

A Kalmus Classic Edition

Nicolai

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

MOZART AND SALIERI

Opera in One Act, Two Scenes

Opus 48

With Russian and English Texts

VOCAL SCORE

K 05258



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INSTRUMENTATION

(Full Score and Orchestra Parts on rental)

Flute	2 Horns
Oboe	3 Trombones*
Clarinet	Timpani*
Bassoon	Piano

Strings

(*ad lib.)

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INTRODUCTION

“In the summer of 1897, at Smychkovo, I composed much and ceaselessly,” writes Nikolai Andreevich Rimsky-Korsakov in his autobiography, *My Musical Life*.¹ One of the fruits of this summer was the one-act opera, “Mozart and Salieri,” based closely on a verse-drama of the same name by Rimsky-Korsakov’s countryman—and probably Russia’s most beloved writer—Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837).

By the time Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), Russia’s first truly professional composer and guiding spirit to the group of Russian nationalist composers known as The Mighty Handful, came to “Mozart and Salieri,” he had already written five operas. Among them were “May Night,” “The Snow Maiden,” “Christmas Eve” and the lavish fairytale, “Sadko.” Still to come—Rimsky wrote 14 operas in all—were “The Tsar’s Bride,” “Tsar Saltan,” “Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh” and “The Golden Cockerel.” “Tsar Saltan” and “The Golden Cockerel” were, like “Mozart and Salieri,” inspired by Pushkin poems. Nor was Rimsky-Korsakov the only Russian composer to base operas on Pushkin: Glinka in “Ruslan and Ludmilla,” Dargomyzhsky in “The Stone Guest,” Mussorgsky in “Boris Godunov” and, of course, Tchaikovsky in “Eugene Onegin” and “The Queen of Spades,” had all turned to the great Russian Romantic.

If one can question Tchaikovsky’s or Mussorgsky’s manipulation and deformation of Pushkin’s incomparable words—returning to that endless argument on the incompatibility of great literature and successful libretti—it is impossible to reproach Rimsky for his treatment of “Mozart and Salieri.” Rimsky’s libretto, composed in two scenes, is Pushkin’s text. A few lines of Pushkin’s verse (the play is in blank verse) are omitted, but all the lines included to be sung are taken verbatim from the drama. Above all, Rimsky was concerned with preserving the words and spirit of the Pushkin original. How different was Tchaikovsky’s approach to “Eugene Onegin,” which he romanticized almost beyond recognition!

Rimsky described it this way: “I turned to Pushkin’s ‘Mozart and Salieri,’ in the form of two operatic scenes in recitative-arioso style. The composition was purely vocal indeed: the melodic web, following the sinuosities of the text, was composed ahead of all else; the accompaniment, fairly complicated, shaped itself later, and its first outline differed greatly from the final form of its orchestral accompaniment. I felt content: the result was something new for me, and it approached most closely the manner of Dargomyzhsky in his ‘Stone Guest,’ however, without the form and modulatory scheme of ‘Mozart and Salieri’ being quite as much an accident as in Dargomyzhsky’s opera. For my accompaniment I took a reduced orchestra. The two tableaux were connected by a fugue-like intermezzo, which I subsequently destroyed.”²

It is the legend of the rivalry between Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri (1750-1825), official composer for the Hapsburg Court in Vienna, that is the source of the “Mozart and Salieri” story. According to rumors still unproven—and recently made famous by Peter Shaffer’s Broadway play “Amadeus”—Salieri poisoned the younger Mozart out of uncontrollable envy for his enormous musical talent. In Shaffer’s setting, Salieri poisons Mozart not literally but figuratively; he consistently undermines his position at court, and intrigues against his career and music. Pushkin (and Rimsky), however, has Salieri actually murder Mozart by pouring poison in his glass. In the opera’s most striking moment, Salieri, seconds after slipping the poison into Mozart’s wine, sobs unrestrainedly as he hears Mozart’s unfinished “Requiem,” whose opening is quoted in full in the orchestral and off-stage choral accompaniment.

There are only two singing roles: Salieri and Mozart (tenor). A blind violinist plays a snatch from “Don Giovanni.” No women appear. Salieri is at the center of the piece—the action is seen more from his viewpoint than Mozart’s—and he has several lengthy reflective monologues. The piece ends with his desperate questioning, directed more to himself than to the audience: “Did he speak the truth? That I’m no genius? Murder and true genius can never know a union? He’s lying—remember Michaelangelo! Was it a story, a tale? Or could it be the truth—He murdered his model for the Sistine Crucifixion?” Michaelangelo is Michaelangelo Buonarrotti who, it is rumored, murdered the man who served as the model for Christ in the crucifixion painting above the altar in the Sistine Chapel.

“Mozart and Salieri” is a realistic psychological tragedy of small, intense proportions, verbally and emotionally detailed, very different from the extravagant and exotic fairy-tale operas—“The Golden Cockerel,” “Sadko,” “Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh,” “The Tsar’s Bride”—for which Rimsky is better known. The atmosphere is heavy, brooding and intellectual—even Dostoevskian.

Rimsky’s unexpected attraction to such a serious and introspective work of literature seems motivated in part by a strong unconscious identification with Antonio Salieri. Like Salieri, Rimsky was an exceptionally disciplined and organized composer: his obsessive “revising” of his own and his colleagues’ (Mussorgsky’s, Glinka’s, Borodin’s) scores is well documented. It was, of course, Rimsky who played Salieri to Mussorgsky’s Mozart in the case of Mussorgsky’s opera “Boris Godunov.” Both men belonged to The Mighty Handful; they worked together closely and at one time even shared an apartment. Mussorgsky never had formal musical training, while Rimsky forced himself to master the fundamentals in his late 20s, and eventually became the most academic Russian composer of his era.

Like the Salieri in Pushkin's drama, Rimsky discounted pure talent and could say: "I saw music as a craft—a skill that could be mastered." Rimsky admitted that he both "loved and hated" the unorthodox harmonies of the original version of "Boris Godunov"; he always viewed Mussorgsky—as Salieri viewed Mozart—as enormously gifted but irresponsible and undisciplined. One could easily see Rimsky's controversial re-orchestration of "Boris" after Mussorgsky's death—which subsequently became the accepted performing version—as a kind of envious musical poisoning of his less academic colleague. History, though, has come down on Mussorgsky's—and Mozart's—side. Rimsky, certainly, has fared better than Salieri, whose reputation, at least until the Broadway success of "Amadeus," extended not much further than musicological footnotes.

Whatever the reasons for Rimsky's choice of "Mozart and Salieri" as a libretto source, the opera is one of the composer's most unusual and moving compositions. The great Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin, famous for his crazed portrayal of "Boris Godunov," sang the role of Salieri in the opera's premiere in Moscow on December 7, 1898. Rimsky writes that "Chaliapin won enormous success, and from this time dates his fame and the growth of his popularity."³ A performance in St. Petersburg followed in March, 1899.

The first American performance came in 1933 in Forest Park, Pa. In 1956 the Little Opera Company revived the work in New York, and in the years since, the piece has been given at the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut, the Brooklyn College Opera Workshop, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and at the Aspen Music Festival in Colorado. Two performances were staged in New York in 1981: one with piano by the Theater Opera Music Institute, and the first complete New York performance with full orchestra by Chamber Opera Theater of New York.

HARLOW ROBINSON
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1) *My Musical Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1923. Translated by Judah A. Joffe, p.310. (First published in Russian 1909.)

2) *My Musical Life*, p.310-11.

3) *My Musical Life*, p.318.