

The Professor and the Sea Princess: Letters of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel

EDITED BY MARINA FROLOVA-WALKER
TRANSLATED BY JONATHAN WALKER

I am still filled, my dear, dear friend,
Filled with your visage, filled with you! . .
It is as if a light-winged angel
Descended to converse with me.

Leaving the angel at the threshold
Of holy heaven, now alone,
I gather some angelic feathers
Shed by rainbow wings . . .

—Apollon Maykov (1852),
set by Rimsky-Korsakov as No. 4 of his Opus 50 songs
and dedicated to Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel

“I am rather dry by nature,” confessed Rimsky-Korsakov in one of his letters.¹ This is indeed the prevailing impression we are likely to draw from his biographies, or even from his own memoirs. We know so much about the externals of his life, and yet the inner man somehow eludes us, obscured by his professorial image: a kindly but reserved man, with a positive outlook on life, dignified and of impeccable morals. The contrast with the wild biographies of Musorgsky and Tchaikovsky allows us to suppose that Rimsky-Korsakov was really rather ordinary, even a little dreary.

1. Maykov's Russian original of the epigraph above is as follows: *Yeshcho ya poln, o drug moy miliy, / Tvoim yavlen'yem, poln toboy!. ./ Kak budto angel legkokriily / Sletal besedovat' so mnoy, / I, provodiv yego v preddver'ye svyatikh nebes, ya bez nego / Sbirayu vipavshiye per'ya / Iz kril'yev raduzhnikh yego...*

The selection from his correspondence with the soprano Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel (1868–1913) that is presented here offers us a glimpse into the composer’s inner world that cannot be found in other sources.² He first heard Zabela sing in late 1897, when she performed as the Sea Princess in his opera *Sadko*, and from that moment on, she became his muse, prompting him to create soprano parts specifically for her, in one opera after another. The context of this artistic relationship is Savva Mamontov’s Moscow Private Opera (hereafter MPO), where Zabela was one of the leading soloists.³ For several years, this opera company devoted itself to the operatic oeuvre of Rimsky-Korsakov, providing him with a reliable vehicle for bringing his music to the public as soon as it was written. The performances were not always musically perfect, but great care was lavished on the visual aspects, since Mamontov was equally a patron of the most interesting painters of the day. One of these was Mikhail Vrubel, Zabela’s husband, who was a visionary innovator in painting, but also firmly embedded in the culture of applied art, often producing costumes and sets for the MPO.⁴ He also made several striking portraits of his wife in her Rimsky-Korsakov roles, most famously as the Swan Princess from *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (1900), or the Sea Princess from *Sadko* (1898). Eschewing naturalism, Vrubel tried to evoke the magic of an operatic moment animated by Zabela’s voice, encapsulating the qualities that held Rimsky-Korsakov captive in the later years of his life.

Rimsky-Korsakov’s collaboration with the MPO began after the Mariinsky turned down the opportunity to launch *Sadko*. The Mariinsky was, quite literally, the court theater, and Nicholas II did not find the opera engaging enough.⁵ The composer took this snub badly, and when his friend Semyon

2. All 189 extant letters in Russian were published in N. A. Rimskiy-Korsakov, *Perepiska s N. I. Zabeloy-Vrubel*, ed. by L. G. Barsova (Moscow: Kompozitor, 2008). The letters translated here were drawn from this source.

3. The railway tycoon and philanthropist Savva Mamontov created the company in 1885, originally on his own estate, Abramtsevo. The company’s prestige rose significantly in the mid-1890s, when Chaliapin joined, and Rachmaninov became a resident conductor—at this stage, they performed in the Solodovnikov Theatre, in the center of Moscow. After Mamontov was jailed for embezzlement in 1899, the company was put on a new financial footing as the Society for Private Opera (*Tovarishchestvo Chastnoy Operi*) until 1904. Rimsky-Korsakov and Zabela were both investors in the Society. For clarity, though, we will refer to both entities as the “Moscow Private Opera,” using the abbreviation MPO.

