

ARTSYBUSHEV Nikolai Vasil'evich (1858 - 1937)

Artsybushev was born on 7th March, 1858, at Tsarskoe Selo, fifteen miles south of St. Petersburg. He graduated from the School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, and we may take it that he also studied music as a leisure pursuit.¹ Rimsky-Korsakov described him as 'a jurist by profession and a good musician', which sums up the entirety of Artsybushev's career.² Early on he had the good fortune to be introduced to Balakirev. He wrote about it in his memoir on Belaieff, 'On leaving the School of Jurisprudence, I had the opportunity to meet Mily Alexeevich. He was interested in my work and advised me to continue it under the guidance of Nikolai Andreevich (Rimsky-Korsakov). I remember one evening when we found ourselves in Rimsky-Korsakov's apartment on Nevsky-I remember this evening especially, because on finishing our business talk, Mily Alexeevich turned to Nikolai Andreevich with these words, 'do you know Nikolai Andreevich, I haven't played your 'Antar' for a long time-let's play it'. Thus, I found myself listening to the enchanting music of 'Antar' in a performance by two great artists'.³

Through Rimsky-Korsakov, Artsybushev came to know Belaieff, and his 'Pyatnitsy' (Friday's), and he participated in the creation of 'composite' works for string quartet, orchestra and piano duet. Though Artsybushev's name never appeared in the published lists of pupils of Rimsky-Korsakov, it is to be assumed that he received private lessons from the latter, who must have had a high regard for his abilities. This is evidenced by Artsybushev's arrangements for piano duet of some of Musorgsky's orchestral works (in the first place 'arranged' by Rimsky-Korsakov) published by Bessel from about 1883. Artsybushev also arranged Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Symphonietta', Op.31, (Belaieff, 1888), and collaborated with Glazunov in the piano duet arrangement of the latter's Suite for string quartet, Op.35.

Artsybushev has been described as not possessing especial creative gifts. Ossovsky wrote that he composed featureless music in small forms in a competent manner.⁴ M.M. Kurbanov wrote that Artsybushev composed 'interestingly and did little things with great taste, his piquant and witty harmonies of the polka determined the beginning of a whole line of comic dances within the composer's circle'.⁶

Artsybushev was a member of the St. Petersburg City Council, and chairman of the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Musical Society from 1909 to 1917. In 1907 he assumed control of the Belaieff enterprise when Rimsky-Korsakov resigned, and its affairs and finances prospered until the Revolution.⁷ In the early years, following the death of Belaieff, he was obliged to deal with the impecunious and often fractious Skryabin, used to being coddled by Belaieff. This invidious task called for prudence, judgement, tact and firmness, qualities which- rather naturally from Skryabin's point of view-were unhelpful to the latter's cause.

Artsybushev left Russia in 1920, and settled in Paris, where he continued to concern himself with Belaieff's business until his death in 1937. His position as administrative head of the Belaieff business far outweighs his achievement in the musical field.

Artsybushev's earliest published compositions to be traced are a prelude for piano solo and a set of six songs which appeared with Jurgenson in 1878/79.⁸ Bessel published a mazurka in 1894 in a volume commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the firm.⁹ None of these works was assigned an opus number.

All other works traced were published by Belaieff and identified by opus number. They include two for orchestra, seven piano pieces, thirteen songs, and two compositions for violin and piano. The unpublished Scherzo in C major for orchestra was performed at a Russian Symphonic Concert on 31st October, 1887, at the same concert at which Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Spanish Caprice', Op.34 received its première. Artsybushev's Scherzo was privileged to receive a second performance on 26th January, 1891.¹⁰