

*The Beauty of Belaieff*By Richard Beattie Davis
Bedford: G-Clef Publishing, 2008.

Reviewed by Julian Gallant

Richard Beattie Davis's long-awaited *The Beauty of Belaieff* is a wide-ranging study of music and music publishing in pre-Revolutionary Russia. The book is also a *revel* of the brightly coloured title pages that adorned the first editions of music emanating from the publishing house of Mitrofan Petrovich Belaieff (1836-1903/4); there are in this book no less than 145 full-page colour facsimile plates, the jewels of a vast collection of printed music in the hands of the author.

Richard Beattie Davis has spent a life collecting valuable first editions; his interest in Russian music dates back to his early experiences of Balakirev's orchestral and piano music and the discovery of a vast collection of Russian music housed at the Central Library of Music in Westminster. Juggling a parallel business career, the author has written, lectured, researched and exhibited throughout the world. The book is a work of conservation, since examples of these editions are now very rare and fragile; the original plates have long been destroyed or melted down for reuse as military materiel. The title pages are also the springboard for the author's research into the composers, many of whose names have long been buried by ignorance and fashion.

The Beauty of Belaieff is not designed to be read in one sitting; it doesn't follow a single argument from chapter to chapter. It opens with a brief and useful coverage of sources, a word on the intricacies of Russian transliteration, a Foreword by Dmitry Rachmanov, Assistant Professor at the Chicago College of Performing Arts, an extended Author's Preface and a graph which helpfully shows the dates of publishers and composers alike. The pith of the text begins with the Introduction to Russian Music Publishers; this is a thorough yet digestible study, laced with title pages, of seven leading houses – Stellovsky, Johansen, Bernard, Jurgenson, Zimmerman, Bessel and Belaieff. There follows as expected an extensive biography of M.P. Belaieff himself, charting his life, his early experience of music, his first encounter with the music of his star client Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936) and his subsequent patronage of this important composer. There

follows an account of the 'Piatnitsi', the Friday-afternoon musical sessions at Belaieff's house, the establishment of a capital fund to back the Glinka Prizes, the establishment of the Russian Symphonic Concerts, The Russian Quartet Evenings and finally the Belaieff Edition and its importance in the transmission of Russian music. The author writes movingly about the death of Belaieff, quoting an obituary from the ubiquitous Vladimir Stasov.

Richard Beattie Davis next moves into detailed discussion of the Belaieff-published composers, each study formed of a biographical note followed by discussion of the composer's music; the author discusses the music in biographical terms without recourse to printed musical examples or extended graphic analysis. The composers are listed alphabetically, but the inclusion of a particular composer and the amount of space

allotted to each one is not dictated by the composer's 'importance', rather by the availability of biographical detail and musical editions. This treatment may be judged unscholarly and quirky, but the result is an utterly fascinating exposé of little-known composers and of the unknown repertoire of some of the greatest composers. For example, the biography of K.A. Antipov (1859-?) is expectedly short for a composer of very limited output, but the biography of F.M. Blumenfeld (1863-1931) runs to about 3000 words, and that of S.M. Lyapunov (1859-1924) to about 6500. In both these cases, the author is clearly more interested in the life of the composers than their music. The longest section in the book is that on A.K. Glazunov (1865-

1936), the well-trained and prolifically gifted composer who dominated symphonic, ballet and chamber music for over thirty years, who was lionized before and after the Revolution yet who died in sadly neglected circumstances in Paris in 1936. Beattie Davis presents 38 works and title pages by Glazunov; he keeps the biography to one page only — there is much on Glazunov published by others — but explores the individual works and their circumstances in considerable detail. There are treatments of Borodin, Balakirev, Musorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, all published (not exclusively) by Belaieff, but especially fascinating is that of Tchaikovsky himself. Most of Tchaikovsky's *œuvre* was published by Jurgenson, but there were four substantial orchestral works never published in the composer's lifetime but resurrected by Modest Tchaikovsky in the late 1890s and published by Belaieff. Here they are listed and discussed in tandem with their glorious title pages



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Richard Beattie Davis is perhaps telling us to wake up to the poverty of an ever-dwindling orchestral repertoire. The final chapter is a brief account of the Belaieff Edition from the death of its founder up to the present day. There are extensive endnotes, a bibliography, a list of works discussed in the book and a clear index.

Inseparable from the information in the text are the marvellous title pages, never before collected and presented in one volume. The designs range from the staid to the erotic, from the monochromatic to the psychedelic. The author states 'quite apart from whatever artistic merit a title page may possess [...] each tells a story — the title of the work, the nature of the instruments for which it was written, the price (often an aid to dating the publication), and the plate number establishing its position in the publisher's catalogue, the publisher's address and the work's dedicatee...'. The author does not discuss the artistic merits of the individual designs; suffice it to say that they are a window on the variety and extravagance of life in late nineteenth-century Russia, an era we

tend to view through sepia-tinted photography. It is a great shame that so little is known about the artists and the design culture that went into these marvels. There are no sales figures to prove the worth of the coloured title pages, though Richard Beattie Davis reports that production virtually ceased after 1900. Alexander Scriabin, the one composer who tried to develop the relationship between music and colour, and who was extensively published by Belaieff, appeared on the scene too late to have his published works so adorned.

To highlight the style of the book we can take the entry for Nikolai Vladimirovich Shcherbachov (1853-?). It is hard to imagine Shcherbachov getting more than a passing mention (let alone an entry) in a dictionary of music, yet the biography brings out all kinds of scintillating detail. Shcherbachov was one of the first Belaieff-published composers and yet his privileged background always dragged him into indolence, as witnessed kindly by Balakirev and very cruelly by Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky. Amongst the wealth of anecdote we learn that Shcherbachov contributed to the *Paraphrases* (not originally

a Belaieff publication), a collection for little pianists praised over-fulsomely in a letter from Franz Liszt himself. You get a picture here of a human being revolving in musical circles rather than a composer composing at a table. Davis's fluid prose does not attempt to defend the music — it rather bubbles with the sheer excitement of research, while warning us not to write off what we haven't heard. The two title pages, for Shcherbachov's *Mozaique* and *Scherzo-Caprice*, bear witness to their value beyond mere decoration. The design of *Mozaique* is a blinding riot of bright green, blue, yellow and red in intricate, oriental patterns; Davis himself is somewhat bewildered why Belaieff chose to shower such lavish treatment on music of admittedly variable quality. But the argument that the title pages are no mere decoration is proved by the inclusion of a dedication to Glazunov, titles for each of the pieces, price, copyright warning, the name of the publisher and the date of publication. Future research may find more information, perhaps even hidden meaning, in these delightful pages.

The Beauty of Belaieff is designed for easy reference and will be treasured by scholars, students, performers and anyone interested in this extraordinary, fecund — and decadent — period of Russian cultural history. The book, true to the spirit of the main protagonist, is extravagantly bound in hardback and printed on high-grade paper with the text and full colour plates generously spaced over 367 pages. It is a valuable and permanent addition to any library.

The Beauty of Belaieff by Richard Beattie Davis (ISBN 978-1-905912-14-8) is published by G-Clef Publishing, PO Box 613, Bedford, England, MK40 3WZ. Copies can be obtained by order from info@gclefpublishing.com. Price £65.00 plus £9.99 for package and delivery.



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