ISAAC MIKHNOVSKY’S CONCERT FANTASIES ON RUSSIAN OPERAS FOR
SOLO PIANO

by

Ina Mirtcheva
Dissertation
Submitted to the
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of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Musical Arts
Piano Performance

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Date: __________________________
Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
Isaac Mikhovsky’s Concert Fantasies on Russian Operas for Solo Piano

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts at George Mason University

by

Ina Mirtcheva

Director: Dr. Linda Apple Monson
School of Music

Spring Semester 2014
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DEDICATION

In memory of and as a tribute to Isaac Mikhovsky
First and foremost, I would like to thank the family of Isaac Mikhnovsky, his wife Cecilia Mikhnovsky and their son Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky for granting me several personal interviews and providing me access to their personal archives including musical scores, letters and photos. I deeply appreciate their sharing of personal memories about the composer. I am grateful for their permission to include selected photos and letters in my dissertation.

I am also grateful to Deka-BC Publishing House\(^1\) for granting me permission to use musical excerpts from Isaac Mikhnovsky’s “Concert Fantasies,” published as Volume 7, in the series *Masterpieces of Piano Transcription*.

I wish to express my gratitude to the late pianist Professor Iliana Batemberska (1939 – 2012), who graciously invited me to her house in Bulgaria in the summer of 2009. She granted me a personal interview, where she shared stories about Isaac Mikhnovsky, her beloved teacher, and subsequently gave me permission to use these stories in my dissertation. I am grateful to Santiago Rodriguez (b. 1952), Professor and Artist-in-residence at University of Miami, for providing a letter stating his expert opinion about Mikhnovsky as a pianist and composer. I would also like to thank Petronel Malan (b. 1976), concert pianist, for her insightful comments about Mikhnovsky’s transcriptions.

I am profoundly grateful to my piano professor Dr. Anna Balakerskaia for introducing me to Mikhnovsky’s music and his family; for her help and encouragement while I was learning the concert fantasies; and her unwavering support throughout the years. I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Linda Monson, the chair of my dissertation committee, and my inspiring mentor during my years at Mason. My deep appreciation is also extended to my dissertation committee members Dr. Rachel Bergman, Dr. Gregory Robinson and Prof. John Aler, for their time, helpful comments and support.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family: my parents Elena and Radi, for their support and encouragement to follow my dreams; my brother Slavi, for his insightful advice and friendship; and my grandmother Vasya for her unconditional faith and love.

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\(^1\) Deka-BC Publishing house is also translated as Decca-VS Publishing House.
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ABSTRACT

ISAAC MIKHNOVSKY’S CONCERT FANTASIES ON RUSSIAN OPERAS FOR SOLO PIANO

Ina Mirtcheva, D.M.A

George Mason University, 2014

Dissertation Director: Dr. Linda Apple Monson

The purpose of this dissertation is to reintroduce Isaac Mikhnovsky (1914-1978) to a new generation of scholars and musicians. Not only was Mikhnovsky a brilliant pianist who gave the Russian premiere of Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, he was also an outstanding composer who wrote a number of original works and created many transcriptions on songs by Glinka, Borodin, Tchaikovsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov as well as several larger Concert Fantasies based on Russian operas. This work contains a detailed analysis of these Concert Fantasies and assesses their significance within the history of the piano virtuoso piano transcription genre and within the vast solo keyboard repertoire. Furthermore, the formal study of these highly original, technically demanding, yet faithful renditions of the operatic material is the first scholarly research of Mikhnovsky’s works. In addition, this document will assist scholars and performers who wish to expand their knowledge of the Russian piano heritage.
In the same way as Liszt turned to the Central European canon and Ferruccio Busoni focused on Bach’s organ music, Mikhnovsky devoted himself solely to the Russian tradition and specifically to the Russian vocal and operatic repertoire. He developed the keyboard adaptation in his own way and his compositions are a valued contribution to the piano literature.

Chapter One covers the life and career of Isaac Mikhnovsky, specifically his growth as a musician in a difficult period in Russian history; his relationship with his brilliant Russian colleagues; and his reputation and legacy as a performer, teacher and composer. Chapter Two presents a brief overview of the virtuoso piano transcription and highlights Mikhnovsky’s unique contribution to the art form. Chapters Three – Six provide a synopsis of the variety of musical and technical challenges, as well as theoretical analyses of Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies based on Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades*, Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka*, and Glinka’s operas *Ivan Susanin* and *Ruslan and Ludmila*. A conclusion is presented in Chapter Seven, followed by two Appendices consisting of Mikhnovsky’s total compositional oeuvre, as well as letters and photos from the Mikhnovsky Family Archives.
Isaac Mikhnovsky (1914 – 1978) was an extraordinary pianist and a respected pedagogue and composer. He wrote and performed a substantial number of virtuoso piano transcriptions and had a very successful career, yet due to the Soviet regime at the time and the cultural isolation of the country, has remained largely unknown in the West similar to many of his brilliant colleagues. It is my goal in this study to make the life and work of Mikhnovsky known to a larger audience and to inspire further study and performances of his music.

There has been a recent revival of Isaac Mikhnovsky’s works. Many of his piano transcriptions were published in Moscow, Russia by Deka-BC as part of the Masterpieces of the Piano Transcription series in volume 7 (2008) and volumes 14 and 15 (2009).\(^2\) Mikhnovsky’s brilliant recording of an all-Chopin program was re-issued as a compact disk on the Melodiya label in 2007.\(^3\) The concert pianist Petronel Malan included several of Mikhnovsky’s transcriptions for her newest recording titled Transfigured Tchaikovsky,

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\(^2\) Volume 7 includes Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies based on themes from Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades*, Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka*, and Glinka’s operas *Ivan Susanin* and *Ruslan and Ludmila*. Volumes 14 and 15 include piano transcriptions of Russian art songs. See Appendix A for complete list.

\(^3\) Additional recordings are not available to the general public, but exist solely as 78 rpm records in the archives of the former Soviet Union Radio. Melodiya was “founded in 1964 as a state-owned company for production, storage and distribution of sound recordings. The All-Union Recording Studio Melodiya was the only record company in the country until the collapse of the Soviet Union.” Today Melodiya is the guardian of the “national Russian heritage and the most valuable archives with more than 230,000 recordings.” *Melodiya*, accessed December 20, 2013, http://melody.su/en/melody/about/.
issued by Hanssler Classic in 2012. Mikhnovsky’s bassoon sonata was premiered in 2012 and his cello sonata was premiered in 2013.4

The renowned pianist and pedagogue Santiago Rodriguez, who is familiar with Mikhnovsky’s work, writes:

Isaac Mikhnovsky was one of the greatest pianists in Soviet Russia. His incredible artistry is documented in a series of recordings he made for Melodiya and Soviet Radio throughout his career. What is immediately apparent in listening to Maestro Mikhnovsky’s artistry is the completeness of his pianistic technique and musical sensitivity. His is a level of artistry that I rank at the same level as Gilels, Richter, Berman, and the many other great Russian pianists. Musicians such as Mstislav Rostropovich and Evgeny Mravinsky collaborated often with Mr. Mikhnovsky and were among his many advocates throughout his career.5

I was first introduced to Mikhnovsky’s compositions in the fall of 2008 by my wonderful piano professor and mentor Dr. Anna Balakerskaia at George Mason University. A native of St. Petersburg, Russia, Dr. Balakerskaia has known Mikhnovsky’s family since 1993. From the moment I saw the score of Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies and discovered that they were never performed in public, I was both fascinated and determined to learn and premiere them. Each of the works is deeply emotional and demanding for both the pianist and the listener. Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky, son of the composer, granted me access to his father’s original manuscripts. This proved incredibly helpful, both in my research and my performances of these works. I had the

4 The Sonata for Bassoon and Piano was premiered on February 27, 2012 by Arnold Ichai, bassoonist and Dr. Anna Balakerskaia, pianist at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. The Sonata for Cello and Piano was premiered by Igor Zubkovsky, cellist and Irina Kulikova, pianist on October 18, 2013 in Moscow, Russia.

5 Santiago Rodriguez, e-mail letter to author, dated January 10, 2013. Santiago Rodriguez is currently Professor and Chair of Keyboard Performance at Frost School of Music at the University of Miami, Florida.
privilege of giving the premiere of Isaac Mikhovsky’s Fantasy on themes from Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades* at one of my doctoral piano recitals at George Mason University on April 26, 2009. It was a memorable evening with the composer’s wife Cecilia and son Eugene in the audience. Subsequently I premiered three additional Concert Fantasies by Isaac Mikhovsky on October 28, 2012 at another of my doctoral recitals at George Mason University: Mikhovsky’s Concert Fantasies on themes from Russian operas including Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka*, Glinka’s *Ivan Susanin*, and Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmila*. Consequently I was honored to have the opportunity to interview Isaac Mikhovsky’s wife and son in their home in Bethesda, Maryland several times between 2012 and 2014. They were most gracious in granting me unlimited access to Mikhovsky’s scores, letters, photos, recordings and concert memorabilia.

During my extensive research regarding Mikhovsky’s career and compositions, I discovered and translated from Russian a significant amount of scholarly material including reviews and letters. I was born and raised in Bulgaria and my native tongue is similar to the Russian language. In addition, I have studied the Russian language formally at George Mason University. I am grateful for my many years of both informal and formal studies of the Russian language, as these studies made it possible for me to translate the many documents necessary for my dissertation research. An interview conducted with Isaac Mikhovsky in 1946 was recently published as a book chapter in *Besedy s pianistami* [Conversations with Pianists] by A. V. Vitsinskii in 2007. A three-

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page overview of Isaac Mikhnovsky’s life and career is included in the Biographical-Encyclopedic Dictionary: Moscow Conservatory from its Origins to the Present Day, 1866-2006. A reference to Mikhnovsky’s as a pianist and composer can also be found in several other books including Notes of a Moscow Pianist by Dmitry Paperno and The History of Piano Transcription: Evolutionary Trends, Styles, and Methods by Boris Borisovich Borodin.

As a performing pianist, I was intrigued by Mikhnovsky’s total oeuvre, all of which feature the piano. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, my focus is twofold: to provide a detailed biographical sketch of Isaac Mikhnovsky, including letters and photos directly from the family’s personal archives; and to provide an in-depth analysis of four of his published Concert Fantasies. There is an additional unpublished Concert Fantasy of Mikhnovsky, based on themes from Anton Rubinstein’s opera Demon. Since this work is currently unpublished and exists only in manuscript in the Mikhnovsky Family Archives, I have not included it in this study.

This document is the first formal study of any of Mikhnovsky’s compositions. In an effort to place Mikhnovsky’s life and career in the proper context, I briefly discuss the political and social regime in the Soviet Union during Mikhnovsky’s lifetime. I also

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8 Dmitry Paperno, Notes of a Moscow Pianist, (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1998), 62.

explore the perception and heritage of the transcription as a genre, its close relationship to
the virtuoso pianist-composers, especially as related to Mikhnovsky.

Although Mikhnovsky never played his Concert Fantasies in public, he shared
them with close friends and colleagues. A letter by the prominent Russian composer

Dmitri Kabalevsky, dated March 5, 1948 states:

The extremely limited number of piano transcriptions of Russian vocal (including
opera) music and at the same time the absolute need of such transcriptions made
me look at the works in this field by Isaac Mikhnovsky with special interest and
attention. I know a lot of his transcriptions (Romances by Glinka, R. Korsakov,
Tchaikovsky, Taneyev and others, fantasies on themes from operas like Ivan
Susannin, Queen of Spades) and I consider them very valuable works. In his
transcriptions, Mikhnovsky finds his own new path to arrange for solo piano
Russian vocal music, fundamentally different from the tradition established by
Liszt’s pianism. It seems to me that Mikhnovsky succeeded in discovering a
method of arrangement that preserves the song-vocal basis of the music while in
prevalent earlier written transcriptions (including transcriptions by Liszt, Pabst,
Balakirev, and others) this exact quality of Russian vocal music seemed to
disappear. I consider that the works of Isaac Mikhnovsky deserve by all means
full encouragement to be published and performed.10

Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies are more than simple literal translations. He
preserves the original melodies yet expands them through artistic commentary, and
strikes a balance between dramatic storytelling and formal structure. Most importantly,
he holds the original opera score in high esteem, and while his operatic transcriptions are
technically demanding, there are no cadenzas or passages purely for displaying virtuosity.
Rather, every note plays a role toward the larger goal: transforming these beloved

10 Dmitri Kabalevsky Letter, March 5, 1948, Mikhnovsky Family Archives. See a copy of the
original Kabalevsky letter in Russian in Appendix A of this document. All English translations completed
by Ina Mirtcheva, unless otherwise noted.
Russian operas into magnificent works filled with deeply personal expression and musical finesse.

The four Concert Fantasies of Mikhnovsky are well-suited to the pianistic idiom and are among the few transcriptions on Russian operas. These works should be presented to a larger audience not only for inclusion into the music literature, but for their artistic enjoyment. It is my belief that all pianists, especially those who aspire to the higher levels of technique and maturity, will welcome the opportunity to study and perform these wonderful pieces.
CHAPTER ONE
ISAAC MIKHNOVSKY – BIOGRAPHY

Early Life and Conservatory Years

In the lobby of the Moscow Conservatory a marble board lists the school’s most outstanding graduates. The list includes Sergei Rachmaninoff, Emile Gilels, Vladimir Ashkenazy, and there among the other great musicians is the name Isaac Mikhnovsky.

The youngest of four children in a middle-class Jewish family, Mikhnovsky was born April 17, 1914 in Smolensk, a manufacturing city near the Polish border that bore witness to Napoleon’s 1812 winter invasion. Mikhnovsky’s father worked for the government, and his mother made hats while tending to the children at home. When Mikhnovsky was four, his father died suddenly, and his mother often left him at the piano, where he began to improvise and also play music by ear.

The prominent Smolensk piano teacher Evgenia Il’inichna Gurevich-Aaghes (a graduate of St. Petersburg Conservatory) discovered Mikhnovsky’s talent when he was a young boy. Walking on the street, she heard Mikhnovsky playing the piano through an

11 Personal biographical information is provided from several interviews conducted with the composer’s son Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky in April and August of 2012.

