

# JAY REISE'S ENCOUNTER WITH A RUSSIAN MONK



GLENN BROOKES



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An associate professor of music has just done what nobody else has ever done: written an opera about Rasputin. And had it mounted by the New York City Opera. And reviewed by the critics.

*By Peter Ross*

**W**HEN my editor asked me, "What do you know about opera?" I found myself sifting through the collected troves of unused—usually unusable—information heaped in a writer's mental junkyard, sorting through files overloaded with gems of the arcane, the curious, the exotic, the mind-bogglingly dumb, hunting for operatic lore.

What I unearthed was paltry: random dates; names of composers, productions, and singers; a few places (La Scala, the Met, Covent Garden). A few quixotic quotes (Al Capone's "To me, grand opera is the berries" and some scenes from the Marx Brothers' classic send-up of opera

and the *haut monde*, coupled with *New Yorker* movie critic Pauline Kael's sage assessment that "In *A Night at the Opera*, the Marx Brothers do to opera what it deserves to have done to it"). Also, a host of crude impressions, most starring a stereotypically sizable soprano—a dead ringer for Margaret Dumont—with trailing blond braids and cavernous breastplates bleating interminable intimations of imminent death, which never—alas!—seems to descend to silence her as quickly as I'd like.

Aghast at the prospect of enduring such an ordeal, I thought how best to feign an incapacitating tone-deafness or a phobic dread of musical drama stemming from some unspeakable childhood trauma.

I didn't think it would play; when I responded to the question, it was with

resignation and—I hoped—commendable professional fatalism: "Not too much. Why?"

Little did I realize that soon I would know something about opera—and from the inside. What I would learn would have nothing to do with busty Vikings, happy-go-lucky gondoliers, or tubercular Bohemians. I was to cover the world premiere of *Rasputin* by Jay Reise, '75 G, the associate professor of music at Penn who wrote both its score and libretto. It is Reise's first opera, commissioned by Beverly Sills for the New York City Opera and sung for the first time in the company's home at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts on September 17.

But before the glitter and glamour of the premiere—which will also be marked by

some clamor—I make two trips to Lincoln Center to see *Rasputin* come alive. To get to the first of the two rehearsals I am grudgingly permitted to attend—the New York City Opera publicists guard too well against intruders—I have to rise long before dawn, dash to Philadelphia's 30th Street Station to catch an express train, and then stand and wait until it arrives. Two hours later, at the stage entrance of the building in Lincoln Center known as the New York State Theater, I pass a smiling guard, who instructs me in a Jamaican lilt to follow the squares of black set into the tile floor until I come to the practice area, where I am to meet Jay Reise.

Down long corridors I descend—not much like Orpheus, I fear—passing a burly man guiding a floor-waxer. To my satisfaction, he sings as he toils, an aria that I cannot identify and, for all I know, one that is the current salsa hit. His voice is what I consider a queasy baritone.

Reise is late, and he apologizes for his tardiness when he arrives. Now 38 years old, he carries a tote bag and a suit bag and wears glasses with clip-on tinted lenses flipped up; he has thick, close-cropped, wavy brown hair that is beginning to gray.

We make our way to the auditorium. I am instructed not to sit too close to conductor Christopher Keene and Reise, who sits in the front row behind Keene, not because I am persona non grata but so I don't block the flow of traffic: copyists, technicians, opera company officials.

Keene—who seems and, in fact, having reached only his 41st year, is very young to have been named, as he just has been, to succeed Beverly Sills as head of the New York City Opera company—talks to Reise while the orchestra warms up. Cacophony reigns until precisely 10:30 a.m., when the strings sound a concert A (440 vibrations a second). Not until Keene announces they will begin with Act II, at measure 401, does he greet the musicians with a brisk, businesslike “Good morning.” Then they begin to play. Keene, who is wearing a short-sleeved knit shirt, waves a pencil in place of the usual baton. He feints and jabs at points for emphasis, making some gestures that look like rabbit punches.

I am too far back to see much of the orchestra, but a quick peek allows quick impressions: the musicians seem to range in age from the 20s to the 60s; I do not see any blacks; there are many women; nearly everyone is wearing glasses. At measure 741, a cellist asks a question, and Keene has all the cellists repeat their section without the rest of the orchestra. Reise rises from his seat—where he has been engrossed in following along from a huge score resting on a stand in front of him—peers into the orchestra pit, and describes

what he had in mind. “Yeah,” he says, “that gets picked up by the voice, so when you play it”—he gestures like someone hurling a frisbee on a short, straight flight—“play out.”

