

ALEXANDER GLAZUNOV

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The music-listening public and so-called musicologists can be both cruel and misleading and this can ruin a musician's career. Similarly people can elevate a composer who is not worthy and so myths and falsehoods are both created and maintained.

There are some very shallow people who, if they like a composer, will insist that that composer is great and often enter into acrimony with others who do not think the same and may prove them wrong!

Glazunov seems only to be known as the conductor who premiered Rachmaninov's Symphony no 1 in a disastrous performance which, it is said, caused Rachmaninov's to have a nervous breakdown seeking help from Dr Dahl. It was also claimed that Glazunov was drunk at this premiere. While he did develop into being an alcoholic dependent the most likely truth about this premiere was that the orchestra did not have time to rehearse adequately.



Max Reger is also maligned as a difficult man with a drink problem and apparently he was also a glutton, but he was very sound as a musician and his technique and skill are second to none. It is both amazing and hurtful that such musicians are condemned for their lifestyles and yet to mention the gross misconduct and perversions of other composers produces irrational defence, excuses and vitriolic attacks on those telling the truth, as well I know.

Alexander Konstantinov Glazunov was born on 10 August 1865 in St Petersburg. His father was a wealthy publisher and bookseller. The boy's piano studies started when he was nine years old and he was certainly a child prodigy, a boy of staggering music talent and an exceptional pianist.

Balakirev, another under rated Russian composer, recognised Glazunov's talent and recommended him to Rimsky-Korsakov who, within a short time, claimed young Alexander to be a colleague not a student.

While with Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov wrote his Symphony no 1 in E. He was seventeen. There is a tremendous amount of praise given to Shostakovich's Symphony no. 1 written when he was nineteen, which is a very uneven and often poor work, whereas Glazunov's symphony is coherent and consistently well-written.

This first symphony of Glazunov, sometimes called the Slavonic Symphony, Op 5, is dedicated to Rimsky-Korsakov and is the work of an expert craftsman. There are several modulations but it does not hinder the work's progress and the score is 231 pages of delightful music.

Glazunov also had the support of Mitrofan Belyayev who was a wealthy timber merchant and a keen amateur musician who took up music publishing. It was Liadov who introduced Glazunov to this generous sponsor who took him to Weimar to meet Liszt where Glazunov's super Symphony no 1 was premiered in 1884. This success encouraged Belyayev to commence his Russian Symphony Concerts which began in the 1886-1887 season, a year after he had established his publishing business. He helped many young composers and his name must not be forgotten.

This leads us to Glazunov's Symphony no 2 in F sharp minor dedicated to the memory of Liszt, which symphony was completed in 1886. It is clearly Russian with a vital spirit and is nationalistic. The Andante movement reflects this composer's interest in the Orient as it did for many composers. The whole work is magnificently scored and despite some writers' adverse and ill-judged comments on the finale, it is a tremendous piece.

The opening andante maestoso has a typical simple theme before the allegro appears. The third movement, allegro vivace, has another appealing theme. The finale allegro energico may briefly lose its way and, throughout the symphony, there is a surfeit of music in 3/4 time which occasionally renders it common place.

By now, he had composed three string quartets. The first of 1882 set in D is his opus 1 and has a gorgeous theme which reappears. It is catchy. The Quartet no 2 in F, Op 10, of 1884 is introspective and often profound while the Quartet no 3 in G, Op 26, of 1888, called the Slavonic, seems to be a collection of folk songs and becomes tedious. The Symphonic Poem Stenka Razin, Op 13 has some truly superb orchestration. It tells of the Cossack who led a revolt against both the nobility and the Tsar in Southern Russia during the mid 17th century.

The success of the Symphony no 3, Op 33, lies in its glorious slow movement and this work dates from 1890. It owes too much to Tchaikovsky to whom it is dedicated. The Symphony no 4, Op 48 was dedicated to Anton Rubinstein, another under rated composer. It is a more succinct work and, while there are too many tempo changes, the work hangs together well. The introduction is in G flat with a plaintive cor anglais solo is recalled at the end of the work after a vigorous and impassioned allegro in the home key of E flat.