12 Her last name is sometimes translated in English as Eiges.
open window and was so impressed that she offered to teach him at no cost. By the age of nine, Mikhnovsky had given his first solo public concert at the Old Town Hall in Smolensk, the former residence of the nobility before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. A year later, at the young age of ten, Mikhnovsky left his family and followed his teacher Gurevich-Aaghes to Moscow,\(^\text{13}\) where he enrolled at the M.P. Mussorgsky Music School and later at the Gnessin School of Music.\(^\text{14}\)

Mikhnovsky’s passion for music and determination to succeed were strong, yet his life was filled with challenges. While living in Moscow, he had no relatives to help him and he had to balance school and work. He could barely afford to rent a corner of a room and therefore had to sleep on top of a trunk. At the age of twelve, Mikhnovsky was working as a score copyist\(^\text{15}\) and as a piano accompanist at a Moscow Ballet School. Sometimes he would have to study until late at night and consequently spend the night in the classroom.

Mikhnovsky’s interest in composition was evident since his childhood. Several of his early compositions survive, notably his Fantasy for piano and orchestra Op. 9, composed 1928, as well as his Variations on Weber’s *Der Freischutz* for solo piano.

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\(^\text{13}\) Gurevich-Aaghes’s husband, who was a prominent scholar of the Russian author Anton Chekhov, received a new job in Moscow and the family had to relocate. Mikhnovsky loved and appreciated his first teacher. When he enrolled at the Academy he didn’t accept the offer from Elena Gnessin, the head of the school at the time, to become her student and continued his studies with his old teacher. Interview with Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky, Bethesda MD, April 2012.

\(^\text{14}\) Known today as Gnessin Academy of Music, this music institution was established in 1895 by the three Gnessin sisters, all of whom studied and graduated with distinction from the Moscow Conservatory. As of 2014 more than 1000 Russian and foreign students attend the Academy. Some of the most prominent graduates include the composer Aram Khachaturian, pianist Evgeni Kissin, and conductor Evgeny Svetlanov. *Gnessin Academy of Music*, http://www.gnessin-academy.ru, accessed January 10, 2014.

\(^\text{15}\) At the time, copying scores was still an important art form, all done by hand in calligraphy.
composed 1927, foreshadowing his growing love for the opera. It is astounding that Mikhnovsky did not have access to a piano on a regular basis; in order to learn new music, he internalized music scores, a habit that developed a brilliant sight reading ability and a phenomenal memory. His incredible skill to learn large complex works (e.g. Beethoven Sonatas, Liszt etudes) away from the piano and then to play them perfectly was a subject of great interest to many people. In a personal interview with the composer’s son Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky in 2012, he recalls that his father’s ability to absorb complicated compositions was such a phenomenon that as an adult Mikhnovsky’s skill was included in a scientific psychological study.

Mikhnovsky shared his recollections about his struggles as a young teenager in an extensive interview conducted by the Russian music journalist Aleksandr Vladiirovich Vitsinskii in 1946.

As a student I learned the new material without an instrument, even extremely complicated ones like Don Giovanni or Figaro transcriptions by Liszt, the Appassionata Sonata by Beethoven, and other works by Schumann. I think learning the music without an instrument was harmful possibly because of the huge quantity. Yet, I had used this method for quite some time. I had to learn numerous things by heart in a very short period of time and this had an impact on my memory. Now I will never use this method to memorize a new work, and I have completely abandoned this habit. The first interaction with the piece starts behind the instrument. Even if it happens that I look at the music before I start playing, it is with the goal to get a general idea about the piece.

Mikhnovsky was accepted into the Moscow Conservatory at the age of 16, first as a student of the rising pianist Lev Oborin and a year later as a student of the highly

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16 Personal interview with Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky, April 14, 2012, Bethesda MD.

17 Vitsinskii, Aleksandr Vladimirovich, Besedy s pianistami [Conversations with Pianists], (Klassika-XXI: Moskva 2007), 98. Interview with Isaac Mikhnovsky was conducted on February 9th, 1946.
respected and sought after pedagogue Konstantin Igumnov (1873 – 1948). In 1933 Igumnov wrote that his second-year student was “extraordinarily talented on all accounts; still unpolished, but an exceptionally sensitive musician and pianist; under the right circumstances he can become a concert pianist.”18

A few years later, Sergei Rachmaninoff, who had permanently settled in the United States by then, sent Igumnov the score to his new Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. It was premiered and recorded with the Philadelphia Orchestra under its maestro Leopold Stokowski in 1934. Igumnov gave his best student Isaac Mikhnovsky the privilege of the Russian premiere. Mikhnovsky performed this work with the Moscow Conservatory Orchestra as part of his graduation thesis in 1936.

In the midst of heavy political tension of a dangerous police state and the possible threat of war from Germany, Mikhnovsky competed in the first All-Union Piano Competition in Moscow in January 1938. With the deciding vote cast by Sergei Prokofiev, Mikhnovsky’s brilliant performance of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto was awarded first prize. The noted Russian pianist and musicologist Lev Barenboim stated: “Mikhnovsky is the most mature among the participants in the piano competition. He absolutely deserved the first place and demonstrated not only inspiration but also great artistic piano talent.”19 Many musicians credited the influence of Konstantin Igumnov and believed that Mikhnovsky was the most prepared to carry on the old teacher’s legacy. Concert pianist and pedagogue Yakov Flier wrote: “Among the

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18 Konstantin Igumnov, in Moscow Conservatory from its Origins to the Present Day, 353.

numerous talented pianists in the last competition, Mikhnovsky turned out to be the most mature master of the piano. He belongs to the closest followers of the technique of his professor Igumnov, yet he differentiates himself with amazing virtuosity and real artistic intuition."20

Likewise, Soviet musicologist Arnold Alshvang observed: “It is enough to say that Mikhnovsky’s performance of Schuman’s Fantasy was inspired by the same spectacular interpretation of the masterpiece as Igumnov’s remarkable soulful playing of it. However, the artist contributed to that interpretation the marvelous ardor of his youth.”21 Additional praise of Mikhnovsky’s performances was given by Professor Vassily Nechayev: “Mikhnovsky should be very grateful to his teacher Igumnov. A bright representative of his class, Mikhnovsky has acquired all the important traits – bigger depth, concentration, remarkable wide range of the sound palette, even some reflective interpretation peculiar to Igumnov.”22

Mikhnovsky’s victory at the All-Union piano competition was the beginning of a long and illustrious concert career. He toured the country and performed several times as a soloist in the prestigious Great Hall of Moscow. Mikhnovsky frequently collaborated with many of the leading singers and instrumentalists in Russia. He also performed piano concertos by Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Mozart, Beethoven, etc., with orchestras

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22 Vassily Nechayev, Isaac Mikhnovsky No. 87 p.3, in Moscow Conservatory, 353.
conducted by Evgeny Mravinsky, Kurt Zanderling, Nikolai Rabinovich, Natan Rakhlin, and others.  

**Political and Social Environment**

Although Mikhnovsky’s career as a touring pianist was on the rise, his long-time passion for composition remained in the background. Furthermore, the political and social uncertainty that surrounded him undoubtedly made it very difficult for his compositions and transcriptions to be published.

After the October Revolution in 1917 and the birth of Soviet Russia, many new policies and organizations were created to guide and shape the new aesthetic in the arts. The nationalization of musical institutions in 1917-1918 “forced musicians to cooperate with the State or lose their jobs.”  

Several musicians chose to emigrate including Rachmaninoff, Koussevitzky and Prokofiev (until 1933 when he returned and remained in Russia until his death in 1953). The social and political situation deteriorated further in the 1930’s. In his book *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia* the highly respected

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25 Ibid.
musician and musicologist Boris Schwarz\(^{26}\) describes that period as a time “punctuated by conflicts between high-minded artists and low-minded bureaucrats, alternating between defiance and compliance by the musicians, concessions or repressions by the Government and the Party.”\(^{27}\) He goes on to say that “the official course remained inflexible, dogmatic and dictatorial.”\(^{28}\)

In 1932 Stalin’s regime instituted Socialist Realism, “a policy that restricted public art to the traditional and accessible for the perceived benefit of the Russian people.”\(^{29}\) A new *Resolution* was issued entitled “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” which historically “signified the end of an era of flexibility, and inaugurated one of regimentation.”\(^{30}\) According to Schwarz it transformed Soviet arts from “multiformity to conformity and ultimately to uniformity.”\(^{31}\) Many composers and their works were targeted and blacklisted. The so-called Great Purge swept through the


\(^{28}\) Ibid. 60.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Ibid. 110.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
country in 1936-38. These years came to be known as Yezhovshchina, named after Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

During the 1920’s it was deemed possible for Soviet Composers to explore Western methods without embracing Western ideologies, however “such thoughts were blasphemous in the 1930s.” For example, Shostakovich’s revolutionary symphonies of the 1920’s were reevaluated and “discarded for almost thirty years as symbols of “formalism.”

Another shocking example is the attack on Shostakovich’s opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk. It had premiered on January 22, 1934, attracting international interest resulting in performances abroad including Stockholm, Prague, and London. In Russia, it was performed 83 times in Leningrad and 97 times in Moscow; a piano score was published by MUZGIZ in 1935. Yet in January of 1936, the Party newspaper Pravda issued an unsigned article “which gave them the standing of official policy pronouncement.” By declaring it “Chaos instead of Music,” the “Party made it clear that no one was allowed to ignore its directives, that public success offered no protection,


Schwarz, Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 66.

Ibid., 80.


Schwarz, Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 122

Ibid., It was later revealed in 1948 that the articles condemning Shostakovich’s music were written on instructions from the Party’s Central Committee.
and that the higher they climbed the harder they could fall.”39 It wasn’t until 1963 that the Soviet Party reinstated Lady Macbeth and the opera was declared an “undisputed masterpiece.”40

With the onset of WWII and Hitler’s attack of the Soviet Union in June of 1941, followed by immediate occupation of Leningrad, many musicians were evacuated or dislocated. Yet Moscow and Leningrad retained several of their artistic institutions including the Radio Orchestra and the Bolshoi Theatre. Many musicians, including Mikhnovsky, continued to work; musicologists paired up with performers to visit soldiers at front lines, factories, and villages, and gave recitals undeterred by danger, cold and hunger. 41 The art of “cultural popularization” – a tradition of the early revolutionary years – was revived and was considered an important civic assignment.42 One isolated but significant statistical fact illustrates what music meant to the population: “On a single Sunday, February 1, 1942, sixteen thousand Moscovites attended sixteen different concerts.”43

During the war the Soviet Army occupied a Bechstein piano factory and began shipping pianos back to Russia, where the Soviet government distributed them to the most prominent pianists in the country. At the age of 30, Mikhnovsky was given his first

40 Schwarz, Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 130.
41 Ibid., 176.
42 Ibid., 185.
43 Ibid., 176.
professional piano. He was also one of the first musicians to perform, despite brutal conditions and exhausting travel, in his native city Smolensk, after the Soviet Army liberated it from the grips of the Nazis in September 25, 1943.\textsuperscript{44}

After the war, the arts became the domain of Andrei Zhdanov: “old regulations were reactivated and additional guidelines decreed.”\textsuperscript{45} Many composers including Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Khachaturian were found guilty of “formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies”\textsuperscript{46} in a formal Resolution published in 1948. This second period of the cultural purges, the years 1946-48, became known as Zhdanovshchina.\textsuperscript{47} Zhdanov died unexpectedly on August 31, 1948, but the “policies he had initiated continued for at least another five years until Stalin’s death in 1953.”\textsuperscript{48} How the purges affected the intellectual community is best expressed by Ilya Ehrenburg in his Post-War Memoirs:

I had believed that, after the Soviet people’s victory, the 1930’s could not repeat themselves, yet everything reminded me of the way things had gone in those days: writers, film directors, and composers were called together, ‘abettors’ were singled out, and every day new names swelled the list of those censured.\textsuperscript{49}

The twentieth Communist Party Congress in 1956 signified a turning point in Soviet policy and the impact on the arts was strong and immediate. Nikita Khrushchev

\textsuperscript{44} Personal interview with Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky August 15, 2012 Bethesda, MD. Included in Appendix A is a photo of Mikhnovsky at his apartment in Moscow, with his piano.

\textsuperscript{45} Schwarz, \textit{Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia}, 80. 205.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 219.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 204.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 206.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
rose to power and initiated policies that brought a relaxation of tensions and a reconsideration of certain Stalinist taboos. “Gradually, certain writers and composers of the 1920’s and 1930’s, Soviet as well as foreign, who had been blackballed during Zhdanovshchina, began to reappear in print and in performances.”50 A cultural exchange program was initiated to re-establish ties with the West and the “International Tchaikovsky Competition” was created in Moscow in 1958. As part of the opening ceremony there were a series of recitals by Soviet musicians. Mikhnovsky gave the last solo piano recital before the competition. The next day when the competitors were choosing pianos, Van Cliburn asked specifically for the piano Mikhnovsky had played and they had to bring it up from the basement since it wasn’t one of those on stage. A week later, Cliburn won first prize.51

A Family Man and a Soldier of Music

Between traveling and performing, Mikhnovsky met Cecilia Burshtin, a doctor at the Orthopedic Institute in Moscow, who came from a family of doctors in Orenburg, a city in the Ural Mountains, over 900 miles southeast of Moscow. In 1946, they married in Moscow, where they lived in downtown Moscow. Four years later, Cecilia gave birth to their only child, Eugene.

Because Isaac Mikhnovsky lost his own father at such a young age, he was determined to be present in his child’s life. Isaac Mikhnovsky spent an enormous amount

50 Schwarz, Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 309.

51 Personal interview with Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky August 15, 2012 Bethesda, MD. Years later Mikhnovsky’s son met Cliburn in New York and the two recollected the events.
of time with his son, Eugene, taking him to parks, museums, and the theater, and together, they enjoyed a common interest in mechanical toys. Now in his sixties, Dr. Eugene Mikhnovksy remembers his father with warm affection. He describes his father Isaac Mikhnovksy as modest and devoted to his craft stating that “he never went more than two or three days without practicing and he was always working on something, composing.” At family vacations, he remembers his father’s first mission in the new town was to find a piano. He recalls his father’s extensive knowledge of opera and his inexhaustible ability to improvise and create variations on the spot. When father and son were spending time together at the piano, Isaac would conjure “musical jokes,” which often consisted of playing themes from famous operas and through altered rhythm and modality, transforming them into Russian folk songs.

