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The Enigma of the *Golden Cockerel:* Catch It if You Can

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Abstract. Pushkin's fable was a creative remake of a tale by Washington Irving, which he wrote during his travel to Granada (the Alhambra) with Pushkin's pal, Russian diplomat, Count Dmitry Dolgorukov. This legend about an Arabic Astrologer (from *Tales of Alhambra*, 1832), undergoing metamorphosis was relocated from Spain to Russia and Shamakha. Current research delves into the connection between the two texts, tracing the transformation of the main characters in the context of the central plotlines. I explore how and why Irving's gothic princess turned into Pushkin's Tsarina of Shamakha and how the plotline relates to Russia's historical annexation of Azerbaijan. The core of my research is the musical language Rimsky-Korsakov employs to create the fairytale and Eastern characters. Is there any positive Russian imagery in the opera? Why is Rimsky-Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel* considered an anti-opera? To what extent can Stravinsky's first ballets, *Firebird* and *Petrushka*, be viewed as the continuation of Rimsky-Korsakov's stream of fairytales?

Extending author's work on Russian operas and Rimsky-Korsakov in particular, this research originated at the invitation to write program notes for the Santa Fe Opera production of *The Golden Cockerel* in 2017.

Keywords: *Golden Cockerel*, Washington Irving, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

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Энигма «Золотого петушка»: поймайте, если сможете

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Аннотация. Пушкинская «Сказка о Золотом петушке» — творческая переработка рассказа Вашингтона Ирвинга, который он сочинил, путешествуя по Гранаде с русским дипломатом и приятелем Пушкина князем Дмитрием Долгоруким. Легенда об арабском астрологе (из «Сказок Альгамбры», 1832), претерпев различные метаморфозы, перекочевала из Испании в Россию и Шемаху. В статье рассматриваются пересечения между двумя литературными текстами, а также трансформация образов главных героев и их взаимоотношений в контексте центральной фабулы — в частности, то, как готическая принцесса из сказки Ирвинга превращается в пушкинскую Шемаханскую царицу и как сюжет соотносится с историческим присоединением Азербайджана к России. Центральное место в исследовании принадлежит проблеме адаптации сюжета пушкинской сказки в опере Римского-Корсакова, а также вопросу появления Астролога в «Петрушке» Стравинского. Какими музыкальными красками пользуется Римский-Корсаков в отображении сказочных и восточных образов; есть ли в этой опере русское начало? Почему «Петрушку» называют анти-оперой? Можно ли считать первые балеты Стравинского продолжением сказочной темы Римского-Корсакова?

Это исследование началось с приглашения написать программные заметки для постановки «Золотого петушка» в Санта-Фе в 2017 году. Оно продолжает работу автора по изучению русских опер и, в частности, опер Римского-Корсакова.

Ключевые слова: «Золотой петушок», Вашингтон Ирвинг, Александр Пушкин, Николай Римский-Корсаков

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Awondrous riddle

In Russian mythology the cockerel symbolizes the golden sun. Cocks carved from wood have decorated the rooftops of Russia's peasant huts for centuries; they appeared in wooden children's toys, folk crafts, and lollipops. The *Golden Cockerel's* libretto by Vladimir Belsky is based on a tale in verse by Russia's beloved poet and prankster Alexander Pushkin. Although the poet called his *Golden Cockerel* a "simple-folk tale" [prostonarodnaya skazka], he, in fact, retold a story written by his American contemporary Washington Irving. Travelling across southern Spain (1829) with Russian diplomat and Pushkin's pal Prince Dmitry Dolgorukii, and residing in a mystical palace in Granada, Irving drafted his *Tales of the Alhambra*. One of Irving's tales portrays an old king and an Astrologer; the duo appears in Pushkin's *Golden Cockerel*. While Irving's tale ends with the ruler losing the Princess and the Astrologer, yet still enjoying the environs of the Alhambra, Pushkin's tsar is obliterated, the kingdom in disarray.

Among other possible sources of Pushkin's tale might be *Der goldene Hahn* by Austrian Friedrich Maximilian von Klinger (1752–1831), an officer of the Russian imperial army.[1] The two tales, having different plotlines, share the title and some important elements. Each depicts an aged king seeking peace, both majesties finding themselves in the same neighborhood, the Caucasus: Pushkin's tsar encounters the Queen of Shamakha; Klinger's king reigns in Cherkessia, and among the tale's characters is a princess of Tiflis. Among Pushkin's works, filled with the poet's witty riddles, *The Golden Cockerel* is one of the most mystifying, enigmatic; its abundant sources and interpretations still puzzle readers and critics.[2]

[1] See Klinger, F. M. (1789). *Le coq d'or*: fragment historique pour servir de supplément à l'histoire ecclésiastique. Hachette Livre – Bnf; Alekseev, M. P. (1982). Zametki na polyakh (6): Pushkin i povest' F. M. Klingera "Istoriya o Zolotom Petukhe" [Notes in the Margins (6): Pushkin and F. M. Klinger's tale *The Story of the Golden Cock*]. In *Vremennik Pushkinskoy komissii: 1979* (pp. 59–95.). Nauka.

[2] See [1]; Akhmatova, A. A. (1933). Poslednyaya skazka Pushkina [Pushkin's Last Tale]. *Zvezda*, (1), 161–176.

A Russian — American — Spanish tale and a bit of history

Even without electronic networks, tales in the early 19th century got around, crossing different languages — repeated, refashioned, published, and repackaged at a surprising speed. Paris saw the first publication of *The Alhambra* in English and French in 1832, and in 1834 Pushkin remolded *The Legend of the Arabian Astrologer* into his own farcical *Tale of the Golden Cockerel*.

