



Rimsky-Korsakov
The Golden Cockerel
Igor Markevitch

mp **LIVE**

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

The Golden Cockerel

Libretto by Vladimir Belsky after the tale by Alexander Pushkin

Sung in an English translation by Edward Agate

King Dodon

His sons:

Prince Guidon

Prince Afron

General Polkan

The astrologer

Amelfa, the royal housekeeper

The Queen of Shemaka

The Golden Cockerel

Howell Glynne

John Lanigan

Geraint Evans

Frederick Dalberg

Hugues Cuénod

Barbara Howitt

Mattiwilda Dobbs

Arda Mandikian

The Royal Opera Chorus *chorus master* Douglas Robinson

The Orchestra of The Royal Opera House *leader* Charles Taylor

Igor Markevitch

Recorded: 14 January 1954, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

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CD 1

1 Announcer 0'17

Prologue

2 The astrologer's preface 4'08

Act 1

3 Dodon's monologue 3'03

4 Prince Guidon's plan 2'34

5 Prince Afron's plan 4'43

6 Entrance of the astrologer
and the golden cockerel 5'52

7 Scene with the parrot 5'06

8 Sleep of Dodon 7'31

9 Dream of Dodon 6'49

10 The summons to war 2'27

CD 2

Act 2

1 Soldiers' chorus 6'45

| | | |
|--------------|--|-------|
| 2 | Queen Shemakha's entrance and Hymn to the Sun | 16'14 |
| 3 | Shemakha's seduction of Dodon | 11'03 |
| 4 | Dance of Queen Shemakha | 4'51 |
| 5 | Chorus of slaves | 2'18 |
| Act 3 | | |
| 6 | Introduction and chorus of the people of Dodon | 8'52 |
| 7 | The wedding procession and reappearance of the astrologer | 5'04 |
| 8 | The death of Dodon | 6'31 |
| 9 | The astrologer's epilogue | 1'49 |
| 10 | Applause | 1'15 |

Remastering engineer's note:

There is a small break in the tape during track 4 of CD2.

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The Golden Cockerel – Synopsis

Alison Latham

PROLOGUE

A strange figure introduces himself. He is the Astrologer, a wizard who is going to tell a story that contains an important lesson.

ACT I

Tsar Dodon's palace

Tsar Dodon is concerned for the safety of his country, which is surrounded by powerful enemies who threaten to attack from all directions. His two sons, Guidon and Afron, each offer solutions. Guidon suggests he should withdraw the army to the citadel because no-one will invade the border if there are no troops defending it. Dodon and his courtiers applaud this suggestion until General Polkan points out that it is much less risky to defend the border than the capital. Afron has a better idea: disband the army, then suddenly mobilize it again a month before each attack. This, too, is greeted with enthusiasm until Polkan points out that the enemy is scarcely likely to give them a month's warning. Polkan is derided and beaten up for his pessimistic objections. Confused, everyone recalls the days when the future could be reliably foretold, and they start quarrelling about the best method of doing so.

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They are interrupted by the arrival of the Astrologer; he offers Dodon a Golden Cockerel whose crowing is guaranteed to indicate impending danger or continuing peace. It crows to indicate the latter and Dodon is delighted. He promises the Astrologer any reward he wants. The Astrologer says he will claim payment later but would like Dodon to promise it in writing; he refuses and the Astrologer goes off.

Dodon is joined by his housekeeper, Amelfa. He climbs into a big bed, accepts some delicacies to eat, plays with his pet parrot, then, reassured by the Cockerel's repeated cry that everything is safe, falls asleep. He has a mysterious dream.

He fails to hear the Cockerel suddenly sounding the alarm. Everyone is roused and Polkan wakes Dodon. He mobilizes two armies under the command of each of his reluctant sons and gives them orders to defeat the enemy. The Cockerel crows that danger is past and Dodon tries to sleep. Again the Cockerel sounds the alarm and this time Dodon himself must go into battle. With great difficulty he puts on his old, rusty armour and sets off amid the cheers of the populace.

