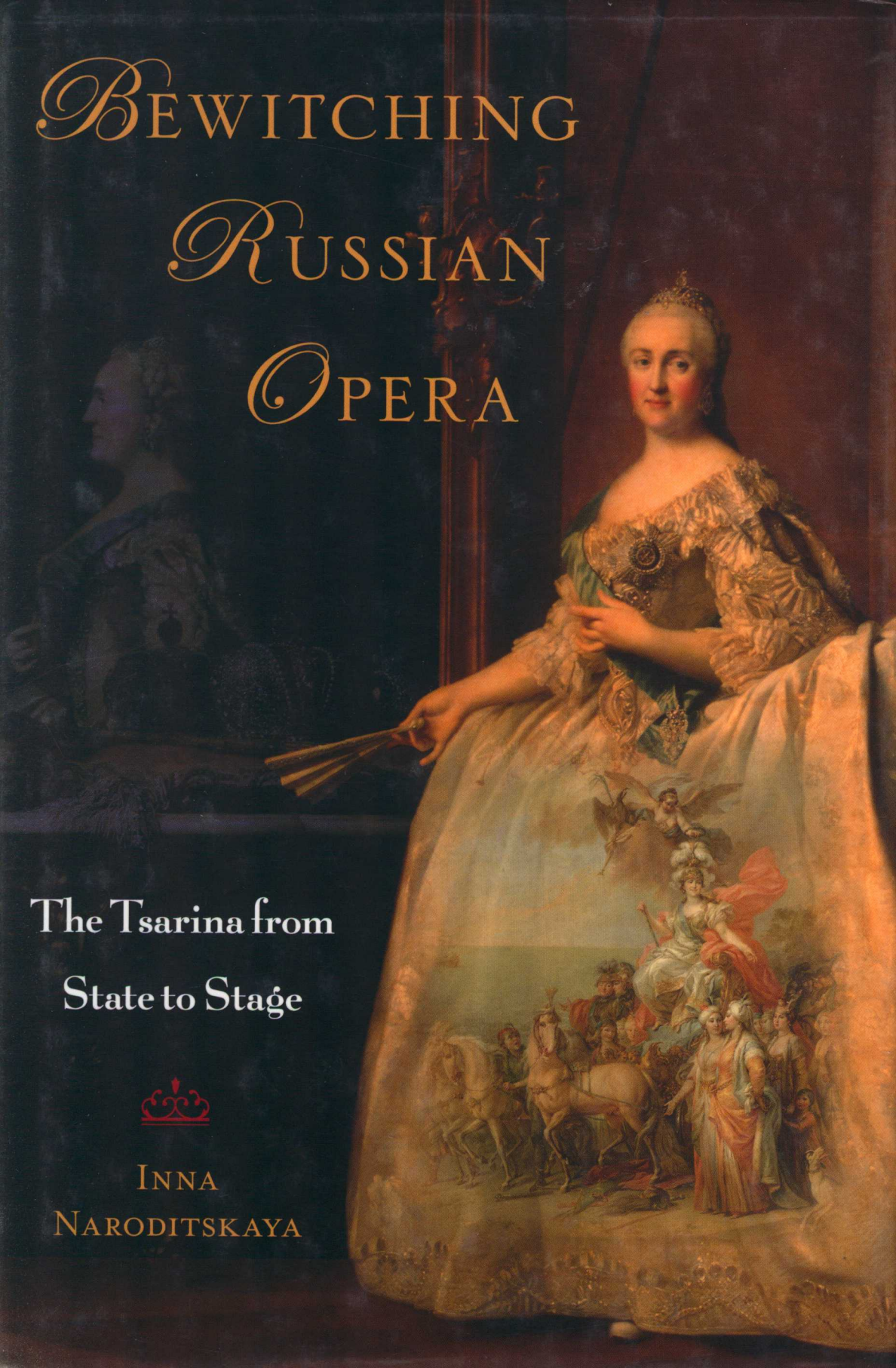
Bewitching Russian Opera



The Tsarina from State to Stage

Inna Naroditskaya

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To Oktiabrina-Zhenia-Zhenechka Golik
and *Pavlik Naroditskiy* you are my world