Reise's music is usually accorded the catch-phrase “eclectic”; Reise himself employs it when talking about his work—especially about *Rasputin*—but he expresses some reservations about the term, wondering if he has overused it, or if it has come to carry derogatory connotations. His approach to composing, he says, “involves examining and culling from the best sources. We're all influenced, we all have a parentage, we all have roots, and I think that a lot of art esthetics that involved negating roots—I think of Webern and Schoenberg [two of the most influential modern composers], who tried to get rid of the whole 19th century—has become this obsessive quest for what has become, for lack of a better definition of the term,

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*What motivates an American living in the 1980s to write an opera? It is, Reise suggests, very much a matter of temperament.*

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*originality.*” To him, that spells a serious problem, especially since, in his view, even the most erudite listeners (and, I suspect, critics) “wouldn't know originality if it hit them over the head.”

Reise considers the term *polystylistic* to encompass his musical sphere, but he isn't content with that, either. “Certainly anybody listening to my music,” he says, “is going to be aware of the fact that I've heard a good deal of music in my day.” In *Rasputin*, he uses tonal music and atonal music, usually depending on the characters, and the opera includes strains of a Tchaikovsky waltz, ragtime, cabaret motifs à la Kurt Weill. He feels strongly that the intermingling of modern atonality with more traditional tonal music is not a style, merely a spectrum of compositional range, and that the task for today's writers of music is melding the modern and the traditional with authority. “The problem historically is: do you do that convincingly?” he says,

“and we all take our chances. I think I do it convincingly; I hope so. I try to.” He thinks of himself as “a romantic modernist,” he volunteers.

The music is, to my ears, *very* modern, brimming with dissonances and harmonic clashes, flinty and formal. So I'm surprised when, at measure 816, Keene asks the pianist, “Can you play that fox trot now?” A fox trot ensues, and the pianist is soon joined by the strings, the juxtaposition creating a tense, still-dissonant counterpoint. The piano is soon drowned out—in fact, it seems to sink, surface, and sink again, almost like the proverbial “down for the third time.” The effect is eerie and unsettling.

When the passage concludes, the orchestra takes a break. A woman comes up to Reise. “Those layers,” she says, referring to the dense carpets of sound: “brilliant.” The orchestra pit empties; a violist delicately packs her instrument in its case and unwraps a package from which she removes two hard-boiled eggs.

During the break, I wander around, overhearing conversations between the growing number of people lounging around, trying to guess what they have to do with the opera: those who pace nervously, grind to halts, place hands on their diaphragms, and emit trills are dead giveaways. When the orchestra reconvenes, I hear more unusual instruments: a tenor saxophone warbles in a swing-era mode, Chinese gongs add brassy flutters, and although I am unable to spot them, I am convinced I hear maracas. I have to remind myself that this strange, exotic, demanding music is but one part of something much vaster—the foundation for a drama, for singing and acting.

A little after noon, the singers are called up, and they sit on two benches at the forefront of the stage, which is concealed by the curtain. Most are in casual dress, jeans and knit shirts. They flip through the score while they wait for one of their number to join them, and soon, one of them, grown impatient, summons the shirker with a down-home cry of “Hennnnnn-reeeeeey!” (Tenor Henry Price, who plays Prince Felix Yusupov, *Rasputin's* assassin.) A tall man with a puckish expression—much suggestive of humorist Garrison Keillor—then stands and, with a stylishly dressed woman, begins to sing. (They are bass-baritone John Cheek, who has the title role, and soprano Margaret Cusack, who plays Tsarina Alexandra Romanov.) The number and combinations of singers shift as different groupings practice different portions of the opera.

I know the generalities of *Rasputin's* life and career: a rural monk, he attached himself to the ruling Romanov family by stanching the bleeding of Tsar Nicholas

and Tsarina Alexandra's hemophiliac son and heir, accruing tremendous power and influence. He was said to be an overwhelmingly forceful personality and to possess hypnotic powers. He was also said to be given to debauchery. Stories of his assassination—of the huge doses of poison the monk quaffed without ill effect, of his withstanding pistol bullets and knife wounds, of his surviving being thrown from a window, and of his final demise, from all these, combined with drowning—are the stuff of gory movies and the nightmares of small boys.

Even having some familiarity with the facts, I find following the dramatic thread of the opera's version difficult, out of context (they are rehearsing Act II—I haven't yet seen Act I). I have not yet received a copy of the libretto, either, so I mostly pay attention to the singers' postures and stances. That becomes absorbing after the next break, when they practice Rasputin's death scene. The monk has been slipped a huge dose of poison but refuses to die; Cheek is camping it up, twitching his body and fluttering his hands after downing two glasses of cyanide-laced madeira. Endowed with a big, booming voice, Cheek continues to mug through the rehearsal.

