

MUSSORGSKY

MARRIAGE – RUSSIAN STYLE

English Version by Donald Pippin

Your first question no doubt will be, where is the Pocket Philharmonic? For the moment, it's me. Mussorgsky left this one-act comic opera, *The Marriage*, with just four singers and piano accompaniment, and this is the way it was performed several times by the composer himself, not at the piano, but singing the leading role.. Significantly, Mussorgsky never married, and this may reflect some of his own ambiguities on the subject, though I would guess that the resemblance between the composer and the hero of tonight's opera stops there.. The title, of course, gives you an idea of what the story is about, but it might do well to tell you what it's *not* about -- not a tale of unbridled passion, careless rapture, nor reckless abandon. Hence, the up-dated title, "*Marriage – Russian Style*." The reluctant groom, prone to procrastinating, is not your usual operatic romantic lover – not a prince, nor a dashing adventurer, nor a handsome tenor, Well the truth is, he's a civil servant, employed in a government office, with the sort of mentality that could be evolved only after long years of petty routine and endless monotony. Not exactly young, he lives alone and spends many hours brooding.

But he's decided to get married. Or has he? He has gone so far as to put the matter into the capable hands of a matchmaker, Fiokla, who has found what would seem to be a most desirable bride – a young lady in her early twenties, beautiful, intelligent, charming, sympathetic, docile, domestic – and rich. It looks as if the ceremony is on the verge of consummation, but don't be too sure.

Meanwhile, the lights go up on a scene of squalor and disarray – in short, a bachelor's living quarters. The most prominent object is a chaise lounge. Almost everything else is to be found on the floor -- a pipe, a bathrobe, a stack of newspapers, a pair of worn out slippers and a few dirty dishes.

You may have guessed that the language of the opera is not lyrical. Unlike practically every opera composed up to this time, it is not in verse, nary a rhyme, but rather the language of ordinary conversation. And Mussorgsky intended for his music to reproduce faithfully the natural inflections and modulations of everyday speech.

The play that it's based upon, by Nicolai Gogol, is in two acts. Mussorgsky set only one, in four scenes. It feels complete in itself, but nonetheless, why did he stop there? The fact is that he was well pleased with what he had done and had every intention of completing it, but sometimes life interferes in unexpected ways. It was just at this time that he came across a new subject that wouldn't leave him alone. For years afterwards he remained obsessed, unable to work on anything else. It was called "Boris Goudonov." But Pocket Opera is going to hold off on that one for a while.

SCENE I

PODKOLESSEN: *(a middle aged bachelor, sitting alone)* True, when you ponder it, alone, at your leisure, it's evident, despite all, that marriage does have its points. Yes, take my own case: I wake, I sleep, but this life of solitude can't be called living. Here we are, and already in Lent, and it looked as if all were settled. These many weeks the old matchmaker's been hard at it. Such confusion. It's almost too much for me ... Hey! Stepan!

STEPAN (his servant) enters.

PODKOLESSEN: It that old woman here yet?

STEPAN: No.

PODKOLESSEN: You saw the tailor, eh?

STEPAN: Yes.

PODKOLESSEN: What about my suit?

STEPAN: What?

PODKOLESSEN: Well, is it nearly done?

STEPAN: Yes, it's coming. He's only the collar to do.

PODKOLESSEN: Ha! Did he question you, ask why your master should need a formal suit?

STEPAN: Oh, no! No! Not a word.

PODKOLESSEN: In passing, did he imply, "So your master's considering marriage?"

STEPAN: No. I do not believe he spoke.

PODKOLESSEN: And yet ... you noticed other suits on his hangers, no doubt. He must have a few steady clients.

STEPAN *(yawning)* Yes. There were three or four suits in the shop.

PODKOLESSEN: Ah, so! Were they not made of cheaper fabric, cheaper than mine?

STEPAN: Yes, I would guess they were cheaper, on the whole.

PODKOLESSEN: Tell me once again ...

STEPAN: I would say the fabric seemed a bit inferior, by comparison.