4. Vrubel was the designer for Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Mozart and Salieri*, *The Tsar’s Bride*, and *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* at the MPO, as well as operas by Cui and Kalinnikov.

5. *Stranitsi zhizni N. A. Rimskogo-Korsakova: Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva*, ed. A. A. Orlova, vol. 3 (Leningrad: Muzika, 1972), 90. The Mariinsky in St. Petersburg and the Bolshoi in Moscow were the two Imperial stages, both operating under the direct control of the Imperial Court. It was nothing out of the ordinary for interested members of the royal family to decide whether a particular opera should be approved or rejected.



Figure 1. Nadezhda Zabela-Vrubel with her husband, Mikhail Vrubel.

Kruglikov⁶ suggested that he offer *Sadko* to the MPO, he took action. He had, it is true, heard about some unsatisfactory orchestral playing when this company first produced an opera of his (*The Maid of Pskov*, in 1896). But this was not enough to put him off, especially since it enabled him, as he said, “to spite you-know-who.”⁷ Kruglikov duly brokered the deal.

Rimsky-Korsakov was unable to attend the MPO’s premiere of *Sadko*, but he was present at the third performance, given on 30 December 1897.⁸ Noting that the musical aspects were generally lacking in polish, he nevertheless singled out Anton Sekar-Rozhansky⁹ and Zabela for praise; they played the roles of Sadko and the Sea Princess, respectively. He also recorded the fact that Zabela was the wife of Mikhail Vrubel, whose sets he also enjoyed. He went to meet Zabela personally in the intermission.¹⁰ The opera was clearly a public success, and Rimsky-Korsakov, overcoming his characteristic modesty, enjoyed being feted by Mamontov and the troupe.

6. Semyon Kruglikov (1851–1910) was a Russian music critic, a pupil and friend of Rimsky-Korsakov’s. In the 1890s, he served as a consultant for the Moscow Private Opera.

7. *Stranitsi*, 3:100.

8. All the dates in this publication are given according to the “old style,” the Julian calendar, which ran twelve days behind the Gregorian calendar in the nineteenth century, and thirteen days in the twentieth.

9. Anton Sekar-Rozhansky (1863–1953), tenor, was one of the most distinguished soloists at the Moscow Private Opera, and particularly remembered for performances in the title role of *Sadko*.

10. *Stranitsi*, 3:114.

He attended one more performance, where Chaliapin sang the Venetian Guest. Zabela now fascinated him, and Rimsky-Korsakov decided that she was the ideal performer for the Sea Princess.¹¹

Mamontov, fired up by the success of *Sadko*, immediately launched a production of *May Night*, and after only a month's preparation, this reached the stage in early February 1898. Rimsky-Korsakov, in turn, was inspired to revive a long-abandoned project, a prequel (he called it a Prologue) to his very first opera, *The Maid of Pskov*, under the title *The Boyarinya Vera Sheloga*. It is highly probable that he had already seen how Zabela would fit into the new opera, since he was aware that she had previously taken the role of Olga in the MPO's production of *The Maid of Pskov*.

Always ready to exploit a good opportunity, Mamontov asked Rimsky-Korsakov to conduct *Sadko* in St. Petersburg in the MPO's forthcoming tour, and once he had agreed, more of his works were added to the program. The MPO arrived in late February, and over the next two months staged no less than four Rimsky-Korsakov operas in the Conservatory's Grand Hall: *Sadko*, *The Maid of Pskov*, *May Night*, and *The Snow Maiden*. While rehearsing *Sadko* with Zabela, Rimsky-Korsakov was carried away in a flight of enthusiasm: "I am not the only one robbed of his senses by the Sea Princess. All honor and glory to her!"¹² Rimsky-Korsakov also had Zabela in mind for *The Snow Maiden*'s title role, and rehearsed it with her very thoroughly. Mamontov, however, had other ideas, and cast Alevtina Paskhalova¹³ in the role, leading to a serious rift with Rimsky-Korsakov, who heard Paskhalova's first performance and declared that it was "poor." He then refused to conduct the second performance of *The Snow Maiden*, and vowed that he would not even attend any other events in the festival. Mamontov decided that he had allowed matters to deteriorate too far, and reversed his decision, allowing Zabela to take over from Paskhalova. She then sang in the third performance of *The Snow Maiden*, after minimal rehearsal with the rest of the cast. Much of the credit must go to Kruglikov, who worked hard behind the scenes to smooth things over, although Mamontov and Rimsky-Korsakov were never on a friendly footing again, and treated each other with caution.