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This book gave me the precious gift of learning from, interacting and collaborating with, remarkable scholars and thinkers on Russian music and culture on the both sides of the Atlantic. Andrew Wachtel informed the frame of the book as a literary scholar. A colleague and friend (and incidentally one of the busiest people I have encountered in the academic world), he read the manuscript twice, leaving his incisive remarks throughout. The work owes its existence to the everlasting patience, continuous encouragement, and tireless editing of my life partner, James Borland. His intellect and inquisitiveness, his pointed questions guided me in writing. The number of times he read every chapter, page, line, and footnote is a secret I share only with my computer. He now knows about the subject as much as I do. Nick Naroditski, who perused the volume, enjoying the opportunity of passionate criticism and equally passionate praise of his mother, translated several poetic excerpts and edited others. In our daily lives, he made sure that I keep an ironic distance between myself and the regal heroines of the volume. I am looking forward to the next collaboration with him.

Whether knowingly or not, the contributors include Richard Wortman, whom I recently met and who continues to inspire me; Boris Gasparov, whose interdisciplinary writing served for me as a model; and Richard Taruskin, whose writing reshaped the field and certainly my understanding of it. The excitement of working with recent Russian scholarship on music, theater, and cultural history was complemented by personal contacts with authors who through the past seven to nine years generously shared their works, donated their time, challenged and were challenged in our engaging ongoing discussions in Moscow and St. Petersburg: Maria Shcherbakova, Natalia Ogarkova, Polina Vaidman, Liia Lepskaia, Liudmila Starikova, and the late Viktor Varunts. Emma Rassina and her assistants opened to me the archives of the Taneev' Research Library of the Moscow Conservatory. Together with Rassina, my musicology colleague Svetlana Sigida hosted a preliminary presentation of my research at the Conservatory. John Roland Wiley and Glenn Watkins read and commented on parts of this work; Judith Becker as always supported and advised me in my

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Моему самому дорогому на свете человеку, бесконечно щедрой, любящей, требовательной, храброй моей маме, которая уже не сможет увидеть этой книги! Дважды иммигрантка, герой войны и врач, всегда гордая, предельно честная, с высоким чувством достоинства, ты и сейчас ведешь меня. И моему отцу, инженеру, глубоко разбирающемуся в изобразительном искусстве и литературе, который, слушая мои музыковедческие "байки" на русском, дал мне столько полезных идей. Их любви, интеллекту, этике я обязана всем.

To the dearest person of my life, endlessly generous, loving, demanding, courageous: my mother, who will not touch this book. Twice an immigrant, a war hero, a doctor, proud, honest, always guided by a sense of integrity, you lead me still. And to my father, an engineer who knows art as I never will and who, listening to my endless chatter about this book in Russian, gave me the most precious ideas.

I owe everything to your love, intellect, and ethics.

INTRODUCTION

A ball-masquerade. Costumed pairs of courtiers proceed in a majestic polonaise, the tsar of dances and the dance of tsars. Guests dressed as Arcadian shepherds sing and dance a pastoral. Excitement reaches its peak when the master of ceremonies announces the arrival of Her Imperial Majesty. Everyone joins in a cantata-polonaise "*Slavsia sim, Ekaterina*!"—Glory to Catherine the Great.

The scene takes place in the middle of Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*. At the close of the nineteenth century, the composer brings the silent shadow of the eighteenth-century empress on stage. Why would Catherine appear in this and two other Tchaikovsky operas? Why would she emerge as well in Rimsky-Korsakov and Cui? No other Romanov monarch inspired composers to flout the imperial decree forbidding operatic portrayal of the ruling dynasty. One might suspect that the composers were prompted by the centennial of Catherine's death (1896). Possibly. But my contention is that the shadow of the empress and the idea of the power she stood for had always been present in nineteenth-century operas, appearing in various guises, changing, evasive, residing in the world of magic and fairy tales.

Weaving history and opera, this volume explores two interconnected stories. One is *her* story, which belongs to the Russian "women's kingdom," a phrase coined by Michelle Marrese to describe an era not only ruled by tsarinas but in which women of a certain class enjoyed legal and social privileges far beyond those in Western Europe. Catherine the Great, as a central figure, emblemizes the chain of four vigorous tsarinas who dominated Russia for three-quarters of a century. The other is *his* story, that of nineteenth-century Russian literati who contributed to the restoration of patriarchal rule, converging masculine ideals with nationalism. Both stories began with a break from the preceding age. *Her* era started when tsarinas emerged from the ruins of the demolished *terem*, an architectural and social construction that until the beginning of the eighteenth century segregated tsars' wives, sisters, and daughters from public life. *His* century, the nineteenth, began four years before its chronological date, on the day the last empress, who during her thirty-four-year reign never lost her tight grip on the empire, passed away. The dialogue between the two stories is traced here through operas.