PODKOLESSEN: Hm! Very good. Did he say anything, ask why your master would have nothing but the finest cloth, only the best?

STEPAN: No. He didn't ask.

PODKOLESSEN: Not even one tiny hint that perhaps ... that perhaps I was thinking of marriage?

STEPAN: No. I told you, he gave no sign of it.

PODKOLESSEN: And yet ... You made clear to him my civil rank, my position of trust?

STEPAN: That I did.

PODKOLESSEN: What did he answer?

STEPAN: That he aims to please his clients.

PODKOLESSEN: *(with a sigh)* Very well. Now you may go. *(Stepan leaves)*

PODKOLESSEN: *(alone)* For my rank, I believe that black is best on such occasions. The others – secretaries, government clerks, lowly flunkies that have no *savior faire* – they can be far more careless.

Now that I'm promoted. I of course should maintain –

I think it's called –hm! A certain ... a certain, hm!

Well, I forget the word -- but the word was quite clever.

It's slipped my mind. Ah, yes, little chum.

Now you can suit yourself – you're a man of consequence,

with a position, a title, almost a captain, except

I am not allowed to wear the braid. Hey! Stepan! *(Stepan returns)*

PODKOLESSEN: My shoe polish! You bought it?

STEPAN: I did.

PODKOLESSEN: From where? That little shop near the Vesnessensky?

STEPAN: Exactly.

PODKOLESSEN: Is it the best? You've tried it already?

STEPAN: *(interrupting)* It's the best.

PODKOLESSEN: It shines?

STEPAN: It shines, oh how it shines!

PODKOLESSEN: Think back now. Hm! The old merchant, when he sold that box to you ... Ha! Did he say, just why does your master demand the finest polish?
(Stepan stands on one foot, then the other, eager to get away.)
Did he not add, is your master now thinking of marriage?

STEPAN: *(already at the door, with a nasty look at Podkolessen)*
Oh, no! No, no, none of that. *(leaves)*

PODKOLESSEN: A wedding! Ah, *bon dieu de bon dieu*. Such a headache!
One thing, then another. And why?
All must go in keeping, with custom.
No, no! Take my word.
Not quite as simple as some imagine it.
Hey, Stepan! *(he raps with his fists)* Stepan!

STEPAN: *(back again)* What is it this time?

PODKOLESSEN: One more question – I wish merely to ask ...

STEPAN: *(interrupting)* The old woman is here!

PODKOLESSEN: Ah! Fiokla! Quick, go let her in, go let her in!
(Stepan has already vanished)
Good Lord! What to do?
So complex ... Too much for me!

SCENE II

(Through the open door, one sees Fiokla in conversation with Stepan. She writhes and wriggles, indicating something with gestures. She then enters, simpering and looking around. She approaches Podkolessen with much bowing and scraping,)

PODKOLESSEN: Ah, *bonjour, bon jour*, Fiokla Ivanovna. What news, huh?
Have a chair, sit down and tell me everything.
Fiokla, continuing to salute, takes a chair and finally sits down.)
She's in good health, yes?

And her name is ... Melania ...

FIOKLA: Agafia Tikhonovna.

PODKOLESSEN: Of course! Agafia Tikhonovna.
No doubt some pathetic old maid, probably well past forty.

FIOKLA: Absolutely not! After you're married,
Upon you knees you will thank your lucky stars for the lovely bride.

PODKOLESSEN: Oh, you're a fraud, Fiokla Ivanovna!

FIOKLA: (*indignant*) At my age, why would I tell you a lie? Me lie!
(*both are silent*)

PODKOLESSEN: Can I hope for a handsome dowry? Let's review a bit.

FIOKLA: Shall I itemize?

Right in the middle of town, a huge, magnificent house,
and so easy to rent, you'll have to turn away people.
Six hundred yearly for the shop, a grocery,
besides, a wine merchant draws in customers
by the hundreds. (*she approaches Podkolessen's chair*)

Two well-located cottages –
they're both wooden; the one's a log cabin;
the other has a base of solid brick –
both of them easily bringing in four hundred rubles.
(*she approaches Podkolessen closer still*)

Add to that a backyard, with gardening plot –
three years already, it's bursting with cabbages!
And the sweetest of tenants!