In both Irving's and Pushkin's tales, an elderly king, who in his youth had devastated neighboring kingdoms, is now repaid by their constant attacks. The king yearns for repose; a visiting old Astrologer, provides him seeming solace. In Irving's tale within a tale, the Astrologer tells the king about two symbolic figures, a ram and a cock, devised by a pagan priestess and placed on a mountain above the city of Bursa (today's Turkey). Warning inhabitants about invaders, the ram pivoted and the cock crowed, keeping the city safe. Sharing this story of the past, the Astrologer erects for his king a tower with chessboards and toy armies, and at the top he places a magical talisman — a bronze Moorish horseman that turns in the direction of advancing enemies.

King Habuz from the tale entertains himself by battling chess effigies that come alive: "warriors brandished their weapons, and there was a faint sound of drums and trumpets." Brushing away whole armies like so many swarms of flies'[3] Habuz defeats the chess army. The Astrologer, meanwhile completing the construction of his marvelous abode, pleases himself with female dancers — who reappear a century-and-a-half later in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera. In Irving, Habuz's guards find and bring to their king "a Christian damsel of surpassing beauty."

She was arrayed with all the luxury of ornament that had prevailed among the Gothic Spaniards at the time of the Arabian conquest. Pearls of dazzling whiteness were entwined with her raven tresses; and jewels sparkled on her forehead, rivaling the luster of her eyes.[4]

In his first sketches of the tale, Pushkin, clearly borrowing from Irving, mentioned a chessboard with an army of wax soldiers, but later abandoned these lines. Pushkin also eliminated Irving's rider, having featured the *Bronze Horseman* in his poem of the same title a year earlier (*The Bronze Horseman*, 1833).[5] Remaking the Alhambra tale into a Russian *skazka*, Pushkin chose a mechanical cock of gold as the title. He also replaced the chessboard figurines with the tsar's doltish sons who, briefly mentioned, in no time kill each other after seeing the Queen of Shamakha, Pushkin's substitute for Irving's gothic princess.

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3 Irving, W. (1870). The Alhambra. J. B. Lippincott & Co, p. 205.

4 Ibid., p. 206.

5 Feliks Raskol'nikov compares *Golden Coq* and *The Horseman,* both written in Boldino a year apart, finding 'the same theme of human hopelessness in dealing with the irrational, the combination of tragic and comic.' See [2].

The astrologers in both tales, accommodating their rulers, demand the mysterious damsel as their reward. Irving's Habuz refuses; the Astrologer escapes with the gothic bride into an underground garden paradise, one of the mysterious structures he has built. Pushkin's tzar, unwilling to give away his dame, clubs his Astrologer to death, himself pecked at and killed by the Coq. Habuz may have been drawn from a real Berber king of 11th-century Granada, Habbus ibn Maksan (1019–1038). Entitled *The Legend of the Arabian Astrologer*, Irving's tale introduces his astrologer-physician as Ibrahim Ebn Abu Ajeeb ("ajeeb" in Arabic means a wonder, anything strange and admirable[6]). The fanciful Arabian, the owner of "the wondrous book of knowledge, <…> given to Adam and <…> handed down from generation to generation to King Solomon the wise" may parallel an actual person, Habbus's trusted vizier, a learned Jew, Samuel/Shmuel Levi (Nagrila, ha-Nagid[7]), known among Arabs as Ismail ibn al-Nagrila. Like the historical Nagrila, Irving's Astrologer is versed in Arabic philosophy, Solomonic wisdom, and Egyptian pyramids. Nagrila rebuilt the Alhambra as a fort on a hill of bright-red clay [its name "al-Hambra" means "the red"]. Enchanted by the Alhambra, Irving portrays the Astrologer erecting a marvelous tower and palace. The two whitebeards, king and Astrologer, engage in a contest over a mystical Gothic princess.

Simon Morrison sees the Russian tale and the opera as "a caricature of a caricature, a compilation of references"and tsar Dodon, carrying a rusty shield, as an allusion to "Cervantes's Don Quixote, and/or to the Imperial Russian Army's obsolete weapons" [6, p. 178]. The episode with "rusty ammunition" and the sword "heavy for the tsar's shoulder" also echoes a scene from Catherine II's satirical opera *Gorebogatyr'* [*A Woeful Knight*]. In her title character, the empress mocked Gustav III of Sweden during the Russo-Swedish war (1788–1790) [7, p. 88]. Vladimir Dal' defines the word "dodon" as a "clumsy undersized person, possibly a midget; also a blister, pimple, boil."[8] The original name of the title character in Catherine's Gorebogatyr' was Fufliga from "fuflo," which according to Dal's dictionary also means a "pimple, boil, something unworthy." Pushkin's prototype of Habuz is also a remake of the poet's own Chernomor from R*uslan and Liudmila*. A lascivious dwarf from the Black Sea [Chernoe More] captures a Russian bride; and a hopeful geezer, Russian Dodon, is trapped by the Eastern beauty, both tales entering an operatic stage.

In Pushkin's tale, the architectural element is absent. While Irving employs elevated, sometimes ironic prose, Pushkin writes in a mocking pseudo-folksy style that barely conceals his attitude towards the Russian autocracy. He adds to the tsar's

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6 Mason, J. (Ed). (1879). *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. Cassel Publishing Company, p. 96.

7 See [3, p. 216; 4, p. 508; 5]. See also HaNagid, S. (2007). The Dream of the Poem (P. Cole, ed. and transl. from Arabic). Princeton University Press, pp. 371–375.