Eighteenth-century empresses devised their court as theater and made theater a part of their court. Imported and assimilated, opera served as *the* imperial genre. Consistent with the notion Harsha Ram identifies as the "imperial sublime," operatic choruses praised the empresses as Olympic gods and heroes, Eastern armies on the stage symbolically submitted to empresses' power, ritualistic weddings signified the blessed Russian folk, and the tsarinas' surrogates—operatic monarchs—exemplified the rulers' virtues and benevolence. Folk songs, weddings, heroic ventures, and final choral "Slavas" were passed to the nineteenth century, becoming major elements of Russian nationalist opera. As real tsarinas disappeared from Russia's political stage, a number of magical tsarinas materialized in Russian fairy-tale operas. In their enchanting gardens (replicas of the imperial park in Tsarskoe Selo) or in their aquatic kingdoms (like the waterways the empresses were proud to acquire), entrancing female queens tried to allure, hunt, or trap Russian heroes. Champions' victories over the magical tsarinas were celebrated as a triumph of the nation; their defeats led to the destruction of the folk or at least the disappearance of the folk chorus from the operatic stage.

While preserving and expanding upon elements of eighteenth-century operas, nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals demeaned and discarded the culture of their predecessors. Claiming new beginnings, however, they never escaped in their operatic tales from formidable tsarina-sorceresses, never broke the ties. A number of marvelous nineteenth-century operas, viewed in relation to male contempt and nostalgia for the tsarinas' age, illuminate an anxiety of nineteenth-century Russian male artists. Crossing political and artistic realms, as it always does, opera in Russia bridged the two centuries and linked the two stories. Thus *his* story (in opera) rewrote and refashioned *hers*, while *hers*, casting a shadow and woven into his story, defined *him*.

Events lived through and times past belong to imagination, turning into fictional narrative that includes history. Even historical chronology, the establishment of recognized events and dates, reflects a particular set of values, an angle of perception. Everyone knows, for example, that the history of Russian national music begins in 1836 with Mikhail Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*. The premiere of Glinka's first-born opera, however, marked the hundredth anniversary of the first Italian opera troupe's arrival in St. Petersburg and the fiftieth year since Yevstigney Fomin's *Boeslavich, Champion of Novgorod*, on a text by Catherine II. Both dates vanished behind national dithyrambs to the first, the founder, the "father" of Russian national opera. If Glinka is indeed a "father," how does one account for the hundred-some operas staged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Why would historians largely ignore the nobility's obsession with theater, when nearly every courtier, and a number of provincial aristocrats, engaged in theatrical ventures—versifying, composing, acting, staging dramas, collecting folk tunes, and establishing their own theaters? What about the

emergence of professional composers, librettists, and actors? How did the operatic "folk" —a defining factor of the Russian musical self—become disconnected from the real folk, serf actors, who constituted a major performing force in early Russian theater? The folk songs these peasant actors belted out on rural and urban, public and private stages were overlooked in favor of a grand beginning of Russian opera crafted by the aristocrat and serf owner Glinka, whose ears were sensitive to peasant songs. Yet what Marina Ritzarev terms the "Glinka-centric conceit"[1] is only now being questioned; discussing Glinka's *Ruslan and Liudmila,* Marina Frolova-Walker writes that "shedding the nationalist inheritance is even more difficult than was the shedding of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics a few years ago."[2]

Even scholars who extend the history of Russian opera to pre-Glinka times, and even those who have produced remarkably rich works on eighteenth-century musical Russia, weave their prose with an ongoing apology for Russian artistic insufficiency and mimicry of the West. The dismissal of early theater and opera and the separation of the two centuries by cultural historians reflect particularities of Russia's past. Patriarchal Russia, encompassing gender prejudices of both West and East, has found it difficult to deal with the cultural memory of more than seventy years of female rule during Russia's formative period. The biggest problem was Catherine—a monarch, woman, and foreigner, also a prolific fellow Russian writer and historian, a creator and producer of early operas. Her historical semi-operatic *Early Reign of Oleg,* a transitional work that falls between Italian *opera seria* and native heroic operas such as Gavrila Derzhavin's *Dobrynia* and *Pozharsky,* laid the path for famous, cherished nineteenth-century nationalist historic operas. Catherine's operatic tales—including a *bylina* (old native epic), a magical opera, a satire, and a moral tale—prefigured the nationalist opera-*skazka*s (tales) that blossomed in the next century.