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ACT II

A mountain pass

Dodon and his comrades arrive to find the advance party dead. His sons have been killed. Polkan tries to rally the surviving soldiers' spirits, to no avail: they have even lost sight of the enemy.

The dawn mists disperse and a mysterious beautiful tent is seen. Thinking it contains the enemy, Dodon orders his troops to fire. But before they attack, to everyone's astonishment a beautiful woman steps out and sings a hymn to the sun. She reveals that she is the Queen of Shemakha and that she has come to conquer Dodon – but not by force. At her command he sends Polkan away, leaving himself at her mercy. With a sensual description of her naked body, she begins to seduce Dodon. She makes him sing a song. He asks her about her homeland and she becomes distressed. Having tried to console her, he offers to rescue her. She will not discuss it until he has danced with her. He obliges to the point of exhaustion. Again he offers her his heart and his kingdom. The Queen accepts the offer and her attendants reflect on the qualities of Dodon, her ridiculous conquest.

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ACT III

Outside Dodon's palace

The people are anxiously trying to find out what has happened in the battle. Amelfa tells them that Dodon is returning in triumph with a new bride. Trumpets sound his approach and a fantastic procession arrives, followed by Dodon and the Queen. Suddenly the Astrologer appears: he has come to claim his reward. He asks for the Queen, whom he himself wishes to marry. The King refuses to keep his side of the bargain and orders the Astrologer to be removed. When the Astrologer resists, Dodon strikes him on the head and he falls dead. The sky darkens and Dodon becomes troubled; but the Queen is oddly amused and when he tries to embrace her she repulses him. The Cockerel suddenly crows, swoops down and pecks the King on the head. He too falls dead and there is a clap of thunder. Darkness descends and the Queen's laughter is heard. When light returns, both the Cockerel and the Queen have vanished. The people mourn the death of their Tsar: there will never be another so good – particularly at spending their money. Terrified and overcome with grief, they collapse.

EPILOGUE

The strange figure of the Astrologer comes to life. He reminds everyone that although the story they have witnessed is tragic and bloody, it is simply a fairy-tale: only he and the Queen of Shemakha were real.

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Unbuttoned satire: Rimsky at Covent Garden

Stephen Jay-Taylor

A life in brief

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was born in 1844, and despite evidence of genuine musical ability, was compelled by his aristocratic family to enter the Russian Imperial Navy as a cadet at the age of twelve. Studying principally navigation, he remained at the Naval School in St. Petersburg until graduating in 1862, but had already become familiar with Mussorgsky, with whom he would eventually share an apartment, and the founder-father of Russian musical romanticism, Mily Balakirev. Within six months the 18-year-old cadet was sent on his preliminary naval posting, a three-year world tour, during which he pursued his informal musical studies by post and completed a four-movement symphony in E flat minor, which was premiered in St. Petersburg under Balakirev mere weeks after his final return to Russian terra firma in 1865. By 1871, Rimsky was such a part of the fabric of the imperial capital's musical life that he was sensationally appointed as Professor of Harmony and Composition at the world-renowned St. Petersburg Conservatory, a post he would retain – but for a brief interruption of which more anon – until his death in 1908.

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A career in opera

Rather touchingly, Rimsky's first response to his new job was to take an extended sabbatical from composing in order to teach himself more thoroughly the very rudiments of musical theory of which he had just been appointed professor: that, and get married. Significantly, the first fruit of his new standing was his very first opera *The Maid of Pskov*, which premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre, then part of St. Petersburg's Imperial Court, in January 1873, and treated of an episode in the life of Ivan the Terrible. Increasingly the object of hostility amongst his fellow composers on account of his retreat into what was construed as academicism, Rimsky's response was to write, at his wife's suggestion, *May Night*, in which he felt he had finally freed himself from the constraints of contrapuntal rigour in favour of a looser, more folk-derived melodic style. *The Snow Maiden* followed rapidly in 1881, but presaged a period of creative sterility that endured throughout the decade, until March 1889, when he attended the local premiere performances of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which struck him like a thunderbolt, and led to a wholesale re-evaluation of his compositional aesthetics and attitude to orchestral instrumentation.