In February 1978, in his Moscow apartment Isaac Mikhnovksy suffered a heart attack. On February 19, he died at the age of 63. Soon afterwards, his wife Cecilia and adult son Eugene immigrated to the United States. When Dr. Eugene Mikhnovksy completed his post-graduate studies at Georgetown University Medical School, Rostropovich, who had become a close personal friend of the family, took time away from his busy schedule to perform at the graduation ceremony. As of the completion of this document, Cecilia and Eugene still reside in the Washington D.C. area.

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52 Personal interview with Dr. Eugene Mikhnovksy August 15, 2012 Bethesda, MD.

53 Ibid.
The late Rostropovich (1927-2007) described the devotion of the Russian musicians from that era to their music in an interview, conducted on September 21, 2006 by the French journalist Bertrand Dermoncourt.

I was twenty years younger than Shostakovich, and, for the people my age, Shostakovich was not only a teacher, but a moral reference.” Rostropovich continued: “One day, Shostakovich asked me: ‘Slava, if you were on the stage and someone threw a rock at you, would you stop playing?’ I replied: ‘No, I would continue.’ Shostakovich smiled and added: ‘You are right; we are all soldiers of music,’ Shostakovich marked this with a pause, ‘and there are no generals among us. I have therefore become a soldier to the service of his music.”

Mikhnovskv loved to perform, no matter the personal or physical circumstances: with or without a good piano; in a grand concert hall or a remote Russian village. He continued to read throughout his life, and his vast knowledge of literature brought to life whatever scores he absorbed into his fingers. To this end, Isaac Mikhnovsky was a true “soldier of music.”

**Mikhnovsky as Performer**

Mikhnovsky’s concert career flourished and after his win at the First All-Soviet Union Competition in January 1938, he was considered to be an elite pianist. Significant is the fact that in April, 1938 he already performed at the Moscow Conservatory Grand Hall alongside pianists Emil Gilels and Yakov Flier.55

The Russian musicologist and music critic Daniel Zhitomirsky wrote:

“Mikhnovsky’s playing has a quality which is not an intrinsic feature in many young


55 Personal interview with Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky August 15, 2012 Bethesda, MD.
pianists these days: spirituality that makes both the performer and the audience forget about the enormous technical difficulties that are overcome.”

The Russian pianist D.A. Rabinovich declared: “Mikhnovsky is a first class talent. He is the best ‘thinker’ among our young artists. Deep lyrical concentration, complete understanding of the emotional side of the music, various feelings that bring nuances in the performance…reveal not only his natural talent but his outstanding general knowledge.”

Another great achievement and testament to Mikhnovsky’s talent was the opportunity to represent the Soviet Union in the Queen Elizabeth Competition in Brussels in 1939. He was among the few musicians selected to travel outside the country, which was very rare and almost impossible to do at the time. “Soviet artists are taught early to be competitive, to be able to perform under stress. Those who are sent abroad to participate in competitions are trained like teams for Olympic events, exposed to trial performances, and prepared both technically and psychologically.”

His fellow pianist Emil Gilels took first place, yet Mikhnovsky’s performances were impressive and he was invited to perform several recitals in Brussels as well as in Paris. The concerts were critically acclaimed. The famous French music critic Emile Vuillermoz exclaimed: “Mikhnovsky demonstrated a remarkable musical finesse.”

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59 Emile Vuillermoz, (1938), *in Moscow Conservatory*, 353.
Over the years Mikhnovsky built a repertoire of more than thirty complete solo programs, all of which he was able to perform by memory at a moment’s notice. At times he would play somewhere between sixty and seventy concerts a year. He often collaborated with such eminent musicians as Rostropovich, Goldstein, Shirinski, Dorliak, and Shafran.60

Aleksandr Vladimirovich Vitsinskii interviewed some of the most remarkable Russian pianists of the 20th century including Mikhnovsky in his book *Conversations with Pianists*.61 The following exchange remains an excellent guide for advanced students and young professionals who are preparing for a performance:

Vitsinskii: What process do you use these days to memorize the music?

Mikhnovsky: Some things are memorized by themselves in a natural way. In order to test myself I sit on the sofa with the music in hand and play it in my thoughts not looking at the notes until I stumble. Then I have a look at the music to remember.

Vitsinskii: How do you play during the last days before a concert - in a slow pace or in the real tempo?

Mikhnovsky: I play the whole works in the real tempo and only parts that I need to correct or improve, I play slowly. I start playing parts that worry me the most. I try to find the most comfortable decision about technical difficulties, “indigestible” parts in the piano music.62

Vitsinskii then inquires about the path the pianist should take after he or she has finished learning the music. Mikhnovsky replies:


62 Ibid., 97.
What is most needed is training for endurance. There are works that require in that sense a huge fortitude on part of the pianist. Now I am getting ready to play *Petrushka* by Stravinsky and I push myself to endure the furiously fast tempo. The same is true for the fourth sonata by Scriabin, which I will play in a couple of days. In it *presto* means your fingers have to fly, and this is a state of the body and mind that the musician should have learned and gotten used to. All this can produce a big “mess” if it is not preceded by hugely diligent work and practice.\(^{63}\)

As a performer, Mikhnovsky was closest to the Romantic tradition: Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Glinka, Liszt, Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, and Rachmaninoff. At the same time, he was keenly interested in the contemporary works of Bartok, Szymanowski, Prokofiev, Hindemith, Poulenc, Shostakovich, and Schnittke. He also premiered many pieces by Chinese composers and was the first to premiere the piano concerto by the Finnish composer Selim Palmgren.\(^{64}\)

Mikhnovsky’s extensive repertoire extended to piano and chamber works by several lesser known composers in the West, some of which he also recorded for the Soviet Radio, such as the Russian composers Nikolay Medtner, Yuri Shaporin, Vasily Nechayev, Anatoly Alexandrov, Leo Laputin, German composer Max Reger, Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly, Czech composers Josef Bohuslav Foerste and Vítězslav Novák, Slovenian composer and lawyer Gojmir Krek, Serbian composer Milenko Zivkovic and many others.\(^{65}\)

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\(^{63}\) Vitsinskii, *Conversations*. 97.

\(^{64}\) A.M. Merkulov, “Isaac Mikhnovsky” in *Moscow Conservatory*, 353.

\(^{65}\) Mikhnovsky Family Archives.
Mikhnovsky as Pedagogue

In addition to a demanding performance career Mikhnovsky was a highly sought after and respected pedagogue. Mstislav Rostropovich wrote the following accolade of Mikhnovsky in a 1960 letter to the Gnessin Academy of Music in Moscow:

I have known Isaac Mikhnovsky for twenty years now, as a brilliant musician, artist and pedagogue. Our mutual musical collaboration has been a real pleasure. Working together was not only a delightful experience but it was very useful for me and I learned a lot. Mikhnovsky has a complete set of qualities as a pianist and composer. He has his own compositions and an enormous quantity of transcriptions for piano. He is an excellent ensemble player and has a vast knowledge as a pedagogue. It is my great honor to give my heartfelt recommendation for Isaac Iosifovich Mikhnovsky to be given the title of Professor.  

Mikhnovsky’s pedagogical career began in 1937 as a Teaching Assistant of the composer-pianist Vassily Nechayev. From 1939-1943 he was an Associate Professor in the Chamber Music Department at the Moscow Conservatory. From 1960 until his death in 1978 Mikhnovsky was teaching Piano and Chamber music at the Gnessin Academy of Music in Moscow, where he was awarded the title of Professor for his incredible achievements and contributions.

As a professor Mikhnovsky nurtured a myriad of students, many of whom remember him fondly. Among his most outstanding students were Iliana Batemberska,

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66 Mstislav Leopoldovich Rostropovich, Letter/Recommendation, Mikhnovsky Family Archives. In the Russian academic collegiate system, the title of “Professor” is an honor that is given only to select few. The fact that Mikhnovsky became a Professor in his later years is evidence of his high level of achievement and accomplishments.


68 Personal Interview with Dr. Eugene Mikhnovsky, Bethesda MD, April, 2012.
O. Dultsina, Ivan Eftimov, A. Isenko, Ludmila Kogteva, Larissa Lobkova, E. Iosiovic. ⁶⁹ Each of these pianists had successful solo careers and/or teaching positions in Eastern Europe. ⁷⁰ Two of Mikhnovsky’s students Ivan Eftimov and Iliana Batemberska, originally from Bulgaria, completed their graduate work at the Gnessin Academy in Moscow. Ivan Eftimov (b. 1937) had a successful performing and teaching career and was head of the Piano Department at the Pancho Vladigerov Music Conservatory in Sofia, Bulgaria from 1983 – 1999. ⁷¹

Iliana Batemberska (1939-2012), was also a prominent Professor at the Pancho Vladigerov Music Conservatory in Sofia for over twenty years until her sudden death in 2012. In a personal interview conducted in the summer of 2009, ⁷² she shared her great admiration for Mikhnovsky, and she described him as intelligent, passionate and caring. She vividly recalled her lessons with Mikhnovsky as inspiring and intense. One of her favorite memories was from her very first lesson with him. She remembered how thorough and detailed his teaching was, working with her on a particularly challenging part for over forty-five minutes, until she could play it just right. Then, he simply said, “now that we are warmed up, we can really dig in and start working.” They kept going and her lesson lasted well over two hours. ⁷³

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⁶⁹ The list of Mikhnovsky’s students is taken from Moscow Conservatory, 353. First names are indicated with initial only.

⁷⁰ A. Isenko is also the author of a piano pedagogical method titled Ekspress-kurs dla detei i vzroslykh [Express-Course on Piano for adults and kids], published by Golos in 2000.


⁷³ Ibid.
Some of Mikhnovsky’s views as pedagogue are explored in Vitsinski’s book, *Conversations with Pianists*.

The importance of the slow tempo has a broader meaning to me than typically to other people. I think it is necessary to get into the habit of peacefully without rushing to listen to everything, reflect, control and feel the music. I am certain that the complexity of the process of learning a new piece for a conscientious musician shouldn’t start in a vigorous tempo as his attention should be distributed to so many different aspects of the music. Calm and deliberate playing is the only way to grasp the full complexity of the piece in musical and performing sense. The resolute intention at this point is to achieve all that at this stage of the learning process so that it can be maintained later when playing in the real tempo.

Mikhnovsky further elaborates:

Before attempting to memorize the piece, it is very important to get the fingering. The methods to overcome the technical difficulties are various and come out of the material itself. I sometimes use different rhythmical combinations, stressing different beats, but it is more of some kind of a superstition. I am not sure if this helps or not... The return to slow tempo is possible at any stage. The performer feels that right away. You are at a stage when you notice that things do not go in the way you have tried, it is obvious that you will return to a slower pace to work on the defects you want to eliminate. I want to note that the defects might not be obvious; it might be something that the musician senses. The performer’s work and experience suggest the path and methods to technical perfection.

Throughout his life, Mikhnovsky successfully balanced the demands of teaching with numerous solo and chamber recitals and concerto appearances. He also made a series of recordings for the Russian National Radio that are still extant. Many of his

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74 Vitsinskii, *Conversations*, 97.
75 Ibid., 97.
76 Isaac Mikhnovsky recordings of solo and chamber music can be found in the Archives of the Soviet Union Radio as 78 rpm records. In 2007 Melodiya released a CD with an all-Chopin program.
fellow countrymen succumbed to pressure and joined the Communist Party, but Mikhnovsky never did. Whatever feelings he harbored toward politics or government leaders, he kept to himself. Through it all, he continued to write music, and while his oeuvre is modest compared to the towering Soviet composers of the 20th century, it accurately reflects the competing voices of tradition and innovation that defined the time period.

Mikhnovsky as Composer

Mikhnovsky’s natural desire to compose was always linked to the piano. As a child he initially learned to play by improvising and his first written compositions date from his teenage years. Later in life, Mikhnovsky’s son remembers his father entertaining their guests and family friends with spontaneous creative arrangements of popular melodies. Furthermore, Mikhnovsky always composed sitting at the piano and most of his works are either for solo piano or for piano and another instrument. He took some theoretical and compositional classes as a student at the Moscow Conservatory but was primarily self-taught as a composer. During his adult life Mikhnovsky consulted several times with the composer Genrikh Ilyich Litinsky.

77 Mikhnovsky Private Archives: Several manuscripts exist dated 1926 and 1928

78 Genrikh Ilyich Litinsky (1901 – 1985) was a Russian composer and teacher. A student of Gliere, and a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, Litinsky taught there from 1928 to 1943, becoming a Professor in 1933. In 1947 he joined the faculty of Gnessin Teachers Institute of Music, Moscow, and held a professorship at Kazan Conservatory from 1949 to 1964. He also wrote a series of books on polyphony and counterpoint. Genrikh Ilyich Litinsky, jewishvirtualibrary.org, accessed January 15, 2014.
Mikhnovsky wrote a substantial number of original compositions for solo piano. Among them are six miniatures, twelve Preludes; two Ballades; and a Sonata. In addition he composed a bassoon sonata and a cello sonata. Mikhnovsky also composed original cadenzas (one for every movement) for several piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. 79

Mikhnovsky followed in the Western tradition of great composer-pianists, serving as the primary source of introducing his own music. Like Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Rubinstein, MacDowell, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, and Prokofiev, he performed many of his own works. From his pen came many concert adaptations of art songs by Liszt, Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Taneyev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Vasilенко, Shaporin, and Kabalevsky. Many of these expert transcriptions garnered great acclaim with the public at the time and were published.80 In 1948 the composer Yuri Shaporin wrote: “Isaac Mikhnovsky’s piano transcriptions of art songs and operas by Russian and Soviet composers are indisputably interesting. Not only is there an almost complete lack of similar works, but Mikhnovsky’s taste, craftsmanship, creativity and unique style allow me to recommend his transcriptions for both performance and publication.”81 When the esteemed composer and Moscow Conservatory Professor Reinhold Gliere heard the piano

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79 See Appendix A for complete list.

80 Most of them were recently re-issued in 2009 as part of the series *Masterpieces of Piano Transcription*.

81 Uri Shaporin, Letter, March 5, 1948, Mikhnovsky Family Archives. See a copy of the original Shaporin letter in Russian in Appendix A of this document.
transcriptions of several of his songs, he wrote a letter to the Russian publishing house urging them to print and issue them.  

