

# H-Net Reviews

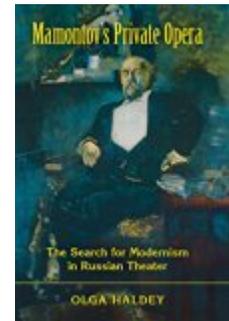
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Olga Haldey. *Mamontov's Private Opera: The Search for Modernism in Russian Theater*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35468-6.

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Savva Ivanovich Mamontov, railway tycoon and art patron as well as amateur singer and sculptor, was also the creator of one of the Russian Empire's most successful private opera companies: the Moscow Private Opera (henceforth MPO). While Mamontov's role as the financial force behind the Abramtsevo colony of artists has received significant scholarly attention, the precise impact of Mamontov's MPO on the evolution of Russian theater and music has long remained unclear. In her recent book, Haldey uncovers the daily workings of the MPO, arguing for its central importance in shaping the history of Russian theater. Three central arguments underpin her analysis: first, she claims that the MPO served as a testing ground for theatrical approaches later popularized in productions by Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Sergei Diaghilev; second, she argues that Mamontov himself was far more than a financial backer: his aesthetic vision shaped the productions of the MPO and, ultimately, Silver Age theater itself. Finally, Haldey seeks to reconstruct the aesthetic vision of the MPO, which she argues was "an outgrowth of Mamontov's personal aesthetic preferences, shaped and tested over three decades" (p. 15). Abandoning earlier scholarly accounts that defined this modern-day Maecenas alternately as a supporter of realism or as a formative figure in the development of Russian nationalist sentiment, Haldey argues that Mamontov's artistic views were neither nationalist nor realist, but a multifaceted product of the transitional period between realist and symbolist aesthetics. Haldey's complex of arguments engage with a variety of scholarly fields, ranging from theater, music, and art to social and cultural history. In large part, her analysis succeeds in offering something new to a wide range of readers.

The book's eight chapters proceed logically from a

contextual analysis of the aesthetic trends of Russia's *fin-de-siècle* (chapters 1-2) to the role of visual arts (chapters 3-4), theatrical experimentation (chapters 5-6), and market forces (chapter 7) in MPO productions. Haldey ends by arguing for the immediate influence of the MPO on subsequent Russian modernist theater, including the productions of Diaghilev, Stanislavsky, and Meyerhold (chapter 8). Enfolded into this overarching structure are useful explorations of precise terminology, personal relationships, and artistic practices. For instance, Haldey offers a careful analysis of the meaning of "decadence" in late imperial Russia, claiming that the particular moral tone adopted by Russian critics made figures like Diaghilev and Mamontov unwilling to embrace the term, despite the similarity of their vision to the decadent movements sweeping across Europe (pp. 59-63). Similarly, Haldey emphasizes the concept of "stylization" (*uslovnost'*) in Mamontov's approach to stage movement, interpreting it as a link between realist theatrical approaches and the emergence of symbolism (pp. 196-202). Throughout her analysis, Haldey emphasizes the internal contradictions within Mamontov's personal aesthetic which make it difficult to place him into any one ideological camp.

Of central interest to Haldey is Mamontov's emphasis on a unified artistic product (similar to Richard Wagner's image of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*) in which acting, plot, staging, scenery, and music all advanced the ultimate goal of Beauty. In tracing the development of this aesthetic vision, Haldey skillfully uncovers the interconnections (personal and intellectual) between Mamontov and better-known artistic figures. Mamontov's experience with the Abramtsevo colony provided a unique context out of which scene design at the MPO took on an

importance unseen in earlier theatrical stagings (pp. 68-87). Similarly, Mamontov's emphasis on the "beautiful" rather than the "real," together with his inability to fully embrace the concept of a "decadent" aesthetic mirrors the rejection of "decadence" offered by Sergei Diaghilev, whose journal *Mir iskusstva* received financial support from Mamontov. Haldey places Mamontov firmly within the context of the first generation of "decadent symbolists," arguing that his personal aesthetic views and glorification of Beauty meant that "he would never accept the avant-garde" (p. 60). In this sense, Mamontov's MPO truly offers an example of a transitional form of art between the realism of the 1860s and the modernism of the twentieth century. The MPO was fundamentally, Haldey suggests, a theatrical experiment, "studio theater" (p. 268) or "cradle of Russian artistic modernity" (p. 2), within which future innovators had the possibility to explore new approaches to artistic expression which would never have found expression in the more established and conservative imperial theaters.

Insufficient primary evidence demonstrating the precise influence of Mamontov on his younger contemporaries (Diaghilev, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold) hampers Haldey's argument to some degree. The absence of such materials is hardly surprising: artists of the time preferred to stress their originality rather than acknowledge sources of inspiration. Lacking such immediate evidence, Haldey relies in part on careful analysis of similarities in artistic approaches and aesthetic worldviews as a means of establishing Mamontov's influence on younger artists. Her findings are intriguing and generally compelling, though such connections may give rise to debate among specialists: in particular, not everyone may find Haldey's classification of Mamontov's relationship with Diaghilev as that of a "mentor-student" persuasive (p. 6). It is, nevertheless, an analysis worthy of further consideration.

While Haldey presents a carefully researched analysis of the MPO, historians looking for a broader social analysis of the role of merchant patrons in shap-

ing late imperial Russian culture will not find it here. While claiming that Mamontov's approach was distinct because he actually shaped artistic practice rather than merely providing financial support, Haldey never engages in a comparison of Mamontov's endeavors with those of other merchant patrons (such as Pavel Tretjakov or Mitrofan Beliaeff). How his business associates and clients viewed his artistic exploits remains an open question, though Haldey stresses Mamontov's repeated attempts to separate his name from the MPO. The scandal that emerged with Mamontov's arrest and exposure as the institution's financial backer in 1899 suggests that this seeming contradiction between artistic patronage and professional business practice would be worthy of further interrogation (pp. 3-4). Nevertheless, Haldey does offer important insights for social and cultural historians interested in how the task of the MPO was interpreted in society more generally. Her examination of the financial considerations that helped to shape the MPO as well as the impact of critical reception in reshaping Mamontov's endeavor into a nationalist mission reveal that an increasingly exclusivist national discourse was shaping reception of art in both Moscow and Petersburg. Within this context, the "Russianness" of the MPO's productions turns out to be largely a myth constructed by the periodical press rather than one of Mamontov's expressed aesthetic goals (pp. 247-260). Several minor inaccuracies appear in the text: *Mir iskusstva* music critic A. P. Koptiaev is identified as "Andrei" rather than "Aleksandr" (p. 260); the total numbers of ticket sales for the MPO and Wagnerian productions are incorrectly tabulated—the total sales should be, respectively, 29,091 and 30,342 (pp. 257-258).

Despite the minor critiques expressed above, Haldey's research provides an effective reclaiming of the important (if not exclusive) role played by Savva Mamontov and the MPO in the history of modernist theater in Russia. It should attract the interest of musicologists, visual art and theater historians, as well as social and cultural historians interested in the development of artistic modernism in late imperial Russia.

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