Even so, by the time of Tchaikovsky's premature death in 1893 – at the age of 53, only three years older than Rimsky-Korsakov – the latter had produced just four operas (the most recent of which, *Mlada*, was essentially a reworking of an earlier

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abortive collaboration with the other members of ‘the Five’, who comprised Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky and Balakirev). But while the deaths of Mussorgsky and Borodin had prompted Rimsky to prepare performing versions of *Boris Godunov* and *Prince Igor* to honour his colleagues’ memories and make available their respective magnum opus, the death of Tchaikovsky, never part of the St. Petersburg circle, seems to have stimulated a desire to write operas of his own as never before. Between 1894 and his death 14 years later, Rimsky wrote no fewer than 11 more operas, a workload doubtless trifling by Donizettian standards, but one unprecedented amongst late-19th-century romantics.

A Russian lesson

Rimsky came increasingly to think of the profoundly Wagnerian *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* – written in 1903-4 – as a summation of his life’s work and a fitting end to his career. But this was to reckon without the astonishing turns of fate that history had in store for Russia as it entered the momentous year 1905. For some time the virtually feudal conditions of the peasantry and the rigid structures of Russian society had been the source of political unrest, and centred on the unwaveringly autocratic and repressive rule of first Alexander III, and then his son, Tsar Nicholas II. In 1905, just as Puccini was rehearsing the premiere of *Madama Butterfly* at La Scala and Strauss putting the finishing touches to the orchestration of *Salome*, the Russian empire found itself at war with Japan, a war which, contrary to

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quasi-divine tsarist decree, it lost humiliatingly. Against a background of industrial unrest and semi-starvation, a group of protesters in St. Petersburg had marched to the Winter Palace in January to hand over a petition and were summarily mown down by the Imperial guards, leaving over one hundred dead (a graphically audible account of which is to be heard in the second movement of Shostakovich's Eleventh Symphony). Within days the whole country was virtually paralysed by a workers' strike while the liberal intelligentsia wrung its hands in despair. A decision was taken to establish a parliament of sorts for the people – the Duma – but its intended toothlessness only led to a general strike in October, followed by tsarist capitulation to demands for democratic representation which Nicholas II privately stated had made him 'sick with shame at this betrayal of the Romanov dynasty'.

The students of the St. Petersburg conservatory had gone on strike and taken to the streets too, and when Rimsky-Korsakov was publicly upbraided for maintaining poor discipline, wrote an open letter of support for his students' activities which promptly earned him the sack, and caused his works to be banned by the police. This was met by international protest, and following the various amnesties proclaimed later in the year to dissidents, Rimsky was reinstated to his post. He spent much of this period writing – both his unfinished treatise on instrumentation and his autobiography – and though by mid-1906 there were signs that he was still prepared to let *Kitez* stand as his operatic farewell, the old fighting spirit soon

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returned, and by the autumn of that year we learn from a pupil that he was hard at work on a setting of *The Golden Cockerel*, adapted from Pushkin's small-scale fairy-tale verse story of 1834, in which an incompetent and dithering King – Dadon – is manoeuvred into a war with a neighbouring country by the faith he places in a eunuch astrologer's gift of a prescient rooster, is seduced by an exotic princess he agrees to marry, and at the end of which he is pecked to death by the titular bird. And, bizarrely, it was precisely in 1905 that the already famous Grigori Rasputin had been summoned to St. Petersburg by a frantic (and foreign-born) Tsarina in order to save her haemophiliac son Alexei, and indeed had done so (probably by taking the boy off the new wonder drug aspirin, which might well have relieved pain, but, as an anti-coagulant, would have made his bleeding much worse). Clearly, semi-mystical shamanism ruling the roost in the imperial household was in the air...