Many other works remained only in manuscript during his lifetime, notably the Concert Fantasies. Four of Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies were published in 2008 as volume seven of the *Masterpieces of Piano Transcription*.

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82 Reinhold Glière. Letter/Review April 24, 1949, Mikhnovsky Family Archives. See a copy of the original Gliere letter in Russian in Appendix A of this document.
Description and characterization

The word transcription is a rather complex word with multiple meanings. Considered strictly as a musical genre and applied directly to the piano, the word transcription is still very broad and all-encompassing. The virtuoso piano transcription, however, is typically tied to an existing and well-known composition. Furthermore, these transcriptions are usually composed by virtuoso pianists.

The virtuoso piano transcriptions, in particular those based on themes from songs or operas, became extremely popular in the 19th century. The piano was “obviously the single instrument that could best encompass something as grand as the spirit of opera.”

The transcription became a vehicle for pianists to display their phenomenal technical abilities. Many pianists selected two or more melodies from an opera and “fashioned them into multi-sectional works, using a variety of titles (fantasy, caprice, potpourri, souvenirs, reminiscences, etc.).”

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programs during the middle of the century (approximate period 1830–70), and there was scarcely a pianist who did not seek to win audiences by composing and performing his own.\footnote{Suttoni, \textit{Piano fantasies}, Oxford Music} The Russian musicologist Boris Borisovich Borodin describes the term “Fantasy” as a type of transcription that “does not necessarily transform the original composition, but rather transforms the original concept.”\footnote{Boris Borisovich Borodin, \textit{The History of Piano Transcription: Evolutionary Trends, Styles, Methods} (Moscow: Deka-BC, 2011), 381.}

Some of the common characteristics of the virtuoso piano transcription in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century include “a majestic presentation of the themes followed by elaborate variations that pushed the boundaries of traditional techniques.”\footnote{Johnathan Kregor, \textit{Liszt as Transcriber} (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 171.} Typical writing featured “double stops (in thirds and sixths), repeated notes, arpeggios, octaves, cadenza-like filigree and roaring scales.”\footnote{Ibid., 171.}

The leading virtuoso pianist-composer-performer at the time was Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886). He was one of the first artists “to grapple with the transcription on stage, in print, and as an art form unto itself.”\footnote{Ibid., 28.} Arguably for the first time in music history “Liszt made the transcriber visible,”\footnote{Ibid., 4.} and to many “his transcriptions not only constitute great acts of creativity, but also great works of originality.”\footnote{Kregor, \textit{Liszt as Transcriber}, 171.}

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{86} Boris Borisovich Borodin, \textit{The History of Piano Transcription: Evolutionary Trends, Styles, Methods} (Moscow: Deka-BC, 2011), 381.
\bibitem{87} Johnathan Kregor, \textit{Liszt as Transcriber} (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 171.
\bibitem{88} Ibid., 171.
\bibitem{89} Ibid., 28.
\bibitem{90} Ibid., 4.
\bibitem{91} Kregor, \textit{Liszt as Transcriber}, 171.
\end{thebibliography}
based pieces and hundreds of other transcriptions based on symphonies, songs, and other genres.

Many others followed in Liszt’s footsteps, including the German pianist and teacher Friedrich Kalkbrenner (1785 - 1849), the Austrian-Czech pianist and teacher Carl Czerny (1791-1857), and the Polish virtuoso Carl Tausig (1841-1871). The Swiss-born piano virtuoso Sigismond Thalberg (1812-1871) wrote more than thirty opera fantasies and developed a unique way of displaying his technical facility. He would place the melody in the middle register of the piano, and surround it with scales and arpeggios making it appear as if there were three hands needed to perform the piece.\(^\text{92}\) Clara Schumann also contributed to this new virtuoso genre, and “broke the gender barrier with her own Variations on Bellini’s opera Il Pirata.”\(^\text{93}\)

The virtuoso piano transcription based on opera themes began to fade from the concert halls by the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century. Changing musical trends, complex chromaticism and prolonged phrases resulted in operas that no longer had “the simple melodies that lent themselves to pianistic elaboration.”\(^\text{94}\) Furthermore, once certain operas completely disappeared from the stage, so did many of the piano opera fantasies that had formed crucial thematic relationships with them.\(^\text{95}\) There was also “a growing


\(^{93}\) Charles Joseph Smith, Performance Suggestions for Franz Liszt’s Operatic Arrangements on *Don Juan (Don Giovanni), La Sonnambula, Robert le Diable, and Norma* (Program Notes of two Doctoral lecture-recitals), Urbana-Champaign, IL: 1995, 3.


\(^{95}\) Ibid.
insistence on ‘authentic’ performances,”96 which reshaped the opinions and expectations of critics and the public. Piano Transcriptions were seen by many as tampering “with the purity of the composer’s original,”97 and no longer “as a valid form of artistic expression and comment upon another’s work.”98

Nevertheless many of the most successful and famous pianists of the 20th century continued to compose and include virtuoso transcriptions in their performance repertoire. Polish-American Leopold Godowksy (1870-1938) was known for his famous arrangements of the already virtuoso Chopin etudes. Italian Ferruccio Busoni (1866 – 1924) created his own brilliant transcriptions on works of J.S. Bach. The Australian-born Percy Grainger (1882 – 1961) made arrangements of Gershwin songs as well as Strauss’s opera Der Rosenkavalier.99 Sergei Rachmaninoff (1870 – 1945) also wrote several virtuoso transcriptions including his famous arrangement of the Flight of the Bumble Bee from Rimsky-Korsakov’s Opera The Tale of Tsar Saltan. Polish born Adolf Chulz-Evler (1852 –1905) is remembered for his transcription of Johann Strauss's Blue Danube Waltz and Vladimir Horowitz (1903-1989) is renowned for his several awe-inspiring renditions of Bizet’s opera Carmen. Other pianists-composers of virtuoso transcriptions include


98 Ibid.


In the 21st century, the trend of the virtuoso piano transcription continues in a similar vein. Lang Lang (b.1982) arguably the most famous living pianist today, is referred to by many as a “superstar.” He is credited with inspiring more than 40 million children in China to learn to play the piano, a phenomenon coined by the “Today Show” as “the Lang Lang effect.” Lang Lang often plays the piano transcriptions of Franz Liszt (whom he calls “My Hero”), and is also known for performing Horowitz’s dazzling arrangement of *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Other living champions of the virtuoso piano transcription (as performers or composers) include Ronald Stevenson (b. 1928), Mikhail Pletnev (b. 1957), Marc-André Hamelin (b.1961), Boris Berezovsky (b.1969), Arkadi Volodos (b.1972), Cyprien Katsaris (b.1951), Christopher O-Riley (b. 1956), Eric Himy (b. 1960) Yuja Wang (b.1987), and Vyacheslav Gryaznov (b. 1982). The Dutch pianist and composer Frédéric Meinders (b. 1946) created more than six hundred transcriptions,

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of which one hundred and forty were composed for the left hand alone.\textsuperscript{101} The Australian pianist and composer Leslie Howard (b. 1948) recorded the complete solo works for piano by Liszt, including all of his transcriptions.\textsuperscript{102}

Petronel Malan (b. 1976), a Grammy-nominated South-African concert pianist, is known for her \textit{Transfigured} album recordings (e.g. \textit{Transfigured Bach}, \textit{Transfigured Mozart.}) Malan recently recorded several of Isaac Mikhovsky’s transcriptions on Tchaikovsky’s Romances in her “\textit{Transfigured Tchaikovsky}” compact disk. She recalls:

I made contact with Isaac Mikhovsky's son and he helped my program-editor to compile all the most important information about his father. He also graciously provided photographs and recordings from the family archive. I loved hearing Mikhovsky's recordings, especially the famous Chopin works. He was clearly a phenomenal pianist who deserves to have a more mainstream reputation.\textsuperscript{103}

She goes on to say:

The transcriptions reminded me a lot of the Rachmaninoff and Godowsky transcriptions, and although by no mean easy to play, at first, certainly very pianistic. It lays well on the hand and just works, from a pianistic point of view. The use of the piano, with regard to the full range of colors and possibilities within the instrument, is simply fantastic.\textsuperscript{104}

To appreciate Isaac Mikhovsky as a composer it is essential to understand him as a performer. The following is an excerpt from an interview Vitsinskii conducted with Mikhovsky in 1946. Mikhovsky talks about the importance of staying true to the score, even if you have to change the way you play it (which fingers or hand to use in a particularly difficult passage).

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Frédéric Meinders}, http://www.fredericmeinders.com, accessed December 18, 2013. \\
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Leslie Howard}, http://www.leslie-howard.com/index.html, accessed December 18, 2013. \\
\textsuperscript{103} Petronel Malan, e-mail letter to author, February 8, 2013. \\
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
Here, I can show you numerous places like that in *Petrushka*, in the fourth sonata by Scriabin, where I make changes to the original fingering by the composers and the distribution of the texture (notes) between the two hands is different. I always struggle to justify this right of the musician to adjust the original work to their particular hands even without omitting a single note. Sometimes I think this is not the right thing and I shouldn’t do it. But if I stick strictly to the original fingering to be completely “honest” then the music itself will suffer as numerous parts will not sound the way I think the intention of the composer was and will be extremely hard and uncomfortable. Please have a look, for example in *Petrushka*…

Vitsinskii further elaborates on Mikhnovsky’s beliefs in his book.

Then Mikhnovsky shows a whole series of particularly hard passages for the performer, in which he partially changes the fingering among the hands, in most of the cases making the part for the left hand easier at the expense of the right one. Each time he constantly raises the “honesty” issue and the doubt that musicians should do that, but then confirms that this can be done only to preserve the original sound. Then he demonstrates that exactly reproducing the author’s fingering is extraordinarily difficult. Further he shows three places in the fourth sonata by Scriabin where he also changed the fingering among the two hands.

The virtuoso aspects found in Mikhnovsky’s music are a reflection of his amazing abilities as a pianist as well as his creative mind and ingenuity in developing and transforming the Russian opera themes. Unlike many of the 19th century virtuoso transcription composers, Mikhnovsky does not compose extended cadenza-like passages for displaying technical dexterity. Rather, his goal is to consistently highlight the sensitivity and authenticity of the original music which he so greatly admired.

**Mikhnovsky and his Concert Fantasies**

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105 Vitsinskii, *Conversations*, 98.

106 Ibid.
During the 1940s, while balancing the demands of performing during and after the war, Mikhnovsky composed five Concert Fantasies for solo piano, four of which will be discussed here. Each one is based on a 19th-century Russian opera: Mikhail Glinka’s *Ivan Susanin*, also known as *A Life for the Tsar* (1836), based on the true story of a 17th-century Russian patriot; Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmila* (1842), after the fairy tale (1821) by the early 19th-century literary prodigy Alexander Pushkin; Alexander Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka* (1856), after the dramatic yet incomplete poem (1819) by Pushkin, and Petr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* (1890), based on the tragic short story (1833) by Pushkin.

Although he never played any of the fantasies in public, he shared them with his close colleagues and friends. A letter dated March 6th, 1948 by the prominent Russian pianist Lev Oborin declares:

The piano transcriptions by Isaac Mikhnovsky (the concert adaptations of songs and opera fantasies for piano) are extremely interesting and valuable contributions to the piano literature. They are both diverse and colorful, providing piano performers the possibility to build up great knowledge and skills. I think that many of these transcriptions have all the qualities to achieve an honorary place in the repertoire of many pianists. In addition most of them were based on compositions by classical and contemporary Russian composers which make them extremely valuable as we don’t have a lot of adaptations for piano.  

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107 The Concert Fantasy on themes from Anton Rubinstein’s Opera *Demon* is unpublished and exists in manuscript in Mikhnovsky Family Archives.

108 Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799 – 1837) was one of the greatest Russian poets. Many Russian composers wrote operas based on Pushkin’s masterful literary works including Glinka, Dargomyzhsky, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninoff, and Stravinsky.

109 Lev Oborin, Letter, March 5, 1948, Mikhnovsky Family Archives. See a copy of the original Oborin letter in Russian in Appendix A of this document.
From a chronological perspective, Mikhnovsky’s works might appear outdated, since they were written almost a century after the genre’s peak of popularity in the European concert hall. However, from a cultural perspective, they are distinctive as being among the very few opera fantasies in the piano literature that concentrate on specifically Russian sources. Furthermore, Mikhnovsky was able to expand on the operatic transcription genre and create works that are unique to his compositional style. In his Concert Fantasies there is polyphony on a level that did not exist previously in the operatic transcription genre. Often one can observe the theme in conjunction with other simultaneous voices, creating virtuosity that is truly inspiring. The number of sudden modulations (sometimes four or more per page) was rare if not unprecedented in piano compositions at the time. Yet it is important to note that Mikhnovsky was always true to the original material and the opera themes are represented faithfully.

Mikhnovsky’s *Concert Fantasies* on Russian Opera Themes are unique to the genre of the virtuoso opera transcriptions. Not only are Mikhnovsky’s transcriptions significant in length,\(^{110}\) but each Concert Fantasy serves to intensify the drama and spirit of the opera themes, therefore enhancing the listener’s understanding of the original compositions.

\(^{110}\) Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies based on Glinka’s *Ivan Susanin*, Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka* and Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades* are each about fifteen minutes long; Mikhnovsky’s *Ruslan and Ludmila*’s transcription is about seven minutes long.
CHAPTER THREE

MIKHNOVSKY’S CONCERT FANTASY BASED ON GLINKA’S OPERA

IVAN SUSANIN

Mikhail Glinka (1804 – 1857) is credited as “the first identifiable Russian composer of genius, whose work became the foundation for the entire modern edifice of Russian nationalist music.”¹¹¹ His first opera Ivan Susanin (1836), relates in four acts the legend of a Russian peasant who sacrifices himself in order to protect the hiding place of the new young Tsar Mikhail Romanov from the invading Polish soldiers. Glinka’s heroic tragedy Ivan Susanin is considered to be the first nationalist Russian opera, because it was “the first fully composed opera, with no spoken dialogue, to a Russian text on a lofty national subject.”¹¹²

The premiere of Glinka’s opera Ivan Susanin took place at the Bolshoi Theatre in Saint Petersburg in 1836. When Tsar Nicholas I attended one of the dress rehearsals for the premiere, Glinka changed the title to A Life for the Tsar.¹¹³ In 1939, the new Soviet state announced that “the original title was misleading,” changing it back to Ivan Susanin.


