic nostalgia surrounding the folk.

Mozart and Salieri undergoes a similarly probing line of inquiry in Anna Nisnevich's contribution. In fitting complement to the Zabela letters, she argues that rather than hearing the declamatory text setting in this opera as a return to Kuchkan ideas about recitative, it should be considered in light of Rimsky-Korsakov's new respect for the human voice. She weaves this in neatly with late nineteenth-century Mozart reception and anxieties about the loss of spontaneous creativity amidst the contrived pursuit of progress. To finish, she posits that *Mozart and Salieri* might fruitfully be taken as an inversion of Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*. In so doing, she presents an intriguing challenge to assumptions that the academic, less popular Rimsky-Korsakov was to Tchaikovsky what Salieri was to Mozart: in Rimsky-Korsakov's eyes at least, he was the Mozartean, concerned with freeness and transparency as opposed to what he considered to be Tchaikovsky's *fin-de-siècle* superficiality.

At the centre of the volume sit three chapters about *The Golden Cockerel*. The number may seem high, but if one of Rimsky-Korsakov's operas is to be granted special attention, it makes sense that it would be this one; of all his operas, it is the most obviously political and is rich in ambiguity. Although there is some overlap in content, the writers manage to offer comfortably distinct arguments. For Adalyat Issiyeva, *The Golden Cockerel* communicates Rimsky-Korsakov's distress over the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. In this immensely readable chapter, she suggests that the mysterious Eastern land that tricks and defeats Tsar Dodon represents Japan. While she is not the first to make this observation, she makes her case fresh through ample context about Russian interest in and respect for Japanese culture, and with new analytical points about the ways in which Rimsky-Korsakov and librettist Vladimir Belsky's adapted Pushkin's original text to make Queen Shemakha Japanese. For me, Shemakha's part contains too much Orientalist parody for her to be a sympathetic figure, but Issiyeva does illustrate convincingly that her music is at least more complex than that of the Russian characters. She then suggests that the puppeteer-like Astrologer would have reminded audiences of Pyotr Badmaev, the Russian Asian doctor who held much criticised sway over Tsar Nicholas II's imperialist ambitions. Some examination of the Astrologer's voice could have been welcome here, to balance the keen insights she makes into Shemakha's music.

Frolova-Walker's chapter also examines *The Golden Cockerel* as shaped by the Russo-Japanese War. But where Issiyeva sees the project as steeped in sorrow, for Frolova-Walker, this is an opera 'born of rage' (p. 217). In her delectable prose, she reveals a series of fascinating resonances between actual events of the conflict and the libretto. She then (and here there is admittedly some similarity with Issiyeva) shows how the Eastern enemy in the opera represents Japan. In Frolova-Walker's reading, though, both sides in war are necessarily evil. The chapter closes with Frolova-Walker returning to a topic explored in her *Russian Music and Nationalism*: the

opera's lampooning of the Russian style. Doing so after her account of the costly blunders of war renders Rimsky-Korsakov's subversions all the more bitter and profound.

Simon Morrison begins by placing *The Golden Cockerel* in its historical context, then details Belsky's battle with the censor. Ultimately, though, Morrison contends that this opera is about something other than real events. For him, Rimsky-Korsakov was dealing in an aesthetics of magic, or, borrowing Carolyn Abbate's term from her introduction to Jankélévitch's *Music and the Ineffable*, 'charm'. He reads Rimsky-Korsakov's kaleidoscopic, repetitive music as a means of dazzling his audience. While perhaps at odds with the style of Morrison's narrative, some concrete musical figures would have furthered his case. To conclude, he takes a 2012 ballet version of the opera as a sort of performance of this analysis. Like Morrison, the choreographer Alexei Ratmansky 'trades politics for aesthetics' (p. 190), leading us to wonder which came first; did Morrison find his ideas embodied in this production, or did the production inspire his interpretation? Either way, this essay offers something quite different from others in the volume, while maintaining the objective of deepening our respect for Rimsky-Korsakov's compositional processes.