Rimsky and Pushkin

Although Pushkin's poem seems highly characteristic in its vivid, absurdist, satirical manner, the story was actually lifted by him from Washington Irving's 1832 *Tales of the Alhambra* and simply relocated to Russian soil of legendary times. Rimsky's long-term librettist, Vladimir Belsky, was drafted in to work Pushkin's 1500-word-piece into a full-length opera, while his preferred designer Ivan Bilibin started work on the sets and costumes. Though composition of the new opera was interrupted by

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the belated stage premiere of *Kitezha* in early 1907 and Rimsky's international conducting commitments, it was fully written and orchestrated by mid-September and immediately submitted to the St. Petersburg Imperial censors for production at the Mariinsky. It was rejected. This is scarcely surprising: in the fragile political situation and uneasy peace following on from 1905, the chorus' closing words of the opera, after Tsar Dodon's death – 'Will this be a new dawn? Are we now to live without a tsar?' – were bound to be deemed unacceptable, not least since Tsarevich Alexei's chances of living long enough to become the next one were so dependent on a drunken, corrupt fraudster. And the fact that the hapless and hopeless Dodon – renamed perhaps to suggest both physical infirmity and the collision-course-with-extinction-destiny Mauritian bird – is portrayed as little more than a buffoon, addicted to sensuous pleasure and easily manipulated, can hardly have played well in imperial circles. One marvels at the daring of Rimsky, the 60-plus, life-long establishment figure, in proffering the work for production in the first place.

A stand-off ensued, during which the censorship demanded extensive cuts, Belsky offered to make them, and Rimsky refused to countenance any whatsoever. But by this time the composer's health was failing, due to long-standing cardiac problems, and the situation appears to have remained unresolved at the time of his death in June 1908. The opera only reached the stage in October 1909, and then in Moscow, at the privately run theatre of Savva Mamontov, the Solodovnikov – where

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Sadko and *Tsar Saltan* had been premiered – given by Sergei Zimin’s equally privately run opera company. Six weeks later, it was premiered at the Moscow Bolshoi, with no less than Antonina Nezhdanova as the stratospherically-written Queen of Shemakha. The West had to wait somewhat longer – until 1914 – to hear Rimsky’s swan-song, when both London and Paris staged the work, the latter under the title *Le Coq d’or*, and reconfigured by Diaghilev’s resident choreographer Mikhail Fokine as a ballet, much to the Rimsky family’s displeasure. New York’s Metropolitan Opera heard the work in 1918, similarly Frenchified, in which format it held the stage there until the end of the Second World War.

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The Cockerel crows at Covent Garden

Covent Garden first gave the work in 1919 in English (the London premiere had been at Drury Lane) but it was only rarely revived thereafter, even though Sir Thomas Beecham conducted it both there and at the Theatre Royal. It finally reappeared, sung in English rhyming verse – though still in large part staged as a ballet – in January 1954, in a new production by the choreographer Robert Helpmann, and was revived in 1962 and 1969. The 1954 premiere took place on 7 January: one week later, the Third Programme of the BBC broadcast the opera live from the Royal Opera House, and it is that performance which is finally made available in this download.

The conductor of the work was Igor Markevitch, a very Frenchified Russian himself, who had become a protégé of Diaghilev in Paris in 1929, aged barely 17 and fresh from the *École Normale*. Throughout the 1930s he had established a considerable reputation as a composer – Bartók thought him the most striking figure in contemporary music – but he had abandoned composing in favour of conducting by the time he took up permanent residence in Italy, alas at the start of the Second World War. He had relocated to London in 1953, only the previous year to this broadcast, and perhaps expected to become a feature of English musical life.

Certainly, the level of discipline he secures from the ROH orchestra would suggest that much was lost to us when he thereafter decamped to Switzerland: ensemble is razor-sharp, tight corners are turned with all four wheels firmly on the road, and the effortless virtuosity of the brass – lead trumpet in particular – and the sharply characterful winds are a chastening reminder for us today that all is not progress.