¹¹³ Leonard, Russian Music, 44.
and emphasizing the hero’s devotion to his country rather than his ruler. The text was modified again in 1991, this time emphasizing “Russia, our beloved land…”

Mikhnovsky emphasizes one main theme in each of his Concert Fantasies; this all-important theme permeates the entire work and gives the Fantasy its expressive direction. Under the title of each work, Mikhnovsky always identifies the specific operatic aria from which he takes his inspiration. In Mikhnovsky’s transcription based on Glinka’s Ivan Susanin, the culminating theme is the aria from Act IV “My Dawn Will Come” sung by Ivan Susanin (bass) in the last moments of his life (Example 1).

Example 1. Fantasy on Glinka’s Ivan Susanin, Title.

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114 Maes, A History of Russian Music, 47.

Mikhnovsky composes his Fantasy in a through-composed manner. He also builds the dramatic tension as the music progresses by presenting most of the themes chronologically, similarly to their original appearance in the opera (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Form of Mikhnovsky’s Fantasy on Ivan Susanin**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Antonidas's Romance</td>
<td>En'tract Russian soldiers theme</td>
<td>Polish mazurka theme</td>
<td>Ivan Susanin Aria</td>
<td>Coda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 1-44</td>
<td>mm. 45-117</td>
<td>mm. 118-146</td>
<td>mm. 147-236</td>
<td>mm. 236-301</td>
<td>mm. 302-316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mikhnovsky is always very specific with his intentions for color and volume, writing a dynamic indication at the beginning of each phrase and supplying accents and directions for hand crossing in order to enunciate his thickly-layered textures more vividly. The Introduction, marked *Adagio non Tanto*, proceeds in a slow 2/4 time and in a wide dynamic range—*pianissimo sotto voce to fortissimo*. The opening melody is the first theme heard in Act I, sung by the Russian soldiers ready to fight to the death against a foreign army that threatens their homeland. The entire melody is stated in the bass clef, in the same register as the low male voice. Measures 9-12 signify the singing of a lone soldier, and measures 13-16 the response of his companions. Mikhnovsky also uses the gloomy key of D minor (the key of Ivan Susanin’s aria, instead of the original G Major in Glinka’s opera) to emphasize the inevitability of death and suffering (Example 2, mm 9-16).
Mikhnovsky also includes material from the beginning of the final Act IV (Entr’acte motive): a rhythmic sequence of quarter notes tied to falling sixteenth notes. This motive introduces Susanin’s fateful aria in the opera. Mikhnovsky uses it several times throughout the Concert Fantasy, each time alluding to the climax yet to come (Example 3, mm 23-28).

The Russian Soldier’s melody soon develops into a grand chorale with bold diatonic chords. As one can see in Example 4 (mm. 29-32), Mikhnovsky uses accidentals instead of a key change to state the melody in C minor, a step lower from the original D minor, and ff to represent the courage of the Russian troops.
Mikhnovsky begins the next section B at measure 46. It is based on one of the most dramatic moments in Glinka’s opera: the Romance from Act III sung by Antonida, Ivan’s daughter, to her maiden friends. It is her wedding day, yet she is worried about her father and fears for his safety.

Antonida: I do not grieve, because of this, dear friends
I have no regrets at losing my freedom, and leaving my father’s house
Chorus: Your grief is not because of this? Then tell us why this sorrow?
Antonida: A great misfortune has befallen us,
Fate has turned against us.
The enemy came here and took my father away!
Chorus: What! The Poles were here? And they took your father?
Antonida: Like cruel eagles the Poles fell upon us.
They took my father prisoner and will surely torture him!
Chorus: Dry your tears, he will return! God will have mercy on him!
Antonida: Ahh, my heart tells me the contrary! I am full of dread and foreboding! Ahh, my father will not return! He will meet his death!116

To begin this section, Mikhnovsky states the melody of the first stanza with great clarity, accompanying it with simple eighth notes. As Glinka’s texture increases in complexity, however, Mikhnovsky uses three staffs to combine the soprano and alto melody from the women’s chorus and all the instrumental parts (including the oboe solo

part, clarinets and strings) from Glinka’s orchestration. A copy of Glinka’s opera orchestration score (Example 5) and a vocal score reduction (Example 6) are included for comparison and to further highlight the creative way in which Mikhnovsky transformed the borrowed material. (Example 5, mm 9-12 and Example 6, mm 7-11).

Example 5. Vocal Score *Ivan Susanin*, Antonida’s Romance and Chorus, mm. 9-12.\(^{117}\)

Example 6. Glinka’s Opera *Ivan Susanin*, Antonida’s Romance and chorus, mm. 7-11.118

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As shown in the following Example 7, Mikhnovsky’s transcription has multiple layers and features a bell-like pedal point on a third low staff in the left hand (m.s.). The right hand (m.d.) has the soprano line from the women’s chorus melody in octaves with additional eighth notes playing the string part. In the middle staff, also marked for the left hand (m.s.), Mikhnovsky challenges the performer to leap and cross hands several times to play all the notes. It includes the oboe solo part and the alto melody part from Glinka’s opera. It is complex, yet done in a masterful way. All the individual elements remain transparent and keep the integrity of the original score (Example 7, mm 55-59).

Example 7. Fantasy on Ivan Susanin, Antonida’s Romance and chorus, mm. 55-59.

As shown in Example 8, Mikhnovsky constructs a virtuoso variation on Antonida’s theme with an expanded register, a seamless passing of the melody between hands, and an added layer of running sixteenth notes. There is an accelerando (poco a poco piu animato), more large leaps, hand crossing, and doubling of the melody (Example 8, mm.82-87).
During the rest of section B (mm. 82 – 98), Mikhnovsky further develops the themes through a series of modulations, beginning in C major, quickly darkening to C minor, transitioning to the submediant A minor, traveling to the remote key of E major, and finally G minor as a subdominant to the new tonic key of D minor at measure 118 where the new section C begins.

Mikhnovsky develops the motive from the Entr’acte to Act IV, which was previewed in the Introduction (Example 3). As shown in Example 9, the meter is 4/4, and the rhythmic sequence is twice as slow with the quarter note tied to eighth notes, instead of the original sixteenth notes. Mikhnovsky emphasizes the grandioso nature of the passage with a *fortissimo* dynamic and a decorative chromatic scale that runs nearly the entire range of the keyboard 119 (Example 9, mm. 118 - 120).

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119 Notice again the use of leaps and hand crossing. They add a breathtaking visual effect to the piece, as many of the audience members told me after I premiered the Concert Fantasies in October 2012.
Example 9. Fantasy on Ivan Susanin, mm. 118-120.

In the following measures, the Entr’acte theme gains intensity through several quick chord progressions from Ab Major to C minor, to F minor, back to Ab Major and then Ab minor. There is a careful escalation of dynamics and tempos, and a call-and-response sequence of the eighth notes between registers in the left hand. Mikhovskiy eliminates the tie from the original rhythmic figure and presents the theme first in octave or single notes, and then beginning in m. 130 the right hand fortifies the left hand melody with single notes and then with broken octaves (Example 10, mm. 127-131).
Section D of Mikhnovsky’s Fantasy begins at measure 147 with the *mazurka* theme from Glinka’s Act IV, Scene II. In the opera Glinka uses the *mazurka* dance to represent the invading Poles. As shown in Example 11, Mikhnovsky maintains the original key of A-flat major and the 3/4 meter of the Polish dance; the mazurka melody appears first in its entirety and is developed later through melodic doubling at the octave as well as through texture variation. Mikhnovsky’s attention to detail is meticulous. He requests *marcato assai*, yet specifically asks for soft dynamics (*piano* or *sempre pianissimo*) and his inclusion of *sottovoce lugubre* preserves the gloomy character of the
scene and the imminent arrival of Susanin’s heartbreaking aria (Example 11, mm. 157-166).

Example 11. *Fantasy on Ivan Susanin*, Mazurka, mm. 157 – 166.

One can also see in Example 11 how the use of accents and grace notes enhances the integrity of the mazurka dance. Furthermore, Mikhnovsky’s manipulation of the harmonic material (with the left hand in simple octaves) creates a thin texture which does not overpower the melody on top (Example 11, mm. 157-166).

Mikhnovsky then begins the transition for the central moment of his Fantasy: Susanin’s death scene aria. He does this by placing the mazurka tune over the theme from the Entr’acte to Act IV; in order to fit the Entr’acte theme with the mazurka, he changes its rhythm into a dotted quarter note and three eighth notes (Example 12, mm. 230-238).
Through another series of restless modulations, Mikhnovsky arrives in D minor, the tonic key of the Concert Fantasy and Susanin’s aria “My Dawn Will Come.”

My dawn will come,  
I will look you in the face my last dawn,  
My time has come!  
Oh Lord, do not desert me in this hour of need!  
My fate is bitter; a dreadful sadness is in my heart!  
My soul is grieving… how frightening it is to be tortured to death.  
My dawn will come,  
I will look you in the face my last dawn,  
My time has come!  
My dying moment, in this fearful hour give me strength, give me strength.120

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120 Mikhail Glinka, Ivan Susanin: opera v 4-kh deistviakh s epilogom. Perelozhenie dlia peniia s fortepiano. [Ivan Susanin, Opera in 4 Acts with epilogue, Vocal score with piano] (Muzgiz: Moscow) 1949.
The first statement of the aria takes place between measures 237 and 261. Mikhnovskiy builds a three-layered texture: pedal point, melodic line, and triplet eighth-note accompaniment. He shifts the melody from the left hand to the right hand, and in the climactic moment of the aria (measure 243) the hands overlap and the melody is doubled (Example 12, mm. 230-238 and Example 13, mm. 239-244).

Example 13. *Fantasy on Ivan Susanin*, Susanin's Aria, mm. 239-244.

A copy of Glinka’s orchestration from the opera leading to the climactic moment in the aria is included as Example 14 (mm. 44-47). Notice Susannin’s aria, the harp and strings parts, all of which are carefully preserved in Mikhnovskiy’s Concert Fantasy.
Mikhnovsky continues with several virtuoso variations on Susanin’s theme. In Variation One (mm. 262-269), he thickens the texture to four layers, doubles the melody at the octave, expands the register, and in the right hand, raises intensity through large leaps in both hands. In addition he creates a striking rhythmic effect by alternating triplet eighth notes and even sixteenth notes in the right hand (Example 15, mm. 262-267).

121 Mikhail Glinka, Ivan Susanin: opera v 4-kh deistviakh s epilogom. Perelozenie dlia penaia s fortepiano. [Ivan Susanin, Opera in 4 Acts with epilogue, Vocal score with piano] (Muzgiz: Moscow) 1949.
Variation Two (mm. 285-301) is even more intense. Mikhnovsky places the aria melody within a chordal structure in the left hand and adds a series of brisk chromatic scales in the right hand. He breaks the main theme into different sections and alternates the meter between 4/4 and 6/4 in order to make more room for a sequence of descending diminished seventh chords that build harmonic and dramatic tension (Example 16, mm. 284-286).
Mikhnovsky modulates into the parallel key of D major at measure 298. He presents a final variation of the Russian Soldier’s theme and reinforces this important structural and emotional transition with a triple fortissimo, bold octave scales, allargando and Maestoso emphasizing a feeling of celebration, despite the tragic death of Susanin (Example 17, mm 298-303).
Unfortunately Mikhnovsky left his Fantasy on *Ivan Susanin* unfinished. For the 2008 Deka-BC Publishing House printing, the young Russian concert pianist Vyacheslav Gryaznov (b. 1982)\(^{122}\) contributed two different endings: a slow and sad elegy in a minor key, with reference to Antonida’s Romance; and a majestic salute to the hero in a major key, which includes material from the chorus melody in the Epilogue of Glinka’s opera.\(^ {123}\)

Despite its incomplete state, Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasy on *Ivan Susanin* is a significant work. Demonstrating fidelity to Glinka’s original operatic score and the

\(^{122}\) The Russian pianist and composer Vyacheslav Gryaznov was born in 1982. A graduate of the Moscow Conservatory he has been an Assistant Professor at the Piano Department there since 2008. Many of his own virtuoso piano transcriptions have been published by Deka-BC, Moscow, in the series *Masterpieces of Piano Transcription*, in vol.3 (2005), vol. 8 (2007) and vol. 18 (2011).

\(^{123}\) At the 2011 premier of Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasy based on themes from Ivan Susanin, I chose the shorter, more dramatic ending.
dramatic elements of the libretto, Mikhovsky’s transcription is filled with creative manipulations of texture, harmony and rhythm. The final product is a virtuoso piece that is innovative and relevant in today’s century of increasing artistic sophistication and taste.
CHAPTER FOUR

MIKHNOVSKY’S CONCERT FANTASY BASED ON GLINKA’S OPERA

*RUSLAN AND LUDMILA*

Glinka selected Pushkin’s epic fairy tale poem *Ruslan and Ludmila* for his second opera. The poem follows the fate of Ludmila, the daughter of the Grand Prince of Kiev, her abduction by the evil wizard Chernomor, and her rescue by the knight Ruslan. The exotic subject matter, ambitious design, and boldly original music that characterize *Ruslan and Ludmila* find a perfect synthesis in the central act of the opera. Known as the Persian Chorus, Act III, Scene I takes place at the enchanted place of the evil sorceress Naina, where young maidens sing and dance seductively to lure passing travelers.

Mikhnovsky selects this particular event as the germ for his transcription, and in contrast to the other three fantasies discussed in this document, he maintains his focus on this single chorus, never calling upon material from elsewhere in the opera. He follows Glinka’s variation format in the Chorus with minor alterations. As such, this work is the shortest and the most conservative of the four.

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125 Musicologists still debate the exact origin of the Persian Chorus melody, despite Glinka’s statement that he “heard at Shterich’s a Persian song sung by the secretary of the ministry of foreign affairs – Khezrev-Mirza.” Seaman, *History of Russian Music*, 182.
At the same time it retains all the aspects that distinguish Mikhnovsky’s treatment of borrowed material. Melody plays an integral role throughout; the imported theme is first stated in full without alterations; and the development of the theme takes place through decorative scale passages and multi-layered textures (See Table 2).