During this intense period, Rimsky-Korsakov neglected his Conservatory duties and experienced a surge of emotion that led him to present Zabela

11. *Ibid.*, 3:115.

12. *Ibid.*, 3:121.

13. Alevtina Paskhalova (1875–1953) was recruited to the MPO by Mamontov himself, and still sang for the company at this stage; she left the following year (1899), and toured widely, eventually pursuing an international career and recording several discs of Russian romances.

with a vocal score of his new opera, *Christmas Eve*, carrying the following inscription: “To the poetic and musical Olga, Pannochka, Snow Maiden and Volkhova: Nadezhda Ivanovna Zabela, with the devoted composer’s request that she add Oxana to these, N. Rimsky-Korsakov, 22 April 1898, St. Petersburg.”¹⁴ He spent the summer months at work on a new opera that would suit her talents well, *The Tsar’s Bride*, which he intended from the outset for the MPO, overlooking, for Zabela’s sake, the recent friction with Mamontov.

Such is the back story that brings us up to the very first letter of their correspondence. This, and the following two letters in the selection, can all be understood in light of the events just described.

In October of 1898, Rimsky-Korsakov traveled to Moscow for the rehearsals of *Christmas Eve* at the Bolshoi, and used the opportunity to refresh his association with the MPO. At the theater, he attended a dress rehearsal of *Sadko*. He was also invited to Mamontov’s home for a very lengthy soirée, where he heard a rendition of his operas *Mozart and Salieri* and *Sheloga* (the latter twice, allowing him to hear both Sofya Gladkaya¹⁵ and Zabela in the role of Vera), rounded off with dinner.¹⁶ All this attention, art, and bonhomie left him feeling elated, and inspired to write more operas, as he tells Zabela in Letter 4.

Letters 4–10 refer to a concert at the Russian Musical Society (19 December 1898), where Zabela sang extracts from *Sheloga* and *The Tsar’s Bride*. Vrubel, in a letter, tried to persuade Rimsky-Korsakov to make arrangements for a complete concert performance of *Sheloga*,¹⁷ but knowing that Mamontov was not even happy with performances of extracts before the stage premiere, Rimsky-Korsakov declined. His artistic relationship with the couple was of mutual benefit: just as Rimsky-Korsakov’s later operas (and several songs) were inspired by Zabela, Vrubel was inspired by Rimsky-Korsakov’s operas, and his work on the sets and costumes was a labor of love that far outstripped the bare requirements of Mamontov’s commission. As he said, he was so immersed in Rimsky-Korsakov’s fairytale world that he wished to stay there,¹⁸ and so we find that world reflected in many of his paintings and sculptures from these years.

In the end, the Russian Music Society concert received disappointing press, especially from the newspaper *Novoye vremya* (New Era).¹⁹ Nevertheless,

14. *Stranitsi*, 3:132–33.

15. Sofya Gladkaya (married name Kedrova, 1875–1965), Russian lyrical soprano, and a singer at the MPO.

16. *Stranitsi*, 3:148.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 3:134.

19. *Ibid.*, 3:162.

Rimsky-Korsakov began to lobby the Mariinsky to hire Zabela, although without any discernible result (Letter 10). His next visit to Moscow ran from late 1898 into the new year, and the score he carried on his journey revealed his main purpose: he could now reveal *The Tsar's Bride*, a new departure in his operatic work, and written to showcase Zabela. Vrubel was certainly flattered that an opera had been written expressly for his wife, but he also worried that “such signs of respect for Nadezhda’s talents and achievements only serves to make a jealous Directorate treat her with greater severity and neglect.”²⁰ Whether or not these concerns had much basis in reality, Zabela evidently shared them, since the subject of unfair treatment does indeed feature prominently in Zabela’s next letters to Rimsky-Korsakov, and he patiently indulges all her complaints.