Glazunov enjoyed acclaim but re-assessed his style during 1890 and 1891. This may have resulted from his conducting appearances which started in 1888. He conducted his Symphony no 2 in Paris in 1889 and was appointed conductor for the Russian Symphony Concerts in 1896.

A very worthwhile piece is his String Quartet no 4 in A minor, Op 64 of 1894. There is so much to admire in this work and has a lively and engaging scherzo. The Quartet no 5 in D minor, Op 70 of 1898 is another successful work, cast in five movements which work is both skilful and clever.

The Symphony no 5 in B flat, Op 55 appeared in 1895 and the splendid Symphony no 6 in C minor, Op 58, was completed in 1896.



In 1897, he was on the podium for the premiere of Rachmaninov's Symphony no 1. Apparently, it was Mrs Rachmaninov who said that Glazunov was drunk and Shostakovich went to great lengths to report how Glazunov always had alcohol hidden on the desk and drank it through a straw. It is also said by reliable witnesses that Glazunov was not the greatest conductor.

The year 1903 saw the emergence of the Symphony no 7 in F entitled Pastoral. It is a flop; it is lightweight and anaemic; it lacks coherence and continuity and has nothing to say and takes a while to do so.

In 1905, he was appointed director of the Conservatory at St Petersburg. He was admired everywhere. Cambridge and Oxford Universities gave him degrees of Doctor of music.

The following year saw his Symphony no 8 in E flat which is a very fine work and considered by many to be his best. There is an incomplete Symphony no 9 of about 12 minutes which is very impressive.

Like many, he endured hardships during both World War 1 and the Russian civil war that followed. He conducted concerts in various locations most of which were not concert halls or theatres. He took part in the centenary concerts to mark Beethoven's death in 1927.

Whatever is said about his drinking and difficult personality he was always kind to his students including Nathan Milstein and the treacherous Shostakovich who was obsessed with Glazunov's drinking and his alleged consequent and slurred speaking.

Glazunov reorganised the Conservatory and made it more efficient. He established a good working relationship with the Communist government but not everyone agreed with his conservative outlook. In 1928, he went to Vienna for the Schubert centenary celebrations and did not return to Russia. He toured Europe and the USA in 1928. Maximilian Steinberg ran the Conservatory at this time and Glazunov officially resigned in 1930.

The previous year, he had married the 54 year old Olga Nikolayevna Gavrilova. Her daughter, Elena, had premiered Glazunov's Piano Concerto no 2, Op 100, in 1928 in Paris. There is a Piano Concerto no 1, Op 92, of 1904. There are two well-written Piano Sonatas Op 74 and 75.

I do not wish to go into details about these piano works other than to say that they show what an amazing pianist Glazunov was and how magnificently they are written for the piano. That my friend, the British composer, Ruth Gipps, played both concertos proves what a great pianist she was. I will briefly comment on the Piano Sonata no 1 in B flat minor. It is in three movements. The first is a staggering tour de force with many key changes but that does not hamper the flow of the music. It is in true sonata form with two superb and memorable themes and so very well developed. It is, as one expects from Glazunov, romantic and is fiercely virtuosic. The slow movement has a memorable theme as well, and seems to be a set of variations in principle, and the use of the theme in the left hand covered by an intrusive top part is outstanding. The finale in B flat is sensational, often like an exciting thunderstorm with torrential rain in pianistic cascades. It generates great excitement. One can understand why it is played so infrequently. It is an absolute beast to play but is an unforgettable experience to hear in the hands of any other genius.

His last two quartets date from 1921 and 1930 respectively. The Quartet no 6 in B flat, Op 106 is good in part but tends to wander aimlessly. The Quartet no 7 in C, Op 107 is warm, very attractive and appealing.

The Saxophone Concerto, Op 109 of 1934 has been described as an awful work and has found very few friends. It is ordinary and has nothing to say.

There are other works that fall into this category such as the predictable Concert Waltzes, Op 47 and Op 51 respectively and some for the piano such as the Valse du Salon a ghastly schmaltz piece which will cure constipation as one eminent critic wrote.

He also wrote three or four ballets depending on how you describe *The King of the Jews*, Op 35. The others are *Raymonda*, Op 57, *Les Ruse d'Amour* and *The Seasons* Op 67. Much of the music is good; the theme for Autumn is one of the most enjoyable tunes ever written but it is ballet music with its unsatisfactory episodic music.

He had an amazing memory which did not dissipate as he grew older. There is a story that he played a symphony of Taneyev symphony from memory at the piano after hearing it once which story is probably apocryphal just as is the story that Mozart copied Allegri's Miserere out note for note.

Glazunov was a humble man attributing some of his success to the influence of Borodin. The kindness shown to Glazunov was shown and replicated in his demands that the government supply wood for the conservatory so that the students would be warm and comfortable. He gave portions of his salary to needy students.

One of his very finest works is his Violin Concerto which is simply gorgeous. Heifetz loved it and, although it was sometimes rubbished for its brevity at 20 minutes, it has gained in popularity. Someone, after hearing this glowing masterpiece wrote, "Now I do believe in God". A performance by Hilary Hahn produced the comment, "I now believe in angels!"

The Violin Concerto no 1 by Max Bruch is well loved and deservedly so, but the Glazunov is even finer. However, it is said that after the Glazunov's Violin Concerto and the Symphony no 8, his drinking affected his creativity.

Stravinsky, at first, admired Glazunov who transcribed one of Glazunov's quartets for piano solo and modelled his Symphony no 1 in E flat on Glazunov's Symphony no 8 in E flat as his model.

Later, Stravinsky was later both to say and write that Glazunov was one of the most disagreeable men he had ever met although Glazunov had sincere praise for Stravinsky's work although he had reservations about the dissonance in The Firebird. Glazunov did not care for Debussy and his modernism, calling him, and others, degenerates.

As already said, Shostakovich was highly critical of Glazunov who obtained alcohol from Shostakovich's father. The Bolshevik's ban on alcohol had caused Glazunov to pursue any means to find alcohol elsewhere. Dmitri Shostakovich said that Glazunov was often incomprehensible and objectionable.

It never ceases to amaze me that musicians, music-lovers and writers on music can castigate and condemn some musicians and yet object to the unpleasant truths about other composers. We have to conceal Schubert immoral lifestyle and syphilis, Chopin's philandering, Scriabin's madness, Britten's pederasty and the appalling behaviour of Elgar and yet we can get away with harsh and unfair criticism of Glazunov, Reger, Webern, Schoenberg and Bartok as well as many others.

Alexander Glazunov died in France at Neuilly-sur-Seine near to Paris on 21 March 1936. He was 70.

This shocked the world of music, although both he and his music was sometime condemned as anachronistic and never modern and that he did not have an individual voice which may be why his music has fallen out of fashion. He used some old-fashioned forms and styles and was found of the polonaise, the style of which appears in some of his symphonies and in his Chopiniana which is called Les Sylphides. There are several version of this score. The usual takes 25 minutes and this version consists of the orchestration of

- 1 Polonaise in A Op 40
- 2 Nocturne in F Op 15 no. 1
- 3 Mazurka in C sharp minor Op 50 no 3
- 4 Waltz in C sharp minor Op 64 no 2
- 5 Tarantella in A flat Op 43

It does not improve the musical content of Chopin's works but is a truly sensational exemplary orchestration.

So what are we left with? A very fine composer in the main, perhaps overshadowed by Rachmaninov and the originality and inventiveness of Prokofiev? A composer who lived too far in the past? A

composer whose unfair reputation has preceded and ruined him? Or is he yet another casualty of neglect such as Miaskovsky and Rubinstein?

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