

Ruslan and Lyudmila premièred 1842 in St Petersburg

MIKHAIL GLINKA (1804-1857)

Libretto from a poem by Alexander Pushkin

Running time: 86 mins {January} plus 125 mins {February}

Performed 1995 by the Kirov Opera at the Mariinsky Theatre St Petersburg

Svetosar, Grand Prince of Kyiv	<i>Mikhail Kit</i>	Bass
Lyudmila, his daughter	<i>Anna Netrebko</i>	Soprano
Ruslan, a Kyivian knight	<i>Vladimir Ognovenko</i>	Baritone
Ratmir, an eastern prince from Khazar	<i>Larissa Diadkova</i>	Contralto
Farlaf, a Viking (Varangian) prince	<i>Gennady Bezzubnikov</i>	Bass
Gorislava, maiden in love with Ratmir	<i>Galina Gorchakova</i>	Soprano
Finn, a benevolent sorcerer	<i>Konstantin Pluzhnikov</i>	Tenor
Naina, an evil sorceress	<i>Irina Bogachova</i>	Mezzo
The Bayan, a bard	<i>Yuri Marusin</i>	Tenor
Conductor	<i>Valery Gergiev</i>	
Director	<i>Lotfi Mansouri</i>	

Synopsis

ACT 1 at the court of Svetosar, Prince of Kyiv: Celebrations are in progress before Lyudmila is married to the warrior Ruslan. Bayan a minstrel sings of trials in store for Ruslan, while he predicts the victory of true love. Lyudmila nostalgically bids farewell to her parents' home, and consoles her unsuccessful suitors, the eastern prince Ratmir and the Viking warrior Farlaf. Everything suddenly darkens. When light is restored Lyudmila has vanished. Svetosar promises her hand and half his kingdom to anyone who can rescue her.

[January Interval]

ACT 2: In his cave Finn the good magician reveals to Ruslan that Lyudmila's abductor is the dwarf Chernomor (whose strength lies in his enormously long beard). He warns Ruslan against the evil enchantress Naina.

In a deserted place the sorceress Naina instructs a very frightened Farlaf to wait at home; she'll help him to defeat Ruslan and gain Lyudmila.



On a deserted battlefield Ruslan reaffirms his resolve, and then defeats a gigantic head. He draws a sword from beneath it. The head explains that he's Chernomor's brother – as well as one of his victims – and that the sword's magic can defeat the dwarf.

[Pause before February Resumption!]

ACT 3 in Naina's enchanted palace: Her maidens pay attention to the travel-weary Ratmir, which distresses his slave Gorislava who loves him. Ruslan appears and is smitten by Gorislava, but Finn intervenes to break the seductive spell. He unites Ratmir and Gorislava, then all set out to rescue Lyudmila.

[February Interval]

ACT 4 in the dwarf Chernomor's enchanted garden: Lyudmila expresses despair and defiance about her confinement, and she rejects her captor's blandishments. On Ruslan's approach Chernomor casts a spell over her, and he goes out to fight with Ruslan. Chernomor's followers observe the offstage moment when Ruslan catches hold of Chernomor's beard and cuts it off. He returns triumphantly with the beard, but he despairs when he finds Lyudmila in an enchanted sleep. He decides to take her back to Kyiv.

ACT 5: Ratmir sings of his love for Gorislava. Farlaf steals Lyudmila and speeds to Kyiv, pursued by Ruslan. Meanwhile Finn gives Ratmir the magic ring that will waken Lyudmila. In Kyiv Farlaf cannot rouse her, but everyone rejoices when Ruslan arrives with Ratmir and he uses the ring to break the spell.

**Operatic Context**

Glinka began work on his second and final opera in 1837. His disorganised lifestyle ensured that his compositional progress was characteristically disorderly and spasmodic. Before its 1842 performance Glinka's score received warm approval from Liszt, which created extra interest. Despite a lukewarm première appreciation steadily increased, with three hundred St Petersburg performances during the next fifty years.

Although the fantasy and romance of Pushkin's poem appealed to Glinka, his compositional challenges were augmented when Konstantin Bakhturian contrived an operatic scenario too hastily. Drastic surgery during rehearsals failed to eliminate every dramatic weakness. Characterisation remains weak, particularly the Viking Farlaf.

At its best, *Ruslan and Lyudmila* contains some of the most strikingly original invention in 19th century opera, which includes some brilliantly treated incidents. The opera is far more characteristically Russian than its *Life for the Tsar* predecessor. The Russian effect springs from novel materials and free structures created by Glinka's very Russian imagination. Hence the ensuing importance of this opera in Russia. The clear and bright scoring also established the fundamental style of Russian orchestration, as well as providing so much theatrical colour. Glinka introduced a simple harmonic delineation that Russian composers followed for generations: diatonicism for human characters, contrasted with chromaticism for the supernatural.

