

BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Vladimir Dechevov: Eis und Stahl (Ice and Steel). DVD. Directed by Immo Karaman. Berlin: Arthaus Musik, 2007. In Russian with German, English, French, Spanish, and Russian subtitles. 96 minutes. \$32.98. ASIN: B001DELWZO.

Shostakovich - Bolt. DVD. Directed by Alexei Ratmansky. Paris: BelAir Classiques, 2006. In English with French, German, and English subtitles. 145 minutes. \$47.98. ASIN: B000NVL4MY.

Each of the two DVDs under review records a first-time revival of a Soviet stage production that came and went in very short runs around 1930. One is the opera *Ice and Steel* that portrays the uprising at Kronstadt in 1921 and its repression. Commissioned in 1929 by an Opera Reform Commission set up in Lenin-grad, the music was composed by Vladimir Deshevov (1889-1955); a well-known writer Boris Lavrenëv (1891-1959) contributed the vivid and idiomatic libretto. The opera was first staged in 1930 and met with some success, but soon left the stage, never to return. The present DVD records a 2007 production by the German opera theater Saarländisches Staatstheater in Saarbrücken.

The other DVD is the ballet *Bolt*, with music by Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) and original scenario by Viktor Smirnov. The idea behind the ballet was to portray factory life, but the workers who saw the previews were offended, and the ballet barely made it on to the stage for a single performance in 1931. Shostakovich saved some of the best music for an orchestral suite but showed no desire to restage this or his other two ballets (*The Golden Age* and *The Limpid Stream*), in contrast to his attitude toward his two operas from the same period (*Nose* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*). Since the plot of the original production was rather exiguous and the choreography impossible to reconstruct, the choreographer of the Bolshoi production, Alexei Ratmansky, devised a more substantial plot suggested by the themes of the original production. (Not only the *Bolt* orchestral suite but the entire ballet is available on CD.)

These two DVDs are valuable for the student of NEP firstly because they are characteristic examples of central cultural currents of NEP Russia. Furthermore, the subjects of the two productions constitute historical bookends for NEP. The entrance into NEP is portrayed in *Ice and Steel*, which opens by portraying the social flotsam and jetsam created by the social breakdown of the civil war and ends with the hapless resistance of the “formers” and their final defeat. The exit from NEP is portrayed in *Bolt*, in which a disgruntled worker first seeks solace in a NEP-era dive and afterwards indulges in actual industrial sabotage (he literally throws a spanner, or at least a bolt, into the works). His exposure and expulsion from the collectivity is celebrated by the relentlessly cheerful workers.

Both DVDs bring up the following problem: how does one recreate a theater piece from the Soviet era for today’s stage? Neither of these works was originally

intended to be subversive or disloyal in any way (although some present-day observers seem bound and determined to find dissident features hidden in these works).¹ A production that simply gave us *Ice and Steel* or *Bolt* straight, just as they would have been shown to their original audience, would hardly be acceptable to audiences today. On the other hand, a production that just as simply sabotaged the original intentions of the creators by presenting these shows in an over-ironic manner would quickly become a tiresome cheap shot. Both of the current productions adopt a compromise attitude: the stories are presented for the most part with a straight face, but directorial comment is made clear by various devices of staging. Opinions of the relative success of these two productions will differ, but I feel that the final result is happier in the Bolshoi *Bolt* than in the German *Ice and Steel*.

The opera *Ice and Steel* switches between scenes featuring the rebels and their social (or rather anti-social) milieu and scenes featuring the workers and their voluntary militarization in order to fight the Kronstadt rebels. The scenes with the Kronstadt rebels are staged and costumed by people with a real sense of the historical period. The rebels and their supportive milieu are pictured as a heterogeneous conglomeration of “former” types – gentry, intellectuals, officers, socialist agitators, and anarchist peasants – all bitter and thoroughly demoralized by the economic hardships of the revolutionary period. Soviet critics at the time pointed out that the opera was more successful with these colorful losers than with the workers, and the current production confirms this judgment.

The German production of the opera seems to have been baffled by the problem of presenting the workers. In any event, the staging of the factory scenes contrasts strongly with the staging of the Kronstadt rebels. In the counterrevolutionary scenes, the staging is slightly stylized but essentially historical. In the “Soviet” scenes, the staging is based on a deliberately anti-historical, highly stylized, almost comic-book approach. The workers all stand and work at the machines like interchangeable robots. The singers – especially the heroine, or what passes for a heroine – maintain a fixed earnestness of expression that might be termed stoned Socialist Realism. And the costumes! – really ugly jump suits in flaming orange and the like. The Cheka officials are (perhaps somewhat ambiguous) heroes for the original opera. For today’s audience, they would at best be sinister figures. In this production, however, they come across as only camp.

The Bolshoi production of *Bolt* faced even larger challenges than the ones presented by *Ice and Steel*, since a whole new story for the ballet had to be created and fitted to music written for other staging. Taking off from the original factory setting and the idea of sabotage, the choreographer Alexei Ratmansky came up with what might be called wholesome Stalinist myth. Denis, a worker who does not quite fit in with the collective, is reprimanded for taking a smoking break and loses the respect of the girl of his dream, an upstanding Komsomolka. He drowns his sorrows in a low dive and befriends a young pickpocket named Ivachka. Together the two return to the factory and throw a bolt into the machinery. But then, Denis goes on to frame Yan, the fellow worker who had earlier denounced him and thus won the girl. This disloyal act proves too much for Ivachka, who de-

nounces our anti-hero Denis. As a reward, he becomes enrolled into the good family consisting of himself, Yan and the upright Komsomolka Nastya. This simple story is interlaced with set dance numbers in the factory, in the dive, and finally in a celebration of the Soviet armed forces (a feature also found in the original production).