8 Dahl, V. I. (1989). Tolkovyy slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo yazyka [Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language] (Vol. 1). Russkiy yazyk, p. 452. See [7, p. 93].

entourage his two sons, who fatally stab each other on the battlefield. Living under three emperors, a father and two sons consecutively reigning over Russia (Paul, Alexander, and Nicholas), Pushkin was likely deriding the tsar's family. His versed tale is laconic and fast-paced.

Belsky in his libretto elaborated on every scene and every detail of Pushkin's tale; he also likely perused Irving's tales, from which he, for example, borrowed the chessboard allusions, absent in Pushkin. Amelfa, the nanny of the aged tsar, sings him a lullaby:

Что ж такое? Уж не то ль,	What is it? What is a thing?
Что ты шахматный король? <…>	Aren't you our chess king? <…>
«Шах и мат вам всем, злодеи!»	"Check and mate to all you, villains!"
Кони, ферзь, ладьи, слоны —	Knights and queens and rooks and bishops
Все тобой побеждены.	All of them are crushed by you!

The Golden Cockerel was Pushkin's final tale and the last of Rimsky-Korsakov's fifteen operas. At the rise of the twentieth century, both Russia and the composer faced difficult times. After completing the Trans-Siberian Railroad, Russia suffered massive losses and an embarrassing withdrawal in the war with Japan (1905). The cover of a short-lived "savagely satirical journal" *Zhupel*, issued in revolutionary 1905 depicted a cartoonish fairy-tale *Tsar Pea*. "Picking his nose," this "Tsar Pea (also known as Old King Cole, akin to Dodon, likened to Nikolas II) gazes at the full moon, imagining its absorption into the Russian Empire." [6, pp. 179—180]

That same year, Russia experienced the first in a chain of revolutions. Students of the St. Petersburg Conservatory — Russia's most prestigious musical institution — joined the uprising. Rimsky-Korsakov, the director of the conservatory, stood with the students, protesting their arrests. He was fired and performances of his compositions in St. Petersburg were cancelled. His bitterness with imperial authority permeates the opera. When the Astrologer asks the tsar to sign a legal document, the cartoonish tsar Dodon replies, bemused: "The law? What word is it? I've never heard of it. My order and caprice are the only law."

Near the end of the opera, after the tsar kills the Astrologer and the faithful cockerel finishes off the tsar, the confused Russian folk on stage utter the final chorus —not a traditional "Glory" to the Tsar and nation, but a puzzling question: "What brings the new dawn? How will we be without the tsar?" The imperial censors demanded revisions, but the composer refused any alteration. He did not see the premiere of his *Golden Cockerel*, which was staged after his death.

Pushkin and the Caucasus

Irving's Moorish king is entranced by a Christian damsel. Pushkin reverses this East-West paradigm. Dodon, surrounded by boyars and leading an army towards the East, belongs to Russian lore. His mysterious seducer is an Oriental

beauty, the Queen of the city Shamakha in the heart of the Caucasus (present-day Azerbaijan). Pushkin's choice of Shamakha may point to the long history of Russia's military campaigns in territories bordering with Ottoman Turkey and Persia. Not accidentally, Klinger's *Der goldene Hahn* (1785) was written between two wars Catherine conducted with Ottomans, each bringing parts of the Caucasus under the Russian empire (1768–74 and 1787–92). Russia is not a part of Klinger's tale, which deals with the Caucasus torn by unending rivalries and battles among local sultanates.

Pushkin's tale, depicting a tsar likewise frightened by his neighbors and attracted by the Eastern Queen, reflects on specific contemporary political events. At the rise of the nineteenth century, Russia, engaging in a barrage of military assaults mixed with nuanced separate dealings with local Caucasian sultans, as well as battles and negotiations with Persia, acquired desired lands that included Shamakha. Around the time Irving resided in the Alhambra, the Russian empire signed treaties with Persia and the Ottomans that finalized Russian ownership of Transcaucasia [8, pp. 170–174].

For Pushkin and his fellow Russian poets, all officers of the Russian army, the Caucasus was not solely a destination. Just as Irving, Benjamin Disraeli, Gérard de Nerval and generations of European servicemen, diplomats, artists, and literati traveled to the Middle East, attracted by its exoticism, Russians served, toured, and resided in Russia's own recently acquired East. Aromas, mystery, intimacy, and violence fill Pushkin's *Fountain of Bakhchisaray*, as well as his poems and novels. Pushkin's literary journey to the Caucasus paved the way for Russian Orientalists.

