GLAZUNOV’S SAXOPHONE CONCERTO

"GLAZUNOV? Wasn’t he some Russian poet?" is hardly an unlikely utterance even from more sophisticated music lovers these days. Such are, unfortunately, the vicissitudes of history, often a cruel mistress to those artists who endeavored to serve her well, indeed, did serve her well. Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936) was a man like this, immensely gifted, prophesied over, and playing the role of prophet at a time when many giants walked the earth. One of these patriarchal gladiators was the great Franz Liszt, who performed the anointing on Glazunov after hearing the young man’s first symphony. Now, it is true that Liszt made many such pronouncements over the span of his long career, and often such a blessing was the kiss of death—few came to fruition. But he was on to something here, and perhaps the biblical axiom of a prophet never being accepted in his native land was never truer than in the case of Alexander Glazunov.

The composer has now been unfairly assigned to the endless category of Russian second-tier artists. How often are composers like Medtner, Arensky, or Taneyev played or listened to in our international concert halls? Even among the musically literate, the names are seldom mentioned aside from a few identifying works. During his life, Glazunov was heralded as a composer of greater promise, but one problem dogged him then and continues to do so now—he is simply not as "Russian" as his illustrious predecessors. "The Mighty Five," the self-proclaimed inheritors of all things genuinely Slavic, did a most persuasive job in defining Russian music of the nineteenth century. Tchaikovsky arrived and bucked the trend to a degree, freely making use of the European musical inheritance while simultaneously writing a music that was more genuinely Russian than the "Five." Glazunov, perhaps the most cosmopolitan of all (save Glinka, perhaps), freely embraced the caresses of western musical history, openly adoring composers like Beethoven, and writing works that owed their structural elements more to the teachings of the Germans instead of someone like Rimsky-Korsakov.

This cosmopolitan worldview was hardly surprising considering his privileged upbringing. Glazunov, as a child blessed with a noble bloodline, was exposed early on to all of the benefits and intellectual wealth that Europe had to offer. By the age of seventeen he had already composed his first symphony and string quartet. By twenty-four he was a professor at the famous St. Petersburg Conservatory. Free of any financial fetters, his early years were a gift to the world of music—an amazingly fecund period that produced symphonies, ballets, quartets, concerti, and a host of smaller works.

At one point a strong musical reactionary, his devotion to the styles and manners of the nineteenth century seeped into his musical perspective, allowing him to form a real resistance to the persuasive trends of the day. But every significant moment in musical history has seen these same reactions, pro and con, with both sides of the debate always imbued with innovative, highly skilled composers. That Glazunov was a traditionalist there can be no doubt. But no more so than Brahms, another reactionary embracing conservatism (or at least a model of it). And, it is equally certain that Glazunov’s view of “Russian-ness” went beyond that incorporated a wide variety of internationalist flavors, maybe even more than the arch-heretic Stravinsky. His last years, spent in a Paris that he had known and loved, but one that had changed from a cross-century “comfortableness” to a musical environs dominated by the aforementioned Stravinsky, were not easy ones. Glazunov was devastated, feeling more respected than admired. And perhaps it was—and still is—true. Glazunov is not in the same league as Stravinsky (though he can hold his own among the “Mighty Five”), but perhaps not yet. That doesn’t mean that they should be written off altogether. How many classical-period composers were in the same league as Mozart? None, I would venture. Yet Glazunov did leave a large, largely untapped body of beautiful work that the world is surely poorer for if it continues to ignore it.

The Saxophone Concerto is one of Glazunov’s last—and best—works, an incredibly concentrated score full of surprising twists and turns. The cover page says that the work is by “A. Glazunov et A. Petiot”, but it has been long established that Andre Petiot had nothing to do with the genesis of this work, though some people remain under the delusion that he in fact composed the entire final allegro. The great Sigurd Rascher, the driving force behind the germination of the piece—and also its dedicatee—explains it thus: though the work is in one movement, it possesses three independent parts, following the traditional concerto model. But even this only hints at the riches found in this music. It is in fact a “metamorphosis” (again, Rascher’s words) with the first movement neatly transformed almost into the last movement.

The broad, brooding, majestic theme of the introduction gives way to a variant in the saxophone’s upper octave that is modified even further in the second statement of this initial “theme.” Glazunov tricks us into thinking that we are hearing a genuine sonata-form structure, when in reality we are presented with an exposition, and two two-part melodic statements that have the second half of each serving as a modified development of the first half. There is no real development as such in this section, making the term “concerto” somewhat of an affectation. It is much more sophisticated than a normal concerto.

The second section imitates the first with an introduction that is not only a variant of the introduction of the first section, but also a transition to the first theme of the “slow” section, in C-flat. This section also has two main thematic statements, but the second half of each in this case is more flowing and rhapsodic in style, though Glazunov will develop these motives later on in a very subtle manner.

At the end of this section there is an extended cadenza. Glazunov again tips his hat to the concerto form while using it in a different manner for his own purposes. At the end of the cadenza, a fourteen-measure transition appears that steals its theme from the bass accompaniment of the second half of the second theme in section I. The man literally draws his ideas from the smallest of musical materials.

Section III, the infamous fuga—because for many years it was imagined that Glazunov left off work here—explodes its initial statement so that the composer has us thinking we are in for some kind of enormous fugal episode. But his real motive is to familiarize us with the insistent triplet-loaded twelve-eight meter that he will ingeniously use to pit two against three in a very Brahmsian topsy-turvy rhythmical bacchanal. Glazunov again imitates the first movement’s A-B-A-B-structure, each theme being a variant on its corresponding theme in the first section, moving into an extended coda that recapitulates many of the motives in a shifting cornucopia of melodic invention. By any measure, this work is a fluid, dynamically integrated list of ideas that constitute a unified whole, and proves that Glazunov, for all of his stated traditionalism, still had a very creative way of looking at things, even near the end of his life.
stringendo

8 Poco più mosso (≈ 120)

sul G

dim.
24 Allegro \( \text{\( \frac{d}{f} \) = 120} \)

\text{energico}

\text{dim.} \quad p \quad \text{cresc.}
(sempre stesso)

Cantabile

Poco a poco

Crescendo

Energico

Rallentando

Poco più moderato ($z = 100$)