It is evident, though, that he is not fooling around: his eyes dart from the score he holds to Keene and back again, and he appears to be looking for a physical stance that suits him, shifting his body restlessly, pulling his shoulders back as he sends his lines swimming out, leaning from the waist, swiveling and pivoting his torso, rocking on his heels. Occasionally, he gnaws at a knuckle. During the death scene, as Rasputin fades, Prince Yusupov taunts him: "I hate you, you bastard, hate you, hate you, hate you. . . ." Cheek, playfully out of character, grimaces, rolls his eyes at tenor Henry Price, and pantomimes a Bronx cheer.

At 1:15 p.m., Christopher Keene shushes the murmuring orchestra and raps his music stand twice. "That's it," he says, and the rehearsal is over.

The question I ask myself—and which I put to Jay Reise's colleagues, collaborators on *Rasputin*, and the composer himself—is a simple one: what motivates an American living in the 1980s to write an opera? Curiously enough, while the replies I get vary a little in the details, they all dance around the same word—*temperament*.

When I speak to Dr. George Crumb, the prolific and revered modern composer and professor of music at Penn who taught Jay Reise when Reise was a graduate student, he (like the others) says that undertaking an opera is "a matter of temperament." When I ask him if he's ever been so inclined, he lowers his head and peers at me

from over his glasses for a moment. Suffering from a virus he brought back from a trip to Rio de Janeiro the week before and coughing violently throughout our interview, he says laconically, "No, that's a bug I've never been bitten by."

*Why an opera?* continues to resound in my mind, and when I ask Richard Wernick, another professor of music at Penn who is also a distinguished composer and also a former teacher of Reise's, he resorts to an anecdote. Aaron Copland, he says, had visited the University in 1980 and given a series of seminars to music students. In the course of one of those seminars, Wernick recalls, "One of the students asked the question almost exactly the way you've asked it: Why would anybody write an opera in the 20th century?" Copland, he says, met the query with a morsel of advice. "Don't do it," the venerable composer had said. "Don't start—just stay clear of it!"

I can only assume Reise missed that talk.

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*'Rasputin' is a very modern work in its perspective and conception—and delivers some unoperatic shocks along the way.*

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When I ask Reise his reasons for making the foray into the operatic, he offers some background before uttering the buzzword *temperament*. (It is two weeks before *Rasputin* makes its debut, and Reise is feverishly making cuts, revisions, and additions at night and spending his days in conference and rehearsal at Lincoln Center.) Why did *he* tackle an opera? "Well, because it's a very satisfying musical experience," he states simply: "It combines a literary experience with musical and theatrical ones. Not everybody is cut out to do it: it's an awful lot of work, and if you're not terribly interested in theater and drama and are more interested in music for its own sake, exclusively . . ." he trails off. "Some very great composers never wrote operas," he says, "like Liszt and Schubert." He pauses and, a moment later, corrects himself: "No, that's not true, Schubert wrote several—but they're so forgotten that I forgot he wrote them."

I ask if, this far along, he thinks he is cut out for opera. "Basically, you give it a shot," he replies: "You have to have the temperament to want to do it to start out with. My guess is that someone like Mahler—who never wrote an opera—never felt the true urge to do so, or never had the urge at the right time and place."

The events that propelled him into opera, he explains, allowed him to sidestep the tremendous obstacles that have deterred other composers—the investment of time and creative energy in a complicated and enormously costly project that might never be produced. "I'm particularly fortunate," he avows, "because the City Opera commissioned it and wanted to perform it—that's an awful lot to start with."

*Rasputin's* genesis came about almost offhandedly, I learn. Conductor Christopher Keene, then music director of the City Opera, has been an advocate of Reise's music, and his friend, for years, conducting more of it than anyone else. Keene introduced Beverly Sills to Reise's music, and Reise proposed *Rasputin*, which he was then—in 1985—beginning to formulate. Sills made a formal commission—her last, it turns out, as general director of the company. She hands control to Keene next season.

In describing the opera's gestation, Reise accords credit for the idea to George Crumb: "George and I play a lot of four-handed, two-piano music—we bang our way through Rachmaninoff and have a good time—and we were talking about opera. I said that I wanted to write one, and he said, 'You know, nobody's ever written on *Rasputin*—which is unbelievable, because it's such an operatic topic.'"

Reise began to saturate himself in early 20th-century Russian history—he was already an expert on and an admirer of the music of that era and its largely out-of-vogue composers, like F. B. Busoni, Alexander von Zemlinsky, Alexander Scriabin—in what would become, in his estimation, "an obsession." A week later, he says, he approached Crumb again. "Are you sure you don't want to use any of this?" he asked him. "No, be my guest," Crumb replied. "And I took him up on it," Reise says with a chortle.