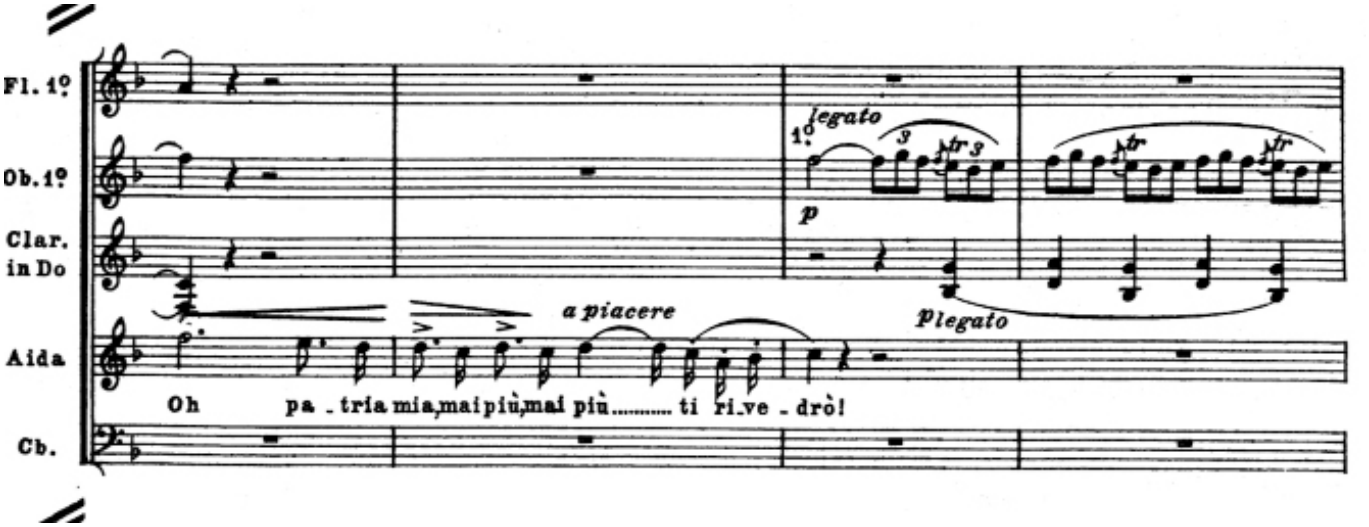
Rimsky-Korsakov and the Orient[9]

Rimsky-Korsakov, composing his opera seventy years later, seemed to be at ease with East, West, and the rest. Irving's *Alhambra* exudes the aura of *One Thousand and One Nights*, also evoked in Rimsky-Korsakov's instantly successful *Scheherazade* (1888). The rich gallery of Eastern images in Rimsky-Korsakov's operas also include Indian, Moorish, and Arabian traders, Gypsies, and the most alluring of all seductresses, Cleopatra, who serves as a model for his Queen in *The Golden Cockerel*.

But neither magical Princess Volkhova from *Sadko* nor the Eastern beauty Cleopatra from *Mlada* match the alluring power of the Queen of Shamakha. She owns the second act of the opera — a pastiche of Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade and Cleopatra, Verdi's Aida, entwined with vocal striptease, cabaret, drinking songs,

[9] The numbers in parentheses indicate rehearsal marks (rm) in Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral score of the opera. Rimsky-Korsakov, N. A. (1908). Zolotoy petushok: nebylitsa v litsakh [*The Golden Cockerel*. An Acted Parable]. Opera in three acts, libretto by V. Belsky [Clavier]. P. Yurgenson.

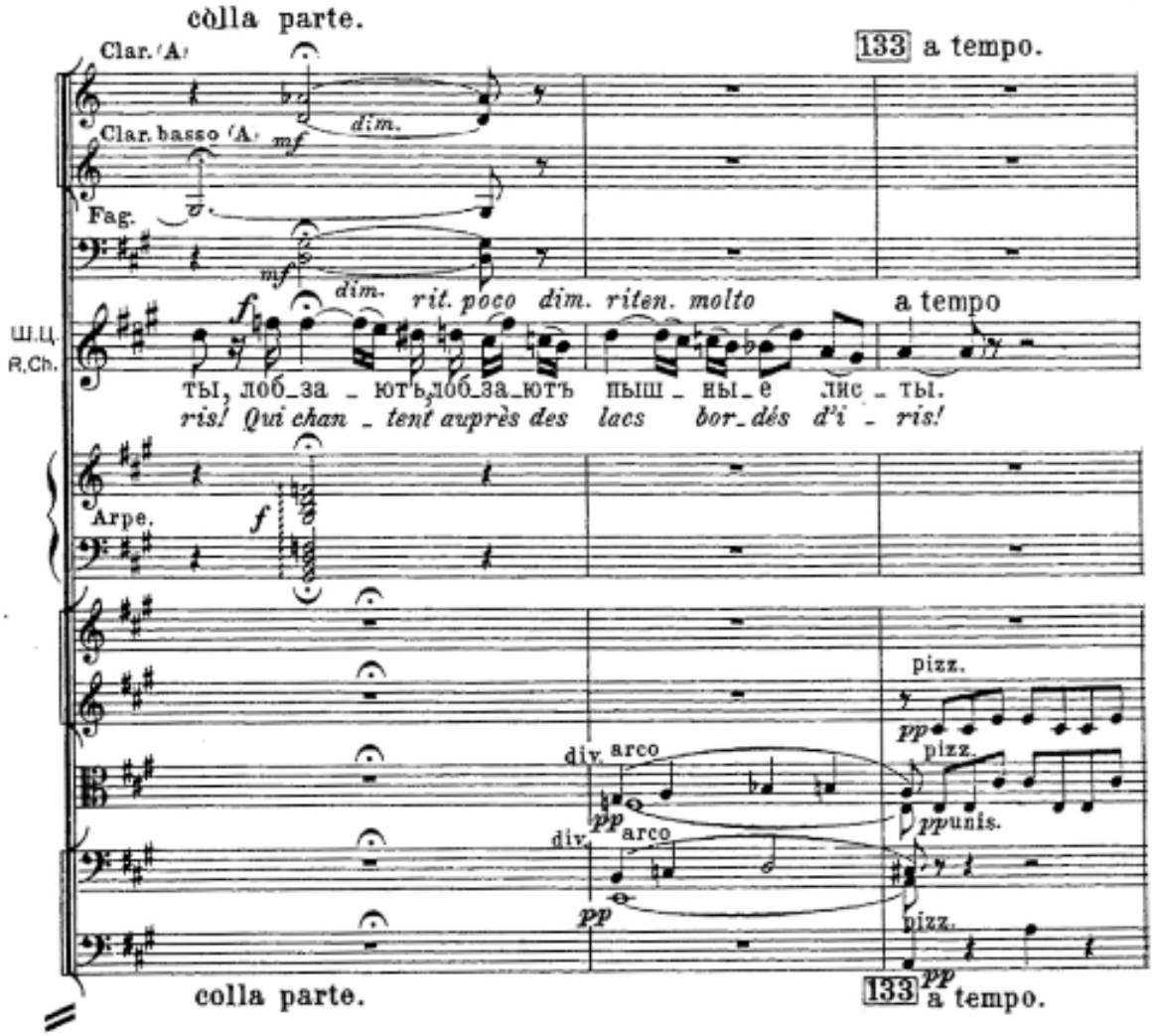
everything saturated with enthralling aromas identified with musical realization of the East. In this perfectly symmetrical three-act opera framed by a short prologue and epilogue, the first and third acts are set in Dodon's palace surrounded by his quaint picturesque capital. At the beginning of the second act, the tsar, leading a military campaign in a dark forest and discovering his fallen sons, is flabbergasted by the sudden emergence of an ornate tent. The Queen steps out. From the first moment, she, with her elaborate and extraordinarily challenging vocal part, engages in erotic conquest. She enters singing "Hymn to the Sun," haughtily announces she's about to subdue the tsar (rm 139), then flirts with him, stirs his jealousy by toying with his general, and unleashes her dancers on Dodon. She pleads, commands, weeps, teases, challenges, and dominates, following a perfect step-by-step plan of seduction, each emotional phase rendered musically. The densely laced, intricately zigzagging ornamented melody of her initial appeal to the sun evokes her dreams of the motherland. Her singing about "roses, lilies, and turquoise dragonfly caressing lush leaves," along with repeated "a piacere" written in the score, recalls Verdi's *Oh Patria mia* (*Examples 1* and *2*). Aida's desperate vocal line combines chromatic rises with octave-wide falls; the Queen of Shamakha spills her long notes in endless chromatic ornaments, both accompanied with orchestral tremolos.