Looking in more general terms at the correspondence in 1898 and 1899, we find the most intense and revealing letters here: they are full of warmth and subtle flirtation, punctuated by examples of Rimsky-Korsakov’s characteristic self-deprecating humor. There are endearing tokens of intimacy, such as Rimsky-Korsakov’s requests that Zabela stay in the key of A major, their key of spring. But the same letters also provide us with musical insights into Rimsky-Korsakov’s creative practices and anxieties, and cast light on his relationship with the MPO and the pitfalls of opera production in Russia at the turn of century.

In the spring of 1899, the MPO paid another visit to St. Petersburg, and Rimsky-Korsakov dominated their program once again, with *Sheloga*, *Sadko*, *Mozart and Salieri*, *The Maid of Pskov*, together with Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* (a version by Rimsky-Korsakov, soon to become the standard version of this opera under Diaghilev). By the end of the tour, Rimsky-Korsakov was planning a further opera with a prominent role for Zabela, namely *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (containing the famous bumblebee interlude).

The Tsar's Bride had to wait until the autumn to see its premiere, with the MPO’s production closely supervised by Rimsky-Korsakov, and featuring Zabela in the role of Marfa. At this stage in the correspondence, we find Rimsky-Korsakov returning again and again to a defense of the *Bride*, obviously stung by the critics, who failed to appreciate the simpler and more lyrical style the composer had chosen for this work. For the public, the *Bride* was a huge success, and Rimsky-Korsakov could have satisfied himself with this if it were not for deeper issues lurking in the background. The problem was not just with the critics: even his closest friends saw the *Bride* as a blatant betrayal of the “progressive” principles that had been formulated by Rimsky-Korsakov himself and his colleagues of the

20. Vrubel’s letter to his sister, *ibid.*, 3:165.

Kuchka back in the 1860s, and developed ever since. These principles most prominently included dramatic realism and a focus on declamation (in opposition to *bel canto* lyricism). In general, all operatic convention was treated with suspicion. The *Bride* was inevitably seen as a repudiation of all that the Kuchka had stood for and, worst of all, a repudiation by its most prolific representative (not only for his own operas, but for his completions and revisions of Musorgsky and Borodin). Even Rimsky-Korsakov's own wife, Nadezhda Nikolayevna, saw the *Bride* in these terms, as we know from the withering account of the opera in a letter she sent to their son Andrei.²¹ She was a musician herself, and had formerly composed; she had been closely and enthusiastically involved with the work of the Kuchka, and with all her husband's previous productions, so her hostility to the *Bride* cannot be written off as the mere symptom of a marital tiff. In his subsequent letters to Zabela, Rimsky-Korsakov's unease is focused on a recurring comparison between the *Bride* and *Saltan* as the representatives of his new and old styles, and now it is Zabela's turn to indulge him as he gives vent to his interior struggles.

Early in 1900, Rimsky-Korsakov returned to Moscow, still carried along by public acclaim for the *Bride*, which spilled over into new opportunities for the composer. He wrote an extra aria for Sekar-Rozhansky, in the role of Lykov, thereby confirming his new commitment to opera as, above all, a collaborative art between composers and singers (the Kuchka had always regarded this as one of the vices of Italian opera). This might well be regarded as the pinnacle of his involvement with the MPO, since his public success would soon bring him back into the gravitational pull of the Imperial theaters. In January 1900, he received the curious but very welcome news that the Tsar had reversed his earlier decision on *Sadko*, and now required its performance at the Mariinsky. We might well say