Looming over romantic artists and perhaps fueling their craving for nationalist male primacy, the shadow of the empress(es) materialized in a number of operas in two ways. One was the creation of vicious royal operatic women. Though differing in their appearance, character, and functions, these formidable women share common characteristics. They are often foreigners, whether Italianate virtuosos or Eastern seductresses. These women of supernatural power express themselves in a musical lingua infected by chromatic, whole-tone, or octatonic gestures, which sets them in contrast to diatonic Russianness. Several of them are silent or deprived of elaborate vocal parts. Instead they are linked with dance or accompanied by an entourage of fleeting, graceful, tempting, or dangerous female dancing choruses that represent "others" in the domain of the opera. Bearing royal, princely, or elevated titles, these women, devised to represent multifaceted otherness, challenge and combat operatic male leads. Male victories precipitate folk/nation celebrations in the final scenes of Glinka's *Ruslan and Liudmila* and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko;* the defeats of

other protagonists are associated with the demise of the folk, flooded in *Mlada* and replaced by laughing female shadows in Dargomyzhsky's *Rusalka*. In neither case is there a celebration for a female protagonist—a dead soul that in the afterlife turns into a royal water spite, an aerial spirit, or, in Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*, a dreadful ghost. How would psychoanalysts following Freud or Jung address this nightmarish resurrection of the female ghosts navigating between past and present? How might literary scholars Harold Bloom and Michael Roth interpret the anxieties shared by generations of Russian male authors? Analyzing the operas named above, I contend that the supernatural tsarinas, tsarevnas, and countesses, if examined in their historical and intertextual context, can be viewed as a manifestation of Russia's nineteenth-century nationalist ethos—or its psychosis.

Second, the empress's shadows also revealed themselves in essential elements of Glinka's operas and of post-Glinka nationalist works. Despite all the "forgetfulness" or active disparagement, nineteenth-century Russia expanded patterns characteristic of operas before Glinka, including Catherine's. Despite their acclaimed primacy, nineteenth-century national operas reiterated familiar (if often forgotten) precedents and conventions: the genres of historic-heroic opera and opera-skazka; ritualistic weddings equating lovers' vows with the bonds between folk and crown; monumental choruses representing the folk; choral "Slavas"; princes and nobles as lead characters; the multifaceted East welcoming and acceding to omnipotent Russia; the use of folk tales and songs; colossal productions reminiscent of the huge casts engaged in the empresses' court theater; the imperial polonaise; ancient Greek modes represented as authentic Russian sound; lyric songs (*protiazhnaia*); and musical otherness. This catalogue suggests that the issue at stake was not a break between centuries, but rather an unspoken conflict over the ownership of the nation and national lore. As power and ownership shifted, the image of bygone empresses underwent metamorphosis; after their demise, tsarinas returned in the guise of enticing dangerous supernatural operatic heroines.

This subject matter invites a combination of three "*inter*" approaches—interdisciplinary, intertextual, and intergeneric. Interdisciplinarity is a common thread in American scholarship about Russian culture, which has produced a constellation of works such as those of Richard Taruskin in music, Boris Gasparov in music and literature, and Richard Wortman on Russia's cultural history and performativity. In Russia today, scholars including Liudmila Starikova and Natalia Ogarkova have produced revealing intertextual readings of theater history. As an analytical method, the intertextuality identified with the semiotics of Yurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii is inherent to Russian intellectual tradition. Throughout history, Russian literati have engaged in intertextual exchange as an intellectual and political game, transmitting their ideas via references to one another, commenting on events, targeting politicians, creating a

densely coherent body of literary works. Intertextuality in Russia encompasses not only literature but also music, theater, and opera. At their very base, such close readings require intergeneric dialogue, which, according to Andrew Wachtel, illuminates a specific period "through multiple competing narrative perspectives."[3] The principle of intertextual and intergeneric dialogue applied to sources in different genres, ranging from memoirs to historical documents and musical scores, coincides with methods of historical ethnomusicology that, according to Joseph Lam, allow one to "probe ideologies, aesthetics, and methodologies with which people interrelate their musical past and present into musical and intelligible realities."[4]