Reise's grounding in music goes back to his childhood; he studied, he says, with his father, who had been a protégé of Swiss-born composer, conductor, and instrumentalist Rudolph Ganz (his father gave up music as a profession, Reise relates, but other than that, he is reluctant to discuss him, describing him as intensely private). His parents were friendly with many prominent jazz artists, including composer-bandleaders George Russell and Jimmy Giuffre; in his early college years, Reise



studied with Giuffre in New York (Reise grew up in Queens).

He did not, however, settle upon music as a career so early, he says; he played piano well as a teen-ager, but he did not possess the drive and single-minded determination that is de rigueur for a successful soloist. "Some people take the next step and go to Curtis [the music institute, in Philadelphia], and then you have to make certain kinds of progress, and I was never willing to do that: I was always interested in sports and extracurriculars and a lot of different things," he says.

He maintained his interest in music as an undergraduate at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., but he took his bachelor's degree in English literature in 1972. By the time he graduated, however, he was prepared to take a decisive turn toward music, and he went on to study composition for a year at McGill University in Montreal. Then he came to Penn, for his master's degree in composition. He taught at Hamilton and then at its old sister school, Kirkland College, for a total of five years before returning, in 1980, to the University as a member of the music faculty.

Reise was promoted to associate professor in 1985; most semesters, he teaches an undergraduate and a graduate course. "They really balance," he says: "There's a freshness about the undergraduates, it's a lot of fun. And the graduate students—they've got an angle that they're interested in, which is just as it should be." Teaching, he says, provides certain rewards—exposure to composers and musicians, to ideas and approaches that the students are excited about. "It's not relaxing," he notes, "but I find it a really good antidote to composing."

This semester, his undergraduates are studying 19th-century harmony and his graduate students are analyzing 20th-century compositions. "We pick 'em apart and examine the techniques," he relates.

Though, he continues, the emphasis is usually technical, this year he has embarked upon a deeper sort of scrutiny, a search for what he (warily) calls the "spiritual values" of music. Intrigued by the terminology, I mention French composer and organist Oliver Messiaen, a Catholic near-mystic and the only forthrightly spiritual modern composer I can think of. Reise immediately brightens. Messiaen, he says, "is one of my favorite composers, partly because of that. I go up and down in my reaction to his pieces over the years, and yet his spiritual commitment to music, and the music as symbol for internal transcendental ideas, is so apparent. . . . I think he's a wonderful composer."

By Reise's definition, *spiritual* does not necessarily signify religious but, rather, is

a catch-all term that aims to encompass the emotional qualities of music—and something else as well, something ineffable "that takes you from the three-dimensional world around you into the special world of music, and makes you want to go there," he says. In his music generally, he strives to push the "buttons of various emotional and musical comprehension that I like to see pushed in myself and that I want to see pushed in other people"; in *Rasputin* specifically, he elaborates, his admixture of tonal and atonal elements aims for "a meaning that, to me, gets very tied to the types of people that we are, the type of people that we feel ourselves to be, in the 20th century."

That meaning, he says, revolves around contradiction: "I think that, in some ways,

sonally when a guard stops Reise at the gate as well and demands that someone vouch for him. Once inside the auditorium, I get my first glimpses of director Frank Corsaro, who hovers around the control panel placed over the seats a dozen or so rows from the orchestra pit, and of general director Beverly Sills, who sits near the control table eating a sandwich (I can't tell what the former diva is consuming, but it is on a kaiser roll).

Reise's wife sits with their two small sons and a young woman who is introduced to me as a houseguest from Spain; there are perhaps another 100 people—critics from the New York papers and opera magazines, workmen, opera company administrators, friends—milling about. Christopher Keene can be overheard issuing commands clearly



**Beneath huge posters of Bolshevik revolutionaries, a firing squad executes the Romanovs—then turns to face the audience.**

we are very emotional, and in some ways, we are very unemotional, very detached. We are capable of embracing incredible paradoxes within our own lifestyles, within our history, within our politics, within our art." Tracing and relating those paradoxes to musical ideas, he says, is important to the opera: "I was trying to reflect the sort of roller coaster that we all live through life to a certain extent. We experience such extremes in our lives—the ups and downs—and yet, they're all part of the same package. We deal with that on an emotional basis, and to some extent, I try to reflect that in the music."

At the dress rehearsal of *Rasputin* on September 14, I am again detained by City Opera officials less than thrilled by my presence, but I take the gesture less per-

and sternly; the orchestra responds by running over short bits of the score, but the musicians can only be heard, not seen—a black scrim covers the pit completely. The lights dim, then fade, and the "supertitles" (a convention at the City Opera: the librettos, even if, like *Rasputin*, in English, appear above the stage on an elongated electronic screen, a helpful touch at times but also a distracting and esthetically questionable one) begin to flash.