Example 1. G. Verdi, *Aida*, Act III, *Oh Patria mia!*

While "looking modestly, eyes down," as indicated in the score, the Queen declares that victory does not require an army and calls her slave girls to feed the tsar and entertain his suite dancing. Switching to six beats and a swifter dance-like move, the Queen utters, "Air becomes intoxicating, moist and heavy, spicy..." (rm 144). Next, in a chain of descending sentences, increasing dynamics, with flute and clarinet echoing her melody in a racing sixteenth, she "whispers" to the baffled tsar. Back to the rhythmically clear dance-like melody, accompanied by harps later joined by celesta, the two outshining each other in a stream of luscious glissandos and arpeggio, the Queen offers a detailed vocal account of a striptease:

Shedding ordinary clothes, and like a sunray in the fog, I will shine inside the lodging. Check if there is a hidden birthmark or a little blemish <...> Hair, liberated, will stream like a dark waterfall over supple white hips <...> And my breasts! They compete with the blazing rose, lavish and robust. Like dreams, they are light (rm 154).



Example 2. N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Golden Cockerel*, Act II, Queen of Shamakha

Still accompanied by a harp, in the following section of her multi-part seduction stunt, the Queen, in a nearly uninterrupted vocal flow of sixteens, mourns her passing youth, wishing to "give every hour to love." Dropping intricate rhythmical figures, in an evenly-paced quarter-note melody, she sings about the sweet lulling sound of a *gusli* — falling arpeggios in strings imitate the sound of the Slavic zither. Announcing that she is tired, the Queen asks the tsar to sing. Laughing at his ditty, she, as directed in the score, forgets about the tsar, drawn again to the dream of her motherland. The longest air in her vocal soliloquy, this section might also be the most moving — her melody and tremolo accompaniment unmistakably echo

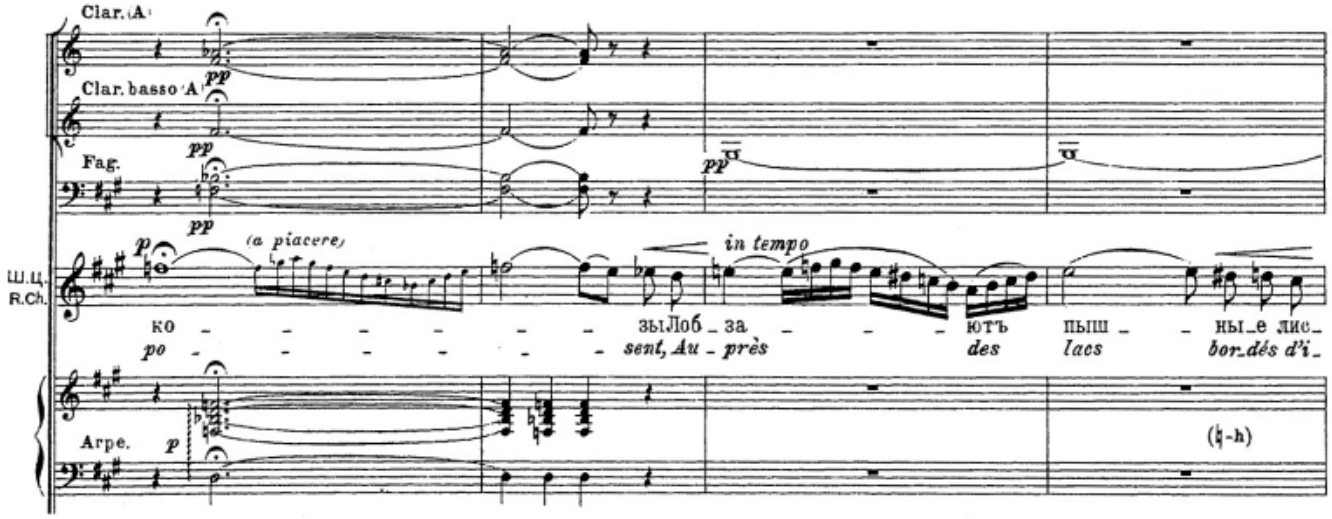
Aida. Waving away her reveries, she weeps one moment and next amuses herself by replacing the heavy helmet on the senile tsar's head with a girlish scarf, taunting him to dance "wildly."[10]

