

SHCHERBACHOV

Nikolai Vladimirovich
(1853/ ?)

N.V. Shcherbachov, sometimes confused with better known descendants of his family who also devoted themselves to music, Andrei Vladimirovich (1869-1916) and Vladimir Vladimirovich (1889 -1952), was a minor composer of the period who was rich enough in the 1880s to flit about between the best hotels in St. Petersburg,¹ some retreat in nearby Tsarskoye Selo,² and the casinos of Monaco³ -he also left a sufficient impression on the musical scene as to entitle him to a slightly closer study than hitherto.

Gifted from an early age, educated in a Jesuit school, fluent in French (his mother converted to Catholicism and lived abroad)⁴, he made himself useful to Berlioz when the latter visited St. Petersburg towards the end of 1867, honouring Shcherbachov with a letter, now lost, though the text has been preserved.⁵

Thanks to Stasov, Shcherbachov was early introduced to the 'Kuchka', then in its heyday and to other followers including A.S. Gussakovsky (1841 -1875), who died with much unpublished music, and N.N. Lodyzhensky (1842 -1916), who, after having published a small group of admired songs, pursued a career in a government ministry. Lodyzhensky may have passed on some of his wasted talent to Shcherbachov, which bore fruit in some of the many small piano pieces which the latter saw published by Belaieff. Shcherbachov is thus, with Lyadov, the earliest follower of the 'Kuchka' to survive into the Belaieff era.

Balakirev, who, one senses, had a 'soft spot' for Shcherbachov, wrote to Tchaikovsky about him on 8th May, 1869, as 'the young dilettante whom Rubinstein knows...beau genie', no mean tribute to Shcherbachov's gifts⁶ endorsed by Cui in a letter to Balakirev dated 9th November, 1869, about Shcherbachov's endearing 'Ave Maria' on which Cui was writing a few words.⁷

Shcherbachov's noted idiosyncrasies commenced to emerge when Borodin, in a letter to his wife, Ekaterina, on 24/25th October, 1871,⁸ remarked about Balakirev 'summoning to his quarters Miloradovich, Pomazansky⁹ and Shcherbachov', whom he describes as 'Flakon s dukhami', which has been translated as a 'flagon of perfume'. This is one of several nicknames which Shcherbachov acquired over the years. Like Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov's wife, Nadezhda, also regarded Shcherbachov with scepticism.¹⁰ In a letter on 21st April, 1873, to Stasov, whom she invited to a small gathering, she exhorts him to attend, 'Only, please, without your beloved Shcherbachov. I cannot tolerate him.'¹¹

In the early days of the 1870s, Shcherbachov's principal protagonists were Cui, Musorgsky (who admired the 'Fantasie-Etude', known as 'Tourmente') and, above all, Stasov, whose enthusiasm for Shcherbachov's exaggerated musical gifts led him to be ranked third after Musorgsky and Borodin.¹² As an instance of this, Stasov's letter to Rimsky-Korsakov of 1st July, 1874,¹³ praises Shcherbachov's sectionalised 'Zig-Zags' beyond its true worth, whatever its merits, 'nobody since Schumann has composed the like for piano'. Stasov also commended the work to Nadezhda, swearing that he would conquer her antipathy to Shcherbachov, whose true talent she would come to recognise in what Stasov described as a 'recueil humoristique'-a theme (B minor),¹⁴ six variations and a finale (F major). In alluding to the finale of Shcherbachov's Symphony, 'the best that has been done by our 'Flakon' up to now', Stasov unwittingly draws attention to a lamentable failing in Shcherbachov the composer, his inability, either due to sloth or lack of technical training (or both), to complete this work (and other works on which Stasov- probably more than anyone-had knowledge).

On 23rd July, as Rimsky-Korsakov had not replied by that date, Stasov sent him a further letter, recapitulating the contents of his letter of 1st July, with embellishments¹⁵ 'I told you about an entire piano suite written by Cheremis'¹⁶ (another of Stasov's nicknames for Shcherbachov), so marvellous.' Extolling the unexcelled quality of 'Zig-Zags', Stasov then inserted an exclusion clause in respect of Liszt's piano transcription of Saint-Saen's 'Danse Macabre'.

^{5.} The undated letter from Berlioz confirms that he awaits Shcherbachov's visit to him that afternoon or evening. He refers to his poor health, to seeing his 'enfants moscovites' the following Thursday, and to the absence of a musical instrument, presumably in his abode. 'Au revoir, monsieur, je vous attends sans faute. Berlioz.'

The expression 'enfants moscovites /moscov children' has been taken to refer to Berlioz's Russian friends, in particular Balakirev.

^{9.} Mikhail Alexandrovich Miloradovich (18??-18??), minor composer, 'little more than a Balakirev satellite'.

Ivan Alexandrovich Pomazansky (1848-1918), harpist, minor composer and chorus master at the Maryinsky Theater.

^{16.} Cheremis
The significance of this nick-name is not clear. In pre-Soviet Russia and Western Europe, the term 'Cheremis' was used to refer to a people inhabiting the Middle Volga, and speaking a Finno-Ugric language. Was Shcherbachov descended from this human group?