Table 2: Form of Mikhnovsky’s Fantasy on Ruslan and Ludmila.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Persian Chorus Theme</td>
<td>Var. 1</td>
<td>Var. 2</td>
<td>Var. 3</td>
<td>Var. 4</td>
<td>Coda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 1-32</td>
<td>mm. 33-56</td>
<td>mm. 57-80</td>
<td>mm. 81-100</td>
<td>mm. 101-120</td>
<td>mm. 121-132</td>
<td>mm. 141-161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melodic Phrasing</td>
<td>aaba‘ba’</td>
<td>aaba‘b’a’</td>
<td>aaba‘b’</td>
<td>2 mm bridge aba‘b’</td>
<td>2 mm bridge aaba‘b’</td>
<td>2mm bridge aa Coda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this scene, the maidens sing the following verses:

Darkness falls down upon the field
The waves bring up the frigid wind
It is late, young wanderer
Take shelter in our joyful palace

Here the nights are blissful and calm
But in the daytime, there is noise and merrymaking
Come to our welcoming call
Come to us young wanderer

Here you will find a swarm of beautiful girls
With sweet speech and caresses
Come to our mysterious call
Come, oh come young wanderer

To you, as the dawn comes,
We will fill your chalice for the parting,
Come to our peaceful call
Come to us young wanderer
Come to us young wanderer

The extended introduction, marked *Con moto*--thirty-two measures in total--establishes the mood of the Fantasy through sparkling chromatic sixteenth-note triplets, exotic grace notes set at the interval of a ninth instead of the more common second, and rhythmic reference to the main melody. Mikhnovsky also keeps the original tonic key of E major and 2/4 meter of the Persian Chorus though he adds his own colorful harmonic background. (Example 18, mm. 4-10).

Example 18. Fantasy on Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmila*, Introduction, mm. 4-10.

The next section slows the pace of the music (*Andantino*, mm. 33-56) and it presents the complete 24 measures of the Persian Chorus theme with the melody and harmony unchanged. This enticing Persian Chorus is subdivided into six four-measure

phrases: aaba’ba’. Nevertheless, Mikhnovsky introduces two personal touches. First he doubles the melody at the octave to give the impression of a mixed chorus, unlike the Persian women’s chorus that sings in unison in Glinka’s opera. Second Mikhnovsky varies the rhythm or texture of the accompaniment (Example 19, mm. 33-43).

Example 19. *Fantasy on Ruslan and Ludmila*, Theme, mm. 33-43.

Because Mikhnovsky does not include cadenzas or any bridges between the variations, the Fantasy has an unusually continuous flow. In Variation One (mm. 57-80), Mikhnovsky places the melody in the middle register and embellishes it with ornamental staccato sixteenth notes and bell-like pedal tones in the bass (Example 20, mm. 59-63).
Example 20. Fantasy on Ruslan and Ludmila, Var. 1, mm. 59-63.

In Variation Two (mm. 81-100), Mikhnovsky maintains the octave doubling of the melody displayed between the two hands and he thickens the texture and intensifies the virtuosic writing. Triplet sixteenth notes and grace notes in the right hand simulate Glinka’s scoring for the solo flute in the A section, and the sixteenth notes in the left hand alternate back and forth between the melody and the accompaniment. Great technical facility is necessary to execute this passage and maintain the proper balance of all of its components (Example 21, mm. 80-83).

Example 21. Fantasy on Ruslan and Ludmila, Var. 2, mm. 80-83.
The original Glinka orchestration (Example 22) is included to compare and highlight the masterful way in which Mikhnovsky combines all the parts (flute, chorus and strings) in his virtuoso transcription (Example 22, mm. 58-61).

Example 22. Glinka’s Opera *Ruslan and Ludmila*, Var. 2, mm. 58-61.127

In Glinka’s operatic vocal score reduction (shown in Example 23), the cello part is included as reference only. The flute is imitated by the right hand piano score (Example 23, mm. 57-60).

Example 23. Vocal Reduction of Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmila*, Var. 2, mm. 57-60.\(^ {128}\)

Mikhnovsky preserves the integrity of the original orchestration and masterfully incorporates the cello countermelody from Glinka’s orchestration of the B section in the left hand. The flute part is presented in the right hand along with the Persian melody in octaves (Example 24, mm. 90-92).

Example 24. Mikhnovsky’s Fantasy on *Ruslan and Ludmila*, Var. 2, mm. 90-92.

In Variation Three (mm. 101-120), Mikhnovsky slightly alters the structure.

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He writes a two-measure transition, then uses only abab from the original melodic phrasing, and then writes a two-measure transition into the next variation. This facilitates the transfer of the melody to the left hand, doubles it at the octave and requires large leaps in the left hand with a decorative layer of thirty-second note scales in the right hand (Example 25, mm. 99-105).

Example 25. Fantasy on Ruslan and Ludmila, Var. 3, mm. 99-105.
In the final variation (Variation Four, mm. 121-139), the texture is more transparent than in previous variations, but the new level of difficulty is striking. Mikhnovsky builds the melody on a series of septuplet sixteenth note runs in the right hand and he assigns the left hand to play straight eighth note block chords that punctuate the uneven rhythm in the treble clef. Meanwhile, the dynamics and color are very specific: *sempre p molto tranquillo* (Example 26, mm. 121-123).

Example 26. *Fantasy on Ruslan and Ludmila*, Var. 4, mm. 121-123.

At the final statement of the A’ section in Variation Four, Mikhnovsky extends the passage into a nineteen measure coda (mm. 141-160). Similar to Glinka’s chorus in his opera, Mikhnovsky ends this transcription quietly.

Mikhnovsky’s *Fantasy on Ruslan and Ludmila* is a little gem that is simultaneously simple and complicated. Mikhnovsky writes neither modulations nor long developments, yet he gives each variation its own unique color. The music remains in the original key of E major, yet the added chromaticism in the scale passages bestow the impression of more complex harmonies. The entire piece stays true to the variation
format of Glinka’s structure, but declares individuality through the extended introduction and coda, as well as unexpected transitions and bridges. In this way, Mikhnovsky achieves in this chorus transcription what he achieves in his other and more complex concert fantasies: a work that both respects and transcends its source.
CHAPTER FIVE
MIKHNOVSKY’S CONCERT FANTASY BASED ON DARGOMYZHSKY’S
OPERA RUSALKA

Modest Mussorgsky called Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813-1869) the "great teacher of musical truth." Dargomyzhsky composed the opera Rusalka over a period of seven years and wrote the libretto himself based on a poem by Pushkin. Rusalka was premiered at the famous Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg in 1855. In 1873 Tchaikovsky wrote an article about the recent revival of Rusalka: “It is well known that Dargomyzhsky’s strength lies in his astoundingly real and at the same time gracefully singing recitative, which imparts to his magnificent opera the fascination of inimitable originality.” Cast in four acts, Rusalka tells the story of a prince who woos and then abandons a miller's daughter in order to marry his betrothed. The grief-stricken girl drowns herself in the Dnieper river and her father goes insane. The girl, now a vengeful water nymph (Rusalka) lures the remorseful prince to a watery death.

As foundation for his Concert Fantasy on Rusalka, Mikhnovsky turns to the Cavatina of the Prince in Act III, Scene II, which is in two parts (A and B). The text is once again identified under the title of the work (Example 27, mm 1-5).

Example 27. Concert Fantasy on Dargomyzhsky’s Rusalka, mm. 1-5.

Unwillingly to these sad shores
I’m drawn by a mysterious force;
Familiar, sad places!
I recognize the things around:
Here, here’s the mill, but it’s broken,
Its cheerful noise fell silent.
Ah, probably the old man has died, as well!
He mourned his dear, poor daughter for a long time!
And here is the coveted oak, where she,
Embraced me, slumped and then fell silent!

Here everything brings me back memory of the bygone,
And the beautiful days of carefree youth.
Here, I remember I was once met,
Emancipated, by emancipated love.
Here the heart first of bliss had learnt.
Alas, not for long are we granted such fortune!
Forever are gone, those days of bright joy,
Now heavy grief sits deep down in the heart!
Did I not myself, demented, lose happiness!
And it was so close, so possible it was!
Here everything brings me back memory of the bygone,
And the beautiful days of carefree youth.
Here, I remember I was once met,
Emancipated, by emancipated love.
Here in this grove, joyous with love,
Care and sorrow, and all I forgot.
Here everything brings me back memory of the bygone,
And the beautiful days of carefree youth.\(^{131}\)

Mikhnovsky also incorporates two other themes, the Wedding March from Act II and Rusalka’s aria from Act III. The March is present in the Introduction of the Fantasy and the aria appears in the extended development section of the Fantasy (See Table 3).

Table 3 Form of Mikhnovsky’s Fantasy on Rusalka

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Wedding March and Rusalka</td>
<td>Prince’s Theme A and B</td>
<td>Extended Development of Rusalka and Prince’s theme’s</td>
<td>Coda Prince’s theme Part B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm 1-36</td>
<td>mm 37-145</td>
<td>mm 146-349</td>
<td>mm 330-373</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cast in A-flat major and 4/4 common time, the Introduction (Allegro non troppo, mm. 1-36) contrasts the joyful Wedding March with the quieter yet brooding theme that represents Rusalka (Example 27, mm. 1-5). There is also a brief reference of the Prince’s theme in measures 21-23, which foreshadows its later entrance at measure 37 (Example 28, mm. 21-25).

Example 28. Fantasy on Dargomyzhsky’s Rusalka, Introduction, mm. 21-25.

This next section (mm. 37-145) breaks the Prince’s aria into two parts: Part A (mm. 37-47) maintains the key of A-flat major in a three-layered texture that passes the melody between hands. The echo of the melody in the original orchestration can be seen in the fragment marked pianissimo in measure 38 (Example 29, mm. 36-39).

Example 29. Fantasy on Dargomyzhsky’s Rusalka, Prince’s Aria Part A, mm. 36-39.

Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasy faithfully presents the Prince’s Aria. At the same time it sound more orchestral with the wide range and octave doubling in comparison to a simple vocal reduction score of Dargomyzhsky’s opera (Example 30, mm. 5-7).
Mikhnovsky writes an eighteen-measure bridge beginning at measure 48, encompassing several modulations and meter changes. In measures 53-57, a brief reference to Rusalka’s aria appears in the parallel enharmonic key of G-sharp minor and 6/8 meter, and then quickly dies away *perdendosi* (Example 31, mm. 51-57).

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At measure 67, Mikhnovsky begins Part B of the Prince’s aria. The music brings back the key of A-flat major, but the meter stays decisively in 3/4. Here, Mikhnovsky closely follows the contour of the original melody, alternating it between the hands as needed, and providing a simple eighth-note accompaniment for a more transparent texture. He also includes the cello part an octave higher that echoes the melody line in Dargomyzhsky’s orchestration (Example 32, mm. 66-70, and Example 33, mm. 202-206).

Example 32. Fantasy on Rusalka, Prince’s Aria Part B, mm. 66-70.

Example 33. Fantasy on Rusalka, Prince’s Aria Part A, mm. 202-206.133

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133 Dargomyzhsky, Rusalka, Muzyka.
Then the texture thickens with an added line of quickly moving sixteenth notes. As the music builds toward its first climax, the sixteenth notes give way to thirty-second notes. At measure 111, a miniature cadenza highlights the most dramatic moment in the aria (Example 34, mm. 111-113).

Example 34. Fantasy on Rusalka, Prince’s Aria Part B, mm. 111-113.

Mikhnovsky states the second verse of the Prince’s aria after the one measure cadenza (m. 111). Although he maintains the original melody and harmony, Mikhnovsky varies the accompaniment, especially with regard to voicing and the responsibilities of the hands. As the excitement in the second verse rises, so do the technical demands. While the left hand must play the melody, block chords and pedal point, the right hand flies in the upper register of the piano in shimmering thirty-second notes. Large leaps and
hand crossings make this passage one of the most challenging in all of Mikhnovsky’s concert fantasies (Example 34, mm. 111-113).

The remainder of the Fantasy is a development of both parts of the Prince’s aria through modulation and variation. Between measures 148-175, Mikhnovsky transforms Part B of the Prince’s theme with a new 6/8 meter and modulates the harmonic accompaniment through a series of chords progressions a third apart (Example 35, mm. 149-151).

Example 35. Fantasy on Rusalka, Prince’s Aria Part B, mm. 149-151.

From measure 176, Mikhnovsky brings back Part A of the Prince’s theme; first in A major and then in D major in measure 183. The melody is accompanied by sixteenth notes and colorful harmonies that build intensity and drama in the music (Example 36, mm. 183-186).
Then Mikhnovsky changes tempo (Andante), meter (6/8), and key (A major) in order to present Rusalka’s aria from Act IV. In the aria Rusalka sings to her daughter, telling her about her father the Prince.

**Rusalka**
Listen, daughter:
From now in you I place my trust.
Today a man will come to our shore,
Look out for him, and go to greet him.
He is close to us, he is your father.

**Rusalochka (Little Mermaid)**
The very same, that abandoned you and married a woman?

**Rusalka**
The same! Charmingly
Endear yourself to him, my friend,
Tell him of you, of me.
Tell him you’ve heard, not once,
of your birth, and of my sorrows.
Should he ask if I reminisce about him,
Tell him I remember him always
And I love him with erstwhile passion,
Say that my home breathes coolness,
and that I call him to my chambers,
I call and await him.

Make all effort, my friend, with the charm of a child’s speech,
Draw him to us, and to my chambers snare.
Remind him of youthful love,
And tell him that I call for him and await him,
Tell him, my friend, tell him,
That I await.
Do you understand?

**Rusalochnka**
I understand!¹³⁴

The following example is from a vocal score reduction of the opera, showing the first four measures of Rusalka’s aria (Example 37, mm. 5-10).

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¹³⁵ Ibid.
Mikhnovsky stays true to the melodic and harmonic material he borrows. Even so, he manipulates the lines and the texture to make the music sound rich and coherent on the piano. The melody in the right hand reflects Rusalka’s soprano voice, and the words *semplice con dolcezza* point to the nostalgic melancholy of the scene (Example 38, mm. 189-191).