From laughter to lament, from submission to offence, the Queen of Shamakha explores step-by-step moves in a cascade of intricate chromatic melodic sequences. Taruskin comments:

> The Queen of Shamakha's Lakmé-ish coloratura music is a reductio ad absurdum of the stereotyped "oriental" idiom <...> and also of the sequence-driven chromaticism (now extended to encompass retrogrades and inversions) long associated with fantastic characters in Rimsky-Korsakov's earlier operas [9].

Crafting this most extravagant vocal seduction, the composer no longer limits his Queen to an association with either octatonic or whole-tone scales. She mixes a variety of symmetrical scales; her vocal line explores full facilities of both double-harmonic major and minor scales (Example 3); the orchestra follows hexatonic progressions. Music theorist Philip Ewell suggests that *The Golden Cockerel* "might reasonably be subtitled 'a hexatonic opera', whose premise is centered around mysticism and sorcery." [10, p. 129]

Thus the Queen's vocal part draws on triple powers: the virtuosity of Italian bel canto; a modal lingua that signifies magic; and densely ornamented filigree associated with Eastern imagery. The pinnacle of compositional mastery, the second act is also, as Taruskin wrote, an absurdist ruse, in which the composer and librettist paired the formidable Queen of Shamakha with an unworthy partner, making her sing laboriously in a quest for a crowned nitwit.



Example 3. N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Golden Cockerel,*
Queen of Shamakha part, fragment

[10] Score reads: Dodon's helplessly waving his hand, breaks into a wild dance". See Rimsky-Korsakov N. A. (1977). Zolotoy petushok: nebylitsa v litsakh [*The Golden Cockerel*. An Acted Parable]. Opera in three acts, libretto by V. Bel'skiy [Clavier]. Muzyka.

The Tsar

Dodon appears in two works by Pushkin. The first is the versed tale *Bova* (1814). Woodcuts, bylinas, and written tales dedicated to heroic ventures of Prince *Bova*, largely forgotten, were popular in eighteenth and nineteenth century Russia.[11] In Bova's epics Dodon is a villain and the murderer of the hero's father. Pushkin's ironic retelling of Bova's tale portrays Dodon as a "sleepless tyrant," who

…двадцать целых лет
Не снимал с себя оружия,
Не слезал с коня ретивого, <…>
Всюду пролетал с победою,
Мир крещеный потопил в крови,
Не щадил и некрещеного <…>[12]

…for twenty years
Did not lay down his arms
Dismounted no horse, <…>
Everywhere flying victorious,
Drowning the Christian world in blood
Sparing no others <…>

At some point in the poem, the aged and tired Dodon, surrounded by his associates, falls asleep; the cheeky poet invites his reader to…

Глядь, с Додоном задремал совет…
Захрапели многомыслящи!

Glance, along with Dodon his council naps,
Snoring, the hard-thinking ones …

This satirical scene may have become an impetus for Pushkin's *Golden Coq* and the "slothful autocrat," a caricature of his powerful namesake in *Bova* [9].

Continuing the panoply of Pushkin's ironic borrowings and references, Belski and Rimsky-Korsakov make their Dodon first enter the stage grouchy; his opening sentence "So heavy to bear the crown" is a satirical paraphrase of a dramatic utterance of Pushkin's Boris Godunov, "Oh, so heavy is the cap of Monomakh" [which is absent in Pushkin's *Coq*. Pushkin himself borrowed this sentence in his *Boris Godunov* from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown"]. The orchestra, with giggling sixteenths in woodwinds and syncopated sforzandos and jiggling staccatos in strings accompanying Dodon's short sentences,

[11] A champion of Russian bylinas, Bova and his heroic ventures were Russian remake of French and Italian chivalrous tales. Felix Lurie dates the published *Tale about Prince Bova* between 1635–1644. Lurie, F. M. (2022). Istoriya Rossii s VIII veka do n.e. po XIX vek v tablitsah. Lenta vremeni [History of Russia from 8th Century BC to 19th Century in Tables. Ribbon of Time]. OGIZ, p. 87.

[12] Pushkin, A. S. (1999). Polnoe sobranie hudozhestvennyh proizvedeniy [Complete Collection of Artistic Works]. Folio; Olma, p. 576.

adds another ironic layer. Although present on the stage virtually throughout the opera (minus the introduction and the epilogue), Dodon, unlike his foes, has no leitmotiv and appears largely incoherent, verbally and musically. He frequently utters monosyllabic expressions, his musical sentences rarely exceeding a few measures.