21. In her letter, Mme. Rimsky-Korsakov's description reads thus: "I would place this opera far below the level of *Sadko*, and on the whole, it is the least successful of your father's operas. In the first place, I don't particularly like Mey's drama, and the form it takes in the libretto is still less satisfactory. Secondly, I have little sympathy for this return to the old operatic forms of *A Life for the Tsar*, especially when they are applied to this entirely dramatic plot, since they hobble the dramatic action. Third and last, even if we were to let these forms pass, they would still need to be justified by wonderful music to compensate for the lack of movement—but this is precisely what's lacking. To my mind, all these duets, trios, quartets, and sextets are musically quite banal, no more than acceptable. Admittedly, you can detect the hand of a master at work, all the parts are put together very well, and it does indeed make pleasant listening. But unfortunately, there wasn't a single moment when the opera convinced me that it had any power, or any capacity to astonish. Your father, on the contrary, is delighted, as is everyone else (so they say, at any rate). This left me sounding the only discord in the midst of so much smooth harmony." *Ibid.*, 3:193.

that Rimsky-Korsakov's strategy of the "counter-snob" had worked: his studied avoidance of the Imperial theaters eventually led the directors to realize that they needed him after all. He also received a "strange" invitation, as he told Zabela, to have his "new opera" staged by the Imperial theaters—except that he had not even planned, let alone written any new opera.²² His state of bemusement was brief, and he made plans for his first *grand opéra*, titled *Servilia*, a project that was obviously far beyond the MPO's resources and abilities. He had not abandoned the MPO, which was given *Saltan* in preference to the Bolshoi, but he was now determined to see his work return to the stage of the Mariinsky.

The *Bride*, in the meantime, had begun spreading to other theaters across the country. Rimsky-Korsakov enjoyed a new production by the Tsereteli company in St. Petersburg, with Maria Insarova as Marfa, whom he found "wonderful."²³ This throwaway comment was not received well by Zabela, jealous of her place in his affections as a composer, and Rimsky-Korsakov had to tread carefully whenever he mentioned Insarova thereafter (Letters 14 and 18). This little sign of Rimsky-Korsakov's disloyalty, as Zabela saw it, showed that the high flowering of their artistic partnership was over, and Letter 19, full of very intense, if veiled emotion, is the last of its kind. The pace of the correspondence then slackens, although there is still another central role for Zabela, namely the Tsarevna in *Kashchei the Immortal*, premiered at the close of 1902. Later in the same year, we see the onset of Vrubel's mental illness, which soon led to his final decline, and there was now a baby to care for, so Zabela's attention was necessarily transferred to these domestic problems, although she managed to maintain her career. She suffered much: Vrubel sometimes had violent breakdowns, which were a danger to Zabela, and he was eventually taken to a sanatorium; in the midst of this turmoil, her baby son died at the age of eighteen months. Weathering these storms, she continued to pursue and even advance her career, securing a post at the Mariinsky (where Rimsky-Korsakov was still lobbying in her favor), bringing her to St. Petersburg in 1904. She remained a soloist with the Mariinsky until 1911.

Perhaps the artistic partnership could have adjusted to the new circumstances, but instead it petered out, even if their personal relations remained amicable. In September 1904, Rimsky-Korsakov heard Zabela perform at the Mariinsky (as Margarita in Gounod's *Faust*) and wrote to

22. *Ibid.*, 3:216.

23. *Ibid.*, 3:211. Maria Insarova (1866–?), soprano, sang with many private opera companies throughout Russia. In St. Petersburg and in Kharkov she sang with the Tsereteli company.