The cast, as one would expect of this period, contains a number of Anglophone resident company members, notably John Lanigan as Dodon's elder son Guidon, and Geraint Evans as the younger, Afron, who are only alive in the first act (Rimsky oddly suppresses the fact that in Pushkin, whether by accident or design, they kill each other: Dodon merely finds them dead at the start of Act II). Both would remain mainstays of the company for the rest of their respective careers – to 1981 in Lanigan's case, and 1984 in Evans' – though the latter had by far the more

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important international career and extensive recording history, including a longish brush with Karajan that involved Leporello on stage and Beckmesser in the studio.

Tsar Dodon is sung by Howell Glynne, 47 at the time of this relay though sounding older, but who was nevertheless still singing at the time of his accidental death in 1969. General Polkan, Dodon's much-abused military chief, is sung by Frederick Dalberg (born Dalrymple), English-born, South African-reared, and resident bass in Leipzig and then Nazi Berlin and Bayreuth in the first half of the 1940s. He became Principal Bass at Covent Garden in 1951, creating the roles of Claggart in *Billy Budd* that year, Raleigh in *Gloriana* in 1953 (also available on mpLIVE, LM7405) and went on to create Calkas in Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* in 1955 before experiencing a *Drang nach Nord* that took him back to Germany for the rest of his career, which only ended in 1970.

The Cockerel is voiced by the Greek soprano Arda Mandikian, who had already recorded *Dido and Aeneas* with Kirsten Flagstad for EMI, and would later in 1954 go on to create the role of Miss Jessel in the world premiere of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* in Venice. In her mid-80s, she is happily still with us, as are both the Queen of Shemakha, Mattiwilda Dobbs, and the Astrologer, Hugues Cuénod. Dobbs belongs to that first generation of African-American singers whose appearances in opera houses made news simply because of the colour of their skin, in which capacity she

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holds the record as the first black singer ever to appear at La Scala. And though Marian Anderson was indeed the first African-American to sing at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, Dobbs was the first to enjoy an actual career there, lasting some eight seasons from her debut in 1956 as Gilda in *Rigoletto*. She had made her UK debut at Glyndebourne in 1953, as Zerbinetta. At Covent Garden in Rimsky's opera she has to contend with much the same precarious tessitura – very successfully – but in a melodic style more reminiscent of that touchstone of exotic operatic 'easterness', Délibes' *Lakmé*.

Hugues Cuénod is at least as much a supernatural being *in propria persona* as his character the Astrologer: at the time of writing he is fast approaching his 107th birthday. One might be forgiven for thinking that such a role, castratically high written (to E above top C) for a *tenor altino*, might have shortened his vocal – if evidently not remotely his physical – longevity somewhat, but this is the man who made his debut at the Met in 1987 as Altoum, aged 84. Having made his absolute stage debut in 1928 in the premiere of Krenek's *Johnny spielt auf*, and marrying his life partner Alfred Augustin under new Swiss civil laws in 2007, one can only wonder what further adventures may be in store...

This very distinguished cast, which at the time was probably regarded as no more than quotidian domestic, certainly throws itself into Rimsky's scatty whirligig with

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every evidence of relish and high spirits. Helpmann's production clearly didn't stint on the knockabout either, as the frequent gales of laughter from a most unbuttoned audience attest. Indeed, it sounds like one of those nights when everybody in the House, on either side of the footlights, had a thoroughly good time. Accidents are few; stage/pit ensemble is tight, and if M. Cuénod's high E in Act III goes rather loudly haywire – not deigning to avail himself of Rimsky's suggested Plan B, falsetto – it really only adds to the prevailing sense of fairy-tale absurdity that the composer was keen to project. Not perhaps so keen, however, as to mask at least something of the underlying political outrage that Rimsky felt at the time of composition, and which in our own troubled times of doubtful military interventions we can perhaps ill-afford to regard as quaintly irrelevant to us now.

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The original sources are stored in the Borthwick Library at the University of York, where they are curated by Dr. Christopher Webb. Many of them are unique, irreplaceable and fragile: acetates in particular have an unpredictable shelf-life and require extremely careful handling. They are being remastered by Roger Beardsley, who has a worldwide reputation in the field, to the highest possible standard, with the emphasis kept on the feel of the live performance.

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Roger Beardsley

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