A father of three boys, two of them wed.
(*She approaches closer and closer*)

The third, however, is still a youngster
living at home with father,
ready always with a helping hand.

Till I expire, says father,
I'll keep him at home, ready with a willing hand to help me.

PODKOLESSEN: (*waving her off*) Tell me more about her looks ... her face?

FIOKLA: Sugar and spice! Lily white, with rosy cheeks,
sheer honey and cream! (*leaning towards Ivan*)
Charming and simple – you have never seen her like –
You'll simply go wild! I cannot praise her enough.
And you will thank me aloud before witnesses.

Blessed Fiolka Ivanovna! (*leaning back in her chair*)
Oh, bless you!

PODKOLESSEN: But she is not, I gather, an officer's daughter?

FIOKLA: No, her father's a merchant in town.
My, she is gorgeous! Good enough for any general.
We turn up our nose at commerce?
So we're a bit of a snob?
Ah, on festival days,
when she puts on silk and goes out walking,
heavenly day! Everyone turns!
The queen, no less!

PODKOLESSEN: Well and good. But the mater is delicate ...
Though not the head of a department,
I have to maintain ...

FIOKLA: (*interrupting*) I understand.
One of the brass was trying to win her.
I felt so sorry! He had not a chance.
Indeed a singular personality.
When he opened his mouth, out came a lie!
He was ashamed of it, but he continued just the same –
which shows it must have been the will of God.

PODKOLESSEN: Well, aside from her, could you suggest someone else?

FIOKLA: Someone else I could offer you?

PODKOLESSEN: Ah, is she indeed the best possible?

FIOKLA: Explore the whole world, from East to West,
there's none to compare!

PODKOLESSEN: I'll sleep on it. I really must sleep on it.
(*yawning*) Why not come back on Sunday?
Tête-à-tête, we'll talk at leisure.
I can stretch out and you can continue.

FIOKLA: This could go on for years!
We've been talking over three months,
and what's the good of it?
(*rudely*) He calmly smokes his pipe!
Wrapped in his bathrobe, he lies on the sofa!

PODKOLESSEN: *(with a bit of agitation)*
Do you think that one should wed
The way you would call out
“Hey, Stepan! Come bring me my boots!
Here they are! Put them on! Off and away!
(tranquilly) One must give it some time ... see her at least.

FIOKLA: Yes, and then what?
Oh well if you insist, you can go see her.
Let us go now!

PODKOLESSEN: Go now??? Look outside, see how black it is!
I predict bad weather.

FIOKLA: Ah, take my warning!
I notice at your temples quite a touch of gray.
You are already late to be dreaming of a wife.

PODKOLESSEN: Rubbish! Utterly ridiculous! What a silly thing to say!
(touching his hair in horror) Gray hair? Where am I gray?

FIOKLA: *(calmly)* And why not? Age catches up with one and all.

PODKOLESSEN: You lie! The mirror will tell the truth.
But what a foolish idea. Gray hair! Hey, Stepan!
(stamping his foot) Stepan! *(enter Stepan)*
Ai once! A mirror! Never mind... I'll go myself.
(with a grimace) We shall see ... Worse than the plague!
What a horrible woman!
(He goes to the door, stops, touching his hair, and goes out clutching his head with both hands)

SCENE III

ILIA: *(an energetic friend, entering)* Ah, Podkolessen! How's it going?
(Sees Fiokla) Oh, no! You again!
It was you that pushed me into marriage.

FIOKLA: *(simpering)* So, what's the damage? It's quite the custom.

ILIA: You mean it's a living hell!
It's a custom I wish I had never come near.

FIOKLA: You kept whining to me:
Find me a wife and the sooner the better.

ILIA: *(furious again)* Ah, you scheming old witch!
(suspiciously) Don't tell me ... Podkolessen intends ...

FIOKLA: Why not? All men should have a wife.