his wife that “she sang well, but her voice is too weak for the Mariinsky Theatre.” During the intermission, he had a chance to speak to Vrubel (who was enjoying a period of remission), and “found him changed and looking older, but speaking ‘quite normally.’”²⁴ A few days later, he heard Zabela again in *Sadko*, and reported that her performance “is undoubtedly very fine, but she has developed a mannerism, a forced open tone for lower notes, which I didn’t like and told her so.”²⁵ Now outside the more intimate environment of the MPO, which had suited Zabela’s voice perfectly, she could no longer hope for a central role in any further Rimsky-Korsakov opera, a painful truth that was tacitly understood by both of them. She admits that much as she enjoyed singing through Fevroniya’s part in *Kitezha* (which demands almost Wagnerian strength), she realizes that it was not written with her in mind, and that she wasn’t suited to delivering it from the grand stage. Instead, she humbly asks Rimsky-Korsakov to see that she is cast in the much more modest role of Sirin, one of the paradise birds in the opera’s transcendent finale. This turned out to be the final chapter of their partnership, allowing her, for the last time, to inhabit the realm of the fantastic that they had cultivated together. Outside of her operatic performances, some later events deserve mention: in early 1905, Zabela sang the aria from *Servilia* (discussed in Letter 18) in concert,²⁶ and one year later gave another concert performance of two Rimsky-Korsakov songs with orchestra (“Midsummer Night’s Dream” and “The Nymph”), with great success.²⁷ She also put in the occasional appearance at Rimsky-Korsakov’s musical soirées, where she would sing some of his pieces, together with others written by his composition pupils.

In his operas, Rimsky-Korsakov liked to pair more earth-bound women, dramatic and passionate, with other female roles that were ethereal and otherworldly, and so the Sea Princess in *Sadko* is a foil to Sadko’s wife, Lyubava, the Snow Maiden to the feisty Kupava, and the innocent unwitting victim Marfa to the tormented and malign Lyubasha. Zabela proved to be a perfect embodiment of these fairy-tale women and fantastic creatures. As a woman in real life, she also remained for Rimsky-Korsakov a beautiful fantasy, fragile and unattainable. As his muse, she was pivotal in Rimsky-Korsakov’s decision to break with his former declamatory aesthetic. He showed inclinations toward this aesthetic shift in some songs that predate their first meeting, but it was Zabela who effectively

24. *Ibid.*, 3:344.

25. *Ibid.*, 3:345.

26. *Stranitsi zhizni N. A. Rimskogo-Korsakova: Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva*, ed. A. A. Orlova, vol. 4 (Leningrad: Muzika, 1973), 6.

27. *Ibid.*, 4:99.

gave him the confidence to transfer this to a grand public statement, his designedly conventional and melodic *Tsar's Bride*. He told Zabela at the time that he hoped the *Bride* would draw other Russian composers into its wake “even though at present they think it is backward” (Letter 15). As his life drew to a close a decade after his first encounter with Zabela, he doubted whether he should ever have departed from his artistic path, and doubted even the artistic worth of the *Bride*. Perhaps it was just the product of an aging composer’s chaste infatuation for a younger woman, an interesting, if not major singer, wrapped up in the mystique of her husband’s costumes, stage sets, and paintings. If posterity has a say in the matter, his delightful melodic tribute to Zabela is vindicated: the *Bride* remains a favorite on the Russian stage to the present day.

1. Rimsky-Korsakov to Zabela-Vrubel

29 April 1898, St. Petersburg

Most respected and most kind Nadezhda Ivanovna,
I am sending you my Romances Op. 50, and apart from yours,²⁸ I think you might also make use of No. 1, “The Maiden and the Sun.” You are forbidden to peek at them yet, and the same applies to *Christmas Eve*, because you really must have a good rest over the summer and gather fresh strength for the autumn. According to rumors doing the rounds here, the Moscow Opera will not be coming to St. Petersburg in the autumn. That would be very sad, because in St. Petersburg everyone often remembers a talented Volkhova princess, Olga Ivanovna, or rather Yuryevna, etc.²⁹

Be healthy and merry: in *la majeure*.³⁰

My wife sends her greetings.

Yours, N. R-Korsakov

28. Rimsky-Korsakov refers here to the song No. 1, Op. 50, which he dedicated to Zabela. The lyric is by Apollon Maykov, and the full text can be found in the epigraph of this essay.

29. Rimsky-Korsakov is referring to roles played by Zabela in his operas: Volkhova (the Sea Princess) in *Sadko*, and Olga in *The Maid of Pskov*. The two patronymics Rimsky-Korsakov gives for Olga reflect the vexed question of Ivan the Terrible’s paternity, on which the plot turns.

30. The key of A major, which Rimsky-Korsakov saw as the key of spring (see Letter 5 for further elaboration).