

ALFERAKI
Akhilles Nikolaevich
(1846 -1920)

All except one of the few traced references to Alferaki agree the year of his birth as 1846 - one gives 1842. Opinions as to whether he died in 1919 or 1920 tilt in favour of the latter year by a majority of one. Detailed information about Alferaki is sparse. He originated from Kharkov in the Ukraine, and graduated at Moscow University,¹ studying music privately with, among others, V.I. Suk.² He was described as having been a candidate of the 'Historic Philologic Institute of Moscow University', an amateur pianist, composer and artist, and an official of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.³ Much the same age as Rimsky-Korsakov, he never studied with the latter, whose influence though is reflected in the great output of songs by Alferaki which Belaieff published. (In point of fact, Alferaki's early set of six songs was published by Bessel as Op.3. in 1887.)⁴ Belaieff seems to have taken the view as to the publication of Alferaki's songs after Glazunov wrote to him an undated letter, conjectured as 1888, in which, after describing the songs as rather colourless, sometimes boring and lacking in individuality, he admitted 'the ability of the author to control the voice, and from a singer's point of view, they would appear to be successful.'⁵

One has to presume that Belaieff interpreted Glazunov's very cautious judgement as clearance for publication of ninety-two of Alferaki's songs, which then gushed forth from 1890 to 1899, when the flow was staunch. Many had been written before his publishing house was founded in 1885. As with other over-productive song writers of the period, one may suspect the quality. Rimsky-Korsakov himself disapproved 'though the first were good enough'.⁶ However, Alferaki had his advocates. Albert Soubies, in 'Histoire de la Musique de Russie' (Paris, 1898), wrote, 'N'oublions pas non plus les fort nombreuses et souvent fort expressives compositions vocales de M. Alphéraki'. Alferaki's facile songs were popular at the time, and several sets were reprinted during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

A further pointer to the impression that Alferaki made is to be found in Yastrebtsev's 'Reminiscences of Rimsky-Korsakov'. On 31st March, 1895, 'Over tea we talked about Wagner and his exceptional style, and the theme from the Romance by Alferaki, 'Vesna idet/It is spring'(Op.15, no.1), taken by Glazunov for his 'Vesna'.⁷ This is an orchestral piece, Op.34 and dates, with the song, from 1891. Glazunov's work is prefaced by the same lines of Tyutchev's poem as those which graced Alferaki's song and that of Rahkmaninov's Op.14, no.11.

Alferaki wrote a number of pleasant piano pieces, of moderate difficulty. An orchestral piece, 'The Dances of the Enchanted Virgins' received its first and possibly only performance at the Sixth Russian Symphonic Concert of the 1889/90 Season on 18th February, 1890.⁸

The provenance of this unknown and unpublished work is of some interest, in view of the fact that it relates Alferaki to P.I. Tchaikovsky, to whom Alferaki wrote for advice as to his orchestral compositions on 27th March, 1888,⁹ probably at much the same time as he was seeking publication of his songs by Belaieff. (The slow movement of Tchaikovsky's first string quartet, op.11 in Alferaki's arrangement for violin had been performed at a convent on 25th March, 1880.)

Tchaikovsky replied on 28th April,¹⁰ with a courteous apology for the delay in acknowledgement ('the letter only reached me to-day'), and expressed willingness to look over the manuscripts which Alferaki submitted in June or July.¹¹ On 20th July, Tchaikovsky wrote a long and detailed appreciation, characteristically kind, but severely critical, chiding Alferaki for his lack of orchestral technique and stating, 'It is a pity that, before you began the work, you did not appeal to me or some other musician for advice...You wished to set to music for chorus, solo voice and orchestra a very worthwhile text, but it demands that you be armed with the richest compositional techniques. Such, regrettably, you do not have. You have an undoubted aptitude for composition, but insufficient for the problem you have selected. Remember that even your songs...were written without observance of musical orthography, and needed to be shown to a professional musician.'

Tchaikovsky then set out the criteria for composing large scale choral works: 'You see, in order to write such works, it is necessary: