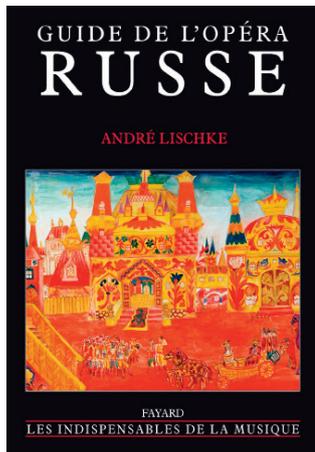


BOOKS

**GUIDE TO RUSSIAN OPERA**

Published in French: *Guide de l'opéra russe*
André Lischke
Fayard, 778 pages

Lovers of Russian opera enjoy works by Glinka, Musorgsky, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and these are covered in a tactful new compendium by André Lischke, a French musicologist who has previously authored standard works on other favourites, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov, as well as a history of Russian music up to the Revolution of 1917.

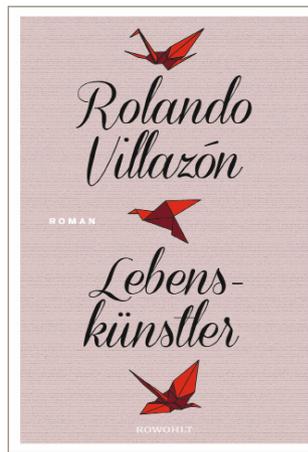
The scope of Lischke's erudition is seen in pages about lesser-known composers and works. Even devotees of the subject might admit to being less than familiar with a once-celebrated 18th-century ballad opera with the catchy title *The Miller who was a Wizard, a Cheat and a Matchmaker*. Lischke makes a compelling argument that its composer, Mikhail Matveyevich Sokolovsky (1756–after 1795), was the father of Russian opera, which would explain why the composer Nikolai Tchernepin (1873–1945)

bothered to restore portions of its incomplete score, making revivals in Russia possible from the 1920s to the present. There are perceptive observations here about the lack of inspiration from Shakespeare in Russian opera librettos, apart from a *Taming of the Shrew* (1957) by Vissarion Shebalin (1902–1963), a buffo effort memorably recorded in 1957 by the Czech maestro Zdeněk Chalabala with the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya – who else? – as the eponymous heroine.

Only in recent decades has the modern composer Sergei Slonimsky added settings of Boris Pasternak's translations of *Hamlet* (1990) and *King Lear* (2000–2001). Yet Victor Hugo readily appealed to Russian composers as an inspirational source, especially for *Esmeralda* by Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813–1869), after Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Lischke's description of this opera, like many others in this compelling guide, whets the aural appetite for further discoveries, extending to Leonid Desyatnikov's *The Children of Rosenthal* (2005) and Alexander Raskatov's *A Dog's Heart* (2010), the latter co-produced by the English National Opera, where it was respectfully received. There are also cogent meditations on Russian vocal types and exemplary singers, as well as helpful discographical notes.

One powerful theme of this inviting study is how despite this majestic heritage, new Russian operas rarely appear today, although Lischke discreetly abstains from explaining this latter-day sterility.

Benjamin Ivry

**MASTER OF THE ART OF LIVING**

Published in German:
Lebenskünstler
Rolando Villazón, translated
from the Spanish by Willi
Zurbrüggen
Rowohlt Verlag, 384 pages

The Mexican tenor Rolando Villazón, 45, who has experienced repeated vocal crises, also writes novels. His second, entitled *Paladas de sombra contra la oscuridad* (Spadesful of Shadow to Ward off the Darkness) appeared in Spain last year and is now available in German translation.

It describes a group of friends, clowns and would-be clowns, who gather in a pub named Cellar of the Mirrors in an unspecified city, to philosophise whimsically. Palindromus has received an inheritance from his Uncle Baobab, 'tall and wide, with a ...velvety voice'. Baobab, an operatic bass-baritone with a 'world-famous career behind him', left his nephew a pocket watch, acquired when Baobab sang the role of 'noble Prince Gremin' in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* in St Petersburg, and an admirer pressed the heirloom upon him.

Following this murky allusion to Saint-Exupéry's

Le Petit Prince, in which baobab trees threaten the Little Prince's planet, Villazón's protagonist admits that he tried to be a singer-songwriter but his voice failed. So Palindromus abandoned performing, instead subsisting as a nude model and pizza delivery man: 'I never bring anything to an end. I invent and play my little games, and that is enough for me in life. I do not want more... The only purpose of my games is to invent them, to play them, and to forget them.' Wearing a green coat 'like an unkempt grasshopper,' Villazón's hero pities those who spend time staring at mobile phones and tablet computers, for they are missing real life.

Readers requiring a twee alert at such hard-to-swallow fantasy might marvel at the magic realism inherent in the fact that this effort received state funding to be translated by Willi Zurbrüggen, an established literary craftsman who has previously worked with such reputed authors as Ernesto Cardenal, José Donoso, and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán.

BI

▼ Rolando Villazón: fantasy worlds



PATRICK WALTER/06



**THE MAGIC FLUTE:
SUPERNATURAL AND MANIFOLD
OPERA**

Published in French: *La flûte enchantée: Opéra merveilleux et multiple*
Eric Chaillie
Fayard, 265 pages

Mozart's last produced work for the stage has long baffled admirers by its multifaceted tone and content. Eric Chaillier, a lecturer based in Switzerland, offers a friendly, if high-flown, reconciliation of different theories, arguing that such coexistence is possible.

The Magic Flute may be seen as a love story, otherworldly tale, popular farce, sacred drama, and struggle for power, without these themes counteracting one another. Only one perspective, Chaillier suggests, has been overstressed by writers heretofore, that of *The Flute* as a Masonic fable, given that actual Masonic elements in it are allusive rather than precise, 'topsy-turvy, overstretched, disputed'.

These apparent ambiguities have been the bane of some directors, such as the Frenchman Patrice Chéreau, who flatly refused to stage it. Chéreau complained that *The Flute* posed a 'host of problems' due to its 'heavy, crude mime show combined with sublime music. There's a real conflict between the two, it's dreadful!'

Less dread than admiration has been felt by others, such as the Swiss literary critic Jean Starobinski, who celebrated how *The Flute*, by 'moving from fear to laughter, from contemplation to impulsive jokes', takes the listener through the 'whole range of human emotions'. The oft-criticised libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder is the work of an actor who

had the dramatic solemnity to perform in Viennese productions of Shakespeare's tragedies, Chaillier reminds us. As a result, he argues, the birdcatcher Papageno, famously first incarnated by Schikaneder himself, may be an Everyman, but is presented 'without a hint of vulgarity'. Even the opera's villains are not burned in hellfire like Don Giovanni, merely having their voices drowned out in the general jubilation.

The last word is given to the theologian Karl Barth, who lauds the opera in which 'joy surpasses grief without eliminating the latter: "... "yes" resounds louder than "no", which subsists nonetheless.'

BI