Bah! I can't believe it!
To me, not so much as a word!
He's bent on matrimony, him?
And on the sly, too!

(Podkolessen returns, carrying a mirror into which he gazes intently; Ilia creeps up from behind)

ILIA: Boo!

PODKOLESSEN: Aie! *(startled, drops the mirror)* What a noise! You...
What for? ... but... but what for? I call that rather rude.
You gave me a shock, a shock so great
that my heart started pounding.

ILIA: My little joke. Never mind.

PODKOLESSEN: *(angrily)* Most amusing, ha ha ha! *(still upset)*
I have not even yet entirely got my breath back.
(looking sadly at the broken mirror) And my mirror smashed to bits.

ILIA: *(consoling him)* I'm sorry.
I'll replace it with another just as good.

PODKOLESSEN: *(sarcastically)* Ha! Another! Just as good!
These mirrors I can never trust.
Ten or more years they add to your age
with shadows and wrinkles on your face. *(with a gesture)*

ILIA: Now listen, Podkolessen: to me it appears
I'm the one that should be angry.
(sly, soft-spoken) Secrets from me?
Why are you *acting* so mysterious?
(staring fixedly at P.) What's this about marriage?

PODKOLESSEN: Marriage? Marriage?
How so? Planning marriage?

ILIA: *(pointing to Fiokla)* Then why is she here?
(Fiokla simpers and assumes an air of importance)

I know the old vulture. Well?...
After all, it is not criminal.
Christians go for it.
I consider marriage patriotic.
Bravo! In fact ... Leave it entirely up to me.
(to Fiokla) **But first, let's hear it all.**
Tell me, is she of proud, high nobility?
Or middle class? What's her name? Speak up!

FIOKLA: Agafia Tikhonovna.

ILIA: Agafia Tikhonovna Brandakhlistova.

FIOKLA: Oh, no! Kouper-Diagulina.

ILIA: Of course! She lives at St. Presnovsky Street.

FIOKLA: Not at all! She is not far from Pesky, on the Safron Crossroad.

ILIA: You're right! On the Safron Crossroad ...
It is that wooden house next to the boutique.

FIOKLA: There is no boutique. You surely mean cabaret.

ILIA: Yes, of course, the cabaret.
Ah, you win! I've got it muddled.

FIOKLA: Listen closely: just as you enter the side street,
a sentinel turret faces you.
So go past the turret, turning to the left,
and there almost in front of you,
or rather straight ahead a bit to the right,
you'll see the little wooden house where the seamstress lives ...
(severely) **That is not the house that you want.**
But you'll notice on the right side another house of brick,
and that's the one you're looking for.
It's there that our young lady lives,
Agafia Tikhonovna, his fiancée.

ILIA: *(hurriedly)* Much obliged!
(complacently) **And now I'll handle this affair myself.**
(calmly) **And you may go! You know, three is a crowd.**

FIOKLA: *(horrificed)* Yourself!!!
You'll manage the marriage without my assistance?

ILIA: That's it precisely.

FIOKLA: Aren't you ashamed of yourself?
For a man it is indecent!
It's my calling, gentlemen, it's my calling!

ILIA: (*brusquely pushing her aside*) Go on, get out!
(*indifferently*) You've got what you deserve.

FIOKLA: (*heading toward the door*) This makes us even now.
Why don't you mind your own business?
(*at the door, at the peak of rage*) My own fault!
If I'd only held my tongue!
(*she spits and disappears*)

SCENE IV

ILIA: Now then! Come, we can wind up this business right away.
Come on!

PODKOLESSEN: (*lying lazily on the sofa*) O my God! Why such a hurry?

ILIA: Would you rather go on like this then!
Just look at this place!
How can you prefer this bachelor existence?
You like living in this disarray?
(*inspecting*) Look, a dirty old boot beside the bed.
Here, a basin cluttered with dishes.
And there on the table that old stump of cigar.
(*now pointing directly at Podkolessen*)
And you yourself, just lolling in bed, asleep half the time.