Example 38. *Fantasy on Rusalka*, Rusalka’s theme, mm.189- 191.

Mikhnovsky’s own brilliant piano technique and imagination are evident in the following passage, which feature the second verse of Rusalka’s aria. The melody (mm. 201-218) is preserved, yet the accompaniment is unusually virtuosic. Descending triplet sixteenth-note arpeggios in the left hand, played staccato and preceded with grace notes, create excitement and dramatic intensity. The right hand carries the melody doubled in octaves or backed by full chords and thirty-second notes. Mikhnovsky marks the section *Sempre con pedale*, making the music sound ethereal and eerie (Example 39, mm. 209-212).
Starting at measure 218, Mikhnovskiy embarks on yet another adventurous development section. The meter changes to 3/4, and the key center moves from A major to B major, followed by B minor and D-flat major. Then in measure 239, Mikhnovskiy offers another variation on Rusalka’s aria. As shown in Example 40, the texture is surprisingly transparent: the left hand plays the melody, this time in quarter notes instead of eight, and the right hand is decorative with rapidly moving sixteenth notes (Example 40, mm. 245-247).
After a short bridge, the next section (starting in measure 252) is another variation of Part B of the Prince’s theme. The melody undergoes a series of changes in harmony and texture, and each manipulation is more intense than the previous one. This section unfolds at first with a single line of sixteenth notes in A-flat major that alternates between the hands. When the music modulates to G-flat major, the texture thickens: in the right hand, the sixteenth notes remain, but in the left hand, block chords prepare the way for the entrance of the theme. As shown in example 30, the theme appears in octaves in the left hand in 6/8 meter, in contrast to the busy right hand, which plays the melody in 3/4 meter with an additional layer of chromatic scales. Mikhnovsky also uses accidentals to present the theme in the key of B-flat major instead of the Eb minor key signature of the section (Example 41, mm. 278-283).
Mikhnovsky further stretches the rhythmic perception when he writes the left hand notes in 3/4 meter, while simultaneously placing eighth note triplets in the right hand which create a feeling of 9/8 meter. At the same time, the music shifts into E-flat major and both hands participate in an imitative dialogue on the Prince’s theme (Example 42, mm. 292-297).
As the score progresses, the music intensifies even more in dynamics and texture, and the full range of the piano keyboard is explored. After another series of sequences and modulations, Part B of the Prince’s theme makes a final statement at measure 327 in the key of C major (Example 43). Mikhnovsky is again very specific with his markings in order to achieve maximum emotional impact at a structurally important point. In the transition measures 325-326, Mikhnovsky slows the pace with an allargando and simple eighth notes. Upon the arrival of the Prince’s theme in measure 327, he writes a triple fortissimo. He also adds the words con grandezza and places an accent on each chord (Example 43, mm. 325-329).
The final section of the Fantasy (mm. 332-371) is a dazzling coda filled with passages of parallel octaves, a short cadenza, and a brief variation on Part B of the Prince’s aria in a *molto vivace* 6/8 time. The combination of fast sixteenth note runs, large leaps in the left hand, and frequent hand crossings appear again as identifiable traits of Mikhnovský’s virtuosic writing in all of his opera fantasies (Example 44, mm. 351-354).

Mikhnovský’s Concert Fantasy on Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka* has a unique flair that is not shared by the other three works discussed in this document. It is not a
transcription or essay on a specific event, but rather a creative paraphrase of the most important scenes and characters from the opera. While he preserves elements of key and meter and presents the borrowed theme at first unchanged, Mikhnovsky goes further in this Fantasy developing and transforming the operatic themes through intense sequences, modulations, and variations. The result is an unusually thrilling journey through one of the darkest stage works to emerge in Russian Romantic opera.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCERT FANTASY BASED ON TCHAIKOVSKY’S OPERA *THE QUEEN OF SPADES*

The Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg commissioned the celebrity composer Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky to write an opera in 1888 on the Alexander Pushkin short story, *The Queen of Spades* written in 1833. Piotr Tchaikovsky’s younger brother Modest constructed the libretto. While abroad in Florence, Italy in early 1890, Tchaikovsky completed the work in only 44 days. In December 1890, *The Queen of Spades* premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg to great public and critical acclaim, and it quickly entered the repertoire as one of the most beloved Russian operas.  

While the Tchaikovsky opera and its source story are full of dark undertones, Mikhnovsky’s concert fantasy draws on material entirely from the happy event in Act I, Scene II, where the two leading characters, Liza and Herman, declare their love for each other. The scene takes place at night in Liza’s bedroom. Alone, she sings of her despair in being engaged to a prince, yet is stirred by the romantic overtures of a young soldier named Herman. Meanwhile Herman suddenly appears on her balcony, tells her that he is suicidal over her betrothal to another man, and begs her to take pity on him. The Countess hears the commotion and knocks on Liza’s door, and Liza promptly hides.

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137 Ibid.
Herman in her room. After convincing the Countess to return to bed, Liza asks Herman to leave, but his words of love sway her, and she soon falls into his embrace. Mikhnovsky’s exploration of this event in the opera is through-composed and unfolds in four sections: an Introduction, Liza’s Theme, a Development, and a Coda (See Table 4).

Table 4. Form of Mikhnovsky’s Fantasy on Tchaikovsky’s Queen of Spades

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Liza's Theme</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Coda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mm. 1-29</td>
<td>mm. 30-125</td>
<td>mm. 126-236</td>
<td>mm. 237-244</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As in the other three Concert Fantasies of Mikhnovsky, there is only one aria that serves as the foundation and possibly the inspiration of Mikhnovsky’s Fantasy on Tchaikovsky’s Queen of Spades. In this opera transcription, Liza’s aria “Why These Tears” is central to the entire work. As can be seen in Example 45, it is referred to with text directly beneath the title of the work (Example 45, mm. 1-5).
While Mikhnovsky narrows his focus to only one scene, he enhances the drama of
the music with several other elements from Tchaikovsky’s score. In the Introduction
to his Concert Fantasy shown in Example 45, Mikhnovsky alternates the ominous orchestra
ostinato and the leitmotif of the three cards that permeate the opera. Cast in C-sharp
minor, the rising sequence of the “three-card” motive, consisting of two short notes
followed by one long note, is intended to fill the listener with anticipation, tension, and
fear. Mikhnovsky further contributes to this with a skillful combination of major, minor,
and diminished chords all in first inversion, thus allowing the melody to be easily heard
(Example 45, mm. 1-5).
A reference to Tchaikovsky’s orchestration, his use of ostinato, and Herman’s theme can be seen in Example 46 (mm. 214-216).

Example 46. Tchaikovsky’s Opera The Queen of Spades. Herman’s theme and orchestra ostinato, mm. 214-216.138

The remainder of the Introduction is built upon Herman’s theme, essentially an unsettling melody of rising and falling triplets shown in contrary motion between the two hands (Example 47, mm. 6-9).

Example 47. Fantasy on *The Queen of Spades*, Herman’s theme, mm. 6-9.

The following is a translation of Liza’s aria.

What am I crying for, what is it?
My girlhood dreams, you have deceived me!
This is how you have come true in real life!
I have entrusted my life to the prince,
Chosen by me for his heart, his personality,
And his intelligence, his looks, his position wealth,
And worthy of a very different wife from me.
Who can compare with him in nobility,
In looks or dignity?
No one! And yet . . . here am I wretched and fearful,
Trembling and weeping!

What am I crying for, what is it?
My girlhood dreams, you have deceived me!
I feel oppressed and frightened!...
But why, delude myself?
I am alone here, all around me lie sleeping...

Oh! Hear me, night!
To you alone can I confide the secret
Of my heart! It is as dark as sin,
Dark as the melancholy look of those eyes
That rob me of my happiness and peace of mind...
Queen Night! Like you, great beauty,
Like a fallen angel he is handsome,
In his eyes is the fire of glowing passion.
Hebeckons to me like some wonderful dream
And all my soul is in his power!
O night . . . night!139

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In the Introduction, Mikhnovsky uses a fragment of Liza’s theme “Why These Tears” on two different occasions. It is not until measure 32, however, and the beginning of Section B, where he presents Liza’s entire aria in full, staying true to the exact melody and harmonic content, the original meter (3/4), and the original key (C minor). But he also follows his unique compositional techniques: the melody is doubled in octaves for greater clarity and depth, and in order to respect the rising contour of the melody within the thick orchestral counterpoint, hand crossing is required to execute the passage (Example 48, mm. 32-37).

Example 48. Fantasy on The Queen of Spades, Liza’s aria “Why These Tears,” mm. 32-37.

Tchaikovsky’s orchestration of Liza’s aria can be seen in Example 48 (mm. 85-88).
Example 49. Tchaikovsky’s Opera *The Queen of Spades*. Liza’s aria “Why These Tears,” mm. 85-88.\(^{140}\)

As Liza’s aria becomes more urgent and passionate, Tchaikovsky’s orchestration grows in breadth and color and Mikhovskiy recreates that into several particularly challenging passages for any pianist. But Mikhovskiy does not aim for a mere score reduction; rather, he enhances Tchaikovsky’s harmonies in a dazzling blend of melody and counterpoint. At measure 90, Liza’s aria begins with the words “Oh! Hear me,

\(^{140}\) Tchaikovsky, *Complete Collected Work*, Muzgiz.
night!” and over the next thirty measures, Mikhnovskiy skillfully merges the vocalist’s tune, the thirty-second notes in the strings and harp, and an independent line in the oboe. For comparison see the examples from a vocal reduction score and the original opera score (Example 50, mm. 97-100; Example 51, mm. 118-119, and Example 52, mm. 118-119).

Example 50. Mikhnovskiy’s Fantasy on The Queen of Spades, Liza’s theme, mm. 97-100.
Example 51. Tchaikovsky’s Vocal score on *The Queen of Spades*, Liza’s theme, mm. 118-119.\(^{141}\)

\[\text{Example 52. Tchaikovsky’s Opera score *The Queen of Spades*, Liza’s theme, mm. 118-119.}^{142}\]

\(^{141}\) Tchaikovsky, *The Queen of Spades*, Schirmer.

\(^{142}\) Tchaikovsky, *Complete Collected Works*, Muzgiz.
Regardless of the exciting pyrotechnics displayed in Mikhnovsky transcription, he emphasizes the dramatic storytelling aspects. In the opera Liza’s aria comes to an abrupt end when Herman suddenly appears at the door of her balcony, an event that Tchaikovsky enhances with brooding tremolos in the strings. At measure 119, Mikhnovsky recreates this moment with the two sff chords and imitates the ominous texture with an octave pedal point in the right hand and extended arpeggios in the left hand (Example 53, mm. 119-121).

Example 53. Fantasy on The Queen of Spades, Orchestral interlude, mm. 119—121.

After a short bridge consisting of the frightening three-card motif (Example 54), Mikhnovsky launches into a free development (Section C) of the borrowed material. Beginning at measure 133, Liza’s theme is arranged into an intimate yet highly transparent texture of arpeggiated sixteenth note triplets in the ethereal key of C-sharp minor (Example 54, mm. 126-135).
Then Mikhnovsky combines Herman’s theme with the menacing orchestra ostinato outlined in the opening measures. The theme begins *pianissimo* in the lowest register of the piano; slowly climbing through finely paced sequences and modulations it arrives at a greatly expanded register and dynamic level and a *fortissimo* climax. The Concert Fantasy, however, is far from finished. At measure 176, following the dissipation of Herman’s theme, Liza’s aria emerges in quarter notes, twice as slow as the original presentation and emphasized with accents. Her theme is merged with wandering sixteenth notes in the right hand portraying her growing distress. More significantly, Herman’s theme cautiously appears in the texture in the left hand, an event that recalls
the critical dialogue between Liza and Herman at the close of Act I, Scene II (Example 55, mm. 176-179).

Example 55. *Fantasy on The Queen of Spades*, Liza and Herman’s themes, mm. 176-179.

Herman’s theme is then combined with the now fearsome three-card motif played in the low register of the piano in rising octaves in the left hand (Example 56). Herman’s theme intensifies with each measure, laying the groundwork for the climactic moment in the development section of Mikhnovsky’s opera transcription. Marked *Andante* in 6/4 meter with the words *con sommo passion*, Mikhnovsky employs four layers of polyphony, including superimposed chord progressions and a pedal point. The music effectively commemorates the moment in the opera where Herman proclaims his love to Liza: “You are my queen, my goddess, my angel” (Example 56, mm. 202-206).
The following Coda is a tranquil pianissimo written in the parallel enharmonic D-flat major (to the previous section written in C# minor) that exhibits the momentary happiness shared by two young lovers at the end of a very turbulent scene. Herman’s usually anxious theme is now peaceful, and the tremolo in the right hand creates the sensation of an enchanting dream. As before, the contrapuntal yet highly transparent texture as well as the large leaps required of both hands are characteristic traits of Mikhovsky’s writing (Example 57, mm. 225-227).
Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasy on Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* is a stunning work that explores the full potential of the borrowed material yet sticks closely to the narrative with its vivid dramatic elements. Tchaikovsky’s beautiful melodies and harmonies are enhanced by Mikhnovsky’s structural scheme, artistic vision, and virtuoso flair. All the decoration, modulation, variation, and development in this virtuoso transcription reflect Mikhnovsky’s complete mastery of the piano. However, the technical demands are never present for the sake of audience amazement but rather to heighten the original dramatic character of the themes.
CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

Mikhnovsky was an extraordinary pianist, who combined great virtuoso technique with profound musical intellect in his performances as well as in his compositions. The prominent musicologist and critic V. Delson reflected on Mikhnovsky’s triumph at the first All Union Piano Competition in Moscow in 1938:

Mikhnovsky’s performing style is primarily lyrical and dramatic, but with detailed intellectual interpretation of the music. His poetic playing is always full of inner graciousness; it is full of intense fire and deep emotional pathos – all that guarantees its huge emotional impact. Mikhnovsky is a deeply intellectual artist-performer. Despite his youth, he is a very mature musical interpreter.¹⁴³

Years later in 1968, Delson’s review of Mikhnovsky’s performance was again flattering. Recounting a piano concert titled “An Evening in Memory of Igumnov,” Delson stated that “Mikhnovsky’s interpretation of Tchaikovsky’s piano works sounded delicate and noble…truly continuing in the spirit of Igumnov’s great piano teaching.”¹⁴⁴

Mikhnovsky had a phenomenal memory and a keen ability to learn music quickly. He had an incredible knowledge of the vast piano repertoire, including works from J.S.