Act I, Scene 1 opens with billowing clouds of incense masking huddled figures. The setting is a secret meeting of a Christian flagellant sect, the Khlysty, of which the monk Rasputin is the leader. The members chant; the mood is ominous, but suddenly some laughter erupts, and the scene stops and is started over. As the scene con-

CAROL ROSEGG

tinues, Rasputin instructs his disciples to "suffer pain through sin/suffer sin through pain" for "only in the act of mortal sin can you find the eternal in your souls." Members of the cast clamber to their feet and drop their shaggy robes; they stand nude, and begin to converge on the charismatic monk. Rasputin kneels over a naked woman who writhes sinuously to the touch of his tongue; the scene is stopped again. When it resumes, most of the cast is nude; John Cheek wears fleshtone tights. I do not know precisely what I had expected, but this is *not* it.

Whatever else it may be, *Rasputin* is a very modern work in its perspective and conception, and the production and staging are calculated to deliver some shocks: there are other orgy scenes, with more nu-

them—their bodies slump over the iron rails, limbs loose, eyes tight-shut—and then the firing squad pivots on its collective bootheels. Facing the audience, its line of rifles is again raised, and a volley rings out. With that, the opera concludes.

(Or the opera as written, anyway: describing his sensations at the curtain call of the world premiere, Reise tells me some days later that, though he was "slightly incoherent—if you had come up to me at the time and asked me a serious question, I wouldn't have been able to answer it—" he was aware that, in the aisles, another drama was unfolding. As he describes it: "a second opera was starting to go on out in the audience, with some people booing and catcalling and other people jeering them.")

compositions include three symphonies: the first, written in 1979 for voice and orchestra; the second, for large orchestra, commissioned by the Syracuse Symphony in 1980 and performed in a revised version in 1984 by the Philadelphia Orchestra, with Christopher Keene conducting; and the third, commissioned by the Long Island Philharmonic in 1983. He has also written works for string orchestra, wind quintet, string quartet, large and small chamber orchestras, choir, viola and piano, solo piano, cello and piano, solo clarinet, clarinet and piano, solo flute, and various other groupings—such as soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices with flute, harp, percussion, piano, and electric harpsichord. Among the ensembles he has been commissioned to write these for are the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Richard Wernick's Penn Contemporary Players, and the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia.

Since he mentions *Rasputin's* length—about two and a quarter hours—and its sheer scope, I ask if he encountered problems in writing it. Not problems per se, he tells me, but certainly challenges. "It's much harder to control something like this," he confesses, "but the way that I hope I solved that was by treating each scene basically as a separate piece having its own separate musical identity, then linking other scenes thematically." He began the whole process by writing the libretto, after submersing himself in the history of the era and boiling the action down; even so, he says, the opera has changed a great deal from its original conception, and it was reduced to its present two-act form from a three-hour, three-act version that called for a cast more than twice as large. He doesn't regret the cuts, he says, although he is planning to revise the opera thoroughly after its run at Lincoln Center. A few of Reise's colleagues suggest to me that, in view of some of the critical reception of the scaled-down version, Reise may intend to restore *Rasputin* to its original form, and they suggest as well that he may be having second thoughts about complying with demands for cuts and condensation.

Ten days after the debut, I meet Reise in his office on campus, and we swap perspectives on the evening; he is particularly interested in mine because, he says, he is still so immersed in the opera and in the subject matter that he feels "slightly spacey" and because I have since spoken to Frank Corsaro, who dashed off after the performance to Los Angeles, where he is preparing a restored version of Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. Reise tells me that, at the second performance of *Rasputin*—a Sunday matinee—audience response was "very good: there were no

CAROL ROSEGG



**Rasputin (right) strengthens his hold on the Tsar and Tsaritsa when he is able to stop their infant son's hemorrhaging.**

dity, and there are elements of transvestitism, sadomasochism, homoeroticism, and necrophilia worked into it as well.

There are also some staging devices that are more attention-grabbers than mere attention-getters. At the end of the first, partial rehearsal I attended, the only bit of scenery visible was a backdrop, a huge placard depicting the members of the doomed Romanovs after they had been summarily executed by Bolshevik revolutionaries in a basement of the Imperial Palace. By opening night, the backdrop is gone. In its place is a new device. The performers playing the Romanovs are escorted onto a window-washer-type platform that lifts them high above the stage. A firing squad forms below. It turns its long rifles on the Russian royals and dispatches

As the curtain falls on the opening-night performance, applause *is* tempered by some boos and hisses, in turn eliciting a ripple of reaction from the crowd. The singers are received well. Reise is greeted respectfully, if not with wild abandon. When director Corsaro takes the stage, he is booed—if not en masse, roundly—and he reacts first by cupping his hands around his mouth to form a bullhorn and booing back, then by shaking his fist vigorously at his detractors. It may not be decorous, but it *is* fascinating.