I gather from comments made in the interviews included in the DVD that the creators of this simple story regard it as repulsive kitsch which they are mocking – and one can see their point. Yet a strange thing seems to have happened in the course of making this production: the exuberant talent and good humor of the choreography, dancing, staging and costumes – not to mention Shostakovich's extremely witty music – removed much of the sting of the intended satire. Indeed, I almost at times felt the presence of something like post-Soviet nostalgia for the more optimistic myths of the early Soviet era. Unlike the grim robots of *Ice and Steel*, the workers in *Bolt* are young, vigorous and clearly enjoy life. *Bolt* thus produces the same reaction as old Hollywood musicals: sure, the story is escapist myth, but wouldn't it be nice if life really were like that?

Of course, the Bolshoi production has all sorts of sly touches that undermine the Stalinist purity of the myth. The lowlifes congregated in the dive are a charmingly raffish lot who end up celebrating their own counter-community (unlike the most sinister Parisian nightclub denizens in the Bolshoi production of Shostakovich's ballet *The Golden Age*). The Soviet armed forces get a send-up, especially in the form of a spectacular turn by a Budënni cavalry consisting of leggy female dancers in tight red costumes. Most chillingly, Denis the basically likeable anti-hero is executed amidst the celebration at the end (here the DVD lets us down, since the camera-work does not properly focus on these events, leaving them somewhat in obscurity). The DVD interviews available reveal another intriguing impact of the post-Soviet context: the anti-religious satire of the original production was removed explicitly because it would have offended present-day Russian sensibilities. Thanks to these touches, *Bolt* is a genuinely unsettling post-Soviet look at the Soviet era – unsettling both in its satire and its perhaps inadvertent nostalgia.

As the previous discussion shows, these two theatrical pieces share a common theme: community vs. anti-community. On one side, we see the Soviet workers who are not only constructively organized as a group but are also individually fulfilled, since they are contributing toward a useful purpose. Opposing them, we see a motley group of rejects and misfits who have no unity beyond impotent spite and who are rapidly spiraling into nothingness. The dive in *Bolt* is a continuation of the flea market from hell in *Ice and Steel*. The intent of the original creators of these two shows, one gathers, was to present the opposition in rather stark contrast. The current productions understand that the underlying opposition between community and anti-community provides the structure for these Soviet-era works, but they cannot bring themselves to be completely faithful to the original intentions. *Ice and Steel* undercuts the idea of worker community by making the workers unpleasantly robotic. Most of the intended original drama – the Petrograd workers under severe material privation, talking it over among them-

selves, listening to appeals, and then freely deciding to affirm their Soviet loyalty at a difficult moment – is thereby lost. The current Bolshoi production of *Bolt* undercuts the original intent of stressing the contrast between the doomed “backward” social types and the brave new world of the Soviet factory, since the marginal figures who meet in the dive do manage to create their own temporary but supportive community.

This same set of themes places both of these works solidly in the tradition of Russian opera and ballet. The picture of Russia found in the Russian Ur-opera, Glinka’s *Life for the Tsar*, is as exuberantly monolithic as only a fear of disunity could inspire. Subsequent Russian operas focus almost obsessively on Russian disunity vs. the unified foreigners who are ready and willing to take advantage. Or, conversely, a ballet such as Stravinsky’s *Firebird* contrasts the chaotic and monstrous world of the evil sorcerer to the elegant and courtly unity of Russian princes and princesses. Despite their workers’ blouses and their slangy speech, the characters in *Bolt* and *Ice and Steel* face the same existential threats as those from Kievan Rus in Borodin’s *Prince Igor* and from Muscovite Russia in Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*.

The theme of community vs. anti-community also places these works squarely in the context of Socialist Realist drama and melodrama.² The Soviet regime had a self-evident interest in demonstrating that the alternatives to Soviet society were demoralization and social disintegration. But perhaps theatrical productions such as *Bolt* and *Ice and Steel* cannot be explained fully by this top-down logic. Perhaps they are also the results of Soviet society considering its options and deciding that the existential threat of social and personal collapse did warrant loyalty to the new community that at least seemed to be doing something and going somewhere. If so, then these DVDs are especially valuable to those interested in the NEP period.

Evaluating *Bolt* and *Ice and Steel* as works of art has not been the focus of my remarks. In conclusion, then, let me say that in my view the Bolshoi production of *Bolt* is a masterpiece. All elements of the current production live up to the music, which in turn is an outstanding expression of a sometimes overlooked feature of Shostakovich’s oeuvre, namely, his good humor, wit, and sense of fun. The DVD also contains a number of valuable extra features, including snippets from silent and early sound films for which Shostakovich wrote music. (This DVD has recently been placed in its entirety on Youtube, although this is of course no substitute for the DVD itself).

Deshevov’s *Ice and Steel* is not a masterpiece. On the whole, I agree with the damning critique of the Soviet critic Valerian Bogdanov-Berezovskii, writing in the later 1930s. As a composer, Deshevov was good at, say, evoking the world of the factory in musical terms, but opera was definitely not his strong suit, so that the characters have almost no musical individuality. The libretto by Boris Larenëv is written in very vivid and colloquial language (the DVD provides Russian-language subtitles that will be helpful even for Russian-speakers). Unfortunately, the libretto seems to peter out toward the end, so that the drama is ineffective. The current production sometimes rises to the challenges of such an unusual

opera and sometimes does not. Despite these substantial flaws, this production of *Ice and Steel* does successfully evoke aspects of the period in a unique and hard-hitting way.

Both of the DVDs under review provide excellent opportunities for creative teaching. I strongly recommend anyone interested in Russian music or Soviet history to acquire both DVDs (especially *Ice and Steel*, as it may not be available much longer!).

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