This inquiry, dealing with issues of gender, involves female authorship and performance on one hand and the operatic treatment of female characters on the other. It leads me to question the historiography of the Russian female monarchs, the empress-dramatist, and historic female performers ranging from noble dilettantes to serf actresses. Like the writings of female authors elsewhere in Europe, Catherine's literary works were posthumously dismissed as "lacking wit" and overall "mediocre," "worthless."[5] Written by the monarch, they were also disparaged for deluding and corrupting citizens. Such scornful remarks have not typically required evidence. Jacky Bratton, in a feminist study of theater that recovers names and works of "lost" female dramatists and artists, calls for a form of "archaeology." While dealing with largely unknown works of the female monarch, the inquiry here requires both archeological and anthropological approaches. What specific circumstances determined the value of a female author's works?

The topic of gender also involves the study of a certain type of female character produced in nineteenth-century Russian operas. Reflecting and commenting on the eighteenth century, nationalist artists engaged European romantic tropes, subjecting their native heroines to the "undoing" successfully fostered in the West. Catherine Clement's classical work on how operas deal with their heroines provides a basis for analyzing the story lines, situations, characters, voice types, and vocal parts. Carolyn Abbate delved into voice as an acoustic and social phenomenon. Both addressed a wide-ranging repertoire spanning national borders and traditions. Indeed operatic theater presents a significant body of shared gender prejudices—on stage, backstage, in libretti, music, and performers' stories. This book, proposing a connection between historical figures and the repertoire of Russian fairytale operas, addresses and situates gender in a specific historical and national, operatic and extra-operatic context.

What led me to pursue this research was the rather surprising discovery of Catherine II's operas, of which I, trained as a musicologist in the former Soviet Union, never knew. It was only when I returned to attend a conference at the Moscow Conservatory as an American ethnomusicologist that I found, merely by chance, the published libretti and scores of Catherine's *Oleg* and *Fevei*. The lack of attention to half

a dozen of Russia's earliest operas is puzzling and telling. More than two hundred years after Catherine's death, in the vein of post-Soviet revision of imperial cultural history, the encyclopedia *Musical Petersburg* finally acknowledged Catherine among the "pioneers of traditional Russian fairy-tale opera"—a recognition briefly mentioned in parentheses. The first volume analyzing Catherine's dramas in recent times was produced not in Russia but in the United States, by Lurana Donnels O'Malley. Having the copies of Catherine's operas on my shelves for a few years while teaching nineteenth-century Russian fairy-tale operas, Glinka's *Ruslan and Liudmila,* Dargomyzhsky's *Rusalka,* Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mlada* and *Sadko,* Tchaikovsky's *Slippers,* which I have known and loved for many years, made me see these operas in a new and quite different light.

The book consists of two parts. The first part raises the curtain on the theatricality of the eighteenth-century court, scripted, staged, and conducted by empresses. Opera seria and early comic opera functioned within the courtly social repertoire, bourgeoning in the culture of imperial masquerade, in which theater permeated society, from nobles to serfs. The analysis of Catherine's operas, her collaboration with native and foreign artists, and the political purpose of the productions aims to reconsider her role as a highly influential political playwright during the formative period of modern Russian society, literature, and theater. The second part of the book consists of five chapters each focusing on a nineteenth-century opera; four of them are magic tales and one a ghostly opera that connects an eighteenth-century imperial tale with late-nineteenth-century symbolism. Although selected to demonstrate issues traced through the book, each opera is a world of its own that entices and absorbs one as a spectator and as a writer. I found the operas taking over my writing, each demanding prose that would befit its watery, phantasmagoric, wicked, or witty magical world. It has been exciting to trace the genealogy of these operas back to the age of tsarinas, and to the monarch-librettist and producer who had at her disposal the best artists as well as unimaginable resources. By establishing links between Glinka's *Ruslan* and Catherine's *Oleg,* between her *Boeslavich, Champion of Novgorod* epics and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko,* by grappling with the anxiety of her cultural progeny, and by seeing her shadow in Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Christmas Eve,* one can't help recognizing the irony that the Russian nationalism we now know, patriotic and patriarchal, was built on a foundation created by foreign matriarchs.