Throughout the first act, Dodon echoes the vocal lines of his foolish sons, lambasts his general, shares with Amelfa a stylized lullaby to himself, and, when calling the army "Nu, rebyatushki, voina!" intones a Russian folk song, "Dubinushka" [11]. In the second act, seeing his dead sons, the tsar descends in a whole-tone triad, filling it with a chromatic scale and recurring tritones. Dotted rhythms and pickups, gradually seeping into Dodon's melody, add some light dance-like elements as if signaling the advent of the Queen. Responding to the erotic yearning of the Queen, thrice repeated, each time expanding to a higher pitch and increasingly elaborated, Dodon mumbles to Polkan, "What a song, take note." Even the stern general comes back with a more agile vocal reply to the Queen. Accompanied by trembling pizzicato strings and fragrant runs of flutes, the Eastern Beauty, "moving her pillow close to Dodon" and "whispering in his ear" (as directed by the composer), quizzes him about her "blazing beauty." Dodon's stuttering reply — "I," "thi-is," well <...>"(rm 152) — leaves even the resourceful Queen at a loss. But the pinnacle of the tsar's vocal contribution to the opera is when, picking up the *gusli*, he bellows his four-measure twice repeated love confession intoning the most absurd little ditty known to every Russian child and grownup: "Chizhik-pyzhik" ("Birdy-birdy, where do you drink?" rm 168).

With royal pomp, the tsar brings the new tsarina to his kingdom in the third act; the Eastern Queen's leitmotiv is braided with what Taruskin calls "a snatch of *Svetit mesyats* (*The moon shines brightly*), a veritable roadhouse number (the remaining folk tune, the aptly named "Uzh tï, sizen'kiy petun" ("Oh you little grey-blue cock") is associated with Amelfa in Act 1)" [9]. The bombastic Wedding Procession of the lustful old tsar and the Queen brings to mind *The March of Chernomor*, Glinka's dwarf parading before Luidmila. Instead of the sequence of quasi-ethnic Eastern dances in *Ruslan*, Rimsky-Korsakov devised a succession of "warriors with self-inflated swollen faces and colorful and exotic characters adopted from an Eastern tale." Listed in abundance in the score, "the giants, pyzhiks, people with an eye on their forehead, and horned people" herald another parade of "swollen-heads" and different "groups of freaks" in *L'amour des trois oranges*, which Sergei Prokofiev composed over the decade after his teacher's *Golden Cockerel*. The three grotesque pageants, from Glinka to Rimsky-Korsakov and Prokofiev, replete with joshing staccatos, excessive brass and percussion, and a combination of high and low ranges with the hollow middle. They also share un-suffixed key signatures saturated with accidentals, chromaticism, augmented moves, a modal palette that Russians,

especially Rimsky-Korsakov, employed in the portrayal of everything magical and Eastern.

Chernomor, awakened from his nap and brought on stage in a lengthy procession, has to fight Ruslan. Prince Tartaglia, suddenly cured of hypochondria, meets with the wrath of Fata Margana. Dodon, refusing to grant the Astrologer the promised reward, faces the ensemble of Astrologer, Golden Cockerel, and Queen, which leads to a sequence of quick murders and disappearances. The tsar smacks his wizard to death, the cock pecks the tsar on the head, and the bird and the laughing Queen vanish together. In the epilogue, the Astrologer reappears.

Folk and Nation

Irving's tale, while filled with colorful descriptions of the Alhambra — plush hills, extravagant gardens, magnificent palaces, exotic vestibules, lofty arches, dancing girls, silvery lyres, and lots of other frills — focuses on a dynamic triangle: two aged men and a sedentary girl. Pushkin, uninterested in describing exotic environs, provides the tsar with two sons, creating what could work as a triangle, counterbalancing the magical trio. But the regal trio appears dysfunctional; halfway through the poem, the tsar finds his two boys lying dead, their "swords thrust in each other."[13] Rimsky-Korsakov, not wasting even half of the opera, shows the two brothers alive only in the first act, each vocalizing a preposterous plan to save the kingdom. Quoting operatic Dodon falling head-over-heels for the Queen recites: "Good riddance! Not much use for them." (rm 170)

In addition to Pushkin's brothers, the opera supplies Dodon with two other supportive characters, making the tsar a part of yet another trio with his general Polkan and the housekeeper Amelfa. Lulling Dodon to sleep in the first act, Amelfa questions whether he is a chess king. In the opening of the third act, the folk, frightened by double trouble — stormy skies and the advent of an unknown tsarina — seek the counsel of Amelfa. She utters some confusing lines: "Hear the news. Four kings — the spade, the heart, the clover, and the diamond — all are conquered by our tsar." Does the tsar's faithful domestic see Dodon and his kingdom as a game?

The character of Polkan, like Dodon, belongs to the narrative about prince Bova. Absent from Pushkin's *Golden Cockerel* but mentioned in the poet's *Bova*, operatic Polkan is a good warrior and the lonely voice of reason. He opposes ridiculous proposals by Dodon's sons in the first act, and in the second attempts to disrupt the tsar's delusionary romance. The Queen of Shamakha reacts capriciously: "How many lashes will you give him? I don't like him at all." Taunted by the queen,

[13] Pushkin, A. S. (n.d.). Skazka o zolotom petushke [*The Tale of the Golden Cockerel*]. *Internet-biblioteka Alekseya Komarova / Internet Library of Alexey Komarov*. Retrieved May 10, 2023, from https://ilibrary.ru/text/458/p.1/index.html

the tsar "amply," as indicated in the score, proposes to decapitate Polkan. For the tsar, neglecting an honest warning and purging loyalty, the law is a joke. Encountering magical characters, each with a leitmotiv that permeates the opera, Dodon and his team appear to be musically deprived. None has either a memorable vocal line or a distinct instrumental color, lacking any individual musical characteristics.