The fourth section shifts from opera to pedagogy. Olga Panteleeva argues that music theory, aesthetics and history gained importance at the St. Petersburg Conservatory from their inscription into the curriculum in the late nineteenth century, but remained subservient to composition and performance well into the twentieth. This chapter is much more about 'his world' than Rimsky-Korsakov himself, and presents a textured backdrop against which to place the composer's teaching career. I wonder, however, whether it could have done with some consideration of how the emergence of musicology affected Rimsky-Korsakov's compositional outlook. Such a line of investigation might have tied in well with the book's recurring themes, including Rimsky-Korsakov's self-awareness about his place in history.

Building on existing studies of Rimsky-Korsakov's legacy in Stravinsky's music, Yaroslav Timofeev (in elegant translation by Walker) offers new motivations for the latter's shift away from his teacher's influence. He suggests that 1913 ought to be considered a watershed year in this respect, not, as typically thought, because of *The Rite of Spring*, but due to his reworking of Musorgsky's opera *Khovanshchina* with Ravel for Diaghilev. Timofeev carries out some intricate detective work on Stravinsky's surviving sketches. Despite Stravinsky and Diaghilev proclaiming that this would be a return to something closer to Musorgsky's intentions – and thus a corrective to Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestrated, edited and completed version of 1883 – Timofeev finds evidence that Stravinsky likely wrote with Rimsky-Korsakov's edition open in front of him. In the end, however, it turns out that this sketch work doesn't so much serve to illustrate ties with Rimsky-Korsakov, as to reveal that Stravinsky was guided above all by his own 'personal aesthetic decisions' (p. 266), thus largely freeing himself of Rimsky-Korsakov's shadow.

In a series of events that will come as little to surprise to those familiar with such histories, Lidia Ader (also in translation) traces Rimsky-Korsakov's tumultuous Soviet reception via the conservatory. In a matter of decades, from the 1920s to '50s, he goes from respected pedagogue to bourgeois formalist to national treasure. One episode that draws particularly pointed attention to the contradictory nature of official guidance on musical matters is that surrounding the infamous 'Muddle instead of Music' article of 1936, which damned Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The errors pointed out by the anonymous critic led to attacks on Rimsky-

Korsakov's teaching legacy among Soviet composers; and yet, as observed by his pupil Mikhail Gnesin, Rimsky-Korsakov was hardly someone whose methods could be labelled 'muddle' (p. 288). Ader's story may lack the hard-hitting argumentative lines of previous chapters, but it is compelling nevertheless.

Leon Botstein luxuriates in a somewhat sprawling afterword. It does, however, provide an apt final note. The chapter tackles Rimsky-Korsakov's 'world' in the most direct sense, bouncing between Russia and the West, and proposing that Rimsky-Korsakov's chief motive was to create music that was relevant internationally. It also reminds us that many of the authors – particularly Frey, Nisnevich and Morrison – have conceded that Rimsky-Korsakov's creative achievements were bound up with his conservatism. In his own confrontation of Rimsky-Korsakov's ambivalence towards modernity, Botstein proposes that Rimsky-Korsakov's music offered 'a nearly static aesthetic relief from the relentless passage of time' (p. 345), and that it was in this way that he cast a powerful influence over twentieth-century composers (if largely via Stravinsky).

The weight of the essay lays in a section comparing Russian composers and artists. What could be clearer here is whether these comparisons are intended to illustrate parallels or instances of influence. And while the wide reach of Botstein's essay is admirable, some more focused pauses would have been welcome. For instance, he writes that the artist Mikhail Vrubel's 'costumes and sets display a stylization and formal abstraction of clearly recognizable Russian dress and jewelry, crowns and swords, analogous to Rimsky's celebrated handling of orchestral textures and sonorities' (p. 342) – a tantalizing claim that begs closer analysis of Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration techniques.

Rimsky-Korsakov and His World presents an invaluable addition to Rimsky-Korsakov studies. We are left with an impression of Rimsky-Korsakov as a complex character: passionate, angry, idealistic, self-doubting. And, as opposed to dealing in trivial fantasy – in captivating concubines and bewitched bumblebees – many of these essays convince us of Rimsky-Korsakov's very concrete place in the politically fraught world in which he lived. The volume should thus prove of interest not only to musicologists and Russianists, but also to cultural historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.