Act 1 has real consistency, and establishes a characteristically heroic Russian idiom (which reappears in Ruslan's great Act 2 aria). Act 1 also contains the famous abduction passage where Glinka uses a descending whole tone scale to disrupt the prevailing tonality, thereby depicting the disorientation caused by Chernomor's magic.

Naina's music in the central Act 2 tableau introduces something of the special Russian 'magic' style, and an oriental idiom appears for the first time in Act 3, notably in the voluptuous Persian chorus and in the first part of Ratmir's aria. Act 4 contains a great concentration of excellent music: Lyudmila's spirited scena and aria, languorous delicate choruses for Chernomor's houris, and Chernomor's splendidly grotesque march. Act 5 includes Ratmir's memorably sultry romance.

Mikhail Glinka

Glinka indisputably founded the Russian operatic tradition. As a dilettante without a formal musical education, he focused on Italian opera in the late 1820s. He then met Bellini, Donizetti, Mendelssohn and Berlioz during a three year residence in Italy, where he resolved to compose operas in a specifically Russian way. His first opera *A Life for the Tsar* (also known as *Ivan Susanin*) was a sensation at its first performance in 1836.

He originally hoped that Pushkin would transform his *Ruslan and Lyudmila* poem into a libretto, but the 37 year old poet was killed in a duel in 1837. Dejected after the poor initial reception of *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Glinka's spirits rose when he travelled to Spain. He spent several years in Paris, before moving to Berlin where he died suddenly in 1857.

Glinka's operas display a sensitive colourful treatment of folk material and a gift for translucent orchestration lacking in earlier Russian music, combined with some melodic traits of the Italian *bel canto* tradition and a debt to French opera in the large choral scenes and dance sequences.



Glinka as the Father of Russian Opera

Tchaikovsky later dubbed Glinka as the *acorn* from which the *oak* of Russian music grew. Before Glinka French tastes were cultivated by the ruling class, who regarded everything Russian as inferior. Less than 50 years later Cesar Cui was able to make a previously unthinkable comparison with its Paris-dominated rival: 'Operatic matters now stand with us on a higher plane than in western Europe'.

Dargomyzhsky is a less familiar intermediary after Glinka: his *Stone Guest* opera was particularly influential. It was based on Pushkin's version of the Don Juan story (and coincidentally Tchaikovsky was originally influenced by the same legend in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*).

The historical and heroic elements of *A Life for the Tsar* were taken up in Borodin's *Prince Igor*. Glinka's treatment of fantasy and comedy in *Ruslan and Lyudmila* were developed by Rimsky-Korsakov, particularly in some later operas such as *The Golden Cockerel*. Dargomyzhsky's attempt to set Pushkin's poetry more or less word for word was a potent influence on later Russian operas including Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri*.

<i>Composer</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Operas</i>	<i>including ...</i>
Glinka	1804	2	A Life for the Tsar (1834-36), Ruslan and Lyudmila (1837-42)
Dargomyzhsky	1813	2	Rusalka (1848-55), The Stone Guest (1860-69)
Musorgsky	1839	6	Boris Godunov (1868-72), Khovanshchina (1872-80)
Borodin	1833	1	Prince Igor (1869-87)
Tchaikovsky	1840	10	Eugene Onegin (1877-78), Mazeppa (1881-83), The Queen of Spades (1890)
Rimsky-Korsakov	1844	16	The Snow Maiden (1880-81), Mozart and Salieri (1897), Tale of Tsar Sultan (1899-1900), Golden Cockerel (1906-07)
Rakhmaninov	1873	3	Aleko (1892), The Miserly Knight (1903-05)
Prokofiev	1891	8	The Love for Three Oranges (1919)
Stravinsky	1882	7	Mavra (1921-22), A Rake's Progress (1947-51)
Shostakovich	1906	4	Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk (1930-35)

Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)

Pushkin is considered by many to be the greatest Russian poet, as well as the founder of modern Russian literature. Despite being unfashionable in the 1840s, Pushkin's subsequent influence on Russian opera – including the works highlighted in [blue](#) above – could hardly be more extensive. His poetic tragedy *Mozart and Salieri* also inspired Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*.



Selected Musical Biographies

LYUDMILA: ANNA YURIEVNA NETREBKO is a Russian coloratura soprano born in 1971, who's performed in New York, Vienna and London. Discovered by Valery Gergiev, she began her career at the Mariinsky Theatre. She attracted global attention at the 2002 Salzburg Festival. Having been known for lyric and coloratura roles, Netrebko later proceeded into heavier 19th century romantic repertoire, particularly Verdi. Since 2016 she's focused on verismo roles.

CONDUCTOR: In 1992 Valery Gergiev, penniless head of the Mariinsky Theatre, was in desperate need of a friend in power. His subsequent alliance with Putin has been fruitful. Gergiev (born in 1953) has become richer than oligarchs now that he also controls the Bolshoi. War in Ukraine is his only drawback. Gergiev has lost his international career, probably for decades if not forever.