PODKOLESSEN: (*becoming agitated*) I admit it.
Yes, everything's in a mess.
I can't argue that point.

ILIA: Ha! Once you're married, presto!
You become a new person.
(*He goes about the room indicating the place for various objects*)
Here is a spot for a smart divan ... and a poodle ...
there a canary cage ... and a landscape ...
(*turning suddenly*) I see it already.
You in your favorite armchair, cozy, contented,
and then the little lady comes tripping in,
so delicate and delicious.
She offer her hand, you give it a kiss ...

PODKOLESSEN: You're dreaming it up. Impossible!
If I were sure such a hand existed! ...
Gossamer, and white as milk! ...

ILIA: See for yourself. Women have all these allurements,
and more yet ... There is one way to find out if they do or not.

PODKOLESSEN: Frankly, I'd like it far better
with a sweet woman here at my side,
congenial, a smile on her lips ...

ILIA: Ah! Ready at last! Come on!
There's no time like the present.

PODKOLESSEN: A moment! A moment!
Must you always be so impatient? One would think ...

ILIA: Now what's wrong? Can't you make your mind up?

PODKOLESSEN: Me? Of course! Only I haven't quite decided.

ILIA: You're impossible!

PODKOLESSEN: Though I admit, perhaps it would suit me.

ILIA: So what's the objection?

PODKOLESSEN: It's not that I'm opposed ...
though it is amusing.

ILIA: Amusing!

PODKOLESSEN: Rather amusing. Bachelor one moment, snap!
I become a husband.

ILIA: You're not serious enough!
I must, my friend, point out the simple facts of life:
Stop and take stock of yourself,
and what do you amount to? Only a fool!
Why live at all? Answer that!
Go and look in the mirror
and what do you see there? An idiotic smirk!
Married, all is transformed.
Pink and chubby babies surround you –
Not just two or three!

I'll wager six or more,
and all of them looking exactly like you.
As a single man, you're merely a flunkey,
civil servant, just one of the millions ... But after,
you'll have your own tiny civil servants,
all of them little rogues and imps.
I can see one now, full of mischief,
reaching up to his daddy,
and he gives a playful tweak to your mustache.
And you pretend you're a doggie ... Woof! Woof! Woof!
Ha! Is there any scene more agreeable? Tell me!

PODKOLESSEN: Noisy brats!
I can see the little devils, breaking the furniture
and upsetting my papers.

ILIA: Never mind! They're the image of you, the devils ...
That is the point!

PODKOLESSEN: True enough, that's what matters.
Isn't it strange and curious, how a tot,
a piddling tadpole becomes one fine day
your living photograph!

ILIA: Curious indeed. Well ... shall we?

PODKOLESSEN: I'm willing! Let's go!

ILIA: Hey! Stepan! Come and help your master get ready.

PODKOLESSEN: Oh, look at this collar! Stupid laundry!
Ironed wretchedly, not even starched!
Just see how it droops.

ILIA: No matter! Hurry up!
My God, how slow you are!

PODKOLESSEN: My coat!
I wonder, Ilia Fomitch ...
Why don't you go just yourself?

ILIA: Insanity! Which one of us is marrying? You or I?

PODKOLESSEN: Listen: let's go tomorrow then,
That would suit me better.

**ILIA: You're a fatheaded fool, an obnoxious ass,
a quivering, queasy jellyfish!
A toad, but less intelligent.
Imbecile! Donkey! Prima donna!**

**PODKOLESSEN: Now calm yourself, and remember
there are things that are simply not said before a servant.
God only knows what he is thinking.
You could use a little discretion.**

**ILIA: How can one be calm around you?
And who is insulting to whom?
Take a sensible, grown-up man, he wishes to marry
by every rule of commonsense,
then runs from it like a rabbit.
There is something wrong with your head!**

**PODKOLESSEN: Oh, stop it! I'll go.
But really why the screaming?**

**ILIA: Finally! I'll believe it when I see it.
(to Stepan) Hurry up and bring his hat and overcoat. HURRY!**

THE END