CONTENTS

Bewitching Russian Opera

OVERTURE
RUSSIA'S IMPERIAL PRIMA DONNAS

A magical tsarina changes into a mighty river at the end of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko* (1897), while a folk chorus praising the opera's hero for bringing prosperity to Novgorod sings a "Slava" that had long been a hallmark of Russian national opera. Sadko's accomplishments rest on his marriage to two women: one a suffering, submissive, and nearly forgotten Russian Christian wife, the other the Sea Princess who provided his fortune and, when no longer needed, sacrificed herself for his convenience, bequeathing herself as a river to benefit his fellow citizens. A predecessor of Sadko, the male lead in Pushkin's poem and Dargomyzhsky's opera *Rusalka* (1855) is likewise split between two women. Seducing (and in the opera impregnating) a miller's daughter and afterward marrying another woman, his equal, *Rusalka*'s protagonist is haunted first by the bodiless voice of his deceased lover and then by her ghost, a deadly water sprite. Unlike Sadko, he is incapable of becoming a people's hero—not so much because of the moral dilemma but because in his guilt-ridden vocal solo, one of the most poignant vocal parts in Russian operatic literature, he shows himself vulnerable to the magic vengeful tsarina who in the end vanquishes him.

Fairy-tale operas like *Sadko* and *Rusalka*—a distinct brand of national operatic literature—have been analyzed, contextualized, and conceptualized in terms of musical language, ties with folklore, literary sources, and intertextual connections, but rarely through the lens of gender theory. Folk tales lent a sense of authentic, untainted Russianness to Russian operas,[1] which have been seen as a manifestation of nineteenth-century national aspirations. Their stories and characters, even when borrowed from early sources, have been examined in relation to historical and social issues of the nineteenth century. But never in the plethora of musicological scholarship has there been an attempt to connect the operatic magic tsarinas, princesses, and dangerous women

of power with the unprecedented chain of formidable tsarinas who had ruled Russia a scant century earlier: Catherine I (1725–1727), Anna (1730–1740), Elisabeth (1741–1762), and Catherine II (1762–1796). These historical tsarinas championed theater and opera, acting as patronesses, authors, actresses, critics, and ardent spectators—their robust commitment to theater interlaced with the acquisition and exposition of supreme power. Though referring to four empresses, this study focuses mainly on Catherine II (Catherine the Great), the last and the longest-ruling female monarch, who also wrote in various literary genres, including libretti, and produced operas. Establishing her unique and powerful persona, as did the female monarchs before her, Catherine distanced herself from her predecessors.

Beginning under Anna and increasingly in the courts of Elisabeth and Catherine II, operas, as a part of imperial ceremonials, mirrored regal weddings and coronations, echoing monumental church choruses and resounding military salvos—elements inherited by nineteenth-century historic and fairy tale operas. Pronouncing Mikhail Glinka the founder of national opera—a status unchallenged by native scholars to this day—his contemporaries and followers, much like Sadko discarding the tsarina-donor while enjoying her gifts, cast aside eighteenth-century Russian opera and spectacle. Reuniting nineteenth-century operatic tsarinas with eighteenth-century female monarchs offers the tempting possibility of reading nineteenth-century operas as a commentary on eighteenth-century history, and eighteenth-century operas as a shadowy precursor to nineteenth-century historic aspirations.

The four eighteenth-century female rulers, appearing in the guises of Eastern princesses, Aegean shepherdesses, and triumphant victors, crossing gender, social, and ethnic lines, staging masquerades, surrounded themselves with a cast of costumed courtiers. Also impersonated on stage as ancient heroes, tsars, and goddesses—long before Russian fairy-tale tsarinas appeared on the operatic stage—the empresses became characters in their own dynamic absolutist production. Not at all domesticated, doleful women, they shaped their courts and waged wars while probing, polishing, and disseminating their social and political agendas in highly politicized theater. The performativity of state and stage converged.

The discussion of Russia's imperial court as a theater owes its direction to the works of Richard Wortman, who views the history of imperial Russia through the lens of mythologized drama; and Natalia Ogarkova, who explores theater as an organic part of dramatized spectacular court rituals. Wortman terms this mythologized social repertoire Russia's "scenario of power": "The sumptuous, highly ritualized presentations of Russian monarchy, produced at enormous cost of resources and time, indicate that Russian rulers . . . considered the symbolic sphere of ceremonies and imagery intrinsic to their exercise of power."[2]