When I ask Reise if *Rasputin* is the biggest project he's undertaken, he laughs and gives a double assent for emphasis: "Oh yeah, oh yeah," he says, "in absolutely every sense of it. It's about five times longer than any other piece I've written." (Reise's



boos." I point out that at the premiere, he was not booed; "No," he says, "but I was ripped apart in *The New York Times* the next day, so I couldn't very well say it was all receptive."

Critical response to *Rasputin* was mixed. *Times* critic Donal Henahan (in a review that ran the following Monday, not the next day) dismissed it on all counts—musical, theatrical, and operatic—and lambasted Keene ("a heavy hand"), Corsaro ("neo-Brechtian staging . . . in his familiar bluntly sensational way"), and—especially—Reise ("a characterless melange of 20th-century styles"). *New York* magazine was not much warmer. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* review lacked the blistering disdain of the others. Its critic, Daniel Webster, judged from *Rasputin's* rowdy reception that "the work has said something too strong to be ig-

nored." But he also called its message and characters, even its music, "remote."

Two weeks after his review in the *Times*, Henahan discussed *Rasputin* again, this time in a reflective piece in the Sunday edition. The vitriol was softened considerably, if the overall assessment of the opera was unchanged. Henahan noted that successful first operas are extremely uncommon, and he noted as well the profound difficulties contemporary composers face in attempting to invest freshness and originality in opera; the best operatic talents, he observed, like Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner, used established theatrical conventions and musical forms, bending them, perhaps, to their individual purposes. Today's opera composers have no such tradition and, Henahan continued, often possess no definitive musical style; resorting to

eclecticism—mining the past for inspiration and lodes of allusion—is a risky proposition, one that can yield an artistic pay-off in the right hands. That was not the case, he declared, in Reise's *Rasputin*. Henahan went on to tacitly approve of the New York City Opera's resolve in commissioning and presenting new works, and he went so far as to offer some consolation to Reise. But still, he deemed *Rasputin* a failure, probably impossible to repair.

Leighton Kerner, in *The Village Voice*, viewed *Rasputin* as a notable contrast to most new operas, most of which fail, he said, as compositions, even though they may be bolstered by expert production and performance. Kerner praised Reise's score ("*Rasputin* . . . has lots of strong music") and found fault only with the opera's staging (he called it "badly focused"). He ap-

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE: Rasputin and his followers gather for a meeting of the Khlysty, a heretical religious sect. Rasputin preaches that salvation is achieved only through pain and mortal sin. When Iliodor, a zealous monk, charges blasphemy, Rasputin rebukes him, and an orgy of sex and flagellation ensues. Rasputin dares God to strike him down instantly if He is displeased. When he is not harmed, the Khlysty proclaim Rasputin their Savior. Iliodor is overcome by the sectarians.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO: Prince Felix Yusupov and his friend Grand Duke Dmitry Pavlovich meet at a Winter Palace ball celebrating Russia's entry into the Great War; they discuss the Tsar's military naiveté and the emergence of the peasant Rasputin, a lecherous monk who calls himself the voice of God and the people. Tsar Nicholas and his wife Alexandra arrive at the ball. Terrified by the restless crowd gathered outside, Alexandra recalls a prophecy that Germany would not be vanquished until the Russian autocracy was destroyed. Rasputin enters, greeting the Tsar in an overly familiar manner. Outside, a riot erupts in which many are killed. When Rasputin commands the indecisive Nicholas to reassure the crowd, Yusupov challenges Rasputin's impertinence. Alexandra convinces Nicholas to obey Rasputin, but Yusupov orders the monk's arrest. Rasputin repels the guards, and the crowd quiets when he emerges from the palace with Nicholas. Alexandra swears that Rasputin will save them; Yusupov resolves to destroy him in order to preserve the security of the nobility and then leads the court in a toast to Russia's coming victory.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF RASPUTIN

*A synopsis of Jay Reise's opera.*

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE: Nicholas and Alexandra enjoy a quiet moment with their infant son Alexei, the heir to the throne. Nicholas, however, is clearly distracted by the gunfire outside, and Alexandra is troubled by prophecies of Alexei's death. As Alexandra holds Alexei, Nicholas notices that the child's back is covered with blood. Alexei has hemophilia, and Sokolsky, the royal doctor, cannot stop the bleeding. Rasputin suddenly appears and, as if by magic, stops the hemorrhaging. Nicholas receives word that Cossacks have fired upon a mob attempting to storm the palace; when he goes to mollify the crowd, Rasputin, with Alexandra's approval, curtly dismisses Sokolsky. Alexandra berates herself for passing hemophilia on to her son, but Rasputin calms her by saying that the Mother of God has promised that Russia and Alexei will grow stronger together. Alexei will be saved, Rasputin vows, if Alexandra follows his advice.

ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR: Rasputin gloats that he has gained complete control over the Tsar and Tsaritsa. Nothing can prevent him from ruling Russia now.

ACT TWO, PROLOGUE: Lenin expounds upon the need for revolutionary violence and terror.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE: Yusupov, in drag, performs in a cabaret. After a thunderous reception, he is visited backstage by his friend Dr. Sokolsky, who tells him he was dismissed by Rasputin. Distraught over his bleak future, Sokolsky shoots himself. In a rage, Yusupov vows revenge upon Rasputin.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO: At an orgy in his apartment, Rasputin makes love to several women. Yusupov bursts in and finds his wife Irina among the revelers; Yusupov orders his henchmen to rough up Rasputin. Rasputin tries to bribe Yusupov into becoming political allies. When that fails, Rasputin overcomes Yusupov physically and then hypnotizes him into total submission.

ACT TWO, SCENE THREE: In the stateroom, Alexandra and Rasputin discuss Nicholas's need for medical "cures." Rasputin suggests that Nicholas abdicate in favor of Alexei and let Alexandra rule as regent. Yusupov, Smerdsky, Dmitry, and General Zhevadov concur that Rasputin's power must be thwarted. Nicholas, looking terribly ill, is led into the room. Zhevadov informs the Tsar of heavy losses in battle, and Rasputin pleads for an end to the war. Yusupov shows Nicholas suggestive cartoons of Rasputin and Alexandra and her daughters,

and demands Rasputin's dismissal. Nicholas finally breaks down completely and, in an hallucination, shouts out military orders and calls for plans from his ministers. Yusupov realizes that all is lost—the Tsar and Tsaritsa are both under Rasputin's hypnotic power. Yusupov plans an apparent reconciliation with Rasputin in order to destroy him. Alexandra reassures her deranged husband that she and Rasputin will save Russia. After urging Yusupov to join them, Rasputin symbolically proclaims Alexei the new Tsar.

ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR: At Yusupov's palace, Smerdsky, Dmitry and Zhevadov prepare poisoned wine and cakes to kill Rasputin. Yusupov arrives with Rasputin, who has been lured to the palace on the promise of cementing their alliance and of seeing Felix's wife Irina, who is purportedly upstairs giving a party. While waiting for Irina, Yusupov and Rasputin argue about the succession to the throne. As Rasputin repeatedly refuses the wine and cake, Yusupov grows increasingly nervous. When Rasputin finally accepts the refreshments, the poison has no effect. On the pretext of inquiring about Irina's delay, Yusupov periodically goes upstairs to confer with the conspirators. In desperation, he gets a revolver and shoots Rasputin. The assassins prepare to dispose of Rasputin's body in the river, and Yusupov abuses it when left alone. But inspired by spiritual voices, Rasputin revives, and the terrified Yusupov summons his friends, who brutally finish Rasputin off. His body is reclaimed by the Khlysty as revolution sweeps Russia and the Imperial family is executed.

proved of Reise's merger of 19th- and 20th-century styles—"The core of his opera's strength is its dramatically apt juxtaposition of tonal and atonal sequences"—and of Reise's employment of radically different forms for each of the segments—"The score as a whole thus gives you a variety of weight and style that keeps the ear alert from scene to scene."

Philadelphia *Daily News* music critic Bill Zakariassen urged readers to "go see *Rasputin*, already—you may hate it, but you won't be bored." He found less fault with the opera's staging than with its libretto, and though he called Reise "inept" as a librettist, he deemed him "an accomplished composer." Describing the score as "eclectic," he said it "evokes the tumultuous period immediately preceding the 1917 fall of Tsarist Russia."

In *The Washington Times*, Octavio Roca accorded *Rasputin* the paper's top rating of four stars. "This new opera is a spell-binding, challenging, and profoundly beautiful creation," Roca declared. He justified the employment of violence and nudity by considering them "an integral part of a score whose seriousness and effectiveness are beyond question." Reise's first opera, Roca pronounced, "works."

As for the ruckus at the premiere and the critical reception to *Rasputin*, Reise presents a cool and unruffled reaction: "I think I'm taking it all pretty well," he says, and he is willing to provide his own perspectives on the commentary. Of Daniel Webster's review, "It's clear he had listened to the opera very carefully, and he had a very thought-out response to it," Reise says: "There were certain things he picked bones over and took issue with—I agree with certain things, I don't agree with others, but I thought that that review was fine."