In this *kapustnik*-like opera,[14] Rimsky-Korsakov, a major composer-nationalist, pointedly offered a trifling image of the folk. A master in portrayal of antique Slavic tribes, Russian and Slavic rituals, wedding scenes, marketplaces, city squares with *schomorokhs*,[15] and ritualistic *kolos*, a collector and composer of folk songs and choruses, including laudatory choral "Slavas," in his *Golden Cockerel*, Rimsky-Korsakov depicted three groups of Dodon's subjects — boyars, warriors, and simple folk — all folding into an oblivious, musically idle mass. Boyars surrounding the tsar in the first act mindlessly echo their leader and his heirs; their pompous march-like sentences do not exceed a few measures. The folk, present but silent on the stage throughout the first act, finally salute their tsar-father marching ahead of the army by "blasting out" an eight-measure "Hurray!" adding as the curtains falls, two more measures: "Save yourself, stay behind all the time!" (rm 112).

The eerie opening of the second act on a dark night with "bloody shadows cast by the dim crescent" depicts Dodon's army on a dreadful battlefield. Stupefied, the tenors and basses begin pianissimo, repeating a single tone, their rhythm imitating a heartbeat, the low strings' line following intervallic tritones and violins fluctuating octave-wide. Gradually winds and brass inject unresolved harmonic clusters, and chromatically sliding violins lead to the entrance of Dodon. After listening to the mournful air of Dodon — the grieving father and witnessing the entrance of the Queen — the warriors are promptly replaced by a chorus of singing and dancing Eastern beauties, appearing again only at the very end of the act to bellow a triple "Hurray!"

After the second act unfolding in the murky night in the mountains, the beginning of the third act pictures the "bustling capital" and a "thick crowd everywhere." But it is not a happy scene: the heat, the heavy cloud from the East promising a tempest, and the advent of the tsar and a new tsarina sow trouble, signaled by an alarming tremolo in strings and chromatic moves of the trio of bassoons, their pianissimo broken by the trumpets blasting the Coq's leitmotiv accompanied by racing violins. The tenors and altos, as if talking to each other, initiate a chorus "Scary, brothers!" joined by likewise frightened disoriented basses and sopranos. Turned away by Amelfa, the folk, as marked in the score, "scratch

[14] A kapustnik ("cabbage" party) is "a hodgepodge of mocking songs and skits," a long-existing tradition of lampooning everything and everyone, staged in Russian conservatories and theaters.

[15] Shrovetide (*May Night*), Yarilo rites (*May Night, Snow Maiden*), a midsummer festival of Kupala (*Mlada*).

their backs and grin stupidly," ending with their choral admission, "If we are whipped, it's for a reason." The following wedding procession brings another spree of a folk choral "Hurray!" When the tsar is gone, the chorus utters the Cock's theme and afterwards moves to the eight-part dirge, saturated with chromatic and whole-tone cries and ending with a tritonic unresolved question "How will we live without the tsar?"

The Bird as the Title

A bird with a woman's head and chest, the Sirin occupies a significant place in Russian myths. There are two of these woman-birds, one a creature of the night and the underworld, the other a heavenly bird of light. Both mythological birds with divine powerful voices are related to their cousin — the siren — that can be either vengeful or generous. Tchaikovsky's swan turns into a princess in *Swan Lake*. Nocturnal swan-maidens accompany the magical Water Princess in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko*. A Swan Princess appears in his other opera based on Pushkin, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. Shortly after *The Golden Cockerel*, Rimsky-Korsakov's pupil Igor Stravinsky produced the ballet *Firebird* and several years later the opera *Le Rossignol* (*The Nightingale*).

The Golden Cockerel doesn't turn into a beautiful princess like the Firebird, but its voice type links the Cockerel with the Queen: the bird and the dame are the only sopranos in the opera. The Cock's characteristic call, played by a muted trumpet, opens the symphonic introduction to the opera. The motif moves upward by triads in a rhythmically accented line; immediately afterwards there are soft ornamented hexatonic melodic sequences, first in low strings, and then repeated by high flutes and oboes. Beginning on a last sustained pitch of the Coq, this flowing melodic line, associated with the Queen, is in fact an inverted and reversed version of the first. The Cock monopolizes the first act, the Queen reigns in the second. Her first aria, a hymn to the golden sun and her leitmotiv from the introduction, also links her with the cockerel. As if echoing each other, the cock crows, "Ki-ri-ki, ki-ri-ku-ku!" and the Queen laughs, "Khi-hi-hi-hi! Kha-ha-ha-kha!" The leitmotiv of the Astrologer, like that of the Coq, follows a triadic chord. Showing up before the regal couple in the third act, the Astrologer first recites a melody echoing the leitmotiv of the Queen and later sings one of the Coq's. The three most memorable musical characters are linked.

Epilogue

Everything is a bit off-kilter in this opera with endless surprises. For example, why does the Astrologer — a eunuch cast as a rare tenor-altino — need the Queen? When he announces his desire to marry, his voice soars in a wide leap to the highest falsetto, creating a comical effect. Pushkin's Astrologer is dead; Rimsky-Korsakov's

Astrologer comes back to life. Pushkin ends his tale with a puzzling moral: "The tale is false, but there is a clue — a lesson for youth." Rimsky-Korsakov's Astrologer recites this very line in the prologue. Beginning where Pushkin ends his tale, the operatic Astrologer concludes the opera with an obscure statement: "This bloody tale should not upset you. I and the Queen are only real ones; the rest — delirium and dream." Whether drawn from tales by a German serving the Russian crown or an American visiting Granada, or any other sources, written by the Russia's great poet and trickster, made into an opera by the composer of musical fairytales, turned into an opera-ballet by the Ballets Russes, *The Golden Coq* is an enduring tale that ends to begin again.

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