¹⁴⁴ V. Delson, “Evening in memory of Igumnov,” 1968 No.9 p.82-83, in Moscow Conservatory, 353.
Bach to Mikhnovsky’s contemporaries. In addition he often performed as a soloist and collaborated with other musicians, including his close friend Mstislav Rostropovich. Mikhnovsky also did a series of recordings of Classical and Romantic repertoire as well as contemporary compositions for the Soviet Union.\(^{145}\) However, Mikhnovsky felt closest to the Romantic tradition and the works of Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Liszt.\(^{146}\) Russian composer and musicologist Anatoly Drozdov wrote about Mikhnovsky’s concert in 1946, which included selected works by Frederic Chopin: “His performance was very intense and deeply artistic. The basic qualities of Mikhnovsky’s playing were his persuasive interpretation, clear and logical reading of the music, profound tone, and rich artistic pedaling. I will also note the deep feeling of the rhythmic pulse combined with expansive rhythmic freedom.”\(^{147}\)

In addition to a successful performance career, Mikhnovsky was also a beloved teacher. As a pedagogue Mikhnovsky nurtured and inspired a whole generation of musicians. He was devoted to his students and his knowledge and advice on effective practicing, memorizing, technical improvements and attention to detail, were invaluable to their future musical careers.

As a composer, Mikhnovsky wrote a number of chamber and solo piano pieces. However, his greatest contribution is in the genre of the virtuoso piano transcription.

\(^{145}\) During his lifetime, Mikhnovsky recorded a number of chamber works as well as solo piano pieces, including several of his own virtuoso transcriptions based on Russian Romances.

\(^{146}\) Mikhnovsky even made a piano transcription of Liszt’s song *Wie singt die Lerche schön (The Spirit of Laura)* S.312. This is Mikhnovsky’s only mature complete transcription not based on a Russian composer.

\(^{147}\) A. Drozdov, “Chopin and Soviet Performers,” 1946 No. 8 p.82, in *Moscow Conservatory*, 354.
Many of his shorter transcriptions based on Russian Romances, including songs by Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, became very popular with the public in Russia, and were published. In contrast to the 19th and 20th century, where many pianist-composers wrote transcriptions to promote themselves or the original works, Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies seem to exist because of purely intrinsic artistic reasons. In a genre where virtuosity and showmanship were often the final goal, Isaac Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies are deep, personal reflections which explore and pay tribute to other great Russian composers.

Although all of Mikhnovsky’s opera transcriptions are based on music from Russian operas, each fantasy is unique in its construction. Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasy based on Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* borrows material from only one particular dramatic scene whereas Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasy on *Ruslan and Ludmila* uses only the *Persian Chorus* from Glinka’s opera as the melodic and harmonic basis for the entire transcription. Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasy on *Rusalka* features several selections or ‘highlights’ from Dargomyzhsky’s opera and Mikhnovsky’s transcription on *Ivan Susanin* encompasses all the important themes that Glinka uses in his opera.

While each of the four Concert Fantasies is structurally diverse, there are common identifiable characteristics, which make all four Concert Fantasies distinctive. Although all four Mikhnovsky transcriptions stress the beauty of the vocal line, each preserves the harmonic background of the original opera. While Mikhnovsky cleverly manipulates and develops the borrowed material, he is careful to always preserve the musical integrity of the opera. The melody is often surrounded by several layers of accompaniment in
Mikhnovsky’s transcriptions, but never obscured. At times the melody alternates registers and is tossed quickly between the hands, causing unique technical challenges to the performer. A thick, dense texture is created by Mikhnovsky’s fusing multiple layers of different thematic and harmonic material. Noticeable is Mikhnovsky’s tendency for including flourishing chromatic scalar passages, enharmonic notation, as well as an extraordinary number of accidentals to facilitate the many modulations throughout the fantasies.

Mikhnovsky’s integrity as a performer is translated into his compositions. There is a sense of “honesty” and of reverence to the original composer’s work. The technical challenges of the Concert Fantasies are significant, but they do not change the essential emotional and dramatic characters of the operatic themes. On the contrary, Mikhnovsky’s transcriptions preserve, emphasize, and elevate the intent of the original music.

The renowned concert pianist and pedagogue Santiago Rodriguez wrote the following regarding Mikhnovsky’s virtuoso transcriptions:

Maestro Mikhnovsky’s career as composer was a life-long passion that gave us many original works and a number of transcriptions of songs, and arias from operas. These latter works represent among the most distinctive representations of the art of the piano transcription. Following in direct line from the transcriptions of Liszt and Busoni, Mr. Mikhnovsky’s works represent a treasure trove of riches for pianists who are able to surmount their difficulties and musical demands. All are endowed with the composer’s impeccable musical taste and sophistication and, with continued advocacy, will soon gain a respected place in the piano repertoire.  

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\[148\] Santiago Rodriguez, e-mail letter to author, dated January 10, 2013.
Isaac Mikhnovsky’s passion and commitment to music were evident from his early childhood. He was a brilliant and dedicated performer, composer, and pedagogue who made phenomenal contributions in each of these areas. Mikhnovsky was hailed as one of Russia’s elite performers. He was also a cherished and beloved teacher who was awarded the coveted title of "Professor" at the Gnessin Academy of Music. Most importantly, Mikhnovsky composed an impressive body of works that beautifully showcase his incredible ingenuity and creativity as a composer. In particular, the legacy of Isaac Mikhnovsky's virtuoso piano transcriptions from Russian opera themes will continue to inspire marvelous performers, inquisitive scholars, and music enthusiasts who love beautiful music.
APPENDIX A

List of Isaac Mikhnovsky’s works by genre

Mikhnovsky's Solo Piano Works

1) Ballad #1 in A Minor Allegro molto agitato, unpublished
2) Ballad #2 in E Minor Andante mesto, unpublished
3) Fantasy, for piano and orchestra Op. 9, unpublished (composed in 1928)
4) Piano Sonata A moll, unpublished
5) Six Musical Moments, unpublished

   a. Allegro A minor
   b. Lento ma non troppo A major
   c. Molto agitato assai C# minor
   d. Andante C minor
   e. Molto vivace Eb Minor
   f. Andantino oscuso Eb Major

6) Two preludes for piano, published in Moscow, Piano Songs by Soviet Composers, 1966
7) Two sketches for piano, published in Moscow, Piano Songs by Soviet Composers, 1964
8) Three stories, unpublished
9) Variations on Weber’s Der Freischutz, unpublished (composed in 1927)
Mikhnovsky's Original Cadenzas for Piano Concertos

1) L. von Beethoven #2 B dur op. 19, Moscow, Myzgiz, 1955
2) L. von Beethoven #4 G dur op. 58, Moscow, Myzgiz, 1963
3) W. A. Mozart #20 d moll KV 466, Moscow, Myzgiz, 1956
4) W. A. Mozart #21 C dur KV 467, Moscow, Myzgiz, 1955

Mikhnovsky's Transcriptions for Solo Piano


1) M. Glinka - I remember a wonderful moment
2) M. Glinka - Venice night
3) M. Glinka - Incidental song
4) A. Borodin - To the shores of the motherland modal
5) N. Rimskij – Korsakov - Thins the clouds flying ridge
6) N. Rimskij – Korsakov - Not the wind with height
7) N. Rimskij – Korsakov - Dance of the buffoons
8) S. Rakhmaninov - Here is good
9) S. Rakhmaninov - How it hurts me
10) S. Rakhmaninov - Do not sing, my beauty
11) Y. Shaporin - Spell

II. Concert Piano Transcriptions of Romances by Petr Tchaikovsky in Masterpieces of Piano Transcription vol. 15, Moscow: Deka-BC., 2009

1) 6 Romances, Op. 38: No. 3. Sred shumnogo bala (Amid the din of the ball)
2) 12 Romances, Op. 60: No. 6. Nochi bezumniye (Frenzied Nights)
3) 6 Romances, Op. 73: No. 3. V etu lumnuyu noch' (On this Moonlit Night)
4) 6 Romances, Op. 6: No. 6. Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt (None but the Lonely Heart)
5) 6 Romances, Op. 16: No. 2. Pogodi! (Wait!)
7) 6 Romances, Op. 6: No. 3. I bol'no, i sladko (It is both painful and sweet)
8) 6 Romances, Op. 25: No. 2. Kak nad goryacheyu zoloy (As Over Burning Embers)
9) 6 Romances, Op. 73: No. 1. Mi sideli s toboy (We Sat Together)
10) 6 Romances, Op. 16: No. 5. Tak chto zhe? (So what can I say?)
11) 6 Romances, Op. 25: No. 1. Primiren'ye (Reconciliation)
12) 6 Romances, Op. 63: No. 2. Raztvorilya okno (I opened the window)
13) 7 Romances, Op. 47: No. 6. Den’ li tsarit? (Does the day reign?)

III. Concert Paraphrase of Sergei Taneyev Song Op. 17 #9 Бьётся сердце беспокойное, (The Restless Heart is Beating), published in Moscow and Leningrad, Myzgiz, 1950

IV. Piano Transcriptions of Reinhold Gliere’s Songs, unpublished
   1) Live, we shall live
   2) Wake up child
   3) Oh, if my sadness
   4) Oh, do not weave flowers
   5) Creek

V. Piano Transcription of Liszt’s song Wie singt die Lerche schön (The Spirit of Laura) S.312, unpublished

**Mikhnovsky’s Concert Fantasies based on Opera Themes**

I. Concert Fantasies on themes from Russian Operas, in *Masterpieces of Piano Transcription* vol. 7, Moscow: Deka-BC., 2008
   1) Concert Fantasy based on opera themes from Glinka’s Ivan Susanin
   2) Concert Fantasy based on opera themes from Glinka’s Ruslan and Ludmila
   3) Concert Fantasy based on opera themes from A. Dargomyzhsky’s Rusalka
   4) Concert Fantasy based on opera themes from P. Tchaikovsky’s The Queen of Spades

II. Concert Fantasy based on themes from A. Rubinstein’s Demon, unpublished

**Mikhnovsky’s Chamber Music**

1) Sonata for Bassoon and Piano in c moll, published, TrevCo Music Publishings

2) Sonata for Cello and Piano in b moll, unpublished
APPENDIX B

Letters from Mikhnovksy Family Archives

1) Glière, Reinhold. Letter/Review April 24, 1949 English Translation by Ina Mirtcheva

2) Kabalevsky, Dmitry. Letter/Review March 5, 1948 English Translation by Ina Mirtcheva

3) Oborin, Lev. March 5, 1948 Letter/Review English Translation by Ina Mirtcheva

4) Rostropovich, Mstislav Leopoldovich. Letter/Recommendation English Translation by Ina Mirtcheva

5) Shaporin, Yuri Alexandrovich, March 5, 1948 Letter/Review English Translation by Ina Mirtcheva
The piano transcriptions by Isaac Mikhnovsky (the concert adaptations of songs and opera fantasies for piano) are extremely interesting and valuable contributions to the piano literature. They are both diverse and colorful, providing piano performers the possibility to build up great knowledge and skills. I think that many of these transcriptions have all the qualities to achieve an honorary place in the repertoire of many pianists. In addition most of them were based on compositions by classical and contemporary Russian composers which make them extremely valuable as we don’t have a lot of adaptations for piano.

Letter by Mstislav Rostropovich:

Our mutual musical collaboration was a real pleasure. While working together it was not only a delightful experience but it was very useful for me and I learned a lot. Mikhnovsky has a whole set of qualities as a pianist and composer. He has composed original compositions as well as an enormous quantity of transcriptions for piano. He is an excellent collaborative pianist and has a vast knowledge as a pedagogue. It is my great honor to give my heartfelt recommendation for Isaac Iosiphovich Mikhnovsky to be given the title of Professor.
The extremely limited number of piano transcriptions of Russian vocal (including opera) music, and at the same time the absolute need of such transcriptions, made me look at the works in this field by Isaac Mikhnovsky with special interest and attention. I know a lot of his transcriptions (Romances by Glinka, R. Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Taneyev and others; as well as Mikhnovsky’s Fantasies on themes from operas like Ivan Susanin, Queen of Spades) and I consider them very valuable works. In his transcriptions Isaac Mikhnovsky finds his own new path to arrange for solo piano Russian vocal music fundamentally different from the tradition established by Liszt’s pianism. It seems to me that Mikhnovsky succeeded in discovering a method of arrangement that preserves the song-vocal basis of the music while in prevalent earlier written transcriptions, (including transcriptions by Liszt, Pabst, Balakirev, and others) this exact quality of Russian vocal music seemed to disappear.

I consider that the works of I. Mikhnovsky deserve by all means full encouragement to be published and performed.
Letter by Uri Shaporin, March 5, 1948.

Isaac Mikhovsky’s piano transcriptions of art songs and operas by Russian and Soviet composers are indisputably interesting. Not only is there an almost complete lack of similar works, but Mikhovsky’s taste, craftsmanship, creativity and unique style allow me to recommend his transcriptions for both performance and publication.

Letter from Reinhold Gliere April 24, 1949.

After examining closely the concert transcriptions of my romances (Live, we shall live; Wake up child; Oh, if my sadness; Oh, do not weave flowers; and Creek) composed by pianist Isaac Mikhovsky, I found them very desirable for printing by Muzgiz.
Photos from Mikhnovsky Family Archives

Photo 1. From Left to Right: Dr. Eugene Miknowsky (son), Mistslav Rostropovich, Isaac Mikhnovsky.

Photo 2. Picture in Paris, while on tour with fellow pianists from Left to Right: Emil Gilels, Uri Shaporin, Jacob Flier and Isaac Mikhnovsky.
Photo 3. Isaac Mikhovsky at his piano.
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CURRICULUM VITAE

Ina Mirtcheva received her Bachelor of Music from George Mason University in 2005. She also earned a Masters in Piano Performance in 2006 from George Mason University as well as a Masters in Instrumental Collaborative Piano from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati in 2008. Currently she is teaching keyboard skills classes at George Mason University and is an active collaborative pianist in the Greater Washington DC area. In addition she has performed internationally in Italy, Poland, Bulgaria, and Canada.