Some of Henahan's accusations disturb him, however. "The inaccuracies in what he said regarding my opera were such that I didn't recognize my own piece in it," he says, warming to the topic: "He said the piece was primarily atonal; that the piece is mostly atonal, simply atonal, is simply not true. It's mostly tonal, and the atonality springs from other things—it's always an extension." Of the complaint that the critic could not understand the words, Reise says he's asked people who attended for corroboration and has heard none, and he points out that in opera, "you have to take everything in context: there's a certain point where you repeat things, you have ensembles. Can you understand everything in *Falstaff*? Of course not: you've got four or five people singing at the same time."

Henahan had taken issue with some of the vocal techniques as well, especially the

falsetto parts performed by bass-baritone Cheek—a few keening lines that inched ominously above the musical background. "He said I didn't know how to write for voice," Reise recalls. The charge irritates him, and he details his consultations with Cheek once the singer had been hired; he had not rewritten the lines, but he altered some to accommodate the singer's specific range. "I know the vocal *tessitura*," Reise intones (using the Italian word for "texture" to indicate the prevailing or average position of a composer's notes in relation to the range of a voice or instrument).

The falsetto, he says, was meant to reveal "the schizophrenic nature of the character, the changing of the character." He suddenly sings a note, then sends the note soaring up the scale in a shriek. "Anyone can do *that*," he emphasizes—"that's not falsetto." (His own voice is hard to describe, probably because it is ordinary—a low tenor that becomes more highly

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*In the music of  
'Rasputin,' says  
Reise, 'I was  
trying to reflect  
the sort of roller  
coaster that we  
all live through.'*

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pitched when he grows excited, as he frequently does.)

The most important comment on *Rasputin*, Reise says, "one that disturbed me and is something I continue to reassess," was that most reviewers felt outside the realm of the drama—"Its events keep listeners at a distance," said Webster. Reise ruminates: "You have a situation in which you have a victimized family with a hemophiliac son, which is heartbreaking; and on the other hand, you have a tsar who has been responsible for the pogroms and things like that; just how far do we draw in and not draw in? When the child has hemophilia and the empress is all upset, it's a tragic situation—I can't think of anything more *human*—yet, on the other hand, gunfire goes on outside all through the opera, and you know what's happening out there is going to cause this huge revolution.

"Part of the paradox," he continues, "part of the marvelous sense of contrast,

is the very human versus the maniacal/demonic, one of the worst experiences of humanity, the stuff that's happening in the 20th century—this tremendous insensitivity and slaughter that's starting then will go on through the century. So I'm not so sure that I didn't succeed in doing exactly what I wanted. As soon as you are drawn to a point of almost romantic catharsis, you're thrown out of it. That's the whole point."

Reise describes Tsar Nicholas's ineffectuality as a ruler and his increasing withdrawal into himself and his domestic affairs, the indifference to politics and to the internal disputes which led to the collapse of his empire. "I don't know anybody who thinks that Nicholas was a great hero with a tragic flaw," he exclaims: "He was a wimp! Talk about a wimp factor!"

But if he is not sympathetic to the characters, he does not take them, or their parts in history, at all lightly. "To me," he elaborates, "it's very serious, because, after all, these personalities were the ones who have made the world largely what it is today; their ineptitude led to world-wide collapse, to World War I, to revolution." The conception of the characters and their fates, he says, was something he and Frank Corsaro had agreed upon. "As you've probably read," Reise says, "people say the characters and characterizations are wooden. Yes, they're wooden! *Of course*, they're wooden! If they were all heart, and all wonderful, tragic figures, you wouldn't have had what happened there!" Nonetheless, he is still mulling over the change of remoteness: "It's not something I dismiss."

Although Reise says *Rasputin* has been the most enjoyable working experience of his life ("I can't imagine having so much fun again") and although he says quite matter-of-factly that he is not unduly distressed by its critical reception, he admits that a work listed on the two-year-old *curriculum vitae* he had given me—an opera based on a novella by Balzac, "Sarrasine," rediscovered and made immensely popular in the 1970s by French literary theoretician Roland Barthes—is on hold. "I certainly wouldn't write an opera without a commission, without as close as you can get to a guarantee of a performance," he declares.

Even with another commission, he would prefer not to have the sort of deadline that propelled *Rasputin* from an idea to a debut in roughly three years. "I wouldn't really want to stay still long enough to do it," he says of the prospect of writing another opera; "I would probably write other pieces between." Still, he repeats, the experience of *Rasputin* "hasn't dampened my ardor for the theater or anything like that—I would *love* to write another opera."

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